

# PORT MORESBY'S COBRAS

THE BELL P-39 AIRACOBAS OF THE 5th AIR FORCE'S 8th AND 35th FIGHTER GROUPS WERE THE FIRST USAAF FIGHTERS TO SEE ACTION IN NEW GUINEA - PART ONE  
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Star marks the location of Port Moresby. The fight to hold the area against Japanese aggression would depend upon Airacobras and Warhawks.

Insignia of the 8th Pursuit Group.



Jacket patch for the 35th Pursuit Group.

Less than two months after the Japanese invaded the Philippine Islands in December 1941, reinforcements were on their way to Australia for the US Army Air Corps' (USAAC) Far East Air Force, which, in the midst of this process on 5 February 1942, became its new 5th Air Force (AF). They included the aircraft and personnel of the 8th, 35th, and 49th Pursuit Groups (PG). The 8th, comprised of the 35th, 36th, and 80th Pursuit Squadrons (PS), and the 35th, made up of the 39th, 40th, and 41st PSs, were equipped with Bell P-39 Airacobras, while the 49th flew Curtiss P-40 Warhawks.

## THE AIRACOBRA

In March 1937, the USAAC asked American aircraft companies to submit design proposals for a new pursuit plane to fulfill "the tactical mission of interception and attack of hostile aircraft at high altitude." The new design was to attain a minimum level airspeed of 360 mph and

reach an altitude of 20,000 feet in less than six minutes. Two months later, the Bell Aircraft Corporation of Buffalo, New York, submitted a design that it had been working on for the past year, and in October the Air Corps ordered a prototype, which it designated XP-39. (The Lockheed Aircraft Corporation responded to the USAAC's challenge with its radical twin-engine design for what became the P-38 Lightning.)

The P-39's design was also unusual for its time. It was built around a single weapon — a large 37mm Oldsmobile cannon that was located in its nose (one of Bell's ads for the P-39 referred to it as a "Cannon on Wings"), so its designers

positioned the engine (a liquid-cooled Allison V-1710) in the fuselage behind the cockpit. It turned the propeller by means of a driveshaft that went under the cockpit. Placing the engine in the rear fuselage meant there was no room there for a fuel tank as was typically the case with single-engine fighters, and it could carry just 120 gallons in its wing tanks plus 75 more in a centerline drop tank. This meant the P-39 would have a rather limited range. (A 500-lb. bomb could be carried in place of the

auxiliary tank.)

The design also included two machine guns (.50-caliber) inside the cowlings above the cannon — just behind the spinner, through which the cannon fired, and firing through the propeller's arc via an interrupter gear — and two more (.30-caliber) in each wing panel. Like the P-38, it featured tricycle landing gear with a nose wheel, which made taxiing much easier, and it also had jettisonable, automobile-like doors (including roll-down windows) on either side of the cockpit.

The aircraft, which the company named Airacobra, went through numerous design changes before its first operational model, the P-39C, was built in 1940. The biggest change was the decision, made

An early P-39D of the 31st Pursuit Squadron in Panama. Even though a steady run of P-39s and P-40s were coming off production lines, the Air Corps was scrambling in the early days following America's entry into the Second World War to get aircraft to vitally needed combat fronts. The Panama Canal was an obvious point that would be defended at all costs but getting fighters to Australia would be a major logistical nightmare.