

From Test Flights to Air Shows The Living History of our P-63

Beginnings

Throughout its life, our P-63 has served many different roles, from test aircraft to air show performer. It was built in the winter of 1944, bearing the Bell construction number 33-11, for model 33, aircraft 11. It rolled out of the Bell plant in Niagara Falls on 24 February 1944, where it was formally accepted by the United States Army Air Force as a P-63A-6 and given serial number 42-68941.

Tests and Trials

Its first documented assignment was to Bell Aircraft Corporation as a test aircraft, officially starting on 15 July 1944 by USAAF records. Little is currently known as to the role this aircraft played, but it is believed that it was used for testing modifications later incorporated on the P-63C and P-63E models. This is evidenced by the ventral fin mounted below the aft fuselage, a standard feature on the P-63C and later models, but absent on the production P-63A models such as ours. We believe that the fin was added at Bell during its stay as a test aircraft to evaluate its handling qualities with the fin. Furthermore, our P-63 had a front window defroster unit installed, a feature not standard on any production Kingcobra but planned for the never-built P-63E-5 series. We continue to search Bell archives for the list of tests our particular aircraft was involved in. The photograph below was found several years ago and is a picture of our P-63, as seen by the serial number on the tail (it was typical at that time to drop the first digit, in this case "4," of the serial number on USAAF aircraft). This photograph must have been taken shortly after it first rolled out of the Bell factory, as it does not yet have the ventral fin modification and still has the .50 caliber under-wing machine guns installed.



Our P-63 served as a Bell test aircraft until January of 1945, when it was transferred to the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA), the forerunner of today's NASA. The aircraft was accepted at Moffet Field on the grounds of NACA Ames Research Center in Mountain View, California on 27 January 1945. A picture of our P-63, courtesy of the Ames Research Center photo archives, appears below. Notice that the 37mm cannon in the spinner of the aircraft has been removed and the hole covered with a small dome. This was standard practice for P-63 used as test aircraft, as the nose bay provided ample room for test equipment when the cannon and machine guns were removed. You can also see that the machine guns under the wings have been removed as they were not necessary for the flight tests being performed. Also, notice the large letters on the side of the aircraft denoting it as a test vehicle.



There were two P-63 test aircraft used at the Ames Research Center, and we know that our aircraft was used for several test flights. One technical paper is known to come from these tests. The paper, published 10 April 1946, is NACA Technical Note 1044, "Effect of Mach and Reynolds Number on Maximum Lift Coefficient," by John R. Spreiter and Paul J. Steffan. John Spreiter was a NACA test pilot who flew the aircraft, as well as several others operated by NACA at Moffet Field.

P-63s at Ames were also involved in aileron flutter tests. We believe our P-63 was used for these tests, evidenced by the static pressure test ports drilled into the surface of the left aileron. This is hard to know for sure, unfortunately, as most test records have been lost or destroyed.

Civilian Life

On 30 April 1946, the United States government decided that P-63A-6 serial number 42-68941 had completed its tour of duty as a test aircraft and subsequently declared the aircraft surplus. The war was over, and the market was flooded with cheap warbirds headed to private owners or scrapyards. Our P-63 left Moffet Field on 18 June 1946 and had a brief stay in Long Beach, California, before being sent to the surplus depot in Altus, Oklahoma on 1 July. It stayed there briefly and was sold to Mr. Steven H. Christenson of Houston, Texas. The entire aircraft, along with a spare Allison V-1710-93 engine, was sold for a mere \$1,000.

FAA records continue to tell the story of our aircraft. It was registered as NX75488 on 10 September 1946, and it appears that Mr. Christenson intended to fly his new P-63 as an air racer. Records show some minor modifications took place, such as the adjustment of ballast in the nose of the aircraft and stripping the paint to the bare metal, to reduce weight and improve handling. The picture below was taken sometime between 1946 and 1954, and shows the aircraft as it originally appeared in civilian colors under Mr. Christenson's ownership.



Some sources show that the aircraft sat unused at Dallas-Love field for several years from the mid 1950's through the early 1960's. A bill of sale, issued on 10 March 1963, shows that the aircraft and spare engine were sold for \$15,576 to Don Hull of

Sugarland, Texas. Mr. Hull reregistered the aircraft as N191H, but little is known of its history under his ownership. Both the engine and airframe were sold again on 21 June 1967 to Olin C. Crabtree and William R. Rodgers of Rolling Fork, Mississippi, this time for a sum of \$2,492.28. Mr. Rodgers was a member of the CAF at that time, and flew the aircraft in CAF colors. Below is a picture of the aircraft shortly after its sale to Crabtree and Rodgers.



The last airworthiness certificate for this aircraft was issued on 5 June 1975, and at the time of application the airframe had only 366.15 hours! At this time, Mr. Rodgers was quite ill and wished to donate the aircraft to the CAF. However, he passed away before the paperwork was complete. His wish was known by many, however, and on 5 October 1975, CAF Colonel "Lefty" Gardener flew the aircraft from Mississippi to Harlington, Texas on behalf of the CAF. This is the last known flight of the aircraft. The photograph below shows the aircraft as it appeared around the time of its last flight in 1975, this time in French colors.



The late 1970's were a confusing time for this P-63. Rodgers' business partner and mechanic, Mr. M. D. Johnson, submitted a false bill of sale on 19 August 1978 -- over two years after Rodgers passed away -- indicating that Rodgers had given the aircraft to him. Meanwhile, Mr. Rodgers' widow had completed the required paperwork for the donation of the aircraft and submitted a bill of sale on 26 March 1979. A legal battle soon ensued between Mr. Johnson and the CAF over ownership of the aircraft, and in October 1980 the court ruled in favor of the CAF.

Misfortunes

Unfortunately, the aircraft was in poor shape when it arrived at Harlington. Despite having less than 370 hours total time on the airframe, it was over 31 years old when it arrived, and years of being stored amongst the elements had taken its toll. It was starting to show signs of serious corrosion, and the aircraft was grounded shortly after its trip to Harlington. Its condition worsened during the next several years, as the CAF was locked in a legal battle over ownership of the airplane, and soon after it was set aside as a restoration project and awaited adoption by a unit willing to restore it to flight status.

It was adopted by the Missouri Wing of the CAF several years later, but was still far from being completed when disaster struck. The 1995 flood of the Mississippi river left the Missouri Wing's hangar soaked. Indeed, at some point, pieces of this very aircraft were floating in the hangar or completely submerged. Several parts were lost in the flood, and the Missouri Wing had to abandon the project shortly thereafter to repair their flying aircraft. The aircraft was once again up for assignment.

Restoration and Rebirth



The Dixie Wing of the CAF decided to adopt the stricken P-63, and the aircraft was trucked from Missouri to Georgia in the December of 1996. Here it has remained, with serious restoration work begun in 1999 and continuing through today. Currently, the horizontal and vertical tails are completely restored, and the aft fuselage is close behind, waiting on only a few components. The forward

fuselage, pictured below, has been the subject of recent work. Restoration of the cockpit, wiring, and control system are but of few of the projects under way.

As with all aircraft this age, there are no new parts mass-produced -- any part that is missing or damaged must be repaired, salvaged from another aircraft, or hand-made to the original specifications. This is a very long and delicate process, but it is fueled by dedicated volunteers who devote their spare time to get this rare warbird back in the air. Only a handful of the 3,303 Kingcobras produced from 1942 to 1945 are flying today, and we at the Dixie Wing are doing all we can to restore this aircraft to its former glory.

