

# The ORIGINAL OLD CROW



The great ace 'Bud' Anderson will forever be associated with the P-51 Mustangs he named *Old Crow*. But the first fighter to which 'Bud' had that moniker applied was a Bell P-39 Airacobra, and when the AirVenture show at Oshkosh this summer celebrated his 100th birthday, a very special salute was planned

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“Don’t give me a P-39. The engine is mounted behind. They’ll tumble and spin and auger you in, don’t give me a P-39!”

So went the verse of the well-known US Army Air Forces drinking song *Give Me Operations*, famously sung by Canadian broadcaster, composer and folksy singer Oscar Brand. The tune was making its way around the officers’ clubs and flightlines of the AAF’s rapidly expanding roster of fighter groups in late 1942, when newly commissioned 2nd Lt Clarence ‘Bud’ Anderson was posted to the 328th Fighter Group at Hamilton Field near San Francisco, California that autumn for training in the Bell P-39 Airacobra at Oakland Municipal Airport.

The stall characteristics of Bell’s unconventional, tricycle-gear fighter with its engine mounted mid-fuselage behind the pilot, yielding an aft centre of gravity, were giving the Airacobra a bad reputation. Pilots worried they would have a devil of a time recovering from any stall-induced spin they might inadvertently experience. ‘Bud’ told me he was vaguely aware of the P-39’s reportedly odd tendencies, but mostly he was just excited to get into the first fighter he’d ever fly.

The P-39’s peculiarities were the last thing on John Cyrier’s mind as he taxied toward the Commemorative Air Force’s ramp at San Marcos, Texas in the late-evening summer sun nearly 80 years later on 28 July. He had just

completed the final leg of a four-stop flight home from AirVenture 2022 in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Cyrier pivoted the Central Texas Wing’s P-39Q around to the right, braked to a stop and cut power to the fighter’s Allison V-1710 V12 engine. Just after its 11ft 7in Aeroproducts propeller swung to a stop he shot both arms through the P-39’s rolled-down cockpit door windows, clenched his fists and yelled an exultant “Yeeaaaah!” Cyrier had realised a dream three years in the making, reuniting America’s highest-ranking living ace, Col ‘Bud’ Anderson, with a tribute to the aeroplane he first dubbed *Old Crow*.

Before Anderson went to combat in Britain and scored 16.25 kills in B and D-model P-51 Mustangs wearing his famed *Old Crow* livery, he learned how to fight and lead other pilots in the Airacobra, the aircraft he’d first give that name to. After three months with the 328th FG, ‘Bud’ was chosen to be among a cadre of officers forming a new group for combat, the 357th Fighter Group.

Initially, the group trained at Tonopah, Nevada, practising formation flying, gunnery, dive-bombing and aerial combat, flying as many as 100 hours per month. New pilots joined the unit throughout its time at Tonopah,

including ‘Chuck’ Yeager. Anderson was a made a flight leader in the 363rd Fighter Squadron, flying D and later Q-model Airacobras as the group made its way from Tonopah to bases in Santa Rosa and Oroville, California, then Casper, Wyoming, before leaving its P-39s behind and setting sail for England in November 1943.

But before ‘Bud’ left for the ETO, he had a chance to personalise the aircraft he was assigned as flight leader. Many readers may be familiar with the origins of *Old*

*Crow*, but the now 100-year-old ‘Bud’ maintains an amusingly straightforward way of explaining it. “I wanted it to have something to do with flying and I wanted it to have something to do with

drinking... ’cause that’s what we did”, Anderson chuckles. “My drinking buddies all know it’s named after that Kentucky straight bourbon whiskey.”

In spite of Anderson’s fame, however, few realise that P-39Q serial 42-20746 was the original *Old Crow*. John Cyrier, for instance, “had no idea”. A 20-year member of the CAF’s Central Texas Wing (CTW), current member of the Texas House of Representatives and long-time pilot, Cyrier was combing through posts on an internal forum for CTW members when he came across

**ABOVE LEFT:** The then 2nd Lt ‘Bud’ Anderson was posted to the 328th Fighter Group at Hamilton Field near San Francisco to hone his skills on the Airacobra.

VIA JIM ANDERSON

**ABOVE:** P-39Q 42-20746 showing the *Old Crow* name applied in small lettering on the nose.

VIA JIM ANDERSON

“My drinking buddies all know it’s named after a whiskey”

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** Craig Hutain flying P-39Q 42-19597 of the Commemorative Air Force, freshly marked as Col Clarence E. ‘Bud’ Anderson’s original *Old Crow*.





**ABOVE:** From left to right, assistant crew chief Walker (left) and crew chief Sgt Otto Heino with 'Bud' on the wing of his first *Old Crow*.

VIA JIM ANDERSON

a message from fellow member Vernon Rooze with a picture of a plastic model of Anderson's P-39 *Old Crow*. Rooze asked if his colleagues knew about the P-39. "There wasn't much reaction but I thought, 'Wouldn't it be cool if we did an *Old Crow*? And wouldn't it be phenomenal to have Bud Anderson's P-39, his B-model and his P-51D *Old Crows* flying together?'"

The idea wasn't a pipedream. Since 1962, the CAF has owned the P-39Q, 42-19597, pictured here. Recovered from a high school yard in Hobbs, New Mexico, the hulk was trucked to CAF headquarters. CAF Col Don Hull began its restoration four years later with sponsorship from CTW founder Col John Stokes. Stokes donated the restored Airacobra to the CAF in 1974 and it's been flying off and on with the CTW ever since.

"Knowing I had an opportunity to sponsor the airplane and then get checked out in it," said Cyrier, "I thought it would be a phenomenal opportunity to celebrate 'Bud' Anderson and bring that history alive and teach people about the P-39." With twin goals of reuniting Anderson with the CTW's P-39 decorated in his *Old Crow* markings and helping to rebuild the "unfair reputation" he thinks Bell's unique mid-engine fighter acquired, Cyrier dived in, investing time, money and effort into maintenance for

the wing's Airacobra, acquiring the training to fly it and accurately reproducing the livery of Anderson's first *Old Crow*.

**“The P-39 wouldn't have been worth a darn in Europe”**

Though he's relived the experience of flying or riding in a Mustang dozens of times since the war, Anderson hasn't flown a P-39

since late 1943. With its unusual configuration and a 37mm or 20mm cannon firing through the spinner, the Airacobra was a unicorn among contemporary Allied taildragger fighters with in-line and radial engines mounted up front. Its aft centre of gravity was partially balanced by ammunition storage in its nose. But pilots still had to carefully manage the machine.

"Because it was my first fighter, I had nothing to compare it to, so I thought it was pretty nice," 'Bud' told me. Like every other pilot who made the transition, he preferred the P-51, of course. "I enjoyed flying the P-39," he continues. "But it wouldn't have been worth a darn fighting in Europe because it has a one-stage supercharger that kind of craps out at 15,000ft, whereas our Mustang had a two-stage turbo-supercharger. One stage cut in about where the P-39 gave up."

"The aft CG is what gave the P-39 its reputation," he notes. "As the Bell test pilots told me years later, it had some 'pretty peculiar post-stall gyrations'." 'Bud' was witness to a sad illustration of how the Airacobra could severely penalise inexperienced pilots. While still with the 328th FG, flying from Oakland, Anderson and a brand-new wingman were tasked with flying a coastal defence patrol over San Francisco Bay. "This guy out there on my wing was just getting checked out in the P-39," 'Bud' remembers. "I noticed two navy fighters above us. There were a lot of navy squadrons in the bay area so it wasn't surprising. And it wasn't unusual that we would bounce each other and have a little dogfight."

"These two navy guys started heading down toward us. I



**RIGHT:** The tribute at Oshkosh reunited 'Bud' with a P-39 in his colours for the first time since 1943.





waggled my wings to send the message, 'Hey, don't bother me now'. But maybe they thought I was saying, 'Hey, let's have a dogfight'. So I made a pretty steep turn into them and my new wingman — maybe it was his second ride in a fighter — turned inside and just stalled the thing. I watched him go into the bay."

Evidence that the Airacobra could bite even talented pilots was illustrated twice in one week, Anderson says, by none other than 'Chuck' Yeager. "When we got to Casper we were just getting ready to go overseas. A guy by the name of 'Chuck' Yeager flew my airplane and had a landing gear malfunction. He had to suck the gear back up and belly-landed it, and pretty well ruined the airplane! A couple of days later he bailed out of another one and got two of them in a week's time."

That's how 42-20746, the first *Old Crow*, ended its career. Ironically, the first stage of 42-19597's life came to a halt in similar fashion. Delivered to the Army Air Forces in May 1943, the aircraft eventually wound up at Harlingen Army Airfield, Texas in June 1944 to support gunnery training at the field's Aerial Gunnery School. Just a year later, with only 392 hours' total time, the P-39Q was

on its way to the Reconstruction Finance Corporation's aircraft storage, sales and scrapping centre in Albuquerque, New Mexico to be disposed of. Near Hobbs its Allison V12 failed, forcing the pilot to make an emergency landing at a local crop-dusting strip. Moved to the nearby schoolyard, there it sat until 1962.

Cyrier had more than 700 hours flying the 1941 Boeing Stearman Kaydet he owns from his ranch in Lockhart, Texas, plus another 800 hours in other aircraft as well as multi-engine, commercial, and instrument ratings when he had the idea to pay tribute to the original *Old Crow*. That's considerable experience but not enough to fly a warbird fighter, particularly not one as rare as the Airacobra. To make his dream a reality, Cyrier threw himself into training.

His foundation in the Stearman served him well but he went through an intensive T-6 flight programme, rapidly building hours in the trainer including flights with well-known

warbird pilot/instructor Thom Richard. "The CAF made me go through lots of hoops to get to the P-39", Cyrier explains. "I get it, totally accept it and agree with it. It's one of only three flying, it's different than flying all of the other fighters and there's no dual-control P-39."

Stearman to T-6 to P-39... that's nearly the same path 'Bud' followed, one that hasn't been trodden since World War Two by almost anyone

other than Cyrier. Who else these days can say the first fighter they flew was an Airacobra?

Cyrier also took advantage of flying his brother Mark's T-28C Trojan, the only high-

horsepower, tricycle-gear warbird that is similar in some ways to a P-39. "It was excellent preparation. If anyone wants to go fly a P-39, I'd highly recommend they fly a T-28 as was recommended to me. It has 1,400hp and that made me feel prepared."

The Texas state representative also made sure the CTW's Q-model was as good as it could be before taking it aloft. Unlike warbirds

“‘Chuck’ Yeager belly-landed it and pretty well ruined my airplane!”

ABOVE: The Central Texas Wing began applying the new scheme to its P-39 about a month before AirVenture.



## WW2 HISTORY 'Bud' Anderson

**RIGHT:**  
The now-centenarian — he turned 100 on 13 January this year — signs the P-39.

**BELOW RIGHT:**  
Re-creating one of the wartime photos showing 'Bud' with his groundcrew in front of the Airacobra, he's joined by son Jim and daughter Kitty.

in private hands, the CAF's historic aircraft are supported by the organisation's volunteers and donors, and sponsors like Cyrier. He raised considerable money for the aeroplane, spearheading an effort to replace and upgrade its previously tricky-to-operate brakes/wheels combination.

The CTW and Cyrier consulted with the Military Aviation Museum, whose P-39F was recently returned to flying condition, about the Redline brakes and aluminium wheels sourced for their example of the Bell fighter. With help from Jerry Yagen's MAM staff, Cyrier tracked down Redline's original founder-engineer Dan Kumler in Florida. "Dan was able to reproduce the same kind of disc brakes they usually put on P-40s, Stearmans and T-6s and made beautiful, newly spun aluminum wheels to fit them on", he notes.

The P-39 and Cyrier were shaping up but a couple more ingredients were needed. In October 2021, Cyrier contacted 'Bud's' son Jim Anderson with the idea of changing the wing's P-39 to mimic the markings of *Old Crow*. "Jim responded the next day, very enthusiastic and sent me tons of pictures of the airplane", Cyrier remembers. "I was blown away. 'Bud' had a Brownie camera in 1943 at the age of 21 and took all of these photos."

Some of the images are included here. They're delightful proof that the first *Crow* was a P-39 and they would be essential to re-creating Anderson's initial *Old Crow* livery. But first Cyrier wanted to ask 'Bud's' permission. He did so during an interview last March, now viewable on the CTW's YouTube channel. "Bud said, 'I'd feel honoured if you would do that'", Cyrier relates. "He said, 'Boy, we'll get some great ground shots but if we can get those three airplanes in the air, that would be something special!'"

That was Cyrier's intention and, with Anderson's agreement, the Central Texas Wing set to work replicating 'Bud's' markings. Cyrier worked with Colorado-based Aero Graphics to get a complete set of decals. "I was able to take 'Bud's' photos, enlarge them and zoom in and see the details I needed. I took them out to our actual P-39 and was literally able to count rivets and screws, and measure off that to get the sizes and the heights of the markings."



Cyrier, along with CTW volunteer and mechanic Tynneson Moreno and a local aircraft painter, began applying the markings just a month before Oshkosh. The P-39's diminutive *Old Crow* lettering is a far cry from later renditions applied by 'Bud's' groundcrew, led by his

group commanders got together and decided the groups should be permitted to have individual colours to build morale. That's what led to 357th FG commander Col Donald Graham choosing the famed yellow and red checkerboard colours for the 'Yoxford Boys'.

"When we got to change them, Otto and the crew said, 'Let's get *Old Crow* back up there', 'Bud' remembers today. "They put it on the engine cowling up front and it was huge. I was a little embarrassed, but they were so proud of it that I kept it."

Jim Anderson adds that the distinctive dagger-stabbed skull emblem of the 363rd Fighter Squadron which appeared on the doors of 'Bud's' P-39 was in fact a revised version of the unit's original insignia, which further included swastikas in the eye sockets. "The USAAF disapproved [of] the design because no national symbols were allowed in unit markings", Jim explains.

**“ 'Bud' had a Brownie camera in 1943 and took all of these photos ”**

devoted crew chief Sgt Otto Heino, to his B and D-model Mustangs in Britain.

Anderson explains that all the Mustangs in the 8th Air Force wore olive drab paint with white spinner, wing and tail flashes initially before the organisation's fighter





John Cyrier's journey to piloting a P-39 and honouring 'Bud' Anderson is an illustration of the cliché often associated with military life — hurry up and wait. Or, in Cyrier's case, wait and hurry up. His inspiration came about not long before COVID-19 arrived. That global interruption, combined with the FAA's recent on/off prohibition of warbird flight training, delayed his progress. Most of his preparation to fly the CTW's P-39Q took place in the latter stages of 2021 and half-way through 2022. He didn't make his first flight in the newly marked Airacobra until 12 July, just two weeks before AirVenture 2022 where the wing's P-39 would meet up with Bud and the P-51B and D-model *Old Crows* owned by Jack Roush and Jim Hagedorn.

Cyrier says he was a bit apprehensive but felt confident his first flight would be successful. Craig Hutain, the wing's chief pilot and the man with the most experience flying the CTW's Airacobra, flew

chase in a T-28, accompanying the new P-39 pilot. The flight went well, and thereafter Cyrier flew the fighter almost every day until he took off in it for Oshkosh.

That's where his dream came together. After delays on the way to Oshkosh, Cyrier in the P-39 and his brother flying the T-28C arrived shortly before the airfield closed on the evening of Monday 25 July. Early the next morning, Cyrier and Hutain briefed for the Crows flight along with Ray Fowler, Paul Draper and Rob Gordon who would fly the Hagedorn D-model, Roush's B-model and a recently restored TF-51D from Raleigh, North Carolina respectively.

Hutain took the seat in the Airacobra. Cyrier explains, "We had Craig do the actual photo mission. Photo missions are way beyond just a formation flight. Having the two Mustangs and our national treasure 'Bud' Anderson in another, along with the P-39, we had decided way before Oshkosh that this was

a mission for Craig. I was so glad and so proud to get the airplane to Oshkosh for Craig to be able to do that."

Bud was seated in the TF-51D for an up-close and personal airborne view of the three aircraft which now carry his *Old Crow* markings. Cyrier flew right-seat in a Beech Baron used for the photo sortie. With a front-row seat for the realisation of an idea he'd had three years before, Cyrier reflected, "It was my dream to see this for 'Bud' Anderson, to give something back to our national treasure, as I call him. He's such a terrific example of the greatest generation.

"I was taking pictures through the Plexiglas canopy of the Baron during the photo flight and I could see 'Bud' looking at the lead aircraft as you do in any formation flight. He knew exactly what to do. I'm looking over his shoulder and I see the P-39 and the P-51B and D models with all three *Old Crow* names. I'll never get that out of my head." **A**

**ABOVE:**  
The flight of the *Crows*. The Airacobra leads Jack Roush's P-51B Mustang and Jim Hagedorn's P-51D, both in Anderson's markings.