

The evening sun was low on the horizon as John Cyrier taxied toward the Commemorative Air Force's (CAF's) ramp at San Marcos, Texas on July 28. 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 V-12 engine. Just after its 11-foot, seven-inch 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 "Yeeeeeaaah!"

The Central Texas Wing's P-39Q "Old Crow" with the unit's chief pilot Craig Hutain at the controls closes up tight on the camera aircraft over the farm fields near Oshkosh, Wisconsin last July during AirVenture 2022.

The Original "Old Crow"

Col. Bud Anderson's airborne reunion
with a P-39Q Airacobra

BY JAN TEGLER
PHOTOS BY DAVID LEININGER

Cyrier had just realized a dream three years in the making, reuniting America's highest ranking, living ace, Col. Clarence "Bud" Anderson, with a tribute to the airplane he first dubbed "Old Crow."

Before Anderson went to combat in England with the 357th Fighter Group and scored 16.25 kills in B- and D-model P-51 Mustangs wearing his famed "Old Crow" livery, he flew another fighter—the Bell P-39 Airacobra.

Shortly after earning his U.S. Army Air

Nevada, practicing formation flight, gunnery, dive-bombing, and dogfighting, flying as much as 100 hours per month. New pilots, including Chuck Yeager, joined the unit throughout its time at Tonopah.

Anderson was 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 sailing for England in November 1943.

BEFORE ANDERSON WENT TO COMBAT AND SCORED 16.25 KILLS IN P-51 MUSTANGS WEARING HIS FAMED "OLD CROW" LIVERY, HE FLEW ANOTHER FIGHTER—THE BELL P-39 AIRACOBRA.

Force wings and commission in September, 1942, Anderson received orders to the 328th Fighter Group at Hamilton Field near San Francisco to train in the P-39 at Oakland Municipal Airport. After three months, he 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,

Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey

But before Anderson and the 357th left for the ETO, he had a chance to personalize the airplane he was assigned as flight leader. Many readers may be familiar with the origins of "Old Crow," but 100-year-old Anderson 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 know all know it's named after that Kentucky straight bourbon whiskey."

LEFT: Twenty-one-year-old Bud Anderson stands in front of the first "Old Crow," a P-39Q with the 363rd Fighter Squadron. (Photo courtesy Bud Anderson)

BELOW: Numbered 220746, this Airacobra was Anderson's personal P-39 as a flight leader with the 363rd FS. He had the "Old Crow" name applied to the airplane shortly before the 357th Fighter Group left for England in November 1943. (Photo courtesy Bud Anderson)



Anderson and fellow original flight leaders of the 363rd FS at Tonopah, Nevada in 1943. Left to right: squadron commander Capt. Stuart Lauler, 1st Lt. Lloyd Hubbard, 1st Lt. Clarence "Bud" Anderson, 1st Lt. William "OBee" O'Brien, 1st Lt. Paul DeVries, and 1st Lt. Ed Hiro. (Photo courtesy Bud Anderson)

In spite of Anderson's fame, however, few realize that P-39Q, tail-number 220746, was the original "Old Crow."

John Cyrier had no idea a P-39 was the first "Old Crow." A 20-year member of the Central Texas Wing (CTW), current member of the Texas House of Representatives, and longtime pilot, Cyrier was combing through posts on an internal forum for CTW members when he came across 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 pipe dream. 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 where, four years later, CAF Colonel Don Hull began its restoration with sponsorship from CTW founder Colonel John Stokes. Stokes donated the restored Airacobra to the CAF in 1974, and

it has been flying off and on with the CTW ever since. Cyrier shares, "Knowing I had an opportunity to sponsor the plane and then get checked out in it, 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" Cyrier thinks Bell's unique mid-engine fighter acquired, he 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."

"Don't Give Me a P-39"

"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 USAAF drinking song, "Give Me Operations," famously sung by composer and folk singer Oscar Brand.

The Airacobra's unconventional engine placement—mid-fuselage behind the pilot with a long propeller shaft rotating below/

THE ORIGINAL "OLD CROW"

between the pilot's feet—its tricycle landing gear, and 37 mm or 20 mm cannon firing through the nose made it a unicorn among contemporary tail-dragger fighters with inline and radial engines mounted up front.

The configuration gave the P-39 an aft center of gravity that was partially balanced by ammunition storage in its nose. But it also yielded spin characteristics pilots had to be careful of.

"Because it was my first fighter, I had nothing to compare it to, so I thought it was pretty nice," Anderson says. Like every other pilot who made the transition, he preferred the P-51, of course. He hasn't flown a P-39 since late 1943. He adds, "I enjoyed flying it. It had a bad reputation because with the engine behind the pilot it had an aft-CG. So as the Bell test pilots told me years later, it had some 'pretty peculiar post-stall gyrations.'"

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 220746, 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 Force in May 1943, the airplane 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 center in Albuquerque, New Mexico to be disposed of. Near Hobbs its Allison V-12 failed, forcing the pilot to make an emergency landing at a local crop dusting strip. Moved to the schoolyard, there it sat until 1962.

Following in Anderson's footsteps

Cyrier had more than 700 hours flying his 1941 Stearman out of his ranch in Lockhart, Texas plus another 1,700 hours, mostly in tail-wheel 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 and unique 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 program, rapidly building hours in the trainer and 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. I get it, totally accept it and agree with it," Cyrier explains. "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 Col. Anderson followed, one that hasn't been trodden since WW II by almost anyone other than Cyrier. CTW chief pilot Craig Hutain and Cyrier are among the only modern warbird pilots who can say the P-39 was the first warbird fighter they flew.

Cyrier also took advantage of flying his brother Mark's T-28C, the only high-horsepower, tricycle-gear warbird that is similar in some ways to a P-39. He adds, "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 1,400 horsepower 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 in private hands, the CAF's historic aircraft are supported by the organization's volunteers, donors, and sponsors like Cyrier. He raised considerable money for the airplane, spearheading an effort to replace and upgrade

Anderson and the men who helped him bring the first "Old Crow" livery to life, his crew chief Otto Heino and assistant crew chief Walker. (Photo courtesy Bud Anderson)

AD



its previously tricky-to-operate brakes/wheels combination.

The CTW and Cyrier consulted with the Military Aviation Museum (MAM), which recently returned its restored P-39F to flying condition, about the Redline brakes and aluminum wheels sourced for their 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 few more ingredients were needed.

Permission & a Brownie Camera

In October 2021, Cyrier contacted Anderson's son Jim with the idea of changing the Wing's P-39 to mimic the markings of the first "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 prove essential to recreating Anderson's initial "Old Crow" livery. But first Cyrier wanted to ask Bud Anderson's permission. He did so during an

interview with him last March, now viewable on the CTW's YouTube channel.

"Bud said, 'I'd feel honored 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 Anderson'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 crew chief Tennyson 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

TOP: Craig Hutain brings the newest "Old Crow," the CAF Central Texas Wing's P-39Q, alongside for David Leininger's camera near Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

ABOVE: Bud Anderson (left) with daughter Kathryn and son Jim at AirVenture 2022.

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: Anderson autographs a panel on the Central Texas Wing's P-39 that now wears his "Old Crow" livery. ■ Anderson on the right wing of his first "Old Crow," P-39Q serial number 220746 at Casper, Wyoming in 1943. ■ Anderson reprises the picture above nearly 80 years later, posing just as he did in 1943 at AirVenture 2022 in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Note the 363rd FS emblem on the P-39's right cockpit door. This was actually a revised version of the squadron's original design that included swastikas in the skull's eye sockets. The original was "disapproved" because the USAAF didn't allow national symbols in unit markings. ■ Anderson straps into the rear cockpit of a TF-51D piloted by Rob Gordon for the morning flight with the three "Old Crows" at Oshkosh. At 100 years old, he still enjoys going flying in a Mustang.



renditions applied by Bud's ground crew, led by his devoted crew chief Sergeant Otto Heino, to his B- and D-model Mustangs in England.

Anderson explains that all of the Mustangs in the 8th Air Force initially wore olive drab paint with white spinner, wing and tail flashes before the organization's fighter group commanders got together and decided that the groups should have individual colors to build morale. That's what led to 357th FG commander Col. Donald Graham choosing the "Yoxford Boys" famed yellow and red checkerboard.

"When we got to change them, Otto and the crew said, 'Let's get 'Old Crow' back up there,'" Anderson remembers. "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 dagger-stabbed skull emblem of the 363rd Fighter Squadron that appeared on the doors of

"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."



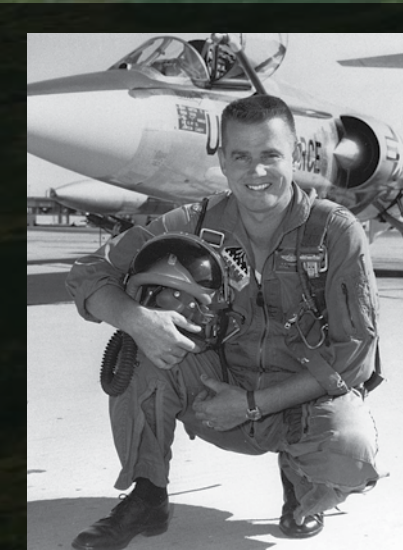
his father's P-39 was a revised version of the unit's original emblem that included swastikas in the eye sockets.

"The USAAF disapproved the design because no national symbols were allowed in unit markings," he explains.

Airborne with a Murder of Crows

John Cyrier's journey to piloting a P-39 and honoring 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.

The three "Old Crows" fly in formation near Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Craig Hutain leads in the P-39Q with Paul Draper in Jack Roush's P-51B "Old Crow" below and to his right, and Ray Fowler trails in Jim Hagedorn's P-51D "Old Crow."



TOP HONORS

On October 14, 2022, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III approved Col. Clarence E. Anderson's promotion to the grade of Brigadier General, an extremely rare and well-deserved honor. Anderson's previous awards include two Legion of Merits, five Distinguished Flying Crosses, the Bronze Star, 16 Air Medals, the French Legion of Honor, the French Croix de Guerre, and many campaign and service ribbons.

His inspiration was formed 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 halfway through 2022.

He didn't make his first flight in the newly marked Airacobra until July 12, 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 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 Monday evening July 25. 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 CTW P-39, 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."

Anderson was seated in the TF-51D for an up close and personal airborne view of the three airplanes that now carry his "Old Crow" markings. Cyrier flew right-seat in a Beech Baron used for the photo mission. With a front row seat for the realization 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!"

PILOT REPORT

Charming the Snake

Craig Hutain & John Cyrier on flying the Bell P-39 Airacobra

Headquartered just over a mile from the often frozen waters of the Niagara River and Lake Erie in Buffalo, New York, Bell Aircraft Company and its founder Larry Bell were known for doing things differently in the late 1930s.

In 1937, the company debuted its radically unconventional YFM-1 Airacuda, a twin-engine, pusher-driven design that included a gunner station at the forward end of each engine nacelle to operate the airplane's twin 37 mm cannons. Conceptualized as a "bomber destroyer" or "convoy fighter," the heavy, slow Airacuda proved too bizarre for the U.S. Army Air Corps. Just one prototype and 12 production versions of the Allison V-12 powered oddity were built with all scrapped by 1942.

But some of the Airacuda's weirdness spilled over into the DNA of another snake, the P-39 Airacobra.

An Allison V-12 mounted mid-fuselage six inches behind the pilot's shoulders drove an 11-foot Aeroproducts propeller via a driveshaft that ran between the pilot's ankles. A 37 or 20 mm cannon fired through its spinner. Automotive-style canopy doors with windows the pilot could roll-up/down, comparatively tiny wings and vertical stabilizer, and tricycle landing gear—described the P-39.

But this time around, the Army Air Corps was interested. First flown in April 1939, the P-39 was one of America's frontline fighters on December 7, 1941. Over 9,500 were built through August 1944, with roughly half sent to the Soviet Union. American pilots weren't too enthusiastic about the Airacobra, but the Russians liked it.

Craig Hutain, chief pilot for the Commemorative Air Force's Central Texas Wing, likes it, too. He has over 100 hours of flight time in this rare type and plenty more in its younger brother, the P-63 King Cobra, as well as the P-51 Mustang and P-40.

"If you think of warbird fighters as cars, the P-51 is a big, nice, smooth-riding Cadillac," Hutain says. "The P-40 is a Lexus. It's just as smooth and maybe a little more maneuverable. The P-63 is like a Jeep CJ-5 and the P-39 is like a 1943 Willys jeep. It's really fun and agile but not terribly refined."

But that adds to the fun Hutain opines. "A Stearman isn't refined, neither is a Champ. The P-39 is a joy to fly."

John Cyrier likes it too. With just about 24 hours total time in the Central Texas Wing's Q-model Airacobra—one of only three P-39s currently airworthy—since early July, he agrees that its character is a bit rough around the edges.

"It's a very mechanical airplane," Cyrier explains. "You feel the vibration. Because the engine is behind you, because you have the drive shaft—which is like over ten feet long—and because you've got the gear reduction housing for the propeller right in front of you with its straight-cut gears, you really feel the airplane. You've got the exhaust noise and you definitely hear it, even though it's behind you. You really notice the sound of the straight-cut gears and the whine they produce."

MOUNT UP AND TAXI

Though he enjoys it, Craig Hutain wants to make it clear that flying the P-39 is deceptively tricky. "People mistakenly assume that because it's a tricycle gear airplane it's easier to fly," he notes. "It's absolutely not. There's the nose-wheel steering challenge and overheating. It's got two oil coolers and one radiator, so it heats up fast."

Climbing onto the Airacobra's wing, opening the door to the cockpit and taking a seat brings the realization that "everything about it is kind of small," Hutain says.

"The cockpit is quite snug. I'm 5-foot-ten and I have to fold myself up a bit, more than is comfortable, to get in. There's definitely a procedure for entry. Also, the head space is tight enough that I really can't wear a flight helmet when I fly ... gotta use my Bose headset."

A wingspan of just 34 feet and narrower main gear than the P-63 add to the impression of smallness. Hutain says the P-39's roll-down windows help relieve a bit of the cramped feel.

"The windows are one of the coolest aspects of the plane. There's nothing like rolling them down, on taxi in and waving to the crowd! Just like the doors on a '65 Ford Mustang!"

When the Allison V-1710 comes to life in the P-39, there's not much time to wait around, Hutain explains. The Wing's Q-model is equipped with a spray bar and a 23-gallon water/coolant tank in the nose in place of the cannon and ammunition originally located there. On the ground, it's common to use the spray bar if the airplane has been running for five minutes or more he affirms. "If you're flying a show in west Texas on a hot day, you want to start up, taxi to the active, do a run-up and get going. In a P-39 you always want to put wind through the radiators to keep the engine cool."

Getting to the runway is one of the trickiest phases of operating the Airacobra, Hutain says. "I don't know whether it's because of the prop shaft but you can't really idle the airplane at below 1,000 rpm. There's a harmonic vibration that sets up and it will shake the instrument panel so bad it will break the instruments. It's really violent."

That means the pilot has to add a touch of throttle to keep the engine turning above 1,000 rpm. Doing so increases the challenge of steering the P-39. It has a free-castering nose wheel, so steering is accomplished by differential braking.

"That means you kind of have to ride the brakes," Hutain adds. "I jokingly say that if you want to show off in a P-39, bring it to a stop taxiing up to an audience. If you can brake straight ahead and not have the nose tire turn left or right, anybody that knows the P-39 will say, 'That guy is good.'"

TAKEOFF & CLIMB

Cyrier says he completes his run-up and mag-check while taxiing. When he's lined up on the runway, the fun continues ... in a manner of speaking. When cleared for takeoff, it's time to



LIFTOFF COMES AT AROUND 100 MPH, BUT IT'S MORE A CASE OF ALLOWING THE AIRPLANE TO FLY WHEN IT WANTS TO ... I PUT THE AIRPLANE IN A POSITION TO FLY, THE FLIGHT ATTITUDE I WANT IT TO BE IN, AND I LET IT TELL ME WHEN IT'S READY TO FLY."



HUTAIN THINKS OF THE P-39 AS AN EARLY INTERCEPTOR WITH ITS SMALL WINGS BIG, POWERFUL ENGINE AND WIDE-CHORD, THREE-BLADE PROPELLER. "TO ME, IT'S LIKE A POOR MAN'S BEARCAT."

push the throttle up and anticipate a lot of torque.

Hutain and Cyrier use a conservative power setting to get airborne, usually 46 inches of manifold pressure and 3,000 rpm.

The American fighters of WW II feature left hand-turning engines. With power on, the P-39's V-12 pulls it strongly to the left on the runway in any situation, but it's worse with a crosswind Hutain, reports. Using the main gear brakes is essential to keeping the airplane straight because its vertical stabilizer and rudder are comparatively diminutive. "You're adding power and you're tapping the right brake to keep the airplane straight because the airplane wants to head viciously off the left side of the runway. So you have full [right] rudder which is doing nothing because it's the size of a dinner plate. You get going about 60 mph indicated and the rudder is not doing you much good."

Cyrier says he dials in five degrees of right rudder trim and cocks the stick slightly to starboard. "One of the techniques [warbird instructor] Thom Richard taught me is that you always want right aileron in. The airplane feels like it's putting so much load on your left main gear."

Hutain says right rudder can be diminished as speed increases and the airplane passes through 70 mph. Liftoff comes at around 100 mph, but it's more a case of allowing

the airplane to fly when it wants to, he notes. "You're really not staring at an airspeed indicator in any of these airplanes. I put the airplane in a position to fly, the flight attitude I want it to be in, and I let it tell me when it's ready to fly."

Hutain and Cyrier agree that the P-39 climbs well. "The climb rate is typically 1,500 to 2,000 feet per minute," Cyrier says. "I've pushed it over it and had it climbing at over 3,000 fpm no problem."

Hutain thinks of the P-39 as an early interceptor with its small wings big, powerful engine and wide-chord, three-blade propeller. "To me, it's like a poor man's Bearcat."

Comparing it to the P-63 and P-40 which both use the Allison V-12 as well, Hutain says he can climb at a good rate using less power in the P-39. "Normal climb power for a P-40 or P-63 would be 35 inches and 2,400 rpm, or if you really wanted performance, 40 inches and 2,700 rpm. I do my climbs in the P-39 at basically 32 inches and 2,100 rpm."

CRUISE & MANEUVERABILITY

When it's up and away, the P-39 has good agility and generally pleasant flying traits according to Hutain. Cross-country legs of an hour to an hour and a quarter are reasonable given the Airacobra's small wing fuel tanks.

Cyrier flew "Old Crow" from the CTW's San Marcos, Texas

base to Oshkosh and back in four-leg flights with close to 90 minutes per leg. He experimented with power settings on previous flights to understand the airplane's fuel burn and used his calculations to do his flight planning. "Ground speed is right at about 250 mph," he says. "The happy spot for the settings is around 27 inches and 2,150 rpm."

Hutain uses a little more power for cruise flight but still pampers the Allison. "I cruise both the P-39 and the P-63 at 30 inches of manifold and 2,000 rpm. A lot of people don't like going that low in turns but in the Bell manual during the war they brought them back to 1,700 rpm."

Even at those conservative power settings, he attests that the whine from the reduction gears in the P-39 and P-63 and the feel of mechanical action from their V-12s is conspicuous. "The thing I remember most about both these airplanes is the mechanical noise that you can hear and kind of feel happening six inches behind your shoulder blades. If you think about the monkey-motion in the valve train, you can kind of feel the engine mechanicals. It's a really unique experience I've never had before in any motorized vehicle."

Both pilots say that the P-39 requires frequent trimming, even in level flight, as fuel burns from either of its wings tanks.

Hutain has done aerobatics in the Wing's Q model and says it maneuvers well at higher speeds as long as you respect the corners of its performance envelope. "The P-39 has a sensational roll rate, probably as good as a Mustang and nearly as good as the P-40," he contends. "It has light controls as well for what it is. As with all airplanes, the forces will build as you go faster, but the P-39 is very agile, very light on the controls."

"At anything over about 180 mph indicated you can have 2 Gs. At anything above 200 mph you can have 3 Gs, and above 220 mph you're good up to 4 or 4.5 Gs. It likes wind over its wings and as long as you're not slow, it's quite agile."

But with the power on the Snake can depart if you're not careful he explains. "When I first flew the airplane I was noodling around at 180 knots doing turns over the runway to try to get a feel for the airplane. The first thing you want to do is find the corners. I couldn't tell you at what speed or G it was but I was absolutely amazed at how early the airplane let loose. The P-40 will corner all day long at 180 knots, but the P-39 lets go pretty early."

That trait may have been less than endearing to the Army Air Corps pilots transitioning to the P-39 as their first fighter.

Bud Anderson was witness to a sad illustration of how the Airacobra could severely penalize inexperienced pilots. While with the 328 FG, flying P-39s from Oakland, California in 1943, Anderson and a brand new wingman were tasked with flying a coastal defense 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 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."

"The P-39 is not a slow-speed maneuvering airplane," Hutain reports.

APPROACH & LANDING

Landing the P-39 is not too different from landing the P-40, P-51 or P-63, according to Hutain. "I fly them all about the same."

In the P-39, he does an overhead break to landing, making "one big swooping turn to final."

"When I come into the overhead break, I try to pull back to about 26 inches and 2,500 rpm, not all the way back because you're going to shock cool the engine because it's water-cooled and you don't want to load the plugs up with a bunch of lead and carbon."

"You do the overhead to scrub off energy and with the P-39's short wings you can scrub it off pretty easily," he notes. "Pulling about 2 Gs gets you down to where you need to be for your gear [speed]. You throw your gear out and then it's about a count of five and you're right there at your flap speed. Once you've got the flaps coming down, that's about all you'll need for turning base."

Hutain slows the aircraft to 150 mph on downwind, 130 mph for the base leg and "no slower than 110 mph indicated across the fence."

Checking brake pressure on downwind is a necessary chore. "You want to make sure you've got good brake pressure on both brakes. If you don't, you probably need to do a go-around."

He waits until he has the runway made to slide the Q-model's throttle back because "when you pull the power back to idle and you get that groovy little 'pop-pop-pop' sound, it's like hitting a brick wall in these airplanes. You slow down pretty quick with the prop. It's like trying push an 11-foot sheet of plywood through the air."

Roll out requires the same attention as takeoff with aerodynamic braking keeping the Airacobra's nose up until speed drops to around 60 mph. Differential braking, in sparing touches, is necessary to keep pointed straight down the runway.

FORMATION FUN

Cyrier tells me flying the P-39 is incredibly rewarding as he discovers more about it on every flight. He's carefully building experience to stay on top of a fighter that, like most of its contemporaries, demands constant attention. "But for me it's very special to have the P-39 as my first fighter," he enthuses. Amazingly, the P-39 was the first warbird fighter Hutain flew as well. That gives both a unique perspective on the Airacobra.

Hutain says the P-39 "does a sensational four-point roll" but his favorite thing to do with it "is fly it in tight formation with another Bell airplane. It's like a little jackrabbit. If you get sucked a little bit [out of position] you just squirt a little power and she's right on it. It's a wonderful formation platform." →