TWO THRONES FOR THE KING

THE BELL P-63E KINGCOBRA WOULD BE A VERY LIMITED PRODUCTION AIRCRAFT. WE EXAMINE THE E MODEL AND TWO MODIFIED VARIANTS ALONG WITH THE TYPE'S MILITARY SERVICE IN HONDURAS

BY HOWARD CARTER

As the war progressed in favor of the Allies, Bell Aircraft Corporation tried many different concepts to improve the performance of the Bell P-63 Kingcobra. It wasn't as if the P-63 was a bad aircraft — far from it. However, there were better aircraft in production with the promise of even more improved warplanes in the very near future.

Many other fighter types saw a plethora of experimental designations; not so the Kingcobra. There were only two P-63 variants that were not built for mass production. One was the P-63D-1-BE that was fitted with an improved visibility bubble canopy; the second was P-63F-1-BE (two built) fitted with larger vertical tails as part of a NACA experiment to improve P-63 directional stability.

Perhaps the most interesting experimental P-63 variant was an aircraft that was never built — the XP-63B. Bell intended this aircraft to be flown with a Packard V-1650 Merlin in order to achieve improved high-altitude performance. The program was cancelled before metal could be cut.

The main production variants of the Kingcobra were the P-63A (1725 built, P-63A-10-BE comprising 730 aircraft) and P-63C (1227 built, with the P-63C-5-BE comprising 1012 aircraft).

THE BELL P-63E

With virtually no USAAF interest in the Kingcobra, the government (via Lend-Lease) and the Soviet Union drew up contracts (although these had to go through USAAF approval) to construct 1574 P-63E-1-BEs. A second contract for a further 425 E-1s was also drawn up. There was also a future projection for a further 1674 P-63E-5-BEs, which would be an E-1 with upgrades. It was planned that many, but probably not all, of these airframes would be upgraded with the bubble canopy of the P-63D and revised vertical tail of the P-63F. In the end, the Soviets would receive some 2421 Kingcobras (other sources have this number as 2415), but the type would come along at the very end of

Planned production P-63Es would incorporate the bubble canopy tested on P-63D 43-11718. Test pilot Robert Borcherdt took the P-63D up for a test flight to check high altitude performance. Apparently, the Allison came apart at 30,000-ft resulting in a fire that incapacitated the pilot. The one-off Kingcobra went into a nose dive from which it did not recover. (Bell)

NX41963 in its earliest form with open rear cockpit and no ventral fin. Wording EXPERIMENTAL is carried on the craft's left door. (Howard Levy)

Beautiful clear side view of P-63C NX41963 at the Bell factory in Buffalo, New York. During its time with Bell, the aircraft went through numerous small airframe and markings changes. In this 14 October 1946 photo, the plane carries the Bell logo on the nose. (Jim Hawkins)