

# A History of NASIC

NATIONAL AIR AND SPACE INTELLIGENCE CENTER

WRIGHT-PATTERSON AIR FORCE BASE, OHIO

## CSI—Fairborn

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In the late 1980's, two Russian hunters discovered an aircraft crash site somewhere near Murmansk. Two things were apparent from the wreckage: the aircraft was a World War II-era fighter, given the heavy machine gun found; and the aircraft had been manufactured in the United States. The remains of the pilot were also found at the site and, given the origins of the aircraft, the hunters thought that the pilot might have been an American.

Through some unknown chain of personal contacts, information about the crash site was passed to the Russian representatives on the Quadripartite (American, Russian, British, and French) governing body for the city of Berlin. The Russian representatives informally approached their American counterparts to see if they could be of assistance in identifying the aircraft and possibly the nationality of the pilot. These pictures were passed along with the informal request.



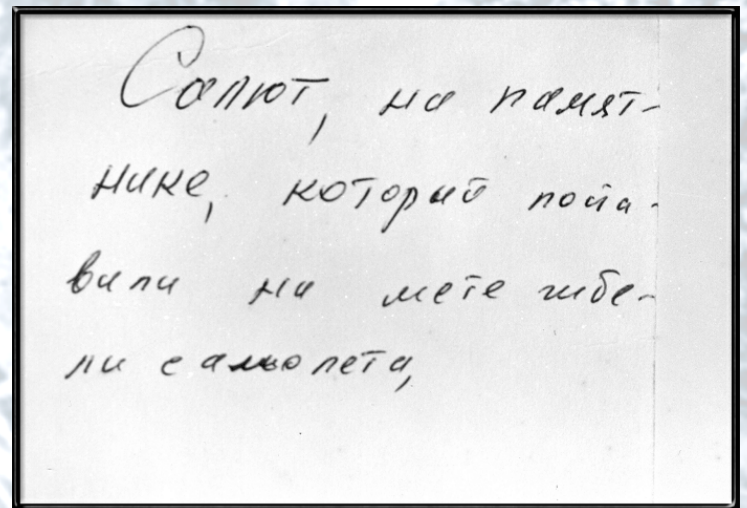
*Hunters at Crash Site*

The American representatives were at a loss to answer the Russian's questions, but agreed to investigate further. If the aircraft was American, it was most likely a Bell P-39 Airacobra, Curtiss P-40 Warhawk, or Bell P-63 Kingcobra. Again, through a chain of personal contacts, the pictures from the Russian crash site were passed to the Air Force Foreign Technology Division (FTD). My love of aircraft scale modeling and aviation history was well known to many in FTD, so I was approached to see if I could shed any light on the identity of the aircraft.

The initial set of photographs contained little information that could precisely identify the aircraft. The smooth curve of the tail surfaces and the lack of a tail wheel well pointed toward the aircraft being a P-39, but what was needed to definitely identify the aircraft was the manufacturer's data plate. To provide guidance to the Russians as to where to locate this plate, I contacted Geoff Hays, then Director of Acquisitions at the US Air Force Museum and a close friend in scale modeling circles, to see if he could assist me. Geoff invited me to the museum and together we searched the museum's P-39 to find the location of the manufacturer's data plate. For the Bell P-39, the data plate is located on the backside of the nosewheel landing gear strut. This information was passed back through the informal chain to guide the Russian hunters should they return to the site for more information.

I don't know if it was our feedback or if the Russians found the data plate on their own, but soon after our return contact, a new set of photographs was sent to us containing closeup views of the aircraft manufacturer's data plate.

The information on the data plate was conclusive. The aircraft was not a P-39, but a Bell Aircraft Model 14. The P-39 designation was given only to Model 14 aircraft actually purchased by the US Army Air Force (USAAF). The engine designator was also listed as



*Inscription on Pilot's Grave Marker*





*Hunter Holding Machine Gun*



*Part Made in United States*



*More Crash Remains*





a V-1710-E4, the Allison Company's commercial designator. The USAAF engine designator would have been V-1710-35 if the aircraft had been a P-39. Conclusively, this aircraft was never owned by the US government. So, it is also unlikely that the pilot was an American.

Who did own this aircraft? The data plate also lists the aircraft's serial number as being BW149, the British convention for assigning serial numbers to aircraft. Early in World War II, the British government was in desperate need of aircraft. It sent purchasing agents to the United States to visit all US aircraft manufacturers and selected several aircraft type for purchase by the Royal Air Force. One of these was the Bell Model 14, the Airacobra I in the British designation scheme. The British directly purchased four blocks of Airacobra I aircraft (AH570-AH739, AP264-AP304, BW100-BW183, and BX135-BX434). BW149 is included in the third block of those purchased.

The Airacobra was tested extensively by the British and one squadron, No. 601 "County of London" Squadron, actually used the aircraft in combat for a brief period. The Airacobra's lack of a turbo supercharger made it unsuitable for combat in Western Europe. When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, the British suddenly

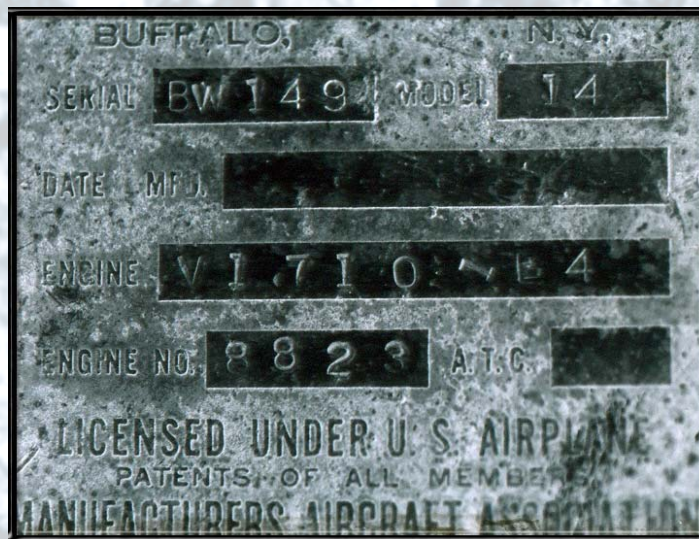
had a new ally also in desperate need of aircraft. In 1942, the British shipped 212 of their remaining Airacobra aircraft to the Soviet Union, while the rest were retained by the United States, where they became the P-40 in USAAF service. Interestingly, BW149 was apparently one of only six aircraft of the third block that were actually transferred to the USSR. The rest of that block was used by the USAAF. The Airacobra I was well suited to the low-altitude, ground-attack-oriented fighting on the Eastern Front. Several Soviet aces achieved many of their victories flying Airacobra planes.

In the final analysis, in all likelihood, Airacobra I, BW149, was purchased from the Bell Aircraft Company by the British, transferred to the USSR, and shipped to Russia via convoy to Murmansk. The aircraft would have been unpacked and assembled right off the ship and was being flown to the front, probably by a Russian combat or ferry pilot, when it crashed.

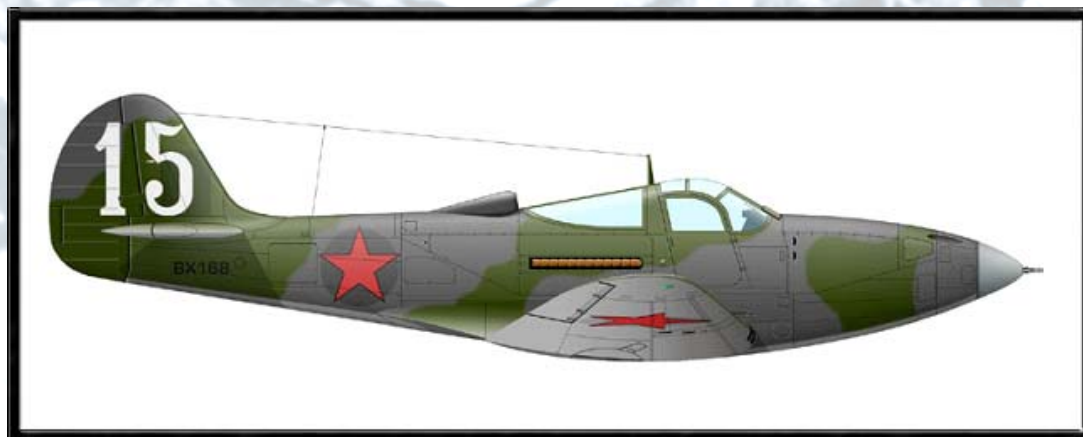
It has always fascinated me that even at the height of the Cold War, the Russians and the Americans both held each other's contributions and sacrifices in the Great Patriotic War in such high regard. It moved me that the Russians thought so much of a possible American war casualty that they went to such great lengths to determine if the remains found by the hunters should be returned home. It gave me great pleasure to be able to tell the Russians that this gallant pilot was most likely a Son of the Rodina.



*Bell Aircraft Data Plate*



*Model, Serial, and Engine Numbers*



*Airacobra I, BX168, in Soviet Markings*