

LAWRENCE DALE BELL, 1894-1956

"...Lawrence D. Bell is 'president, nerves, voice, elbows, and heart of the Bell Aircraft Corporation,' manufacturers of the famous pursuit ship P-39, which is known as the Airacobra, and its assembly-line brother, which the Royal Air Force calls the 'Caribou.' The success of his firm, Bell believes, is due to the fact that it has always been 'armament minded,' that all who worked there realized 'the basic reason for fighter airplanes--winged weapons with a knockout punch.'

"Lawrence Dale Bell was born in Mentone, Indiana, the son of Isaac Evans and Harriet (Sarber) Bell. When he was still in short pants he was taken by his parents to Santa Monica, California. In Santa Monica he attended high school until, inspired by the exploits of his brother, Grover Bell, one of the early airplane pilots, he left school to take a position with the Glenn L. Martin Company. By 1912, when he was eighteen, he was shop foreman at Martin, at a time when the factory at Los Angeles was housed in an abandoned church and listed in the telephone directory under 'amusements.'

"Bell's rise to the top was rapid. By 1925 he was Martin's vice-president and general manager. Three years later, however, he left Martin to take the positions, first of general sales manager and then of vice-president and general manager of Major Reuben Fleet's Consolidated Aircraft Corporation at Buffalo, New York. When Consolidated moved from Buffalo to California in 1935, Bell quit his secure position to remain behind with his wife, Lucille Mainwaring, whom he had married in 1915, and to develop his own ideas. He and Ray P. Whitman and Robert J. Woods of Consolidated shared the unorthodox belief that the airplane was primarily a weapon, and they had ideas for making it an effective one.

"These men started with a shoestring and a screw driver. They scraped together enough capital in that depression year to lease part of a one-story building and hire forty employees. While keeping themselves going by sub-contracts for building wings for Consolidated PBV Navy patrol boats they started working on a revolutionary type of twin-engine multi-seat fighter. In the summer of 1937 this new plane was completed. Called the Airacuda, it mounted two 37 millimeter cannons in power turrets firing from the nose of each engine nacelle. By the time the Army had bought thirteen of these planes, though, Bell and Woods had discarded the idea of this pusher-plane with the propellers behind the wings in favor of an even more revolutionary plane idea.

"The idea was based on Bell's belief that three qualities were vital for fighter planes: sufficient fire power, improved landing and ground handling characteristics, and greater vision. In 1937 he and Woods started to develop such a plane. In February 1939 the Bell Aircraft Corporation entered two designs in competition for an Army Air Corps pursuit plane. Both designs were built around a 37 mm. airplane cannon which was located in the nose and fired through a hollow propeller hub; both had tricycle landing gears. But in one the pilot sat behind the Allison liquid-cooled engine, while in the other he sat in front of it. The winning design was the one in which the pilot was in front of the engine.

"In April 1939 the Bell Aircraft Corporation received a contract for thirteen planes of the winning design, called XP-39 by the Army and the Airacobra by Bell. Building these planes was no simple matter. There was trouble with the landing gear until the fuselage was made

