

At the time of the accident, the prototype had accumulated just 3 hours 20 minutes of flying time (Balfour had logged 2,298.40 hours of solo time at this point). The Civil Aeronautics Authority Air Safety Board listed damage to the aircraft as “engine housing broken, both wingtips damaged, tail surfaces damaged, top of fuselage damaged, and other miscellaneous damage.”

Investigation of the crash revealed that the Allison had run dry when the selected fuel tank had been allowed to be completely depleted. NAA and the British both agreed that, in spite of the crash, they had a winning aircraft and the accident was no way the fault of the design.

Some aviation historians have recorded that the prototype was scrapped after the accident, but this was not the case. Actually, the prototype was carefully raised out of the bean field by crane and transported back to NAA where it was stripped apart and rebuilt in a very short time. However, to increase the pace of flight testing, the first RAF machine was completed and joined in the flight program.

Robert C. “Bob” Chilton was hired as chief test pilot to replace the unfortunate Balfour, and a study of Bob’s logbooks indicates he flew the rebuilt NA-73X on 3 April 1941 for a 1-hour familiarization flight from Mines Field. Chilton also recalled that the NA-73X had made between five and six flights with another pilot immediately after its rebuild. Chilton went on to make at least a dozen more flights with the aircraft.

Bob later remarked, “The NA-73X was a clean-flying aircraft with no bad vices. It was quite pleasant in the air and handled very similar to the later production articles.”

Chilton had accrued considerable fighter experience in the Air Corps before going to NAA, flying the Boeing P-12 and P-26, the Curtiss P-36, and other fighter types. His expertise in the fighter field enabled the engineers to incorporate changes that would be beneficial to the combat pilot.

“I recall that the NA-73X was just pushed to the side after it had been retired from its last flight,” stated Chilton. “It probably ended up on the company’s junk pile, but I do not recall seeing it there. The NA-73X was a very attractive aircraft and its aluminum skin glowed with constant waxing by George Mountain Bear, an American Indian whose duty was to keep the airframe as clean as possible to pick up those few vital miles per hour.”

With the first RAF aircraft coming off the production line, NAA and the British decided to use these airframes for continued testing. “The ‘old’ NA-73X was no longer representative of the design,” said Chilton. “We had orders on our hands for hundreds of new fighters and the NA-73X had served its purpose. It had established the trend for what I believe was the finest propeller-driven fighter ever built by any country.”

Research indicates that the NA-73X, stripped of useable components, may have been donated to a local trade school.

NAMING THE MUSTANG

Following the arrival of this official British Purchasing Commission communiqué at NAA on 12 December 1940, the NA-73 became known as the Mustang.

EXPORT OFFICE BRITISH PURCHASING COMMISSION
9 DECEMBER 1940

IN REPLY PLEASE QUOTE BAC/C/A250 (FSC)

NORTH AMERICAN AVIATION, INC., INGLEWOOD,
CALIFORNIA

CONTRACT A250
FOR THE SUPPLY OF NA-73 AIRPLANES AND SPARES
LETTER OF AMENDMENT NO. 13

GENTLEMEN:

WE ARE TO INFORM YOU THAT THE ABOVE MENTIONED AEROPLANES HAVE BEEN GIVEN THE OFFICIAL DESIGNATION “MUSTANG,” AND THIS NAME SHALL BE USED IN ALL CORRESPONDENCE.

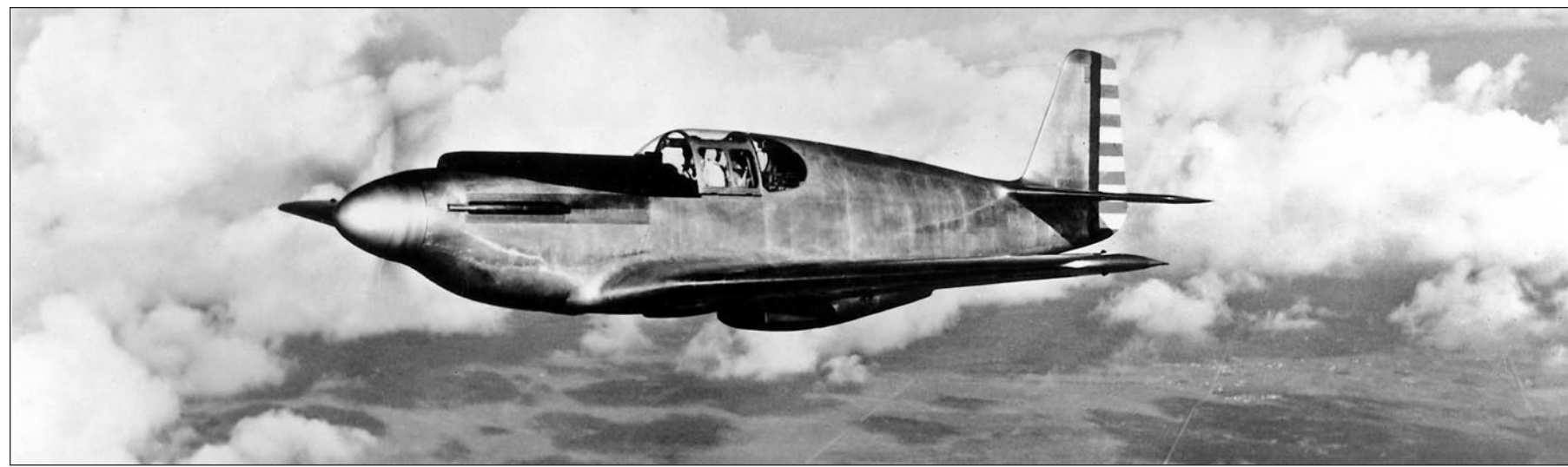
PLEASE RETURN TO US THE THREE ATTACHED COPIES OF THIS LETTER DULY SIGNED BY AN AUTHORIZED OFFICER OF YOUR COMPANY.

VERY TRULY YOURS,
HIS MAJESTY’S GOVERNMENT IN THE UNITED KINGDOM
BY BRITISH PURCHASING COMMISSION
BY (SIGNED) R. F. PAYNE
FOR AND ON BEHALF OF THE DIRECTOR GENERAL

ACCEPTED: 12 DEC. 1940
SUPPLIER: NORTH AMERICAN AVIATION, INC.
BY: (SIGNED) NOBLE SHROPSHIRE
TITLE: CONTRACT ADMINISTRATOR



Even though later production variants would feature many changes, the basic profile of the Mustang remained recognizable through its production life.



The rebuilt NA-73X with the radiator scoop fully retracted. The racing style windscreen was soon replaced with armor glass. Oddly, the eliminated rudder stripes have been touched back in for this photo.