

# Conventional and Unconventional



The engine position in the Airacobra gave the pilot a good range of view.

## Another of "Indicator's" Handling Impression Series : The Bell Airacobra and Two Early Curtiss Fighters Remembered

THE British-trained pilot must necessarily "live" for several weeks in American fighters if he is to learn to appreciate them, and if one of them happens to be unconventional in the extreme sense, the recovery action is even more delayed. Of course, the layout is all very neat and tidy in every American type, and makes the average British cockpit look like a blacksmith's shop; but we have grown up with all the bits and pieces and have learnt to like it that way.

Obviously, it would be unfair to judge the modern American fighter by the yardstick of some very early attempts. The three aircraft I have bunched together—the Airacobra, the Tomahawk and the Kittyhawk—were slow and had a very poor altitude performance even when compared with British fighters of the same period. American designers have gone a long way since then, with or without the help of British power-units and early European fighting experience, but these machines helped to fill the gaps and the Curtiss fighters, at least, did good work in Africa and the Far East. From my own non-operational point of view, all three handled nicely and offered no difficulties.

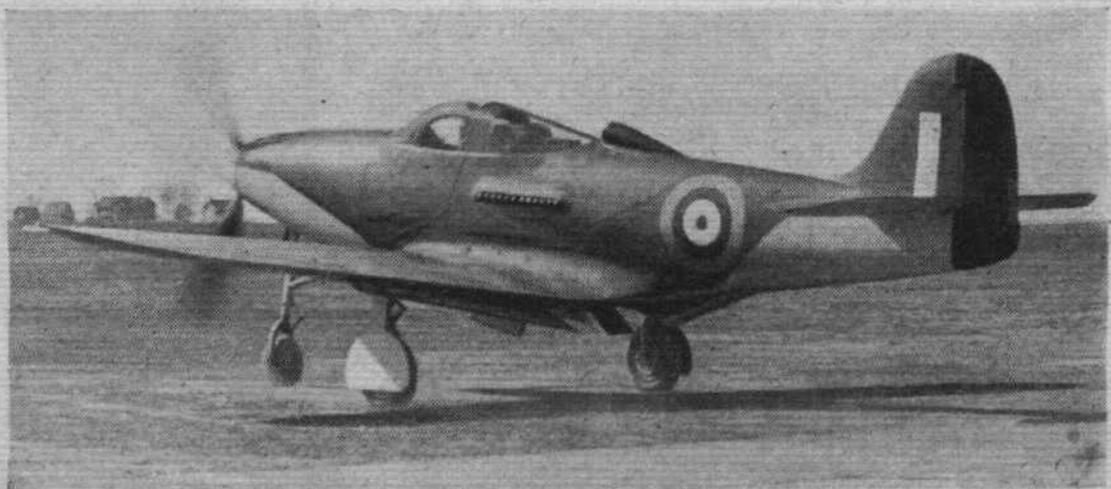
The Bell Airacobra, of course, was something quite new, with its Allison engine sitting in the small of one's back, with a propeller-shaft between one's legs, and with a tricycle undercarriage. Nevertheless, it must be confessed that there was still so much cowling in front of the screen that one was inclined to forget the disposition of the major items except while taxiing—when the shaft, under varying loads, whipped about in a

noisy frenzy from time to time. One learnt to taxi with lots of throttle and with the treadle brakes hard on in order to reduce the grindings down below. Which reminds me of the perfectly true story of the fitter, new to the type who poured glycol into an Airacobra's reduction gear, thinking it was the header-tank.

In the air the Airacobra had one peculiarity caused by relative c.g. position. While recovering from a dive the aircraft tended to organise its own pull-out to no mean degree if the speed happened to be above a certain figure, and things had to be handled firmly if the structure was to be saved from excessive loadings. I'm not quite sure how was one expected to abandon ship if something *did* come off, though I daresay it was easy enough; for entry and exit were made through a miniature saloon-car door. Presumably one just rolled out on to the wing and hoped to avoid the tail-plane.

### Best Leg Forward

The tricycle was electrically retracted, and I can vouch for its strength. On one occasion I was forced by weather to a very immediate landing, and put down in a tiny airfield which was in the process of being extended and run-



An R.A.F. Airacobra taking off. Only one squadron was equipped with these aircraft, and later all the Airacobras were sent to Russia.