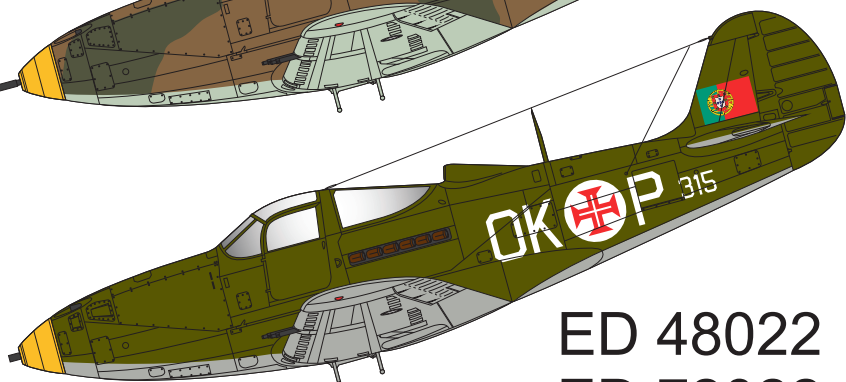
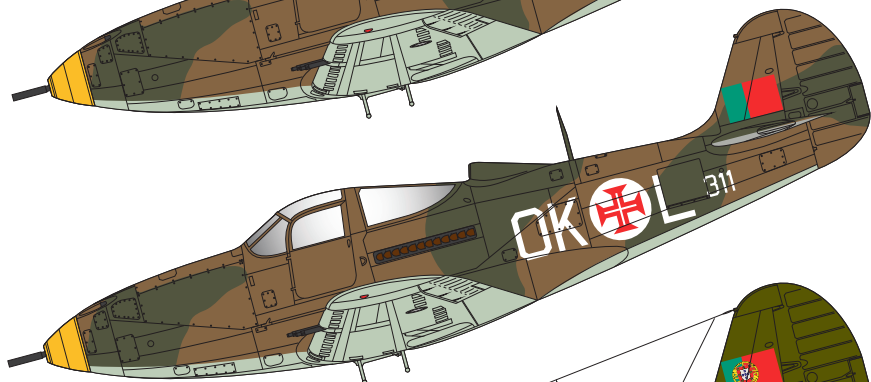
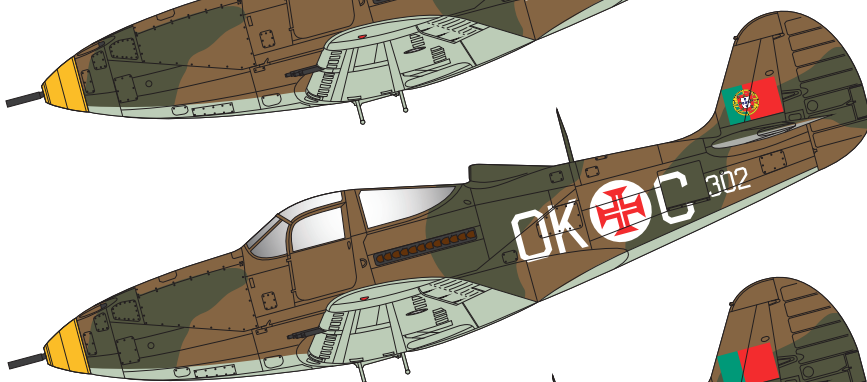
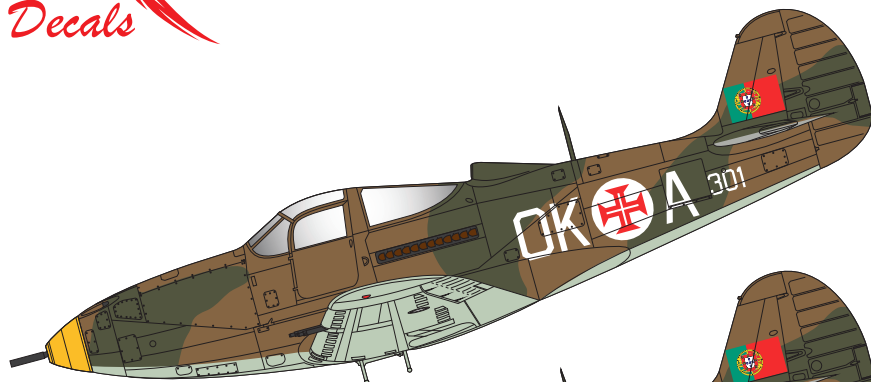




Aeronáutica Militar Cobras

Bell P-39 Airacobra in Portuguese service



ED 48022

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Bell P-39 Airacobra in Portuguese service

By November 1942, with the Allied *Operation Torch* in full progress, the West coast of Portugal was to become the backdrop to a major air operation: the transfer of the 81st Fighter Group from the United Kingdom to the French North Africa. This Fighter Group, equipped with P-39L/M Airacobras and the former British export version, the P-400, started the move to its new operational theatre during late 1942/early 1943. The transfer was made by dispatching several groups of aircraft per day, led by twin-engined bombers (B-25 Mitchell or B-26 Marauder).

The pattern of the transfer operation was the formation to take-off at dawn from a base in the South West of England, in order to reach North Africa or Gibraltar after 6-7 hour flight. One piece of advice that the pilots received before leaving England was that, in case of extreme difficulty (engine failure, loss of communications, shortage of fuel, ect.), they should try to land in Portugal.

Following this advice, on 27 December 1942 five Airacobras, from a group of around 50 aircraft of the 91th and 92th Fighter Squadrons (81st FG), landed in Portugal due to fuel shortage or equipment malfunction. Two of them landed at Lisbon, one at Sintra Air Base and others on the beaches. All planes had been took by Portugals to Ota Air Base. Another Airacobra landed in Lisbon before end of the year. It was also transferred by air to Ota. On 15 January 1943 the tower logs of Lisbon Airport registered the largest arrival of aircraft to Portugal in a single day: ten landed at Lisbon (nine from 350th FG and one from 81st FG), and another landed at the Naval Air Station of S. Jacinto, on the Northern coast. All planes had been transferred to Ota Air Base. During 1943 the arrivals continued, following the evolution of the combat in North Africa. On 8 February one P-39L from 350th FG landed in Lisbon, on 27 April three Airacobras (two P-400 and one P-39M) also arrived at Lisbon, on 3 June one P-400 made an emergency landing at Aljezur. Totally at least 22 Airacobras landed in Portugal. Negotiations with the previous owners of the Airacobras to transfer full ownership of the aircraft to Portugal started in March 1943. The country was, at this time, involved in discussions with the Allies to grant permission for the use of the Azores Islands facilities, and the prospect of having an up-to-date equipment for its Air Arm was appealing. In accordance with official documents, in April 1943 permission was granted to sell „...16 Airacobras and one Lightning...” (but at the date of the document, Portugal already had 18 airacobras on its territory...)

With negotiations successfully completed, it was now possible for *Aeronáutica Militar* to form one Flight of 19 aircraft by 23 June 1943 at Ota Air Base. The Flight was assigned the identification code letters **OK**.

Of the 19 aircraft, there were 15 of the P-400 model, three of the P-39L model and one P-39M. The *Aeronáutica Militar* intended to operate Flight as two sub-Flights of seven aircraft, with different coloured spinners (red and yellow). Individual aircraft received the serials **300 to 318**, and code letters **A to S**. After when Airacobra no.301 was lost in an accident, plane no.300 was renumbered to 301, and empty number 300 to be applied to the P-38G Lightning attached to the Airacobra Flight. Unfortunately the operational career of the Airacobras suffered from several accidents - five planes had been damaged and one pilot being killed. The Airacobras were operational until 1946, being retired from the inventory in June 1949 (6 planes) and in April 1950 (8 planes) - no example was preserved, all being reduced to scrap.

No colour photographs exist with which the camouflage type and colours of the interned Airacobras can be confirmed, while official reports are unclear on the subject. However, contemporary sources including the pilots mentioned above when interviewed, referred the aircraft as „green overall” or „brown and green”, with „yellow or red spinners”. Recent research suggest that the latter description is the correct one where the P-400 aircraft are concerned. In fact, some of the P-39s and P-400s delivered to the 81st FG were part of a shipment originally destined for the Soviet Union on a convoy to Murmansk that was so decimated that it was forced to return to its original departure point.

The aircraft were then assembled in the UK to constitute the core of the US Fighter Group in development. The Airacobras were finished in the older British delivery scheme, applied in the US by Bell factory - Dark Earth and Dark Green over Sky undersurfaces (all DuPont Paint Company). Considering that these aeroplanes were not anticipated to enter RAF service or stay in the ETO area, no attempt to change the camouflage for the new British Day Fighter Scheme. The above camouflage description applies to the interned P-400s, while P-39Ls and sole P-39M probably wore the original USAAF scheme of Olive Drab over Neutral Grey. For these aircraft there is no photographic confirmation of its colours, only verbal descriptions describing the P-39s as „green overall and grey”.

info based on Luiz Armando Traves & Armando Jorge Soares book „Portuguese Fighter Colours 1919-1956” published by STRATUS



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