

1939-1

“Head For Mitchel Field and Don’t Spare the Horses”

As the sun set behind cloudy skies across the length of Mitchel Field’s runways, it lingered softly upon the checkered hangar roofs and glass enclosed control tower. Receding light reflected off the shiny metallic surfaces of an incoming “mystery plane”, as “it came over the field from the West and made a long arc to the South, checking the winds for a landing.” (BDE, February 12, 1939) Perhaps the fastest military aircraft in the world, aviation minded spectators and pilots who witnessed the arrival and inspected the plane later described it as “the most perfect example of streamlining yet achieved in aviation.” (NYT, February 12, 1939) With an air temperature of about 35 degrees, mild for a February day on Long Island, clear weather and light shifting winds from the northwest at 10-13 miles per hour, the strange looking machine commenced its final approach.

High above Mitchel Field airspace on February 11, Lieutenant Ben S. Kelsey, piloting the revolutionary craft, was “sighted streaking into the field here at 4:55PM EST”, (BDE, February 12, 1939) following a near record-breaking cross-country flight from California. Flying the experimental Lockheed XP-38, Kelsey left March Field at 9:12AM EST, made a quick fuel stop at Amarillo Texas and resumed at 12:21PM EST. He refueled a second time at Wright Field, before completing the trans-continental flight in an officially recorded elapsed time of seven hours and 45 minutes and 36 seconds, with the actual flying time seven hours and 36 seconds. His time was 17 minutes and 11 seconds short of Howard Hughes’ record non-stop flight from Burbank to Newark, achieved on January 10, 1937 in seven hours 28 minutes and 25 seconds.

The test flight of Lockheed’s groundbreaking design had not left the West coast intending to set records, the main purpose was to test its speed and long-term airworthiness. Veteran test pilot Ben Kelsey had flown the craft on just six short test hops, totaling 4 hours and 49 minutes over the course of the previous two weeks, during which many engine and mechanical adjustments, re-designs, and modifications were made to eliminate several “bugaboos” and increase performance. Yet, by February 10, Kelsey felt confident the XP-38 was ready, and “he obtained approval for a record attempt flight, at least as far as Dayton.” (Bodie, 1) General H. H. Arnold agreed that if all was going well when the

plane reached Wright Field, then, a decision would be made to challenge Hughes' transcontinental record.

Kelsey was keenly aware of Hughes' reputation and record and in the seat of the XP-38 cognizant of his potential to break it. "His competitive spirit had been aroused. Only serious technical problems by the time he landed in Dayton were going to deter him from blasting eastward to Mitchel Field." (Bodie, 1)

In the hazy gray, pre-dawn hours at March Field, final preparations for the important cross-country flight of Lockheed Model 22-64-01-2201 XP-38 AC37-437 were completed. "Kelsey climbed onto the wing center section, slid into the spacious cockpit and adjusted his parachute harness." (Bodie) He brought the powerful Allison engines to life; mechanics closed the canopy and ground crews cleared the aircraft. Kelsey radioed the tower for clearance for taxi and takeoff. The sleek streamlined twin fuselage bird rolled gracefully past the squatly blunt-nosed B-18s of the 19th Bombardment Group, which looked like dinosaurs compared to the sharp, tear-drop shaped silhouette of the XP-38. "From the end of the runway, the yellow and black checkerboard roofs of the hangars were now visible in the early half-light of morning." (Bodie) Kelsey pushed the throttle and turbo controls forward and lifted easily off the runway at 6:12AM PST. (9:12AM EST)

Kelsey climbed steadily to 18,000 feet heading east towards Amarillo Texas. About two hours later General Arnold departed from Wichita Kansas in a medium bomber to meet Kelsey at Dayton, scheduled to arrive a mere twenty minutes before the test pilot. After a flight of three hours and 10 minutes during which the plane performed flawlessly, Kelsey put down in Amarillo at 9:22AM PST (12:22PM EST). Ground-crews spent 23 minutes pumping close to 300 gallons of fuel into the XP-38s wing tanks, before Kelsey departed at 9:45AM



Photo courtesy, Airpower Magazine, Volume 3, No. 6, November 1973,

PST (12:45PM EST), flashing eastwards again towards Dayton. He reached 21,000 feet and cruised past the 400-mph mark, barely pressing the twin turbocharged engines.

The Lieutenant made a smooth, routine landing on the concrete runway of Wright Field at 12:10PM PST (3:10PM EST) and rolled to a stop. He clambered out of the cockpit, greeted by General Arnold and BG A. Warner Robbins. Lockheed and Allison technicians swarmed about, checking and inspecting the craft. After 1920 miles of high-speed flight there were no signs of stress or wear. “No exhaust stains streaked the vertical stabilizers or red, white and blue striped-rudders.” Arnold decided: “Head for Mitchel Field and don’t spare the horses!” (Bodie)



The Lockheed XP-38 being inspected and refueled at Wright Field. Photo courtesy Wings Magazine, Vol. 6, No. 2, April 1976.

Arnold had been under pressure to find a fighter capable of matching the fast German Messerschmitt’s and British aircraft. Arnold knew what he wanted; a fighter to fly in excess of 400 mph to hold its own against any comers. He did not have time for lengthy tests and weeks and weeks of performance evaluations. “Did it go, or didn’t it go?” was all he needed to know. (Bodie, 1)

Eighteen minutes later, (12:33PM PST, 3:33PM EST), Kelsey shot back into the sky for Mitchel. Over Pittsburgh, a cryptic radio message crackled into the control tower. “XP-38, Kelsey pilot, out of Dayton for Mitchel Field, altitude 22,000, cruising speed 420.” The tower operator, believing he misheard Kelsey’s reported airspeed stuttered. “What...!?” “Cruising speed 420.” Repeated Kelsey, “estimated time to Mitchel Field, 43 minutes.” “Listen fellow...”, the baffled radioman countered, “Mitchel Field is 300 miles from Pittsburgh.

Let's start over..." Before the incredulous operator could confirm with Kelsey, the signal faded as the ship sped out of radio range. (Life Magazine, August 16, 1943)



Kelsey reviews the weather report with Generals Arnold and Robbins looking on. Last minute words before heading East towards Mitchel. Photos courtesy Wings Magazine, Vol. 6, No. 2, April 1976.

Without pre-planned arrangements made for the last-minute record-breaking flight, no official requests were sent for timing the effort, and no word was radioed to Mitchel Field to report the forthcoming arrival of the XP-38 and the history making finale. Descending gradually to 6,000 feet, Kelsey contacted the Mitchel control tower at about 4:55PM EST for landing instructions but did **“not** request a clear approach for a dash past the tower and immediate landing.” (Bodie, 1) Kelsey was instructed to land “number four, behind three PB-2As” already in the pattern coming in from Langley. Kelsey then flew “a very long base leg before turning onto final at about 6,000 feet.”

(Bodie, 1)

“I really didn't give it a second thought when the tower instructed me to take a position behind the PB-2A”, Kelsey later said. “I had to get the plane slowed down for the flap extension anyway.” (Bodie, 1) Colonel Raymond Toliver was Officer of the Day (OD) that Saturday. (a 2nd LT. at the time) “Operations called me to meet an incoming plane that was attempting to break some sort of transcontinental record, as they put it. We didn't know anything else... except that it was something new and experimental. Two, maybe three, PB-2As ... were coming in-to land. ...One was on base leg and one was on final. The tower requested that

Kelsey... stretch out his base leg and take station behind the second PB-2A still in the air. I stepped out in front of Operations to watch the planes land. Both PB-2As were coming in from the southeast-landing to the northwest- and the closest was about one-half mile out at about 400 feet, while the other was about one and a half miles out. The strange silver job, was, by then, way out and pretty high. I guess he was about 6000 feet as he banked for final.” (Bodie, 1)

Kelsey lowered his landing gear and throttled back. “The turbos slowed down, and power reduced to about 15 percent. The descent rate was quite high, but I planned to drop it in near the end of the runway with power on to keep the nose up and let the plane act as its own brake.” (Bodie, 1)

COMING SOON!

Beneath The Shadow of Wings

Untold Stories from Mitchel Field, Long Island

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The Gathering Storm:

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