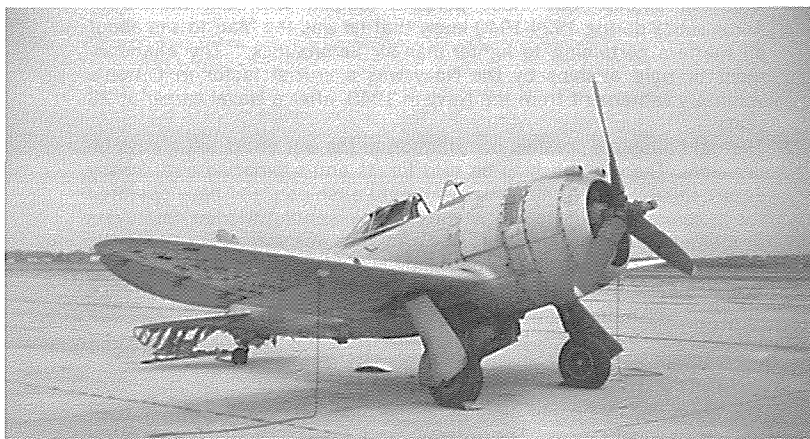


The Last Lancer

by Thomas E. Lowe and Earl Reinert

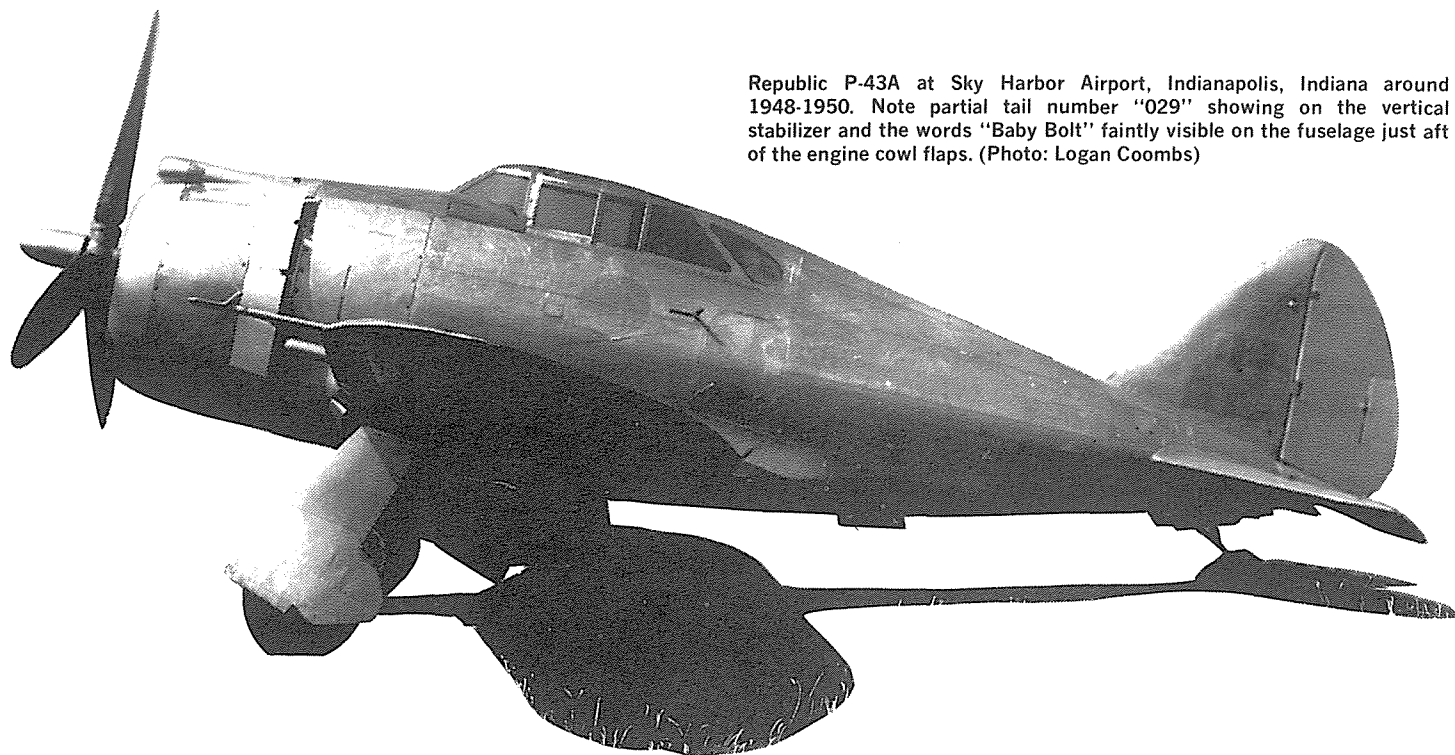


In 1938 the Seversky Aircraft Corporation began work on two developments of the P-35, one of which culminated in the YP-43 Lancer. The YP-43 continued a long tradition of Seversky airplanes characterized by an elliptically shaped wing, but improved on the P-35 by incorporating a fully retractable landing gear, turbo-supercharging, and flush riveting.¹ On March 12, 1939, thirteen service test models were ordered and the first YP-43 was delivered in September, 1940. All thirteen YP-43s were completed by April, 1941, but by this date Seversky had been re-organized as the Republic Aviation Corporation. Consequently, P-43s bore the Republic name.²

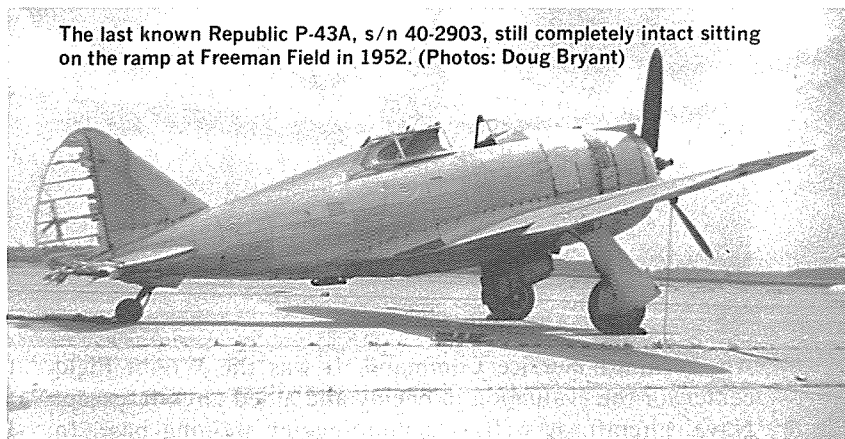
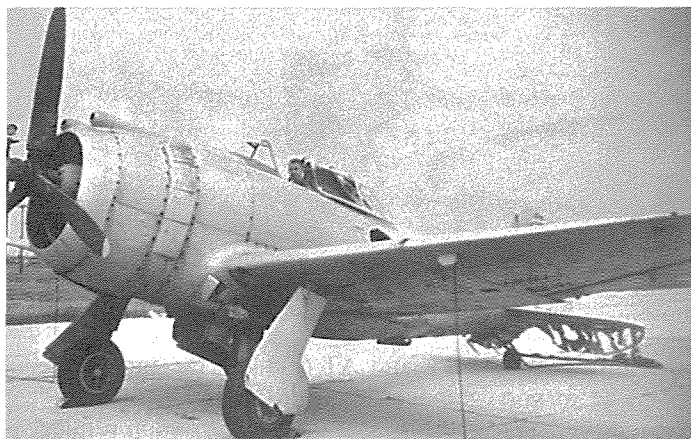
The P-43 Lancer had already been outdated by the developments in Europe and its only appealing factor in comparison with its contemporaries was its range of nearly 1000 miles and the ability to develop full power up to 23,000 feet.³ No production plans had been formulated for the P-43 Lancer since the other development from the P-35, which was given the company designation of AP-4, and known as the P-44 by the U.S.A.A.F., had been ordered instead in September, 1939. But by the spring of 1940 combat reports from

Europe indicated that even the P-44 would leave much to be desired and Republic was already at work on a new design that would emerge as the P-47 Thunderbolt. Consequently, on September 13, 1940, all contracts for the P-44 were cancelled in favor of the P-47. In view of the inavailability of Pratt & Whitney R-2800 engines and the delay before the P-47 could take its place on the Republic assembly lines, it became necessary to keep the factory occupied, thus the P-43 Lancer was ordered into production as a stop-gap fighter.⁴

Only 272 Republic P-43 Lancers were built: 13 YP-43s (s/n 39-704-39-716); 54 P-43s (s/n 41-6668-41-6721); 80 P-43As (s/n 40-2891-40-2970); and 125 P-43A-1s (s/n 41-31448-41-31572).⁵ Production of the final P-43A-1 was completed in March, 1942. Since the P-43s were ordered before the U.S. entry into WW II, they do not legitimately qualify as a WW II type airplane even though they were pressed into wartime service. The P-43s and P-43A-1s were considered unsuited for use as fighters by the U.S.A.A.F., although they were on defensive duty on U.S. coasts after Pearl Harbor and a few saw overseas duty. China received 108 of the P-43s where they saw a certain amount of action



Republic P-43A at Sky Harbor Airport, Indianapolis, Indiana around 1948-1950. Note partial tail number "029" showing on the vertical stabilizer and the words "Baby Bolt" faintly visible on the fuselage just aft of the engine cowl flaps. (Photo: Logan Coombs)



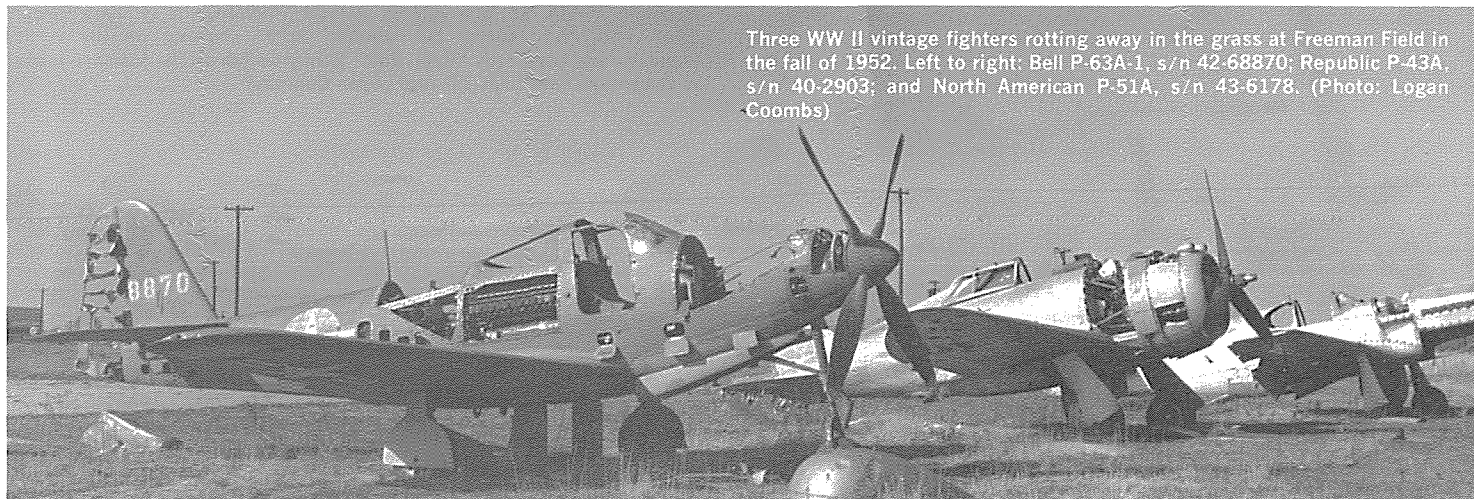
The last known Republic P-43A, s/n 40-2903, still completely intact sitting on the ramp at Freeman Field in 1952. (Photos: Doug Bryant)

against the Japanese.⁶ In India aircraft and equipment were also in short supply and old and obsolete types found their way to this area, seemingly a backwater of war. Among them were at least four Republic P-43s used for reconnaissance missions during the winter of 1942-43.⁷ Reconnaissance became the primary role for the remaining P-43s as the U.S.A.A.F. converted them all to P-43B reconnaissance aircraft by the installation of cameras in the rear fuselage.

After WW II the few surviving Republic P-43s were scrapped or auctioned off to civilian buyers at surplus sales for \$1250.⁸ They quickly slipped into oblivion as the higher performance fighters such as the P-47, P-38, P-51, and F4U were available in large quantities to dominate the air racing scene as well as to become the backbone of the world's many emerging air forces. Earl Reinert, of Arlington Heights, Illinois, became a Republic and Pratt & Whitney procurement sub-contractor after WW II and for many years his Meridan Aircraft Company was the prime supplier of P-47 parts to those air forces still flying the Thunderbolt. In this business he traveled extensively throughout the U.S. and the South Pacific gathering airplanes and parts as well as

extensive knowledge of the WW II airplane market. Reinert estimated that at the most, only a handful of P-43s survived to be scrapped or surplused after WW II. The only bases that he knew to have had any P-43s were Walnut Ridge, Arkansas and Bush Field, Georgia.⁹ This conclusion was confirmed by the P-43 Individual Aircraft Record Cards on file at the National Air and Space Museum which showed that almost all of the P-43s were designated as Class 26, surveyed, and destroyed before the end of WW II. Only four P-43s were shown to have escaped destruction during WW II: s/n 40-2900 and 41-6675 were both classified as Class 26 but were not destroyed by the U.S.A.A.F. S/n 40-2900 was assigned to a technical school at Gulfport, Mississippi and the Ohio Institute of Aeronautics in Columbus, Ohio received s/n 41-6675. The other two were s/n 40-2894 and 40-2903 which were both assigned to the Reconstruction Finance Corporation for disposal as surplus.¹⁰

The last known surviving Republic P-43 Lancer was at Freeman Field, Seymour, Indiana which during WW II had been the home of the Air Technical Intelligence Section of

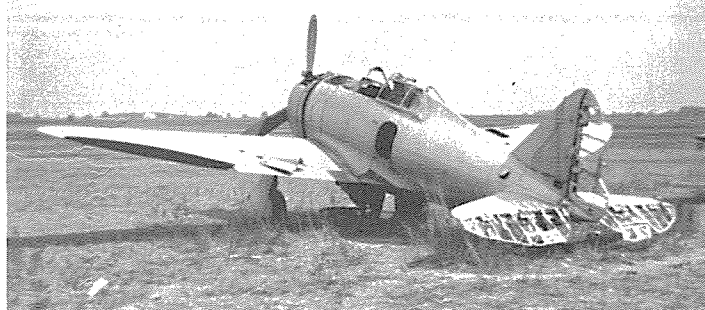


Three WW II vintage fighters rotting away in the grass at Freeman Field in the fall of 1952. Left to right: Bell P-63A-1, s/n 42-68870; Republic P-43A, s/n 40-2903; and North American P-51A, s/n 43-6178. (Photo: Logan Coombs)

The last Republic P-43A moved closer to oblivion when it was moved from the concrete ramp at Freeman Field into the grass area in 1952. (Photo: Doug Bryant)



The last P-43A is beginning to show the effects of neglect in 1953 after was moved into the grass area at Freeman Field, Seymour, Indiana. Not that several pieces are now missing from the fuselage and engine cowling. (Photo: Doug Bryant)



Air Technical Service Command. It was the Wright Field center for the evaluation of enemy and allied aircraft, except Naval aircraft, as well as a multi-engine training base. In 1946 the 108th Air Material Command and its vast collection of airplanes at Freeman Field was transferred to the Douglas plant on Old Orchard Place Airport, later renamed O'Hare Field, in Parkridge, Illinois. When Freeman Field became a completely civilian airport, in approximately 1949, numerous surplus WW II airplanes were based there from time to time, including the Republic P-43 which was to outlast them all.

In 1952 Earl Reinert's surplus aircraft business took him to Freeman Field where he first observed the P-43 sitting on the ramp along with a North American P-51A and a Bell P-63A.¹¹ In the late 1950s he had also become a Field Representative for the Air Force Museum helping locate rare and scarce airplanes. In 1958 while at the Air Force Museum, Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio, Mark Sloan, Curator, mentioned to Reinert that one of the aircraft the museum was searching for to complete its collection was a P-43. Reinert told him that there had been one at Freeman Field, only about 125 miles away, sitting with two other derelicts only a couple of years before. When Reinert left Wright-Patterson AFB he went directly to Seymour, Indiana to locate the P-43. He was quite excited at the prospects of seeing the P-43 again after about five years and with his particular interest in Republic aircraft in seeing it saved from the scrappers. Upon arrival at Freeman Field he could not locate it but was told

that there was "an old BT and AT-6 at the far end of the field."¹² The airport manager, Glen Manion, arrived and Reinert inquired as to the status of the P-43. Manion replied that it had been towed out to the airport dump since the owner, H.L. Pemberton, had never paid any tiedown bills on it and it had been abandoned. They drove two miles to the other side of the airport where the last known P-43 was reposing in the dump. The P-43 was basically complete with only a few pieces missing and the fabric gone from the control surfaces. Reinert mentioned that the Air Force Museum was interested in obtaining it and Manion replied that he would check with the airport commission to insure that they could donate it to the Air Force Museum. Reinert then wrote Mark Sloan confirming the location of the P-43 and initiated action for its acquisition for the Air Force Museum.¹³ By early 1959 all arrangements had been made and the P-43 was earmarked to be rescued.

Several more years passed and Reinert was sure that the last Republic P-43 had been retrieved by the Air Force Museum and was safely in storage at Wright-Patterson AFB. But in 1961 he learned that the P-43 had not been moved to the Air Force Museum storage area. Reinert shortly thereafter revisited Freeman Field to check on its status. Upon arriving at the airport he could not find it anywhere and Glen Manion, the airport manager, informed him that the Air Force Museum had never come to claim the P-43 and the airport commission had thought that they were no longer

Republic P-43A sitting in the grass deteriorating due to neglect in the fall of 1952. Note that several pieces have been removed from the fuselage and are on the ground beneath the landing gear. (Photo: Logan Coombs)



interested in it. So, in an effort to clean up the airport, they sold it to high school boys who lived on a farm just outside of Seymour for \$20! Manion continued by saying that the two boys had removed both outboard wing panels, put the airplane up on the back of a pickup truck, and towed it through town to their farm. As far as he knew they had sold it for scrap.

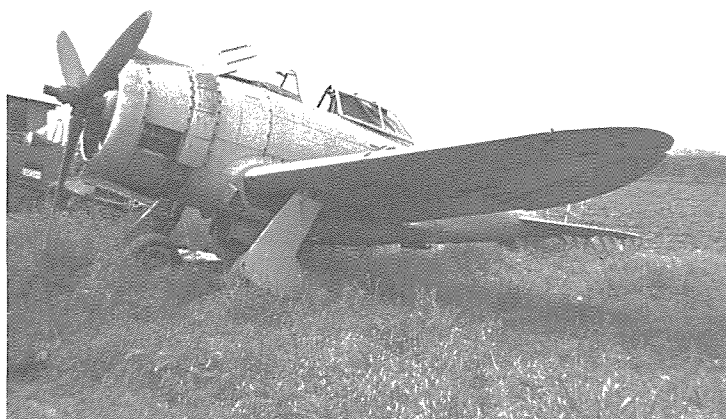
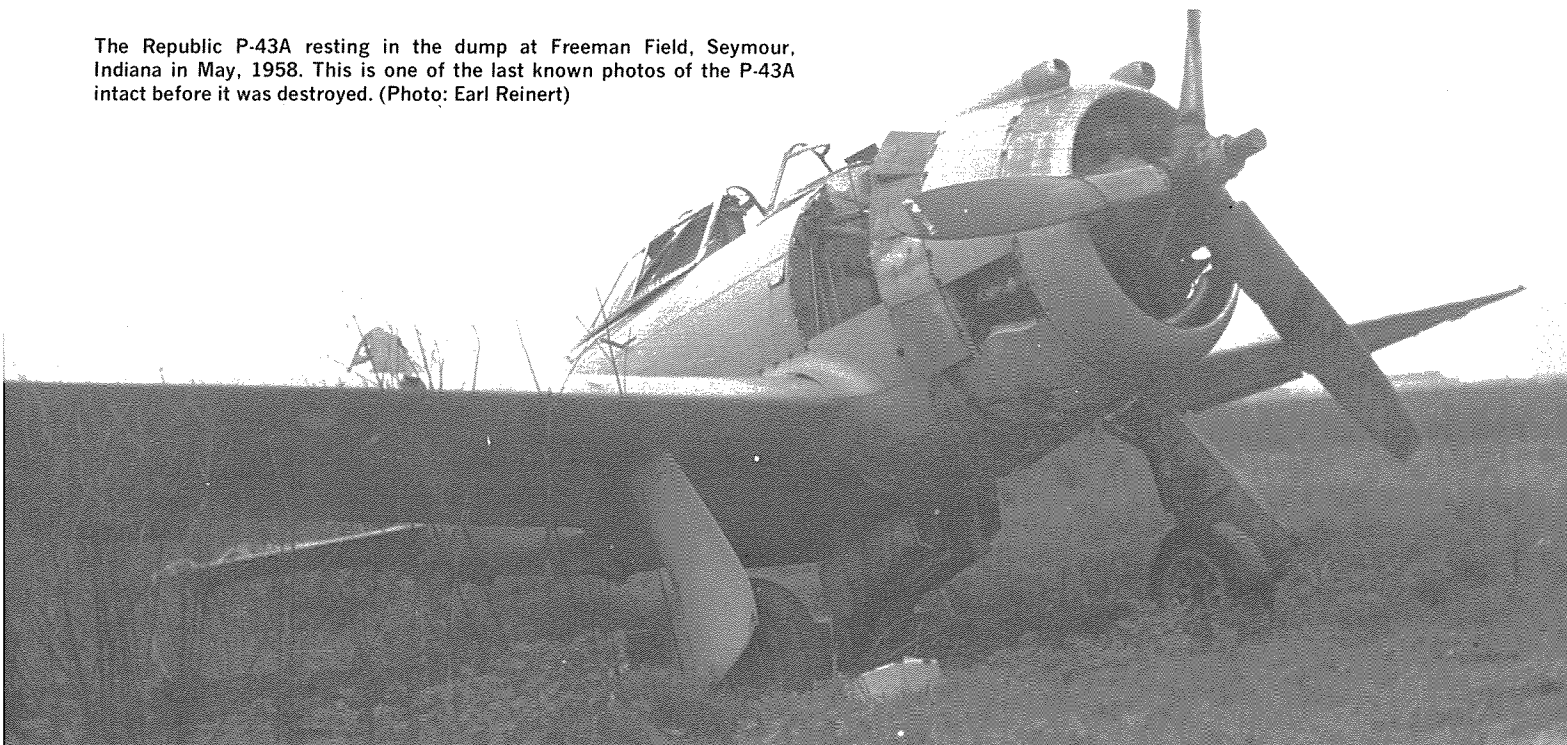
Earl Reinert drove out to the farm and as he entered the front yard there was no P-43 in view, but he did sight the entire engine quick change unit lying in a cattle bin. Bobby Zaring, now 20 years old, informed Reinert that his mother had made him cut it up because she was afraid he might try to fly it. He sold the remains to the local scrap dealer after he removed the engine, wheels, and the turbo-supercharger. He said there were still a few pieces lying around and Reinert purchased these for \$35. They included the engine and quick change unit, landing gear and wheels, turbo-supercharger, intercooler, engine exhaust system, and some other miscellaneous pieces. Reinert piled some of the parts into his car and took them home and on January 7, 1962 Bobby Zaring delivered the engine quick change unit and the other remaining parts to Reinert's surplus business at Palwaukee Airport in Wheeling, Illinois.¹⁴

Determining the serial number of the last Republic P-43 Lancer has been an elusive task since it was destroyed in 1961 and the manufacturer's data plate was removed and subsequently lost by Bobby Zaring. H.L. Pemberton, the last

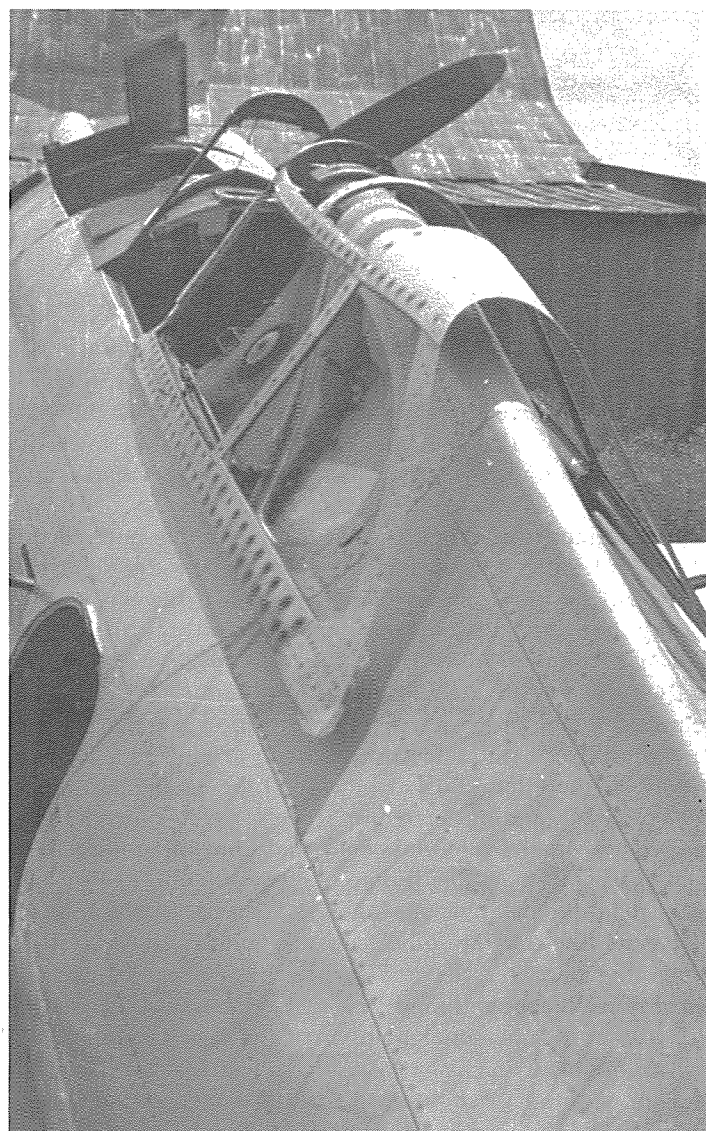
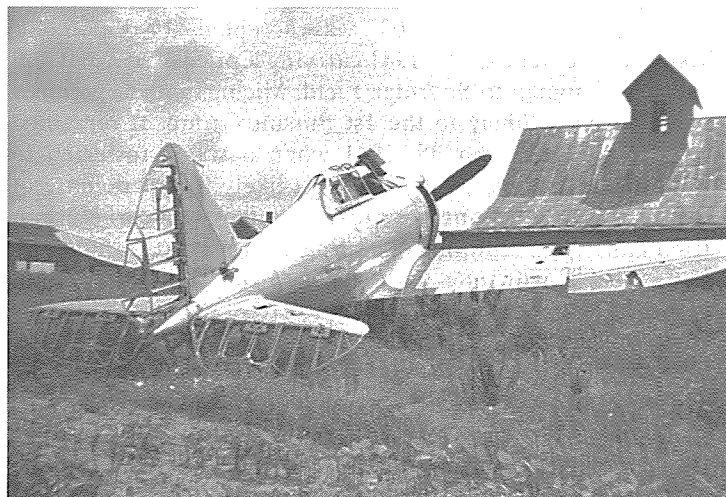
known owner of the P-43, passed away several years ago and any records that he might have possessed have disappeared. However, the authors did locate some photographs of the airplane taken at Sky Harbor Airport, Indianapolis, Indiana around 1948-1950 which showed a partial tail number. Final proof was found when Doug Bryant of Carrouthsville, Indiana found a photograph that he had taken of the P-43's cockpit which showed the aircraft's radio call placard on the instrument panel. It read, "Radio Call 0-2903" which corresponds with a s/n of 40-2903, one of the two P-43s that were surplus by the RFC at the end of WW II.

This P-43A, s/n 40-2903, was accepted for U.S.A.A.F. service on September 23, 1941 carrying a price of \$52,350 and was first assigned to Selfridge Field, Michigan on September 25, 1941, most likely to the 1st Pursuit Group. It remained there until December 25, 1941 when it was transferred to NAS North Island, California, most likely for air defense of the west coast following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. It remained in California, operating at both North Island and Long Beach, with one flight back to Selfridge Field, until May 13, 1942 when it was flown to Hensley Field, Texas by Captain Franklin R. Marshom where he wrecked it in a collision on the ground. It was consequently assigned to the San Antonio Air Depot and repaired. It spent most of its remaining military career in Texas, alternating between Duncan Field, Hensley Field, and Victoria Field. Sometime during this period it was re-designated as a RP-43A, with the

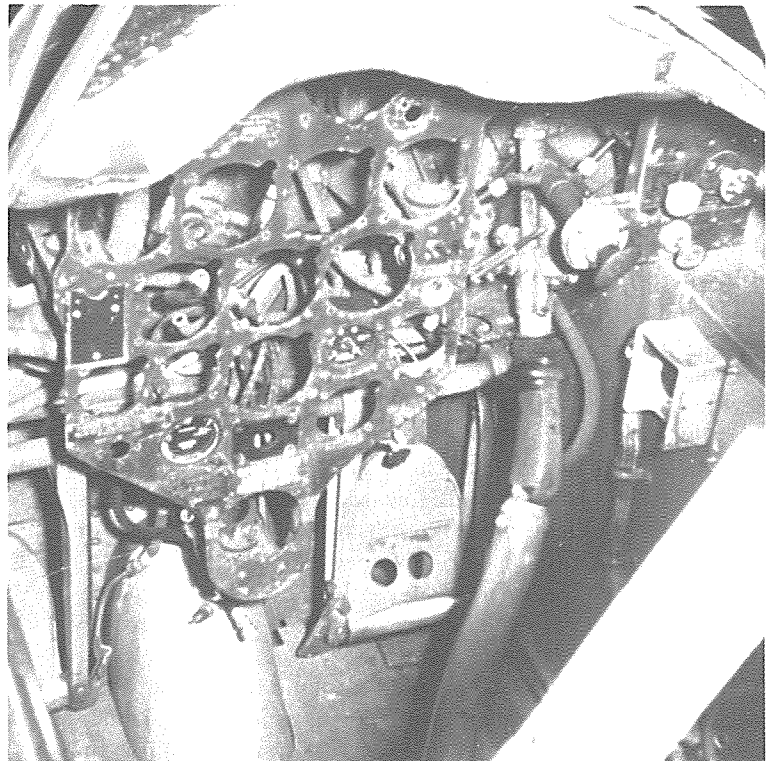
The Republic P-43A resting in the dump at Freeman Field, Seymour, Indiana in May, 1958. This is one of the last known photos of the P-43A intact before it was destroyed. (Photo: Earl Reinert)



In 1956 the P-43A had been moved further from view to the dump on Freeman Field. Here it waits, deteriorating further. (Photos: Doug Bryant)



The last known P-43A deteriorating even further as it rests in the dump at Freeman Field in May, 1958. Note several small caliber bullet holes in the fuselage below the cockpit and in the vertical stabilizer inflicted by vandals. This is among the last known photographs taken of the P-43A before it was destroyed. (Photo: Earl Reinert)

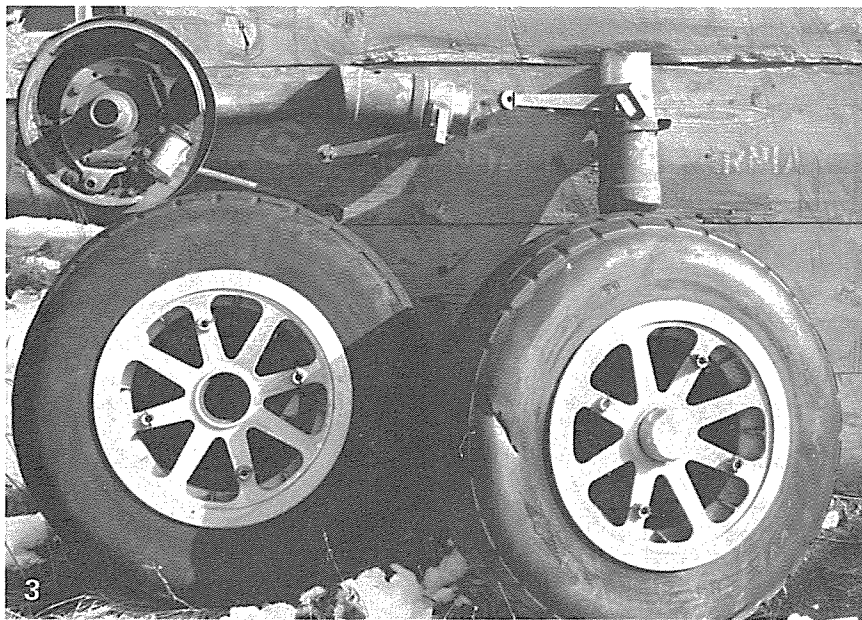
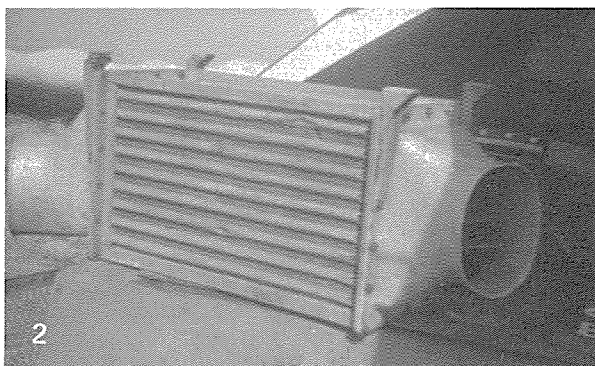


Cockpit of the last known Republic P-43A, s/n 40-2903, as it appeared on October 3, 1953. Note the radio call placard just below the glare shield which reads, "Radio Call 0-2903." (Photo: Doug Bryant)

"R" for Restricted added to indicate that it was no longer to be flown on the missions for which it was originally intended. Its last military base was at Keesler Field, Georgia, and it eventually was assigned to the Reconstruction Finance Corporation at Bush Field, Augusta, Georgia.¹⁵ The RFC was the government's disposal agency for surplus aeronautical property until January 15, 1946 when the disposal of surplus aircraft was transferred to the War Assets Corporation, a subsidiary of the RFC.¹⁶

The history of this P-43A became very sketchy after WW II. Nothing is known of its activities from the time it was

surplused until about 1948 when it was photographed at Sky Harbor Airport, Indianapolis, Indiana. It was never registered with the CAA and consequently did not receive an "N" number. During this time period it apparently was acquired by a civilian mechanic school at Freeman Field, Seymour, Indiana. Local pilots recalled that it was flown on several occasions from Freeman Field to NAS Bunker Hill, Peru, Indiana. NAS Bunker Hill had been closed after WW II and was completely deserted except for several PB4Ys which were



1. The last remains of the P-43A were delivered to Earl Reinert at Palwaukee Airport, Wheeling, Illinois by Bobby Zaring in January, 1962. In the trailer are the P & W R-1830 engine, engine quick change unit, intercooler, and a photo of a Republic P-43. (Photo: Earl Reinert)
2. Part of the remains of the last Republic P-43A, the intercooler, at Earl Reinert's Victory Air Museum, Mundelein, Illinois in October, 1976. (Photo: Earl Reinert)
3. Wheels and landing gear from P-43, s/n 40-2903, at Earl Reinert's Victory Air Museum in March, 1977. (Photo: Bob Arthur)

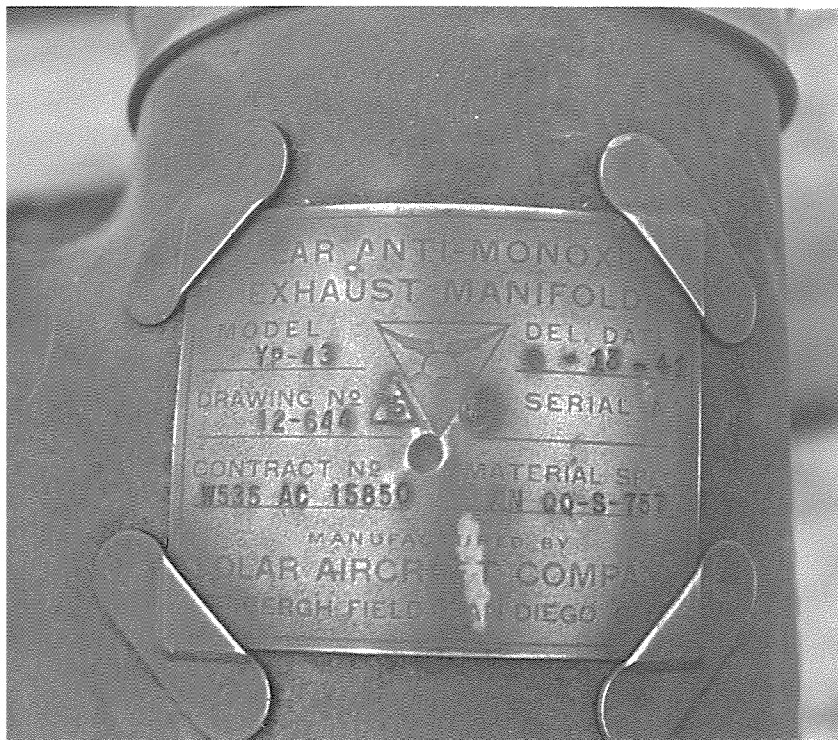
sitting on the ramp. The P-43 apparently was flown to Bunker Hill where gas was drained from the PB4Y's into the P-43's tanks and it was flown back to Freeman Field where the gas was used to keep several light airplanes flying. The last known flight of the P-43 is well remembered by the local Seymour area pilots and has become almost a legend because the pilot was so intoxicated he had to be carried out of the airplane!¹⁷ The mechanic school at Freeman Field ceased operations around 1950 and Howard L. Pemberton, of Niles, Michigan, who had placed tenth in the 1946 Thompson Trophy Race in a Bell P-63F, obtained the P-43A as well as a Bell P-63A and North American P-51A. These three airplanes remained at Freeman Field for several more years where they all deteriorated from neglect.¹⁸

An intriguing aspect of this airplane is the mystery concerning the engine exhaust system which Earl Reinert salvaged. The data plate on the exhaust system contains the information: Manuf.: (Solar), Mark YP-43, Part No. 12-664. Manuf. Date 8-13-1941. The YP-43 designation and date of manufacture of 8-13-1941 do not correspond as the last YP-43 was delivered in April, 1941 and this particular airplane was a P-43A. Reinert believes that this was not really a YP-43 exhaust system, but that most likely Solar stamped "YP" on the plate by mistake.¹⁹

The fates of the last P-43s have been clouded by photographs and misleading information published in books and magazines in recent years. A photograph of a P-43 was published in the Aero Series book, *Republic P-47 Thunderbolt*, with the caption, "One of the few P-43 aircraft to survive

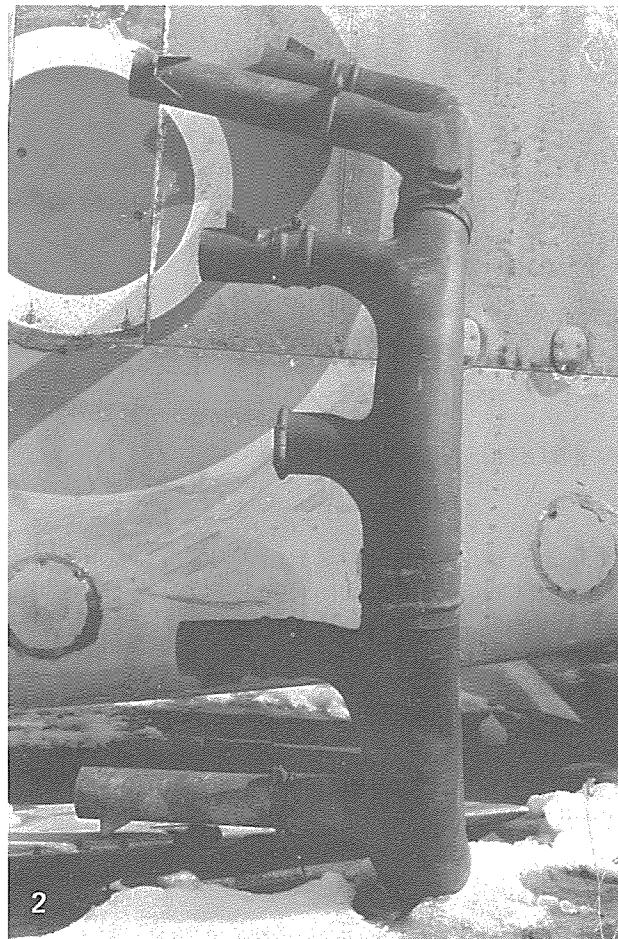
World War II. Aircraft was later scrapped at Air Force salvage yard."²⁰ An almost identical photograph was printed in a current well known aviation history magazine with a caption that included, "... The one shown below was found decaying in the field in Mexico, where it still remains. In 1965 the National Air Museum ordered its one remaining P-43 destroyed. Why?"²¹ This is an inaccurate statement and Earl Reinert reports that to his knowledge no P-43s ever went to Mexico for either military service or as civilian surplus after WW II and this is further born out by the Individual Aircraft Record Cards.²² This photo caption prompted A.W. Yusken, Jr., of Chicago, Illinois to write to the National Air and Space Museum for an explanation as to why they would destroy a potential display airplane.²³ In reply, Mr. Louis Casey, Curator, Aircraft, stated, "Thank you for sending a copy of the source of the P-43 misinformation, I cannot speak for the period prior to 1958 though I have reasonable knowledge of the preceding years. I can state quite definitely that an aircraft was not in the collection in 1958 and, therefore, could not have been destroyed by us in 1965."²⁴

Today there are no known examples of the Republic P-43 Lancer in existence anywhere in the world. While the P-43 never gained any real fame or distinction of its own accord and perhaps is best remembered as the predecessor of the P-47 Thunderbolt, it certainly is unfortunate that this one earmarked for preservation by the Air Force Museum was lost to the scrapper's torch through error, miscalculation, and a lack of communication, especially since it rested so close to Wright-Patterson AFB for so many years. The Air Force



1. Republic P-43 Lancer exhaust system data plate on exhaust taken from P-43 s/n 40-2903. Item is presently stored at Earl Reinert's Victory Air Museum. (Photo: Bob Arthur)

2. Exhaust system from the last known Republic P-43 Lancer taken at the Victory Air Museum in March, 1977. (Photo: Bob Arthur)



Museum should not be faulted however, one must remember that during these years it was understaffed, operated on a minimal budget, and did not have the support and facilities that it enjoys today. While there is no intact example to view today, Earl Reinert still owns the few remaining pieces of the last P-43. They currently are stored at his Victory Air Museum in Mundelein, Illinois, northwest of Chicago where the public may view numerous WW II aircraft. While the P-43 parts are not currently on display, they may be seen upon request.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Air Progress*, Fall, 1958, p. 25.
2. William Green, *Warplanes of The 2nd World War*, p. 167.
3. Bruce Robertson, editor, *United States Army And Air Force Fighters 1916-1961*, Letchworth, Herts, England, Harleyford Publications Ltd., p. 53.
4. Green, *Op Cit.*, p. 167.
5. *Air Progress*, *Op Cit.*
6. Green, *Op Cit.*, p. 168.
7. *U.S. Army And Air Force Fighters*, *Op Cit.*, p. 76.
8. War Assets Administration Surplus Aircraft List, 1946.
9. Letter from Earl Reinert to Tom Lowe, November 2, 1976.
10. Individual Aircraft Record Card, National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
11. The P-51A-10, s/n 43-6178, is now owned by Wally Erickson, Rosemont, Minnesota. The P-63A-1, s/n 42-68870, was scrapped at Seymour, Indiana around 1960 or 1961.
12. Interview with Earl Reinert by Tom Lowe, October 4, 1976, Crystal Lake, Illinois.
13. Letter to Mark Sloan, USAF Museum Curator, from Earl Reinert, May 7, 1958.
14. Postcard from Bobby Zaring to Earl Reinert, December 28, 1961.
15. Individual Aircraft Record Card, P-43A, s/n 40-2903, NASM, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

16. War Assets Corporation Aircraft Sale Notice.
17. Interview with Doug Bryant by Earl Reinert, January 6, 1977, Homewood, Illinois. Doug Bryant is a life-long resident of the Seymour, Indiana area and as a boy closely followed and photographed the aircraft activities at Freeman Field, both during and after WWII.
18. Telephone conversation by Earl Reinert with Doug Bryant, November 28, 1976.
19. Letter from Earl Reinert to Tom Lowe, October 4, 1976.
20. Edward Maloney and Uwe Feist, *Republic P-47 Thunderbolt*, Fallbrook, California, Aero Publishers, Inc., p. 5.
21. *Air Classics*, Vol. 4, No. 2, November, 1967, p. 52.
22. Reinert interview, *Op Cit.*
23. Letter from A.W. Yuskin, Jr., Chicago, Illinois to Louis Casey, Director, National Air Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., October 23, 1967.
24. Letter from Louis S. Casey, Curator, Aircraft, National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., to A.W. Yuskin, Jr., October 31, 1967.



THOMAS E. LOWE



EARL REINERT