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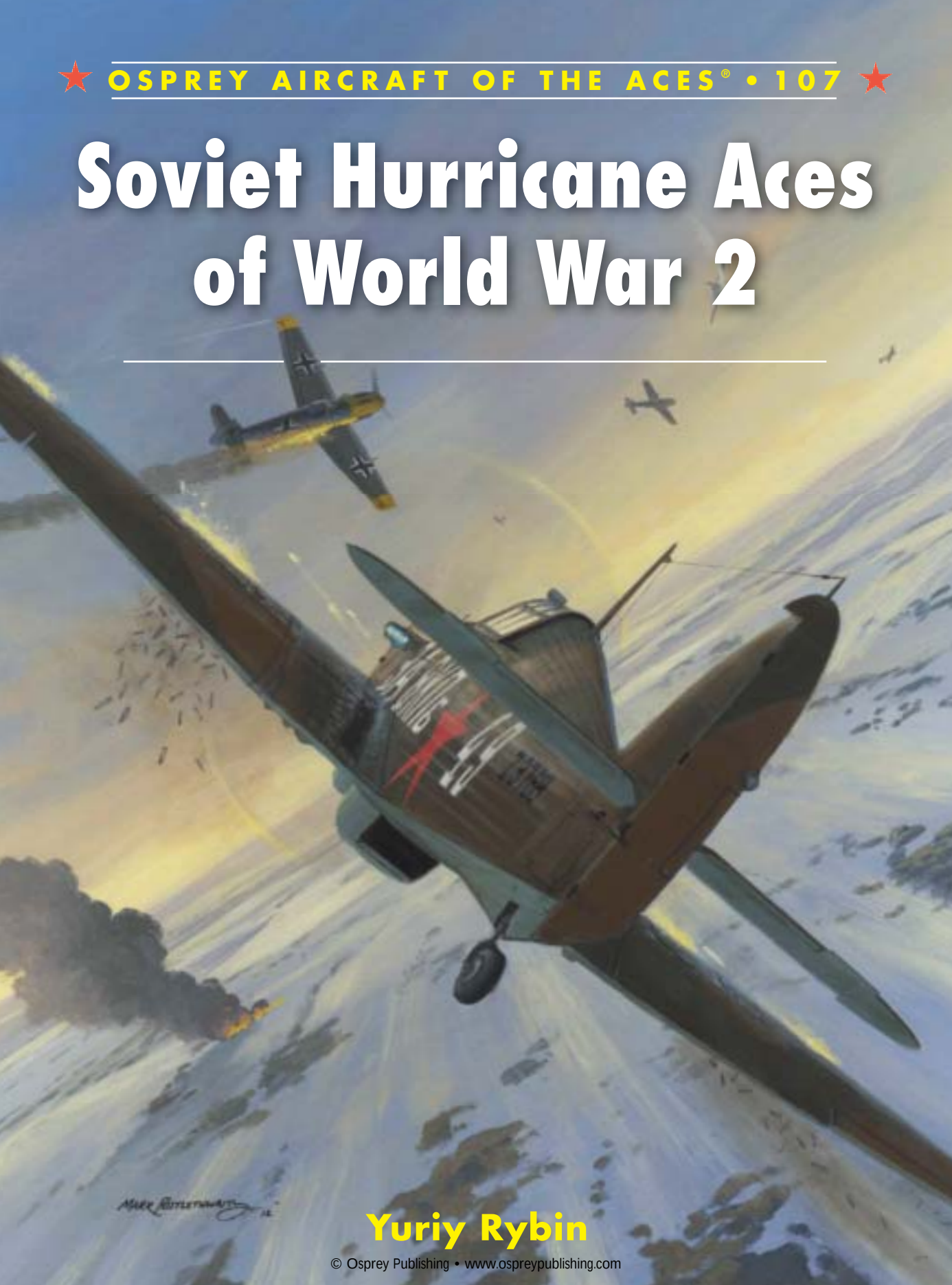
Soviet Hurricane Aces of World War 2



Yuriy Rybin

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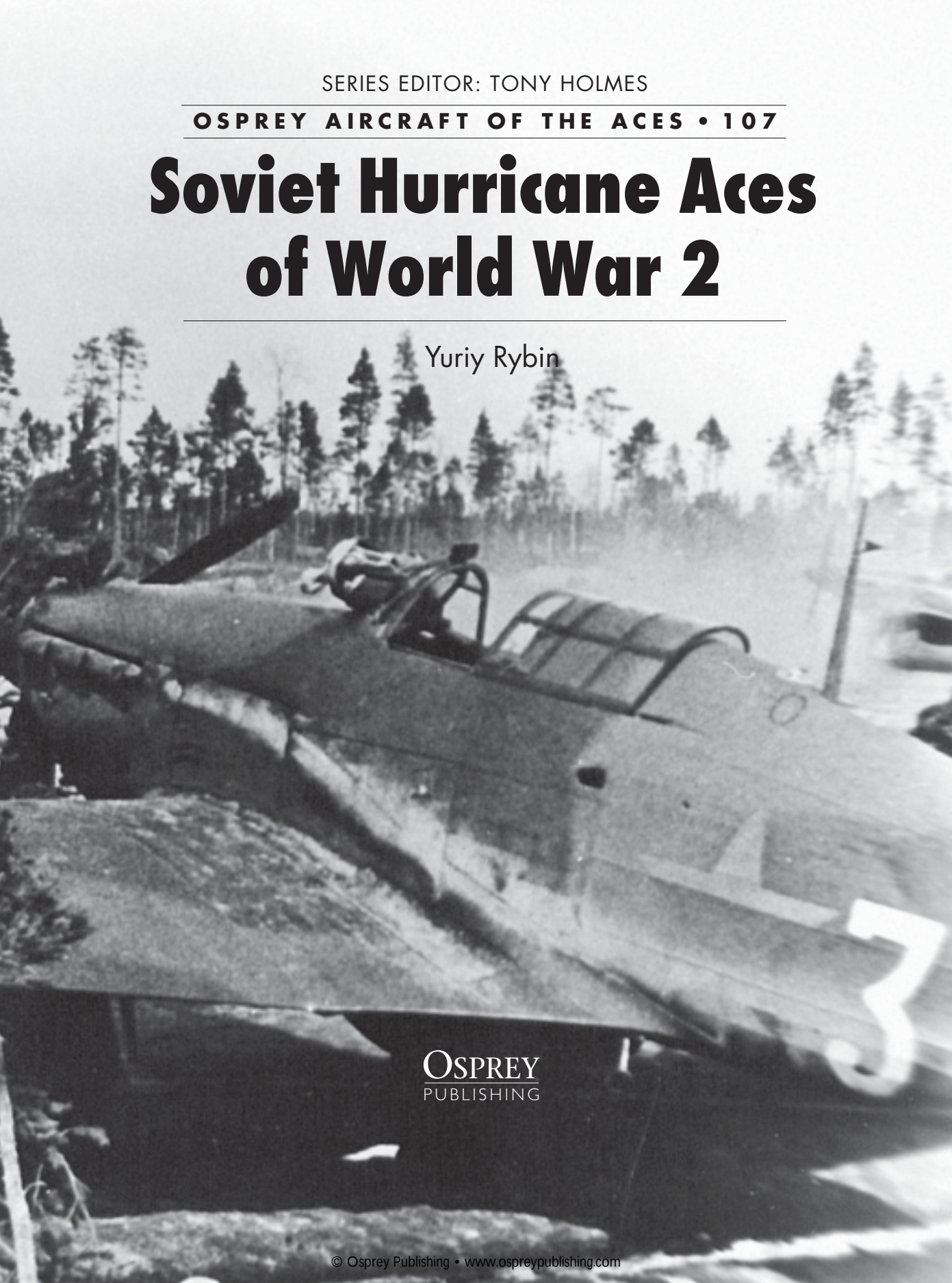

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HURRICANES IN SOVIET SERVICE

Many books and articles have been written about the pilots who fought in the legendary Hawker Hurricane. Inevitably much of this attention has been devoted to those who distinguished themselves in the skies over Britain in 1940, and it was hardly surprising that the annual Battle of Britain flypasts over London in the immediate post-war years were led by a Hurricane.

Similarly, many words have been written about the Allied pilots who fought against Axis forces in other theatres during World War 2 while flying Hurricanes. But little research has been conducted into the exploits of the many Soviet pilots who flew the legendary fighter. What has appeared in print in the past has been fragmentary in nature and often, to put it mildly, full of inaccuracies.

Yet in 1942 the Hurricane was the most numerous Western Allied fighter in the inventory of the Soviet Union's Red Army and Naval Air Force units serving on the enormous Soviet-German front. A major expansion of Red Army Air Force fighter regiments had been made possible by the monthly shipments of equipment from the Allies under lend-lease, which had been arriving since December 1941.

In the winter of 1941-42 these shipments were needed more than ever. The halting of the German advance on Moscow in January 1942 encouraged the Soviet command to build on this achievement with a series of offensive operations along the western, northwestern and Kalinin fronts. Many of the fighter regiments equipped with the Hurricane were the first to be mobilised along these fronts. Specifically, the units involved were 1st Guards and 157th, 191st, 195th, 488th and 736th Fighter Air Regiments (*Istrebitelniy Aviapolks*, IAPs). The latter two units were air defence regiments subordinated to Moscow's 6th Air Defence Fighter Corps (*Istrebitelniy Aviakorpus,* IAK), which also boasted three more air regiments – 67th, 428th and 438th IAPs – that were equipped with Hurricanes.

During this period these regiments were typically comprised of two squadrons, each of which was equipped with 20-22 aircraft. The latter figure also included training and liaison aircraft.

This, however, was just the start of the re-equipment of Soviet fighter regiments with aircraft

Soviet Hurricane units typically operated from primitive unpaved airfields as seen here. This machine has RS-82 rocket rails fitted beneath its wings. The RS-82 was used by most Soviet fighter types during the first year of the war in the east

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supplied by the Western Allies. During the first six months of 1942 new regiments were formed on the Karelian Front at an impressive rate. By the beginning of the summer 13 were equipped with Hurricanes, namely 145th, 147th, 152nd, 197th, 435th, 609th, 760th, 767th, 768th, 769th, 835th and 837th IAPs and 17th Guards Ground Attack Regiment.

It is also clear that the build-up of flight crews for such a large number of new units was mainly the result of accelerated flying training courses. Thanks to the Hurricane's relative simplicity, Soviet fighter pilots were able to familiarise themselves with their new aircraft and become operational on them fairly rapidly.

Yet the Hurricane's contribution to the Soviet war effort has tended to be overshadowed. Its performance was considered inferior to that of the Messerschmitt Bf 109Fs and Gs opposing it. Many reports from this period, when Soviet fighter units suffered heavy losses, characterised the Hurricane as obsolete, bulky and slow. It was almost considered to be a burden on the fighter units operating it. And the Hurricane was unlikely to be the mount of an ace fighter pilot. Of course, there is a grain of truth in this. It was difficult to measure the Hurricane's strengths against the latest Messerschmitt fighters, and it was hardly surprising that the more highly trained pilots tried to get themselves transferred to units operating faster and more manoeuvrable fighters at the earliest opportunity.

The highest scoring ace of the Northern Fleet Air Force, twice Hero of the Soviet Union (HSU) Boris Feoktistovich Safonov, led the first Soviet fighter air regiment equipped with Hurricanes. He flew 44 sorties between October 1941 and February 1942 with the type. Although he encountered enemy aircraft only twice during this time, on each occasion he was able to increase his personal score. He was credited with shooting down a Bf 109 and an He 111 for his 15th and 16th aerial victories. But when more modern Kittyhawk Is arrived in-theatre Safonov immediately transferred from the Hurricane to the American fighter, which, until his death in combat on 30 May 1942, enabled him to account for four more aircraft (three of these were Ju 88s downed on his final ill-fated mission).

Another reason for the negative attitude towards the Hurricane was that Soviet fighter regiments equipped with imported aircraft quickly lost their operational readiness during the intense combat of 1942. This

The appearance of the Bf 109F-4 on the Polar Front in the spring of 1942 was an unpleasant surprise for Hurricane units

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was due to inadequate flying training and a lack of replacement pilots and aircraft in reserve to make good losses suffered after just two or three weeks of combat. Units had to be pulled back to the rear to be re-equipped, as a rule, with another aircraft type. It was factors such as these that left bitter memories of the Hurricane with many Soviet pilots, who flew the fighter for such a short period of time that there was no possibility of them becoming aces.

The combat history of 195th IAP is typical of regiments equipped with the Hawker fighter in 1941-42. Established at Gorelovo, near Leningrad, literally on the eve of the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, 195th IAP became part of the city's 7th IAK and went operational with the Polikarpov I-16 while it was still in the process of being formed. The regiment flew 1269 combat sorties – primarily patrols over Leningrad – between 6 July and 15 September, resulting in 147 'operational encounters' that saw air defence pilots claim 60 enemy aircraft (35 fighters, 22 bombers and three reconnaissance aircraft) destroyed for the loss of 12 I-16s.

Several pilots distinguished themselves in these aerial battles, three of whom destroyed five aircraft and became aces. Snr Lt I P Neustroev, who was awarded the title of HSU on 28 September 1943, had six individual and nine shared victories to his name – he finished the war with a total of 15 individual and 10 shared kills. Capt Vladimir Abramov had claimed five individual and ten shared victories by the time he was killed in combat on 11 September 1941. Jnr Lt V N Kharitonov was also credited with five individual and ten shared victories during this period, became a HSU on 10 February 1943 and ended the conflict with a tally of 18 individual and 16 shared victories.

In the second half of July 1941 195th IAP was pulled back from the front and sent to the city of Cherepovets. Prior to this move taking place most of the unit's technical personnel were posted to another regiment still at the front, while pilots requiring treatment for wounds sustained in battle were sent to the rear. 195th IAP was then brought back up to frontline strength with recent graduates from flying schools and groundcrews posted in from other units. It had essentially been reformed.

While based at Sokol, in the Vologodsk region, in early January 1942, 195th IAP received its first Hurricanes. After ten days' conversion training the regiment was sent with its aircraft to the Kalinin Front to join the 3rd Strike Army in a two-squadron regiment based at Andreapol airfield. 195th IAP began military operations on 13 March when it undertook defensive patrols overhead Soviet troops and local rail transport, as well as in the vicinity of its own airfield.

In ten days of action 195th IAP flew 229 operational sorties, engaged enemy aircraft on 11 occasions and claimed four Ju 88s destroyed for the loss of three pilots and six Hurricanes. By 27 March, of the

Hurricanes were delivered to the Soviet Union disassembled and packed in crates. Most of those destined for service on the Kola Peninsula arrived at Kola railway station, several kilometres south of Murmansk

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15 combat-worthy Hurricanes that 195th IAP had commenced operations with just two weeks earlier, only six remained serviceable.

The regimental combat report for this period describes how bad conditions at Andreapol were in March 1942. The unit lacked any form of vehicular transport, let alone specialist trucks to heat water and engine oil and clear runways of snow. Personnel lived in dugouts, which hardly represented suitable accommodation, and supplies of food, fuel and ammunition were often disrupted. Communications with headquarters were unreliable, and the generation of sorties following requests by ground forces coming under aerial attack were so badly delayed that by the time 195th IAP Hurricanes were aloft, enemy aircraft had long since returned to the safety of their own lines.

On 1 April 195th IAP was withdrawn to be reformed, having handed its remaining Hurricanes to another regiment. In this brief period of operations the unit's pilots had flown 311 sorties and engaged in 24 aerial combats, resulting in claims for five enemy aircraft destroyed. The first of these had fallen on 21 March when two Ju 88s were shot down, one of which was attributed to Snr Lt Shcherban. The other was shared between Shcherban and Snr Lt Drozdov. The following day it was announced that two more bombers had been destroyed, one of which was credited to Shcherban while the other was shared between Shcherban, Afansyev and Burya. The fifth, and final, aircraft downed, in late March, was recorded as an 'Me 115', but it was in all likelihood a Bf 110. Its demise was credited to Zlodeev, Naydenov and Klimenko.

Considering 195th IAP's brief time at the front, and the lack of an early warning system to alert the unit of approaching enemy aircraft, it is unlikely that any of the regiment's pilots would have become aces even if they had been equipped with the most up-to-date fighters then in Soviet service. Yet 195th IAP's experience was typical of Red Army Air Force units fighting on the Soviet-German front in the first half of 1942.

It is true that there were exceptions, however. One was the protracted use of Hurricanes in the skies over the Arctic by the air forces of the Northern Fleet and on the Karelian Front (with the 7th Air Army after 10 November 1942), which saw a number of pilots score five or more kills while flying the Hawker fighter. But before recounting the combat exploits of these aviators, it is necessary to describe the way the Hurricane was characterised by the combat units in this northern sector of the Soviet-German front.

Hurricanes arrived in the Soviet Union from late 1941 as a key part of the first batch of lend-lease aircraft supplied by the Western Allies, together with Curtiss Tomahawk IIs and Kittyhawk Is and Bell P-39 Airacobras. They joined the latest generation of Soviet fighters – the LaGG-3 and Yak-1 – at a time when production of the MiG-3 had been discontinued with only a few examples surviving in combat units. All of these fighters had been designed in the mid to late 1930s and put into large-scale production shortly thereafter.

Each type had advantages and disadvantages. Although the LaGG-3 and Bell P-39 were both quite difficult to fly, the Soviet fighter's main drawback was its weight thanks to its all-wooden construction, with load bearing elements made from laminated plywood. Not only was the aircraft seriously overweight (takeoff weight was 2680 kg), its 1100 hp

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The LaGG-3's primary shortcoming was its excessive weight. The aircraft's all-wood construction, with load-bearing components of laminated plywood, was too heavy for the fighter's low-powered M-105PF engine

M-105 engine was underpowered too. Many manoeuvres could result in a considerable loss of altitude, which meant that dogfighting below 1000 m was to be avoided at all cost. Finnish and German pilots frequently reported incidents of LaGG-3s crashing even though they had not come under fire. In addition, the fighter required a lengthy takeoff run, and had a tendency to swing to starboard.

The Airacobra offered superior characteristics. It was relatively forgiving to inexperienced pilots on takeoff and landing thanks to the excellent view resulting from its unique nose-wheel undercarriage. Yet there were disadvantages with the Bell machine that prevented it from being widely used in the USSR. With its mid-mounted engine located behind the cockpit, the Airacobra was not always predictable in flight. The fighter demanded precision and accuracy during manoeuvres in the vertical plane, for any loss of speed could all too easily lead to a flat spin from which it was all but impossible to recover.

In many respects the Curtiss P-40 was the mirror image of the Airacobra, being easy to fly. Indeed, it could be sluggish like the Hurricane, but with a noticeable tendency to turn as speed increased. This made flying rather more complicated, especially when approaching maximum horizontal speed, which, in any case, Soviet pilots were warned to avoid so as to conserve precious fuel and oil – both in short supply in 1941-42. The aircraft was generally stable in flight, even at slow speeds. Compared with the Airacobra, landing and takeoff seemed fairly complicated in the P-40, especially with the Tomahawk II and Kittyhawk I variants. During its landing roll the aircraft could veer sharply to the left or right, and it was even difficult to keep straight when taxiing. Accidents in Soviet service were not infrequent.

The Bell P-39 Airacobra had an impressive performance but was difficult to fly, and therefore unsuitable for many newly-trained Soviet pilots in 1942-43 because of their limited flying experience. These particular machines were assigned to Northern Fleet Air Force regiment 255th IAP, this regiment regularly escorting Hurricanes of 27th and 78th IAPs during 1943-44

The principal drawback of the early P-40 variants, however, lay in their operational characteristics. The problem was that the first series Allison V-1710-33 engines were very sensitive to the strength of their

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The first Curtiss P-40s to reach the USSR were Tomahawk IIs supplied by the RAF. They proved to be demanding aircraft from a servicing standpoint, which created considerable difficulties in the primitive conditions of Soviet frontline airfields. This aircraft, AH965, was flown by ace Stepan Ridnyi of 126th IAP during the winter of 1941-42

coolant mixture, powerplants being known to fail through overheating caused by only brief periods of oil starvation. Overheated metal fragments from the camshaft bearings would find their way into the coolant and cause total engine failure. In 1942 such failures in Allison engines reached 'epidemic' proportions.

The most widely used fighter during this period was the Yak-1. Easy to fly, even by pilots with inadequate training, it had reasonable firepower with one 20 mm ShVAK cannon and two synchronised 7.62 mm ShKAS machine guns. In some units additional weaponry in the shape of six RS-82 rockets and up to 200 kg of bombs could be carried as external stores. But even this aircraft was far from perfect.

First and foremost, the Yak-1 was put into mass production before the prototypes had undergone all the necessary testing. The result was a string of serious defects. Most of the shortcomings were eventually eradicated, but the necessary remedial work continued throughout the aircraft's service career. Some defects remained unresolved. They included low critical roll-over angle, incomplete fuel feed from port and starboard tanks, oil being forced out of the breather tank and failure of the reduction gear shaft seal and other seals in the liquid cooled M-105P engine. In addition, engines constantly overheated, and together with fuel tanks and hydraulic systems, they also leaked. The windscreen was

The Yakovlev Yak-1 fighter was plagued by numerous design and production defects when it first entered service, but its major tactical shortcomings were poor range and a lack of modern radio communications equipment

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