

# SUN-SETTERS' SAGA

FROM ONE MISERABLE ISLAND TO ANOTHER, THE LIGHTNINGS OF THE 339th FIGHTER SQUADRON BRING THE WAR CLOSER TO JAPAN - PART TWO

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This view of 13th AF aircraft undergoing maintenance and repair by the 13th Air Depot at Tountouta, New Caledonia, in early 1943 gives an idea of the primitive operating conditions and the mix of equipment. Dominating the photo is B-17E 41-2426 wearing a field-applied camouflage. The Fort was delivered on 16 November 1941 to Fort Douglas Airfield near Salt Lake City and then flown to Hickam Field for assignment with the 431st Bombardment Squadron, 11th Bombardment Group, 13th AF. On 17 July, Lt. Ben King shot down a Zeke with the 339th FS P-38G-13-LO in the foreground before having to ditch it in the sea.



The war had been pretty quiet for the 339th Fighter Squadron since the 18 April 1943 intercept mission of Admiral Yamamoto. The veteran pilots had gone on leave to New Zealand and replacement pilots and aircraft had been assigned to and integrated into the Squadron. That lull ended dramatically on 7 June, when the JNAF sent nearly 50 Zekes on a fighter sweep down "The Slot" — the sea passage running through the center of the Solomon Islands. The enemy fighter force was met near the Russell Islands, just north of Guadalcanal, by over 100 Allied fighters including nine Sun-Setter Lightnings — of which only three, the flight comprised of 2nd Lieutenants Bill Harris, Murray "Jim" Shubin, and Robert E. Tucker, saw action.

Over Buraku Island, the Sun-Setters came across a dogfight between Royal New Zealand Air Force Kittyhawks and Zekes that wasn't going well for the Kiwis. They immediately intervened and Jim Shubin put two long bursts into a Zeke on the tail of a Kittyhawk, exploding it. Tucker shot some pieces off another, probably destroying it. Harris, who destroyed two Zekes, later described the action from his point of view:

*"Planes were going in every direction. As we approached the circles of P-40s [Kittyhawks] and Zeros, Shubin fired point blank into a Zero, and it exploded."*

*The Zero I intended to attack jerked his plane sharply to the left and out of my line of fire. I thought the Japanese pilot was going to continue pulling away, so I turned into him as sharply as I could. Just as the nose of my P-38 started turning to follow, he jerked the Zero sharply back to the right. It didn't seem possible to avoid crashing into him. I instinctively fired into the Zero's right side and it seemed to glow as I yanked my plane up and over him. There was not time to look back, for just ahead of me was another Zero firing into a P-40 at close range. It was a deflection shot, but when I fired, the Zero burst into a ball of fire, like a bomb. A New Zealand pilot behind me confirmed that the first plane had also exploded."*

One of Harris' Allison V-1710 engines had been hit and its supercharger put out of commission, but he made it back to his base at Kukum (Fighter II) on Guadalcanal. Twenty-three Zekes were claimed destroyed in this action by USAAF, Marine, and RNZAF pilots.

On the 10th, thanks to advance warning from an island coast watcher, four of the squadron's P-38s and four Marine F4Us intercepted four Betty bombers between Malaita and Santa Isabel Islands. The Corsair pilots shot down three of them and the other was destroyed by 2nd Lt. Floyd White, a 12th



FS pilot who was flying with the 339th on that day.

Two days later, six 339th P-38s, along with a few P-39s and P-40s, were scrambled to intercept some Zekes heading south from Vella Lavella Island, midway between New Georgia and Bougainville. Two of the Lightning pilots had to turn back with mechanical problems and another escorted one of them. The remaining three spotted four Zekes northeast of the Russells and in the ensuing skirmish 1st Lt. William F. Honaker shot one down into the sea.

On the afternoon of 16 June, coast watchers began reporting large numbers of enemy aircraft headed for the 'Canal, their target once again Allied shipping. They consisted of 24 fixed-gear Aichi D3A Val dive-bombers of the 582nd

These 12th Fighter Squadron pilots were photographed in front of 339th FS P-38 #153 sometime in the late spring or early summer of 1943. Although the 12th was a P-39 squadron, most of its pilots also flew the 339th's P-38s during that time — and sometimes actually with it. Under the aircraft number on the right (in shadow) is future ace Henry Meigs, who was assigned at various times to the 12th and 339th Fighter Squadrons and the 6th Night-Fighter Squadron.

