

SUN-SETTERS' SAGA

SWITCHING FROM BELL AIRACOBRAS TO LOCKHEED LIGHTNINGS, THE 339th FIGHTER SQUADRON MADE HISTORY IN THE SKIES OVER GUADALCANAL - PART ONE

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The 7th of August 1942: US Marines land on Guadalcanal at the southern end of the Solomon Islands, which the Japanese had taken from the British that spring. Covered by aircraft flying from US Navy carriers, they soon captured

the airfield their opponents were constructing and then rapidly prepared it for use by American aircraft. Guadalcanal's Allied codename was *Cactus*, and the USN, USMC, and USAAF air units based there soon became known collectively as "The Cactus Air Force."

An Army Air Forces
Bell P-39

Airacobra fighter squadron, the 67th, soon arrived at the field, now called Henderson after a Marine pilot who was killed in the Battle of Midway. Although the P-39 wasn't a very effective interceptor due to its poor climb rate and high-altitude performance, thanks to its heavy armament and sturdy construction it would do excellent work as a fighter-bomber in support of the ground troops. Also in August, the first

Lockheed P-38 Lightnings arrived in the South Pacific — specifically Australia — for use in New Guinea. It was also planned to utilize the Lightning, then the USAAF's fastest and highest-flying operational fighter, in the Solomon Islands. A War Department document dated 29 September 1942 authorized the creation of a new P-38 squadron in-theater from the 67th Fighter Squadron (FS), basically splitting it in two. This took place on 3 October, when the 339th Fighter Squadron was activated, along with the 347th Fighter Group (FG), to which both squadrons (plus, in November, the Curtiss P-40 Warhawk-equipped 68th FS) were then assigned. The 339th was activated on the French island of New Caledonia, the large rear echelon USAAF base some 800 miles south of Guadalcanal, with 33 pilots and 102 enlisted men of whom seven and 16, respectively, were currently serving with the 67th FS on "the Canal." The 67th's CO, Maj. Dale D. Brannon, was appointed the new squadron's first commander.

Although Guadalcanal now technically had a P-38 squadron, as yet it had no P-38s! The first Lightnings would not arrive there for over a month, and in

the interim the 339th's pilots would continue to fly the 67th's P-39s, essentially as part of that squadron. There was no physical separation of their personnel and facilities until 22 October.

The 339th's pilots included seven replacements recently arrived at New Caledonia. They were unique in that they had all been enlisted aviators, graduates of the first class of USAAF staff sergeant pilots — Class 42-C. They had trained on P-38s in southern California with the 82nd FG, but when that unit left for Ireland in September they were sent to the South Pacific and commissioned as second lieutenants. One of them, William P. Irwin, was killed in a P-39 accident on New Caledonia on 9 October. Three others would not survive their combat tours.

While awaiting their P-38s, the 339th's pilots did a lot of valuable work with the Airacobra, supporting the American ground troops attempting to wrest control of Guadalcanal from the Japanese — including the shooting down of a dozen enemy aircraft (E/A).

As to the latter, on 9 October, while six of them were escorting Marine Douglas SBD Dauntless dive-bombers attacking enemy



Flight jacket patch for the 339th Fighter Squadron.

shipping near New Georgia Island, farther up the Solomons chain, Capt. John W. Mitchell and 1st Lts. William S. Shaw and Fred V. Purnell were each credited with destroying a "float biplane" (Mitsubishi F1M, which had recently received the Allied code-name Pete). Mitchell, one of eight 70th FS pilots in the Fiji Islands that were recently transferred to the 339th, led the flight of eleven P-39s that had arrived on the Canal from New Caledonia two days earlier.

An intelligence report on this mission states that the Airacobras included six P-39D-2s with 20mm cannon in their noses and two P-39Ks equipped with 37mm cannon.

Also, that they



USAAF P-38G-13-LO 43-2191 (with 43-2190 in the rear) was perhaps the most pristine Lightning to arrive in the Southwest Pacific. Assigned to the 339th Fighter Squadron on Guadalcanal, the Lightning received the individual aircraft number of 115 and was assigned to Lt. Albert Farquharson. The name *HAD V Unlimited* on the nose probably indicates that this was a presentation aircraft, sponsored by a company or organization before being shipped to the combat front. Note that the "V" includes the Morse Code — three dots and a dash — a popular "Victory" patriotic theme of the time period. (Michael Bates)