

# STORM OVER THE PACIFIC

THE SAGA OF THE 318th FIGHTER GROUP AT WAR - PART ONE  
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One of the most unusual of the USAAF's theaters of operation in World War II was the Central Pacific (CenPac), comprised of hundreds of islands, most of which were quite unimportant militarily, while a few were very important. For a full year beginning in August 1943, CenPac was the domain of the US Navy — and specifically that of its huge task forces centered around aircraft carriers. Preliminary to the invasion of most of the more important Japanese-held islands of the Central Pacific, its carrier-borne US Naval Aviation units bombed and strafed their

airfields and other installations, and decimated the Japanese Naval Air Force (JNAF) units based there and on the Imperial Japanese Navy's (IJN) carriers — culminating in the famous "Turkey Shoot" over and near the Mariana Islands while supporting their invasion in June 1944.

The USAAF also had a presence and a function in CenPac. Once those islands were captured by US Marine Corps and US Army ground forces, its units took over their air defense from the Navy, and also commenced offensive operations against other Japanese-held islands from them.

## HAWAII

In February 1942, the Hawaiian Air Force was redesignated the 7th Air

Force (AF), whose Central Pacific dominion extended west from the Territory of Hawaii, eventually (in 1945) all the way to Okinawa, just south of the Japanese Home Islands. To its north was the 11th AF in Alaska (the Aleutians), and to its south and east the 13th AF in the Solomon Islands and the 5th AF in New Guinea. In 1944, the 5th and 13th AFs became the new Far East Air Force, which fought in the East Indies and in the Philippines, which were on CenPac's southwestern border.

Of course, it was the Central Pacific where the US finally entered WWII, courtesy of Japan's infamous surprise attack on Oahu on 7 December 1941. During it most of the American fighters there were caught and destroyed on the

Airacobras lined up along the Makin Island airfield's taxi strip. In the center is P-39Q-1-BE 42-19484.



Jacket patch for the Hawaiian Air Force.



318th Fighter Group jacket patch.

ground or while barely airborne; only a handful of Curtiss P-36s and P-40s of the USAAF's 15th Pursuit (later Fighter) Group were actually able to take off, and to shoot down ten Japanese planes. From then on, the Hawaiian Islands were a rear echelon of the Pacific War, serving as a transit stop for American ships, planes, and personnel heading farther west into or returning from the actual war zone, including refueling, resupply, and repair services and facilities — and they were utilized extensively for training purposes. As to the latter, there were 15 airfields and airstrips on Oahu, and its skies