

PORT MORESBY'S COBRAS

THE BELL P-39 AIRACOBAS OF THE 5th AIR FORCE'S 8th AND 35th FIGHTER GROUPS WERE THE FIRST USAAF FIGHTERS TO SEE ACTION IN NEW GUINEA - PART TWO

BY STEVE BLAKE

The Japanese returned to Port Moresby in force on 18 May 1942 with their largest bombing mission to date. Eighteen G3Ms of the Genzan Kokutai took off from Rabaul early that morning, followed shortly thereafter by 16 twin-engine Mitsubishi G4Ms of the 4th Kokutai and nine Zeros of the Tainan Kokutai (two of which aborted). When they reached New Guinea, the G3Ms

were joined by ten more Tainan Zeros from Lae.

The G4Ms attacked 7 Mile Drome but their bombs missed the airstrip. The G3Ms hit 12 Mile Drome a few minutes later, and their bombs did not miss. The damage at 12 Mile included the destruction of two P-39s. After their bomb run, the G4Ms were attacked by some Airacobras and one of them was shot down, while six others were damaged, one of which crash-landed at Lae. All the

G3Ms and A6Ms returned to their bases.

The P-39 pilots claimed to have destroyed

three of the bombers, even though they were encountered initially at 22,000 feet, at which altitude the Airacobra's performance was more than noticeably compromised. Captain Brown of the 36th Pursuit Squadron and Capt. Thomas T. Dabney of the 35th were each credited with one, both of which reportedly fell away with burning engines. (Paul Brown would go missing in bad weather during a solo P-39 flight over Australia on 25 September and was eventually declared deceased.)

A few minutes later, Brown's squadron mate Capt. Hoot Bevlock led his flight into another bomber formation, subsequently

claiming one of them as destroyed, while several others were damaged. The escorting Zeros then intervened and a skirmish ensued, during which two of the enemy fighters were damaged, one by the 39th PS' 1st Lt. Thomas J. Lynch, flying with the 35th Squadron. He dove out of the sun, targeted a Zero, saw some of his bullets hit it — and prudently kept going.

Second Lieutenant Charles Chapman of the 36th PS, flying P-39F-BE 41-7191, was killed in this action. Second Lieutenant Frank H.

Beeson of the 40th PS, TDY with the 36th, saw Chapman collide with one of the bombers and both planes being consumed by the resulting explosion. (Beeson would himself be killed on 25 July, when he was shot down by a Tainan Kokutai Zero pilot.)

The A6M pilots claimed to have shot down three Airacobras and the G4Ms' gunners four, although Lt. Chapman's was the only one that was lost. Due to the damage to 12 Mile's



Nose gear cocked hard to the left, the pilot of P-400 *Our Friend* runs up the Allison V-1710 prior to takeoff. The strips, made out of crushed coral and rock, really eroded the paint on the Airacobras as can be seen on the nose gear. Many pilots preferred the 20mm cannon in the P-400 to the 37mm unit in the P-39. Bore sighting the .30-caliber, .50-caliber, and cannon armament proved to be challenging.