

The P-400! What Was It?



A Bell P-39 similar to the P-400

Editors Note: The reader may wonder what does a P-400, nee P-39, have to do with the beloved B-24 of the 15th Air Force. Both were available for export to Britain before the United States entered World War Two, the P-39 in 1938, the B-24 in 1939. The B-24 that the members of the 484th Bomb Group are most familiar with was built in just nine months with many of its systems not fully developed because of the urgent need for heavy bombers. The P-39 suffered likewise, it too was rushed into production before a supercharger system could be readied for high altitude performance. Both were preemies of WWII.

In the year 1942 a little known aircraft, an export version of the Bell P-39, the P-400 was to play an almost unknown but important role in the saving of Henderson field in the Solomon Islands when the war in the Pacific had barely begun.

Except for lone, cruising B-17's, the Marines saw few friendly aircraft for almost a fortnight after the withdrawal of the Navy carriers on the night of 8 August 1942. Meanwhile, back-breaking labor was completing the unfinished Japanese air strip, and on the afternoon of the 20th, the stubby little carrier "Long Island," from some 200 miles southeast of Guadalcanal, catapulted two Marine squadrons, VMF-223 with 19 F4F-4's (Grumman Wildcat fighters) under Maj John L Smith and VMSB-232 with 12 SBD-3's (Douglas Dauntless dive bombers) under Lt/ Col. Richard C. Mangrum. These were followed in 2 days by five long nosed Army fighters, P-400's of the 67th Fighter Squadron, under Capt Dale Brannon.

The P-400's which flew into Henderson on 22 August, 1942 inaugurated a route over which many an Army fighter was destined to pass before the Japanese were driven from the Lower Solomons. In none too short hops they had flown all the way from New Caledonia, employing the Atlantic technique, fighters, equipped with belly tanks, shepherded by bombers or transports.

TBF's, (Grumman Avenger torpedo bombers), later appeared

on Guadalcanal. Leaving Blaines des Galacs on 21 August, Captain Brannon's flight of five hopped 325 miles to Efate, 180 more to Espiritu. The following day, with gas tanks topped off after the warm up, the P-400's tackled the 640 miles to Henderson. Gas consumption had been predicated upon low engine speed, a lean mixture, a 15 mile tail wind, and, in Captain Brannon's opinion, a landing powered by the proverbial fumes. Imperfect navigation and enemy fighters were written off.

The P-400's flew on the deck, at 200 feet, through mist and low hanging clouds. In clear spaces, they spread out; when weather loomed ahead, they snuggled under the navigating B-17's wing. A second Fort followed with rubber boats, to be tossed to the pilots if they bailed out. After 3 3/4 hours of flying, all five planes were set down on the Lunga air strip. The following day, Lt Robert E Chilson with 30 enlisted men of the 67th's ground echelon arrived off Lunga in the transport Fomalhaute, and when Capt John A Thompson brought in nine more P-400's on 27 August, the 67th was ready for action.

The 67th Fighter Squadron. If hardships prepare men for hardships, the 67th was prepared for Guadalcanal. Its personnel had sailed from New York in January 1942 in a crowded transport with inadequate water tanks, the men had received a daily ration of one canteen for washing, drinking, and shaving. After 38 days at sea they were rested for a week at a camp near Melbourne, Australia, and on 15 March disembarked on New Caledonia, where the inhabitants, military and civilian, momentarily expected the Japanese.

The 67th's airplanes were not only in crates but of a type only two of its pilots had ever flown. The 67th's new home was a half completed airfield up at Tontouta, 35 miles from Noumea. Its one combination truck and trailer took one of the crated planes to Tontouta every 8 hours, alternately groaning and highballing over the mountainous road. When the crates were pried open, instructions for P-39D's, F's, and K's were found, but none for P-400's; neither were the mechanics familiar with the plane. Still the work of assembly went forward. The men slept under shelter halves, the officers in a farmhouse, 44 of them in parlor, bedroom, and earth-