

floored basement. All united in cursing the sudden, unpredictable rains and in fighting the mosquitoes.

Tools for assembly consisted of 10 kits of simple first echelon maintenance tools. Lines were found plugged with Scotch tape; one P-400's electrical circuit had evidently had the attention of a factory maniac: when the flap switch was pressed wheels would retract; when the wheel switch was pressed the guns would fire. Nevertheless, in less than a month 411 planes were assembled with the aid of the 65th Materiel Squadron, and the pilots were checked out with only a single accident. The squadron, finding that the P-400's instruments were inferior, learned how to fly without them. Spare parts all came from salvage; and one plane, "The Resurrection," eventually evolved as a 100 per cent mongrel.

When Captain Brannon and his pilots landed at Henderson, action was not long in coming. The Marine pilots had parked on a little knoll near the Japanese pagoda which served as Allied air operations headquarters. Near it was a flagpole up which a black flag was run when an air raid threatened. There was no real warning system, the first radar did not function until September, but from other sources reports of approaching enemy formations were received.

On the hot, sunny afternoon of the 24th, pilots and ground crews were working around the P-400's when the black flag was hoisted. Already the drone of engines could be heard. Two of the 67th's pilots made a run for their planes, Captain Brannon and Lt D H Fincher taking off with the Grummans in a cloud of dust. Thirty seconds later the bombs hit. The P-400's staggered off over the palm trees and evaded the Zeros sweeping down to strafe. The Grummans climbed to 8,000 feet, knocked down all but one of the nine enemy bombers, which may have come from the doomed Ryujo off to the north. The Army pilots happened on a wandering Zero, pumped lead until it exploded.

The Marines, living largely on the Japanese quartermaster, introduced the pilots to life on Guadalcanal. In the green, canopied Marine tents were straw sleeping mats and enamelware eating bowls, both Japanese. Also Japanese food became marine chow, largely fish and rice, the cigarettes, and even the caramels. Socks, always too short, and loincloths were also available by courtesy of the Japanese QM. And across the river, a bare 200 yards away, was the enemy, with his snipers always alert for US officers' insignia.

Until the arrival of VMF-223 and VMSB-232, the Tulagi-Guadalcanal area had been without air resources. Moreover, few supplies had come through to the beachhead. General Vandegrift had thrown a perimeter defense around the airfield upon its capture and was able to set up one battery of 90MM guns and 58 automatic weapon positions against enemy air raids. The F4F-4's were immediately assigned the air defense of the area and the SBD's began to conduct long single plane searches over enemy positions at Guadalcanal and northward up to New Georgia and Santa Isabel. Operating under Marine command, the P-400's soon took up part of the burden. On the 25th, they were up on dawn to dusk patrols over Henderson and on the 26th two pilots flew reconnaissance around the entire Guadalcanal coastline.

By the last week in August, Japanese tactics in the Solomons had begun to take form. In the Buin Faisi area of Bougainville, at Vella Lavella on Kula Gulf and at Rekata Bay on Santa Isabel, the Japanese had bases easily supplied from Truk and Rabaul. By September, enemy men and supplies were being loaded on fast vessels, destroyers or cruisers. These marauders, hiding from the Henderson

based aircraft during daylight, by night came fast down "The Slot" between the parallel lines of islands, landed men and supplies, stood off Henderson Field, shelled it, and were generally safe in the central Solomons by daylight. Thus the enemy in the Guadalcanal bush would be reinforced to the point of mounting a final attack on the beachhead, at which time other Japanese, supported by a sizeable portion of the Imperial Navy, would be brought down from the Mandates as an occupation force. Such actions were feasible so long as the enemy controlled the sea approaches to the Lower Solomons. Once these were lost, as they were in the mid November engagements, the enemy was obliged to rely for reinforcements solely on the Tokyo Express.

Meanwhile, air attacks on Henderson were carried out almost daily from Rabaul via Kahili Field in southern Bougainville and various harassments maintained against the American garrison. These latter were ingenious sleep destroyers. "Oscar," a sub, surfaced nightly in the dark off Lunga, reconnoitered, threw a few shells at either Tulagi or Guadalcanal. After midnight, an asthmatic two engine bomber, variously named "Louie the Louse," "Washing Machine Charlie," or "Maytag Mike," would lay a stick of bombs across the field.

The 67th performed its daily patrols at the dangerous medium altitude of 14,000 feet. The planes could struggle a little higher, but the pilots, without oxygen, could not make long sustained flights at this altitude. The P-400's days as an interceptor were numbered.

Fail to Reach Bombers On 29 August came the first test. The P-400's were scrambled at noon to meet 18 enemy bombers with the usual Zero escort. Twelve went up in flights of four, climbed to 14,000, and, to quote the squadron's historian, "staggered around, looking closely at all spots within their vision to make sure they were just spots and not enemy formations." The bombers rode safely above, at 17,000 until the Grummans hit them, knocking down four bombers and four escorts. The discouraged P-400's returned to a runway swarming with men. The strip seemed to have sprouted bushes too; as it turned out the ground crews were using them to mark bomb craters. Ammunition was exploding: grass, hangars, and aircraft were afire; and scores of enemy snipers in the trees across the river were popping away.

30 August was a busy day. It began for the 67th at midnight; the SBD's had been sent on a hunt for enemy destroyers and the Army pilots were continuously on the alert until dawn, when their regular duties began. That day these consisted of maintaining combat air patrol over four friendly destroyers at Tulagi. The enemy raid was due at about noon "Tojo Time" as it was known from the regularity with which the enemy appeared at that hour. The coast watchers reported 22 single engine planes coming in from Buka Passage and at 1130 all aircraft came in for servicing.

It was reasoned that the Japanese would not send Zeros down alone, so the single engine aircraft must be dive bombers and their target the ships at Tulagi. Eight Grummans and 11 P-400's were in commission and were disposed to meet the expected attack. Four P-400's were to patrol over Tulagi and hop the dive bombers as they pulled out; seven cruised the towering cumulus at 14,000 feet to engage the enemy as he started down. The Grummans were somewhat above the latter group.

The seven P-400's had been cruising for about 30 minutes and already were feeling lack of oxygen when they were attacked (1), not by dive bombers but by Zeros. The agile Japanese dived down around a cloud, climbed up to take the P-400's from behind