

ally became so accurate they could be assigned targets quite close to the Marine lines.

Day by day the P-400's went up to Tasimboko while the Japanese bombed or shelled Henderson. On 4 September, with only three Army aircraft in commission and 13 pilots to fly them, word was received that the enemy was putting men ashore in landing barges up on Santa Isabel, 75 miles northwest of Henderson. Led by Maj. Robert E. Galer in his F4F-4, the three P-400's were on their way by 1440; the target was easily located in a small cove. Six loaded landing craft were destroyed by two direct hits with 500 pounders and the boats and men still landing were thoroughly strafed. All together a total of 25 landing craft out of 30 seen in the area were claimed destroyed. That night, however, the Japanese retaliated with the Express, a light cruiser and two destroyers sinking the American destroyer and, transports Little and Gregory off Savo.

On the 5th, after all personnel on Henderson had undergone a dismal night of enemy shelling, the Jagdstaffel and the Grumman uncovered a prime target, 15 fully loaded landing barges about 500 yards off the northwest coast of Guadalcanal. Six Grumman and two P-400's strafed until ammunition was exhausted. An Army pilot may have had this mission in mind when he came back to report that he and his wingman had literally cut a bloody X on the water through which Japanese troops were wading towards land. Two hours later, two P-400's returned to destroy most of the supplies in the landing craft which had grounded on a reef close inshore.

The Tasimboko operation or, rather, a raid-occurred on 8 September. Beginning at 0700, four P-400's and three SBD's bombed the area for 10 minutes, with the object of pinning down the defenders while the assault party went ashore. At 0900 the mission was repeated. At noon help was again requested, the Marines having tackled a rather larger force than had been anticipated, and the P-400's responded at once. Nevertheless, at 1530 the Marines asked that the P-400's cover their withdrawal.

Meanwhile, intermittent thundershowers had made 6 inch mud of Henderson's runway. Three of the P-400's were in commission and the pilots taxied them out. Captain Brannon lowered half flaps, held the brakes, and gave his engine full throttle. The plane crept forward. He wrestled it down the runway and staggered off. Less fortunate, Lt. V. L. Head lurched and skidded trying to pick up speed, muddy spray drenching the plane as it plowed through pools of water. Torque almost pulled it off the strip. Realizing he was, running out of runway, the pilot tried to "hang it on the prop." The old P-400 stalled and hit, broke in three, and caught fire. Lieutenant Head was able to get out, though badly burned.

The third pilot took off through the flame and smoke. For 2 hours, this lone pair of Army flyers covered the Marine withdrawal, doing lazy eights over the beach while the boats were loaded and launched. When the last had got away, the P-400's came in on reserve gas and somehow in the twilight got down on the strip.

By the time the Tasimboko raiders had returned, the Japanese were ready for a major attempt on the Marine positions. Their Express had been running regularly; their strength had been built to a peak. The Marine air establishment at Henderson was being whittled by operational losses and the necessity of daily interception. On 9 September, the F4F-4's were down to 11.

Lunga Ridge In anticipation of enemy thrusts, Marine air strength was substantially augmented on 11 September and addi-

tional planes came in on the 13th. By the 12th the Japanese had prepared a formidable push against the perimeter defense of the airfield. Bombers hit at Henderson by day and cruisers and destroyers from the Express shelled it by night. A particularly heavy shelling occurred during the night of the 13th, supporting a three pronged assault on the Marines. Two of the attacks were held, but the most vicious struck at the Lunga Ridge just south of the airfield, a position held by Col Merritt A Edson's First Raider Battalion. All night the Japanese drove against the ridge. Colonel Edson's men were forced off the crest and down on the other side. Only the inner perimeter defense stood between the air strip and the enemy. Snipers broke through and the field was brought under mortar and artillery fire. Radio Tokyo announced that Guadalcanal was retaken.

The 67th mustered three of its P-400's to aid the Marine counterattack on the 14th. At 0730 Captain Thompson and Lts B W Brown and B E Davis were dispatched to "Bloody Ridge." They did not have to fly to an objective; they simply circled the field, visible at all times to their ground crews except when they dipped behind the low hill. Then the murderous chatter of their armament could be heard. They made repeated passes until enemy rifle and machine gun fire forced two of them down in dead stick landings; the last simply ran out of ammunition. The Marines retook the hill and buried the enemy dead with a bulldozer. It was clear that the Japanese had shot their bolt in the night attack of the 13th. The American lodgment on Guadalcanal had survived another push.

By now, the maligned P-400 had proved itself. General Vandegrift consistently used the plane against any position blocking his Marines. In fact, he even asked for more P-400's. COMAIRSOPAC's chief of staff, Capt Matt Gardner, testified to its effectiveness in strafing troops and landing barges. The Marines preferred to use their SBD's against the reinforcing vessels. The P-400 had found in ground air cooperation its niche on Guadalcanal.

In defiance of technical orders, the 67th developed its own technique of dive bombing. On the plane's instrument panel was the warning: "Do not release bomb when nose angle 30 degrees up or down or when airspeed exceeds 280 m.p.h. The Jagdstaffel discovered that the bomb would release at 70 degrees and clear the propeller arc if a quick pressure on the stick was employed to pull the airplane away from the falling bomb. Dives averaged 300 and sometimes reached 500 in. MPH. Unlike the SBD's, which pushed over at 15,000 to 17,000 feet, the P-400's started their dives at 5000, released and pulled out right over the jungle, zigzagging over the palms to avoid ground fire and returning to strafe where the latter revealed troop positions.

The cover offered by the jungle and coconut groves effectively concealed the Japanese and distressed the Jagdstaffel, which often could not find the target or believe it had caused damage. Marine outposts reported enemy concentrations, which were shown the pilots on a map and indicated by panels in American held territory. The P-400's dive bombed the spot and came back to strafe blindly among the trees. Only occasionally did they catch a fleeting glimpse of a Japanese. However, the infantry, moving in, found bodies in abundance and sometimes silenced mortars, and captured diaries testified to the Japanese trooper's great fear of the "long nosed American planes." The Marine and Navy intelligence officers who briefed and interrogated the 67th employed this evidence to encourage the Army pilots, and the Jagdstaffel took heart. Thus the lowly P-400 helped save Henderson Field and the American position in the Solomons.