



Issue#1 P40Es in Australia

A short supply: An overview of the situation in Australia: Vers3.

The P40E represented the first modern massed produced fighter that the RAAF had at that time to carry the fight to the then relentless onslaught, by the Japanese, up to March 1942. Up to that time, apart from Brewster Buffaloes operated in Malaya in forward defense by 21 and 453 Squadrons, Australia had no front line Fighter aircraft equipping it's air force on the mainland of Australia. That force had been whittled down to a few serviceable airframes by the 17th February 1942 in Sumatra, NEI.

P40Es were being flown to Java by the USAAF in small numbers and were also separately shipped in two ships to Java for re-equipping those depleted RAF and NEI air force fighter squadrons there.

That proved to be an exercise in futility from the start, as it would have been seen in hindsight.

It must be remembered that the British also did reinforce the Far East in January and February 1942 with over 48 Hudson Bombers (flown out) and over 100 Hurricanes fighters (51 crated by sea and the balance by aircraft carrier). However they were consumed by the fighting during this period.

During this time, the Australian Government realizing the imminent collapse of the Netherlands East Indies, commenced making numerous requests to both the British and American Governments for a early allocation of suitable Tomahawk type fighters as used by Australian Squadrons in the Middle East. The choice was based on the availability of experienced pilots being seconded back to Australia, and the fact that the supply of Spitfires or Hurricanes was practically non-existent due to heavy fighting in the Europe/Middle East theatres.

The January 1942 requests initially centered on the British Government to reallocate some 250 P40 Type fighters to equip 6 fighter squadrons and an OTU, along with attrition replacements for a period of 6 months. These figures were based on the strength of 16 in-use and 8 in-use reserve aircraft for each squadron and twelve aircraft in an OTU. The balance of 94 would be held for training and attrition. After several telegrams to Britain, an early February reply came back whereby they agreed to allow 125 airframes from their next production allocation, along with the proviso that the Americans supply the 125 airframe balance from their production allocation. This would provide a single squadron at Port Moresby, Sydney, Brisbane, Canberra, and with two for Darwin. But the P40Es weren't allocated.

However at this time, General Marshall, was insisted that there was an outstanding ABDA requirement to provide this command with all available Australian assembled P40Es to Java.

To this end the first three USAAF Provisional Squadrons had departed to Java by the 6th February 1942 via Darwin. These P40E were drawn from the first the three shipments to Brisbane, 18 P40Es 22/12/41, 55 P40Es 12/01/42 and 67 P-40Es on the 17/01/42, resulting in only 39 out of 139 assembled at Amberley, arriving in Java (one was damaged on arrival, 41-5382 on the SS Mormacsun).

Two further squadrons were dispatched from the 10th February, formed from previous balance.

A note should be made that at this time, that some returned RAAF Pilots from the Middle East trained pilots for these USAAF P40E Provisional squadrons, had also undertaken conversion training, themselves on P40Es.

This was done at Archerfield and Amberley (23Sqn and 3 SFTS respectively) whilst providing dual control checks on Wirraways for the new USAAF P40E pilots from the States. This was a joint RAAF and USAAF agreement, which was the answer to stem the number of accidents, caused by limited trained pilots, fresh out of training schools from the United States.

Meanwhile, General Barnes, who was in charge of the USAAF in Australia at the time, was concerned about the ferry losses to Java, did consider and implemented a reinforcement plan whereby some 32 P-40Es would embark the USS Langley at Fremantle and sail to Java. A further 27 crated P-40Es would be sent by cargo ship, the SS Seawitch, and be unloaded and assembled in Java.

The first ferry flight of 15 P-40Es, A Flight, 33rd Pursuit Squadron (Provisional) under command of Major Pell, was redirected in transit at Port Pirie to provide fighter cover for transiting convoys out of Darwin. The second Squadron, the 13th Pursuit Squadron (Provisional) arrived in Fremantle to complete the number.

Three further fighter squadrons were to be sent to complete the need of eight squadrons for ABDA before consideration in completing the requirement of forming numbers nine and ten, being the new RAAF fighter squadrons, to defend the Australian mainland.

Prior to the sailing of the USS Langley on the 22nd February 1942 from Fremantle, the Australian Government telegram the American Government requesting that these two squadron worth of aircraft be re-directed to Darwin, which had suffered its first air raid on the 19th February 1942.

This did not happen and the convoy, MS-5 (Melbourne to Singapore #5) sailed to its fate, with its 59 P40Es destined to be destroyed, with 32 going down with the USS Langley. The remainder destroyed at two Java bases whilst undergoing assembly. A further 10 P-40Es were sent on three other ships, but continued on to India as the initial aircraft for the 51st Pursuit Group.

The Japanese at this time had invaded Sumatra by the end of February and Java at the beginning of March 1942, caused therefore a major rethink of where the next assembling three P40E Squadrons would eventually go.

This unit of three squadrons (7th, 8th and 9th PS) was the 49th Pursuit Group, the first whole fighter group to be deployed since the commencement of hostilities to the Pacific theatre. It too was still waiting for P40E aircraft, as the remnants of the first three convoys weren't enough to equip it.

It wasn't till mid February when the assembled P40E/E-1s of the fourth shipment of 111 P-40E/E-1s (5th February 1942), the USS Hammondsport, arrived for each squadron to equip with.

Latter in March, we would see the 7th Pursuit was sent to Horn Island, so as to keep that air route open for the reinforcement of Port Moresby. The 9th Pursuit Squadron

would also be sent to Darwin in March 1942. The remaining 8th Pursuit Squadron would remain at Canberra till the 8th April, till it too went north to Darwin.

Again, the Australian Government requested again in late February (22nd) and was at last granted two allocations. One further USAAF Unit was to be allocated P40E/E-1s in Australia, the 68th Pursuit Squadron, prior to moving to New Caledonia in May 1942. These were shipped in crates from Brisbane during early May 1942 to its destination.

Firstly, a request for a limited number for training (6-12) was granted, followed by a monthly allocation from March 1942 of 42, 40, and then 40 up to May 1942.

The order from the American Government was immediately issued, whereby a limited number of airframes, approximately 6, were allocated, still with USAAF Cockades to 3 SFTS at Amberley, in late February 1942.

Thus started the beginnings of a long association between the *RAAF and the P40*.

The P40E/E-1 from the RAAF View

Coupled with a non-supercharged Allison V1710-F3R (39) 1150 HP Engine and a high wing loading, it did not perform particularly well at altitudes higher than 15000 ft when required to dogfight.

The solution eventually came, after much combat experience, was to use its strengths, particularly in diving, sturdy construction and speed, to overcome its disadvantages when weighed against more agile Japanese aircraft. With increasing numbers available, trained Pilots and the use of improved tactics, resulted in blunting the Japanese waves of success from April 42 onwards.

In the RAAF operational context, an effort was made to produce a periodical Information Fighter Bulletin, referring to fighter tactics, both enemy and successful Allied and other important details that came to light, was being circulated from mid 1942. These were sent to RAAF Fighter Squadrons (i.e. 75,76,77, 30,31 etc) as well to Fighter Flights within Citizen Squadrons (i.e. 25 Sqn at Pearce, WA that had Buffaloes) in order improve Allied preparedness and to understand Japanese formation tactics used.

Up to six Bulletins were issued to the end of 1942. They ranged from simple “stay alive” tactics of weaving, a climbing turn into a Zero attack to attacking Japanese Bomber “V” formations, to minimize exposure to supporting bomber machinegun fire. The before mentioned tactics were written by the 49th FG P40E Squadron’s on their successful defensive attacks on Japanese bombers over Darwin during June to August 1942.

This was important, as the USAAF in Australia did not receive any further imported or assembled P40Es after June 1942 (having had around some 514 Airframes delivered by then), as further deliveries were being sent to other theatres in more need.

It would be nearly October 1942 before deliveries of P40Ks begun to arrive for the USAAF in Australia. Thus the need to conserve those airframes, either by changing tactics or by prolonging them by careful use and maintenance, had to be done. This had a knock on effect to the RAAF, who initially were issued 140 approximately up to June 1942, as the pool of reserve aircraft held by both the USAAF and RAAF dwindled to very low levels by September 1942.

There were cases in early April 1942, due to heavy losses by the 49th FG, where RAAF allocated airframes were repossessed by the USAAF before being issue to RAAF Squadrons.

For example:

A29-94 41-25163 returned USAAF 28/4/42 **41-25176** becomes then **A29-94** 13/5/42
A29-95 41-25185 returned USAAF 28/4/42 **41-25177** becomes then **A29-95** 13/5/42
A29-96 41-25181 returned USAAF 28/4/42 **41-35966** ET612 becomes then **A29-96**
13/5/42
A29-97 41-25174 returned USAAF 28/4/42 **41-35970** ET616 becomes then **A29-97**
13/5/42
A29-98 41-25167 returned USAAF 28/4/42 **41-35973** ET619 becomes then **A29-98**
13/5/42
A29-99 41-25177 returned USAAF 28/4/42 **41-35974** ET620 becomes then **A29-99**
13/5/42

Later post May 42 example:

A29-123 41-35942 returned USAAF 01/6/42 **41-36247** ET883 becomes then **A29-123** 7/7/42

It is interesting as **41-25177** (ex-A29-99) had an interesting career with the 49th FG **P-40E-1 41-25164**(ex A29-92) returned USAAF 28/4/42 then new card states "**A29-92**" **as now 41-25166 being** kept on RAAF strength.

This was to be the aircraft that Sqn Ldr Peter Turnbull was killed in at Milne Bay.

The fate of **41-25168** (A29-93) was lengthy. The remains were found 12/4/1967 at Gurney Strip, Milne Bay and the record states that the aircraft was s/d 11/8/42 there, so it would seem that it came back into the RAAF?

A further trickle of 23 or so airframes flowed on till September 1942. This is also the first case I have found whereby the RAAF re-used serials for different USAAF Serial aircraft (i.e. A29-91). There were also cases where aircraft were refused to the RAAF by the then USAAF 5th Airforce, because there was no P40E's left to spare, as the 49thFG was down to some 64 airframes by September 1942. Well below the establish strength of 80 airframes required by their table of equipment.

In some respects the actual number of RAAF P40E/E-1s hasn't been concluded as yet due to the problem of identification of the original issues. Though they were serial from A29-1 to A29-163, some were never taken on charge, or those taken on charge were returned.

Others crashed on delivery ex-USAAF or were taken on charged, damaged but then returned following repair, to the USAAF.

Confusing? Yes it is, as some of my counts hover around approximately 170 or more P40E/E-1s RAAF nominated airframes, with at least five (maybe even up to seven), being returned to the USAAF.

Questions like did A29-73 exist? What were the USAAF Serials of those first Kittyhawks?

We do have speculative answers for those questions. There will be more information on that in latter newsletters.

So there appears to be a long way to go, and therefore we welcome any information or photographs pertaining to pre-march 42 period and early 75 Sqn photos during the period in PNG.

But perhaps over the next few newsletters, it would be better to share the whole picture from the very first day they arrived in Australia to the end of 1941.

This, we'll do, but first what the difference between a P40E-CU and a P40E-1-CU?

Next issue: we'll examine the differences and identification points of the P40E-CU's and P40E-1-CU's by comparison, with a P40N-1, in more detail than has ever been read by the average Aviation Buff. ***Gordon R Birkett compiled @2003, corrected 2005***