

P40E/E-1 Operations in Australia Part XV

Defence of Darwin: RAAF Transfers/49th Pursuit/Fighter Group August-September 1942 Ver5

At the end of July 1942, reinforcements, changes in leadership and events had taken place to change the overall USAAF direction in the South West Pacific.

Major General George Kenny assumed command of the 5th Airforce in Australia in late July 1942. He had replaced Major General Brereton, who had overseen and commanded the initial period from Java to the consolidating of air forces in Australia, pending reinforcements from the USA. Kenny was known as an aggressive commander and by virtue of his background, would ensure that the right logistical support for all Units would be created from that point onwards and be maintained to ensure that the aircraft availability would be maintained.



1st Lt R Deems Taylor's #88 P-40E-1 41-35968 ET614 of Dragon Flight 9thFS/49thFG June 1942.

The last 49thFG Darwin Interception on Sunday 23rd August 1942.

On this day, the Japanese would change their approach and proceeded south of Darwin towards Hughes Strip. The 8thFS, then followed by the 7thFS, would intercept and shoot down their last Japanese aircraft to be claimed on the Australian mainland by the 49th Fighter Group.

The number of RAAF Radio Direction Sites had been increased around the surrounding environment of the Darwin to provide additional early warning coverage of possible routes of enemy bomber formations. On previous days, a small number of enemy reconnaissance flights failed to be intercepted.

On the 23rd August 1942, a formation of 27 G4M Betty Bombers of the Takao Ku, escorted by some 18-20 Zeros of the 3rd Ku passed to the south west of Darwin harbour on their way to the vicinity of Strauss and Livingstone Strips at around 11.40am.

Having been alerted earlier, by the RAAF RDF sites, both the 8th FS and the 7th FS were at altitude approaching Cox Peninsula in tandem formation at 12.00pm. The 9thFS provided fighter cover over the bases.

8th FS's B Flight Yellow section, under command of Capt. George Kiser, met the first Bomber flight head on some 25 miles off the coast and inflicted damage on 3 bombers before peeling off. 7th FS B Flight led by 1st Lt Ray Melikian, made the next head on attack into the bomber formation before the escorting Zeros engaged and peeled off.

The bombers were by then crossing the coast, when the 8th FS's C Flight, Blue section, led by 1st Lt C. C. Johnson, attacked the enemy bomber formation. By this time the enemy Zeros had reached the attacking force and then with ferocity, engaged the two later flights. By 12.05pm, some 6 zeros and 3 bombers had been shot down.

As the Bombing Formation turned north to commence their bombing run on Hughes Strip, another 7thFS Flight, under the command of 2nd Lt John Posten, made an attack on the formation. By this time the formation had reached Middle Arm and most of the 49th FG Units that had engaged were breaking off after 12.30pm.

A third Flight from the 7th FS, led by 1st Lt Lester Johnsen, engaged the enemy bomber formation at this time at 22,000ft. Another 8th FS Flight led by Capt James Morehead had arrived and were engaging the zero escorts above. Two more bombers were downed as well as two of their escorting Zeros by 12.45pm.

The last 49th FG unit engaged, a 7th FS section led by 2nd Lt Frederick O'Riley, broke off the engagement near Bathurst Island. O'Riley's P-40E would be the only USAAF casualty this day, when he ran low of fuel and bellied in at Finke Bay, 40 miles north east of Darwin. He was unharmed and during the air engagement had shot down a G4M Betty Bomber.

Pilot Name	Unit	G4M Betty	Zero	Pilot Name	Unit	G4M Betty	Zero
Capt Wilson Chapman	7 th FS		1	Capt C.C. Johnson	8 th FS		1
1 st Lt Gene Drake	7 th FS	1	1	Capt Rufus "Bo" Jordan	8 th FS	1	
1st Lt Donald Lee	7 th FS		1	1st Lt Earl Kingsley	8 th FS		1
1st Ray Melikian	7 th FS		1	1st Lt Donald Morse	8 th FS		1
1st Lt Olive B Vodrey	7 th FS	1		2nd Lt Marlin R Smith	8 th FS	1	
1st Lt Frederick O'Riley	7 th FS	1		Capt George Kiser	8 th FS	1	
				Capt James Morehead	8 th FS		2
Squadron Total	7th FS	3	4	Squadron Total	8th FS	3	5

The 23/08/42 49th Fighter Group Kills came to a total of 15 Enemy aircraft. Source USAAF. GRB

As for the 9th FS this day, no aircraft managed to engage in combat the enemy bomber formation. The Japanese bombers managed only to cause only slight damage to Livingstone Strip and surrounding dispersal area and to drop one bomb on Strauss Strip, with a near miss on one aircraft, #86 (41-25180) flown by Capt Andy Reynolds of the 9thFS.

Word that 77Sqn RAAF was coming to relieve the 9thFS became truth, when, it had arrived towards the end of August 1942. On this day, it sat on strip alert.

Pending the arrival of the second RAAF Squadron (76Sqn from Milne Bay), the 7th FS and 8th FS would patrol the first few weeks of September 1942 with 77Sqn RAAF.



Lt Sid Wood's 9th FS P-40E-1 41-25163 #74 "Arizona" August 1942

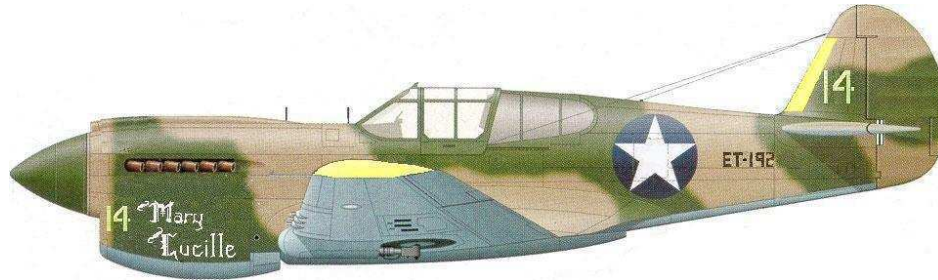
The next day, the 7th FS would loose another P-40E-1 under different circumstances as 2nd Lt Larry Hansen's diary extract, courteous of his Grand Daughter, states:

"Mon 8-24-42

What a day. Seeing old 14 didn't do so good on the alert flight yesterday, I took it up on an altitude hop, about 9:30 AM today. At 2750 she shook herself to pieces and shot oil all over the ship. That was 20 miles north of our field at 3500 ft. At 2800 ft I left. Landed in a good sized field very well bruised & shoulder & my groin so sore I couldn't walk for an hour. That

was about 10:10. I sat on my stern and waited till about 3:00 PM when Vodrey found me & sent Steere & Young out to buzz me. Capt B & the Doct and Vodrey came out and picked me up in a jeep about 5:30. I was very tired, sore and sunburned and thirsty as hell, but very happy to be alive. Its funny how easy it is to get out of one of them. Just trim it very nose heavy, unfasten the belt, open the canopy & let go of the stick. You just shoot out. I did three outside loops & then pulled the ripcord (which I still have) and went on down very easily except for the landing. Poor old 14 blew up a bundle.

They all accused me of leaving it for a new plane. How about that. Could be?"



2nd Lt Larry Hansen's "A" Flight 7thFS P-40E-1 41-24868 (ET192) #14. It had previously been the mount of 2nd Lt Joseph King 7thFS. It may have been a refitted resprayed O/Drab scheme or as a repo may have been painted at the factory before its demise. Still checking this, but the evidence is pointing to a refit O/Drab. GRB

The 9thFS would then deploy to New Guinea as the advance unit for the remainder of the 49th Fighter Group that would follow by October 1942.

The P-40E numbers dwindling on the front line

One resource that didn't increase was the number of available P-40Es.

From December 1941 to August 1942, some 528 P-40E/E-1s had or were being sent out to the SW Pacific from the US of A.

Of these, 141 had been ferried or shipped to Java, 3 also had been shipped to the Philippines, and 10 shipped onwards to India.

Originally, some 250 P-40Es were to be issued to the RAAF as per the agreement of allocation during February 1942. Half were to be allocated RAF P-40E-1s, with the other half to be re-directed USAAF P-40Es. It's fair to say that this agreement was not upheld due to unforeseen circumstances and events of war. However, the RAF kept its word and diverted 126 RAF/DAF allocated P-40E-1s to the account of the RAAF as no charge.

As of the Java conclusion date of the 7th March 1942, a census of P-40E aircraft on strength in Australia was given as 236 P-40E aircraft, with 121 in commission, 61 under Errection and with some 54 having been damaged or written off as of that date.

Out of this total, some 80 P-40Es had been transferred to the RAAF by April 1942, of which some 33 damaged USAAF aircraft having been repaired and re-issued to the RAAF.

A further 133 P-40E-1 aircraft were to arrive over the next three months, consisting mostly of the initial RAF allocation of 126 P-40E-1s as promised and released during February 1942.

However, due an advance supply of 80 USAAF P-40Es in March/April 1942 to the RAAF, a high proportion of these P-40E-1s were paid back to the USAAF.

By June 1942, 134 P-40E aircraft were issued to the RAAF, with another 25 going to the 68th PS USAAF*** to Fiji, and finally some 18 were issued to the RNZAF. The balance of airframes, 116 P-40E/E-1s were on strength of the 49th FG.

*** One of these is still extant flying today with Col Pay in a RAAF Desert Scheme.

Therefore the 49thFG, at the end of June 1942, now numbered approximately sixty-five P-40E/E-1s in frontline use, 12 aircraft in reserve, with numerous airframes (39 in total) being rebuilt or serviced by the 43rd Service Squadron. USAAF Losses during June 1942 either through combat or by accidents had been high at 17 airframes.

The RAAF on the 27th July 1942 had Ninety-Four P-40E/E-1s on strength*, broken down as follows (Serviceable/Unserviceable):

- 21 P-40Es (20/1) with 75F Sqn
- 26 P-40Es (23/3) with 76F Sqn
- 23 P-40Es (23/0) with 77F Sqn
- 8 P-40Es (6/2) with 2OTU at Mildura (Vic)
- 1 P-40E (0/1) with SHQ at Townsville (Qld)
- 2 P-40E (1/1) with 1AD at Laverton (Vic)
- 13 P-40Es with 5AD at Wagga (NSW)
- Some 7 aircraft were unserviceable out of this number, and a further 30 in total had been lost through accidents or combat since March 1942.

Between June and July 1942, the RAAF had received an additional 7 P-40E-1s to replace attrition (**A29-135** to **A29-141**, being **41-35944-6**, **41-35949** and **41-36232-4** respectively) while some 28 P-40E-1s originally allocated to the RAAF during this period from promised RAF allocations, were transferred to the 49th FG to replace the heavy losses of June 1942.

Those 28 new P-40E-1s transferred from RAAF allocations to the 49th FG were: **41-36086 to 41-36091**, **41-36100**, **41-36151**, **41-36153**, **41-36155**, **41-36157-8**, **41-36160**, **41-36162**, **41-36164**, **41-36166**, **41-36168**, **41-36170-1**, **41-36173**, **41-36231**, **41-36235**, **41-36243-5**, **41-36250**, **41-36251**, **41-36253** and **41-36254****.

These were not USAAF allocated P-40E-1s as such, and therefore are stated, are part of the repayment aircraft plan for the first 80 RAAF P-40E/E-1s transferred from USAFIA stocks.

*****Please note:** For simple accounting by me, I have used only the USAAF FY Serial for simplicity whereas these aircraft actually sported both USAAF Data Blocks and fuselage ET*** Serials. It must be pointed out that these RAF allocations were in fact British allocations from production per the Portal Agreement and were paid for by the British after the war. All of these 126 RAF allocated aircraft to the RAAF were marked in their British Purchasing Commission RAF Serials per Contract DA-3 (432 P-40E-1 aircraft), not USAAF Serials.*

A further 9 new P-40E-1s (**A29-142** to **A29-150**, USAAF Serials **41-36236**, **41-36238-2**, **41-36246-7**, and **41-36249** respectively) were delivered to the RAAF from promised RAF allocations on the 20th August 1942. However as remarked in a previous part, one of these, **A29-145**, forced landed on delivery and eventually re-entered service with the USAAF.

However a further 9 RAAF allocated P-40E-1s from RAF allocations, previously delivered to Australia in July 1942 were transferred to the USAAF in August 1942 (**41-36231**, **41-36235**, **41-36243-5**, **41-36250-1**, **41-36253-4** respectively).

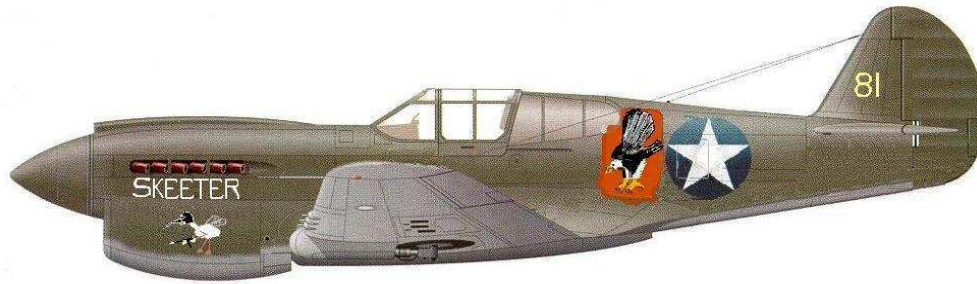
Additionally, a small pool of 6 49th FG (used) P-40E reserve aircraft was transferred to the RAAF (**A29-151** to **A29-156**, being USAAF P-40E/P-40E-1 models **41-24875**, **41-24808**, **41-24789**, **41-5312** and **41-5316** respectively) late in August 1942.

A further 14 P-40E-1s aircraft, being some of the last allocated ex RAF/DAF, had been sunk on route via Halifa (Middle East) to Australia on the SS Montreal during August 1942.

Those undelivered P-40E-1s were **41-36175**, **41-36177**, **41-36179** **41-36181-4**, **41-36188** to **36190**, **36192-3**, **36195** and **36197**.

With the aircraft losses at Milne Bay being in need of replacement, another eight P-40E/E-1s (**These were 41-5316**, **41-24861**, **41-5647**, **41-24823**, **41-36162**, **41-24818**, **41-5503**, and **41-24876**, which became **A29-157** to **163** inclusive, except for the last mentioned FY Serial as only 7 P-40Es arrived into RAAF

Service.) were to be released to the RAAF from the 43rd Service Squadron Pool on the 2nd September 1942. Pilots arrived on the 3rd September 1942 to collect them.



1st Lt John Lander's #81 P-40E 41-5647 of Eagle Flight 9thFS/49thFG prior to becoming RAAF A29-159 on the 07/09/42. It was one of the last seven delivered during September 1942 from USAAF Stocks.

Unfortunately, two of these, **41-24818 #37 (A29-162)** and **41-24876 #35 (A29 Serial not assigned)** both recently of the 8thFS (piloted by F/Sgt Wilm RAAF and by 1st Lt Ed Ball, 9thFS/49thFG USAAF on ferrying duties, respectively), had either suffered engine failure on take off or during the ferry flight, force landed at Birdum in the Northern Territory on the 2nd September 1942, respectively, whilst still in USAAF markings.

Though communicated by the 49th FG as a write-off, **41-24818 #37** was repaired quickly by the 43rd Service Squadron (Propeller, spinner and cowling) and arrived at Charters Towers on the 7th September 1942.

This particular P-40E-1, previously flown by Capt Bob Morrissey of the 7th FS as **#10** had been damaged on the 4th May 1942, but was then re-built, re-sprayed Dark Olive Drab/Neutral Grey, and re-issued as **#37** with the 8th FS in mid August 1942 along with 8 others which were previously deemed as write-offs in June 1942.

It seems that the FY Data block and its RAF serial marking (in this case **ET142**) were stripped and sprayed over at the time of overhaul and was not re-applied externally. These are deemed as the P-40E **refits** in USAAF parlance of the period, which were denuded of external serials and sported fresh single tone dark Olive drab and neutral grey paint schemes.

It would be fair comment by its 5th AAF documented inclusion of **41-24818 #37** as one of the seven P-40Es transferred by the 49th FG on the 7th September 1942 to the RAAF, that the RAAF E/E88 Card has noted it's serial in error as **41-3700**.

From a research perspective, the eighth aircraft, **41-24876 #35**, was not *seemingly* allocated an A29 Serial. In all likelihood, it would have become **A29-164** had it entered service.

Therefore with the last P-40E/E-1 shipped being sunk in August 1942, there would be no more E models sent to or received by the RAAF or 49th FG.



A well-worn A29-159 ("C" of 75Sqn RAAF) as seen later in its career in early 1943

It would be October 1942 before the next replacement shipment of aircraft, P-40K-5 Models this time, would reach the 7th FS/ 49th FG. The RAAF would have to wait till the start of 1943 before they got their P-40K-10s.

The RAAF on the 14th September 1942, following Milne Bay, had one hundred and six P-40E/E-1s on strength*, broken down as follows (Serviceable/Unserviceable):

- 18 P-40Es (15/3) with 75F Sqn at Fall River (Milne Bay)
- 25 P-40Es (21/4) with 76F Sqn at Fall River (Milne Bay)
- 18 P-40Es (14/4) with 77F Sqn at Batchelor (Northern Territory)
- 1 P-40E (1/0) with 77F Sqn at Pearce (W. Aust)
- 9 P-40Es (3/6) with 2OTU at Mildura (Vic)
- 1 P-40E (0/1) with SHQ at Townsville (Qld)
- 1 P-40E (1/0) with 3CF at Mascot (NSW)
- 3 P-40Es (0/3) with 3AD at Amberley (Qld)
- 11 P-40Es (9/0) with 5AD at Wagga (NSW) with 2 P-40Es in transit to 75F Sqn.
- 3 P-40Es (0/3) with 43rd Service Squadron USAAF at Adelaide River (NT)
- 2 P-40Es (0/2) at 12RSU at Charters Towers (Qld)
- 8 P-40Es (0/8) at US/RAAF Pool at Charters Towers (Qld) including 3 in transit.
- 6 P-40Es (0/6) at 15RSU at Port Moresby (PNG)

*Out of this number, some fifty-one aircraft were unserviceable. 57 P-40E/E-1s had been lost either in combat or through accidents.

Coinciding with these actions, there would become major engineering problems caused through fatigue with the P-40E/E-1 model then in use that would lead to some difficult unserviceability levels for the RAAF. Gun blast tubes/ Gun Ribs in the wings were failing.

These provided a shroud and anchoring fixture for the 0.50cal machineguns from the internal to the external leading edge.

Constant action and use at Milne Bay had caused these parts to fail.

Some 8 RAAF P-40Es of both 76F Sqn and 77F Sqn were under repair by the 43rd Service Squadron during the October- November 1942 period for these problems.

A little known fact was the regular visits by Curtiss Wright Factory Technical Representatives to Australia during this period and their continued support throughout the war in advising and resolving technical issues ranging from this example to depot servicing schedules for RAAF and USAAF P-40s.

We'll discuss this further in the next part.

Next Part: We will be continue our long running P-40E Series, with their RAAF operational service and fates in a future part. A full listing of all RAAF Airframes, both A29 serialed and those, which did not have service in the RAAF, will be printed. It will include those aircraft from the RAF allocations, and those paid back or transferred to the USAAF.

Please note:

I would like to express my sincere thanks to our P-40E Research Group (Particular Craig "Buz" Busby for his encouragement) as always, for their professional help.

The research would not have been possible without the Airforce Historical Research Association (USAF) in the USA for aircraft data cards and Unit History Reels. The RAAF Museum E/E88 Cards, the National Archives of Australia and to those people who added "important" bits, here and, to make this story possible.

Please note: My Aircraft Profiles that are depicted in any story are representations only, though every effort is made to be accurate given the information and photographic evidence that is available.

Gordon R Birkett compiled @2005