



## P-40E/E-1 Operations in Australia Part Four Ver5

Previous printed histories of deliveries have stated around 329-344 airframes were delivered up to the 9<sup>th</sup> March 1942. After adding up all of the consignments, we have the extraordinary number of **309 P-40E/E-1s delivered**. I have also, for the first time provided some side profiles of the aircraft mentioned in these essays. Unbelievable? Read on.

### US Convoy Shipments to Brisbane 15/01/42-04/02/42

Following the formation of this reinforcement plan, all shipments then destined for the Philippines were re-routed to Brisbane for unloading, erection and assembly of the P-40Es, whereupon they would be organised into provisional fighter squadrons and flown to Java. The arrival list of ships and their P-40E cargo are as follows:

- **USAT President Polk (10508 tons) (Second Convoy) loaded with 55 P-40Es, departing San Francisco 16/12/41, arriving 12/01/42;**
- **SS Mormacsun (14,909 tons) (Second Convoy) with 67 P-40E's arriving 17/01/42**
- **SS Mariposa (18017 tons) (Phoenix Convoy) with 19 P-40Es departing San Francisco 12/01/42 unloading Melbourne 02/02/42;**
- **SS Coolidge (21936 tons) (Phoenix Convoy) with 32 P-40Es departing San Francisco 12/01/42 unloading Melbourne 02/02/42.**

Not all of these were unloaded at this port as events as shown later necessitated that 37 of these crated airframes be transhipped to two other vessels, for a last ditch effort to reinforce the beleaguered forces in Java. That story will be told in **Part 5**.

Following on the 4<sup>th</sup> of February 1942, another ship arrived in Brisbane:

- **USS Hammondsport (14681 tons) with 111 P-40Es.**

During unloading of this last shipment, an ambitious plan to have small ships to run the Japanese blockade of the Philippines was being created.

One such ship, the **SS Anhui**, a Chinese registered merchant ship was chartered by the USAFIA (US Army Forces in Australia) to carry, amongst ammunition and rations, and three crated P-40Es. These three were part of the 111 P-40E/E-1s unloaded at Brisbane off the USS Hammondsport.

The **SS Polk**, following its unloading of P-40Es, was reloaded with units of the US Army and ammunition, then sent to Java, where it arrived safely.

The **SS Mormacsun**, after it was unloaded of its cargo of 67 P-40Es, was then loaded with some 6000 tons of rations/supplies for shipment to the Netherlands East Indies. The idea was that this ship was not to venture into the combat area, but to tranship its supplies to smaller blockade-running coastal steamers. I haven't found out to date whether this voyage was attempted.

### More P-40E Consignments that came to Australia 20/02/42-03/03/42

On 20/02/42 another arrival:

- **SS Mormac Star arrived Geelong with 23 P-40E and three Wingsets**

On the West Coast at Fremantle:

- **19 P-40Es were unloaded from the SS Robin Tuxworth**

The 19-crated P-40Es left on the Fremantle docks were serialled:

**40-386, 41-5734 to 5744 and 41-13521-22 and 13523-28**. These were a diverted Defence Aid consignment intended for Russia in all cases except for the first mentioned. They were later transported and assembled at Cunderdin, Western Australia (156 miles east of Perth) for 77Sqn RAAF. (Tony Banta has today his **N940AK** P-40E aircraft painted up as one of them, **41-13521**, of all things! That P-40E became **A29-49** in 1942.)

On 25/02/42 another arrival:

- **SS Hawaiian Merchant arrived Brisbane with one P-40E**

On 03/03/42 two further arrivals:

- **SS Cape Alava arrived Brisbane with one P-40E plus three fuselages for the wings arriving on SS Mormac Star 20/02/42;**

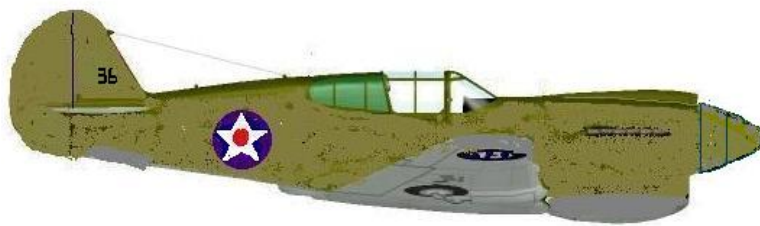
- SS Torrens arrived with 30 P-40Es.

### The Second, Third and Forth Provisional Pursuit Squadrons

Following the arrival of one hundred and twenty two P-40Es on the 15<sup>th</sup> of January 1942, assembly commenced in earnest so that another two Provisional Squadrons could be dispatched to Java. The first P-40E accident since the departure of the 17<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron (Prov) happened on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January 1942. From this accident, the first P-40E fatality occurred in Australia. A 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Hamilton was alighting off the wing of his recently landed P-40E, **41-5398 #95** when another landing P-40E's wing tip, **41-5415 #98** piloted by 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt James Morehead, struck him in the middle of the back. He died of those injuries a few hours later. Both were part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron (Provisional)

The next day, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Jack R. Peres crash-landed at Fort Lytton in Brisbane, resulting in his P-40E **41-5368 #85** suffering undercarriage, wing tip, mainplane, aileron, flaps and airscrew damage.

### 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Jack Peres's P-40E-CU 41-5456 #36 Black later shot down at Darwin 19/02/42



Again, building upon their experience and establishing logistical support, these two provisional squadrons, the 20<sup>th</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> Pursuit Squadrons (Prov), respectively commanded by Capt. William Lane Jr. and Capt. Grant Mahoney, were formed.

These two squadrons were hastily staffed by the limited number of Philippine veterans and with a greater ration of inexperienced pilots from the United States.

Prior to their Timor departure, arrangements and orders were being made by the RAAF and USAAF to have the 20<sup>th</sup> PS (Prov) be moved forward to Port Moresby. This order was rescinded per ABDACOM orders on the 26<sup>th</sup> January 42.

The 20<sup>th</sup> PS (Prov) departed on the 29<sup>th</sup> of January 1942 with twenty-five P-40Es from Brisbane to Darwin via Charleville, escorted by **B24A, 40-2374**. However they lost two P-40Es in accidents en route.

One, **#89 (Serial unknown)**, flown by 2nd Lt Bernard Oliver had a Wing Scrape on landing at Charleville on the 29<sup>th</sup> January 42.

This aircraft was left at Charleville. One other was lost at Cloncurry by fire.

In any event, only one replacement P-40E provided was flown up by, Lt. Allison Strauss before the squadron left for Timor in two flights on the 4<sup>th</sup> February 1942.

Fourteen made the first crossing, with the flight being intercepted by Japanese fighters on arrival at Koepang, Timor. Losses were heavy, with only 6 making their final destination. The second flight wasn't intercepted, however it did lose one aircraft at Lombok Island when it crashed there landing. Of the twenty-four P-40Es to make the crossing, in two flights, only 14 P-40Es made it to Blimbing, Java

The 3<sup>rd</sup> PS (Prov) departed on the 6<sup>th</sup> of February 1942 from Brisbane to Darwin with twenty-five P-40Es via Charleville. It had a heavy loss in numbers during its transit, with five being damaged enroute to Darwin.

Of these, two was left at Daly Waters (including 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt's Bryan Brown's and Ray Melikian, both of whom having over ran their landing and crashing); and three further were u/s at Darwin (2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Robert Kiser P-40E's **#22**).

This left two flyable aircraft that returned to and were to remain at Darwin (2<sup>nd</sup> Lts. Buel & Oestreicher) pending the arrival of reinforcements and a mothership to escort them to Timor. Following this unsuccessful trip, only 8 of the 3<sup>rd</sup> PS (Prov) reached Blimbing, causing a major rethink on the part of the USAAF on how to get single-engine aircraft to Java. In any event, the Japanese invasion of West Timor on the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> February 1942 (Surrender on the 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2003) closed this route and a new plan of action was needed.

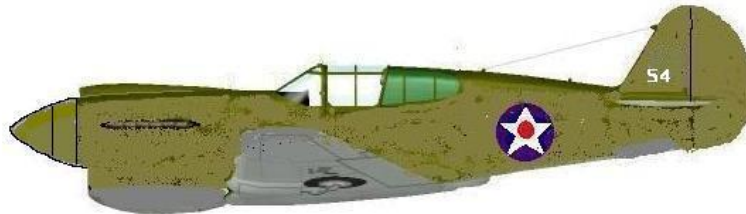
A reinforcement convoy to Koepang Timor carrying an AIF Pioneer Company and US Army National Guard Artillery Regiment to protect the airfield there, escorted by the **USS Houston**, was being shadowed by a Mavis flying boat. A request by the commanding Officer of the USS Houston was issued to the senior USAAF Officer at Darwin to have a pursuit aircraft intercept and destroy the flying boat.

Lt Wheeler ordered 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Robert J. Buel to fly to the estimated north-east position and intercept the aircraft. He did so, but was later lost whilst shooting down the shadowing IJN Mavis off Bathurst Island on the 15<sup>th</sup> of February 1942 at around 14.30 hours. The convoy eventually returned to Darwin on the 17<sup>th</sup> February 1942, having been ordered back when indications that the Japanese were posturing for invasion of Koepang. That invasion happened on the night of the 19<sup>th</sup> February 1942.

*NB: had the 33<sup>rd</sup> PS (Prov) arrived there on the 19<sup>th</sup> February 1942 to provide fighter cover of the Koepang airfield, the IJN Carrier covering force may well have destroyed it on the ground there.*

Thus the defence of Darwin was now down to a single P-40E – that of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Robert Oestreicher - till the arrival of the diverted flight of the 33<sup>rd</sup> PS (Prov) from Port Pirie.

#### **2nd Lt Robert Buel's P-40E – CU 41-? #54 White 3rd PS (Prov) lost on the 15/02/42: Author**



#### **The Re-directed 33<sup>rd</sup> Pursuit Squadron (Provisional) A Flight.**

Up to this stage the number of P-40E accidents was increasing due mainly to the fact that most of the Philippine veteran pilots of the evacuated 24<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Group had by now been sent to Java. This also had the effect of exhausting most of the erected P-40Es of this time.

A few experienced pilots were left in Australia, including Lt. Buzz Wagner, who had suffered glass splinter damage to his eye earlier in the Philippines campaign, mainly to train and lead the final two pursuit squadrons to be raised, namely the 33<sup>rd</sup> and the 13<sup>th</sup> PS (Prov).

The arrival of the third shipment of 70 P-40Es on the **USAT Monroe** on the 30<sup>th</sup> of January 1942 in Australian waters, provided for enough aircraft to establish these last two squadrons.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of February General Barnes directed the 13<sup>th</sup> and the 33<sup>rd</sup> PS (Prov) to fly to Fremantle, Western Australia, with their 50 P-40Es. The first Flight of the 33<sup>rd</sup> PS (Prov) under the command of Major Floyd S Pell left on the 12<sup>th</sup>.

At Port Pirie, in order to satisfy the need to protect convoys forming in Darwin for support of the Java campaign, orders were given to direct this flight of 15 P-40Es to Darwin. At a later appointed time, they were to ferry to Koepang Timor to provide fighter coverage, after being relieved by advance units of the 49<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Group, just beginning to form.

Three 33<sup>rd</sup> PS (Prov) P-40Es were left at Port Pirie to follow on later, including 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Bryce Wilhite, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Borden, and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. R E Pringree, who was to complete his repairs to his P-40E on the 19/02/42.

The diverted flight headed north along the northern railway line to Alice Springs. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Dick "Mac" Suehrs had a tail wheel tyre puncture at Oodnadatta. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. R Dores in his P-40E crash-landed at Alice Springs. From Daly Waters, the Flight proceeded to Darwin.

On take-off, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Robert McMahon struck a parked RAAF tractor, damaging the under carriage of his P-40E, but he continued on.

With only 60 miles to reach Darwin, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Dick Suehrs crash-landed 60 miles south of Darwin.

*After recuperating from his injuries he was transferred to the 39<sup>th</sup> FS of the 35<sup>th</sup> FG to fly P-39Fs in April 1942. He finished the war at the rank of Major, flying P38s, retired from the USAF in 1968, and is still alive today.*

The remaining 33<sup>rd</sup> PS P-40Es arrived late afternoon on the 15<sup>th</sup> of February 1942 at Darwin, joining the surviving airworthy 3<sup>rd</sup> PS (Prov) P-40E of Oestreicher. Another 3 x 3<sup>rd</sup> PS (Prov) P-40Es were in 12 Sqn RAAF Hanger being repaired or salvaged for parts.

However back to the P-40E piloted by McMahon. It was damaged further when the undercarriage collapsed on landing at Darwin on the afternoon of their arrival. They spent the next three days getting their P-40Es serviced and ready.

For McMahon, he obtained a second P-40E. This was one of several abandoned as unserviceable by the 3<sup>rd</sup> PS (Prov) and effected repairs to it. This became "Bahootie the Cootie No II" following repairs, but was damaged on landing following it's test flight when landing at RAAF Darwin on the 17<sup>th</sup> February 1942.

We know that his P-40Es had the White Box number of #22, and was "Bahootie the Cootie No II".

This particular aircraft was flown by 3rdPS(Prov) 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Robert Kiser, who left the aircraft there at Darwin on the 10<sup>th</sup> February 1942. He returned to Amberley by air and eventually was assigned to the 7<sup>th</sup> PS with P-40E #184.

He now turned his attention and eagerness to repair a third abandoned 3<sup>rd</sup> PS (Prov) P-40E to make flight to Java. Whether he had time to "personalize" his third P-40E with another of "Bahootie the Cootie"(as No III) caricature is open to question. But he was ready to fly on the 19/02/42. (Robert McMahon is still alive today).

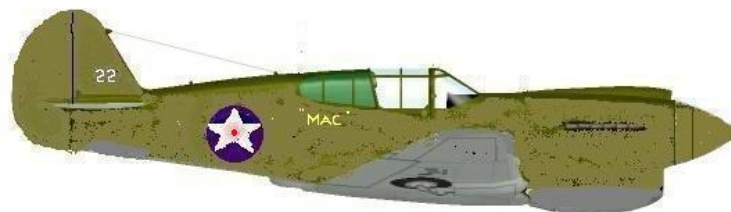
Historians, including the 49<sup>th</sup> FG authors of "Protect and Avenge" have previously stated that a photographed aircraft named "Mac" (Page 33) was an early 8<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron Aircraft.

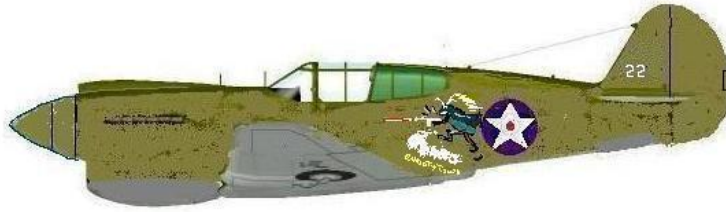
However before the 8<sup>th</sup> PS moved north, an order from USAFIA on the 28<sup>th</sup> March 1942, ordered all red colours to be overpainted by white paint on all markings. This was done before the April move.

On examination the original photograph of this P-40E crash, you would notice the structure on the horizon above the firewall, the Water tanks of RAAF Darwin. There is another name and cartoon caricature on the other side and that there is in existence, a photograph of which I have examined.

What was certain was that McMahon had painted on his second aircraft, "Mac" on the starboard side, thus we have here is a 33<sup>rd</sup> PS (Prov) P-40E, and indeed one of the most sought after serials of P-40 Researchers, "**Bahootie the Cootie No II**"

**2<sup>nd</sup>Lt Robert"Mac"McMahon #22? 33<sup>rd</sup> PS (Prov) "Mac" crashed at RAAF Darwin 17/02/42**  
**The other side, McMahon's 33rdPS (Prov) "Bahootie the Cootie No II" Darwin 17 /02/42: Author**





### The Darwin Raid 19/02/42

This day was the day that the 33<sup>rd</sup> PS (Prov) was scheduled to complete its transit to Timor. Having taken off in the morning at 09.15hrs they returned to Darwin for weather front was forming near Timor. Five P-40Es landed to refuel while five (including Oestreicher's 3<sup>rd</sup> PS P-40E) provided top cover. A flight of twelve Zeros from the IJN carrier **Kaga** under the command of **Lieutenant Masao Sato**, came in behind them. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Robert G Oestreicher alerted the top cover flight (made up of five P-40E's) by yelling "Zeros!"

2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Jack Peres (in #36) was the first of the 33rd Pursuit Squadron pilots to go down. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Elton S Perry (in #51) was the next to be shot down into the sea.

The next casualty was 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Max Wiecks (in #9) whose aircraft was disabled in flight by the concentrated Zero fire and tactics. He managed to bail out into the sea. During this time 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. William Walker (in #46) was under attack, suffering injuries to his shoulder. He managed to extract himself from the fray and perform an extraordinary feat by crash landing at RAAF Darwin.

Meanwhile Oestreicher, credited with shooting down one Zero A6M2 and two Vals, decided after exhausting all of his ammunition to nose down at full throttle to evade the Zeros. He was last seen crossing Darwin in the direction of Daly Waters at treetop level at around 350 knots.

On the ground on receipt of the warning given by the pilots of the covering flight, Pell ordered his men to scramble. Pell (in Vaught's commandeered #28) was first up, desperately trying to gain speed and height, but was attacked by another flight of twelve Zeros, under the command of **Lieutenant Shigeru Mori**, from the IJN carrier **Hiru**. At around 80 ft and 2 miles from the threshold of the northern end of the airfield, Pell baled out of his P-40E. He did not survive. His aircraft landed not far away on a mud flat.

The next to be lost was 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Charles Hughes (in #94) who was strafed on takeoff. He died in the aircraft.

2nd Lt Bob McMahon managed to get airborne and stayed low and fast. He witnessed a low opening chute, which for all intents and purposes had to be Pell. He turned south near Lee Point, some seven miles north of the strip.

There at 200-300ft he ran down via East Point, Fannie Bay to Darwin Harbour along the coast (witnessed by members of the 14<sup>th</sup> AA Battalion 2<sup>nd</sup> AIF). He flew over the ships in the harbour at mast height, including the **USS Peary (1190 Tons)** and the **SS Zealandia (6682 Tons)**. (There is a photograph of this event of a P-40E over-flying the SS Zealandia, see AWM) He then climbed to engage a Kate that had just finished its bomb run.

The return fire from the Kate and the unnoticed fire from a Zero caused damage to his hydraulics. His landing gear dropped down and the resultant drag left him in a precarious position. McMahon stated that he wasn't aware that he hadn't clipped his sash belt on. When the undercarriage dropped, he slid forward into his gunsight. The Zero's fire eventually caused his engine to fail and burn; with the drag and the damage done by the Zero, it was time to get out.

McMahon abandoned his P-40E between 1500-2000 ft and parachuted to safety with slight injuries. His aircraft crashed near Waterlilly Creek, south west of Darwin and hasn't been seen since.

Both 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Burt Rice (in #31) and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. John Glover in (#36) 41-5456 got airborne but were met by the marauding Zeros.

Rice was last seen in a flat spin, before his aircraft crashed and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Glover managed to nurse his damaged ship over the threshold of the RAAF base and survived the subsequent crash-landing and cartwheel.

In a matter of 15-20 minutes all 33<sup>rd</sup> PS (Prov) P-40Es were apparently destroyed, **but one P-40E did survive!** A 3<sup>rd</sup> Pursuit Squadron (Prov) P-40E, “Miss Nadine” #43 of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Robert Oestreicher

### **The Lone P-40E Survivor of the Darwin Raid story told at last after Sixty-one years**

Contrary to most historical writings of the last sixty-one years, Oestreicher survived the fight and managed to fly on to RAAF Daly Waters late that day with some damage. Here repairs were effected over the next few days, whilst he waited for further orders.

Following the arrival of direct orders from General Brett, he was to return to Amberley as soon as possible once an escorting “Mothership” was found.

On the 28<sup>th</sup> of February 1942 he accompanied a Dutch Lodestar to Cloncurry, which was intended to shepherd him then onto Charleville and then finally Amberley. That wasn't to be, as Oestreicher's “Miss Nadine” ran off the end of the runway and ploughed through the runway threshold fence on landing at Cloncurry. It was heavily damaged. The airframe was salvaged and sent by rail to the south. That's where the trail runs cold.

2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Robert Oestreicher finally arrived at Archerfield, but on that very Lodestar.



### **2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Robert Oestreicher's P-40E –CU FY41-#43 "Miss Nadine" 3rd PS (Prov): Author**

**In Part Five, I will complete the history of the Provisional Squadrons, with the “Unlucky” 13<sup>th</sup> PS (Prov). From there, Parts Six-Seven will follow the establishment and early operations of the 49<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Group.**

**Onwards from there we will finally get to Part Eight, the establishment of 75 Squadron RAAF.**

*Thanks for contributions by Shane Johnston (33<sup>rd</sup> PS (Prov) Researcher), Buz Bushby (Ultimate P40 Researcher), Gordon Clarke (RAAF P40 Researcher), Bill Bartsch (USAAF History and Book Author) and others for their help.*

*A special “thanks” to Bob Livingstone for all his help in assisting the production of this article.*

