

P40E/E-1 Operations in Australia Part 5 Vers6

So we come to the story of the remnants of the 33rd PS (Prov) and the unlucky 13th PS (Prov). If you thought researching information on the first four Provisional Squadrons was hard enough, I found the amount of information for the last even more sparse. Thankfully the general history was there, and by some good luck and help, we will be able to tell you details that may have lain buried for over sixty-one years.

The situation in the Netherlands East Indies.

In Part Four we covered the story on Captain Floyd J. Pell and his fourteen P40Es that had been diverted at Port Pirie, and diverted to Darwin on orders of General Barnes.

This was at the request of General George Brett, ABDA, to fulfil a request from to provide Convoy protection over the Darwin area where a joint 2/4th Pioneer Battalion 2nd AIF and 148th Field Artillery, US Army National Guard Battalion Troop convoy, was being assembled. These were for the airfield defences at Koepang Timor. This convoy, under escort of the USS Houston (Captain Rooks), was to leave early morning on the 15th February 1942.

As a post note, this convoy eventually returned when it became clear that the situation was all but lost and the Japanese combined sea borne and airborne Koepang invasion force landed at dawn on the 20th February 1942. Thus this Japanese action resulted in cutting off the Brereton Route to Java for the duration of the war.

The ABDA Command had by this time planned to avert a possible cut in the route, and appalled by the loss rate of ferrying them, decided sending the next P-40E reinforcements by sea.

As early as the 7th of the month, when the risk of its being cut at an early date were apparent, General Barnes was instructed to prepare for shipment of pursuit planes by sea. The USS Langley anchored at Darwin, under command of Commander R P McConnell, was therefore ordered to Fremantle on the 11th February 1942 to collect a shipment of fifty assembled P-40Es (33rd and 13th PS (Prov)) to be ferried to Tjilajap Java. The USS Langley sailed from Darwin on the 17th February 1942, just two days prior to the air raid.

MS-5 Convoy assembly

It was intended that the USAT Mariposa and the USAT Holbrook be loaded with crated P-40Es and were to accompany the USS Langley, with assembled P-40Es, to Tjilajap Java. However, given the risk, the USAT Mariposa was withdrawn and replaced by two Australian transports, the **SS Katoomba** and the **SS Duntroon**.

Another ship, the recently arrived **USAT Seawitch** under command of Lieutenant-Commander Hatfield USNR, was loaded with 27 P-40Es transferred from the USAT Mariposa, accompanied the constituted MS-5 Convoy (designation code Melbourne to Singapore).

It left Melbourne on the evening of the 12th February 1942 at 21:30hrs, with the **USS Phoenix** providing escort to the convoy, to its destination, Fremantle.

When all of the ships eventually arrive at Fremantle there would be a combine load of 59 P-40Es fighters that would be sailing with the MS-5 Convoy.

As intended by General Barnes, USAAF, the diversion of the first flight of fifteen 33rd PS (Prov) P-40Es to Darwin on the 14th February 1942, would be replaced.

I must point out that just prior to MS-5's departure from Fremantle, the collapsing situation in Java had the Americans thinking that its interests would be best served to abandon Java, placing a holding force in Australia and continue the fight from India.

It was decided that the 51st Pursuit Group, 51st Air Base Group and the 7th Bombardment Group (Ground Echelon) be conveyed to Karachi, then part of India, to form the basis of air resistance against the Japanese and to re-open the Burma road supply route to China.

It was intended that the balance of the twenty-seven crated P-40Es on the USAT Seawitch be sent to India and the 32 assembled P-40Es on the USS Langley to be sent to Java. Repeated requests by the Dutch Government and by ADBA command changed this plan before the convoy sailed

Therefore another 10 P-40E (crated) that had been transferred from the USAT Mariposa in Melbourne to the USAT Holbrook (4), SS Katoomba (3) and SS Duntroon (3), which would then form the initial cadre of P-40Es destined for the 16th PS of the 51st Pursuit Group at Karachi, India.

The revised plan now would consist of 27 P-40Es on the USAT Seawitch, and the 32 assembled P-40E on the USS Langley be sent to Java for re-equipping the hard pressed 17th Pursuit Squadron (Prov) USAAF and the RAF/NEIAF fighter squadrons.

This plan called for the USS Langley, with the USS Phoenix providing escort, to separate from MS-5 in the vicinity of the Cocos Island and head directly to Tjilajap. This being the last remaining port that was reasonably spared from Japanese bombing up to this date. It did however lack an airfield. Thoughts of beaching the USS Langley and lowering the P-40Es on a beach to take-off from were considered, should the port be unavailable.

The resultant plan now would be the detachment from the convoy, both the USS Langley (on the 23rd February 1942) and the USAT Seawitch (on the 25th February 1942) to sail there, unescorted and at best speed, with their cargo of fifty-nine much needed P-40Es.

Thus date and destination was set and the ships proceeded to their fate.

The way north by sea is by west by air

On 11th February 1942, the Squadron Commanders (Captain Floyd Pell and 1st Lieutenant Boyd "Buzz" Wagner) of 33rd PS (Prov.) and the 13th PS (Prov) received orders to fly fifty P-40's across the continent to Maylands Airport, Perth.

There, they were to be towed along main road to Fremantle on the night of 21st/22nd February 1942 and loaded on the USS LANGLEY, which would then sail for Java.

The vanguard flight of fifteen was diverted at Port Pirie. Due to mechanical failures, only twelve went north to provide convoy fighter cover and the intended airfield defence at Koepang Timor, as told in Part Four.

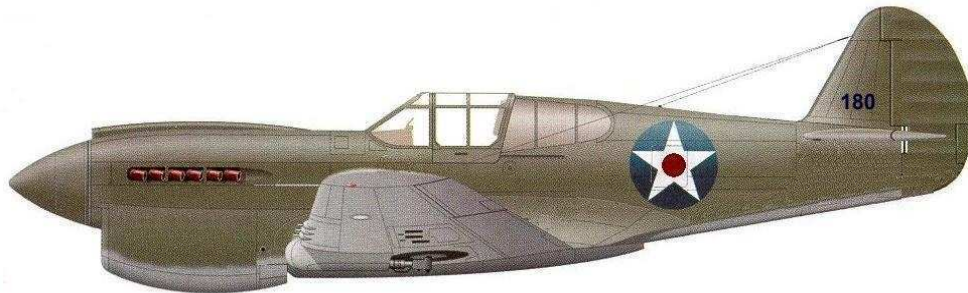
The 33rd and the 13th PS (Prov)'s on loading came under command of 1st Lieutenant Gerald Keenan, Capt Pell's second in command. 1st Lt Buzz Wagner was also ordered to remain in

Australia and was attached thereafter, in charge of the 49th Pursuit Group's pilot training program.

The three stranded 33rd PS (Prov) P-40Es that were left at Port Pirie to follow on later, 2nd Lt. Bryce Wilhite in #25, 2nd Lt. Jess R Dore in #179, and 2nd Lt. R E Pringree #180, were advised to continue on to Maylands for loading onto the USS Langley. 2nd Lt. Borden accompanied the balance of the 33rd PS (Prov) when it staged through Port Pirie on the 15th February 1942 to Maylands.

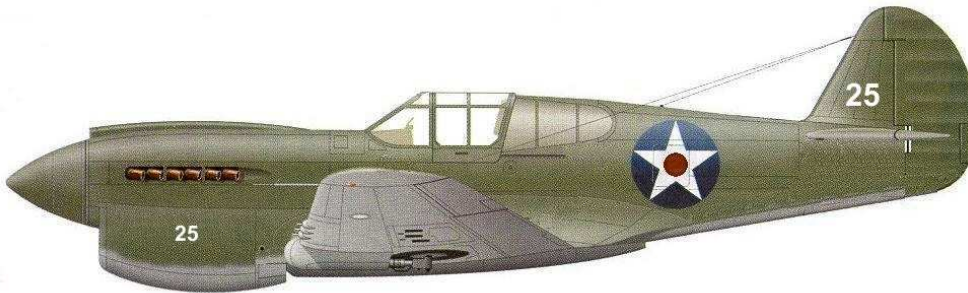
2nd Lt Jess R Dore, as part of Pell's Flight, had been stranded with a flat rear tyre at Alice Springs on the 14th February 1942. Having missed the air raid at Darwin, was ordered to return to Port Pirie

However, 2nd Lt. R E Pringree, who had completed his repairs to his P-40E #180 on the 19/02/42, took the aircraft up for a test flight but unfortunately died when this aircraft crashed near the base.



2nd Lt R E Pringree P-40E-CU 41-5369 #180 33rd PS (Prov) that crashed at Port Pirie 19/02/42

2nd Lt. Bryce Wilhite continued his repairs, but missed the loading onto the USS Langley and was instructed to return to Amberley. Following an uneventful flight, staying over night at Laverton, he arrived there on the 24th February 1942.



2nd Lt. Bryce Wilhite P-40E-CU 41-5436 #25 33rd PS (Prov) at Port Pirie 15/02/42

The fifth and final Provisional Squadron, the 13th PS (Prov) commenced its Trans-Australian ferry flight.

The experience level of these pilots was at a lower level than those that were a part of the first 4 provisional squadrons as the pool of experienced pilots was drying up fast

This can be exemplified when on the 13th February 1942 when an impressed Amberley based USAAF Engineering Officer without any Pursuit experience, a 2nd Lt K.L.Glassburn, USAAF Service #0-425075 transiting in P40E **FY41-5586 13th PS (Prov)**, landed and nose over at Williamtown, NSW.

Like some before him, he had previously crashed an aircraft only weeks before, when he crashed A24 Dauntless **FY41-15772** on take-off Amberley on the 26th January 1942 when testing it after assembly.

With apparently two damaged at Williamstown and three damaged near Grafton, the 13th PS (Prov) was down to twenty P-40Es by the time it arrived over the runway threshold of Maylands Airport by the 17th of February 1942.

On the arrival, a USAAF P-40E Warhawk piloted by 2nd Lieutenant J.P. Martin (Air Reserve, Service No. 0-427557, was damaged on landing at Maylands airfield at Perth. After his starboard wing hit a 15 feet high windsock pole while landing, the aircraft struck the ground on its right wheel and skidded sideways. It has been said that it was loaded onto the USS Langley as spares. Martin however did board the ship and was later killed.

The 33rd and the 13th PS (Prov)'s once loaded on board the USS Langley, came under command of 1st Lieutenant Gerald Keenan, who was Capt Pell's second in command of the 33rdPS(Prov). 1st Lt Buzz Wagner, who was in command of the 13thPS (Prov) was also ordered to remain in Australia and was attached thereafter, in charge of the 49th Pursuit Group's pilot training program. Wagner was already an Ace who had recently been convalesced back to Australia in early January 1942 with eye damage.

To make up the attrition, some three P-40Es of the forming 7th Pursuit Squadron, 49th Pursuit Group and their pilots were ordered to fly to Maylands from Bankstown. All three arrived at Maylands by the 21st February 1942, making a total of thirty-three delivered to Maylands.

One of those P-40Es was not loaded and returned to Bankstown on the 23rd February 1942 piloted by Captain Robert Morrissey; the CO of the 7thPS.

The reason was one of space, as the USS Langley (11050 Tons) was not an aircraft carrier anymore as initially converted in the early 1920s.

The decision to convert her as a seaplane tender in 1936 following the completion of a third purpose built carrier, the USS Ranger. The conversion was completed on the 26th February 1937 and she was reclassified as the AV-3 on 11th April 1937.

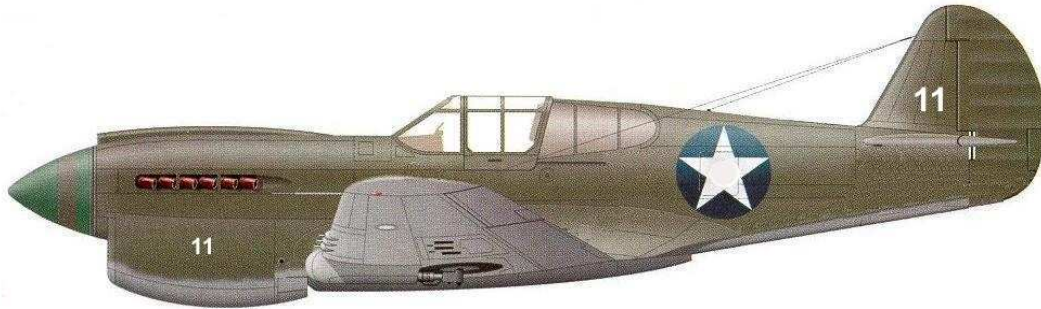
This meant that she now only had the aft two thirds of her original aircraft landing deck and a revised wheelhouse forward where the foredeck used to be. This meant that she was unable to fly off any aircraft whatsoever and the amount of space available permitted the placement of exactly thirty-two P-40Es.

At the outbreak of World War II, the USS *Langley* was anchored off Cavite, Philippine Islands under command of Commander R P McConnell USN. She departed on the 8th December 1941 and proceeded to Balikpapan, Borneo, and then on to Darwin, Australia, where she arrived on the 1st January 1942. Until 11th January 1942, the USS *Langley* assisted in running antisubmarine patrols and support PATWING 10 USN, out of Darwin with the RAAF. She was then assigned to American-British-Dutch-Australian forces assembling in Indonesia to challenge the Japanese thrust in that direction.

Out of the 43 actually sent from Amberley and Bankstown, only 34 made it to Perth and of that total, only 32 were loaded onto the USS Langley.

All in all, out of 32 assembled P-40E=s and 37 crated P-40E=s that departed Fremantle on the 22nd of February 1942 on MS-5 Convoy, only the 10 P-40E=s diverted to India reached its intended destination and were used by the USAAF.

All ten P-40E-CU's, loaded upon the USAT Holbrook (4), SS Katoomba (3) and SS Duntroon (3), arrived safely:



2nd Lt. Chipman's P-40E-CU 41-5570 #11 16th PS at Karachi 31/03/42

They served with the 16th Pursuit Squadron, 51st Fighter Group at Karachi Airport India onwards from the 27th March 1942.

They were 7 P-40Es (41-5558,41-5570, 41-5591, 41-5628, 41-5634, 41-5635, 41-5636) and 3 P-40E-1s (41-24835, 41-24838, 41-24840) that made up the ten survivors that reached Karachi, India.



The USS Langley listing 10 degrees port, photographed sinking 13.40hrs 27/02/42

The MS-5 convoy left Fremantle on the 22nd February 1942 with a total of 146 Officers and 2807 Enlisted Men of the USAAF, including both Provisional Squadrons, the 51st Pursuit Group, 51st Air Base Group and the 7th Bombardment Group (Heavy) ground Squadrons.

Early in the morning 27th February 1942, the USS *Langley* rendezvoused with her antisubmarine screen, destroyers USS *Whipple* (DD-217) and USS *Edsall* (DD-219). At 1140hrs, nine twin-engine enemy bombers attacked her.

The first and second Japanese strikes were unsuccessful; but during the third the USS *Langley* took five hits.

Aircraft topside burst into flames, steering was impaired, and the ship took a 10-degree list to port.

Unable to negotiate the narrow mouth of Tjilajap Harbour, USS *Langley* went dead in the water as inrushing water flooded her main motors. At 1332Hrs, the order to abandon ship was passed.

The escorting destroyers fired nine 4-inch shells and two torpedoes into the old tender to insure her sinking. She went down about 75 miles south of Tjilajap with a loss of sixteen crewmembers.

Of the embarked 33rd and 13th Pursuit Squadrons on the USS *Langley* with their 32 P-40Es, only two Pilots were to survive the events following the sinking of that ship and the latter rescue and sinking of the Destroyer USS *Edsall*.

2Lts William P. Ackerman and Gerald J. Dix were wounded during the bombing and sinking of the USS *Langley* on the 27th February 1942.

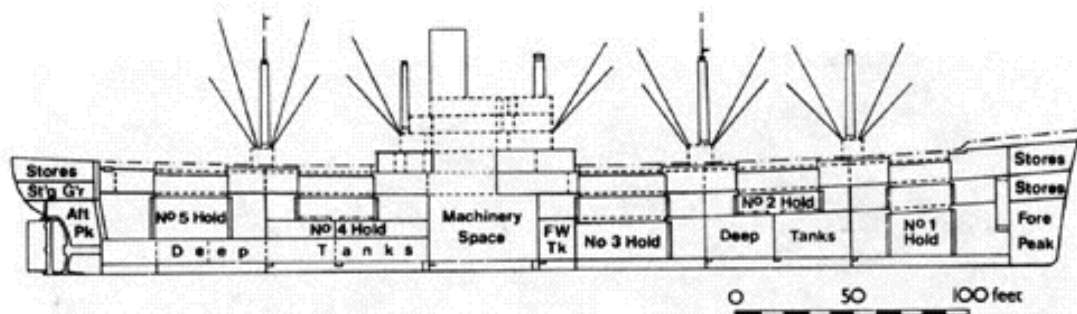
They were transferred to the USN Tanker *Pecos*, (under command of Lieutenant-Commander Abernethy) which was later dive-bombed and sunk on the 1st March 1942 near the Cocos Islands.

They were then picked up by the Destroyer USS *Whipple* (under command of Commander Crouch USN) and were returned to Fremantle along with other survivors of the Java campaign on the 5th March 1942.

The USAT *Seawitch* did get through arriving at Tjilajap on the 28th February 1942. Her contents were unloaded in record time and she sailed back to Fremantle on the tide of the 1st March 1942 with 40 USAAF survivors aboard.

Her cargo was unloaded, but that's an interesting story by itself and to be told in another issue.

Anatomy of the SS *Seawitch*



A plan of a latter C2-S-B1 type (6,230 Gross tons)

The United States Maritime Commission in 1937-38 designed the C2 types. They were all-purpose cargo ships with 5 holds. 173 were built between 1940 and 1945. The first C2's were 459 feet long, 63 feet broad, 40 feet depth, and 25-foot draft. Speed 15.5 knots. Later ships varied in size. The SS Seawitch configuration was a C2 (19 ships built 6,100 Gross tons between 1939-41)

The first C2's completed were the motor vessel **SS Donald McKay**, launched **June 1939** at the Sun Yards in Chester, Pennsylvania and the steam turbine **Challenge** built by Federal Shipbuilding and Dry-dock, Kearny, New Jersey. Many of the early C2's were named after Clipper ships, including **Flying Cloud, Glory of the Seas, Seawitch, and Westward Ho.** *(Up to the current time, I have only ascertained that the ship survived till 1945 with no further record of it in WW2)*

Conclusion

We will never know how these 59 P40E Aircraft could have fared in Java given the time left, or have been used better in the defence of Darwin or Port Moresby in March 1942. It is open to conjecture along with the in-experienced pilots; though with a sprinkling of Philippines veterans, of what they could have achieved had their numbers been delivered and sufficient numbers in the air over Java.

What was apparent was that those aircraft were desperately needed by the RAAF to defend Darwin and other Australia territories. As we now know, the Japanese were soon to invade Papua New Guinea and threaten Port Moresby.

References:

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- George Hermon Gill b1895-d1973 (Royal Australian Navy 1939-1942) AWM 1957

Thanks for contributions by Shane Johnston (33rd PS (Prov) Researcher), Buz Busby (P40 Researcher), Bill Bartsch (Book Author) and others for their help.

