

CHAPTER 9

9th Fighter Squadron “Flying Knights”

One of the 49th FG’s three squadrons, the 9th FS had spent most of 1942 defending the Darwin area with P-40Es. After leaving that theatre around late September, it was intended to convert to the new Lightnings for use in New Guinea. However, the 9th FS’s association with the P-38 was at times convoluted and not without rancor.

When the first batch of sixteen P-38Fs earmarked for the squadron arrived in Townsville in October 1942, they were assigned to a contingent of 17th Fighter Squadron (Provisional) pilots, with previous combat experience in Java. These pilots were posted into the 9th FS, and the squadron commander Jesse Peaselee appealed to Fifth Fighter Command to find P-38 assignments for the squadron originals who felt left out. However, the “originals” languished in Townsville throughout October pending a decision.

Meanwhile, the sixteen P-38Fs did not meet the quantity needed by the squadron to be fully operational.¹ New P-38Gs were becoming available, but technical problems had complicated their introduction into service. Attempts were made to rectify these problems with mixed success. For example, at end of October five P-38Gs were flown to 30-Mile where leaking rubber fuel tanks were replaced with new ones. However, other technical challenges remained which mirrored the situation in the 39th FS (which had been operational since September – see Chapter 3), and the 9th FS’s G-models did not enter frontline service for another six weeks.

As an interim measure and to stop his best pilots from applying for combat assignments with other units, Peaselee organised a group to serve a secondment with the 39th FS to gain frontline Lightning experience. It was not until January 1943 when the 9th FS finally had a full complement of its own P-38s, and the unit began using them for familiarisation flights. New Guinea’s mountainous geography was still largely an unknown, especially since the Darwin area had a comparatively flat landscape. Indeed, there was considerable embarrassment when on a 20 February 1943 escort mission to Gasmata, the 9th FS force-landed three P-38Gs on the return journey. Lieutenants Arthur Bauhof, Robert Douglas and Harry Lidstrom all put down on a beach near a plantation at Kerema, some 140 miles northwest of their departure point. Whilst all three airframes were later disassembled and returned by barge, the event attracted unwanted mockery around Port Moresby’s airfields.

Lockheed technician Frank Bertelli resided with the 9th FS during this early phase, advising how best to keep the big fighters airborne and assisting with field modifications to improve performance and combat effectiveness. On 6 March 1943 the squadron moved to Dobodura, and in late 1943 staged from Kiriwina in the Trobriand Islands for a series of strikes against Rabaul. In December 1943, due to ongoing shortages of Lightnings in the Fifth Air Force and

¹ At this time Fifth Air Force P-38 squadrons generally needed 25 aircraft to be at full strength, supported by a reserve pool used for attrition replacements and maintenance rotations.