

Introduction

This volume focuses only on the P-47 Thunderbolt fighter which operated in the New Guinea theatre of the South West Pacific Area (SWPA).¹ The Thunderbolt lacked the range to take the fight to Rabaul, and neither did it serve with the Thirteenth Air Force in the South Pacific. The *modus operandi* of all SWPA Thunderbolt units changed markedly after they left New Guinea as the war moved northwards towards Japan, after which the type's primary purpose switched to ground attack.

More Republic P-47 Thunderbolts were produced than any other US fighter in World War Two; more than 15,000 were built, of which around six hundred served in the SWPA, all "razorbacks". It was the biggest and heaviest single-engine fighter produced in the war, with a fully configured all-up-weight approaching eight tons and eight 0.50-inch calibre Browning machine guns housed in its wings. In New Guinea at least, its weight proved a real handicap as its take-off requirements and all-up-weight excluded it from operating at several forward airfields.

The first batch of Thunderbolts arrived in Australia on 27 June 1943 at Brisbane's wharves, prior to being trucked to nearby RAAF Amberley where they were assembled. The batch comprised 85 P-47D-2s, however they lacked external fuel tanks as USAAF Materiel Command had sidelined the 200-gallon tank designed for the type as it caused excessive tail buffeting. The first solution was to customise the flat 100-gallon tanks as used with the Airacobra and P-40E, however Patterson Field in the US could not build them in sufficient numbers. Instead, the 27th Air Depot at Seven-Mile 'drome, Port Moresby, modified the 100-gallon tanks themselves, and were soon fitting seven a day to the first 348th FG Thunderbolts.

By 1 August 1943 the same air depot had designed and built a 200-gallon tank later manufactured in Brisbane by the Ford Motor Company which came to be known colloquially as the "Brisbane Tank". Release and mounting mechanisms were soon fabricated, and it was convenient that spare booster pumps provided for the 100-gallon tanks were up to the task of fuel transfer. Units started replacing the 200-gallon "Brisbane Tank" with 160-gallon wing-mounted fuel drop-tanks around late January 1944. The 160-gallon tanks were widely available in the theatre, and two could be carried which increased the extra fuel capacity to 320 gallons. Later larger elongated oval-shaped 200-gallon drop tanks were modified so that they too could be fitted to the Thunderbolt. The shape and size of the fuel tanks on the Thunderbolt throughout 1943 were unique to the SWPA theatre.

On 16 August 1943, 32 P-47Ds initiated the first Thunderbolt mission of the Pacific war, escorting C-47s to a new grass airfield behind Lae at Marilinen. However, the Thunderbolt's arrival heralded a planning problem for USAAF operations officers. Until it showed up, a blunt round nose on a single-engine aircraft had always meant a Japanese fighter. Old habits die hard,

¹ The SWPA included the Netherlands East Indies and the Philippines, where many Allied air force squadrons saw service in the last year of the war. However, in this volume the term "SWPA" refers only to the New Guinea theatre.