

Introduction

The intent of this book is to unravel the confusion of Pacific Airacobra markings which has contributed to the creation of a suite of fictitious aircraft which unfortunately continue to exist in art, model aircraft boxes, history publications and colourised photos.

Bell's unique Airacobra was produced for three years from 1941 until 1944. American pilots lent it several unkind nicknames, including "Iron Dog". Whilst much has been written about the type, lazy scholarship has caused confusion and inaccuracy about its Pacific markings. This volume corrects these past markings inaccuracies and presents many new profiles for the first time. It also explains the numerous markings systems and how exchange between units created a system of hybrid schemes.

Shortly after the 35th and 36th Fighter Squadrons opened the Airacobra New Guinea air war in April 1942, another three Airacobra squadrons from the 35th Pursuit Group which arrived in Australia in late February 1942 were exclusively equipped with P-400s. As the units moved around, were rotated through combat, or needed repairs these airframes were liberally traded between units. This situation led to a labyrinth of complex and interwoven unit markings. This was exacerbated by an accelerated rotation of units from June 1942 onwards, bolstered by the importation of more P-39Ds from August 1942. The mixing of inventories between six squadrons meant that many airframes carried multiple unit markings; *inter alia* mixtures of squadron numbers and alphabetical letters, shark's teeth and nose art. Combined with rudder replacements, painted repairs and some P-400s painted over with olive drab schemes, it is easy to understand why Airacobras from these units have been so misrepresented over the years.

Matters become more complex when it is underlined that it is a myth that P-39s can be discerned visually from the P-400 by the number of exhaust stubs – 12 stubs for the P-400 and six for the P-39 – along with whether the airframe has a 20mm (P-400) or 37mm (P-39) cannon mounted in the nose. The initial batch of P-39D-1s was powered by the export E4 model of the 12-cylinder V-1710 Allison – the same engine installed in the P-400 – equipped with a dozen exhaust stubs. Then the P-39F had an electric pitch control propeller and the same dozen exhaust stubs. Whilst all P-400s had the 20mm cannon and later model P-39Ds the 37mm version, several batches of P-39D-1s and P-39F defy the trend and were equipped with the 20mm cannon.

However, another key point particularly poignant to Pacific Airacobras is that all Allison engines and cannon types were readily interchangeable in the field. Pilots considered the 37mm M4 cannon to be ineffective due to its curved trajectory and slow rate of fire. It is not surprising that pilots showed a strong preference for the 20mm cannon and hence the slow firing 37mm weapon was replaced at the first opportunity.

The only certain way to identify a P-400, aside from its two-tone camouflage scheme, is by the presence of a tubular strut reinforcement attached to the top of the canopy, a detail rarely detectable in wartime photographs. Whilst P-400s sported the unique RAF Dark Green and