

## INTRODUCTION

Dark Earth camouflage over Duck Egg Blue applied in the factory, exposure to harsh tropical conditions often blurred this unique paint scheme in black and white photos. Furthermore, some P-400s were painted olive drab in the field before reassignment or following repairs. Finally, some batches of later P-39D-1s initially ordered as P-400s were reissued to the USAAF in olive drab from the factory.

A curiosity is that six P-39Cs also found their way to Australia, some of which were assigned to the 35<sup>th</sup> Air Depot at Townsville. Others found their way into RAAF service, but it appears that only one (40-2995) found its way into combat, briefly, with the 36<sup>th</sup> FS.

### **P-400s in the Pacific**

The deployment of the P-400 to the Pacific has a curious history. The British Purchasing Commission first ordered Model 14A Airacobras from Bell in April 1940 after accepting the manufacturer's positive performance figures for the XP-39 prototype. Officially termed the Caribou I by the RAF but rarely referred to as such, the Airacobra I was identical to the P-39D-1, featuring the V-1710-E4 engine, long-barreled 20mm M1 cannon and six 0.303-inch calibre machine guns. The first of these reached Great Britain in mid-1941 where they were flight tested at Duxford. In August, No. 601 Squadron replaced its Hurricane IICs with these Airacobra Is. The squadron quickly ascertained that the Airacobra's performance above 20,000 feet was poor, and that the fighter's speed was slower than claimed. Additional performance deficiencies saw the Airacobra withdrawn from RAF service. More than two hundred were diverted to the Soviet Union, and a similar consignment was redirected to the USAAF Eighth Air Force following its arrival in Britain in the summer of 1942. A further 179 Airacobra Is pending delivery to the RAF were reassigned to the USAAC following Pearl Harbor, which in turn were redirected to Australia and the Pacific.

On 28 January 1942 the first Airacobras arrived in the Pacific aboard the USS *President Monroe*. These P-39D airframes were unloaded at Suva then barged to Nausori as described in the history of the 70<sup>th</sup> FS. About three weeks later on 20 February the first RAF-rejected P-400 Airacobras arrived in Australia, unloaded from the SS *Mormacstar* at Melbourne's wharves. A later shipment of P-39Ds was unloaded from shipping crates in Brisbane, then trucked and assembled at Amberley airfield 31 miles southwest of the city.

After initial deployment in New Guinea, a collective of Fifth Air Force P-400s was overhauled from June to October 1942 and reassigned to the South Pacific Area via New Caledonia. These included British serials BW151, -154, -156, -157, -158, -159, -160, -162, -165, -167; and BX150, -151, -152, -154, -156, -157, -158, -159, -160, -161, -162. Several P-400 survivors operated in New Guinea well into mid-1943. The 36<sup>th</sup> FS continued to operate the P-400 the longest; AP335, -347, -355 and -357 were lost to operations as late as August 1943. The 39<sup>th</sup> FS kept a P-39D in its inventory until May 1943 for training purposes, long after their transition to P-38s, and in New Caledonia a former 67<sup>th</sup> FS P-400 was utilised as a liaison hack by a service squadron until mid-1944.

In the New Guinea theatre Airacobras regularly passed through, were operated by or were