

reassigned to other units via maintenance units such as the 27th Air Depot, 46th Service Group and 8th Service Group. At times a handful were also operated by 5th Fighter Command and the 5th Air Force Replacement Pool. The same type of assignments occurred in the Solomons with the Thirteenth Air Force, including with the 29th Service Group.

From late July 1943 onwards the later model P-39N and P-39Qs appeared in the Pacific performing escort, ground attack and patrol duties, however ultimately in the fighter role the Airacobra was surpassed hereon by a suite of more modern and powerful USAAF, United States Marine Corps and United States Navy fighters.

Japanese airpower in mainland New Guinea and the Solomons was withdrawn from around the end of February 1944. Four Airacobra squadrons took up the role of supporting ground operations via strafing, low-level bombing and dive-bombing attacks; the 82nd and 100th Reconnaissance Squadrons (Fighter) in New Guinea and the 68th and 70th FS in the Solomons. These pilots soon discovered that low-level attack flying was different to reconnaissance flying, as thick jungle concealed all but the most obvious targets. Their missions also involved dropping surrender leaflets and smoke target markers for Allied bombers. Targets in New Guinea extended along the northern coast, and aside from Wewak included areas around Madang, Alexishafen, Bogadjim, and Tadjj itself. In the Solomons the squadrons based at Torokina on Bougainville ranged as far as the Rabaul area and New Ireland.

These ground attack squadrons operated N and Q model P-39s. The P-39Ns had armour plate behind the pilot in earlier models replaced by bullet-proof glass. The P-39Qs had their wing-mounted 0.30-inch calibre machine guns replaced with pod-mounted 0.50-inch calibre machine guns in packs attached to under-wing hard points. Many Airacobras in the New Guinea squadrons were equipped with K-24 and K-25 cameras mounted in the aft fuselage. All were equipped with a 37mm cannon fired through the propeller hub, manufactured by the Oldsmobile Auto Company. Although their slow rate of fire rendered them ineffective for air-to-air combat, they excelled in the ground attack role where pilots guided their trajectory with machine gun tracer fire. Bomb loads varied and were much experimented with. These ground attack missions, the last Airacobras ones flown in the Pacific and barely acknowledged by history, continued until mid-July 1944 from Torokina and until the end of September 1944 from Tadjj.

Despite the widespread use of Airacobras in the South Pacific by a dozen USAAF squadrons, intriguingly only one pilot is recognised as an Airacobra ace: Lieutenant William Fielder. Fielder achieved this status with the 68th FS at Guadalcanal in 1943. This remained a bone of contention with several Fifth Air Force Airacobra pilots who were awarded three or four kills from the busy 1942 period. During the early New Guinea campaign records were poorly maintained and some claims were not recognised. While the USAAF also flew P-39s in the Aleutian and the Mediterranean theatres, Fielder remains the only USAAF Airacobra ace.

Michael John Claringbould
August 2021