

CHAPTER 1

Markings and Technical Notes

Welcome to the colourful markings of Fifth Air Force P-51 Mustangs. This air force and the Thirteenth Air Force combined to become the Far East Air Forces (FEAF) on 15 June 1944, however P-51s were not operated by the Thirteenth. It was the Fifth which pioneered the deployment of the type in Pacific operations in the reconnaissance, fighter and ground-attack roles. By war's end it had ten squadrons operating the type.

How the war had changed by the time Mustangs arrived in the theatre. Only three years beforehand the 35th FG had introduced the first USAAF fighters to New Guinea with Airacobras. The war had since progressed to the Philippines, and then encroached on islands close to the Japanese mainland such as Okinawa. The year 1945 saw a completely different air war than that so keenly fought in the first period of the conflict. This was for a variety of reasons, including the fact that Japanese air power was on the decline. The few Japanese pilots who held the line were but a shadow of their 1942 predecessors.

When FEAF commander Lieutenant General George Kenney was notified by Washington that his mainstay Thunderbolt inventory would be replaced by the P-51, Kenney resisted. By late 1944 he had developed the strong view that the proven twin-engine P-38 offered the best insurance policy against the long distances typical in the Pacific theatre. Furthermore, by the end of 1944, FEAF pilots acknowledged and accepted that both the P-38 and the Thunderbolt were here to stay. Acquisition of the P-38 in particular had been hard-won, with initial competition for its scarce allocations to the Pacific sometimes incurring rancor between competing units. The big Lockheed regularly undertook 700 nautical mile missions, greater distances than performed in the European theatre, and the type was well-ensconced as the fighter of choice in the South Pacific. Thus, no Lightning units were slated to have their mounts replaced by the new Mustang.

Instead, the Mustang would mainly replace the Thunderbolt, however here too was a problem. In late 1944 the deputy commander of the Fifth Air Force, Major General Ennis Whitehead, muddied the politics of transition by publicly stating that the P-47D was “the best fighter which our country possesses.”

Despite reluctance by both Kenney and Whitehead, the first Mustangs arrived in the SWPA in November 1944. These were the P-51D and its F-6D reconnaissance variant, of which the first batch of 25 was split into two allotments. The first of these was sent to training units at the Combat Replacement Training Center (CRTC) based at Nadzab in the wide Markham Valley behind Lae. The second allotment comprised F-6Ds slated for the 82nd TRS. The reasons why this squadron was chosen as the first Mustang-equipped Pacific unit stem back to April 1944 where it was evident that the inventory of the 82nd and 110th TRS had become war-weary. Their highly valued close-support reconnaissance work was being conducted by legacy P-40s and P-39s, urging Whitehead to request that both be the first-equipped with F-6Ds.