

CHAPTER 2

69th Bombardment Squadron

The 69th Bombardment Squadron was initially allocated seven B-18s and five PT-17s in January 1942 at Jackson, Mississippi, where it was stationed for several months before moving to San Francisco in preparation for overseas deployment. This squadron was one of four initially assigned to the 38th BG, the other three comprising the 70th and 71st BS plus the 15th Reconnaissance Squadron.

On 29 January the ground echelon boarded the USAT *Tasker H Bliss* (the renamed liner *President Cleveland*). The ship docked at Brisbane on 25 February 1942, after which the men were on-shipped to various Australian locations over the next several weeks. On 17 May the men sailed for Noumea, New Caledonia, from where they were trucked to Tontouta airfield some twenty miles north on 20 May. They shortly thereafter moved to Plaine des Gaiacs airfield further north again where they were joined by the air echelon, which had flown in via the Pacific delivery route. At this juncture the 69th BS, along with the 70th BS, was detached from the 38th BG, to fall under the authority of COMAIRSOPAC.

Earlier the 69th BS had been assigned a new fleet of B-26Bs, the first of which was received at Fort Wayne, Indiana, in early May 1942. Immediately pilots and ground crews started naming their new mounts before moving to Sacramento Air Depot, California. There the Marauders were stripped of armour plate, machine guns and all unnecessary equipment, while long-range fuel tanks were fitted into the bomb bays. From there they proceeded to Hamilton Field, where the planes were checked for airworthiness for the long ferry flight across the Pacific.

On 19 May the first flight of three led by squadron commander Captain John Burhus in *Little John* departed for Hawaii. The following Marauders were piloted thus: *Henry* (Second Lieutenant Robert Wilmarth), *Yap Trap/Black Jack* (First Lieutenant Clifford Johnston), *The Hattie M* (First Lieutenant Lewis Long), *Plenty Peed off Patootie* (First Lieutenant Thomas Waddleton), *Arkansas Traveler* (First Lieutenant Fred Wright), *Mormon Meteor* (Captain Lincoln Behling), *Judy* (Second Lieutenant Lloyd Field), *Winsockie* (Captain James Collins), *Kansas City Kitty* (Second Lieutenant Stephen Howbert) and two other unnamed bombers. At Hawaii a detachment was assigned to the USN for torpedo training. Two 69th BS Marauders later participated in the Battle of Midway by making an unsuccessful attack against Japanese carriers (see Chapter 1 and also Profile 75).

By 23 June all of the 69th BS Marauders had arrived at Tontouta, making the squadron the first medium bombardment outfit to arrive in the SOPAC theatre. A week later when they moved to Plaine des Gaiacs, they found the airfield had no infrastructure save for two galvanised iron huts. Only one runway had been completed, whilst the north-south strip was still under construction.

On 15 July squadron commander Captain Burhus proceeded to Efate, New Hebrides, piloting