

# Introduction

This volume details the markings of the B-17 Flying Fortress in the SWPA, SOPAC and Australian theatres. A varied mixture of misfortune and achievement accompanied the type whose markings are much complicated by the fact that nearly every Fortress in these theatres served at least two or more squadrons. Many spanned service lives of over three years.

The Boeing B-17E was the state-of-the-art heavy bomber in the USAAC inventory when the Pacific War began and was already serving in the Philippines at the war's outbreak. Eventually both the "E" and "F" models would serve throughout the Pacific until late 1944 with two provisional and eighteen mainstay USAAF bombardment squadrons as well as a reconnaissance unit. Others served as converted transports and commanders' aircraft.

The first appearance of a Fortress in the Australia-New Guinea area pre-dated hostilities, when 26 "D" models ferried themselves in late 1941 to the Philippines via Hawaii, Port Moresby and Darwin. Until this landmark flight, long-range deliveries to the Philippines negotiated an elongated ferry route through Africa, India and the NEI. This first Pacific delivery incorporated similar navigational challenges employed by aviatrix Amelia Earhart and navigator Fred Noonan some five years previous. No Fortress crew had previously attempted such long-distances before, made by dead-reckoning and astral fixes.

The inaugural Pacific route went through Hawaii prior to the longest sector from Wake Island to Port Moresby. The fourteen-hour journey took the bombers over the Japanese mandated territory of the Caroline Islands. Political tensions ensured no diplomatic clearance was sought from the Japanese government. As such, the sector was flown at night at 25,000 feet, assessed as beyond the range of Japanese fighters, with oxygen and no running lights. All defensive guns were loaded in anticipation of enemy interception, even though no state of war existed. Once past the Caroline Islands, the bombers descended to lower altitudes. The next sector was to Darwin, a flight of six hours. Remarkably, no aircraft were lost, which was not the case for subsequent wartime delivery flights across the Pacific where a mixture of Mitchells, Marauders and Liberators disappeared on almost every ferry flight.

Whilst this pre-war ferry journey marked the first appearance of Fortresses in New Guinea, in the SOPAC theatre the type's first appearance commenced on 6 January 1942, when three 23<sup>rd</sup> BS B-17Es (serials 41-2429, -2432 and -2433) departed Hawaii to assess the feasibility of conducting sea searches from island land bases including Nadi on Fiji. The reconnaissance mission was designed to also support the carrier USS *Enterprise* and to protect a USN convoy reinforcing Samoa at the time.

Shortly after the Battle of Midway, the role of Fortress groups in the Pacific was envisaged as a "Mobile Force", to provide armed searches to locate enemy ships. It was in this capacity that the 11<sup>th</sup> BG was first sent to the SOPAC prior to the Guadalcanal campaign to support USN operations. The unique *ad hoc* 14<sup>th</sup> RS was similarly dispatched to the SWPA to also operate under USN command, in order to cover Vice Admiral Wilson Brown's Task Force 11 centred