

## Introduction

Welcome to the diverse world of Pacific War night fighters. This volume focuses on their markings and insignia, mostly under-represented to date with the exception of the P-61 Black Widow series. In addition to the P-61, other types illustrated include the P-70 series Nighthawk, the P-38 Lightning, the B-25 Mitchell, the F4U-2 Corsair and the Lockheed PV-1 Ventura. The F6F Hellcat also served as a dedicated night fighter, however, these were carrier-based and thus are not represented in this volume. Neither are the TBM Avengers of VT(N)-90 or numerous PBY squadrons which often performed as night bombers. Three other miscellaneous types associated with the night fighter program are illustrated in the final chapter.

As early as October 1940 the USAAC held discussions at Wright Field in Ohio with Northrop Corporation's chief of research, Vladimir Pavlecka, during which he was given a specification wish-list for an aircraft project titled "Night Interceptor Pursuit Airplane". Then headquartered in Hawthorne, California, the Northrop Corporation had been running for a year as a subcontractor to major aircraft manufacturers. The challenge for the USAAC in obtaining a dedicated night fighter was that the large aircraft manufacturing companies such as Lockheed, Douglas and Boeing were fully committed to other projects. Hence Pavlecka was asked to design an interceptor which would incorporate electronic devices to locate other aircraft in complete darkness.

In these circumstances the American night fighter program took time, with the first production Northrop P-61 not completed until October 1943. For the Pacific the deployment of night fighters was further delayed as the European theatre had priority for aircraft deliveries. In response a series of interim programs was initiated, the first for the USAAC being the P-70 program, a hybrid concept developed from the Douglas A-20A airframe. Experimental programs with the type commenced in April 1942.

Meanwhile those in the frontlines had grown impatient to see measures to counter persistent Japanese night raids in New Guinea and the Solomons. Admiral Ernest King even requested the British Air Ministry to furnish the USN with night fighters, with the sub-text implying he preferred Beaufighters. The request was unsuccessful but shortly thereafter the Fifth Air Force submitted to Washington on 4 February 1943 that:

... a night fighter squadron is urgently needed to meet enemy tactics of concentrated area night bombing, which is seriously interfering with our night operations. Accuracy of enemy bombing is improving, and, if unopposed heavy losses by us are to be expected.

As a result of these high-level requests, interim night fighters were earmarked for the Pacific. Two separate batches of P-70s operating with the 481<sup>st</sup> Night Fighter Operations Training Group at Orlando, Florida, were earmarked for New Guinea and the Solomons, to be operated by the 6<sup>th</sup> Night Fighter Squadron. These P-70s would quickly develop tactics and procedures for radar-controlled night interceptions, but from the start the type proved sub-standard for the role.

To supplement the P-70's lacklustre performance, Pacific units took the initiative of deploying