

P-38s which had a better rate of climb and higher ceiling. Loitering at 30,000 feet above airfields, the P-38s usually had to wait for searchlights to illuminate enemy bombers. However, this reliance on searchlights limited interceptions especially as Pacific weather conditions were seldom clear. To bypass the issue several P-38s were fitted with airborne radar. The concept predictably stumbled because of the excessive workload incurred in single-pilot operation.

Frustrated by having to wait a lot longer for the P-61, the 418th NFS took matters into their own hands and converted a dozen B-25H Mitchells into night fighter configuration at Nadzab in March 1944. These served as an interim platform after discarding its P-70s which wound up with the Combat Replacement Training Center. The Mitchell's 75mm cannon and upper turret were removed, and the aircraft's offensive capacity was increased to fourteen forward-firing machine guns. However, with New Guinea skies swept clear of Japanese aircraft at this juncture, these Mitchells were used for daytime strikes instead. It was not until May 1944 that a Fifth Air Force night fighter squadron took delivery of its first P-61.

Meanwhile, the first of the much-promised Northrop P-61 Black Widows had been delivered to the South Pacific on 3 May 1944. The P-61 was soon showcased widely in the US media as an exemplar of American know-how of the times, which it truly was. The initial publicity surrounding the type continued throughout the war and as a result it all but eclipsed other night fighters operating in the Pacific. These had deliberately been hidden from public view due to the program's secrecy, and they soon disappeared into history.

Meanwhile both the USN and USMC had also entertained night operations in considerable secrecy, after first posting pilots to England to learn RAF night fighter tactics. The USN initiative was codenamed Project Affirm which commenced in April 1942 at Quonset Point, Rhode Island. That same year the USMC received authorisation to establish eight night fighter squadrons each with a dozen airframes, by the first half of 1943. However, as we shall see, similar to their USAAF counterparts, both the USN and USMC ramped up interim programs and types. The USMC, in particular, treated its program in considerable secrecy, even in the field, partially explaining why the history of USMC night fighter units continues to be obscure.

The P-61 eventually saw service across the Pacific with eight USAAF squadrons spread between the Fifth, Seventh and Thirteenth Air Forces. The type's first official kill is credited to 6th NFS P-61A *Moonhappy* (see Profile 8) over Saipan on the evening of 30 June 1944. The Black Widow remained in service for a few more years in the reconnaissance role during the Japanese occupation, and back in the US it became involved in weather and ejector seat test programs.

The later night fighter conquests in the Pacific were decisive, however, herein lies an irony. The enemy threat in both New Guinea and the Solomons evaporated with the Japanese withdrawal of air power from Rabaul in early 1944, almost coinciding with the arrival of the P-61. The new type needed to move closer to the Japanese homeland before it could showcase its prowess which it did and impressively so.

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