

CHAPTER 6

421st Night Fighter Squadron

The 421st NFS arrived from the US at Townsville on Christmas Day 1943 before it quickly continued to Milne Bay, New Guinea. Commanded by Major Walter Pharr with operations officer Captain William Bradley, the unit arrived in New Guinea without aircraft. Pharr had been promised P-61s upon arrival, however, the new type would not materialise until mid-1944. By the end of January and still without aircraft, the unit was ordered to move to Nadzab.

The first aircraft received by the 421st NFS was a pair of combat-weary P-38Fs delivered to Port Moresby's Kila 'drome on 31 January 1944, followed by a solitary P-70 transferred from the 418th NFS a fortnight later. Four more ex-418th NFS P-70s followed in the next few weeks before one new P-70A-2 was ferried up from Brisbane. All required extensive maintenance before they were ready for combat at Saidor by the end of March.

The two P-38Fs were flight-tested from Kila 'drome then on 16 February two more P-38Gs were delivered, and a fifth three days later. On 21 February fourteen pilots, most of the aircrew cadre, took a C-47 to Townsville where they collected five new P-38s to ferry back to Nadzab. However, disappointingly these were commandeered by other combat units upon arrival. On 29 February the 421st NFS flew its first combat mission when three P-38Fs flew a patrol over the US landing in the Admiralties. Capricious weather saw one abort followed by the unit's first loss. This occurred when Lieutenant Paul Zimmer's gear would not retract fully, then his port engine governor failed. Finally, his starboard engine lost power which saw him parachute about 50 miles up the coast from Finschhafen, but he was safely back at base that evening.

Another curious loss occurred on 24 March; for the past several weeks ace pilot Lieutenant Richard Bong had accompanied the unit's fighters on reconnaissance missions and for this morning's mission Lieutenant Tom Malone borrowed Bong's decorated plane *Marge*. The mission was a two-aircraft patrol to Wewak, and half an hour into the flight at 30,000 feet Malone experienced engine trouble. Unable to feather the propeller, he baled out high above overcast and unclear of his position. The identity of the wreck was confirmed at the crash site by Justin Taylan of the Pacific Wrecks website in 2024.

Meanwhile five more P-70A-2s had been assigned into the 421st NFS, after which on 5 April Captain Bradley led six P-70s comprising A Flight to Saidor. From here the detachment commenced a series of low-level attacks against targets along the northern New Guinea coast. Back at Nadzab on 8 April 1944 Lieutenant Alexander Kuzmick became the unit's first fatality resulting from a landing accident in a P-38F.

On 21 April Major Pharr flew to Brisbane to inspect the first four P-61As assigned to the 421st NFS. A few days later, with the go-ahead from Pharr, fifteen pilots boarded a C-47 and made their way to Brisbane where the four fighters were in the process of being assembled. Northrop Corporation's chief test pilot, John Myers, was there to assist with the training program for