

On 28 November 1941, newly promoted Major Paul B Wurtsmith was posted into the 49th PG as its commanding officer. Commencing Air Corps flying training in 1927, Wurtsmith had worked as an instructor, been a squadron commander and had served in the Philippines. He had 4,800 hours flying time and had flown virtually every type of aircraft in the USAAC inventory. His Operations Officer Major Donald Hutchinson was also experienced, with 2,600 hours to his name.

Wurtsmith immediately set about preparing the 49th PG for action. Inexperienced, poorly equipped and with no combat experience, the organisation had a huge learning curve ahead of it. However, Wurtsmith would prove to be an outstanding commanding officer and leader who would rapidly transform the young unit.

After the devastating attack by six IJN fleet carriers against Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 (American time), Japanese attacks on Malaya and the Philippines followed. The result was Japan and the US being dragged into a world conflict already involving Britain and Australia. Before long American involvement in Australia's future was foreshadowed in a report by Major-General Dwight D Eisenhower, who reported on 14 December to the United States Army Chief of Staff, General George C Marshall, that:

...our base must be Australia, and we must start at once to expand it and secure our communications to it. In the last we dare not fail.

The 49th on the move

With America entering World War Two, the 49th PG was placed on an immediate war footing, with the emphasis on preparing for combat. Training increased, while rumours were rife over the Group's future role. Many believed that its relative youth would see the Group assigned to guarding the US east coast; others believed they were destined for South America or the Panama Canal Zone.

On 19 December a fifth squadron was formed when the Interceptor Control Squadron was activated, with its modest initial function pertaining to the maintenance of a group operations plotting board. Command of the unit was assigned to First Lieutenant Van Auken, who however was also assigned to command the 8th Pursuit Squadron on 27 December. He retained command of the new unit as a secondary duty.

A further 37 pilots arrived on 21 December, further boosting the Group's manning. Three days later four officers and 28 enlisted men arrived to set up the Group's medical service under Captain Rosser B Ramsay.

Major Donald Hutchinson was appointed Group Operations Officer on 24 December while a further lot of pilots arrived. One of them was Second Lieutenant Clyde H Barnett Jr, who typified those early arrivals. Born at West Palm Beach in Florida, he had graduated with a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering from the University of Florida in 1940. Gaining his private pilot's licence, Barnett enlisted as a flying cadet with the USAAC on 26 April 1941. Following primary training, he completed his basic flying training and graduated as a Second