

## CHAPTER 1

### **AIRACOBRAS ARRIVE: PORT MORESBY 30 APRIL–4 MAY**

**D**uring March and April 1942 the air defence of Port Moresby was provided exclusively by the Curtiss P-40E Kittyhawks of the RAAF's No. 75 Squadron. However, and as related in Volume 2, by the end of April this unit had fought itself to exhaustion: ten pilots had been killed or taken prisoner, including the commanding officer, Squadron Leader John Jackson. Some 18 Kittyhawks had been lost, and several others were awaiting repairs. Just three machines remained airworthy by 30 April and the surviving pilots were tired and strained.

Fortunately, replacements were on the way in the form of the 35<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadrons (FS), 8<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group (FG), USAAF, equipped with Bell P-39 Airacobras. A key figure among the impending arrivals was Lieutenant Colonel Boyd “Buzz” Wagner, who at just 26 years of age was at that time the youngest Lieutenant Colonel in the USAAF. Wagner was also the first USAAF ace of the war, having claimed five kills while flying P-40Es in the defence of the Philippines in December 1941. In January 1942 Wagner was one of a handful of American pilots fortunate enough to be flown to Australia. The intention had been for these men to deliver P-40Es back to the Philippines, but the speed of the Japanese advance quickly put paid to the idea.

Instead, Wagner was appointed to head USAAF Fighter Command in Australia, where he could be detached for flying duty as the situation warranted and where his experience would be of immense value among a large pool of fledgling pilots. The 8<sup>th</sup> FG had only arrived in Brisbane in March after the sea voyage from the USA, and much training was needed. However, Wagner led an advance detachment of five P-39s to Port Moresby in early April, where they experienced brief combat with the enemy and also witnessed the frontline conditions that No. 75 Squadron was enduring.

On return to Australia, Wagner oversaw intense training until he was ready to lead two squadrons to Port Moresby at the end of April. The Airacobras that had arrived in Australia were a mixture of P-39 D and F models, as well as P-40s, which was the designation given to machines originally built for export to Britain, essentially similar to P-39Ds. The P-39F replaced the P-39D on the production line during 1942 and had minor differences in the propeller type and exhaust stubs. Initially, the 8<sup>th</sup> FG was equipped wholly with P-39Ds and Fs.

The P-39D was the first regular production version of Bell's fighter, with improved pilot armour and self-sealing fuel tanks installed as a result of air combat reports received from Europe in 1940–41. An unorthodox design, the Airacobra featured car-type cockpit doors, an engine mounted behind the pilot and a tricycle undercarriage. Its streamlined profile and 1,325 horsepower Allison engine gave a nominal top speed of 360 mph, which was faster than the