



Early USAAF P40E/E-1 Operations in Australia Part 3V5

The P40E represented the first modern mass produced fighter that the RAAF had at that time, to carry the fight to the then relentless onslaught by the Japanese up to March 1942. Up to that time, apart from Brewster Buffaloes operated in Malaya in forward defense by 21 and 453 Squadrons, Australia had no front line Fighter aircraft equipping it's airforce on the mainland of Australia. History written in Australia to date has largely omitted over this period from December 1941 to March 1942, the true story of the number of P40E fighters that were landed on our shores, formed into Squadrons and sent off to fight the Japanese.

Background

It started when a reinforcement convoy to the Philippines left San Francisco between the 21st and 24th November 1941. This convoy, named after its escort, the USS Pensacola, consisted of the following ships:

- **USS Pensacola** 8" Gun Cruiser as escort
- **USS Yacht Niagara**
- **USAT Holbrook**
- **SS Coast Farmer**
- **Admiral Halstead** both carrying some 18 crated 24thGP P40E's (one P40E lacked a Rudder)
- **SS Chaumont,**
- **SS Republic** (7th BG personnel)
- **SS Meigs** (latter sunk at Darwin 19/2/42) 52 A24's 27th BG (Lt)
- **Dutch Ship Bloemfontein** (75 strong AVG P40 Outfit on board)

Aircraft Ownership

The parent Unit of this shipment, the 35th Pursuit Group, made up of the 21st (equipped with P40E's) and the 34th (equipped with P35A's) Pursuit Squadrons, was to be the second P40E Group to be based in the Philippines after the 24th Pursuit Group (3rd, 17th and 20th Pursuit Squadrons).

These 18 P40E's were to be used to initially equip the 34th Pursuit Squadron, based at Del Carmen Field, with its replaced P35A's being the initial equipment of the 70th Pursuit Squadron, which would arrive from the states after December 1941.

During this work-up, the 35th Pursuit Group Squadron's command was assigned under the 24th Pursuit Group. This arrangement continued at the start of the hostilities on the 8th of December 1941, Philippine time, till attrition resulted in only one squadron size force surviving.

The Convoy's new Destination

Due to the supremacy of the Japanese Navy at this time, and its resultant blockade of the Philippines, it was considered at that time to change the destination of the Pensacola Convoy to Brisbane, Australia.

The reason behind this was twofold. Firstly, there was thought at that time that there were ample facilities for the assembly and training of these reinforcements, without the chance of attack. And secondly, they could be air ferried across Australia, via

Darwin, Timor, and Borneo to the Philippines, thus bypassing the Japanese naval blockade. This Route had been laid out as a backup, some months before by General Brereton, as a way of reinforcing the Philippines, should the enemy enforced a blockade. However, the primary idea was that this route was for bombers, with sufficient ferry range. However it was realised that the P40E, with a drop tank, could negotiate the route. The result would then be landing combat ready P40 Pursuit Squadrons to reinforce beleaguer fighter forces, then holding back the tide of the Japanese thrust.

The Arrival and its Destination

The Convoy arrived in Brisbane's Newstead Wharves on the 22nd December 1941 with its eighteen P40E-cu's and fifty-two A24 Banshee's (Army version SBD3 Dauntless Dive-Bomber) for unloading and then for assembly. These aircraft were trailed to the new Amberley Airforce base outside of Ipswich, some 60 kilometres away.

For erection and assembly, disembarked USAAF personnel from this convoy, along with the volunteers from the AVG contingent on route to China via India, commenced the job of unpacking these aircraft from their crates.

RAAF personnel from No 3 S.F.T.S (Service Flying Training School) assisted in the assembly of these P40E aircraft, along with USAAF Personnel of the 8th Material Squadron (7thBG) and 75 AVG volunteers from the SS Bloemfontein.

Their assembly of these eighteen P40E's was commenced immediately with the first P40E, **41-5332 assembled and flown on the 02/01/42, this being the first flight of a P40E Warhawk in Australia.**

By the 12th January 1942, 15 were ready for combat with two more nearing completion or being rectified of faults and damage, (**40-666** with wing tip damage, and **41-5314**).

Despite several problems, including the supply of Prestone coolant for their radiators and the lack of a rudder for one of the aircraft, training commenced. Because of the nature of its destination, to reinforce the existing fighting units in theatre, the Unit was designated as the 17th Pursuit Squadron (Provisional). Additional pilots evacuated from the Philippines joined the unit.

The Serials of the first Eighteen P40E-cu Warhawks in Australia of the 17th Pursuit Squadron (Provisional)

After researching USAAF Aircraft data cards, particularly they're shipping dates and arrival dates, and photographic records and assistance from co-researches, the following serials are those of the eighteen:

FY Serials:

**40-662,40-663,40-666,40-667,40-670,40-671,40-674,40-675,40-678,40-679,
41-5305,41-5314,41-5332,41-5333,41-5334,41-5336*, 41-5337,41-5338**

What's interesting is that one of the above was later taken over by the RAAF sometime during March 1942. It is believed that this one was a repaired P40E in transit to Java, or the one left behind at Amberley minus its Rudder. More research



has determined that this P40E, FY Serial, 41-5336 aka A29-28, was the Hanger Queen left behind at Amberley, then used for training by 3SFTS RAAF.

A29-28 (aka 41-5336) sitting at RAAF Amberley late March 1942. Note the standard Olive drab finish. Photo: Buz Busby.

The journey north

The squadron was ready to deploy by the 16th January 1942. However by then, the Philippine air route had been severed by this time at Borneo by advancing Japanese Forces. It was therefore decided to reinforce USAAF forces in Java with the intent to re-open the route when sufficient forces, then on their way from the USA, would allow it.

The Combat Echelon of the 17th Pursuit Squadron (Provisional) departed Brisbane in two flights. Captain Gunn in a Beechcraft escorted the 1st Flight (Sprague) and a Fairey Battle escorted the second Flight (Coss).

At Rockhampton, 2nd Lt Carl Geis, due to electrical problems, landed without flaps and brakes, which caused him to ground looped at end of the runway in **40-667 #12**.

At Townsville, Brown in **40-663 #6** had his landing gear collapsed on landing, causing damage to his aircraft.

Squadron then proceeded to Cloncurry where the second flight remained overnight.

The first flight proceeded to Daly Waters and Darwin.

The Second Flight arrived Darwin the next day.

The landing gear on Kruzel's aircraft, **41-5334 #3** collapsed on a practice flight.

The number of airplanes available for flying at Darwin was now at 14. They remained at Darwin awaiting instructions from Headquarters as to ultimate destination of Squadron and availability of escort airplanes.

The route that they plan to fly, all the way to the Philippines, was cut at Borneo. Lt Irwin remained at Darwin because of sickness while Kruzel flew his aircraft to Java.

They departed for Java on the 26th January 1942 from Darwin, where they came under ADDBA Command for the defense of Java.

With minimal loss, the route had been proven that P40Es could be air ferried to reinforce USAAF Forces in the Far East.

With the arrival of more than 55 P40Es, some four days earlier prior of their departure, on the SS Polk, reinforcements were starting to arrive.

These were to follow the 17thPS (Provisional), as you will see in **Part 4**

I would like to express my sincere thanks to Craig "Buz" Busby, Bill Bartsch and Peter Dunne for all of their help. This research would not have been possible without the RAAF Museum E/E88 Cards, the National Archives of Australia records and to those people who added "important" bits, here and, to make this story possible.

Please note: *My Aircraft Profiles that are depicted in any story are representations only, though every effort is made to be accurate given the information available.*

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