

CHAPTER 8

67th Fighter Squadron “Fighting Cocks”

The 67th FS is usually associated with the colourful shark-teeth P-400 Airacobras first involved in the gritty early Guadalcanal campaign. These were unpacked and assembled at Tontouta, New Caledonia, and the first of which was ready for a test flight on 28 March 1942. It was decided that the developed airfields extant on the island would be easy targets for air attack, so a series of four satellite fields was surveyed and used by the squadron’s three flights. Flights of ten Airacobras dispersed to each field, with headquarters retained at Tontouta.

In April 1942 a pasture field near Noumea was first used, named Patsy after the callsign for its telephone exchange. “Patsy Flight” Airacobras soon appeared with the unique shark-teeth markings courtesy of pilot Lieutenant Peter Childress who modelled the design from a magazine photo he had of *Flying Tiger* P-40s in China. White Flight painted their spinners white, while Dumbea (modern-day Magenta Field northeast of Noumea) was home to Blue Flight which named itself “Pair-a-Dice” as a play on the word “Paradise”, with blue spinners. Another field inland was nicknamed “Dustbowl” where Red Flight with red spinners made their home, painting the squadron motif “Fighting Cock” on the doors of the fighters.

Sometimes the flights also used another small grass airfield located near the township of Thio on the other side of island. This was nicknamed “Shoebbox” due to its confined square shape, hemmed in by hills. Navigation exercises during this time included long-distance flights around the area to prepare for the move to Guadalcanal. These also permitted pilots to estimate fuel requirements and optimum engine settings for long distance flights. The 67th FS lost five P-400s to operational causes during its time on New Caledonia.

The first 67th FS detachment to enter combat departed Plaine des Gaiacs on 22 August 1942, and led by a B-17E, refuelled at Efate before proceeding to Espiritu Santo. The following morning they flew to Guadalcanal guided by two B-17Es, a second one trailing in case it had to drop a life raft to any downed pilot. This sector took just short of four hours and was flown at only 200 feet. The squadron fought its first combat at Guadalcanal on 24 August when two P-400s engaged *Ryujo* B5N2 Kates.

The 67th FS had its first combat loss on 30 August 1942 when two pilots were shot down, one of whom was captured and executed. In its first months of service the squadron flew a mixture of ground support and escort missions. By April 1943 it was routinely sharing pilots and aircraft with the 70th FS.

Then exceptionally, the 67th FS was transferred to Fifth Air Force command at Wards ‘drome, Port Moresby, on 13 June 1943 where it was attached to the 36th FS to assist in escorting C-47 transports to Wau and Bulolo. During this time it used the callsign “Agate” but remained under Thirteenth Air Force administrative control while operating in conjunction with Fifth Air Force units. It also flew missions from Dododura and Gurney Field (Milne Bay) before