

Introduction

The intention of this volume is to accurately portray a wide cross-section of the Lockheed Lightnings which served in the South West Pacific and South Pacific theatres.¹ Past publications featuring “Pacific Lightnings” have largely ignored Thirteenth Air Force, night fighter and reconnaissance units, many of which are illustrated here for the first time. The mainstay fare for “Pacific Lightnings” in other publications are those of the famous aces, yet the markings regime of this exceptional fighter encompasses a wider and more interesting breadth than generally realised. This volume also takes the opportunity to correct previous incorrect and fictitious profiles.

However, first a caution for Lightning aficionados. Much existing material about the role and history of the type in the Pacific is questionable or erroneous. The Lightning’s actual operational history reflects an alternative version to the many well-publicised accounts of its exceptional combat prowess. The statistics are unflattering: a total of 939 Lightnings served in both Pacific theatres from April 1942 to May 1944, ranging from the F-4 reconnaissance version through to the natural metal finish P-38J-20 model (about 300 additional Lightnings were later added to the Philippines theatre inventory, which are outside the scope of this volume). Of these 939 airframes, 192 were lost to combat, 37 to weather-related causes, and 171 to various other causes, leaving 539 to either proceed to the Netherlands East Indies and Philippines theatres or be left behind. In such cases they either served with the Combat Replacement Training Center or were scrapped at Nadzab or Finschhafen. The fact is that a Lightning pilot in the Pacific had a roughly equal chance of losing his life to tropical weather or an accident than being shot down by the enemy. Furthermore, many non-combat losses resulted directly from asymmetric engine-out situations, mostly on take-off or landing, a problem less lethal in comparable single-engine fighters.

The amount of Fifth Air Force Lightning losses during the Rabaul campaign in October/November 1943 is instructive. The biggest Rabaul mission by the Fifth was “Bloody Tuesday” of 2 November 1943, during which Mitchells claimed 26 Japanese fighters and the escorting Lightnings a further 29, for a total of 55 American kills. Yet the true American score was only fourteen Zeros, thus they claimed nearly four times as many as actually shot down. In return the Americans paid a terrible price losing eleven Mitchells and nine Lightnings, a combined total of twenty aircraft. Thirteenth Air Force Lightning losses during the January/February 1944 Rabaul campaign are dreadful. Indeed, a sobering examination of specific Zero versus Lightning combats reveals the Zero still retained a slight edge, a statement likely to be met with disbelief in many circles. The popular and accepted version of Lightnings giving quick demise to multifarious Zeros over Rabaul in this timeframe is illusory.

¹ The South West Pacific Area as defined by this volume essentially means the New Guinea theatre, between Dutch New Guinea in the west and the South Pacific theatre in the east. For this reason, the three F-4 reconnaissance Lightnings operated by the RAAF are outside the scope of this volume as they were used over the Netherlands East Indies. A few other Lightnings were loaned to the RAAF in New Guinea but were operated by the 8th PRS, USAAF.