

An alarming sign of things to come was when the 17<sup>th</sup> FS Squadron (Provisional) lost seven P-38Fs during its first few weeks of training and test flights in Australia, the first loss occurring at Amberley on 7 September 1942. Perhaps symbolic is the fate of the most famous Fifth Air Force Lightning, *Marge*, which in 1944 was allocated to the USAAF's highest-scoring pilot, Richard Bong. It was lost, not in combat but due to engine and miscellaneous systems failures (see Chapter 22).

The Lightning's manoeuvrability was markedly inferior to that of more nimble Japanese opponents, and enemy fighter units fought accordingly where possible. Avoiding combat at low altitudes and the use of fast diving attacks were obvious P-38 tactics, however, claims that these enabled the P-38 squadrons in both New Guinea and the Solomons to achieve superior results are incorrect. As a result of these tactics Lightnings often found themselves at low altitude in what is termed aeronautically as a "low energy state". The Zero and even the lightly armed Ki-43 found the Lightning easy prey in such a condition. It is true that when the Lightning's unique performance characteristics were maximised, the results could be devastating, but then the same could also be said of Japanese fighters. The wise Lightning pilot could always use his outstanding speed to escape combat, but an obvious corollary is that such action did not shoot down enemy aircraft.

Perhaps the biggest myth which continues to be perpetrated is the alleged favourable kill ratio of the Lightning against the Zero. Armed with accurate and detailed Japanese unit logs, right down to the number of rounds fired, actual combat results instead of readily accepted USAAF claims give another reality. Both US and Japanese pilots over-claimed by about three to one, or even more in many cases. This means, on average, reducing all Lightning combat claims by about two thirds. As one example, 38 pilots from the 475<sup>th</sup> FG (which exclusively operated P-38s), enjoy "ace" status however the true number is closer to thirteen. If you really want to nail down an individual pilot's score it is easy to do so – the Japanese records offer a ready comparison of claims versus reality. In particular, the early claims by the 39<sup>th</sup> FS in its first few months of combat were almost frenetic.

In the South Pacific theatre combat engagements were often fought by multiple units and often different services were involved, with no cross-checking on combat claims. A good example is "Ace-in-a-Day" 339<sup>th</sup> FS pilot Lieutenant Murray Shubin. Awarded five Zeros on 16 June 1943 over Guadalcanal, Shubin's own claims were two definites and four probables, and by his own admission he witnessed none of the probables crash. Instead, he was awarded the extra kills upon evidence from an army ground observer miles away from the action, an observation readily accepted by Thirteenth Air Force Command, perhaps driven more by prestige than realism. Such a witness would have found it challenging to discern Shubin's Lightning from the many others airborne, let alone confirm which particular victim was his kill. Total awards between USAAF, USMAC and USN aerial units for this particular engagement were 49 Zeros, yet only fourteen actually fell. How then to accurately and fairly reapportion these kills?

None of the above detracts from the uniqueness of the Lightning or the courage of those who flew it. Its matchless range enabled it to take the fight to the enemy, the Hollandia campaign