

CHAPTER 7

44th Fighter Squadron “Vampires”

Assigned to the 18th PG, the 44th PS was activated at Wheeler Field, Hawaii, on 22 November 1940. It was redesignated as the 44th FS on 15 May 1942. It became the first of only two Thirteenth Air Force Squadrons to use the P-40. An advanced echelon arrived at Bauerfield, Efate, in the New Hebrides in November 1942 commanded by Major Kermit Tyler. Here it first operated short-fuselage P-40F-1s, starting combat with the type from Guadalcanal in December 1942. The first five Warhawks assigned into the inventory were flown off the USS *Nassau* on 11 November 1942 to Pelikulo Airfield on Espiritu Santo, where they were test-flown and later ferried down to Bauerfield. The squadron was tasked with the air defence of the New Hebrides, enabling a dozen F4F-4 Wildcats held in reserve there to be forwarded to Guadalcanal.

The first 44th FS losses were non-combat related when on 20 December 1942 a flight of P-40Fs became lost during a training exercise and force-landed on the island of Erromango (see Profile 76). The unit commenced combat operations from Fighter #1 on Guadalcanal in January 1943, before moving a few months later to Fighter #2. Major John Little replaced Tyler as squadron commander on 24 May 1943, and on 14 August 1943 a detachment forward deployed to Munda shortly after its capture, constituting the first Allied aircraft to use the field.

By mid-1943 moves were afoot to convert the unit to the Lockheed Lightning and Major Robert Westbrook was appointed as the new squadron commander on 25 September 1943 to oversee the transition. Although the USAAF did not classify the 44th FS as a twin-engine fighter unit until 20 February 1944, several Warhawk pilots were seconded to other Lightning units as early as September 1943 in preparation for the transition. In January 1944 the squadron said goodbye to its last Warhawk when it relocated back to Guadalcanal to receive its first batch of P-38Hs followed by early model Olive Drab P-38Js. Its last Warhawk combat losses were three downed on 8 November 1943 during a mission to Torokina. It lost a total of fourteen Warhawks in the South Pacific theatre: one accidentally shot down by a F4F Wildcat on 4 February 1943, seven to combat and six more to other causes.

Markings

The 44th FS's first batch of short-fuselage P-40F-1s sent to the New Hebrides comprised just five new airframes in the serial range 41-14101 to 41-14106. Unusually, at least for a USAAF squadron, it allocated commensurate squadron numbers which aligned with the last three digits of each airframe, illustrated in Profiles 77, 78 and 81. Another batch of five was delivered in mid-December from Hawaii, which had the original 18th PG rear fuselage band, as described below, later complemented by the first batch of long-fuselage P-40F-15s in the serial range 41-19819 to 41-19844. The first of these arrived at Efate in January 1943, after which it received its first P-40Ms in June 1943 in the serial range 43-5489 to 43-5813.

The 44th FS numbered its Warhawks in the 101 to 150 range, in the one-hundred series, whereas