



P-38 Lightning Aces 1942-43



John Stanaway

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P-38 LIGHTNING ACES

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INTRODUCTION

The later P-38 Lightning models were honed to the finest edge that Lockheed could produce. In fact, the ultimate fighting example (the P-38J-25) was both fast enough and manoeuvrable enough to match the latest piston-engined fighters of the Luftwaffe up to an altitude of approximately 30,000 ft. With aileron boost, compressibility-dampening flaps and Allison V-1710-111 and -113 engines able to produce 1475 hp at 30,000 ft, the J-25 was the fastest of the production series with a top speed exceeding 420 mph. The J-25 could – according to Lockheed – dive with anything short of the Me 163 rocket fighter. It could climb with any conventional propeller-driven aircraft of the era and could even stay with the superbly manoeuvrable Mitsubishi A6M Zero throughout much of its turning radius.

Unfortunately, the J-25 was not available until mid 1944, when 105 examples arrived in the European Theatre of Operations (ETO) and were assigned in their entirety to the tactical Ninth Air Force. The essentially similar L-model soon followed the J-25 off the Lockheed assembly line from July 1944. For the rest of the war in the ETO and, to a lesser extent, in other theatres of war involving the USAAF, the P-38 was increasingly used as a tactical fighter due to its growing obsolescence as an interceptor.

Up until the end of 1943, however, the Lightning earned a reputation as the USAAF's premier fighter. Indeed, by January 1944 its exploits in the Pacific had made the P-38 the most sought-after fighter in the USAAF arsenal. Although produced in smaller numbers than any other major American fighter of World War 2, every theatre commander wanted the P-38 because of its range, versatility and altitude performance.

The first models to see combat (E to H) were heavily criticised for their lack of modern automation, basic pilot comfort and poor power-to-weight ratio at higher altitudes. Yet despite their shortcomings these early P-38s were delivered into the eager hands of American pilots who took to the skies over every front to which US forces were committed. They also wrote a sterling record for the unconventional fighter. Approximately 100 of an eventual total of some 175 P-38 aces scored the prerequisite five victories to qualify as aces in the early E- to H-models. Indeed, most of the top aces, including Bong, McGuire, Sloan and Leverette, had scored at least half of their total victories by the end of 1943.

Using the comments of these aces themselves, as well as documents detailing the tactics used by various USAAF fighter units, this narrative will show how these early P-38s not only survived in skies dominated by deadly Axis fighters, but to a large degree also dominated the tactical and strategic situations they found themselves embroiled in.

LOCKHEED'S HOT ROD

The P-38 Lightning was initially issued to the USAAF's 1st Fighter Group (FG) in April 1941. Later that same year other groups, including the 14th and 82nd FGs, acquired their Lightnings (mostly E-models) and prepared for operations. The 20th and 55th FGs received P-38s during the second half of 1942. By January 1943 these units, plus the 78th FG (which lost its Lightnings to the Twelfth Air Force once in England), would either be on their way to Europe or preparing to deploy to the ETO.

The first deployment of Lightnings to an operational theatre, however, came in mid-1942 in response to the Japanese diversionary invasion of the Aleutian Islands in the northern Pacific. P-38Es of the 343rd FG and the 28th Composite Group were rushed to Alaskan bases to counter expected Japanese incursions. By then the 8th Photographic Squadron's F-4 Lightnings had already been deployed to Australia.

The P-38 had been designed to meet a requirement for a heavily armed, fast-climbing bomber interceptor to guard US territory against possible attack. Reports from southeast Asia suggesting that long-range bombers could threaten the United States from land bases or aircraft carriers worried American planners. This concern was to lead to one of the most remarkable fighter aircraft of the period. What the design team at Lockheed under Clarence 'Kelly' Johnson and Hall Hibbard managed to create was a twin-engined, fast-climbing, heavily armed fighter that also had a phenomenal load-carrying capacity. The counter-rotating propellers made the P-38 extremely manoeuvrable at various altitudes and the multi-engine configuration gave it great range for a fighter of its era.

Lockheed stressed to the USAAF and to new P-38 pilots the importance of climbing away from hostile aircraft as a prime combat tactic. The Lightning could easily out-climb even single-engined fighters in 1942, contradicting the standard evasive tactic of turning away and diving in order to lose a pursuer. In fact, the P-38's superior rate of climb gave pilots an effective tactical manoeuvre throughout the war. German opponents, in particular, respected the Lightning's ability to pursue them after a bounce without the necessary boost achieved from a 'dive-and-zoom' manoeuvre. Many an Axis fighter pilot would look back in astonishment to see the P-38 he had just attacked now closing in on him in a climb.

But the main P-38 attribute feared by Axis crews was its armament. German pilots were warned not to tackle a Lightning head-on if it could be avoided. The fighter's battery of four Browning M2 0.50-in machine guns and single Oldsmobile-manufactured Hispano M1 20 mm cannon was concentrated in the nose to produce a tight circumference of fire not much larger than a basketball. Even in a tight turn all five guns would usually function to produce a weight of fire that could reportedly penetrate the hull of a destroyer.

What Allied pilots liked most about the P-38 was its range. Any target within a radius of about 400 miles was easily reached by the Lightning. Commanders in the North African as well as the Pacific theatres came to rely on the Lockheed fighter for long-range interceptions as well as strafing and bombing missions. Ordnance loads were impressive for the period, sometimes surpassing a ton of explosives. Perhaps it was this ability to fly long distances that also served to give some German and Italian pilots the impression that the P-38 was a vulnerable target. Attacks on ground targets made the Lightning especially vulnerable to enemy fighters diving from superior heights. One feature of the P-38 in combat, however, could deceive enemy pilots.

Like the P-47, the Lightning could spew out gouts of dark smoke when the throttles were opened quickly in an emergency, giving the impression the aircraft was crippled. This may be the reason why Luftwaffe aces Kurt Bühligen and Franz Schiess stated that the P-38 was the easiest Allied fighter to down in the North African theatre. Indeed, Schiess claimed to have destroyed an astonishing 17 Lightnings prior to falling victim to one himself. Bühligen was credited with at least 13 P-38 kills.

FIRST VICTORIES

Although built as a fighter, the first P-38 model to see combat was the unarmed F-4 photo-reconnaissance variant. These specialist aircraft were assigned to the newly established 8th Photo Reconnaissance Squadron (PRS), led by 1Lt Karl L 'Pop' Polifka. Placed in command of the unit upon its formation on 1 February 1942, the ex-lumberjack had earned his US Army Air Corps wings in the late 1930s. Descended from Russian-Czech immigrants, Polifka had inherited a solid hatred for the Axis mentality from his parents.

War emergency conditions in the Pacific meant that the 8th PRS was urgently needed in-theatre, so Polifka boarded the SS *President Coolidge* on 19 March 1942 with the squadron's A Flight – its B and C Flights would follow in due course. In the meantime, Polifka would fly the four F-4s with a few officers and enlisted men from Townsville, Queensland, until July 1942. For some of the time he found himself operating virtually single-handedly as three of the four F-4s were grounded due to a lack of spare parts until the threat posed by the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) fleet in the southeastern Pacific receded following the Battle of the Coral Sea in early May 1942.

Polifka became a legend when he flew reconnaissance missions over the growing IJN fleet at Rabaul using a B-24 and crew that he had acquired in April. The Japanese undoubtedly heard the high-pitched roar of the P-38's Allison engines for the first time

1Lt Karl 'Pop' Polifka studies a recently assembled aerial photo mosaic of the IJN stronghold of Rabaul in early 1942. These photographs were taken during highly dangerous photo-reconnaissance flights made by unarmed F-4 Lightnings of the Townsville-based 8th PRS





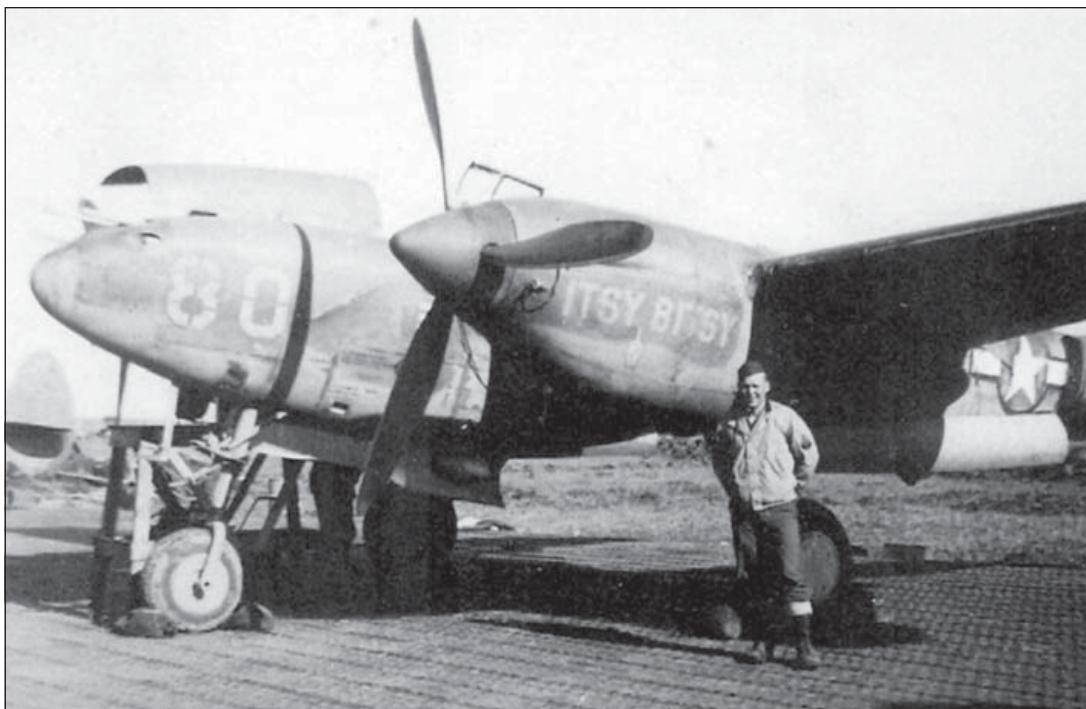
WO Schrader, 1Lt Fred Hargesheimer (right) and TSgt Roland Baker pose near the gun bay of Polifka's *Fainting Floozie II* in 1942. Hargesheimer was subsequently shot down on 5 June 1943 by a Ki-45 over New Britain while flying F-5A-10 42-13073.

Wandering in the jungle for 31 days, he was eventually found by villagers and hidden from the Japanese for six months until he was handed over to Australian Army commandos

when he had ranged over the gathering fleet in late April and early May. There is little documentation to substantiate the wild stories that emerged from this period, but legend has it that Polifka completed his photo runs over the fleet and then out-ran pursuing Zero-sens with one of his engines shot out! The legend even has the remarkable photo-reconnaissance pilot manoeuvring so skilfully that one of the enemy fighters stalled and crashed into the sea.

There is documentation to support accounts of similar feats by other 8th PRS pilots, notably Capt Alex Guerry over Wewak and Lt Homer Taylor over Rabaul. In the absence of witnesses or photographic proof, these pilots could only be credited with a 'probable' each. In any case, the first undocumented claim for the destruction of an enemy aircraft in World War 2 by a Lightning pilot is attributed to an F-4. Polifka was later to perform yeoman service flying photo-reconnaissance missions in Italy, and he was considered the premier American photo-reconnaissance ace of the war.

The first confirmed P-38 victories were achieved over the Aleutian Islands in August 1942. Japanese forces had made a feint attack towards Alaska before the Midway operation in June, but their coded signals had been broken and American intelligence knew exactly where, and when, the main attack would be made. Reconnaissance for the Japanese offensive on Alaska involved patrols by Kawanishi H6K 'Mavis' flying boats, which in turn prompted the USAAF to rush P-38Es of the 28th Composite Group and 343rd FG north from Washington State to Alaska.



Six 'Mavis' flying boats were assigned to the Aleutians following the Japanese occupation of Kiska and Attu in June 1942. IJNAF Capt Sukemitsu Ito intended to lead them in bombing and reconnaissance operations against the Aleutians and western Alaska. However, the campaign got off to a poor start when three of the Kawanishis were lost to the elements. On 4 August Ito was leading the remaining three flying boats towards Umnak Island when an intercepting force of six P-38Es from the 343rd FG's 54th Fighter Squadron (FS), guided by a B-24, intercepted them near Harold's Bay. 1Lts Stanley Long and Kenneth Ambrose, who were part of the third flight (the others had already turned back due to a shortage of fuel), heard a crewman aboard the guiding Liberator call in a speck about ten miles from Great Mountain. Despite encountering alternating sunshine and fog between 3500 ft and 9000 ft, the two P-38 pilots finally spotted two dark dots that stood out against white cloud at 7000 ft.

Ambrose dived on the left-hand 'Mavis' while Long took the one on the right. Ambrose missed with his first burst but Long managed to hit both Japanese aircraft. Long's second pass sent one flying boat spinning into the water off Nazan, while Ambrose's follow-up pass on the other 'Mavis' sent it also into the bay with an engine trailing flame. Ito was subsequently forced to fly the sole remaining H6K back to Japan. The P-38 had achieved its first victories of the war. With the H6Ks gone, only a handful of Nakajima A6M2-N 'Rufe' floatplane fighters (a water-borne variant of the Zero-sen) remained on Kiska, Adak and Attu for bombing and reconnaissance missions.

Another 54th FS pilot had a remarkable record during the early Aleutian fighting. At one time Capt George Laven was unofficially almost an ace in the USAAF's Eleventh Air Force. He had been in the Alaskan theatre

1Lt Stanley Long and Capt George Laven pose with the latter pilot's P-38 in late 1942. Long claimed two kills while serving with the 54th FS, including the first confirmed aerial victory for the Lightning on 4 August 1942 when he downed an H6K 'Mavis' flying boat

Capt George Laven's P-38E 41-2076 bears four victory marks beneath its cockpit. The veteran fighter, assigned to the 54th FS/343rd FG, was photographed at Adak, in the Aleutian Islands, on 29 May 1943



for some time when he shared in the destruction of either a 'Rufe' or an Aichi E13A 'Jake' reconnaissance floatplane (his records indicate an unlikely 'Mavis') moored on the Kiska coast with another 54th FS pilot on 3 September 1942. Eleven days later he claimed to have shot down a biplane over the same distant Kiska area. Laven completed his Aleutian scoring by downing two Zero-sens (possibly 'Rufes') on 13 February 1943. For years later he claimed four aircraft destroyed.

By 1945 Laven was back on operations in the Pacific with the 49th FG, and he claimed a four-engined Kawanishi H8K 'Emily' flying boat for what he considered to be his fifth victory on 26 April. By any account, Laven was the high-scoring P-38 pilot of the Aleutians campaign.

One interesting aspect of Laven's service concerns an assignment to fly his P-38E back to a local maintenance facility in the Aleutians for an overhaul in November 1942. When he found the site inoperable, he simply flew to his old hometown of San Antonio, Texas. After visiting his family, Laven collected his aircraft and flew it back into the war!

GET YAMAMOTO!

When the Allies discovered that the Japanese were building an airstrip on the island of Guadalcanal, in the Solomons archipelago, the news caused consternation among US commanders. It was the first indication that the enemy was expanding into the southwest Pacific and now posed an immediate threat to Australia. On 7 August 1942, therefore, the US Marine Corps waded ashore on the fetid jungle-clad island to secure the incomplete airfield. In doing so they signalled the start of seven months of bitter fighting, much of it for possession of the airfield that the Americans called Henderson Field. The bloody campaign did not end until the last enemy soldier had finally been killed, the capture of Guadalcanal providing US forces with a much needed victory in the Pacific.

Among the units based on Guadalcanal were those equipped with the unconventional Lightning. Eight of the twin-engined, twin-boom fighters were flown in by pilots of the newly formed 339th FS/347th FG on 12 November. The next day another eight P-38Fs, assigned to the 39th FS/35th FG, flew in from Port Moresby, New Guinea, on loan from the Fifth Air Force – in mid-January 1943 the USAAF units on Henderson Field were subsumed into the Thirteenth Air Force.

In November the IJN suffered a series of defeats in the seas around the Solomons, easing the pressure on American troops on Guadalcanal. This meant that the eight 39th FS pilots could be sent back to New Guinea with seven of their P-38s on 22 November, the detachment having not actually seen any action. Further reinforcements would subsequently reach Henderson Field, with new Lightning pilots joining those already seasoned in operations.

Among those who would play a significant role while serving with the 339th FS during this time was 1Lt Douglas Canning. He made an interesting comment on the complexity of the fighter organisation on Guadalcanal during October–November 1942;

‘On 15 September 15 pilots from the 70th FS [part of the 347th FG] in Fiji were transferred to the 67th FS [also assigned to the 347th FG], with future ace Capt John W Mitchell as the senior member. Most of us flew missions as 67th pilots and most were then assigned to the 339th when it was formed on 3 October. Also, the 67th’s pilot strength had been augmented by those who’d been stationed in Hawaii, some joining the 67th and some the 339th. I was one of those who went to the 339th via the 67th from the 70th!’

P-38s of the 339th scored the type’s first victories in the South Pacific whilst covering a strike on enemy shipping at Buin, on Bougainville island, on 18 November. Eleven B-17s and four B-24s were being escorted to the target by eight P-38s when 30 to 40 Japanese interceptors tried to break up the American attack. During the ensuing encounter no fewer than 17 Zero-sens were claimed as shot down, three of them by the 339th. Lt Delton Fincher claimed to have downed two and Lt James Obermiller one.