

SHORT HISTORY OF THIRTEENTH AIR FORCE

JANUARY 1943 -- JANUARY 1945

In the war in the Pacific most major operations by Allied forces have been combined operations in which the air forces, the ground forces and the naval forces have functioned as a team, each playing interdependent roles. The Thirteenth Air Force has been a member of the Allied Pacific team since its activation in January 1943. It has played its roll well under adverse conditions. With the exception of a few units stationed near Noumea, a town in New Caledonia, its units have never been stationed in cities or towns. It has lived and grown in the jungles of the South and Southwest Pacific. In the two years of its existence its personnel has greatly increased, but it still remains a small air force compared with many other air forces now operating in this and other theaters. For its antecedents we must go back to 1942.

Early 1942 found the Japanese still moving on the momentum gained by their initial surprise. Australia faced the threat of invasion. It was not difficult to imagine that the Japanese might soon engulf the entire South Pacific. Against this threat several Army Air Force units operated in guerilla style from South Pacific bases. Fighter units had been the first to arrive. In the latter part of July, Flying Fortresses began to arrive. Weak in numbers and controlled by separate base commanders, these units guarded the life line of American supplies in the South Pacific. In August some units supported the first Allied offensive in the Pacific, the invasion of Guadalcanal.

In order to satisfy the need for centralized control, all Army Air Force units operating in the South Pacific were combined to form the Thirteenth Air Force which was activated on 13 January 1943. Major General Nathan F. Twining assumed command on the same day at New Caledonia. Soon after headquarters was established at Espiritu Santo, New Hebrides, and reinforcements were brought in.

The general mission of the Thirteenth in its early history was to gain air superiority, support land and sea offensives in the Central Solomons, and destroy enemy supply lines in the Northern Solomons. Organized resistance by enemy ground forces on Guadalcanal ended in February 1943. The Japanese continued, however, to hit Guadalcanal from the air. On 16 June an enemy striking force of 120 planes approached the island. Thirteenth fighters, together with Navy, Marine and Royal New Zealand airmen, intercepted and shot down about 75 enemy planes, dealing a heavy blow to Japanese air power in the Solomons.

In July the Allied offensive in the Central Solomons was stepped up with the invasion of New Georgia. The Thirteenth lent support to the New Georgia campaign, and began to neutralize enemy airfields and other installations on Bougainville to pave the way for the landing of Allied forces at Empress Augusta Bay on 1 November.

Late in July the heavies reached out to hit Tarawa, the scene of some of the bloodiest fighting in the Pacific.

Toward the end of the year the entire Allied campaign was intensified. The Thirteenth had replaced what remained of its B-17's with B-24 Liberators.