

and below. They numbered about 20. The P-400's had started turning into a Lufbery in which there were more Zeros than P-400's when the Grummans dived and the melee became general. The astonishing Zeros were making almost square turns and the Army pilots found the only way to shake them was to head down for a cloud, make a turn on instruments, and come out on top, ready for a pass.

Below, the weather over the sea had closed down to 1000 feet and quarter mile visibility, and consequently the four plane patrol started back. Coming out of a rain squall, the P-400's were attacked by a half dozen Zeros and their formation torn apart. Two of the pilots, Lts R E Wythes and R. E. Chilson, did not return.

Altogether four P-400's were lost, two pilots later making their way to Henderson on foot, after bailing out. Five of the seven returning planes were out of commission by reason of bullet holes. Against these losses, the 67th was credited with four kills. The Marines got 14.

That did not end the day's activities. At 1500, 17 F4F's and a dozen SBD's, with two escorting B-17's, arrived at Guadalcanal. Thirty minutes later, with 18 planes on Henderson, the Japanese dive bombers arrived. Ignoring the tempting array on the air strip, they caught the destroyer Blue a half mile offshore and sank her. Across at Tulagi, the transport Burrows ran aground and, to add to the commotion, nature intervened around 1615 with two earthquakes. That evening the Tokyo Express ran again, giving Henderson a shelling. Through all this, after but 4 days of operations at full strength, only three of the original 14 P-400's survived in commission on 1 September.

The air battle of 30 August proved that the P-400's on Guadalcanal could not be used as interceptors. In addition to the planes shot down, six returned to Henderson that afternoon riddled beyond repair. The 67th had early been aware of the limitations of its planes and the reports of the action of the 30th convinced General Harmon. No Army or Marine aircraft then extant was entirely satisfactory against the Zero, but the P-400's possessed a peculiar disadvantage in that they were unable to reach the altitude customarily employed by enemy bombers. Rate of climb was low, wing load excessive, and the engine extremely vulnerable to hits in the glycol cooling system.

The P-400 had been flown under far from optimum conditions, but its pilots were skilled, and courageous, as Major Smith, commanding VMF-223, later testified. General Harmon immediately asked Washington for P-38 and P-47 squadrons, or the P-40 with the Rolls-Royce Merlin engine. Meanwhile, since the P-39 type was his mainstay in the theater, the General cast about for ways of improving its performance. He considered that since .50 caliber bullets neatly disintegrated the Zeros, the 37MM nose cannon in the P-39 could be replaced by either a .50 caliber machine gun or a 20MM cannon. This would have the effect of lightening

the plane.

Washington showed equal concern over the record of the 67th and the specific dictum of General Vandegrift that the P-400 was "entirely unsuitable" for operations on Guadalcanal. But the war had to be fought with weapons presently available and considerable numbers of P-39s were on their way to Pacific theaters. The recommended solution was stripping the fighter to lighten it. By the end of September, the P-39K minus 650 pounds of its original equipment had achieved a service ceiling of 27,000 feet, and the

Bell aircraft's performance against the Japanese eventually reached heights far above that of the old P-400's, the "klunkers," as the 67th dubbed them.

The P-400 as an Attack Plane Meantime General Vandegrift at Guadalcanal faced the immediate problem, he had the undesirable aircraft on hand and had to find a use for them. The planes possessed good defensive armor plate and armament consisting of a 20MM cannon, two .50 cali-

ber and four .30 caliber machine guns; they could each carry one bomb and their engines operated reasonably well at low altitudes. The Japanese, moreover, had shown no extraordinary talent with flak. As an attack plane, then, the P-400 could use its bomb on shipping and shore installations, its 20MM cannon on landing barges, and its machine guns on enemy personnel.

About 20 miles east of Henderson, the Japanese held the native village of Tasimboko in some strength. The Marines planned to bring fresh troops from Tulagi, effect a landing east of Tasimboko, strike the position from the rear, and retire the same day. In preparation for this operation, the P-400's tried their wings in a new employment.

On the night of 1 September, two enemy transports and two destroyers lay off Tasimboko discharging troops. Foul weather having prevented the SBD's from interfering during darkness, Captain Brannon with five P-400's took off at 0600 to attack landing parties in the area. None were found, but five beached landing craft were sighted. At 0800 four more Army fighters took off; they dropped 500lb bombs on the village and strafed both the landing craft and the village. Back on Henderson, Tojo Time was imminent, and rather than sit out the attack, the P-400's returned to Tasimboko. In their absence 18 bombers, escorted by 21 Zeros, came over Henderson. The F4F-4's reduced their number by three bombers and four fighters, but the P-400's returned to a cratered runway, a burned-out hangar, three fired SBD's, burning gas and ammunition dumps, and a good many delayed-action bombs.

Such expeditions became routine with the 67th, which began to be known as the "Jagdstaffel." The mechanics could always produce a pair of "klunkers" to go out and work over the Japanese. At first, the pilots chose their own targets, landing barges or supply dumps. Later they were sent out to bomb and strafe in the inlets and coves of Santa Isabel, where the enemy maintained jumping off points for reinforcing Guadalcanal, and their bombing eventu-



*Export versions of the P-39s awaiting transfer to Russia*