



# **Every Day a Nightmare: American Pursuit Pilots in the Defense of Java, 1941-1942 (Williams-Ford Texas A&M University Military History Series)**

*William H. Bartsch*

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In December 1941, the War Department sent two transports and a freighter carrying 103 P-40 fighters and their pilots to the Philippines to bolster Gen. Douglas MacArthur's Far East Air Force. They were then diverted to Australia, with new orders to ferry the P-40s to the Philippines from Australia through the Dutch East Indies. But on the same day as the second transport reached its destination on January 12, 1942, the first of the key refueling stops in the East Indies fell to rapidly advancing Japanese forces, resulting in a break in their ferry route and another change in their orders.

This time the pilots would fly their aircraft to Java to participate in the desperate Allied defense of that ultimate Japanese objective. Except for the pilots from the Philippines, almost all of the other pilots eventually assigned to the five provisional pursuit squadrons ordered to Java were recent graduates of flying school with just a few hours on the P-40. Only forty-three of them made it to their assigned destination; the rest suffered accidents in Australia, were shot down over Bali and Darwin, or were lost in the sinking of the USS *Langley* as it carried thirty-two of them to Java. Even those who did reach the secret field on Java wondered if they had been sacrificed for no purpose. As the Japanese air assault intensified daily, the Allied defense collapsed. Only eleven Japanese aircraft fell to the P-40s.

Author William H. Bartsch has pored through personal diaries and memoirs of the participants, cross-checking these primary sources against Japanese aerial combat records of the period and supplementing them with official records and other American, Dutch, and Australian accounts. Bartsch's thorough and meticulous research yields a narrative that situates the Java pursuit pilots' experiences within the context of the overall strategic situation in the early days of the Pacific theater.

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