

Profile provided by Warbird Alley, with permission of Buck Wyndham

PROFILE: Lockheed P-38 Lightning

(Variants/Other Names: F-4; F-5)

HISTORY:

In 1937, the US Army Air Force expressed a need for a new high-altitude fighter design. The Lockheed Company answered the call with their first military airplane, the **XP-38**, which first flew on 27 January 1939. This experimental prototype was shortly followed by full-scale production of the **P-38D**, which was equipped with one 37mm gun and four 12.7mm (0.5 inch) guns in the nose.

At the time of its initial delivery to the USAAF in the fall of 1941, the Lightning was the fastest fighter in the American inventory. 143 P-38Ds were also delivered to the Royal Air Force just after Pearl Harbor, but due to an American ban on the export of turbochargers, the contract was cancelled and the aircraft were returned. During its production run, over a dozen model variants of the P-38 were built. Most changes from the early D-model involved improved armament or increased load-carrying capability. The most-built version was the **P-38L**, of which 3923 were built. (It is a little-known fact that a small number of Lightnings were built under license by the Consolidated-Vultee Corporation. 2,000 airplanes were contracted, but production was halted on VJ-Day after only 113 had been built.)

The Lightning gained fame in the hands of Army Major Richard I. Bong, whose 40 aerial victories were scored in the P-38, making him the highest-scoring American ace of the war. P-38 pilots were also credited with the downing of Japanese Admiral Yamamoto.

The final variants of the Lightning design, the **F-4** and **F-5**, were photo-reconnaissance models used in Europe and the Far East. Pilots loved the airplane for its maneuverability, high-altitude capabilities and long flight endurance, which could reach almost 12 hours with a full external fuel load.

NICKNAMES:

Fork-Tailed Devil; Pathfinder (P-38L carrying a nose-mounted Mickey radar.)

SPECIFICATIONS (P-38J):

Engine: Two 1475hp Allison V-1710-111/113 V-12 piston engines

Weight: Empty 12,800 lbs., Max Takeoff 21,600 lbs.

Wing Span: 52ft. 0in.

Length: 37ft. 10in.

Height: 9ft. 10in.

Performance:

Maximum Speed at 25,000ft: 414 mph

Service Ceiling: 44,000 ft

Normal Range: 450 miles

Armament:

- One 20-mm cannon in nose
- Four 12.7mm (0.5 inch) machine guns
- Two 1600 lb. bombs

NUMBER BUILT: 10,037

NUMBER STILL AIRWORTHY: ~7