

Knockout by Torokina

*SOUTHWEST PACIFIC AND CARRIER AIR SUPPORT*¹

On 23 February 1942, a month after its fall to Japanese landing forces, Rabaul was bombed by six B-17s of the Fifth Air Force. This attack, mounted from Townsville, Australia, was the first of a series of raids by small groups of Allied heavy bombers on the enemy base. Be-

¹ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *ComAirPac Oct-Nov43 Analyses*; CTF 38 Rept of First Rabaul Strike—5Nov43, dtd 8Dec43; CTF 38 Rept of Second Strike on Shipping in the Rabaul Area—11Nov43, dtd 8Dec43; CTG 50.3 AR of attack on enemy ships at Rabaul and subsequent enemy aircraft raid on TG 50.3, dtd 9Dec43 (all in COA, NHD); *SE Area NavOps—III*; *SE Area Nav-AirOps—IV*; Lt Roger Pineau, USNR, "Summary of Enemy Air Raids on Rabaul," 12Oct43–29Feb44, n.d., compiled for the Morison naval history project from Japanese documents; Maj Harris G. Warren, USAAF, "The Fifth Air Force in the Conquest of the Bismarck Archipelago, November 1943–March 1944," dtd Jan46 (AAF HistStudy No. 43, USAF Archives, Maxwell AFB), hereafter Warren, "FifthAF in the Bismarcks;" Craven and Cate, *Guadalcanal to Saipan*; Halsey and Bryan, *Admiral Halsey's Story*; George C. Kenney, *General Kenney Reports, A Personal History of the Pacific War* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1949), hereafter Kenney, *Reports*; Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier*; George Odgers, *Air War Against Japan 1943–1945—Australia in the War of 1939–1945 (Air)* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1957), hereafter Odgers, *RAAF Against Japan*; USSBS, *Campaign Against Rabaul*.

tween March and August, SWPA planes dropped an average of 130 tons of bombs a month on targets at Rabaul. On the 7th of August, 18 Flying Fortresses took off from Port Moresby, climbed over the 13,000-foot barrier of the Owen Stanley Mountains, and flew across the Solomon Sea to strike Vunakanau Field in support of the Marines landing at Guadalcanal. Frequently thereafter, American fortresses and Australian Catalinas bombed the airfields and crowded harbors at Rabaul in order to harass the Japanese and inflict as much damage as possible.

Only a relatively small number of Allied planes had enough range to participate in Rabaul raids, and those few were husbanded carefully by scheduling most strikes at night. Before any really sizeable daylight air attack could be launched, bases closer to the enemy stronghold had to be taken to serve as home fields and staging points for fighter escorts and light and medium bombers. Consequently, the interest of MacArthur's planners in acquiring airfields on the eastern slopes of the Owen Stanleys and on Woodlark and Kiriwina was fully as great as the eagerness of Halsey's staff to move into the New Georgias. Both area commanders wanted a clearer shot at Rabaul with longer times over target and more protection for bombers.

In part, the heavy losses of Japanese naval aircraft in the spring of 1943 during the Bismarck Sea battle, the *I Go*

fiasco, and costly attacks on Guadalcanal in June opened the way for CART-WHEEL advances. During the summer, while AirSols planes beat off enemy aircraft attacking the New Georgia beachheads and raided the northern Solomons in their turn, General Kenney's Allied Air Forces concentrated on cutting down Japanese Army air strength on New Guinea. Rabaul, in a sense, had a breathing spell, but it was only a lull before a devastating storm broke.

The first telling blow of the air offensive that eventually neutralized Rabaul was struck on 12 October 1943. On that date, in the first of a series of raids planned in support of the pending Bougainville operation, Allied Air Forces mounted the largest strike of the war against Rabaul. General Kenney later stated that every SWPA plane "that was in commission, and that could fly that far, was on the raid"²—87 B-24s, 114 B-25s, 12 RAAF Beaufighters, 125 P-38s, and 11 weather and reconnaissance planes. Operational accidents and mechanical failures on the long haul from takeoff to target forced 50 of the fighters and bombers to turn back, but the successive attacking waves had strength to spare to overwhelm the 32 Zekes that rose to intercept.

The Mitchells came first, speeding low over the waters of St. George's Channel to avoid discovery by Japanese coast-watchers and radar. At the mouth of the Warangoi River, the nine squadrons of B-25s and their cover of P-38s roared inland just above the jungle to strafe enemy planes at Vunakanau and Rapopo and to leave a deadly litter of 20-pound parachute fragmentation (parafrag) bombs

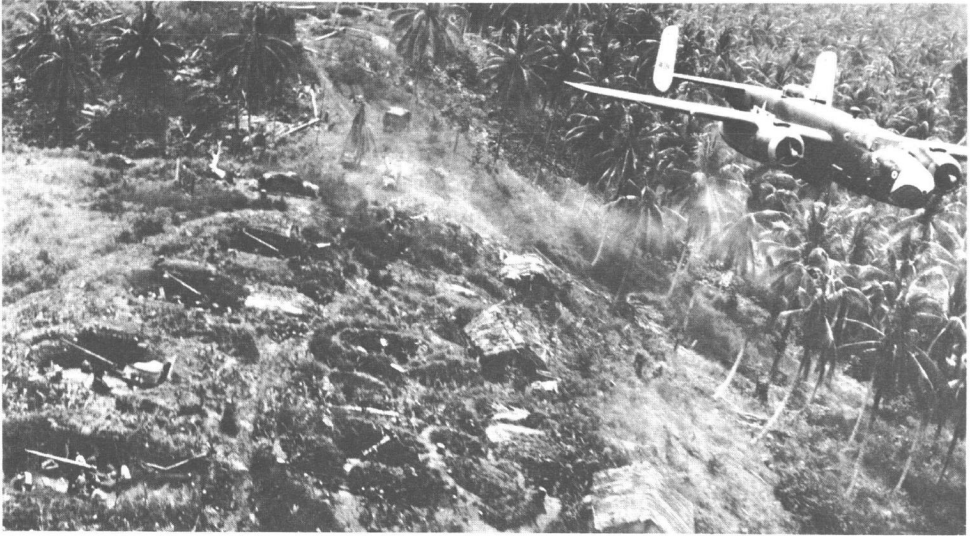
in their trace. This initial attack surprised the Japanese, and there was little effective opposition to the Americans. The RAAF Beaufighters coming in behind the Mitchells were not so lucky. Delayed in their takeoff from Dobodura by the cloud of dust raised by the B-25s, the Australian light bombers missed rendezvous with their escort over Kiriwina and had to fight their way through Zekes to complete their mission of strafing Tobera. After the Beaufighters completed their attack on the airfield, the Liberator squadrons, each plane carrying six 1,000-pound bombs, struck at shipping in Simpson Harbor. Happily claiming a staggering total of damage—one B-24 squadron reported 48 hits for 48 bombs dropped—the big bombers got back to Port Moresby after losing only two of their number. The total of Allied planes shot down during the day's action was five.

While the Japanese lost nothing like the "extremely optimistic"³ figures for ship and plane losses estimated from the original claims of returning aircrews, the actual destruction wrought was significant. One 6,000-ton transport and several smaller ships were sunk, three destroyers and a bevy of small craft were damaged. Japanese records indicate that two of their interceptors were downed⁴ and 45 planes destroyed or damaged on the ground. Allied aerial photographs indicated a much higher figure for enemy aircraft losses, although one smaller than the 177 of the first excited claims.

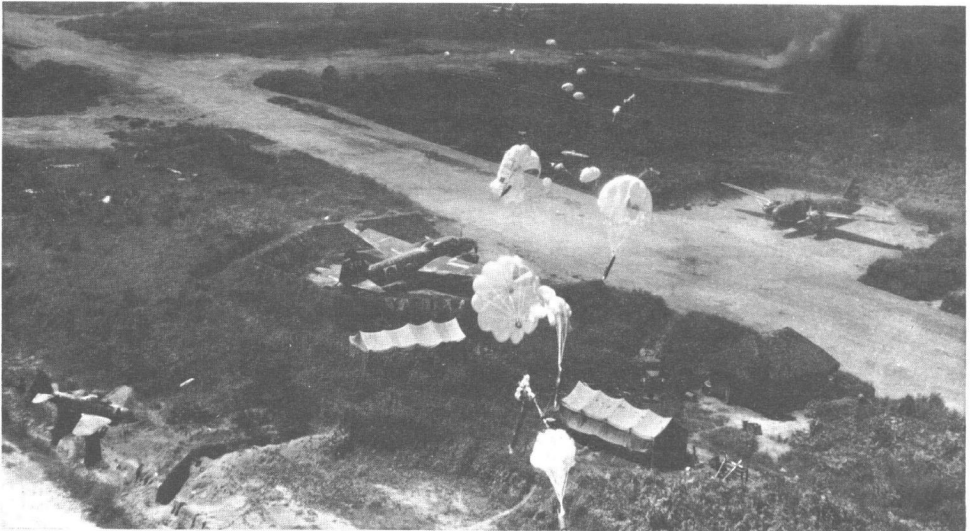
³ Craven and Cate, *Guadalcanal to Saipan*, p. 321.

⁴ Recent Japanese research indicates that four, rather than two fighters were lost, but disclaims the damage to the destroyers. *Japanese Air Comments*.

² Kenney, *Reports*, p. 313.



JAPANESE ANTIAIRCRAFT CREWS abandon their 75mm guns at Rabaul during strafing runs by Army Air Forces B-25s. (USAF A-26636AC)



PARAFRAG BOMBS drop toward Japanese Bettys in revetments at Vunakanau field during a B-25 attack in October 1943. (USAF 25899AC)

On 13 October, a heavy schedule of follow-up attacks was launched with an early dawn raid on shipping in Simpson Harbor by a squadron of RAAF Beaufort torpedo bombers. Visibility was poor during the Australians' attack, and the weather changed for the worse soon after, forcing 70 heavy bombers and 100 fighters already en route to turn back 150 miles from their objective. Continuing bad weather put off the next large strike until the 18th, and then only part of the attacking force got through, 54 B-25s that flashed in under a 200-foot ceiling of storm clouds to hit Tobera, Rapopo, and shipping in the harbor. Again Allied damage claims were unusually high and admitted Japanese losses questionably low. Kenney's flyers told of shooting down 10-12 planes and destroying 41 more on the ground and of sinking a small freighter and a corvette; Japanese records admit the loss of three interceptors and a 100-ton submarine chaser, while claiming nine B-25s against the actual loss of three.

The disparity of claim and counterclaim continues through the reports of 100-plane SWPA raids on 23, 24, and 25 October. More than 175 enemy aircraft were reported as destroyed or heavily damaged in these attacks, while only five Allied fighters and bombers were shot down. The Japanese admitted loss or damage to about two-fifths of the number of planes claimed, and, in their turn, decided that they had made 36 sure kills in the same three days of air battles. Regardless of Allied exaggerations, the actual Japanese losses were high, and the combat effectiveness of the *Eleventh Air Fleet* plummeted.

On 29 October, General Whitehead's 1st Air Task Force, which was the controlling headquarters for the SWPA attacks on

Rabaul, sent 46 Liberators with an escort of 57 Lightnings against Vunakana, where they reported destroying 9 planes on the ground and 16 in the air. Massive attacks planned for the next two days to support the Cape Torokina landings were grounded by unfavorable weather reports, and the dreary picture looked the same on 2 November. Two reconnaissance planes discovered, however, that the sky was clearing over the target, and that Rabaul's harbor was jammed with ships and its airfields held 237 planes of all types. The planned raid was quickly rescheduled.

Eighty B-25s with 80 P-38s were en route to the tempting target by 1100. Two squadrons of Lightnings led the way in a fighter sweep of the harbor, and were closely followed by four squadrons of Mitchells which strafed antiaircraft positions ringing Simpson's shore. This suppressive attack opened the path for the rest of the Mitchells, 41 in all, to hit shipping from a new approach route by swinging in over Crater Peninsula, North Daughter, and Rabaul town. Attacking through a frantic swarm of enemy fighters, the B-25s dropped to mast-top height to skip-bomb and strafe in the scramble of wildly dodging ships. Cruisers and destroyers fired their big guns into the water to send up towering columns of spray in the path of the attacking planes, while antiaircraft batteries fired without letup.

The damage claims that came out of this hotly-contested fight were high as usual, but the actual destruction was high, too. Two merchant ships and a mine sweeper were sunk, and a 10,000-ton oiler plus a number of smaller ships were hit. The Japanese admitted losing 20 planes, and the Allied Air Forces had eight B-25s and nine P-38s shot down. In General Kenney's opinion, the Japanese planes his

attack force encountered on 2 November "put up the toughest fight the Fifth Air Force encountered in the whole war."⁵

The increased savagery of the air battles over Rabaul was easily accounted for—reinforcements had arrived. Admiral Koga of the *Combined Fleet* had launched Operation *Ro* and sent 173 planes of the *1st Carrier Squadron, Third Fleet* to reinforce the 200-odd aircraft that Admiral Kusaka still had in his *Eleventh Air Fleet*. Koga's move was a desperate one, a gamble that immobilized his carriers at Truk while an all-out attempt was made to check the Allied advance into the northern Solomons. Operation *Ro*'s start was put off from mid-October to the end of the month when the *Combined Fleet* commander sortied from Truk with his main body, expecting to crush a U.S. invasion attempt in the Marshalls. A week's fruitless stay in Eniwetok's spacious lagoon convinced Koga that his intelligence was faulty, and after the enemy force returned to its base in the Carolines, the *1st Air Squadron* began staging into Rabaul's fields through Kavieng. As a result of the delay occasioned by the false alarm, the Japanese carrier aircraft reached the New Britain stronghold just as the Bougainville operation got underway.

Immediately caught in a swirl of air battles over Cape Torokina and Rabaul, many of the *Third Fleet's* Zekes, Kates, and Vals and the harried survivors of Kusaka's air groups fell victim to the guns of AirSols rampaging fighters, Kenney's raiding groups, and American carrier planes. On 5 November, for the first time

in the war, U.S. carriers launched a strike against Rabaul.⁶

As soon as Admiral Koga learned of the American landing at Bougainville, he determined to reinforce the *Eighth Fleet* ships at Rabaul. Early on 4 November, AirSols Liberators on patrol over the Bismarck Sea sighted and attacked two enemy convoys, one a part of this reinforcement effort. Two oilers and two transports were damaged. About noon, a B-24 spotted 19 Japanese vessels, including 6 heavy cruisers, headed for the northern entrance to St. George's Channel. As soon as the patrol plane reported its find, Admiral Halsey determined to attack the enemy ships. He meant to stave off the probability of another night sea battle off Cape Torokina, one which Admiral Merrill's battered cruisers and destroyers, then refitting at Guadalcanal, could not possibly win. The threat posed by the Japanese heavy cruisers, Halsey considered, "was the most desperate emergency that confronted me in my entire term as COMSOPAC."⁷

Although ComSoPac expected that its "air groups would be cut to pieces,"⁸ he ordered the carrier task force (TF 38), which had supported the Bougainville landings, to attack the concentration of shipping at Rabaul. As he later dramatically stated his motive, "we could not let the men at Torokina be wiped out while

⁵ Kenney, *Reports*, p. 319. The most recent breakdown of Japanese losses indicate that 4 Zekes were shot down and that 11 other planes were destroyed or heavily damaged on the ground. *Japanese Air Comments*.

⁶ A carrier task force built around the *Lexington* was scheduled to hit Rabaul on 21 February 1942, but it was discovered and attacked while it was still 250 miles east of New Britain. Although the Japanese planes were beaten off, it was decided that the invaluable carrier should not be risked once surprise was lost, and the raid was called off.

⁷ Halsey and Bryan, *Admiral Halsey's Story*, p. 181.

⁸ *Ibid.*

we stood by and wrung our hands.”⁹ The carriers, *Saratoga* and *Princeton*, and their escorts were refueling near Rennell Island when the attack order was received on the evening of the 4th. Streaking north at 27 knots, the task force reached its launch position, a point 57 miles southwest of Cape Torokina, at 0900 the next morning. Rear Admiral Frederick C. Sherman, commanding TF 38, ordered into the attack virtually every plane—52 Hellcats, 23 Avengers, and 22 Dauntlesses—that his carriers could fly off. Combat air patrol over the task force was flown by AirSols Navy F6Fs operating from Barakoma.

Halsey's target priority was cruisers first, destroyers second, and Sherman's orders to his strike leader were “not to spread his attacks too thin over too many targets, but to concentrate sufficient forces to do serious damage to as many ships, particularly cruisers, as possible.”¹⁰ Two hours after take-off, the American planes flying over St. George's Channel sighted their objective, a cluster of 40–50 vessels in Simpson Harbor. The carrier bombers turned to the attack, roaring across Crater Peninsula, as the Hellcats stuck close overhead to ward off some 70 enemy fighters that had risen to intercept. As the dive bombers maneuvered to attack, the TBFs slipped down low to make their torpedo runs. The SBDs struck first in screaming dives that concentrated on the eight heavy cruisers in the violently dodging covey of warships and auxiliaries below them. As soon as the Dauntlesses had released their bombs, the Avengers cut in among the Japanese ships like wolves in

a sheep herd—only these sheep could fight back. The antiaircraft fire was fierce and unceasing; one cruiser was so plagued by TBFs that it fired its main battery guns at them. Speeding through the tempest of flak and smoke, the carrier bombers rendezvoused and headed for home. The Hellcat escort, which had kept formation above the harbor during the attack, now closed the rear of the SBDs and TBFs and fought off the Zekes that tried to follow, refusing to be drawn off into individual dog fights.

Amazingly, the strike group returned with relatively small losses: five F6Fs, four TBFs, and one SBD were missing. Twenty Hellcats, nine Avengers, and eight Dauntlesses were damaged, about one out of five seriously. What was TF 38's score against the Japanese? The returning bomber crews figured they had made certain or very probable hits on six heavy cruisers, two light cruisers, and four destroyers. Twenty-five enemy planes were claimed as shot down in combat, and another 25 were listed as probable kills. While the Japanese admitted losing only an improbable four planes in postwar assessments, they confirmed the heavy damage to the warships. No ships were sunk, but four heavy cruisers were crippled, three of them severely, and two light cruisers and two destroyers were also hit. Most of the destruction was caused by the SBDs; only two American torpedoes found a mark. Whatever the exact toll of damage, the raid can only be considered an unqualified success, since it accomplished its purpose. As a result of his costly lesson in air superiority, Admiral Koga decided not to risk his heavy cruisers in an attack on the Torokina beachhead and ordered his ships back to Truk.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ CTF 38 Rept—5Nov43, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

At noon on 5 November, according to plan, a follow-up raid by SWPA Liberators reached Rabaul, found the airfields deserted, and bombed the town instead. The P-38 escort for the B-24s saw a number of enemy fighters, but the Japanese pilots steered clear of the American formations. Most of Admiral Kusaka's aircraft were out looking for Sherman's carriers, and, at 1255, the *Saratoga* and *Princeton* were sighted as they were recovering their last planes. By the time a flight of 18 torpedo-laden Kates arrived on the scene at dusk, the carriers were long gone. Attacked instead were an LCT, an LCI gunboat, and a PT boat proceeding from Torokina to the Treasurys. The little ships weathered a torpedo attack, even shot down one of the bombers, and limped back to Torokina still afloat. The returning enemy aircrews claimed that they had blown up and sunk a large carrier, set a medium carrier ablaze which later sank, and sunk two heavy cruisers and a light cruiser or destroyer!

By crediting the wild lies of the Kate crews, the Japanese fostered a comforting belief that they had come out far ahead in 5 November's air battles with the American naval planes. The self-delusion could not have lasted more than a week. A second carrier strike, stronger than the first, was in the offing, with destructive raids by SWPA planes spanning the interlude. Kenney's bombers, 26 B-24s with an escort of 60 P-38s, hit Rapopo on 7 November, dropping 167 1,000-pound bombs on its runways and dispersal areas. Five of the Lightnings were lost in running battles with Japanese interceptors, and returning AAF pilots claimed to have shot down 22 of the enemy Zekes. Between the 7th and the 11th, the frustrating barrier of storms that so often screened Gazelle

Peninsula from Allied raiders caused General Whitehead's headquarters to cancel or divert to other targets several more large-scale daylight attacks mounted from New Guinea bases. RAAF Beauforts and American Liberators continued to get through at night, but not in any sizeable numbers. The Rapopo strike of 7 November proved to be the last daylight raid on Rabaul carried out by General Kenney's flyers.

On 11 November, Admiral Halsey scheduled a heavy carrier attack against shipping in Simpson Harbor. He asked that land-based bombers from the Southwest Pacific Area hit Rabaul's airfields and ordered ComAirSols to send a powerful strike group of Thirteenth Air Force B-24s to bomb enemy vessels as they tried to flee the attack of the Navy's dive and torpedo bombers. On this occasion, the planes of three more carriers, the *Essex*, *Independence*, and *Bunker Hill* of Rear Admiral Alfred E. Montgomery's TG 50.3, were available to reinforce Admiral Sherman's air groups. The attack plan called for the SWPA bombers to hit first, with the *Saratoga-Princeton* planes coming in next, followed by those from Montgomery's carriers. The AirSols Liberators were to arrive on the scene and make their bombing runs as the SBDs and TBFs flushed the Japanese ships from their anchorages.

Bad weather caused the attack plans to miscarry in part; only 13 of General Kenney's B-24s were able to break through the night's storm front and reach their target, Lakunai field. Admiral Sherman's task force arrived at its launch position southeast of the Green Islands at 0530 and began flying off its strike group immediately. Again TF 38 made a maximum effort, sending up 36 F6Fs, 23 SBDs,

and 15 TBFs, while AirSols Navy fighters flew combat air patrol over the carriers, landing on the flight decks for fuel and servicing as necessary. At Rabaul, dense cloud cover obscured most of the harbor, and the carrier planes sighted only a cruiser and four destroyers through the openings below them. These they attacked as the enemy ships, guns blazing, scurried for the protection of a rain squall. Several bomb and torpedo hits were claimed as certain or probable, but poor visibility prevented any sure assessment. Japanese air opposition was light, and the carrier planes returned to their ships after losing two planes in the attack, the same number that they claimed of the enemy.

A little over an hour after Admiral Sherman's carriers began launching, TG 50.3 flew off the first of its strike group from a position west of Bougainville. Each of Admiral Montgomery's carriers kept eight Hellcats on board to reinforce the AirSols combat air patrol, and about 165 planes in all were dispatched, 23 of them brand-new SB2Cs (Curtiss-Wright Helldivers), a heavier-armed and faster replacement for the SBD. Like the TF 38 raiders before them, the second group of carrier planes found cloud cover heavy over Simpson Harbor and shipping elusive. Japanese interceptors, alerted by the earlier attack, were aloft and waiting, and the American planes had to fight their way in to their targets and out again. Enemy antiaircraft fire or the guns of Zekes accounted for seven fighters, three dive bombers, and three torpedo bombers. In payment for these losses, the carrier aircrews claimed two destroyers sunk, several other warships damaged, and 35 Japanese planes downed. As the naval pilots headed for home, 42 AirSols B-24s

attacked on schedule, but the results of high-level bombing through fleeting cloud gaps at dodging targets went unobserved.

Admiral Halsey had directed that, if possible, a second strike be mounted by both carrier forces, but Admiral Sherman was forced to withdraw his ships to the south as soon as his air group returned. The escorting destroyers were low on fuel, as zero wind conditions had forced the task force to operate at continuous full speed to launch and land planes of the striking force and the AirSols cover. The next morning, when TF 38 was well away from the threat of enemy air attack, the carriers fueled the destroyers for the run back to Espiritu Santo.

After his planes returned from their first strike on Rabaul, Admiral Montgomery was ready to launch a second attack. The Japanese, who followed the American planes back to their carriers, had different ideas. The enemy reconnaissance planes reported the task group's location, and, at noon, Admiral Kusaka sent out a strike group of 67 Zekes, 27 Vals, 14 Kates, and a small flight of Bettys. Marine Corsairs of VMF-212 and -221 had taken their turn on station over the task group earlier in the day, but when the Japanese approached, the combat air patrol was Corsairs and Hellcats from two shore-based Navy squadrons. Radar on the *Independence* detected the first enemy plane 115 miles away, and when the striking force was 80 miles out, the combat air patrol was vectored to intercept; at 40 miles the enemy was sighted and attacked. In the running fight that ensued, the American fighters were credited with shooting down 15 planes.

At 1355, as the Japanese launched their first dive bombing attack, they flew right

into the midst of 64 Hellcats and 23 Avengers which had been launched to take part in TG 50.3's second attack on Rabaul. In a wild, confused battle all over the sky, punctuated by heavy and accurate anti-aircraft fire, the Americans so harassed the enemy that attacks on the carriers were uncoordinated and not pressed home with resolution. After the last Japanese plane drew off, AirSols fighters landed on the carriers for fuel and servicing before heading back to Barakoma. By the time the land-based planes had cleared the flight decks, it was too late to complete a second strike on Rabaul before dark. Admiral Montgomery cancelled the attack, recovered aircraft, and retired.

The cloud cover at Rabaul had helped keep down Japanese naval losses. One destroyer was sunk, a light cruiser and a destroyer were badly damaged, and three other warships were torn up by strafing bombers. If the ship losses were light, considering the weight of the American attacks, the enemy plane losses were not. Admiral Kusaka lost 17 Vals, 14 Kates, 8 Zekes, and several Bettys in the day's battles, nothing like the 111 planes the carrier aircrews claimed, but still a crippling toll.

On 12 November, as the American carriers were withdrawing, unharmed except in the imaginations of enemy pilots, Admiral Koga ordered the *Third Fleet* planes at Rabaul back to Truk. Although the Emperor issued an Imperial Rescript praising the results of the *Ro* Operation—the bogus damage claims were truly impressive—Japanese plane losses “had put the carrier air force in a position where further combat would rob it of even a skeleton force around which to rebuild.”¹¹

¹¹ *SE Area NavOps—III*, p. 25.

In less than two weeks of furious action, the *1st Air Squadron* had lost 43 of its 82 Zekes, 38 of 45 Vals, 34 of 40 Kates, and all 6 of its reconnaissance planes. In feeble replacement for the carrier aircraft, Admiral Koga diverted 26 Vals from the Marshalls air garrison to Rabaul.

With his carrier plane reinforcements gone, and his own *Eleventh Air Fleet's* strength down to less than 200 planes of all types and states of repair, Admiral Kusaka could do little to interfere with Bougainville operations. Except for small-scale night harassing attacks on the beachhead, enemy air attacks virtually ceased after mid-November. At the same time, Allied air strikes on Rabaul also fell off drastically in size and number. Australian Beauforts were the only aircraft to attack the enemy fortress for a month, as AirSols planes concentrated on patrol and close support missions at Cape Torokina, and the Allied Air Forces hit targets on New Guinea and western New Britain. During the comparative lull, both sides were preparing for the final phase of the battle for control of the air over Rabaul, the AirSols assault mounted from fields on Bougainville.

*FIGHTER SWEEPS AND ESCORTS*¹²

With the Bougainville beachhead well established and a new phase of the CARTWHEEL campaign pending, AirSols again had a change in commanders. In

¹² Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *ComAirPac Dec43 Analysis*; *SoPac ACI Repts*; IntelSect, SoPacFor, The Air Assault on Rabaul 17Dec43–19Feb44, n.d., hereafter *Air Assault on Rabaul*; CTG 37.2 ARs of First, Second, and Third Kavieng Strikes, 25Dec43–4Jan44, dtd 1Feb44 (COA, NHD);

keeping with Admiral Halsey's policy of rotating the top job among the participating services, General Twining's relief was a Marine. On 20 November 1943, General Mitchell took over as ComAirSols, retaining his positions as Commanding General, MASP and 1st MAW. With Mitchell's advent, there was no change in the heads of major tactical commands and little in the staff of AirSols. Colonel O'Neill and General Matheny, both recently promoted, continued to lead the Strike and Bomber Commands, respectively, while Marine Colonel William O. Brice, who had taken over on 24 October, ran Fighter Command. Brigadier General Field Harris, as ComAirNorSols, was slated to direct air operations originating from Bougainville once its fields were open for use.

The principal employment of AirSols squadrons in late November and early December was the support of operations in the northern Solomons. Only a small portion of the missions flown were in direct support of the troops at Cape Torokina; the majority of strikes were sent against Japanese bases elsewhere on Bougainville or on neighboring islands. Sea traffic between Rabaul and the enemy garrisons in the Solomons thinned to an insignificant trickle, as virtually every plane and pilot

in AirSols had a hand in a successful and continual barge hunt.

Not only were the waters around Bougainville unsafe for the Japanese, but the air over the sea was equally unhealthy. Bettys on reconnaissance south of New Britain were shot down with such regularity that their patrols had to be curtailed drastically and halted altogether eventually. The vulnerable bombers had once carried two or three pilots in a crew of eight men, now only one pilot was risked in a cut-down crew of five or six men. Although Admiral Kusaka asked for additional medium bombers for patrol missions, he was turned down; none were available for the Southeast Area.¹³

With his search sector south of Rabaul closed to all except night-flying scouts and an occasional lucky daylight reconnaissance pilot who escaped the eager AirSols hunters, the Japanese air commander had to rely on radar and coastwatchers for warning of Allied raids. The *Eleventh Air Fleet* had 11 radar sets in the Rabaul-Kavieng area with a maximum interception range of 90 miles, and a like number of smaller sets stripped from aircraft which could pick up planes at 72 miles. All these stations were in operation during the height of the air battles over Rabaul.

Gazelle Peninsula was guarded from every approach. If an AirSols strike group took a course that brought it near northern Bougainville, radar on Buka could pick up the planes and give Rabaul 50-60 minutes warning. If the raiders swung west over the Solomon Sea to come in from the south, radar on the peninsula's east coast spotted them and provided a half an hour's notice of impending attack. Similarly, enemy interceptors had a 30-

ComAirNorSols FtrComd MissionRepts, 17Dec43-26Jan44, hereafter *FtrComd Missions*; IntelSect. MASP, FMF, The Combat Strategy and Tactics of Maj Gregory Boyington, USMCR, dtd 19Jan44, reprinted by AirIntelGru, DivNavIntel, CNO, as OpNav-16-V #S42, dtd 15Feb44; AirIntelGru, DivNavIntel, CNO, Interview of Lt Joseph E. Butler, USNR (Op Nav-16-V #E47), dtd 22May44 (COA, NHD), hereafter *Butler Interview*; *SE Area NavOps-III*; *SE Area NavAirOps-V*; Sherrod, *MarAirHist*; Ross, *RNZAF*; USSBS, *Campaign Against Rabaul*.

¹³ *SE Area NavAirOps-IV*, p. 42.

minute alert if Allied planes appeared on the screens of any of the five sets at Cape St. George. When the attackers skirted wide around New Ireland's southern tip and then roared west across the narrow island for Rabaul, radar near Borpop airfield gave 20 minutes alarm. The coverage to the north and west of Rabaul was equally effective and thorough, and the chances for surprise were slim.

The radar sets available to SoPac forces were superior to those used by the Japanese, and the disparity carried over to techniques of radar employment. Not only were enemy planes picked up farther away from their targets, they were also frequently set up for a kill by ground control intercept (GCI) radar working with night fighters. In contrast to the enemy, who by choice or force of circumstance included their aircraft sets in Rabaul's early warning system, AirSols made extensive use of airborne radar for night bombing and interception.

Defending the Bougainville beachhead, the Venturas of VMF(N)-531 and Corsairs of VF(N)-75 proved themselves efficient night fighters. It took a little while before American ground commanders were willing to silence antiaircraft guns in favor of interceptors closing on enemy raiders, but when Kates and Bettys began to flame out of the sky with regularity, the night fighters won enthusiastic acceptance. Unaccountably, Japanese hecklers flew low enough for the Marine Venturas to intercept effectively, and the record of the two night fighter squadrons was about the same despite the Corsair's superior flight performance. The number of planes shot down by means of radar interception was not large—6 were claimed by VF(N)-75 during 4 months in the combat area and 12 by

VMF(N)-531 during 10 months—but the effect was all that could be desired. The Japanese quickly grew chary of risking their planes in areas protected by the GCI-night fighter teams.

During the period when the Navy and Marine night fighters were winning their spurs over Cape Torokina, tension was mounting throughout AirSols command as the plans for the pending assault on Rabaul took shape. The progress of the Seabees working on the airfields within the IMAC perimeter was avidly followed not only at Allied headquarters but in the squadrons themselves. AirSols veterans were already familiar with the tactics that General Mitchell would employ to knock out the enemy base; they had worked effectively in neutralizing Bougainville's airfields and would do so again. The pressure would be constant, destructive, and varied in nature.

The fighter plane was the key to the successful prosecution of the AirSols offensive. As escorts, the fighters made large-scale bombing raids feasible, particularly by SBDs and TBFs, which were much more vulnerable to enemy attack than the heavily-armed B-24s and B-25s. Operating independently of bombers, fighter formations could range at will over Japanese airfields, challenging enemy interceptors to fight. This tactic, the fighter sweep, was honed to a fine edge at Kahili, where the marauding squadrons based at Munda, Ondonga, Segi, and Barakoma made steady inroads on enemy strength during missions calculated to clear the sky of Japanese Zekes and Hamps.

For the individual Allied pilot, the risk entailed in taking part in a mission intended to force air combat was considerable. For the Japanese pilot who met the attack, the risk was much greater and

the chance of survival poorer. Even the latest model Zekes were no match for the Corsairs and Hellcats which now predominated among the AirSols fighters, while the Warhawks (Kittyhawks) and Airacobras, and the Lightnings particularly, could hold their own in combat, and, at the proper altitudes, could outperform the Japanese planes. The enemy naval pilots were engaged in a losing battle, and most of them knew it, but they fought on despite a strong sense of impending doom.¹⁴

Apprehensively, the Japanese awaited the completion of the first Allied airfield on Bougainville, knowing it marked the beginning of the SoPac attack on Rabaul. On 9 December, ground crews of VMF-212 and -215 landed in the IMAC beachhead and moved to the Torokina fighter field, where the 71st Naval Construction Battalion was putting the rough finish on its work. The next day, 17 Corsairs of VMF-216 christened the runway for operational use; they were followed in by six SBDs and four SCAT transports with additional personnel and equipment. In a week's time, after extensive preparations were made to fuel and service the hundreds of planes that would stage through Torokina, General Mitchell was ready to launch the first fighter sweep against Rabaul. As sweep leader, ComAirSols choose Major Gregory Boyington, commanding officer of VMF-214, a veteran fighter pilot with 20 enemy planes to his credit, six of them shot down over China during his service as a member of the American Volunteer Group.

At first light on 17 December, a powerful fighter force took off from New Georgia airfields for Bougainville. After

a fueling stop at Torokina, where the pilots received a final briefing on the mission, Boyington in the lead plane of the sweep was again airborne at 0830. In the next 40 minutes, 30 more Marine Corsairs, 23 RNZAF Kittyhawks, and 23 Navy Hellcats joined up over the beachhead and fitted themselves into a ladder-like attack formation.¹⁵ When the Allied fighters arrived over their objective at 1005, only one lonely Rufe floatplane was sighted in the air, but the P-40s flying low in the lead spotted about 40 enemy planes taking off from Lakunai and swept down to intercept. Two Zekes were shot down as they were climbing from the runway, and three more enemy planes were claimed by the New Zealanders in the resulting battle. Other Japanese fighters, 70 in all, took off during the 40 minutes that the Allied planes circled over the harbor, town, and airfields, but few enemy pilots showed any inclination to climb up to the 25,000-30,000-foot heights where the Corsairs and Hellcats awaited them. Boyington, using a radio channel that he knew the Japanese monitored, taunted the enemy to come up and fight but only got an unrewarding response, "Come on down, sucker," for his efforts.¹⁶

In addition to the RNZAF bag of five Zekes, a Navy pilot of VF-33 claimed one of the enemy fighters, and a Marine of Boyington's squadron flamed the unlucky Rufe which had greeted the sweep's arrival. Seven planes, however, were slim pickings, especially when three Kittyhawks were downed, and only one RNZAF pilot was recovered. The Japanese, preoccupied with their air attacks on the

¹⁴ Okumiya, Horikoshi, and Caidin, *Zero!*, p. 302ff.

¹⁵ Actually, 81 planes took off for the sweep but 5 turned back for mechanical reasons.

¹⁶ *FtrComd Missions*, 17Dec43.

Arawe landing force, were little disposed to tangle with such a formidable fighter force so long as the Allied planes did not attack ground targets. On the whole, the results of the first fighter sweep were disappointing.

A curious aspect of the mission on the 17th was that 27 Tonys, a Japanese Army fighter with a distinctive appearance not at all like that of the Zeke family, were sighted. In the following weeks of attacks, hundreds of reports of Tonys were made by AirSols pilots and aircrews who claimed to have engaged and shot down many of the planes. Japanese records, however, agree that the only Army planes at Rabaul in this period were reconnaissance types, and these were present in small numbers. Apparently the reports were the result of a consistent mistake in identification, though what Zeke model got credit for being a Tony is hard to visualize. Whatever their type, the enemy interceptors soon got over the shyness they displayed on the 17th.

General Mitchell's attack plan called for a continuous round of strikes against Rabaul following the opening fighter sweep, but bad weather turned back the raid planned for 18 December. Secondary targets were hit instead, or, as AirSols intelligence officers phrased it: "Rabaul's Japs were blessed and Bougainville's damned when weather prevented rendezvous of the large Liberator strike with fighter escort and alternative targets on Bougainville were taken."¹⁷ On the 19th, 16 B-24s broke through the weather front and attacked shipping in Simpson Harbor and Rabaul town as clouds obscured the primary targets, the airfields. Evidently, the

presence of the big bombers was what was needed to overcome Japanese reluctance to close with Allied fighters. The 50-plane escort was hotly engaged during withdrawal and made a modest claim of having shot down four Zekes; the enemy admitted the loss of five planes, making it almost a unique occasion in the history of such claims. Japanese pilots in their turn got a more usual score, two Corsairs instead of the eight fighters they asked credit for.

AirSols second fighter sweep over Rabaul on 23 December got markedly better results than the first. In response to Major Boyington's conviction that he had had too many planes to control effectively on the 17th, the sweep force was held to 48 fighters. Taking advantage of the Japanese eagerness to intercept and break up bombing raids, Boyington's fighters were scheduled to hit soon after 18 B-24s with a 46-plane escort attacked Rabaul's airfields. When the sweep group arrived on the scene, 25 minutes after the bombing attack began, about 40 Zekes were chasing the retiring bomber formation. Over Cape St. George, the Allied fighters tore into the enemy interceptors and had a field day, claiming 30 Zekes for a loss of three F4Us. Since the F6Fs of the bomber escort were credited with shooting down three planes while losing one of their number, and the bomber crews added their own claim for 6 enemy fighters, the day's total score was 39. In their postwar reconstruction of this air battle, the Japanese recalled losing 6 fighters and accounting for 5 B-24s and 19 fighters.

The discrepancy in figures was duplicated on 24 December when an AirSols attack in the pattern of the previous day was mounted. This time the Liberators concentrated on Vunakanau and the

¹⁷ ComAirSols IntelSummary, 18-19Dec43.

escorts, 16 P-38s and 32 F4Us, shot down 6 Zekes; the trailing fighter sweep, composed of 24 P-40s and 22 F6Fs, accounted for 14 enemy fighters, while losing 7 of their own number over the target. Two RNZAF Venturas on rescue and patrol duty over St. George's Channel during the strike added at least 2 Zekes to raise the day's claims to 22. The Japanese version of the action saw 58 Allied planes go down as only 6 Zekes were lost.

After the combined attack on Christmas Eve, General Mitchell switched back to a week of separately mounted bombing strikes and fighter sweeps. Liberators with heavy escorts struck the airfields on the 25th and 30th, and 49- and 45-plane sweeps were over Rabaul on the 27th and 28th. These forays cost AirSols nine planes, and, in addition, a B-25 that was shot down by antiaircraft fire while it was attacking the radar station near the lighthouse at the tip of Cape St. George. A Dumbo landed and rescued the Mitchell crew from close inshore despite fire from machine guns and artillery. Allied pilots and aircrews claimed to have shot down 74 enemy planes over Rabaul between Christmas and New Year's Day.¹⁸

The machine guns of enemy fighters were only one means, although the principal one, by which Rabaul was defended. Several times during the late December strikes against the Japanese base, AirSols pilots reported that enemy planes were trying to break up attacking formations and destroy aircraft by air-to-air bombing. Most of these bombs were incendiaries, generally of 70-pound size with a bursting charge of picric acid and an explosive load of about 200 phosphorus-

filled steel pellets.¹⁹ Zekes, flying above and head on to Allied aircraft, released these bombs so that they would explode in the path of the targeted planes. The incidence of such attacks increased sharply in the new year, and a number of planes were damaged by the spectacular phosphorus fireballs, although actual losses charged to such air-to-air bombing were slight.

Far more dangerous to the attackers were the Japanese antiaircraft guns ringing any worthwhile target at Rabaul. At least 260 guns, ranging in size from 13mm machine guns to 12.7cm cannon, were manned by enemy Army and Navy crews throughout the whole of the AirSols attack. Fortunately for the Allied flyers, the only fire control radar the Japanese had was the first such piece manufactured in Japan; it had many mechanical defects and was ineffective. Enemy range and height finders were not too accurate either, and Zekes flying alongside bomber formations were used to radio altitude and speed data to the guns. Communications difficulties marred the usefulness of this makeshift system.²⁰

AirSols had available a limited number of Liberators. While these bombers could release their loads from heights above the reach of the heaviest Japanese antiaircraft guns, the destructive effect of such high altitude bombing did not approach the saturation level that the AirSols offensive required. As soon as the Piva bomber field at Torokina was operational, a new stage in the attack on Rabaul would

¹⁹ MilAnalysisDiv, USSBS (Pac), *Japanese Air Weapons and Tactics* (Washington: GPO, Jan47), p. 47.

²⁰ USSBS, *Interrogation No. 224*, Cdr Yasumi Doi, IJN, I, p. 209.

¹⁸ ComAirSols IntelSummary, 25-31Dec43.

begin, and Strike Command would commit its SBDs and TBFs. When the field on Stirling Island was ready for use, Bomber Command would add B-25s to the assault. The enemy would be hit by bombers and fighters from high, low, and medium altitudes, from every direction possible, and around the clock.

Until General Mitchell was able to unleash the full offensive power of his command, Admiral Sherman's carriers were called upon to heighten the effect of the blows that AirSols could deliver. Intelligence that the Japanese had heavy troop reinforcements en route to the Bismarcks and a strong reserve of aircraft nesting at Kavieng prompted ComSoPac to order an attack on the New Ireland base set for Christmas morning. Since SWPA forces were poised to launch the Cape Gloucester operation at this time, the carrier strike might well disrupt the Japanese aerial counterattack that was sure to be mounted when word of the landings reached Admiral Kusaka.

Before dawn on the 25th, Sherman's carrier task group, composed of the *Bunker Hill*, *Monterey*, and six destroyers, started launching aircraft from a position 150 miles northeast of Kavieng. At first light, the planes—31 F6Fs, 28 TBFs, and 27 SB2Cs—joined up and headed for the enemy base, their primary target being shipping in the harbor. Air opposition was negligible; most of Kavieng's fighters had moved to Rabaul on the 24th, decoyed there by an American cruiser-destroyer bombardment of the Buka-Bonis area (heretofore a usual prelude to a SoPac amphibious landing). With the defending Zekes gone, escort Hellcats were able to stick to the attack plan and precede the light bombers in a strafing run to sup-

press ships' antiaircraft fire during the bombing. Only a few ships were present, and skip-bombing TBF's sunk one of these, a 5,000-ton freighter. Another medium-sized freighter was damaged, and a 500-ton mine sweeper was driven on the rocks.²¹

The strike group was back on board its carriers by 1045, with only one TBF missing. The combat air patrol shot down three enemy bombers during retirement, and ships' antiaircraft got two more, when Bettys tried a torpedo attack. Instead of heading back for port, the carriers stayed at sea on ComSoPac's orders, waiting for a chance to catch the Japanese reinforcement convoys.

On 1 January, a second strike was launched against Kavieng when search planes reported enemy warships near the harbor. This time, about 30 Zekes were present to add their power to the intense antiaircraft fire of 2 light cruisers and 2 destroyers. The Japanese fighters dropped phosphorus bombs on the SB2Cs as they dove to the attack, but without effect. Although the American aircrews were certain that they had hit their targets repeatedly, the actual damage to the skillfully handled ships was slight. The Zekes and ships' guns combined to down two Hellcats and a Helldiver: the carrier aircrews' claim was 14 planes, twice the admitted Japanese losses.

A third attack was launched on 4 January in an attempt to sink a cruiser force reported as being just north of Kavieng. The strike group found the cruisers actually were large destroyers and attacked the radically maneuvering ships with little luck. Reefs prevented effective torpedo

²¹ *Japanese Air Comments.*

runs, and the torpedoes that were dropped were set to run too low to hit destroyers; the only damage was caused by strafing.²² One F6F was shot down by the Zekes that harried the attack formation like wolves; three enemy fighters were downed. The combat air patrol accounted for one Betty scouting the carriers and wiped out a ferry group, a bomber and six Zekes, heading for Kavieng. According to Com-SoPac's orders, no further strikes were sent against the enemy ships on the 4th; destroyers were not considered worth the risks of a second attack.

Admiral Sherman's task group retired after the third strike on Kavieng unmolested by the *Eleventh Air Fleet*. After their withdrawal, the carriers and destroyers refueled and headed for the Central Pacific to take part in the Marshalls operation. Although the Rabaul-centered cordon of enemy bases had experienced its last carrier air raid, the cessation attracted little notice among garrison members. Instead of an occasional unpleasant taste of ship-based dive and torpedo bombers, the Japanese were now to be force-fed a steady diet of SBD-TBF attacks mounted from Bougainville.

PIVA PUNCH²³

By the year's end, the Seabees had the northernmost of the two Piva airstrips they were working on, Piva Uncle, ready for use as a staging base for light bombers. Full-scale operations from the field, however, required an additional week of

logistic preparations, so that repeated 50-100 plane missions could be mounted. While fuel and supply dumps and servicing facilities were expanded to handle the planned strikes, the pace of attack against Rabaul never slackened. If anything, it increased.

In order that the Japanese garrison would get no respite from the daily round of Liberator raids and fighter sweeps during the first week in January, three squadrons of RAAF Beauforts bombed the enemy airfields at night. Instead of hitting their targets in mass formations, the Kiriwina-based Australians made single plane attacks in succession, a harassing tactic used to good advantage by both sides throughout the fighting in the South Pacific. The last of these Beaufort missions was flown against Lakunai and Tobera on the night of 7-8 January; thereafter, the task of hitting Rabaul targets at night was handled by SoPac aircraft. The area of operations of the RAAF planes on Kiriwina was restricted to central New Britain east of Arawe and west of Wide Bay, an Allied Air Forces decision that disappointed the Australians who preferred a more decisive role in the fighting.

Emphasizing the fact that the air battles were not all one-sided in favor of the attackers was the loss of Major Boyington on 3 January during a fighter sweep over Rabaul. Before the sweep leader disappeared, he was seen to shoot down his 26th enemy plane, a feat that ranked him with Major Joseph J. Foss as the lead-

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is derived from: *ComAirPac Jan-Feb44 Analyses*; *ComAirSoPac Daily IntelBuls*, Jan-Feb44; *SoPac ACI Repts*; *Air Assault on Rabaul*; *StrikeComd WarDs*; *FtrComd Missions*;

Butler Interview; *SE Arca NavOps—III*; *SE Arca NavAirOps—V*; Craven and Cate, *Guadalcanal to Saipan*; Morison, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier*; Odgers, *RAAF Against Japan*; Okumiya, Horikoshi, and Caidin, *Zero!*; Ross, *RNZAF*; Sherrod, *MarAirHist*.

ing Marine Corps ace of the war.²⁴ Boyington parachuted from his crippled Corsair into St. George's Channel and was picked up by an enemy submarine and taken to Rabaul; eventually, he reached Japan and spent the rest of the war in a prison camp.

The day on which Major Boyington was downed was one of the few in early January when the weather observations of the attacking squadrons could read: "Visibility unlimited, clear over target, ceiling 30,000 feet."²⁵ Much more frequently, Rabaul was partially or wholly protected by rain squalls and heavy cloud cover and returning flyers reported: "Heavy solid front on New Ireland coast extending south from St. George Cape," or "Heavy overcast to 8,000 feet, built up in thick layers."²⁶ The weather was so changeable and often varied so much over the course of a day that even reports of clear skies by reconnaissance planes might no longer hold true two or three hours later when a strike group reached its objective.

On 5 January, an unbroken wall of clouds over St. George's Channel prevented the first land-based SBD-TBF strike on Rabaul from even reaching its target. The 26 Dauntlesses and 21 Avengers that took part returned to their home fields on New Georgia, but not before the dive bombers attacked enemy troop concentrations on Bougainville. On the 7th, a similar light bomber group staged through Piva Uncle, picked up its

fighter escort over Bougainville, and headed for Tobera field. Again the weather was poor and the primary target was closed in. Rapopo field was visible, but the strike was briefed for another secondary target, the radar installation near the Cape St. George lighthouse, which was attacked instead. Over Rabaul, anti-aircraft fire was heavy and interceptors were numerous and aggressive, but the 72-plane escort was a match for the Zekes. Twelve enemy planes were claimed against a loss of three F6Fs, two in a mid-air collision, and two SBDs which crashed on the way back to base.

Finally, on 9 January, the Navy and Marine bombers were able to get their first good shot at Rabaul targets. Twenty-three SBDs and 16 TBFs flew up from Munda, fueled at Piva Uncle, and winged toward Tobera, home field for most of the Japanese fighters. The enemy had ample warning of the raid, and about 40 interceptors were airborne when the AirSols planes arrived on the scene. The Zekes did not close until the bombers nosed over to make their dives, and then the escort, 62 fighters, beat off the Japanese handily. The SBDs struck first, concentrating their half-ton bombs on defending gun positions; the TBFs followed, hitting the runway and apron with 2,000 pounders. Anti-aircraft fire was light over the field but heavy on the retirement course which followed the Warangoi River to its mouth. Thirteen Japanese planes were claimed by the escort which lost a Hellcat and two Kittyhawks; the strike group had six aircraft damaged that made it back to Piva Uncle. One badly shot-up Marine Avenger, its gunner dead at his post, had to ditch off Torokina; the pilot was rescued uninjured.

²⁴ Actually, before Boyington went down himself, he finished off two more planes, making his an unequalled score among Marine pilots in World War II. His total of 28 victories includes the six planes he shot down as a member of the American Volunteer Group.

²⁵ *FtrComd Mission Repts*, 3Jan44.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 5Jan44 and 6Jan44.



MECHANICS OF VMF-211 repair a Corsair which returned from a strike with its wings and fuselage full of holes from antiaircraft shell fragments. (USMC 77816)

Once the light bombers had scored, they came back again and again to hit Rabaul with increasing strength and effect. The Japanese reported that they met each attack in early January with all their remaining fighters, but that they could not check the raids in spite of what they termed "the remarkable results obtained each time"²⁷ by their interceptors. In general, the enemy fighter pilots hit the Allied formations as they were heading in for Rabaul, attempted to penetrate the screen of escorts and get at the bombers, and often followed the SBDs and TBFs into their dives, through the defending anti-aircraft fire, and all the way out to the rendezvous area before sheering away. The job of fending off the Japanese planes that broke through the high, medium, and low cover fell to the RNZAF Kittyhawks. Flying close cover for the American bombers, the New Zealanders shared the bombing runs, braved the storm of short-range flak, and guarded the tails of the SBDs and TBFs as they streaked for home.

Despite the diversity of plane types and pilots flying in AirSols attack formations, air discipline was tight; the cardinal rule observed by fighters and bombers alike was to stay joined up and fight together. By the time of the Rabaul battle, the Japanese were following the same course and fought in two- and three-plane sections that stuck together fairly well. Occasionally, since aircraft on both sides used voice radio in the medium high frequency range, there was an exchange of insults calculated to goad the incautious pilot into reckless action. The Strike Command operations officer noted that "we would call them and tell them, 'We're

coming, you little so-and-sos, you'd better get ready,' and they would tell us what they were going to do to us when we got there."²⁸ This ruse had little effect; Japanese actions showed that they were husbanding their dwindling strength, employing their fighters to best advantage in the face of mounting odds.

During the first few weeks of determined assault on Rabaul's airdromes and the planes they harbored, AirSols fighters and bombers made few attacks on the shipping in Simpson Harbor. Allied intelligence officers kept close tab on the number and type of ships present, however, through the reports of returning pilots and aircrewmembers and the findings of frequent reconnaissance missions. General Mitchell had no intention of letting the enemy continue to reinforce and resupply Rabaul with impunity. He intended, in fact, to use his planes to choke off all significant contact by sea between the Japanese stronghold and its sources of supply, just as AirSols had already shredded the lifeline between Rabaul and its satellite bases in the Solomons.

Just before dawn on 14 January, after a steady procession of Liberators and Mitchells had made the night hellish for Rabaul's garrison, six TBFs attempted a raid on the shipping in Simpson Harbor. Foul weather forced these Avengers to turn back, but later in the day the enemy ships were attacked by 16 more in company with 37 SBDs. The primary target of the bombers, Lakunai airfield, was closed in, and the strike group was alerted as it flew east across New Ireland to hit its secondary target, the shipping. About 30 enemy fighters intercepted the Allied

²⁷ *SE Area NavAirOps—V*, p. 18.

²⁸ *Butler Interview*, p. 2.

formation while it was still 40-50 miles from its mark; over Blanche Bay the number of defending Zekes doubled.

The escort of American and New Zealand fighters beat off most of the enemy attackers, giving the SBDs a clear shot at a harbor full of scurrying ships. Nos-ing over into steep dives at about 8,000 feet, the Dauntless pilots aimed their planes at the biggest ships, trying to drop their half-ton bombs right down the stacks. The TBFs followed the dive bombers in swift, shallow approaches that brought them down to masthead height where they tried to slam 2,000-pound bombs against the sides of their elusive targets.

Nine direct hits on seven cargo vessels plus hits on two destroyers were claimed, as well as 20 damaging near misses. All but two of the direct hits were credited to the torpedo bombers. During the running battle with enemy interceptors, the escort and the bombers reported they shot down 29 planes and probably got 16 more; the corresponding AirSols loss was 8 fighters, with 4 pilots recovered, 2 SBDs, and a TBF. The admitted Japanese loss was 3 planes, plus bomb damage to a destroyer and an oiler; their claimed bag of Allied aircraft was 65.

Strike Command's attacks on shipping continued, the results improved, and, by the end of January, seven merchantmen and an oiler had been sunk and three more ships badly damaged. The TBFs, which proved to be more effective in shipping attacks than the SBDs, used 4- to 5-second delay fuses on 1-ton bombs, came in very fast 30-40 feet off the water, headed directly for the targeted ships, dropped their bombs when close aboard, and

streaked directly over the ships for the rendezvous point. The pilots said it was pretty hard to miss, but no one was anxious to stick around to check results. The Strike Command operations officer said that he tried:

... to get the pilots to slow down and join up as soon as possible but coming in like that, being shot at continuously, and with phosphorous bombs dropped on them consistently by the enemy fighter planes, they just couldn't do it. I did persuade one squadron commander, one day, to slow down and try to wait for the other men, and he said he eased back on the throttle just a little and he was the last man out.²⁹

As the tempo of AirSols attacks in the new year increased, and their strength and effectiveness grew apace, Allied pilots noted a definite falling off in the number of Japanese planes rising to intercept. For a time in early January, it appeared that "there was a question as to whether reinforcements for the Bismarcks sinkhole would be forthcoming."³⁰ Admiral Koga and his staff, however, were convinced by the intensity of the AirSols attack that the next major Allied move would be made in the Southwest rather than the Central Pacific. Consequently, the *Combined Fleet* commander decided to commit the *2d Air Squadron* to Rabaul, denuding the carriers *Runyo*, *Hiyo*, and *Ryuho* of their air groups to add 69 fighters, 36 dive bombers, and 23 torpedo bombers to the *Eleventh Air Fleet*. When the carrier planes arrived, surviving flying personnel of the battered *26th Air Flotilla*, which had fought at Rabaul since the Guadalcanal landings, were withdrawn to Truk to refit and reorganize.

²⁹ Butler Interview, p. 2.

³⁰ Air Assault on Rabaul, p. 7.

Many of the air flotilla's veteran pilots and crewmen, despite the knowledge that they would be free of the hopeless fight at Rabaul, were unhappy to be going. The men felt there was an implication of failure in their relief, and that the Navy expected the *2d Air Squadron* to accomplish a task that the *26th Flotilla* had found impossible—stemming the AirSols attack. In truth, however, all that was expected of the new planes and pilots was that they would preserve “as long as possible the strategic position to which the Truk advance base is the key.”³¹

By the end of January, Rabaul was set up for a rain of knockout blows, a trip-hammer series of strikes that would batter it into impotence. In 873 daylight sorties during the month, AirSols bombers had dropped over 775 tons of bombs on airfields and shipping. The steady pounding had put each of the enemy fields out of action for varying periods of time, although the Japanese managed to keep at least one runway open for their interceptors. The shipping losses had been so severe that the enemy commanders knew that their principal supply line must soon be cut off.³² The month's toll of defending aircraft, 120 according to Admiral Kusaka's postwar recollection,³³ was more than half of the planes available before the *2d Air Squadron* reinforcements arrived.

³¹ *SE Area NavOps*—III, p. 62.

³² CinCPac–CinCPOA Item No. 11,955. Diary of MajGen Masatake Kimihara, ACofS, Eighth AreaA, 1Jan–9Jun44, entry of 6Feb44, in CinCPac–CinCPOA Translations No. 1, dtd 31Oct44.

³³ USSBS, *Campaign Against Rabaul*, p. 50. *SE Area NavAirOps*—V, p. 19-a, lists losses for the month as 46.

In view of the 1,850 escort and sweep sorties that Allied fighters flew over Rabaul in January, the combat loss of 65 planes was relatively low. Only 19 bombers of all types were shot down by Zekes or antiaircraft. In reckoning their tally of enemy planes for the month, AirSols pilots and gunners arrived at a figure of 503. Japanese aircrews claimed an even higher number of victories, 618 planes. Regardless of what the actual relative score was, one fact is certain, AirSols' combat losses had no dampening effect on the intensity of its offensive; the damage inflicted on the Japanese, however, was telling.

The *2d Air Squadron* pilots, many of them young men new to combat, aged quickly as they fought against increasingly unfavorable odds. The carrier group's operations officer, in recalling the atmosphere of the time, evoked a picture of real desperation:

The days passed in a blur. Every day we sent the Zeros up on frantic interception flights. The young and inexperienced student pilots had become battle-hardened veterans, their faces showing the sudden realization of death all about them. Not for a moment did the Americans ease their relentless pressure. Day and night the bombers came to pound Rabaul, to smash at the airfield and shipping in the harbor, while the fighters screamed low in daring strafing passes, shooting up anything they considered a worthwhile target. . . .

It was obvious that so long as we continued the battle in its present fashion, the Americans would grind us under.³⁴

The Japanese could make no effective response to the relentless AirSols attacks. There were not enough enemy fighters on

³⁴ Okuniya, Horikoshi, and Caidin, *Zero!*, p. 309.

the scene even to slow down the pace, and those that were available were outclassed by newer and better Allied aircraft. The only other means of defense available to the Japanese, antiaircraft fire, was well countered by repeated light bomber strikes. As they had before at Munda and Kahili, Strike Command's SBDs concentrated on gun positions protecting the airfields, while TBFs ploughed up the runways. Complementing the SBD-TBF attacks, B-25 strafers laid a destructive spread of parafrag bombs throughout the airdrome areas, aiming particularly at aircraft on the ground. The attack pattern was varied enough to keep enemy gun crews harassed and apprehensive.

Perhaps the most discouraging aspect of the stepped-up Allied offensive to the Japanese was the order that had to be issued to the *2d Air Squadron* fighter pilots "to attack or defend yourselves only when the battle circumstances appear particularly favorable to you."³⁵ This official admission of Allied superiority put a severe crimp in enemy aircrew morale, even though the imbalance had been obvious for weeks. The massive AirSols attack formations, aggregating 200 planes a day by early February, were too strong to stop or turn aside.

Frequent bad weather was Rabaul's only sure defense, but its shielding effect often did not extend to alternate targets, particularly the airfields at Namatami and Borpop and the radar at Cape St. George on New Ireland.³⁶ These enemy

installations were frequently attacked, since they directly supported Rabaul; the net effect of damage done to them was a reduction in the strength of the key Japanese base.

Everything began to turn sour for the Japanese in February, as concurrent operations in both the Southwest and Central Pacific made the Rabaul airbases untenable. Admiral Halsey was ready to move a New Zealand landing force into the Green Islands, only 115 miles from Rabaul, on the 15th. To support this operation and also to provide cover for a pending carrier attack on Truk, General Kenney's Fifth Air Force bombers began a series of large-scale raids on Kavieng on the 11th.³⁷ In the offing at the month's end was a SoWesPac move into the Admiralties to seize the enemy airfields there and cut off the Bismarecks from New Guinea.³⁸

The net was closing on Rabaul, and the Japanese knew it. Yet neither the Kavieng air raids, the Green Islands landing, nor the enemy-anticipated invasion of the Admiralties was the deciding factor in the Japanese decision to pull all combat aircraft out of Rabaul.

Credit for forcing that move went to Central Pacific task forces under Vice Admiral Raymond A. Spruance which struck Truk on 17 and 18 February. Planes from nine carriers hit airfield installations and shipping in the atoll's anchorage in a two-day spree that saw at least 70 enemy planes destroyed in the air

³⁵ *Ibid.*

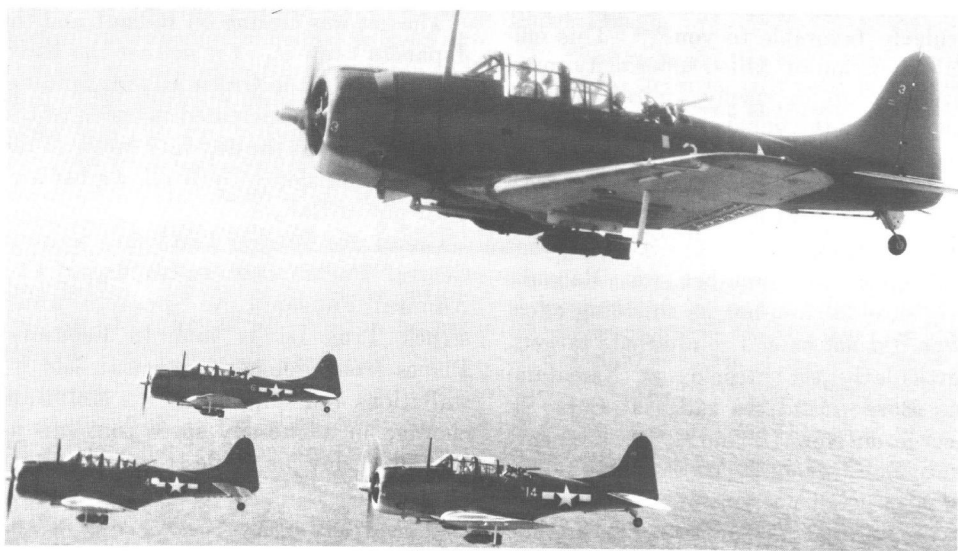
³⁶ The Marine Corps' third leading ace in World War II, First Lieutenant Robert M. Hanson of VMF-215, who shot down 25 planes, was killed by antiaircraft fire during a strafing run at Cape St. George on 3 February.

³⁷ Craven and Cate, *Guadalcanal to Saipan*, p. 355.

³⁸ Details on the Allied seizure of the Green Islands and the Admiralties will be covered in the following chapter.



LOADED FOR A RABAU STRIKE, *Marine TBFs roll down a taxiway toward the Piva bomber runway on 17 February 1943. (USMC 81362)*



HEADED FOR VUNAKANAU, *a formation of Marine SBDs with bombs suspended from their wings takes part in the April strikes on Rabaul. (USMC 81436)*

and on the ground,³⁹ and more than 200,000 tons of merchant shipping sunk. Two enemy cruisers, four destroyers, and a subchaser were sent to the bottom by a combination of air and surface attacks.⁴⁰

Admiral Nimitz, in ordering the strike on Truk, had hoped to catch the entire *Combined Fleet* in its lair. Photographs taken by two Marine PB4Ys of VMD-254 on 4 February had shown the enemy fleet to be present. The planes had taken off from the newly-built airfield on Stirling Island and flown unescorted the 1,000 miles to the Japanese bastion, taken their pictures, and returned after 12 hours in the air to land at the Piva bomber strip on Bougainville. Unfortunately, the Japanese had spotted one of the planes, although they were unable to intercept or bring it down.⁴¹ The sight of the four-engined land bomber overhead, and the realization of all it portended with American forces firmly established in the Gilberts and Marshalls, was enough to convince Admiral Koga the time had come to pull back from his exposed position. Accordingly, the enemy commander ordered the *Combined Fleet* to weigh anchor and head for home waters. The bulk of the ships left on 10 February; most of

the vessels caught by the American carrier attack a week later were auxiliaries and escorts delayed in sailing by the weather.

Many of the Japanese planes shot up on the ground at Truk were replacements meant for Rabaul. Their loss in the Carolines emphasized the futility of further aerial defense of the New Britain base. A good portion of the strategic value of Rabaul to the Japanese lay in its usefulness as a shield for Truk against attack. The twisted wreckage of the Zekes littering the atoll's airfields, the missing ships vanished beneath the waves of the anchorage, and the towering column of smoke rising from gutted supply dumps gave ample evidence that Truk was vulnerable—and that Rabaul's role in its defense was ended.

On 17 February, as soon as news of the American carrier strike reached Admiral Koga, he dispatched orders to Admiral Kusaka to send all serviceable aircraft at Rabaul to Truk. The Carolines' base was only a way-station now, and the ultimate destination of these planes was airfields on the new Japanese defensive perimeter running from Western New Guinea through the Palaus, the Marianas, and the Volcano-Bonins.

On the night of 17–18 February, American destroyers lent insulting but unwitting emphasis to the enemy decision to strip Rabaul of its remaining offensive power. A bombardment group of five destroyers steamed through St. George's Channel with a PB4Y overhead to spot its targets and fired 3,868 rounds of 5-inch at enemy installations at Praed Point and in Rabaul town. At about the same time, a similar group of destroyers shelled Kavieng. Although Japanese coast defense guns replied in both instances, they

³⁹ RAdm Samuel Eliot Morison, *Alcutians, Gilberts and Marshalls—History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, v. VII (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1950), p. 320. Admiral Morison's history usually is the best informed source for assessment of Japanese losses. American claims of losses inflicted at the time of the attack ranged from 128 to more than 200 planes.

⁴⁰ NavHistDiv, Off of CNO, ND, *United States Naval Chronology, World War II* (Washington, 1955), pp. 77–78.

⁴¹ NavAnalysisDiv, USSBS (Pac), *The Reduction of Truk* (Washington: GPO, Feb47), p. 4.

hit nothing, and the raiders retired unscathed.⁴² There was no aerial pursuit.

What last-gasp resistance there was from the *2d Air Squadron* was offered on the morning of 19 February when 36 Zekes rose to intercept a 139-plane attack formation, centered on 71 Strike Command bombers. The SBDs and TBFs which hit Lakunai included six Avengers of VMTB-143 armed with both 500-pound bombs and 5-inch rockets, the latter a relatively new air weapon which proved effective against point targets. When the AirSols escort and the Japanese interceptors tangled, the respective claims were 23 planes shot down by American pilots⁴³ and 31 by Japanese. A B-24 strike group which followed the light bombers to attack Tobera and Lakunai was also intercepted; the Liberator crews claimed three Zekes. AirSols actual loss was one Corsair with 10 planes damaged; the Japanese loss appears to have been eight fighters.⁴⁴

On 20 February, the only aircraft remaining in Rabaul were about 30 damaged fighters, a few Navy utility types, and 4 Army reconnaissance planes.⁴⁵ An attempt was made to evacuate some of the invaluable veteran ground crews in two

of the last merchant vessels to visit Rabaul, but AirSols bombers sank the vessels on the 21st. The next day, American destroyers cruising the waters off New Ireland sank the rescue tug that picked up the survivors. The loss of the maintenance crews, whose skills represented the experience of many years, was equally as damaging to the Japanese naval air arm as the loss of veteran air crews in combat with Rabaul's attackers.

Although the men of AirSols had no way of knowing it, they had won the air battle of Rabaul; the Japanese would never come back. No exact figure for the number of enemy planes that escaped to Truk can be established, but a consensus of the recollections of key officers of the *Eleventh Air Fleet* would indicate no more than 70 got out, although one source says 120 made it.⁴⁶ Even this larger figure makes little difference in the overall assessment of the results of the AirSols offensive.

In the two months that passed between the first Allied fighter sweep over Rabaul on 17 December and the last opposed bombing raid of 19 February, the Japanese lost at least 250 planes, and very probably more. Again the records are incomplete and contradictory, but only as to the number of planes involved, not as to the fact of defeat and withdrawal. Emphasizing the difficulty of assessing the claims of air warfare is the first box score compiled for the 17 December-19 February battle by intelligence officers at ComAir-SoPac—151 Allied planes lost in destroying 789 Japanese planes.⁴⁷ The comparable Japanese claim for the same period—

⁴² ComFAirWingOne Rept of Night Missions, 17-18Feb44, dtd 27Feb44 (COA, NHD).

⁴³ New Zealand P-40s escorting TBFs hitting Vunakanau on 13 February shot down two Zekes bringing the total RNZAF score in the Pacific to 99. Much to the disappointment of the New Zealanders, they never got the century.

⁴⁴ Pineau, "Summary of Enemy Air Raids on Rabaul," *op. cit.*; ComAirSols Bombers and Fighters Mission Rept, 19Feb44.

⁴⁵ MilAnalysisDiv, USSBS(Pac), Answer to Questionnaire No. 5, Bismarck and Solomon Islands, 7Dec41-19Feb44, prepared under LtCol Sakuyuki Takagi, IJA (USSBS Recs, National Archives).

⁴⁶ Miyazaki Interrogation, p. 414.

⁴⁷ ComAirSoPac IntelBul, dtd 22Feb44.

this from a postwar history of their operations by the Japanese—was that they lost 142 of their own planes in shooting down 1,045 Allied aircraft.⁴⁸

The withdrawal of the Japanese defending aircraft on 19 February 1944 did not signify the end of the Allied air offensive against Rabaul. Far from it. The aerial attack went on—and on—and on. It continued in an unceasing round until the end of the war, and hundreds of combat aircraft, many of them Marine planes, took part in the frustrating campaign to neutralize the enemy base. The Japanese fought back, at least the antiaircraft gunners did, whenever they were offered a target; the rest of the huge enemy garrison was immobilized, dug in and waiting for an amphibious assault that never came.

⁴⁸ *SE Area NavOps—III*, p. 59.

The story of those 18 months of hazardous but largely routine aerial attacks on Rabaul should be considered apart from the few weeks of intensive air battles that ended the offensive threat of the key enemy base. In that short span of fighting, as in the preceding months of methodical advance that made it possible, no one service can claim to have had the pre-eminent part. In a very real sense, Admiral Halsey's South Pacific Forces, and in particular, Aircraft, Solomons, were joint commands. The admiral once rather pithily recalled:

Whenever I hear blather about inter-service friction, I like to recall that our Army, Navy, and Marine airmen in the Solomons fought with equal enthusiasm and excellence under rear admirals, then under a major general of the Army, and finally under a major general of Marines.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Halsey and Bryan, *Admiral Halsey's Story*, p. 186.