

**The U.S. Army Air Forces in World War II**

**Weapon of Denial**  
**Air Power**  
**and**  
**the Battle for New Guinea**

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**Air Force History and Museums Program**  
**1995**

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# **Weapon of Denial**

## **Air Power and the Battle for New Guinea**

Gen. Douglas MacArthur, commander of Pacific forces in World War II, viewed the Battle of the Bismarck Sea as a disaster for the Japanese and a triumph for the Allies. In that great air-sea confrontation, U.S. and Australian air forces proved that air power could be decisive in preventing the resupply of ground troops by sea. Months of torturous warfare in the jungles of New Guinea had left Japanese troops vulnerable to disease and starvation. In the end, Allied airmen were able to break Japan's grip on New Guinea and end its threat to Australia through the innovative and aggressive use of air power. MacArthur's strength lay in a dedicated and courageous band of airmen who could attack enemy ships from all directions at any time.

## **The Japanese Onslaught**

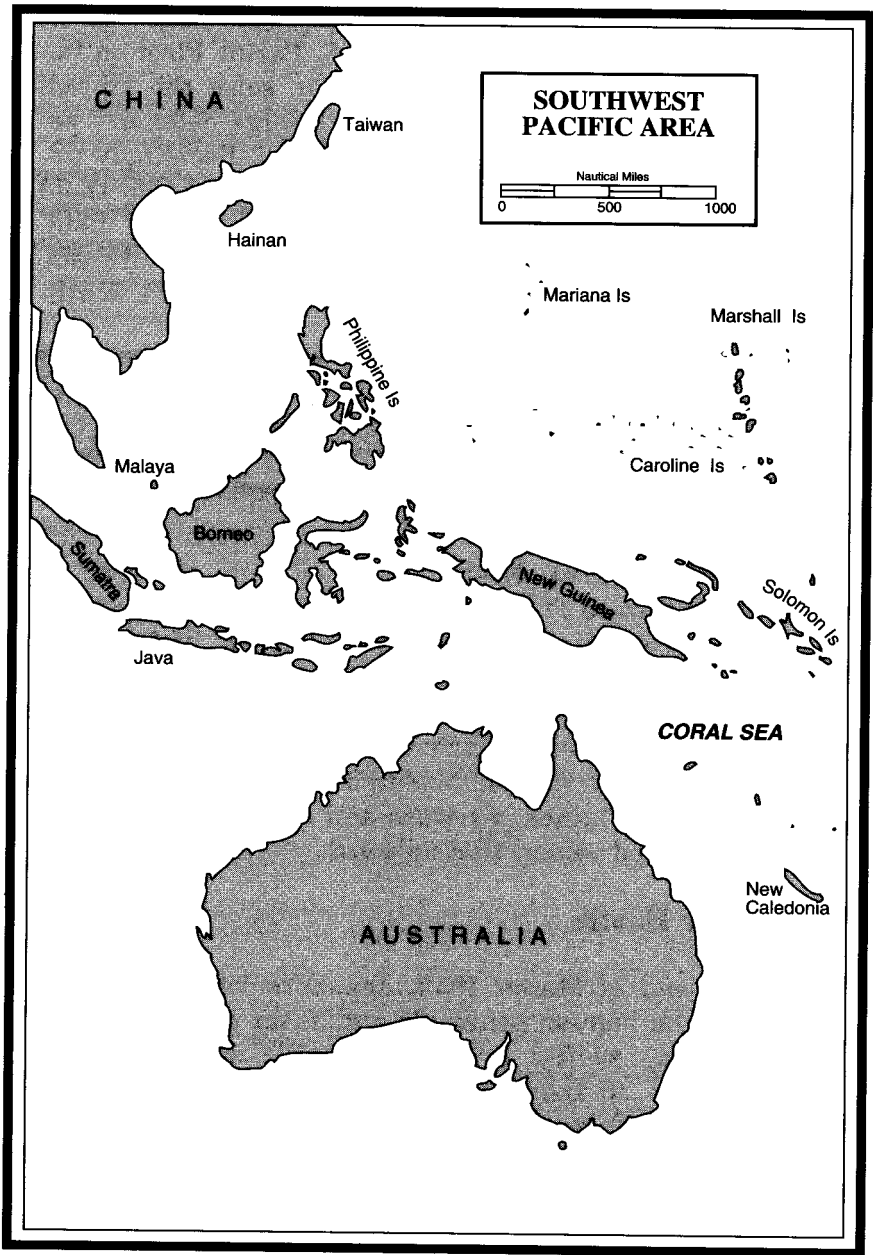
The infamous attack on Pearl Harbor by Japan marked the beginning of a protracted and grueling war in the Pacific. Having dealt a stunning blow to the U.S. Pacific Fleet on December 7, 1941, Japan moved quickly to seize the oil-rich Netherlands East Indies and establish a large defensive perimeter of islands between itself and Hawaii. Seemingly unstoppable at first, it had by late December gained a foothold in the Philippines. During the first three months of 1943, Japanese naval and ground units increased their attacks, consolidated their gains, and moved deeper into the southwest Pacific.

New Guinea was their next target. From there, Imperial Forces planned to expand throughout the area, perhaps into Australia itself. By April 1, 1942, they had landed virtually unopposed at various sites from the northwest to Hollandia and down into the southeast. Their arrival spelled the beginning of the long and difficult New Guinea campaign, which lasted until July 1944. Eventually, they were repulsed in their advance toward Port Moresby on the southwest coast of the Papuan peninsula by Allied ground forces and pushed back to the island's east coast.

The turning point came in March 1943, when U.S. and Australian airmen won a decisive victory in the Battle of the Bismarck Sea, shattering the enemy's ability to resupply its beleaguered New Guinea garrisons and setting the stage for the ultimate Allied victory that followed.

## **Girding for Battle**

By the end of March 1942, Japanese forces had progressed into the Papuan peninsula and as far as the Solomon Islands, moving swiftly from Bougainville southeastward, where on April 30 they began their occupation of Tulagi. Countering this juggernaut, on March 31 U.S. Army Air Forces (USAAF) in the Southwest Pacific Area sent the 8th Bombardment Squadron to assist the small Australian garrison at Port Moresby with some Douglas A-24 dive bombers, the Army's version of the Navy's famed SBD Dauntless, which would soon be victorious in the Battle of Midway. A



month later, the 8th Fighter Group arrived, equipped with new Bell P-39 and P-400 Airacobra fighters—the latter export models of P-39s intended for use by the Royal Air Force (RAF). The fighters made their first attacks against Japanese forces 200 miles north of Port Moresby at two sites 19 miles apart on the western shore of the Huon Gulf—Lae, a major enemy supply base, and Salamaua—on April 30. On May 15 Port Moresby-bound Australian reinforcements were dispatched.

## Strike and Counter-Strike

On May 18 Japanese Imperial Headquarters directed the Combined Fleet to occupy Port Moresby and seize Allied bases throughout the Solomon Islands, New Caledonia, Fiji, and Samoa. Control of the Coral Sea and its shores—the gateway to Australia—would open virtually all of the central and south Pacific to conquest. Elements of the Japanese Fourth Fleet had begun this effort, known as Operation Mo, on May 4 by embarking the Army's South Seas Detachment from their stronghold at Rabaul on New Britain, the largest island in the Bismarck Archipelago, to Port Moresby. Meanwhile, Rear Adm. Frank Jack Fletcher had learned of the Japanese occupation of Tulagi and headed there immediately, taking Task Force 17, built around the aircraft carrier USS *Yorktown*. On May 4 the force launched fighters, dive-bombers, and torpedo bombers—forty right before dawn, thirty-eight later in the morning, and twenty-one in the afternoon—against enemy ships in the area. TF 17 quickly withdrew after sinking a destroyer, a merchant ship, four landing barges, and six seaplanes.

Although the nadir of Allied fortunes in the Pacific occurred just two days later with the surrender of Lt. Gen. Jonathan Wainwright and his forces in the Philippines, the war for both sides was about to change. The Japanese invasion fleet, spearheaded by the light carrier *Shoho* and two Pearl Harbor veterans, the *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*, continued to sail south into the Coral Sea, intent on capturing Port Moresby. On the morning of May 6, B-17 Flying Fortresses from the 19th Bombardment Group discovered the *Shoho*

sixty miles south of Bougainville and the rest of the invasion force later that day.

Pursuing the enemy fleet, Admiral Fletcher's Task Force 17 joined Rear Adm. Aubrey W. Fitch's Task Force 11, built around the carrier USS *Lexington*, and British Rear Adm. J. G. Crace's support group of cruisers and destroyers. TF 11 was absorbed into TF 17 to form TF 17.5, while the support group was redesignated TF 17.3. The entire force immediately steamed northwest toward New Guinea and the Japanese Fourth Fleet.

## **Coral Sea through Milne Bay**

That night, the two opponents prepared for combat, which erupted on May 7, 1942, in the first naval battle ever fought strictly by carrier-based aircraft. When the Battle of the Coral Sea was over, the Allies had turned back the seaborne invasion of Port Moresby, sunk the *Shoho*, and seriously damaged the *Shokaku* and the *Zuikaku*. Of critical importance to the Allies, neither of the two surviving Japanese carriers would be available in time for the coming Battle of Midway, the turning point of the Pacific War less than a month later, and although the *Lexington* was lost, the heavily damaged *Yorktown* was repaired in time to participate. The Battle of the Coral Sea saved the vital Allied stronghold of Australia and also ended the enemy's attempt to conquer Port Moresby by strictly amphibious operations.

In mid-May, Imperial Japanese Headquarters established the Seventeenth Army under the command of Lt. Gen. Haruyoshi Hyakutake. Operating with the Imperial Navy's Second Fleet and First Air Fleet, the Seventeenth Army's mission was the same as the original South Seas Detachment's—to capture Port Moresby, New Caledonia, Samoa, and Fiji. This time the Japanese ground force was significantly larger, comprising nine infantry battalions including the South Seas Detachment. Maj. Gen. Tomitoro Horii would lead his troops overland along the Kokoda Trail to Port Moresby, a difficult route which required their traversal of the towering Owen Stanley Mountains. General Horii and his force moved out of Gona, a Papuan peninsular coastal settlement on Holnicote Bay, on July 21. By August 12 they

had pushed into the mountains and taken a key pass, behaving as brutally along the way as their comrades in China. In a particularly ghastly incident on August 13, the Sasebo 5th Special Naval Landing Force rounded up and beheaded every man, woman, and child in the village of Buna, just south southeast of Gona. When they reached their last victim, a sixteen-year-old girl, they bungled horribly, inflicting grievous wounds instead of immediate death, and had to finish their crime by holding her down as she struggled and screamed to the end.

To support their drive against Port Moresby, the Japanese set out to seize Milne Bay, at the southeast tip of the Papuan peninsula in late August, planning to land troops at Rabi on its north shore and then capture a new Allied airfield being constructed nearby. General Horii and 11,000 reinforcements had set out along the Kokoda Trail on August 22. Five days later Japanese amphibious forces from New Ireland, in the Bismarck Archipelago, and Buna headed for Milne Bay. At the same time, the Australians had assembled six battalions of infantry along with the 46th U.S. Engineers, the 709th U.S. Airborne Anti-Aircraft Battery, two squadrons of Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Curtiss P-40 Kittyhawks, and a detachment of RAAF Lockheed Hudson twin-engine reconnaissance aircraft. The Allies at Milne Bay numbered 9,500 men in all. Perhaps because the bay was often shrouded by rain and mist, they were hidden from the enemy. Worse for the Japanese, RAAF forces were commanded by a remarkably creative and tenacious officer, Group Capt. William H. "Bull" Garing, and would, under his leadership, be victorious in the coming battle there.

The Japanese were shocked by their eventual discovery of this mighty Allied assemblage and driven to precipitous and intemperate action. Rather than wait for the Aoba Detachment, still in the Philippines, they proceeded with troops immediately at hand. The Kure 5th Special Naval Landing Force (612 men), a portion of the murderous Sasebo 5th Special Naval Landing Force (197 men), and the 16th Naval Pioneer Unit (362 men) totaled 1,171 troops. This force sailed for Rabi on August 24 aboard two transports. In addition, 353 men of the Sasebo force, fresh from their atrocities at Buna, followed on board seven large motorized barges.



Admiralty Islands

Hollandia

**BISMARCK  
SEA**

Wewak

**BISMARCK  
ARCHIPELAGO**

**NEW  
GUINEA**

Finschhafen

Lae

Salamaua

Wau

Huon Gulf

Holnicote Bay

Cape Ward Hunt

Gulf of Papua

Gona

Kokoda

Sanananda

Buna

Port Moresby

Owen Stanley Range

Tufi

**PAPUAN  
PENINSULA**

Rabi

Milne Bay

**SOLOMON**

Goodenough

Tr

Fergus

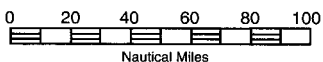
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**AUSTRALIA**

**CORAL SEA**



**EASTERN NEW GUINEA  
AND  
BISMARCK  
ARCHIPELAGO**



The ships got through, and the Japanese were able to land near their destination. Australian aircraft, fighting their way through bad weather to attack the convoy from New Britain on the 26th, managed to sink a minesweeper. Meanwhile, the barges foolishly landed at Goodenough Island, in the western D'Entrecasteaux chain, where their troops disembarked along the beach to prepare a meal. In a sudden surprise attack, twelve Australian P-40 strafers from Milne Bay came roaring over at low level, delivering a taste of real war. They destroyed all of the barges and most of the equipment and supplies. More important, they left the survivors stranded with no way to go on to Milne Bay or return to Buna.

Heavy fighting followed at Milne Bay between Rabi and the Allies' defenses, which stood firm. The Japanese were under orders to "kill without remorse"—orders that backfired when the Australians found the remains of several captured comrades who had been tied to trees and bayoneted. Tacked by their bodies was a sign: "It took them a long time to die." This attempt at psychological warfare failed utterly. It filled the Australians with terrible resolve and they fought even more ferociously, driving the Japanese back to their landing sites. By August 30 the Japanese high command realized that its troops were in trouble. Adm. Matome Ugaki, chief of staff to Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto, commander of the Combined Fleet (and architect of the Pearl Harbor raid), noted:

The situation at Rabi was critical. The commanding officers of both naval landing parties were killed. One-third of the officers and about 560 men remained, but only two hundred of them were capable of fighting. Though they dispatched their last sad telegram, some of them seemed to be still alive.

Despite the arrival of reinforcements during the evening of August 28, the Japanese shortly withdrew, removing survivors hastily during the night of September 5-6 (within earshot of pursuing Australian troops).

Afterwards, the Japanese shifted their attention to the troops marooned on Goodenough Island, launching the destroyers *Isokaze* and *Yayoi* on September 10 to rescue them. But the next day, Australian P-40s from Milne Bay struck, sinking the *Yayoi* and driving off the *Isokaze* and another de-

stroyer, the *Mochizuki*. The trapped soldiers, having paid dearly for their imprudent stop, decided to send two parties in native canoes on a hazardous journey to Buna for help. One managed to get through, triggering futile air-drops to supply its stranded comrades. By late October, when Australians from the 2/12 Battalion, 18th Brigade, landed on the island, sixty Japanese had been evacuated by submarine. Renewed fighting, however, made their further orderly withdrawal impossible. On the evening of the 23rd shuttle runs by submarine between Fergusson and Goodenough Islands allowed more to escape and eventually make their way to Rabaul by cruiser. Those remaining were killed by the Australians.

## **Japan on the Ropes**

While the Allies drove the enemy from Milne Bay, the main Japanese force in New Guinea pushed farther along the Kokoda Trail and by early September began to descend down the mountains toward Port Moresby in the face of stiffening Allied resistance. Together the USAAF and the RAAF had gained air superiority over the battlefield and used it to good advantage. Beset by both air and land opposition, the Japanese were stalled thirty miles short of their goal.

Elsewhere in the Pacific, the American invasion of Guadalcanal, 300 miles southeast of Bougainville, in the late summer of 1942 was taking its toll on enemy plans and provisions. Eventually, the Japanese realized the impossibility of supporting major campaigns in both New Guinea and the Solomon Islands and chose to sacrifice New Guinea. The Port Moresby invasion force fell back over the mountains in a nightmarish retreat for soldiers virtually without supplies. Desperate, some resorted to cannibalism. War had stripped them of the last civilizing influences, reducing them to the infamous practices of New Guinea's primitive tribes.

Their retreat continued, with occasional fierce fighting. By November the Japanese had fallen back to their starting point near Buna. There amid swamps and jungles, the starving troops awaited inevitable Allied attack. Nature augmented their misery as temperatures averaged 96 degrees Fahrenheit, the humidity 85 percent. Both climate and ter-

rain provided an ideal environment for disease. Ringworm, jungle rot, dhobie itch, malaria, typhus, and dengue fever, as well as ever-present poisonous snakes and venomous insects menaced defenders and attackers alike.

On November 16 the Japanese reorganized their command in the southwest Pacific, ordering General Hyakutake and his bumbling Seventeenth Army to limit their operations to the Solomon Islands and Lt. Gen. Hatazo Adachi to assume command in New Guinea. Arriving in Rabaul in late November, Adachi continued the effort to reinforce the starving men around Buna. On November 17 additional units arrived by destroyer convoy, allowing the Japanese to field 6,500 troops. Although only 2,500 were actually healthy and prepared for trench warfare, they held the defender's traditional advantage—being dug-in—and were thus able to stave off Allied victory for two months. The inescapable and bitter fight for Buna would generate a voracious need among the combatants for supplies. That need would be felt, in the long run, more acutely by the Japanese than the Allies.

## **Air Power and the Supply War**

For the Allies, air power became critical as Maj. Gen. George C. Kenney's Fifth Air Force furnished air interdiction as well as aerial resupply, transport, and reconnaissance for the ground troops. The Allies' repeated sweeps against the Japanese advancing across the Owen Stanley Mountains demonstrated that air power would mean the difference between victory or defeat. As early as May the Fifth Air Force airlifted the Australian 5th Independent Company to Wau, thirty-two miles southwest of Salamaua, to strengthen the weak and hard-pressed Kanga Force defending the Bulolo Valley. As the New Guinea campaign progressed, the Australians themselves depended more and more on aerial resupply and transportation.

The potential of air attacks against enemy communication lines first became apparent in April 1942. Light bombers began striking Japanese forces on the Papuan peninsula, and by the 30th, twenty-six P-39s of the 8th Fighter Group were strafing aircraft and fuel tanks around Lae and Salamaua. The Fifth Air Force targeted enemy resupply ships off the

north coast. It achieved only limited success at first but improved its performance because of procedural and organizational changes made by Kenney when he arrived in the theater in August 1942. These affected, chiefly, supply and maintenance to increase the mission-ready rate for aircraft.

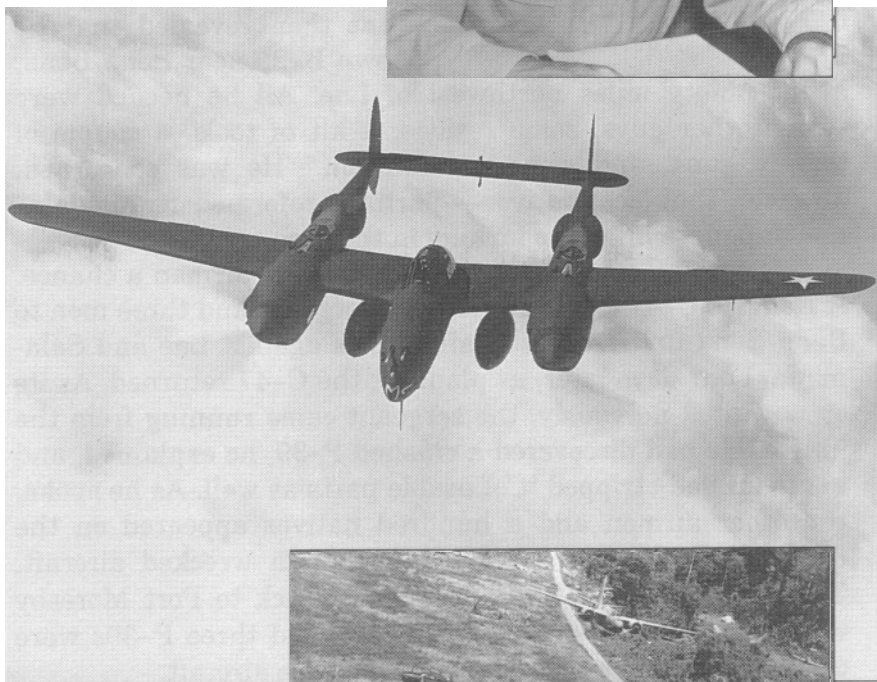
Occasionally, individual initiative made the significant difference. During General Kenney's inspection tour of the forward airfields, a sergeant commented that his unit had five B-25 Mitchell medium bombers out of commission for lack of wheel bearings. The general commiserated, noting that no suitable bearings were available anywhere in New Guinea or Australia. The sergeant then revealed that he could salvage some from a shot-down B-25 near Bena Bena, about ninety miles northwest of Lae. All he needed were "three other guys, some rations, a kit of tools, a couple of tommy guns, and some ammunition." He was concerned, however, that local natives—"partially reformed cannibals"—and Japanese might be lurking in the area.

General Kenney gave the enthusiastic airman a chance. A Douglas C-47 Skytrain flew the sergeant and three men to Bena Bena under cover of air strikes against Lae and Salamaua. Four days later, as planned, the C-47 returned. As its crew waited nervously, the sergeant came running from the jungle. He had discovered a crashed P-39, he explained, and his team had stripped it of usable parts as well. As he spoke, the other airmen and a hundred natives appeared on the trail, all carrying components from both wrecked aircraft. The C-47 flew parts and passengers back to Port Moresby where, within three days, five B-25s and three P-39s were converted from hangar queens to frontline aircraft.

A "can do" spirit suffused Kenney's airmen during the arduous New Guinea campaign, and, as a result, the Fifth Air Force gained a reputation for innovative approaches to warfare. When it encountered problems it solved them, generally discounting their "impossibility." Its ingenuity transformed the B-25 Mitchell from a horizontal, high-altitude medium bomber rarely able to hit enemy ships, to a low-altitude sea-skimming ship-buster. High altitude tactics had been driven by prewar doctrine and fear of anti-aircraft fire. But in late 1942 the Fifth Air Force developed a creative solution—"skip-bombing." The new tactic called for a B-25 to

# Kenney's Air War against the Japanese

RIGHT: As General MacArthur's air chief, General George Kenney used Allied air power creatively to strangle Japanese supply lines.

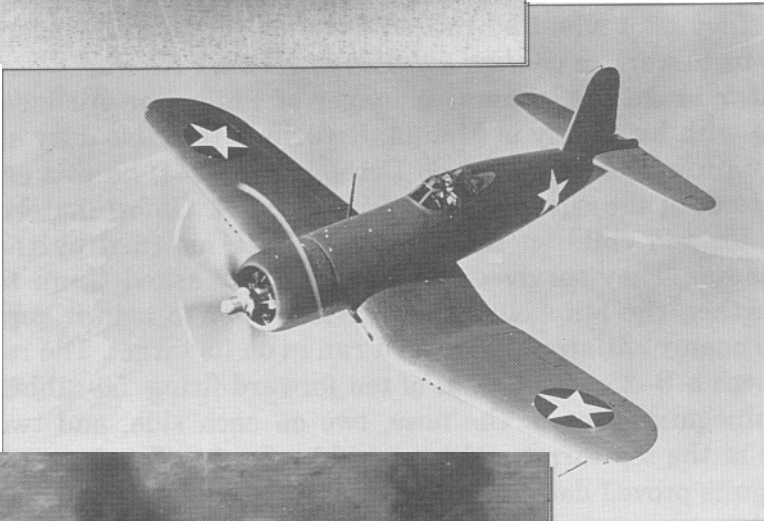


CENTER: Kenney used the long-range twin-engine Lockheed P-38 Lightning to secure air superiority for the Allies over the Southwest Pacific.

BOTTOM: A Douglas A-20 Havoc drops parachute-retarded fragmentation bombs over a Japanese Mitsubishi G4M bomber (Allied code name "Betty").



**LEFT:** Japanese ground defenses were formidable. An A-20, on fire from a hit in its bomb bay, plunges into the sea, narrowly missing a squadron-mate.



**CENTER:** The impressive Vought F4U-1 Corsair, operated by Navy and Marine pilots from island bases, also thwarted Japanese efforts to contest growing Allied air power.

**BOTTOM:** Allied aircraft vigorously attacked Japanese fighter and bomber bases in New Guinea. Two Nakajima Ki-43 fighters (Allied code name "Oscar") burn after being riddled with shrapnel from exploding fragmentation bombs.

approach an enemy ship at very low altitudes, even below mast height, and release its bombs as it closed in. Each bomb skipped, much like a rock thrown in a flat trajectory across a pond, before impacting against the ship's side or near its waterline.

The problem of antiaircraft fire was lessened somewhat by the low altitude and high speed of the B-25; however, Japanese gunners still were a threat. Kenney turned to one of the Fifth Air Force's most colorful figures, Maj. Paul I. "Pappy" Gunn. A maintenance officer, Major Gunn was a former Navy pilot who had retired from military service before the war to work in civilian aviation in Hawaii. He was, when the war broke out, general manager of Philippine Airlines, living with his family in Manila. Returning to active duty as a captain in the Air Corps on December 8, 1941, he was ordered out of the islands just before they fell. Unfortunately, his wife and children remained and were interned by the Japanese. (They survived the war.) Kenney asked Gunn to strengthen the Mitchell with more firepower to help it suppress enemy antiaircraft fire as it ran in on its target. The result was a B-25 with a total of ten forward-firing .50-caliber machineguns—four in the nose, two on each side, and two more in the top turret—which could be fixed to fire forward. The guns proved devastating, turning the Mitchell into a formidable sea attacker and ground strafers.

The Fifth Air Force also produced the "parafrog"—a parachute-retarded fragmentation bomb dropped primarily on enemy airfields by speedy low-level attackers like the B-25 and Douglas A-20 Havoc. Delayed explosions allowed the aircraft to escape the destructive blasts of their bombs.

## **Waging Air War on the Convoys**

As the Fifth Air Force steadily increased its capabilities with reinforcements, artillery, and even armored vehicles, the bitter fighting around Buna was nearing an end. Most of the Allied troops and many of their supplies arrived by air at bases hacked out of the tall kunai grass just a few miles behind the front. Located near villages with strange names like Dobodura, Soputa, and Popondetta, these bases proved crucial in turning the tide of battle against the Japanese. Very



slowly but persistently, the Allies pushed them back into an ever-contracting perimeter. On November 21, 1942, Admiral Ugaki drearily noted in his diary:

Buna has been entirely encircled. About fifty enemy planes attacked there today, and the situation worsened . . . Therefore we reached the conclusion that our policy . . . should be to wait and watch over the situation while securing strategic points on the one hand. This means that we will have to give up Buna, to our great regret.

Despite the certainty of defeat, the Japanese continued to fight, and the battle dragged on. Allied intelligence intercepted two radio reports from Buna on December 29:

. . . four enemy tanks are attacking the headquarters landing party; we are burning the code book.

. . . we are destroying the radio sets at 1710.

Three days later, on January 1, surviving Japanese troops took to the water, attempting to swim to their lines farther northwest along the coast. Harassed by fire from Allied forces offshore, their futile exodus lasted until the next morning, when artillery fire and attacks by Fifth Air Force P-39s and B-25s, along with Australian Wirraways (small, two-place, single-engine attack airplanes patterned on the North American AT-6 Texan advanced trainer), brought it to an unpleasant end. That day marked the end of the Buna campaign. The two Japanese Army and Navy commanders, Col. Hiroshi Yamamoto and Capt. Yoshitatsu Yasuda, committed ritual suicide rather than risk capture. Of the Fifth Air Force's and the Royal Australian Air Force's instrumental roles in the Allied victory at Buna General MacArthur wrote:

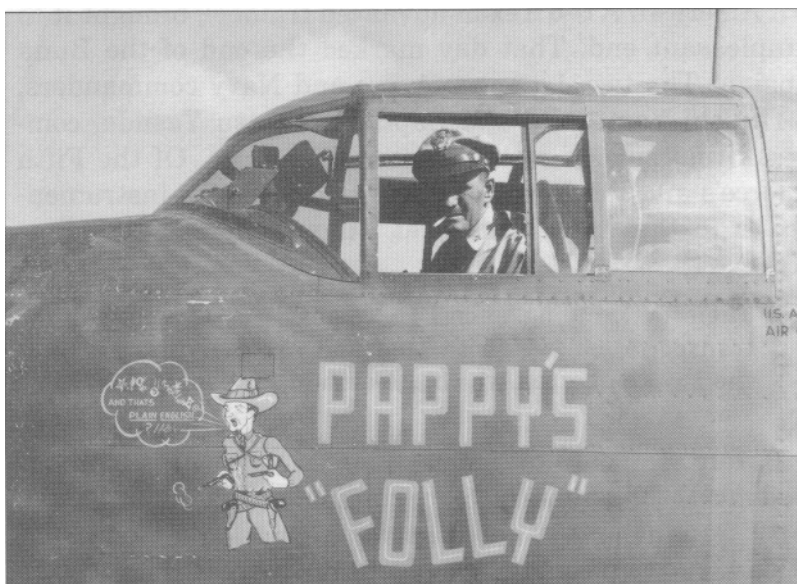
Their outstanding efforts in combat, supply, and transportation over both land and sea constituted the key-stone upon which the arch of the campaign was erected.

Barely pausing to catch their breath, Allied troops moved north on January 5, beginning an all-out offensive against Sanananda, situated between Buna and Gona. The next day, cued by signals intelligence (SIGINT), their recon-

## Stopping Japanese Coastal Traffic

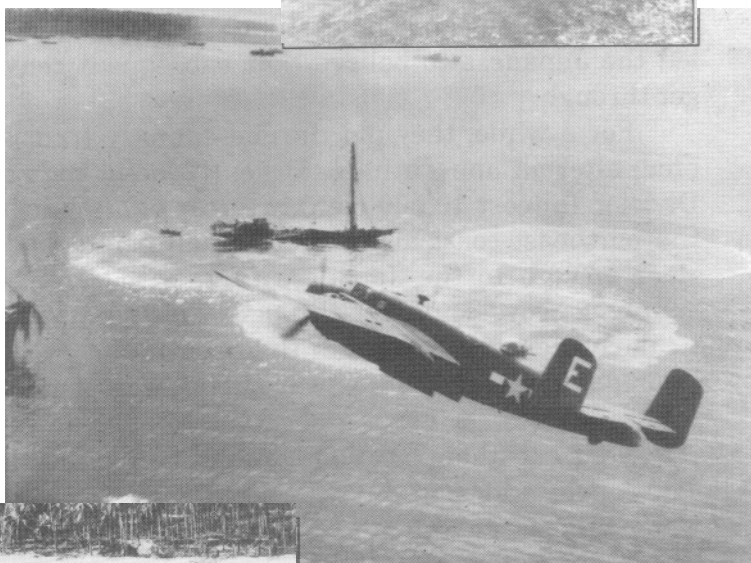
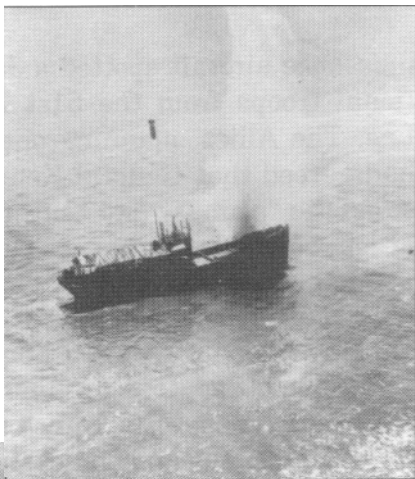


Kenney's airmen modified North American's powerful twin-engine B-25 Mitchell bomber into a potent anti-shipping aircraft, armed with heavy machine guns and bombs. Looking for trouble, four prowl the New Guinea coast.

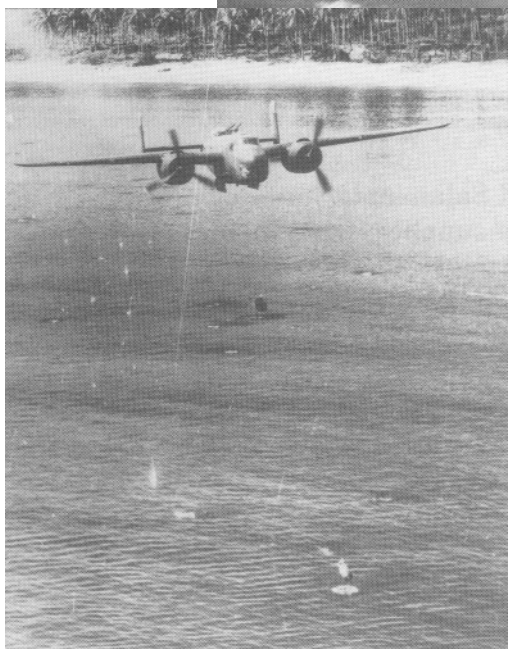


Maj. Paul I. "Pappy" Gunn, Kenney's legendary innovator, in the cockpit of his colorful B-25 commerce destroyer, *Pappy's Folly*.

**RIGHT:** A 500-pound bomb is about to hit a small Japanese supply vessel.



**CENTER:** By day, Kenney's strafers effectively halted coastal traffic around New Guinea. A B-25 circles over a shattered boat after a devastating attack. By night, American PT torpedo boats patrolled coastlines, sinking barges and tugs.



**LEFT:** One of the most spectacular and successful innovations was skip-bombing. Dropped from just above the water, bombs would skip like stones across a pond into the vulnerable sides of Japanese ships. A B-25 demonstrates the technique. One bomb has already skipped off the water's surface; another has just left the plane's bomb-bay.

naissance aircraft spotted a Japanese convoy (carrying additional troops from the 51st Division at Rabaul) bound for Lae. The Allies, planning operations after the fall of Buna, had agreed that General Kenney's Fifth Air Force would assume the "primary and continuing responsibility" for the isolation of enemy forces in New Guinea. Allied aircraft set upon the Lae convoy, bombing it continuously over several days. Nevertheless, an estimated 4,000 replacement troops made it safely to port, working feverishly to unload supplies. The convoy departed on January 9. Of five transports and five destroyer escorts, only two transports were lost. These affordable losses and successful arrivals of men and materiel led the Japanese to believe that subsequent convoys would get through.

For a while, they did. In mid-January transports delivered, after an uneventful passage, the main body of the 20th Division (almost 10,000 men) to forces fighting in Wewak, on the northeast coast above the Papuan peninsula. It seemed clear enough to the Japanese that, with careful planning, supply convoys could get through. This revelation was particularly welcome in light of their continuing failures on the ground; they had been driven out of Wau, for example, by Australia's Kanga Force and its air reinforcements. As they retreated and their positions around Lae and Salamaua became more and more vulnerable to aerial attack, the stage was being set for the most dramatic convoy battle of all—in the Bismarck Sea.

## **A Massive Convoy Forms**

The Japanese in Lae and Salamaua, worn down by constant fighting and inadequate supplies, were to be bolstered from Rabaul by Eighteenth Army Headquarters and the bulk of the 51st Division—6,900 men in all who grouped for transference to Lae during the last few days of February 1943. Combined with 3,500 holding the line, they would constitute a daunting force. Meanwhile, General Kenney had surmised that the Japanese were preparing to run another convoy from New Britain to New Guinea; reconnaissance flights had noted increased shipping in Rabaul Harbor and repairs underway at Gasmata airfield. On February 19 SIGINT re-

vealed that troops were heading for Lae in early March. Additional SIGINT would keep Kenney aware of the convoy's movement. The ever-resourceful Australian, Group Capt. Garing, saw an opportunity developing and encouraged Kenney to mount a massive Allied aerial onslaught against the convoy.

In response, the Fifth Air Force increased its reconnaissance flights over the Bismarck Sea beginning in the last week of February. Kenney ordered his aircraft, particularly the formidable twin-engine, long-range Lockheed P-38 Lightning fighters and B-25 ship-busters, ferried over the Owen Stanley Mountains to airfields on the east side of New Guinea, away from the vagaries of high-altitude weather and possible grounding. He also delayed a raid on Rabaul, allowing his bomber squadrons to attain full strength in time for the fight, and he organized coordinated attacks by a wide range of Allied bombers, including American B-17s, B-24s, B-25s and A-20s, and Australian Bristol Beaufighter and Beaufort antishipping aircraft. At Garing's urging, he assigned his deputy, Brig. Gen. Ennis C. Whitehead, to conduct large-scale training exercises. Allied airmen flew practice attacks against the SS *Pruth*, an abandoned ship that had run aground on Nateara Reef in Port Moresby Harbor. These training sorties were both realistic and risky. Two Allied planes were damaged by their own bomb blasts and another crashed after colliding with the ship's mast. Meanwhile, coastal forecasts for the first few days of March over New Britain indicated bad weather in the north and good weather in the south. Both Kenney and Whitehead, speculating on how they might direct such a convoy, concluded that the Japanese would use the bad weather to conceal their movements. Having considered the range of available aircraft and the probable route of the convoy, they predicted the ideal time of attack—"ten o'clock in the morning some day during the first week of March . . . just off Finschhafen."

## **The Battle of the Bismarck Sea**

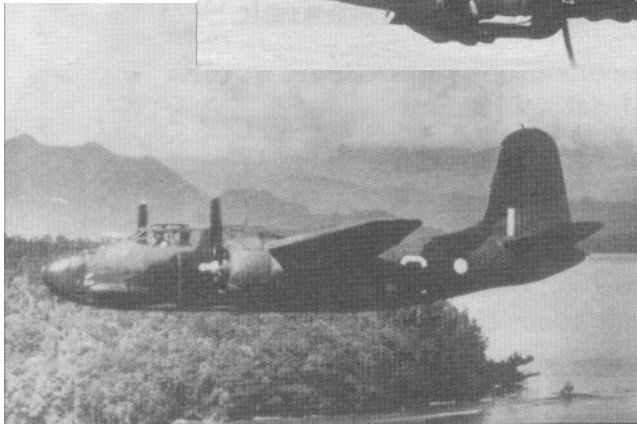
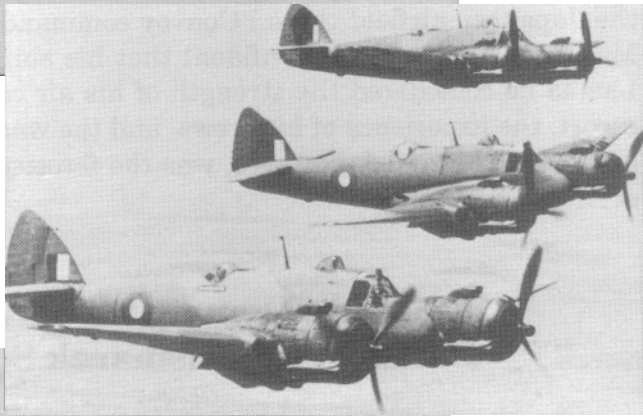
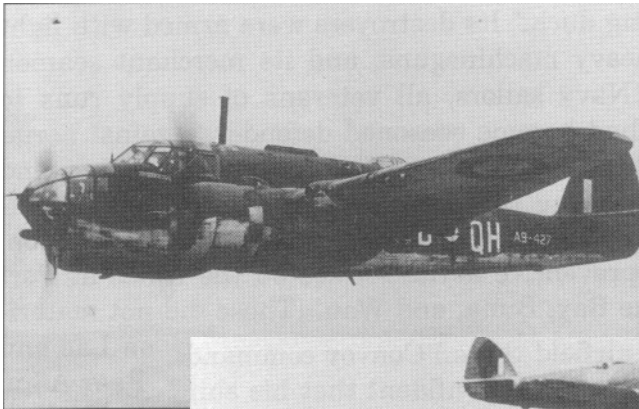
Late on February 28, a convoy of sixteen ships—eight escorting destroyers and eight transports—left Rabaul for Lae. Shielded by Japanese Army and Navy fighters, it was

## **A Vital Partner: The Royal Australian Air Force**

One of Australia's most creative air tacticians was Group Capt. William H. "Bull" Garing, a charismatic and tenacious veteran of both the European and Pacific wars. (Photo courtesy RAAF)



Equipped with British and American aircraft, the Royal Australian Air Force vigorously contested the Japanese for control of New Guinea. Australian-flown Consolidated-Vultee PBY-5 Catalina flying boats performed reconnaissance, maritime patrol, and night attack duties. (Photo courtesy RAAF)



**TOP:** The Royal Australian Air Force operated the British-designed Bristol Beaufort torpedo bomber . . . (Photo courtesy RAAF)

**CENTER:** . . . as well as its derivative, the powerful and heavily armed two-seat Bristol Beaufighter, which the Japanese nicknamed "Whispering Death." (Photo courtesy RAAF)

**BOTTOM:** It also operated the American A-20, adding extra nose guns to make it a formidable strafe. In RAAF service the A-20 was known by its British name, Boston. (Photo courtesy RAAF)

hardly a “sitting duck.” Its destroyers were armed with light cannon and heavy machineguns, and its merchant seamen and Imperial Navy sailors, all veterans of supply runs to Guadalcanal, had become seasoned defenders against aerial attack. The Japanese had wisely divided both cargo and fighting units among the different ships to achieve a relatively balanced force landing should losses occur. In addition, they planned preventive aerial strikes on the Allies at Port Moresby, Milne Bay, Buna, and Wau. (These did not materialize; in fact, the RAAF made preventive strikes on Lae and the Japanese airfield there.) Convoy commander, Rear Adm. Masatomi Kimura, was confident that his ships would reach Lae as he considered the strength of his air cover and naval escort, the experience of his crews, and the weather. What he had underestimated, however, was the ferocity and intensity of Allied resistance.

## **Japanese Convoy Structure Battle of the Bismarck Sea**

### **Commander of Convoy and Escort Forces**

Rear Adm. Masatomi Kimura

### **Commander of Transport Vessels**

Capt. Kametaro Matsumoto

### **Destroyer Escort Force**

*Arashio,\* Asashio,\* Shirayuki,\* Tokitsukaze,\*  
Asagumo, Shikinami, Uranami, Yukikaze*

### **Transport Force**

<i>Aiyo Maru*</i>	2,746 tons
<i>Kembu Maru*</i>	953 tons
<i>Kyokusei Maru*</i>	5,493 tons
<i>Oigawa Maru*</i>	6,493 tons
<i>Shinai Maru*</i>	3,793 tons
<i>Taimai Maru*</i>	2,882 tons
<i>Teiyo Maru*</i>	6,869 tons
<i>Nojima*</i>	4,500 tons

\*Sunk



After leaving Rabaul, the convoy sailed southwest through the night, buffeted by a storm with gale-force winds and lashing rain. Spume blew from the waves, forming a thick mist which hampered visibility and fostered hope among the Japanese that their voyage might proceed undetected. The weather continued to deteriorate the following day. Even so, and unfortunately for Kimura, the convoy was momentarily spotted and its position signaled in the Bismarck Sea on March 1 by a Port Moresby-based Consolidated-Vultee B-24 Liberator from the 321st Bombardment Squadron, 90th Bomb Group; but, worsening weather prevented reconnaissance planes from locating the convoy again until 0815 on March 2.

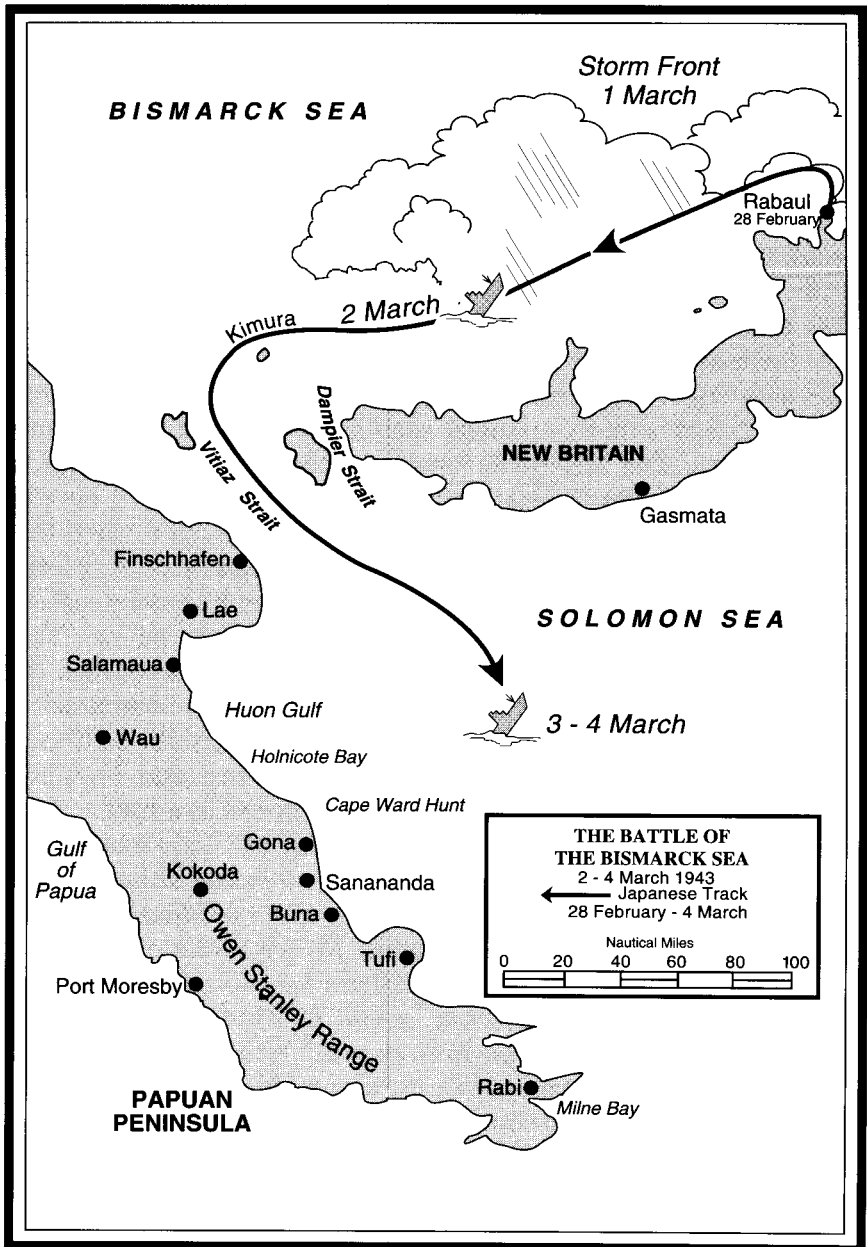
It was still out of range for all but the heavy bombers, when, within two hours of its rediscovery, Kenney opened the battle with a strike by twenty-nine Flying Fortresses and another by eleven later that morning. By that afternoon, the *Kyokusei Maru* had sunk and the navy transports *Nojima* and *Teiyo Maru* were both mortally damaged. Two Japanese aircraft attempting to defend the convoy were also shot down. About 950 men were pulled from the water onto the destroyers *Yukikaze* and *Asagumo*, both proceeding at high speed ahead of the convoy, and delivered to Lae. The two lucky ships—for they survived the battle—returned to the convoy before daybreak the next morning. Throughout the night, a single Cairns-based Australian twin-engine Consolidated-Vultee PBY Catalina seaplane from 11 Squadron shadowed the convoy and heckled it with small bombs before handing it over to an American B-17 in the early hours of March 3. Having passed through the Vitiaz Strait between New Britain and Rook Island into the Solomon Sea, Admiral Kimura made a fatal mistake. Instead of heading straight for Lae, he foolishly circled in the darkness and delayed his arrival until the following morning. The convoy was still well at sea when Allied ship-hunters returned at dawn.

Early on March 3, as the convoy steamed off the Huon Peninsula, several twin-engine Australian Bristol Beaufort torpedo bombers from 100 Squadron at Milne Bay set out in pursuit. However, all but three were prevented by bad weather from reaching their quarry. The first two Beauforts opened up at 0625, the third at 0700. When the third's tor-

pedo failed to release, it began to strafe the *Shinai Maru*, causing minor damage. The Beauforts returned to Milne Bay in time for the form-up of the main Allied attack. From scattered airfields across New Guinea and northeast Australia, bombers, attack aircraft, and fighters lifted into the air, as RAAF A-20s returned to Lae to continue the suppression of Japanese air power. Witnesses to events later recalled that they had never before seen such a large Allied force over New Guinea. Certainly, it was the largest Allied land-based air armada massed for a single operation in the southwest Pacific to that time.

By 0930 the first elements of the strike force had assembled off Cape Ward Hunt. At 1000, thirteen B-17s escorted by sixteen P-38s bombed the convoy from medium altitude, less to hit it than to break up its defensive formation and leave individual ships vulnerable to low-level attackers. Immediately thereafter, thirteen snub-nosed Australian Bristol Beaufighters, each armed with four 20-mm. cannon in the nose and six .303-caliber machineguns in the wings, began to run toward their targets. Beefy American B-25s followed so closely that the two formations merged. Other aircraft circled the convoy from all directions. As the "Beaus" closed in, they came under heavy and accurate anti-aircraft fire. As if this were not enough, they entered a blanketing shower of drop tanks jettisoned by P-38s maneuvering to engage oncoming enemy fighters. Fortunately, none of the Beaufighters was hit and they continued past the destroyer screen, pressing on toward the transports. Once past the destroyers, the plucky Australians climbed to attack altitude, then dove on their hapless targets, engulfing them in a welter of exploding cannon shells and raking machinegun fire, silencing anti-aircraft guns and hammering bridges and upper works. The deck cargo of one ship exploded in an enormous ball of flame. An observer on one Beaufighter described the fighting in vivid terms:

You've gone around behind the warships, but they're still banging away with their big guns, pom-poms, and ack-ack. You can see tracers whipping by. A cargo ship is in the sights. She's camouflaged and has goalpost masts. She looks blurred at first, but then comes into focus. The first thunder of fire



gives you a shock. It jars at your feet, and you see the tracers lashing out ahead of you, and orange lights dance before your eyes on the grey structure of the ship.

Flying with the Australians were Pappy Gunn's heavily armed, sea-skimming B-25s from the 90th Attack Squadron, commanded by Maj. Ed Larner; above them were conventional B-25s, bombing from high altitude. Perhaps mistaking the modified Mitchells and Beaufighters for torpedo bombers, like the Beauforts that attacked at night, the Japanese skipper turned their ships directly toward the fast approaching Allied aircraft. By doing so they presented the smallest possible targets to the torpedoes, but ironically, enabled the heavily armed attackers to rake the ships fore to aft with devastating firepower. Sheets of flame from the bombers' noses fooled some Japanese into believing the B-25s had caught fire. The Mitchells continued the deadly work begun by the Beaufighters, but they also carried 500-pound bombs which filled the air as they skipped across the sea toward the waiting hulls of the Lae convoy. One Beaufighter pilot briefly flew formation with a 500-pound bomb that had bounced off the water and was headed for the same ship as he. The Mitchells dropped thirty-seven bombs in all, seventeen of which hit their targets. Kenney's A-20 Havocs scored with eleven of twenty 500-pounders. As the aircraft pulled off-target, the sea was littered with debris; listing and burning ships, their bridge crews already dead, slowed to a halt.

High over the sea, an equally deadly struggle ensued as Japanese fighters desperately tried to save the ships below. One B-17, piloted by Lt. Woodrow Moore, shuddered under enemy attack and burst into flame. Moore broke off, pulling away from his formation and unloading his bombs. As the Flying Fortress disintegrated, seven of its eleven crewmen bailed out, only to be machine-gunned by Japanese fighter fire as they hung helplessly in their parachutes.

At this point, the convoy was ablaze. Every ship but one had been hit, and most of the blazing transports were sunk, sinking, or abandoned. Aerial attacks continued all morning, followed by a short respite as Allied aircraft returned to base to refuel and rearm. That afternoon, they eagerly returned to swarm over the floating inferno in a grim aerial circus. By

day's end, all eight transports and three of the eight destroyers had slipped beneath the sea or were awash and about to sink. A fourth was badly damaged but afloat. As the remaining destroyers retreated hastily northward from the area, they rescued numerous survivors from the water.

Meanwhile, U.S. Navy personnel based at Milne Bay and Tufi, 125 miles to the northwest, had been plotting the advance of the Japanese convoy and planning their own patrol torpedo (PT) boat attacks. Ten of the swift PT boats sortied against the convoy on the night of March 3–4. Two boats hit debris in the water and were forced to abort. The others continued on, finding only one abandoned vessel, the *Oigawa Maru*. At 1120 hours PT-143 and PT-150 each launched a single torpedo, and the derelict quickly sank. The next day, as RAAF Beaufighters and Kenney's B-25s raided Japanese installations near Lae, other Mitchells located the remaining badly damaged Japanese destroyer and quickly sent it to the bottom. Over the next few days, PT boats and Allied aircraft combed the waters off the Huon Peninsula searching for Japanese survivors and strafing and bombing them mercilessly. It was, Australian historian Alan Stephens noted,

a grim and bloody work which many of the crews found nauseating, but, as one RAAF Beaufighter pilot said, "every enemy they prevented from getting ashore was one less for their Army colleagues to face."

American naval historian, Samuel Eliot Morison, likewise wrote:

It was a grisly task, but a military necessity since Japanese soldiers do not surrender and, within swimming distance of shore, they could not be allowed to land and join the Lae garrison.

By March 31, three-fourths of the convoy's ships and all but one of its transports had been sunk. The Japanese 51st Division had essentially ceased to exist. Three-thousand of the 6,900 troops in the convoy were missing. Many perished by various causes—bombing, strafing, exposure, thirst, or shark attacks. Others struggled ashore, only to choose death over capture. A few managed to join Japanese forces there, but most did not survive the New Guinea campaign.

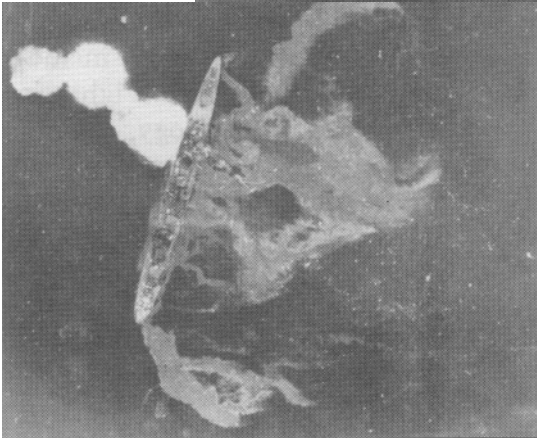
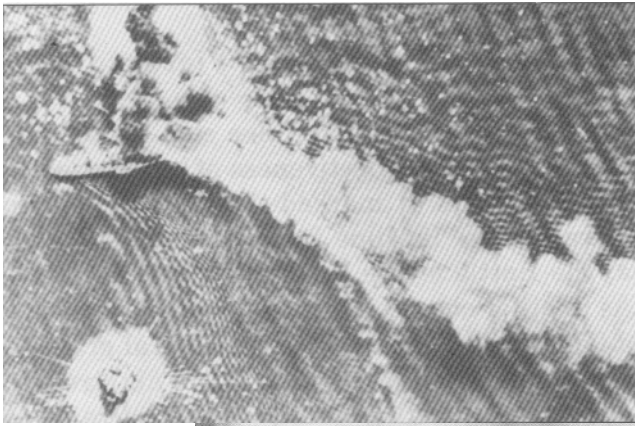
# The Battle of the Bismarck Sea

**RIGHT:** The Battle of the Bismarck Sea represented the decisive application of Allied air power against Japanese shipping. A B-25, caught by an observer in an Australian Beaufighter, bombs and strafes an enemy freighter while its first target burns in the background. (Photo courtesy RAAF)



**CENTER:** Two B-25s circle a desperately maneuvering and doomed Japanese ship.

**BOTTOM:** A pilot's view of a Japanese ship passing beneath him.



**TOP:** Badly hit, burning, and exploding, a Japanese freighter slews out of control despite desperate maneuvering as it slows to a halt.

**CENTER:** Aftermath of an aerial attack (I). A Japanese freighter burns before sinking off the New Guinea coast.

**BOTTOM:** Aftermath of an aerial attack (II). A seriously damaged Japanese destroyer stops dead in the water, streaming oil from its ruptured fuel tanks, before sinking.

## **Bismarck Sea: A Notable Air Power Victory**

Today, the Battle of the Bismarck Sea still stands as a striking example of the deadly effectiveness of land-based air power against naval targets. It marked the turning point in the New Guinea campaign. If Milne Bay was the “Coral Sea” of New Guinea, the Battle of the Bismarck Sea was clearly its “Midway.” As in other successful battles, victory depended on a number of factors. The Japanese made several grave errors. First, they seriously underestimated Allied air strength. Despite their original intent, they failed to neutralize Allied air bases before their convoy sailed within striking range of Allied aircraft. Also, they failed to provide sufficient cover for their ships or to safeguard their coded message traffic. Then, there was Admiral Kimura’s imprudent decision to remain at sea rather than run for shore after the convoy’s first encounters with the USAAF and the RAAF.

For their part, Allied aircrews were well-trained, highly motivated, and full of youthful confidence. They had developed the new antishipping tactic of skip-bombing and had practiced it assiduously. Also, their leaders—Kenney, Whitehead, and Garing—had a clear idea of how to wield air power: apply a maximum amount of force in the minimum amount of time. Allied intelligence was excellent; it included photographs, visual reconnaissance, and SIGINT. Fighter escorts benefited from topnotch tactics, technology, training, and motivation. Even initial anti-convoy operations, as disappointing as they were, gave the Allies valuable experience. The resulting catastrophe, then, is hardly surprising. It was predictable, even inevitable. The Battle of the Bismarck Sea stunned the Japanese. One destroyer skipper, Tameichi Hara, expressed their uniform dismay:

More shocking to me was the Battle of the Bismarck Sea. Japan’s defeat there was unbelievable. Never was there such a debacle.

Two weeks after the last battered ship had slipped beneath the disturbed waters of the Huon gulf, the Japanese high command announced its decision that, in future, every soldier would be taught to swim. The decision was a prudent one for the Battle of the Bismarck Sea would be just a foretaste of the terrible toll land-based bombers would take of



Japanese shipping from 1943 through the final collapse in 1945, particularly of convoys along the China coast.

Theater commander General MacArthur described the Battle of the Bismarck Sea as “the decisive aerial engagement” in his area of responsibility. It was, he signaled Kenney, “one of the most complete and annihilating combats of all time.” As a result, the Japanese ceased resupplying their hard-pressed troops on New Guinea by means of large, exposed ship convoys. They sent, instead, fewer numbers of air transports, submarines, small motor vessels, and barges, but Allied aerial attacks exacted a dreadful price from even these as they hugged the coasts in desperate and sporadic operations. Eventually, a series of punishing assaults by Kenney’s airmen over the summer of 1943 against the enemy base at Wewak sealed the fate of the Japanese forces left on the island.

By the end of 1943, the outcome was clear: land-based Allied air power had effectively blockaded New Guinea. The success of American and Australian airmen against Imperial Japan’s naval forces became an important example for all future conflicts.

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