

CHAPTER 2

THE COMBINED FORCE

Four main aircraft types would form the attacking force:

- 59 Liberators from the 22nd (*Red Raiders*), 43rd (*Ken's Men*) and 90th (*Jolly Rogers*) Heavy Bombardment Groups
- 51 Mitchells from the 38th *Sunsetter* and 345th *Air Apache* BGs
- 87 A-20Gs from the 3rd Bombardment Group *Grim Reapers* and the 312th and 417th *Sky Lancer* Light Bombardment Groups.
- The total fighter force comprised 80 Lightnings from the 475th and 8th Fighter Groups. This escort force was originally intended to include three squadrons from the 35th FG totalling 48 P-47D Thunderbolts to greet and escort home incoming bombers, however in the end all three squadrons aborted when recalled by 19th Sector Fighter Control due to the weather, or decisions by the squadron commanders.

Assigned to conduct photographic reconnaissance of both the Hollandia and Tadjia areas before and after the strike were six 20th Combat Mapping Squadron F-7As (converted Liberators), along with a mixture of six F-5As and two F-5Bs (converted Lightnings) from the 8th, 25th and 26th PRS. Separately Blackcat PBV-5 Catalinas from VP-34 were strategically moving to various locations including Saidor and Langemak Bay near Finschhafen to rescue crews who might ditch or need offshore rescue. These included Lieutenant Norman Paxton flying PBV #72 in the vicinity of Manum Island and Lieutenant (jg) Nathan Gordon in #61.

Both the F-5 reconnaissance Lightning and F-7A reconnaissance Liberator entered the theatre painted blue for high altitude camouflage. The Japanese had quickly come to realise that any blue aircraft played a reconnaissance role. In addition, the blue paint reduced the F-5's cruise speed by ten miles per hour. The distinctive colour of both types thus ear-marked targets of Allied interest to the Japanese. Accordingly, by April 1944 units which operated reconnaissance Lightnings were in the process of paint-stripping their mounts down to natural metal finish. The F-7As would soon follow.

The 20th CMS F-7As had deployed to New Guinea in April 1944 as the first multi-engine reconnaissance unit assigned to the Fifth Air Force. The F-7As were Liberator airframes, factory-converted in Minnesota by removing the bomb racks and adding two fuel tanks in the forward bomb bay. The aft bomb bay was also converted into a photo bay with mounts and windows for two vertical reconnaissance cameras, mostly 9 x 18-inch format K-18 cameras with f6.0 lenses of 24-inch focal length. Three suites of mapping cameras