

INTRODUCTION

This fifth volume of the *South Pacific Air War* series chronicles the air war in New Guinea from 9 September until 31 December 1942. It can be read alone or as a continuation of the first four volumes which span the first nine months of the Pacific War.

As explained in *Volume 4*, after the American invasion of Guadalcanal on 7 August, the Solomons became a separate and distinct theatre from the Allied perspective. Then, from early September the Fifth Air Force was formed to control and coordinate USAAF and RAAF units in New Guinea, and it is the activities of these units (plus some operating from northern Queensland) that form the basis of this volume.

Note that the New Guinea/Solomons boundary was often blurred around southern Bougainville, with Fifth Air Force units often venturing into the northern Solomons. Likewise Allied air units from Guadalcanal sometimes ventured into New Guinea air space. However, from the Japanese standpoint there was no geographical delineation between these areas, all of which formed their single “South Seas” theatre. Indeed, regular reference is made to events in the Solomons in this volume. Not only was Japanese airpower extensively engaged there, but the knife-edge nature of critical campaigns meant that the Fifth Air Force was at times directed to attack targets such as Rabaul and the Shortlands area to relieve pressure on Guadalcanal.

The subtitle *Crisis in Papua* is apt because against this background the Japanese advance over the Owen Stanley Ranges posed an immediate threat to Port Moresby and its invaluable airbases. The Fifth Air Force was quickly directed to the new roles of close support and aerial supply of ground forces, while also trying to interdict Japanese convoys.

The strategic picture evolved remarkably quickly during subsequent months, ending with the Battle of Buna-Gona in November and December. During this period Allied aerial attrition reached an all-time high, reflecting rapidly increasing activity which eclipsed that seen in previous months.

The Japanese too were forced to adapt their air power in the face of horrific losses in the Solomons, caused by their decision to staunchly defend Guadalcanal. In November the entire IJN air force was tactically restructured, while at the same time key JAAF units were redeployed from Southeast Asia to reinforce New Guinea. These initial JAAF units would experience their first combat in this strange new theatre before the year ended.

Never before has this campaign been chronicled in such detail, with Allied accounts matched against Japanese records for a truly factual account of the conflict.

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