

## CHAPTER 3

### INDEPENDENCE DAY REGIONAL OPERATIONS 1-7 JULY

The raid by Australian troops against Heath's Plantation near Lae unfolded in the early hours of 1 July. From around 0500 that morning some coordinated air support was planned to cover the withdrawal of the Australians. Two RAAF Catalinas dropped a mix of 20- and 500-pound bombs on Lae's airfield, while formations of B-25s and B-26s bombed the town and a ship at the wharf. However bad weather hampered the attacks, with three out of six B-26s and a third Catalina unable to find the target. During the day six more B-26s bombed Salamaua, while two B-17s couldn't find Lae due to heavy overcast: one jettisoned its bombs 50 miles from the target area and the other returned with its bombs to Port Moresby.

That morning three Zeros strafed the road out of Lae but none of the Australians were hit. The Australian raids resulted in a sharp Japanese response, both in the air and on the ground. Among the ground reinforcements available to aggressively hunt the Australians in coming days was a detachment of the 5<sup>th</sup> Sasebo SNLF which had arrived at Lae from Truk on the *Kinai Maru* on 30 June. This was the ship targeted by the B-25s early that morning. It was undamaged and sailed for Truk on 1 July, arriving two days later.

However, it was obvious to the Japanese that the Australian raiders had come from the mountain strongholds of Wau and Bulolo. On 2 and 3 July a *chutai* of nine No. 4 *Ku* Bettys, each carrying 12 x 60-kilogram bombs, targeted these centres. At Bulolo a building used by the army as a store house received a direct hit and two soldiers were killed. At Wau six houses were destroyed and a number of natives were wounded. The incident adversely affected the morale of natives which the Australians depended on to carry supplies and many, terrified by the bombs, deserted.

After these raids some Bettys returned to Vunakanau while others landed at Lae and then made further raids before returning home. Among the targets was Gabmatzung Mission which was further upstream along the Markham River from Heath's. These raids were accompanied by strafing attacks by Zeros. Although there were some close escapes, there were no Australian casualties as a result of these attacks.

Despite the Allied air attacks on Lae, the Tainan *Ku* detachment there remained as busy as ever. On 2 July pilots flying defensive Combat Air Patrols flew 28 sorties and another 26 sorties the following day. Two more C5M reconnaissances of the Kokoda area were also flown on 3 July with escorting Zeros. During one of these escort missions, after the C5M turned back for Lae, *shotai* Lieutenant Kurihara Katsumi could not resist leading his *shotai* of three Zeros on a sweep over Port Moresby. A brief attacking pass on three Airacobras was made, but the Americans were able to take evasive action. Kurihara then led his trio back to Lae.