

## CHAPTER 11

### **EMERGENCY! MILNE BAY 23 AUGUST – 8 SEPTEMBER**

As noted in Chapter 10, from mid-August there were strong indications of an imminent Japanese offensive in the New Guinea theatre, and accordingly the garrison at Milne Bay was put on high alert. Ground forces at Milne Bay had been strengthened with the arrival of the 18<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the Australian Imperial Force, part of the veteran 7<sup>th</sup> Division which had returned to Australia from the Middle East in recent months. By 22 August, Milne Force, commanded by Major-General Cyril Clowes, comprised some 8,824 troops. However only about half of this total was infantry, and it included 1,365 Americans, mostly from engineer units. Importantly, the Milne Force command included ground and air force units, so that Clowes had direct control of the Kittyhawks of Nos. 75 and 76 Squadrons and the forward detachment of Hudsons from Nos. 6 and 32 Squadrons.

The awaited Japanese offensive would indeed target Milne Bay, and was both two-pronged and an all-naval affair: no IJA troops would be utilised. This gave the IJN planners at Rabaul (and Tokyo) flexibility to quickly enact a plan without lengthy and formal negotiations with their IJA counterparts. The intention had originally been to establish a forward seaplane base and an 800 metre long airfield on the small island of Samarai, but this was changed to the occupation of nearby Milne Bay following the discovery of the Allied base there in early August. Because Milne Bay had only been established for a short time, it was assumed that ground defences there were relatively thin and hence the limited number of naval troops available would suffice for the task.

The capture of Milne Bay airfield also offered another irresistible strategic objective: it would provide a forward airfield to facilitate the capture of Port Moresby, an objective still exercising the minds of Japanese high command. The destruction of the Allied cruiser squadron off Savo Island on the night of 8/9 August also gave Vice-Admiral Mikawa the encouragement he needed to launch the campaign. Mikawa assessed that without cruisers, the USN was unlikely to send its carriers to resist the Milne Bay invasion.

The first part of the IJN plan was innovative, using barges to transport part of the 5<sup>th</sup> Sasebo SNLF (353 men) from Buna to a landing point on the Papuan coast. These troops could then advance a short distance overland to threaten Milne Bay from the north, with the barge movement including an overnight stop at Goodenough Island. However, the main operation would be via a conventional convoy that would land a larger force of troops on the coast just east of the Milne Bay base. This comprised 612 men of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Kure SNLF and 197 men from the 5<sup>th</sup> Sasebo SNLF, together with 362 construction troops from the 10<sup>th</sup> Establishment Unit. The units would take with them two light tanks, two 37mm guns and two 70mm artillery pieces. These movements were timed to coincide with the arrival of Zeros at Buna, where detachments from the Tainan