

CHAPTER 12

TAINAN KU ANNIHILATED! NEW GUINEA 23 AUGUST – 8 SEPTEMBER

Allied reconnaissance kept a keen eye on Lae and Buna, with 40 fighters noted at the former on 22 August and 30 fighters reported at Buna two days later. While these numbers were over-estimates and those seen at Lae included several non-operational airframes that had been there for some time, the Allies had nonetheless successfully detected the first deployment of Zeros to the newly operational airfield at Buna.

The Allied response was swift. An immediate strafing attack was ordered by Airacobras, as Buna was easily within the operational reach of P-39s from Port Moresby. However, the first attempts were frustrated by the ongoing bad weather which continued to scour the entire eastern half of New Guinea. It was not until first light on 26 August that eight P-400s from the 80th FS succeeded in taking off from Twelve-Mile, albeit in the face of heavy rain. Unfortunately, two fighters quickly aborted due to technical problems, including the squadron CO Captain Phil Greasely.

The six remaining Airacobras arrived over Buna at 0725 and commenced a steep diving approach. The attack could not have been timed better as they found two trios of Zeros making their take-off runs. These represented one *shotai* each from the Tainan and the No. 2 *Kokutai* who were operating closely together at Buna. Lieutenant Bill Brown and his wingman Lieutenant Danny Roberts each found easy targets in the first trio. Barely airborne, FPO1c Iwase Ki'ichi and FPO3c Ihara Daizo from the No. 2 *Ku* were shot down in flames and killed. The trailing Airacobras accounted for a third Zero from the other trio, flown by FPO3c Nakano Kiyoshi of the Tainan *Ku*.

Using their speed the Airacobras pulled up steeply and doubled back to engage in low-level combat. Of the remaining three Zeros two more sustained hits but managed to land. Warrant Officer Tsunoda Kazuo was uninjured, however his Model 32 tail code Q-102 was abandoned at Buna due to damage incurred from Airacobras guns. It was an unusual patriotic donation airframe too, with the fuselage marking HK-872 indicating his Zero had been donated by a Korean businessman. During this final pass Lieutenant Gerald Rogers' P-400, with British serial BW112, was hit by AA fire. After successfully ditching his fighter near a coastal village, Rogers was fortunate to avoid Japanese troops in the area. With the help of friendly natives he eventually returned to Port Moresby after a month-long ordeal in the jungle.

During the combat FPO2c Yamazaki Ichirobei was seriously wounded by gunfire. He managed to return to Buna where he was evacuated by ship to Rabaul. From there he would soon be repatriated back to Japan by Mavis flying boat for long-term medical treatment. Luck had finally run out for Yamazaki, for only three days previously he had force-landed at Buna, receiving