

## CHAPTER 5

### The 26<sup>th</sup> *Hiko Sentai*

Classified as a light bomber / attack unit, the 26<sup>th</sup> *Sentai* only operated Ki-51s in the New Guinea theatre, despite some accounts stating they also operated *Hayabusa* there. Both the No. 2 and 3 *Chutai* were deployed from Clark Field, Luzon, to But airfield on 23 October 1943 under the command of the No. 3 *chutaicho* Captain Takano Kunihiko. These two *chutai* were equipped with the Mitsubishi Ki-51 and their assigned tasks focused on mounting ground attack missions and reconnaissance patrols, mainly in support of the 18<sup>th</sup> Army.

On 9 November a detachment of five of the No. 3 *Chutai*'s later-model Ki-51s moved to Alexishafen. These airframes had additional armour-plating, additional fuel tanks and hard-points to carry up to 200 kilograms of bombs under the wings. A few days after the Alexishafen detachment arrived, it was ordered to Cape Gloucester (Japanese name Tuluvu), from where it conducted alternate daily patrols of Vitiaz Strait. Known within the unit as the Tuluvu Expeditionary Force, the detachment installed a runway lighting system with flare pots for evening patrols.

Throughout late November the No. 3 *Chutai* conducted night shipping patrols, many of which were foiled by bad weather. In the last days of the month four light bombers attacked US infantry positions north of Finschhafen, and despite return fire none of the attackers was hit. The Ki-51s continued to reconnoiter Allied troop positions around Finschhafen on late afternoon missions but found no targets. Up against a lack of spare parts, both the Tuluvu and Alexishafen Ki-51 detachments struggled to keep even a modest inventory airworthy.

Overall the unit achieved limited success, yet the Tuluvu Expeditionary Force was singled out for commendation by the commander of the 6<sup>th</sup> *Hikoshidan*, Lieutenant-General Itahana Gi'ichi, when he issued his farewell speech after being relieved of command for alleged failure to prevent the destruction of JAAF forces on the ground in New Guinea. The two *chutai* were nominally withdrawn from New Guinea to Hollandia in late January 1944 due to ongoing Allied air attack, however the reality is that by this stage most of their Ki-51s had been destroyed.

*Chutai* colors were blue for the No. 2 *Chutai* commanded by Lieutenant Yoshida Tateki, and yellow for the No. 3 *Chutai*. The tail motif is an artistic and composite horizontal interpretation of the *kanji* number 26 (二十六). This same motif also appeared on the unit's No. 1 *Chutai* Ki-43-II *Hayabusa* however this *chutai* never served in New Guinea. Sometimes the motif had narrow white piping applied to accentuate it from the camouflage background. All Ki-51 airframes left the factory painted overall in a light ash blue/green. Each aircraft was individually camouflaged in the field in differing shades of green, ranging from overall schemes to mottled and snake-weave applications, and sometimes a combination of the two.