

CHAPTER 2

JAPANESE AIR POWER OVERVIEW

At the beginning of November 1942, Japanese naval operations in the South Pacific were overseen by the Eighth Fleet, headquartered at Rabaul and commanded by Vice Admiral Mikawa Gun'ichi. Mikawa's fighting reputation had been much enhanced by his bold actions during the Battle of Savo Island when he won a spectacular victory in the early days of the Guadalcanal campaign. Subsequently the Eighth Fleet had overseen the regular "Tokyo Express" supply convoys to Guadalcanal. These utilised the high speed of destroyers to make nocturnal visits to the island, although sometimes larger vessels were also used. These successful missions had landed a division-sized IJA force on Guadalcanal which enabled the late October land offensive. However, this offensive had been repulsed by the US Marine garrison.

IJN air power in the South Pacific was grouped into the 11th Air Fleet headquartered at Rabaul and commanded by Vice Admiral Kusaka Jinichi. The core of this force was a multitude of Zero fighter (Model 21) and Betty bomber units, with both types having the endurance to fly 600-mile missions from Rabaul to Guadalcanal. At the beginning of the campaign these types largely operated from Vunakanau (Bettys) and Lakunai (Zeros), both of which were located near Rabaul.

To increase flexibility and also to make use of many shorter-ranged Model 32 Zeros which were arriving as replacements, a key priority for Kusaka's headquarters was to construct airfields in the Solomons and Bougainville. The first of these was to upgrade Buka, a small, grassed airfield in northern Bougainville that had been used by civilian aircraft before the war. Fuel supplies had been sent there in August, and it had since been increasingly used by Zeros and as an emergency landing ground for Bettys. However, the Buka airfield continued to suffer from poor drainage and accidents were common.

A more promising location was a coastal site near Buin on the southern tip of Bougainville. It lay midway between Rabaul and Guadalcanal and also alongside the increasingly important Shortlands anchorage, which was used as a marshalling point for the Tokyo Express destroyer convoys. Airfield construction began in late August, and it was ready for operations in mid-October. From Buin, even Model 32 Zeros could reach Guadalcanal as well as covering Tokyo Express convoys over The Slot. Buin also enabled newly arrived land-based Val dive-bombers to attack Guadalcanal.

In early November efforts to build an airfield on a small island in the Shortlands called Ballale also commenced. An IJN construction unit used POW labour, mainly British and Chinese who had been captured in Singapore and Hong Kong, supplemented by local labourers from nearby villages. However, this progressed only very slowly, and the airfield would not be useable until well into 1943.

More promising, largely due to its proximity to Guadalcanal, was a site at Munda in New