

## CHAPTER 10

### 13 – 20 DECEMBER: THINKING THE UNTHINKABLE

Upon returning to Rabaul after the latest Tokyo Express run, Rear Admiral Tanaka conferred with Vice Admiral Mikawa's Eighth Fleet headquarters and reluctantly reached the conclusion that resupply of the Guadalcanal garrison was untenable. Despite the implementation of the supply drum method, the four Tokyo Express runs conducted between 30 November and 12 December had delivered only a negligible amount of supplies to the starving 12,000 IJA troops on Guadalcanal. This was at the cost of two destroyers sunk (*Takanami* and *Teruzuki*) in addition to the submarine *I-3* lost during a concurrent supply run.

At this time the IJN began circulating the previously "unthinkable" idea that Guadalcanal should be abandoned. Initially, this was strongly resisted by General Imamura's new Eighth Area Army headquarters whose senior officers instinctively clung to the notion that the island could still be taken. However, the hard reality was that without a means of supply any idea of victory was impossible. With increasing Allied strength and capability on Guadalcanal, Imamura could feel the narrowing of a window of possible action. Gradually he concluded he had only two options: total abandonment or evacuation of his soldiers.

Consultations commenced with the IJN on the possibility of evacuation, sometimes couched as "advancing to the rear". These discussions were predictably robust, with several senior IJN staff officers arguing the punitive cost in ships lost would outweigh the limited number of soldiers they might save. Such arguments gave IJA officers in turn sufficient motivation to accuse the IJN of abandoning the 17<sup>th</sup> Army, carrying with it the implied accusation that the IJN had not done enough to protect its men. This in turn re-stoked old army versus navy tensions.

Hence during the last weeks of 1942 Rabaul's wooden headquarters buildings were oft witness to unkind words which exacerbated the ongoing IJN/IJA rivalry. The general IJN assessment was that one third of the 17<sup>th</sup> Army might be saved at the cost of half the destroyers deployed to do the job. The thorny question of whether this was worth a price worth paying would not be decided until early 1943, after a decision to withdraw from Guadalcanal was finally approved by Imperial General Headquarters in Tokyo on 31 December. Meanwhile, Tanaka honourably accepted blame for the failure of the resupply efforts. He was relieved of his command of the Second Destroyer Squadron before being transferred to Singapore. Never reappointed to a seagoing command, he then suffered the ignominy of a shore-based position in distant Burma where he served for the remainder of the war.

However, there remained some hope on the horizon for the Japanese in the South Pacific. Despite much of Rabaul's attention being focused on the deteriorating situation in New Guinea, as noted in Chapter 1 an initial detachment of JAAF airpower had been committed to