

CHAPTER 4

March 1943: Battle of the Bismarck Sea

The Battle of the Bismarck Sea (termed Operation No. 81 by the Japanese) in early March 1943 marked a unique and extensive deployment of Allied air power in which No. 22 Squadron played a major role. A detailed understanding of the Japanese side is necessary in order to understand the part played by the squadron. In the event, much of the Japanese reinforcement flotilla was destroyed, resulting in heavy troop losses. However, planning for the reinforcement had been much buoyed by the success of the first Lae convoy two months earlier in January. The Japanese objective was essentially to further reinforce Lae and Salamaua following on from the first convoy. This time an ambitious quantity of nearly 8,000 troops would be shipped from Rabaul in merchant ships escorted by destroyers which sailed from Simpson Harbour, Rabaul, on 28 February 1943.

Allied code breakers had decrypted sufficient messages to reveal the convoy's destination and planned date of arrival. The end result was that effective Allied air assault saw only about 1,200 troops arrive at Lae, with about 2,700 more survivors returned to Rabaul. This marked the last time the Japanese attempted to reinforce the area, all but putting a halt to the New Guinea campaign around Lae and Salamaua.

Until the end of November 1942 Lae had been a hotbed of Zero units, until they were replaced at the end of December 1942 by two squadrons (*chutai*) of the JAAF 11th *Hiko Sentai* operating Ki-43-I Oscars, as described previously. This regiment had just arrived in New Guinea via Rabaul, after which its Nos. 2 and 3 *chutai* deployed to Malahang field, just to the northeast of Lae, arriving on 26 December 1942. Throughout January 1943 the regiment successfully defended the first Lae convoy which had delivered the Okabe detachment to Lae, bent on occupying Wau. Air cover for this convoy was provided almost entirely by the regiment bolstered by occasional collaboration with Rabaul-based IJN Zero units. As outlined previously, on 6 February 1943, when escorting bombers over Wau, 11th *Hiko Sentai* Oscars were challenged by USAAF Warhawks, however, they opportunistically downed Boston A28-21 on the way home to Malahang. The forthcoming series of missions during early March would witness the first time No. 22 Squadron's Bostons were attacked by Zeros.

Around 2300 on the last day of February the convoy of eight transports and eight destroyers left Simpson Harbour bound for Lae transporting more than 8,000 troops supplemented with around 2,500 tons of materiel. The flotilla navigated through the channel demarking New Britain and New Ireland before heading across the Bismarck Sea north of New Britain. Around Port Moresby's airfields, all Allied crews were on full standby, pending further alerts. Squadron Leader Hampshire had grounded the No. 22 Squadron's Bostons on 1 March in preparation for participation in full-scale attacks on the convoy. Around Wards there was considerable buzz and speculation centered around a forthcoming "do".