

CHAPTER 3

1 – 5 JANUARY: WALKER’S LAST MISSION

On the first day of 1943, the 11th Air Fleet commander, Admiral Kusaka Jinichi, woke at 0530 at his private Rabaul residence near the town’s botanical gardens. He then penned a short four-line poem in his diary as to how he was “highly content”, and how he wondered how much promise the year held. On a more prosaic level, he entered Rabaul’s pre-dawn temperature already at 85 degrees Fahrenheit.

Kusaka’s residence overlooked spacious Simpson Harbour which held numerous anchorages. On that day Allied reconnaissance assessed the presence of 300,000 tons of merchant ships together with 21 warships. The previous day Lieutenant General Kenney had made his own dairy entry:

When the Jap accumulates that much tonnage it means trouble for me shortly.

This observation could not have been more prescient, as events in this volume will demonstrate.

Indeed, the concentration of shipping at Rabaul had been front of mind for Allied planners for over a week. Back on 22 December, 71 large and 20 small ships had been spotted there by a Fifth Air Force reconnaissance plane. From his Pacific Fleet headquarters in Hawaii, Admiral Chester Nimitz was keen to strike a “crippling blow” by targeting the shipping using a combination of 11th Bombardment Group B-17s based in the New Hebrides alongside the Fifth Air Force.

The 11th BG Fortresses needed to use Henderson Field on Guadalcanal as a forward base for such an attack, and eleven bombers were launched on the evening of 24 December. However, the attack was largely ineffective, as only two bombers found the target as intended. Subsequently a limited supply of fuel at Henderson Field ruled out further attacks from that location, and instead a dozen 11th BG B-17s temporarily deployed to Port Moresby where they arrived on 29 December.

Meanwhile eighteen 43rd BG B-17s had raided Rabaul harbour on the night of 26-27 December where they sank one ship, the IJA transport *Italy Maru*. The following night six 90th BG B-24s also raided Rabaul, bombing both the harbour and town. Then in the early hours of 30 December seven 43rd BG B-17s made another successful attack, sinking the IJA transport *Tomiura Maru*.

On land the bloody Buna-Gona campaign in northern Papua was reaching a climax of sorts. In late December Australian and American troops, supported by M3 tanks, had advanced towards the Buna government station from the east via the coast and adjacent airfields. Meanwhile American troops had advanced from the west, capturing Buna village. Despite heavy casualties, the Allied advance continued on New Year’s Day against an enemy fast reaching exhaustion and running out of ammunition. Daylight on 2 January saw many Japanese attempting to swim out to sea, and that afternoon American troops entered the government station. Although