



*This 50<sup>th</sup> Hiko Sentai Ki-43-I carries the trademark lightning bolt marking of that unit, whose pilots sometimes painted their names on the rudder. Here the kanji 孝 represents the name Yasuaki. When the 1<sup>st</sup> Hiko Sentai arrived in Rabaul on 9 January it had several former 50<sup>th</sup> Hiko Sentai airframes in its inventory which had served in Burma, similar to this one.*

excitedly reported a huge flash amidships on the target, and we knew that the torpedo had run true. A series of red flares or rockets went up from the ship immediately following the torpedo hit, and their guns stopped firing.

Despite Mercer's crew being confident in scoring a hit, no damage was inflicted. Subsequently a third Beaufort made two attack runs, but both were aborted due to the intensity of the anti-aircraft fire. It is unknown if the other two Beauforts completed their attacks or not. Meanwhile, a violent storm was blanketing the area, and Mercer led three Beauforts in landing shortly before 2230 and just prior to the worst of the storm setting in at Milne Bay.

Sergeant Geoffrey Megaw in Beaufort A9-8 did not arrive over Milne Bay until sometime later and was unable to see the runway due to heavy cloud. He was advised by radio to remain aloft while he had fuel in the hope of the weather clearing, or to prepare to bale out or ditch. The squadron personnel on the ground were anxiously listening to Megaw's engines circling above when there was a loud explosion. Megaw had flown into a hill on the southern side of Milne Bay, killing all four crewmen instantly.

Meanwhile another Beaufort, A9-32 flown by Pilot Officer Geoffrey Collins, never returned to Milne Bay and was missing. The following day six Beauforts intensively searched nearby coasts and islands for any sign of the bomber, but without success. It was not until some days later that the wreck was found by Australian soldiers on mountainous Normanby Island, northeast of Milne Bay. Like Mercer, Collins had flown into terrain in the bad weather with the loss of all four aboard.

After these two losses, No. 100 Squadron did not fly another attack mission for the remainder of January. The squadron's Beauforts were all being equipped with radar, which gave the crews a large boost in morale due to the increased ability to find the enemy but also because radar was very useful as a navigation aid. The rest of January was mainly spent in radar training, including its use in formation flying and torpedo tactics.

The same evening as the Beaufort losses, two Catalinas were also searching for the convoy. One of these, A24-2, was flown by Flight Lieutenant David Vernon who had sunk the *Nichiryu Maru* three nights earlier. Vernon's crew once again found the convoy late on the evening of 9 January south of New Britain, reporting three transports "well out of the water" (i.e. empty) with speeds