

INTRODUCTION

As an outpost of the British Empire, the sleepy and deceptively beautiful Solomon Islands were almost unknown to the outside world at the beginning of the Pacific War. Yet from August 1942 the location witnessed one of the bloodiest and hard-fought land, air and naval campaigns of WWII, which at various junctions threatened to teeter in favour of either belligerent.

This fourth volume of *Solomons Air War* chronicles the air campaign throughout January and February 1943 when the Japanese launched their superbly planned and executed Operation Ke. This was an intense and interlinked series of air and naval operations that oversaw the evacuation of all Japanese 17th Army soldiers on Guadalcanal, thus ending a bloody and brutal six-month land campaign. Extraordinarily, the Americans were unaware of the evacuation until the after it had been completed.

Against this background both sides utilised carrier units from temporary land bases to bolster their air strength. The Americans also introduced new and advanced aircraft types to the theatre in the form of Liberators and Corsairs. However, their first missions during a four-day period in February would end in fiasco and disaster.

Solomons Air War is a companion series to the existing *South Pacific Air War* series which chronicles the wider regional air campaign from the start of the Pacific War in December 1941 until the US invasion of Guadalcanal on 7 August 1942. On that date the air war splits into two distinct theatres from the Allied point of view. These are formally known as the South West Pacific Area and the South Pacific Area, but in practical terms they are the New Guinea and the Solomons theatres. Thus, the need to create two separate series, bound to each respective theatre.^{1,2}

However, readers should bear in mind that from the Japanese perspective there was only one theatre, which they termed the *Nanto Homen* or South Seas, with their naval and army commands at Rabaul fighting in New Guinea and the Solomons concurrently.

The full rationale for commencing this *Solomons Air War* series is explained by the authors in the introduction to *Volume 1*. In summary, it was felt a detailed chronicle of all aspects of the Solomons air campaign using primary source material from both the Allied and Japanese sides would provide a fresh, balanced and more factual take on the subject. Indeed, a primary focus of both series is to align belligerents where possible, a task enabled by credible Japanese primary source information made accessible only in recent years.

In this regard we hope that our attempts to evenly match the records from both sides brings new light and understanding to a truly complex air campaign fought so many years ago.

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1 *South Pacific Air War Volumes 4, 5 and 6* continue the chronicle of the New Guinea / SWPA theatre from 8 August until the end of March 1943. Subsequent volumes are planned.

2 A handful of missions from the South Pacific area which cross into the Central Pacific area have been excluded from this volume.