

## CHAPTER 7

### 29-31 JANUARY: BATTLE OF RENNELL ISLAND

By late January 1943 powerful naval forces from both sides were descending on the Solomons, and some background is needed to describe these movements. The Americans still assumed, mistakenly, that Japanese activity was driven by a desire to further reinforce their troops on Guadalcanal. On land this meant a cautious approach by American forces advancing to the northwest of the island, as much hard fighting was still expected. Accordingly, a further reinforcement convoy had been organised with four transports departing Noumea on 27 January carrying assorted reinforcements and replacements including Army artillery units and Marine aviation engineers. Importantly, these ships would also embark thousands of combat weary Marines from Lunga and Tulagi who were headed to New Zealand for overdue rest and recuperation.

To cover this movement, Halsey organised several naval task forces to operate in the vicinity of the southern Solomons. The most significant of these in respect to the forthcoming action was Task Force 18, comprising six cruisers, two escort carriers and eight destroyers which departed Efate on the evening of 27 January. It was intended that part of this force would rendezvous with four destroyers based at Tulagi and make a sweep up The Slot.

American naval strength in the theatre at this time was considerable. Two task forces were each built around a fleet carrier (*Saratoga* and *Enterprise*), while two further task forces were centred on three battleships and four cruisers respectively. These task forces were all in waters south of the Solomons by 29 January. Those that feature in the forthcoming action are detailed below:

<b>Task Group 67.5</b> (Tulagi-based)	
Destroyers	<i>Fletcher, De Haven, Nicholas, Radford</i>

<b>Task Group 62.8</b>	
Transports	<i>President Jackson, President Adams, President Hayes, Crescent City</i>
Destroyers	<i>Craven, Lardner, Jenkins, Gansevoort</i>

<b>Task Force 18</b>	
Cruisers	<i>Wichita, Louisville, Chicago, Cleveland, Montpelier, Columbia</i>
Escort Carriers <sup>1</sup>	<i>Suwannee, Chenago</i>
Destroyers	<i>Conway, Chevalier, Edwards, Frazier, La Vallette, Meade, Taylor, Waller</i>

<b>Task Force 16</b>	
Carrier	<i>Enterprise</i>
Cruiser	<i>San Diego</i>
Destroyers	<i>Ellet, Hughes, Morris, Mustin, Russell</i>

1 A third escort carrier, *Sangamon*, was allocated to this task force but remained anchored at Efate.