

## CHAPTER 8

### 1-2 FEBRUARY: OPERATION *KE* FIRST EVACUATION RUN

The first day of February 1943 was a momentous one for a several reasons. It saw the first major evacuation effort of Operation *Ke*, and associated air missions by both sides ranks it among one of the busier days of the entire Solomons campaign. The landmark day also witnessed a major B-17 offensive mission in the Solomons, one that ended in catastrophe for the 11<sup>th</sup> BG.

Indeed, by this time the veteran 11<sup>th</sup> BG was all but exhausted. On 29 January Cactus Air Force had reported to COMAIRSOPAC that the condition of the advanced striking force of B-17s based on Guadalcanal had deteriorated to such an extent due to the lack of maintenance facilities that an effective strike was “impossible” and all of the bombers should be returned to Espiritu Santo. The last operation of significance by this force had been an ineffective strike on the Shortlands on 28 January by seven Fortresses from the group’s 26<sup>th</sup> and 431<sup>st</sup> BS.

In the next few days these bombers were replaced on Guadalcanal by four 11<sup>th</sup> BG bombers (42<sup>nd</sup> BS), and six from the comparatively fresh 5<sup>th</sup> BG (72<sup>nd</sup> BS). The large concentration of shipping in the Shortlands meant this force was despatched on an early morning raid on 1 February. Escort was provided by just five P-40s and four P-38s and would prove entirely inadequate.

A first element of five 72<sup>nd</sup> BS Fortresses had the benefit of the fighter escort and arrived over the Shortlands at 0820 to find the area packed with 35 ships. The mission began well, with the crews claiming three direct hits on a large transport. This was the seaplane tender *Kamikawa Maru* which incurred medium damage. It retired to Rabaul for emergency repairs before it returned to Japan where it was drydocked. The five B-17s experienced heavy anti-aircraft fire from the ships below, damaging four, but all returned to Henderson Field. The fighter escort remained with this formation and encountered no enemy aircraft on the return journey.

The second element comprised three bombers from the 42<sup>nd</sup> BS plus a single 72<sup>nd</sup> BS machine. This group was led by Major Earl O Hall, the 42<sup>nd</sup> BS commander, and during its bomb run the formation flew through the heavy anti-aircraft fire. One shell scored a direct hit on the bomb bay of B-17E *Eager Beavers* which was blown to pieces. The pilot Captain Frank L Houx and his eight crewmen were subsequently declared missing in action, but they likely died instantaneously.

After releasing their bombs Hall led the remaining formation of three B-17s in a right-hand turn to head directly for Choiseul when they were attacked by an estimated twenty Zeros. An eyewitness to the attack on one of these Fortresses was the 347<sup>th</sup> FG flight surgeon Major William McCarroll who had come along for the ride as an observer. Looking back from the first element formation he saw:

Some of the enemy planes approached to within ten yards of the wing tips of the B-17. They