

16-28 FEBRUARY: OPERATION CLEANSULATE



A formation of Saratoga air group SBDs on one of their regular Munda bombing missions in February-March 1943.



A Saratoga air group SBD-4 from VB-3, that was part of the Guadalcanal deployment in late February 1943. It is illustrated with a 500-pound bomb. The slanted fin stripes are markers to facilitate deck-handling, and appear horizontal when the dive-bomber is parked.

Earlier in the afternoon the Vella Lavella coastwatcher had reported seeing a transport escorted by two corvettes offshore. Subsequently the three vessels were spotted by a Cactus Air Force search plane at 1533. These were the 3,289-ton IJN auxiliary transport *Kirikawa Maru* in company with submarine chaser *CH-26* and minesweeper *W-22*. The ships had departed Buin that morning and were destined for Vila. *Kirikawa Maru* was carrying elements of No. 7 Yokosuka SNLF together with artillery, ammunition, fuel and other supplies.

That afternoon Cactus Air Force despatched a strike force of eighteen VMSB-144 and VMSB-234 SBDs to hunt the ships. However, four dive-bombers returned to base for various reasons leaving a formation of fourteen in the air. About half carried a single 1,000-pound bomb while the others were loaded with a single 500-pound bomb and pairs of 100-pound bombs. The Dauntlesses were accompanied by an escort of eight 339th FS P-38s, six P-40s and seven VMF-124 F4Us.

At 1740 the three ships were found about 25 miles northwest of Kolombangara and the SBDs made diving attacks from 13,000 feet. Three crews claimed direct hits on the forward hold and bow of the transport with a mix of bombs. When the Americans departed the ship was a mass of