

CHAPTER 6

LATE JANUARY – MAY 1942: RESISTANCE AND RETREAT

After the Japanese capture of Rabaul the importance of Port Moresby as a critical strongpoint to resist Japan's advance in the South-West Pacific was amplified. However, the pressure on the now-exposed outpost increased in early 1942. Japanese Navy A5M4 Claude fighters were deployed to Rabaul on 31 January 1942, followed shortly after by three A6M2 Zeros. Long-range Mavis flying boats bombed Port Moresby on 3 and 5 February. The Japanese Navy established No. 4 *Kokutai* at Rabaul in February with A6M2 Zero fighters and G4M1 Betty bombers to consolidate Japan's control of Rabaul and take the air war to the Allies. After 14 Bettys were destroyed in an engagement with USN Wildcat fighters from the USS *Lexington* on 20 February 1942, G3M2 Nell bombers were sent to Rabaul. The Nells launched their first attack on Port Moresby on 24 February.

The RAAF initially had few resources to combat the Japanese onslaught. The handful of Hudsons and Wirraways that survived the Rabaul debacle retreated to Port Moresby. The first fighter reinforcements, P-40 Kittyhawks from No. 75 Squadron, did not arrive until 21 March. During this dangerous period the RAAF's most important assets at Port Moresby were the Catalinas of Nos. 11 and 20 Squadrons: as well as their crucial reconnaissance capability, they provided the only strike force capable of reaching the enemy at Rabaul.

Fortunately, the hard-pressed Catalinas could utilise well-developed flying boat facilities. The RAAF had constructed a base including maintenance facilities, a ramp and moorings in 1939 in Port Moresby's wharf district, to the west of the township. The Catalinas were moored in the harbour close to their base.

Meanwhile the need to maintain the viability of the Catalina force was recognised by the War Cabinet, which ordered nine more of the type on 20 January. These aircraft arrived in Australia during March and April 1942. The timely arrival of these aircraft provided essential reinforcements for the Catalina squadrons during a critical period, although the number of operational aircraft available on any given day in early 1942 was never more than a handful.

Catalina raids targeting the Japanese naval and air units based at Rabaul commenced on 24 January.¹ The two squadrons launched five Catalinas in a maximum-strength effort to strike surface vessels in Rabaul Harbour, with A24-5, -6, -13, -14 and -17 departing as evening fell. In a sure sign the difficulties of visual bombing at night in fickle tropical weather were not understood by the RAAF hierarchy, the mission orders naively assigned specific targeting priorities in the order (1) aircraft carriers (2) cruisers and (3) any other surface vessels sighted. Returning from arduous flights of twelve hours or more the crews reported that:

¹ The Catalinas attacked Rabaul at night, with this attack taking place during the night of 24-25 January. However, this book identifies night attacks by the date when aircraft took off, i.e. in this case, the Catalinas departed from Port Moresby on 24 January.