

# INTRODUCTION

The New Guinea air war was the most remote, diabolical and consequential to the Japanese empire. In this theatre the blueprint for defeat for Japanese air power became apparent. Whilst other theatres such as the Solomons and Southeast Asia offered weather patterns equally as capricious as New Guinea's, no other theatre offered such treacherous geography.

With so much postwar focus on the aerial exploits of the Imperial Japanese Navy, few Western histories acknowledge the influence and rationale of Japanese Army air power. However, it was prominent, offering an impressive range and variety of aircraft types, armament and logistics. As with any military force, the Japanese Air Army found it much easier to commit to a new theatre than withdraw. In New Guinea it took this maxim to new levels.

The Japanese / English language barrier continues to conspire in both ways against assembling this complex history. No Japanese historian has properly aligned Allied belligerents, neither have Western ones done the reverse. Western authors continue to rely on postwar texts and thus repeat past fictions and myths. In summary, both sides are equally complicit in presenting history which favours their own side.

Although the first JAAF contingent arrived at Rabaul in October 1942, the 6<sup>th</sup> Air Division Headquarters was not established there until 25 November 1942. Then in July 1943 Tokyo ordered most of the 7<sup>th</sup> Air Division to redeploy to Wewak from the Netherlands East Indies where it was combined with the 6<sup>th</sup> Air Division. Tokyo wished to form a new air army, and with three already extant, the new one was allocated the number four. The number is considered unlucky in Japanese culture, mainly because its pronunciation (*shi*) emulates the word for death (死). The unlucky 4<sup>th</sup> Air Army fought on in New Guinea for six months until February 1944 when it withdrew westwards to Hollandia in Dutch New Guinea. Here it was wiped out two months later.

The JAAF was a branch of the Imperial Japanese Army, and reflected its structures, ranks and discipline. When reading JAAF operational orders it is hard not be impressed by their inherent rigidity of purpose. In them formal, unyielding and repetitive Nelsonian language offers little room for initiative or flexibility. By contrast, Imperial Japanese Navy orders contain inherent wriggle room, allowing liberties to be taken by more enterprising navy officers. To the average JAAF officer the initiatives taken at lower levels within the USAAF would have been breath-taking. This observation is not a criticism, for the Imperial Army view was that the strictest discipline was required to maintain a functioning army under inexorable pressure. This was especially true following the brutal August 1943 campaign against Wewak.

The air war in New Guinea was ruthless. No words can convey New Guinea's heat and humidity, the intimidatory power of thunderheads over mountain ranges, nor the perils of