

CHAPTER 9

THE PROBLEMATIC FIGHTER

In the midst of the JAAF's New Guinea air war, a much-heralded latest-technology fighter appeared. Its sleek looks gave it the appearance of a gentleman's art-deco racer. Much fiction has been written by non-engineers about the introduction of this fighter to New Guinea. Accounts of its introduction to combat have been mostly authored by non-aviators, promoting more fiction. As but one example, and despite accounts to the contrary, compass accuracy so essential for ocean navigation was meticulously aligned at the Truk depot for the ferry flights to Rabaul.

The striking and sleek Ki-61 *Hien* was powered by the in-line Ha-40 engine, a version of the German BMW DB-601A that so ably powered the Messerschmitt Bf 109, and which was built under license by Kawasaki. However, this engine was the source of engineering problems rooted in a German refusal to allow replication of the Bosch high-pressure fuel injection system. Mitsubishi designed an alternative system, but the pump spline drive sometimes sheared, causing immediate engine failure. Another issue was the limitations of the glycol cooling system. From these two key systems stemmed a host of problems. The fighter was to bring only disappointment and problems to the Southern Area.

The story of the New Guinea *Hien* begins against the backdrop of Mount Fuji on 2 April 1943 when the 68th Air Regiment led by commander Major Shimoyama Noburu flew 55 *Hien* from Akeno, all intended for New Guinea. The formation was structured into fifteen *Hien per chutai* with ten more headquarters fighters that took the lead. Within half an hour, all had landed at Yokosuka Naval Air Station, where all but one of the parked fighters were manhandled onto the dock aside the transport carriers *Chuyo* and *Taiyo*. As well as these fighters, more than 600 maintenance and support personnel were embarked, including 30 especially for the headquarters detachment.



Taiyo dropped anchor in Truk Harbour on 10 April where the *Hien* were craned onto Daihatsu barges which were towed ashore by winch. From these each fighter was then manhandled to the taxiway. At this stage many ashore fell ill with diarrhoea, and to make up the labour shortage, prisoners from nearby Ozuki Prison were enlisted to assist. It took two weeks to prepare 42 *Hien* for the initial ferry flight to Rabaul. In Truk's humid heat the first problem arose with

An unidentified IJN ensign poses in front of one of first batch of Ki-61s destined for Truk in April 1943 aboard the carrier Taiyo. The subsequent ferry flight to Rabaul would prove problematic.