

CHAPTER 13

NASSAU BAY

By mid-May 1943 Adachi's 18th Army was facing considerable Australian pressure on the Salamaua front and was in dire need of air support. The commander of 6th Air Division, Major General Itabana Gi'ichi, still headquartered in Rabaul, spent considerable time liaising with the 18th Army Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Yoshihara Kane, to outline JAAF cooperation. In Itabana's absence, day-to-day coordination of Wewak's air operations fell to the Hakujoshi Air Training Brigade commander, Colonel Shirogane Ju'uji. Headquartered at But, Shirogane was regularly conveyed in Ki-51s to discuss and coordinate operations with IJA commanders in Madang and Wewak.

On 9 and 11 May two 6th Air Division Ki-46-II reconnaissance planes ferried staff officers to Lae to meet key local officers, including the 22nd Airfield Battalion commander. These discussions determined that Australian positions around Bobdubi would be struck using the entire 83rd Independent Squadron based temporarily at Lae, comprising all nine Ki-51s, along with 45th and 208th Air Regiment light bombers called forward to Madang. Ki-21 heavy bombers from the 14th Air Regiment would similarly strike the same targets, flying from distant Rapopo. The Ki-51s could tote either light 15-kilogram anti-personnel bombs or heavier 50-kilogram ones depending on the mission profile.

Hayabusa of the 11th Air Regiment would cover Ki-51 operations, while 1st Air Regiment fighters would protect the Ki-21s once they reached the mainland. In addition, the majority of the newly arrived 24th Air Regiment would accompany both *Sokei* units from Madang. For the present, most of the 13th Fighter Regiment *Toryu* heavy fighters would remain defending Rabaul, although its small *Toryu* contingent at Wewak would remain *in situ*.

On 13 May the first of the Lae advanced echelon arrived in the shape of a pair of 83rd Independent Squadron Ki-51s from where they conducted reconnaissances of Australian holdouts around Wau and Bulolo. The next day one made two low passes at 1,500 feet overhead Wau and incurred 40 rounds of retaliatory 40mm Bofors gunfire. Later that afternoon more Ki-51s put into Lae alongside 11th and 24th Air Regiment *Hayabusa*. As usual, these movements were reported back to Port Moresby by the Australians manning the observer platform in the mountains behind Lae. As a result, Port Moresby organised several low-level strikes against Lae airfield.

Adachi ordered counterattacks to repulse Australian incursions north of Mubo where the 2/3rd Independent Company held Bobdubi Ridge. From here the Australians could interdict the Japanese supply route from Salamaua to Mubo. However, on 14 May the Australian contingent was ordered to fall back to avoid losses. When it did, its abandoned positions offered accessible drop zones for Japanese ground forces eager to receive air deliveries.