

CHAPTER 8

1 – 31 MAY: MINELAYING SUCCESS AND ARRIVAL OF VICTORIOUS

Rainy weather continued into the start of May, with the first day of the month relatively quiet in the Solomons. However, No. 15 Squadron suffered an inauspicious start to its combat tour when Sergeant Frederick Manz suffered an engine failure in P-40K NZ3050 when taking off for a pre-dawn patrol. Manz crashed into the ocean and was killed.

Further to the east a landmark rescue was performed the next day by an RNZAF Catalina from Fiji. Early in 1943 it had been decided to form a RNZAF Catalina unit to replace two antiquated Short Singapore flying boats still operated by No. 5 Squadron. The first task for specially detached personnel was to fly new Catalinas from San Diego to Fiji, with the first flying boat, NZ4001, arriving on 3 April. Six more had arrived within the next three weeks and these began training operations from Laucala Bay.

Although not yet part of an operational squadron, on 2 May Catalina NZ4001 was used to locate eight men in a life raft about 150 miles southwest of Fiji. These were survivors from the liberty ship *Phoebe A Hearst* that had been torpedoed and sunk by the submarine *I-19* on 30 April. The Catalina landed in the ocean and collected the men for transport back to Fiji. Subsequently No. 6 Squadron operated the Catalinas from Fiji, although the unit was not formally formed until 25 May. As much training on the new type was needed, the squadron was not anticipated to be fully operational until the start of August.

There was a changing of fighter units on Guadalcanal when 23 VMF-112 F4Us made the four-hour ferry flight from Espiritu Santo to Fighter One on the morning of 2 May. Cactus Air Force now had two Corsair squadrons at its disposal, with VMF-221 leaving for Espiritu Santo. Bad weather delayed the ferrying of fourteen VMF-221 F4Fs until 4 and 5 May, with other personnel making the trip by R4Ds. After a period of leave in Sydney VMF-221 would begin converting to F4Us in the second half of May.

The first offensive mission of the month occurred during the afternoon of 2 May when six Avengers dropped 2,000-pound bombs on Munda's runway and revetment area. Escort was provided by sixteen VF-11 Wildcats, although Lieutenant (jg) William R Maxwell baled out on the return flight. His plane and another collided in mid-air after the other pilot lost altitude when switching his fuel tanks. Maxwell came down in waters southwest of New Georgia and was seen to get into his lift raft, but it was too late in the day to send a "Dumbo" search and rescue PBY. He then spent almost two weeks on a nearby small island before he got into contact with coastwatchers who arranged for a PBY to pick him up on 18 May.

Following this strike, the next day Nos. 253 and 582 *Ku* Zeros from Buin maintained sizeable defensive patrols over Munda but there was no American attack. Instead, the morning of 3 May