

CHAPTER 10

16 – 28 JUNE: OPERATION SE – GUADALCANAL'S LARGEST AIR BATTLE

At 0800 on 16 June thirteen TBFs and twelve SBDs dropped 48,000 pounds of bombs on a “Japanese centre at Sangigai” located on the southern coast of Choiseul. Escort was provided by two dozen VMF-121, VMF-122 and VMF-124 F4Us. Eight VMF-121 F4Us from this mission returned to Banika in the Russell Islands rather than Guadalcanal as this squadron had become the first fighter unit to be permanently based there. Earlier on this morning sixteen F4Us had flown in directly from Guadalcanal, with another eleven pilots arriving by transport aircraft. The first scramble for VMF-121 from Banika would not be long in coming.

While this Choiseul raid was underway, eight No. 251 *Ku* Zeros scrambled from Buin to intercept a lone B-17 flying a routine search mission. The Zeros made head-on attacks, during which four were damaged by return fire from the Fortress. The most heavily damaged fighter was flown by FPO2c Hachi'ji Shunichi, who was forced to ditch but was later rescued. The Japanese subsequently claimed a victory when they located a B-17 crash site in southern Bougainville.

While this action is not mentioned in Allied records, there may be an explanation. Possibly the bomber returned to Espiritu Santo rather than Guadalcanal, as at this time the 31st BS advance detachment of B-17s at Henderson Field was being relieved by the 394th BS from Fiji. Conceivably the combat report might have been misplaced as the crew enjoyed their exit from the frontline zone. Furthermore, the fresh B-17 crash site on southern Bougainville is likely the missing B-17E *Madame X*, which failed to return from a Buin mission five days earlier as described in Chapter 9. The bomber is still missing, portending an irony that it had in fact been located by the Japanese just days after its loss.

As noted earlier, in the lead-up to the Rendova invasion shipping activity near Tulagi and Guadalcanal had become considerable. This build-up had been noticed by Japanese reconnaissance aircraft, and the 11th Air Fleet responded with Operation *Se*, a daylight raid by Val dive-bombers supported by a large fighter contingent, totalling 96 aircraft. Planned for 16 June, it remains one of the largest Japanese missions in the Solomons after Operation *I-Go's* Attack X on April 7. Following that mission the No. 582 *Ku* dive-bomber wing had been withdrawn to Rabaul. As outlined in Chapter 8, the newly appointed *chutaicho*, Lieutenant Commander Ema Tamotsu, had employed tough disciplinary methods before embarking on a training program. Now Operation *Se* would give the No. 582 *Ku* dive-bomber crews an opportunity for redemption.

On 16 June American shipping in the Guadalcanal-Tulagi area included seven transports, the oiler USS *Monongahela*, at least two dozen landing craft, a dozen destroyers and many