

## CHAPTER 4

### The Unlucky 13<sup>th</sup>

*In the early afternoon of 13 February 1943, a Liberator bomber with two shot-up engines was chased by two Rufes while flying just above the treetops of the northern section of Choisel Island. With its electrical system shot to pieces, and no crew communications, the Liberator pilots were unaware that four of their crew had already baled out. Records of No. 802 Ku combined with the B-24 crew's survival report fit together a jigsaw which provides an extraordinary narrative of happenstance, luck and endurance.*

Just after the Japanese had abandoned Guadalcanal, Allied commanders initiated an air offensive against Japanese shipping using the Shortlands area as a safe anchorage. A small flotilla of merchant ships and destroyers at anchor off Buin was selected as the target for 13 February 1943. Two separate American strikes would be conducted, the second closely on the heels of the first. The logic was that by the time the second strike arrived the defending fighters would have retired to refuel, hopefully leaving the strike force to do its job unscathed. USN bombers would conduct the first blow, while the USAAF would deliver the second. The problem was that the Japanese were not reading the same script and, like many other operations in this theatre, the plan quickly dissolved due to unforeseen circumstances.

The first strike of nine VB-101 Navy PB4Y Liberators led by Lieutenant-Commander William Moffet from 51-P-1 (previously assigned to VB-51) was escorted by eleven Corsairs and a quartet of Lightnings. At 1130 these USN Liberators deposited 54 x 1,000-pound bombs onto several ships which were setting a fast pace about 20 miles southeast of the seaplane base at Faisi. All the bombs missed, and while there was only light AA, below at Kahili a *chutai* of a dozen No. 204 *Ku* Zeros fighters led by Warrant Officer Hidaka Hatsuo scrambled. However, they could not climb quickly enough to catch the retreating US formation, and there was no contact.

An existing patrol of three No. 252 *Ku* Zeros which had departed Kahili at 1020 led by FPO2c Okabayashi Masaru was lurking in the area. A radio call alerted them to return to Kahili, while 17 more No. 252 *Ku* Zeros had scrambled at 1120 led by Warrant Officer Matsuda Katsuyuki. They also failed to make contact, however both these flights were still airborne when the second attack approached. Meanwhile, ground crews scrambled to refuel Hidaka's Zeros which landed at 1230 as the second warning sounded. Four of the pilots which had flown the first patrol jumped into four of nine Zeros which had been readied for immediate departure. These nine, led by FCPO Matsubayashi Momoto scrambled at 1230 giving them a good fifteen minutes to climb to meet the incoming enemy.

Meanwhile, some 20 miles to the south, the No. 802 *Ku* floatplane base at Poporang Island hummed with the sound of eleven A6M2-N Rufe floatplanes led by *hikotaicho* Lieutenant Yokoyama Takeo. They launched at 1220, a good ten minutes ahead of their land-based counterparts. This meant that the incoming US formation would face a total of 29 Zeros and 11 Rufes.