

CHAPTER 11

Long Distance Warfare

A curious flying boat versus antiquated bomber long-distance campaign was waged between remote Vanikoro and Nauru islands, 650 miles apart, throughout June and July 1943. This culminated in a five-day campaign when the relevant Nauru-based Nells tried to sink a solitary USN ship, home to the PBY-5s which had been attacking them. The campaign also involved the only time US fighters based at Espiritu Santo saw combat.

The five-day confrontation, ultimately shut down by a flight of four Corsairs, is unique for other reasons. First, Vanikoro as part of the Santa Cruz Islands, was then secluded from the front lines of the Pacific War. Second, the aerial belligerents never actually met in combat. Instead, a US Marine squadron under conversion was called forward to defend the ship, thus explaining the only occasion Corsairs and Nells fought each other. Third, the incident captured subsequent US-wide attention when it was recreated in a live episode of *The First Line*, a radio program which portrayed dramatic war incidents. The broadcast was made live from the city of Chicago and featured an orchestra and suite of dramatic sound effects. Finally, the targeted USN ship, seaplane tender USS *Chincoteague*, survived to enjoy a diverse and extensive post-war history.

The mini-war was declared just before midnight on 18 June 1943 when six “Blackcat” PBY-5 Catalina flying boats from VP-44 based at Espiritu Santo bombed the Japanese airfield on remote Nauru island as well as military quarters on the north shore. Included in the bomb load of PBY 44-P-7 was two dozen beer bottles which shrieked as they plummeted earthwards. VP-44 returned to the US shortly thereafter however other PBY-5 units took up the offensive.

On 6 July seaplane tender USS *Chincoteague* set anchor in Saboe Bay, Vanikoro Island, where it would be home to PBY-5s of VP-23 and VP-71. Central to the logistics in this account is Vanikoro’s seclusion from any front line, being geographically placed halfway between the New Hebrides and Solomon Islands. Using Vanikoro as a forward base projected the PBY-5’s 800 mile long-range patrols further northwards to forewarn any threats to the growing US military bases and materiel stockpiles on Espiritu Santo in the New Hebrides. From previous long-range patrols and air raids by PBYs to Nauru, the Japanese long suspected Vanikoro was being used as their base.

After finding a ship anchored at Vanikoro on 14 July, Nauru-based G3M2 Nells operated by No. 755 *Ku* were tasked to sink it. The next day a pair of these long-range but antiquated Nells was sent to reconnoitre the island and surrounds, however in fading light they found the ship. The first bomber made a wide circle commencing at 1840, then dropped flares to illuminate the bay, where eight seaplanes were seen moored. The *Chincoteague*’s captain withheld defensive fire in an attempt to remain hidden. The second Nell approached the target area an hour later in darkness later but failed to find anything of interest.