

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In March 1942 Japanese power reached its wartime zenith. It had taken barely three months of fighting to secure resource-rich South East Asia including the key British bastion of Singapore. The Japanese had won a remarkable string of victories overseen by the brilliant Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku, commander-in-chief of the Imperial Japanese Navy's Combined Fleet. Although Yamamoto had authorised the Pearl Harbor attack, he had always been wary of Japan's chances in a long-term war. In mid-1941, when asked about a possible conflict with the United States, Yamamoto made the prophetic statement:

I shall run victorious for the first six months or a year, but I have utterly no confidence for the second and third years.

At the time of March 1942 there seemed every possibility of a continuance of further Japanese victories. Plans were being made for the seizure of Port Moresby and Tulagi in the South Pacific, to be followed by the invasion of Midway Island in the Central Pacific.

However, an initial setback was experienced at the Battle of the Coral Sea in May followed by a major blow during the Battle of Midway in June. Nevertheless, Japanese power in the South Pacific remained considerable, and during the second half of 1942 twin epic struggles were waged over two key fronts. These were in Papua, where the Japanese attempted to capture Port Moresby via an overland campaign, and in the Solomons, where a bitter and desperate battle for the island of Guadalcanal was fought.

After several months of costly fighting and despite numerous tactical victories, the Japanese were beaten in both of these campaigns. By January 1943 the key coastal pockets in the Buna-Gona area of Papua had fallen to Allied troops, while the following month the Japanese evacuated Guadalcanal. Then, in connection to the Papuan campaign, the Japanese suffered another shock in early March when virtually an entire convoy was wiped out by Allied airpower during the Battle of the Bismarck Sea.

Hence by March 1943 the strategic outlook was vastly changed from a year earlier, and the days of easy victories were long passed. Nevertheless, it was from this perspective that Yamamoto sensed an opportunity. Any Allied advances in New Guinea and the Solomons needed to be accompanied by a vast logistics effort given the paucity of existing infrastructure in the region, and this meant that aerial defences (mainly fighters) would be stretched while guarding the rapidly increasing number of new bases and facilities.

For example, a large Allied airbase had been quickly constructed at Dobodura, on the northern side of the Owen Stanley Ranges, and just a short distance inland from Buna and Gona. This was supplied via an anchorage at nearby Oro Bay which was a prime target.