

CHAPTER 3

STRIKE X – GUADALCANAL SHIPPING

Operation I-Go's first strike, termed "Strike X", was the largest. Involving four departure airfields and the most participants, it was also the most challenging to coordinate logistically. Weather always predicated Pacific aerial operations, and this mission would be no exception. The designated target was shipping around Tulagi / Guadalcanal, to which the five-day window of 5 to 10 April 1943 was originally allocated in which execute the mission. Yamamoto initially authorised "X" to proceed on 5 April 1943, however persistent low cloud and squalls obscured some forward airfields and target areas. This meant reluctantly delaying the strike by two days. Part of the initial plan was for several *chutai* of Bettys to destroy enemy vessels fleeing the area after the dive-bomber attack, but this was now cancelled due to the weather outlook. Follow-up night bombing attacks were cancelled for the same reason.

A key planning consideration was that the bombing force of Vals would deploy from Rabaul into three Bougainville bases. This allowed most of them to carry 250-kilogram bombs, the preferred anti-ship weapon, qualified by the fact that about half the No. 582 *Ku* Vals each toted two 60-kilogram bombs due to a shortage of suitable 250-kilogram ordnance pylons to share between the land-based units. These smaller bombs were considered virtually useless against ships, as had been proved in the past, but nonetheless were included in the mix. The lack of suitable ordnance pylons, likely a simple break-down in logistical planning, would prove disproportionately costly.

As we shall see, for the subsequent longer distance missions to Oro and Milne Bay, the Vals' combat effectiveness was compromised by having to tote these smaller bombs. Strike X would use the forward Bougainville airfields at Buka and Buin (known to the Allies as Kahili), in conjunction with Ballale Island in the Shortland Island group just off Bougainville's southern coast. These bases were located roughly halfway to Guadalcanal from Rabaul, and offered considerable advantages of reduced pilot fatigue, better endurance and higher payloads.

The unexpected two-day weather delay which had spurred Kusaka to pen his ominous poem threw the original long-planned and inter-locked carrier-based aircraft movements from Rabaul to Bougainville's forward bases into disarray. These forward bases were understandably nervous about Allied snoopers throughout this build-up period. Two *shotai* of No. 582 *Ku* Zeros launched from Buka on the morning of 6 April at 0810. This was in response to a warning of an approaching solitary B-17, undeterred by the gloomy weather. They failed to intercept it, as their menacing approach was seen by the Fortress crew. Its pilot thought better of taking on six Zeros and quickly turned around. The Zeros were back at Buka after a forty minute sortie.

The poor weather persisted, causing further last-minute weather adjournments which