

CHAPTER 6

STRIKE Y1 – PORT MORESBY

Of the four strikes in Operation I-Go, the third termed Strike Y1 which unfolded on Monday 12 April 1943 against Port Moresby involved the most resources and the longest strike distance. It was also the only one to specifically target airfields. Port Moresby remained a major thorn in respect to Japanese efforts to safeguard its South Pacific territory. Its growing air bases were a major threat to the Japanese and predictably Yamamoto earmarked these for special attention, alongside shipping in the harbour. In essence, Strike Y1 would place a large bomber force over the target, protected by dedicated fighter formations. Another “air superiority” fighter formation would take on the job of attacking Allied airpower during the approach and departure from the target. The coordination required was immense, with bombers departing from two separate bases at Vunakanau and Kavieng, and fighters from four locations: three of Rabaul’s airfields (Tobera, Lakunai and Vunakanau) and from Kavieng.

Only two days prior, on 10 April, the commander of the USAAF Fifth Air Force, Lieutenant-General George Kenney, landed at Port Moresby to assume command of New Guinea air operations from Lieutenant-General Ennis Whitehead, his advance echelon operations commander. Whitehead was returning to Australia for some well-earned leave. In the past few days Japanese destroyers had offloaded substantial materiel at Tuluvu without any attention from Allied air attacks. Now that Kenney was back in Port Moresby, Whitehead briefed him that Moresby’s Japanese air raids thus far in 1943 had been confined to a handful of hit and miss night raids by Betty bombers, the most recent being on 21 February. Japanese records reveal this was a curious raid whereby seven No. 751 *Ku* Bettys had attacked in three separate flights which appeared over the town between 2150 and 2320. During this nuisance raid they dropped 62 x 60-kilogram bombs, none of which found a target. Kenney might have been consoled to learn that when it came to night-flying, Japanese Betty crews were more conservative and had less success in negotiating New Guinea’s mountains than his Fortress crews did trying to get through to Rabaul. When in doubt, the Japanese turned back, a prudent habit they had adopted from day one in the theatre and which had saved many lives.

But Kenney had cause to ponder Japanese rationale and plans following the 11 April Oro Bay attack. The strike against Oro Bay had used dive-bombers from carrier units, which had many command staff, including Kenney, perplexed. The paltry shipping inventory anchored there failed to warrant such a significant effort, particularly in view of the lucrative parked aviation targets on offer around Dobodura’s airfield complex. Kenney judged wrongly that the next Japanese objective would be shipping at Milne Bay, admitting in his memoirs that the Japanese badly fooled him. He therefore sent additional fighters to reinforce Dobodura from where they could reach Milne Bay without overflying the Owen Stanley Ranges and hence avoiding the dangerous mountain weather. Reducing Moresby’s fighter strength was a