

CHAPTER 9

Ace in a Day?

In June 1943 a large Japanese formation, comprising 92 aircraft, attacked targets near Guadalcanal. It was contested by over 100 Allied fighters who took a heavy toll on the Japanese crews. Pilot Murray Shubin was awarded five kills and famously became an "Ace in a Day", but what evidence supports his claim?

When Lightning pilot Lieutenant Murray Shubin was awarded five Zero kills on 16 June 1943 over Guadalcanal he became the Thirteenth's Air Force's first "Ace in a Day". On this day the Japanese made their second biggest air-raid against Guadalcanal after the Operation I-Go mission of 7 April 1943. Two dozen D3A2 Val dive-bombers with substantial fighter escort came to Guadalcanal to attack USN shipping. During 45 minutes of close combat, American and RNZAF fighters exacted a heavy toll, although nowhere near the numbers claimed.

As always with Guadalcanal air battles at this middle stage of the Pacific war, air combat was supplemented by heavy and often accurate AA fire, both land-based and from ships. Total US claims bordered on the fanciful: 79 Japanese aircraft to air combat and 28 to AA fire (all types). This was a total of 107 enemy aircraft, more than were airborne! In fact "only" ten Vals and fourteen Zeros were shot down during aerial combat, with three more Vals brought down by ship-borne AA for a total loss of 27 aircraft. The Allied fighters thus over-claimed by more than six to one (Japanese claims were even more exaggerated). Although six US fighters were lost, only two fell to combat with one of those pilots rescued. Disturbingly, the other four were due to mid-air collisions.

First indication of the incoming raid was provided by coastwatchers at Vella Lavella, confirmed by Guadalcanal's radar not long after. The sizeable Japanese force appeared on radar scopes to be originally divided between a combined force of two dozen No. 582 *Ku* D3A2 Val dive-bombers with sixteen escorting Zeros from the same unit, bolstered by separate formations of two dozen No. 204 *Ku* and thirty No. 251 *Ku* Zeros, a total of 92 aircraft. The composite fighter contingent fell under the command of Lieutenant-Commander Shindo Saburo, *hikotaicho* of No. 582 *Ku*. The two lagging Zero formations flew slightly above and behind the dive-bombers, closing up as they approached Guadalcanal.

Captain Kodo Kei led the Val contingent, however the Vals were particularly sluggish as each was weighed down heavily with one 250-kilogram bomb under the fuselage and two 60-kilogram bombs under each wing pylon. Such a maximum bomb load configuration was not often used.

The No. 251 *Ku* Zeros were led by Lieutenant O'ono Takeyoshi (previously of Tainan *Ku* fame), most of which had arrived at Buin from Rabaul where they refuelled and set off again just after midday. An advance No. 251 *Ku* detachment based at Buka had shot down a Fortress earlier that morning, and had flown to Buin to join the current formation. The two dozen No. 204