

CHAPTER 4

Mystery Milne Bay Airman

A Japanese airman is captured soon after a dive-bomber raid on Milne Bay. He claims to have been an engineer who had hurriedly filled an empty observer's back seat in his one and only combat sortie. However, the truth tells another story.

While D3A1 Val dive-bombers had operated in the South Pacific from carriers in January and May 1942, the first land-based dive bombers did not arrive until early August 1942. These arrived onboard the newly commissioned escort carrier *Unyo* which was being used as an aircraft transport. Sixteen D3A1 Vals were flown off the carrier on 6 August and landed at Rabaul's Lakunai 'drome, which had been mainly used by fighters up to that time. Operating just a short distance from an active volcano, the Vals were assigned to No. 2 *Kokutai* which was a mixed fighter/bomber unit also operating A6M3 Model 32 Zeros.

Unlike their carrier-based contemporaries, the land-based Vals were not equipped with auxiliary fuel tanks. Partly because of this limitation, their preference was to carry a 60-kilogram light bomb under each wing rather than the single centreline-mounted 250-kilogram bomb normally used by carrier-based Vals. While the relatively light 60-kilogram bombs may have been useful for tactical strikes against ground targets, they were less likely to inflict serious damage to ships.

Nonetheless, a *chutai* of nine Vals was rushed into a strike mission against Allied shipping off Guadalcanal the day after their arrival at Lakunai. Such was the limited range of the Vals that they couldn't return to airfields on northern Bougainville and the intention was for them to ditch in the Shortlands on their way home. Not surprisingly, this ill-conceived mission proved a futile waste of resources. While several Vals and their crews were lost to USN fighters, all of the remainder were lost during the ditching process. Worse, some of the highly trained crews drowned given the tendency of the Vals to overturn on ditching, an inevitable consequence when their bulky fixed undercarriages caught the water.

The next mission for the unit's remaining Vals was to support the Japanese invasion of Milne Bay of 26 August. A detachment of eight flew to Buna that morning, where they refuelled before heading southeast to Milne Bay. However, they were forced to turn back to Buna in the face of atrocious weather where they overnighted to try again the following day. This time seven Zeros, two from No.2 *Ku* (Lieutenant Futagami Kichoku and FPO1c Magara Koichi) and five from the Tainan *Ku* would escort them, led by Lieutenant Yamashita Joji. The Val's target was Australian AA positions at Milne Bay's newly constructed airfield. They were led by *chutaicho* Lieutenant Inoe Fumito.

The Australians received their first warning of the raid at 0800, with spotters detecting enemy aircraft at a distance of twenty-two miles from Milne Bay. However, the marginal weather had persisted from the previous day, and the Zeros had become separated from the Vals as