

## CHAPTER 14

# Bloody Tuesday

*The massive USAAF raid against Rabaul of 2 November 1943 was unquestionably the biggest mission against that target by the Fifth Air Force. The grievous American losses incurred quickly earned the raid the nickname “Bloody Tuesday” all over American bases in New Guinea. In terms of aerial combat the Japanese were unquestionably the victors.*

Back in the mainland US, the 29 November 1943 issue of *Life* magazine attracted controversy when it published an article about the raid. A captioned photo of a Mitchell strafing across Simpson Harbour stated that in a recent series of raids against Rabaul the USAAF had destroyed 140 vessels and 700 aircraft around Rabaul. The outrageous claim was later sourced to a background briefing given to newsmen by one of General Douglas MacArthur’s staff. Such articles and claims generated much publicity, but if success was gauged by aerial combat then “Bloody Tuesday” was instead a clear Japanese victory.

The truth is that the ferocity of the Japanese response took American planners by surprise, as they were unaware that significant carrier reinforcements had arrived at Rabaul the day before the raid. This resulted in an unanticipated and engulfing response, explained by the wider historical backdrop that the Japanese reinforcements were as a result of Operation Ro-Go. Authorised on 28 October 1943 by Admiral Koga Mineichi, some 173 aircraft from the First Carrier Division carriers *Zuikaku*, *Shokaku* and *Zuiho* were sent from Truk to boost air power temporarily at Rabaul. Aircraft from these units had already dive-bombed and strafed the American landings at Cape Torokina on Bougainville earlier that morning.

The same participants were preparing for Ro-Go’s second raid against Cape Torokina when the massive Fifth Air Force strike materialised with negligible warning. The spur-of-the-moment Japanese response was understandably the result of a frenetic scramble by both Rabaul’s carrier and land-based fighters at 1240. This produced total turmoil at the three airfields of Vunakanau, Lakunai and Rapopo, where many major and minor accidents extracted a toll even before the Americans arrived.

The low-level attack was conducted by Mitchell strafers based at Dobodura with Lightnings for escort. For the Mitchell crews the mission started a drawn-out process. They were first briefed in Port Moresby before staging to Dobodura after they sat for two days waiting for weather to clear. In addition to General Purpose bombs the Mitchells also used phosphorous bombs against Rabaul’s AA positions, painting at times a dramatic backdrop to the attack.

During the strafing attack substantial and widespread combat broke out. The Mitchells claimed 26 fighters shot down and the destruction of sixteen aircraft on the ground along with another ten floatplanes & flying boats moored in the harbour. The Lightnings claimed a further 29 aerial victories, making a total 55 American aerial claims. The Americans paid a terrible price however. They lost eleven Mitchells and their crews from the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 38<sup>th</sup> and 345<sup>th</sup> BGs, and nine