

## CHAPTER 6

# Saint Valentine's Day Massacre

*On 14 February 1943 a combination of Zeros and Rufe floatplanes won a convincing victory against newly arrived Lightning and Corsair fighters. To the Americans, who lost nine aircraft including two Liberators, the engagement became known as the Saint Valentine's Day Massacre and forced a cessation of daylight missions over the southern Bougainville area.*

Both the Lockheed Lightning and Vought F4U Corsair eventually proved to be superior fighters in the Pacific, however their introduction to the theatre demonstrated some of their weaknesses. Neither became superb fighters until both their pilots and leadership structures worked out how to deploy them effectively. Optimum circumstances for effective engagement did not always occur, and the Zero remained successful against these high-performance fighters throughout 1943 to a greater degree than is often portrayed. Essentially, this translated into a contest of speed and altitude for the Americans, versus the Zero's outstanding agility and range.

The Corsair's first worldwide combat engagement, escorting Liberators on a shipping strike, unfolded on 14 February 1943 and became known as the "Valentine's Day Massacre" due to the high American losses. The first Corsairs had only arrived in theatre two days previously when they had conducted patrols and familiarisation flights. Prior to the strike a 17<sup>th</sup> PRS F-5A reconnaissance Lightning was despatched at 0747 from Guadalcanal to the Kahili area to report on the weather and then the results of the strike. This was conducted by Lieutenant Ardall Nord who never returned, however the answer to his demise lies in Japanese records. In order to minimise their chances of being surprised, that morning over southern Bougainville Zero unit No. 252 *Ku* had conducted a series of four-aircraft patrols commencing at 0705. The second patrol launched from Ballale at 0911 led by Warrant Officer Hayama Yuritake whose quartet intercepted and claimed a single "P-38" near Bougainville at 0931. When Nord failed to make his scheduled radio call to the unit's HQ at Fighter #2, they knew something was wrong. Hayama's quartet returned to Ballale at 1020, claiming a definite P-38 kill and each having spent about two-thirds of their ammunition in doing so.

Meanwhile the weather was fine with scattered high cloud as Corsairs from VMF-124 led by Major Gise joined ten 339<sup>th</sup> FS Lightnings to escort nine olive drab VPB-101 PB4Y-1 Liberators which would bomb Japanese shipping anchored off Buin and in the Shortlands. A hornet's nest of Zeros and Rufe floatplanes was about to contest the raid and hound the Americans both over the target and then as they withdrew.

Each Liberator toted a single 1,000-pound General Purpose bomb. The bombers were led from squadron code 51-P-1 flown by the unit commander, Lieutenant-Commander William Moffett Jr. The Liberators still retained the "51" designator prefix from when the unit had previously been VP-51. P-38G and -F Lightnings flew high cover, and launched mid-morning led by Captain James Geyer, accompanied by a dozen F4Us of VMF-124. The Lightnings would fly