

CHAPTER 7

The 24th *Hiko Sentai*

The 24th *Sentai* converted to the upgraded Ki-43-II from the Model I *Hayabusa* during February 1943 while operating from Palembang, Sumatra. In May the No. 2 and 3 *Chutai* deployed to Dagua and But airfields while the No. 1 *Chutai* staged there via Babo, joining the rest of the unit about ten days later. The unit commander was Lieutenant-Colonel Yokoyama Hachio who at 40 years of age was relatively senior to be flying combat missions. He had led the 24th *Sentai* since March 1943 and enjoyed prominent credentials from his time as commander of the much-publicised 64th *Sentai* during the Nomohan Incident in 1939.

Assigned with a defensive role, the 24th *Sentai* at first flew several interception missions against USAAF Liberators. Two claims in particular underline the ambitious degree of Japanese optimism at the time. Firstly, on 23 May 1943 Sergeant Kira Katsuaki claimed one B-24 and another probable after a long-running battle. Then on 26 May Sergeant Menya Naoji, scrambling by himself, claimed four Liberators. In fact, from a total of five awarded confirmed kills, only one Liberator was shot down.

A fatal operational loss ensued on 10 July 1943 at But airfield when Warrant Officer Saito Chiyoji, his visibility obscured by dust on takeoff, collided with the No. 1 *Chutai chutaicho* Lieutenant Koga Tadashi, killing the latter. On 20 July Lieutenant-Colonel Yokoyama Hachio led two dozen *Hayabusa* along with 30 x 68th and 78th *Sentai Hien*, escorting a *chutai* of 208th *Sentai* Ki-48 *Sokei* to bomb targets in the New Guinea highlands.

On 2 August 1943 nine No. 1 *Chutai Hayabusa* provided an escort for Lieutenant-General Adachi Hatazo, commander of the Japanese 18th Army in New Guinea. Adachi was a passenger in a Ki-51 on its way to Lae, and Lieutenant-Colonel Yokoyama Hachio led the No. 1 *Chutai* formation in which the recently appointed *chutaicho*, Lieutenant Kashima Motosuke, was his wingman. The formation was badly broken up by an unexpected encounter with USAAF fighters. Adachi was lucky to escape with his life, but both Yokoyama and Kashima were lost.

On 2 October 1943 the unit along with the 59th *Sentai* departed New Guinea. The 24th *Sentai* returned to Ashiya, Northern Kyushu, via the Halmaheras. It left behind its surviving eleven Model IIs, ten of which were transferred to the 68th *Sentai* which was running low on Ki-61 inventory, while the rest were dispersed among the 13th *Sentai*. The unit lost at least fifteen pilots to combat during its five-month New Guinea deployment.

Markings

Chutai colours followed the standard JAAF practice of white, red and yellow for Nos. 1, 2 and 3 *Chutai* with blue for the headquarters detachment. Spinners were often partially or completely painted in the *chutai* colour. It was common practice to paint the last two digits of the manufacturer's number on the lower rudder. The origins of the unit's unique tail motif are