

CHAPTER 14

CORAL SEA REGION: 15–31 MAY

As noted in Chapter 2, back in April USN planners were aware that *Lexington* and *Yorktown* would not be able to remain in the South Pacific later than about the second week of May. Accordingly, the other two carriers available at Hawaii, the *Enterprise* and *Hornet*, had sailed for the South Pacific in early May. These two carriers and their escorting vessels were designated TF 16 under the command of Vice Admiral William Halsey.

By 11 May TF16 had arrived east of the New Hebrides. The Japanese were not the only ones tasking their carriers to make aircraft deliveries at this time: Halsey had aboard 21 F4F-3s of Marine FS VMF-212, which were intended for a newly cleared airfield on Efate Island in the New Hebrides. Two SBDs and a Marine SNJ training plane were sent to test the strip, but reported it was not yet ready for fighters. Instead VMF-212 flew off to Tontouta in New Caledonia.

Halsey spent the remainder of 11 May refuelling, and on the following morning came news of the convoy for Operation RY moving into the Pacific Ocean east of New Ireland. The convoy and its covering force seemed like a worthy target for Halsey's force, so he headed north-west with a view to being in a strike position in about two days' time. However, with the sinking of the *Okinoshima* that morning, the convoy was delayed and would not now arrive in the vicinity of Nauru until 17 May.

Halsey took precautions to stay out of a confluence of search radii from Rabaul, Tulagi and Makin Island before arranging to meet several cruisers and destroyers at a point 300 miles south of Nauru at 0900 on 16 May. These ships had formerly been attached to the *Lexington* and had since called at Noumea. Generally, Halsey was hamstrung by overly restrictive orders that prevented him sailing within range of land-based bombers. This reflected understandable caution after the loss of the *Lexington*.

Meanwhile, much more important developments were brewing at a strategic level. American intelligence was fast getting wind of Japanese plans to invade Midway Island in early June. A massive Japanese battle fleet was being assembled, which included four fleet carriers. It was necessary for Halsey to get back to Hawaii as quickly as possible to be near Midway in time to counter this move. However, Nimitz gave him secret orders to make sure he was sighted first: this would lure the Japanese into the false belief that two American carriers were in the South Pacific and could seemingly be counted out of any reckoning at Midway.

During the morning of 15 May, Halsey's force sailed in waters more than 400 miles to the east of Tulagi. As predicted, in conditions of excellent visibility the force was duly spotted by three Yokohama *Ku* Mavis, which departed Tulagi at 0550 led by Lieutenant Sakada Moto'o. He found Halsey's ships at 0907 and continued on an extended patrol, alighting safely at 1640 hours.

His duty complete, Halsey turned eastwards that afternoon and set course for Hawaii at 20