

CHAPTER 4

LAND-BASED AIR ACTIVITIES: 1-4 MAY

Allied land-based air resources were critical in detecting the build-up of enemy forces for Operation MO and in offering an ability to strike back. Aside from the P-39 fighters discussed in Chapter 1, on paper, at least, the SWPA forces in New Guinea and North Queensland appeared impressive. These comprised the 19th Bombardment Group (BG) (B-17E Flying Fortresses), the 3rd BG (a mix of A-20As, A-24 Banshees and B-25C Mitchells, although the A-20As saw no operational service in this period), the 22nd BG (B-26 Marauders) and five RAAF squadrons (one each of Hudsons, Wirraways and Empire Flying Boats; and two of Catalinas). A sixth squadron, No. 76, was in Townsville, but was relatively new and was still training on its Kittyhawk fighters.

Arguably, the best crews available for seawards reconnaissance were those of the RAAF. The Catalina squadrons, Nos 11 and 20, had been flying in the area since well before the Pacific War and were very familiar with the area and its conditions. Also, the Australian crews had training and experience in ship recognition and naval cooperation. However, the RAAF had just 18 Catalinas when the war began, supplanted by nine attrition replacements just received. Losses from December 1941 to April 1942 had been heavy, comprising nine machines, plus two more lost in early May at Tulagi and south of the Shortlands (including A24-23, which had been towed across to Guadalcanal and hidden pending repairs, but was destroyed a few days later to prevent capture).

Hence just 16 Catalinas were available, of which at any time about half were undergoing repairs or were being used for crew training at Rathmines. This meant that both 11 and 20 Squadrons were operating far below strength and had just a few aircraft each. Another flying boat unit, No. 33 Squadron, operated a handful of Empire Flying Boats in a transport capacity. These were instrumental in bringing urgent supplies and personnel to and from Port Moresby.

As already explained, No. 32 Squadron with Lockheed Hudsons had moved from Seven-Mile to Horn Island. This squadron, too, was far below strength, having just a single operational Hudson at one stage during April. However, by the end of the month ten new Mark III Hudsons were in the process of being delivered, much restoring the squadron's capability at this time. One of these was forward-deployed to Seven-Mile, where it was keenly utilised by the two crews that were based there. Other regular search missions were flown from Horn Island and Townsville, including flights from Horn Island on 2 and 3 May, which searched for and found the missing P-39s on Cape York.

A fourth RAAF squadron in the area was No. 24, equipped with Wirraways and based at Townsville. These flew inshore anti-submarine patrols and trained in anti-ship bombing techniques, but were too short-ranged to have any direct impact on the unfolding Coral Sea operations.