

# INTRODUCTION

This volume is the first in a trilogy that chronicles aerial warfare in the South Pacific during the critical six-month period from Pearl Harbor in December 1941 until the Battle of the Coral Sea in May 1942. The latter is often depicted as a standalone naval action, which it was not. The full picture must include the situation regarding land-based aviation, both Allied and Japanese. This aspect had a major influence on the strategies of both sides, and explains the condition and disposition of units when the crucial carrier battle unfolded.

Initially, Australian forces waited apprehensively in the region for the Japanese offensive that was inevitable, but was strangely missing in the first weeks of the Pacific War. Optimists hoped that American reinforcements would arrive before the Japanese. Such hopes were shattered in late January 1942 when the all-conquering Japanese carriers arrived. Over a four-day period, the intense power unleashed by the carriers smashed the brittle Australian defences and left no doubt of Japanese intentions.

The South Pacific was now Japan's for the taking. Indeed, Australia itself was now in peril and underwent a dark time of invasion fears and dire emergency. Yet somehow weak Allied air forces took a spirited fight to the aggressors, and a unique aerial campaign unfolded over the jungles and oceans below where there was a virtual absence of fighting. Little damage was inflicted on the invaders, but, almost inexplicably, they dallied. As will be shown in the later volumes, this delay was just time enough for reinforcements to arrive: land-based air power combined with the US carriers, but it was a close-run thing.

However, this perspective was not apparent to the aircrews doing the desperate aerial fighting at the time. Both sides fought bravely and with immense skill and determination. They also fought against a third force: the brutal New Guinea environment, which tested all aviators. Neither side had navigational aids, and only the most basic of maps existed. Downed aircrews could simply disappear into a jungle that was a true "heart of darkness", possessed by a heterogeneous collection of natives, most only one generation removed from first European contact.

This is, for the first time, the full story of both sides of an air war that could have been won by either incumbent, but for timing, crucial decisions and luck. Recounted with full reference to Japanese records and depicted with precise colour heraldry, it can be trusted as the most accurate and detailed account of this conflict produced to date.

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