## CHAPTER 15

## TOKEN RESISTANCE

As the only base for the Allied naval forces at the south-eastern end of the Malay barrier, and a main link in both sea and air communications between Australia and the Netherlands East Indies, Malaya, and the Philippines, the strategic and tactical value of Darwin was evident. So far as its air defence was concerned the initial Australian plan had envisaged little more than seaward reconnaissance and, should a Japanese invasion force be reported, delaying and harassing attacks. It had been accepted that the air strength of the base would not be able to withstand a strong and determined attack. But with the arrival of American forces there were increasing hopes that the base might soon be appreciably stronger.

The need for decisive operational control in the area was illustrated on 3rd January when A.C.H., Halong, sought approval from the Central War Room in Melbourne for further air attacks on Tobi Island, the contention being that these might check the enemy's air raids on Sorong and Babo and at the same time provide valuable experience for the Hudson crews. The Dutch members of the A.C.H. staff asked that such raids should be deferred until fighter protection against reprisals could be provided. Northern Area Headquarters in Townsville, presumably expressing the opinion of the Central War Room, replied that fear of reprisal must not be allowed to interfere with offensive action. But it was clear that the difficult question of operational coordination had not been answered—there were no further raids on Tobi Island.

Through the commander of the United States Far East Air Force Headquarters at Darwin, Colonel Francis M. Brady, R.A.A.F. Headquarters on 4th January received a copy of a significant American signal:

Following from Admiral Hart for General Brereton, repeat Brett and pass to Australian Commonwealth Naval Board. Twelve-plane squadron navy patrol planes scheduled arrive Darwin about 10th January and hope to base them Ambon. Report Ambon however indicates great danger from Japanese menace and without proper fighter support this base must be abandoned soon. When can you furnish planes originally agreed to by Brereton and how many?

The Central War Room already had received a glimpse of the depressed outlook of the Ambon garrisons when, two days before Admiral Hart's message was received, A.C.H., Halong, had sent word that plans existed at both Laha on Ambon and Namlea on Buru for the destruction of fuel and bombs; that at Laha the operations room had been prepared for demolition, but that facilities did not exist for demolishing the surface of the runways.

As though to justify the dismal note of these signals seven enemy flyingboats were over Halong and Laha before dawn on 7th January. Both bases were bombed and the enemy then flew low and subjected them to gunfire. There was no warning of the raid. Two Hudsons and one Dutch Buffalo were damaged on the ground and Dutch workshops and other buildings were hit. Three natives were killed but there were only minor casualties among the troops. Absence of warning meant that three Dutch Buffaloes, the only fighters available, had not time to take off. There were reports of lights being flashed as signals to the enemy aircraft but, while some of the Ambonese were unsympathetic to the Allied forces and may have served as Japanese agents, proof of these reports was lacking. The inadequacy of the anti-aircraft defences inspired Warrant Officer Knight¹ of No. 13 Squadron to call for volunteers to man a variety of machine-guns, some of which had been salvaged from wrecked aircraft.

With this forewarning of enemy intentions the patrol and reconnaissance operations of the Hudson crews were intensified. On 10th January a Hudson piloted by Squadron Leader Ryland broke off from escorting an American Catalina engaged on a shipping reconnaissance over the Molucca Sea to attack a four-engined enemy flying-boat. The Hudson's gunners had caused some damage to the enemy aircraft when shortage of fuel

forced Ryland to give up the attack.

The purpose behind the Japanese raids on Halong and Laha was soon apparent. Late on 10th January reconnaissance aircraft sighted an enemy convoy bearing down on Minahasa, the northern arm of Celebes. The first assessment of this force at A.C.H. was 8 cruisers, 18 destroyers, 12 transports and 3 submarines, but this was shown by later reports to be excessive, the number of transports being, in fact, only 6. An attack that night by Allied Catalinas was unsuccessful, and A.C.H. ordered dawn strikes by the American and Dutch Catalinas, and the Hudsons from Laha and Namlea, and recalled the detached Hudson flight from Babo. When the Allied aircraft set out before first light on 11th January weather conditions were very poor, giving some cover to the enemy force, which was found to have divided, one formation having anchored off Menado to the west of the tip of Minahasa and the other off Kema to the east. Already the Japanese forces had landed. The Catalinas were met by a strong force of Japanese navy float-plane fighters which set upon the slow-flying Allied flying-boats and prevented them from reaching the target. One Dutch Catalina was shot down and two others were damaged. One of the American Catalinas was later reported to have come down on the sea to the south of Kema and a search by another flying-boat failed to find any trace of it or its crew. The Hudsons, with superior speed, penetrated to the target area at both Menado and Kema to make low-level attacks. They scored a direct hit on one cruiser, a near miss on a transport and two more hits on undesignated ships. All the Hudsons returned safely, one of them damaged by anti-aircraft fire. Five Hudsons from Laha then attacked a light cruiser and destroyer, scoring two direct

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>F-O R. B. Knight, 9179. 13, 11, 80 and 31 Sqns. Clerk; of Middle Park, Vic; b. Warracknabeal, Vic, 26 Jul 1912.



(Australian War Memorial)



(Australian War Memorial)

Above: Lieut-General George H. Brett, Commander, Allied Air Forces, S.W.P.A., formed on 20th April 1942.

Lower: Gp Capt J. P. J. McCauley, when commanding officer of No. 1 Flying Training School at Point Cook.



The reconnaissance of Truk on 9th January 1942, by F-Lt R. Yeowart and crew in a specially fitted Hudson Mk IV of No. 6 Squadron. The operation, involving a return flight of 1,405 statute miles, was the longest sea reconnaissance which had been undertaken by the R.A.A.F. in a land-based aircraft. The concentration of enemy shipping and aircraft seen at Truk gave warning of the Japanese thrust south to New Britain and New Ireland in the next two weeks.

hits and three near misses on the cruiser. A destroyer appeared to have been damaged in the previous attack. At Kema, enemy lighters and troops on the beach were attacked with gunfire by some of the Hudson crews. Half an hour later two Hudsons from Laha bombed a 12,000-ton transport and reported several near misses.

When four Hudsons from Namlea bombed another large transport later in the day, without success, they were set upon by Japanese float-planes. The Hudson gunners scored well in this engagement, two enemy aircraft being shot down in flames. A third was seen to go into a spin from 1,000 feet and was counted a "probable" and a fourth was seen to alight on the sea apparently damaged. Credit for this action went to the crews piloted by Flight Lieutenant Hodge<sup>2</sup> and Flying Officer Gorrie,<sup>3</sup> both from No. 2 Squadron. From this exciting encounter the Hudsons returned. each with minor damage from enemy gunfire and one temporarily unserviceable. The only casualty was an air gunner who had been slightly wounded. These crews reported having seen fires burning in the vicinity of Menado and Kema. About this time Japanese seaplanes were reported to be circling Ternate, a Dutch island air base off the west coast of Halmahera. The garrison there feared that this was a preface to invasion. a fear which was supported by a reconnaissance report that enemy ships (type and number not revealed) had been sighted about 60 miles south from Kema and steaming in the direction of Halmahera.

At dawn on 12th January the Allied air attacks on the enemy forces invading Celebes were resumed. On their way to Menado five Hudsons from Namlea were intercepted by three enemy float-planes and five Zeros —the first of these Japanese fighters to be reported in the area. The Zero pilots immediately turned the tables on the Hudson crews. In unequal combat, the details of which were never recorded, the aircraft piloted by Hodge and Gorrie were both shot down from between 6,000 and 10,000 feet. Two other Hudsons, piloted by Flight Lieutenant Sattler4 and Flight Lieutenant Barton,5 failed to return and their crews were later listed as "presumed lost". The only aircraft of the flight to return was that piloted by Flight Lieutenant Cuming who reported having seen the Hudsons flown by Hodge and Gorrie shot down. When, half an hour later, those captained by Sattler and Barton had not returned, permission was given to the base operators to break wireless silence in an endeavour to call them up. There was a prompt reply, in good signals procedure, informing the base that the pilots had no message for them. That reply, if in fact it did come from either of the two missing crews, was the last the squadron heard of them.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> F-Lt P. H. R. Hodge, 451; 2 Sqn. Regular airman; of Essendon, Vic; b. Beechworth, Vic, 15 Jun 1913. Killed in action 12 Jan 1942.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> F-O P. C. Gorrie, 407168; 2 Sqn. Clerk; of Adelaide; b. Peterborough, SA, 6 Jun 1918. Killed in action 12 Jan 1942.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> F-Lt G. Sattler, 260510; 13 Sqn. Salesman; of Bathurst, NSW; b. Newcastle, NSW, 4 Sep 1911. Killed in action 12 Jan 1942.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> F-Lt A. R. Barton, 270525. 6 and 13 Sqns. Draftsman; of New Farm, Qld; b. Brisbane, 1 Apr 1913. Killed in action 12 Jan 1942.

Attacks by three Hudsons from Laha on a cruiser which, with a destroyer, was steaming about 30 miles east from Kema were made through a smoke pall drifting out to sea from the fires burning on shore. Two runs were made at 7,500 feet and then a diving attack from 2,000 feet, but without success. Later three more aircraft from the same base reported no success in an attack on a cruiser and destroyer which they sighted 120 miles to the south-west of Ternate.

In the midst of these operations, A.C.H., Halong, on 11th January, sent another warning signal on behalf of Lieut-Colonel Roach, the commander of Gull Force, to the Central War Room in Melbourne. It read:

For Army Melbourne from Gull Force. Am very disturbed at complete absence of response in view latest position. . . . Can we rely immediate adequate support. If not the result must inevitably be as predicted. We are all completely in the dark and failing any information from your end prospects are gloomy. At present time factor apparently is twelve hours.

Army Headquarters replied that a ship, the *Bantam*, was due at Ambon next day with 1,000,000 rounds of small arms ammunition, 5,000 mortar bombs, one ambulance, two 15-cwt vans, two motor-cycles and rations. The *Bantam* duly arrived.

A summary of the air operations against the Japanese invasion forces in Celebes sent to the Central War Room on 12th January by A.C.H., Halong, began and ended with these cheerless sentences:

Approach [to target] frustrated by superior air strength and bad visibility.... Operations unsatisfactory. Inadequate air strength further depleted and vulnerability to enemy attack greatly increased.

While the Allied air units had been striving to counter the enemy invasion fleet at Menado and Kema the Dutch ground forces there had been offering a hopelessly limited resistance to the Japanese landings which had been made at both points before dawn. But the enemy was taking no chances. In addition to the seaborne forces with which they had to contend, the Dutch were soon faced with even more serious opposition from the air. That same morning the enemy launched their first paratroop attack. More than 300 men descended from transport aircraft over the Langoan airfield, close to Menado. The small Dutch force fought pluckily but could not contain these paratroops who, though scattered over a wide area at first, succeeded in capturing the airfield on which, next day, a further airborne force was landed. The airborne troops soon linked with the forces landed from the sea. The northern Celebes were now securely in the enemy's grasp.

But the invasion of Celebes was only a part of this new Japanese thrust. Simultaneously they made an assault on the oil base on the island of Tarakan. As their convoy of 16 transports with strong air and sea escort closed on Tarakan on 10th January they were detected and attacked by three Flying Fortresses from Malang, but this attack scarcely interrupted their progress. As they approached the Tarakan coast a dense

column of black smoke rising from the oilfields told them that they would not secure that prize intact. That night the convoy lay off shore and before dawn the landing had been achieved. For the next 24 hours the Dutch garrison fought bravely but, as with their comrades in Celebes, the fight was to the strong and next morning they capitulated. The enemy now held two more important bases; bases which brought them more than 300 miles farther south and which enabled them to intersect the Allies' reinforcement route to MacArthur's beleaguered forces in the Philippines.

Knowledge of these enemy successes, together with the loss of four precious Hudsons and their crews and the increasing repair and maintenance difficulties, forced A.C.H., Halong, to decide, on 12th January, that air attacks on distant and strongly-held targets must be discontinued. By concentrating on reconnaissance and on attacking isolated enemy ships it was hoped that a limited air striking force might be conserved to oppose an attack on the Ambon and Buru bases themselves—an attack which the garrisons believed must come soon. The Central War Room in Melbourne and the new Central War Room, now established at Bandung, were both promptly informed of this decision.

Immediately after the capture of Davao and Jolo the First Air Attack Force, the main strength of which was the 21st Air Flotilla, and the Second Air Attack Force, chiefly the 23rd Air Flotilla, were brought down to these two bases respectively. At once they made ready for the "softening-up" raids. Menado was first raided on 24th December, one day after the 21st Flotilla had arrived at Davao, and the 23rd Flotilla began attacking Tarakan from Jolo on 30th December, only four days after it arrived. The main invasion forces began to assemble at Davao almost immediately despite "small scale" Allied air attacks by heavy bombers, in one of which the cruiser *Myoko* was "moderately damaged" so that she had to return to Sasebo for repairs. By this time the "air neutralisation" operations had "proceeded smoothly and the tactical opportunity had arrived". The main naval force steamed to a position east of Palau while the Eastern Support Unit moved to the waters east of Mindanao. A submarine force fanned out to the Java Sea to undertake reconnaissance of "the enemy strategic areas", the destruction of the enemy's lines of communications and minelaying off Darwin and in Dundas and Torres Straits. For the Celebes invasion the Sasebo Combined Special Naval Landing Force put to sea on 9th January from Davao in six transports with naval escort. Though bombed by Catalinas on the way, it landed soon after midnight of the 10th-11th at Menado and Kema. The troops were "not greatly impeded" by the "sporadic raids" [of the RAAF Hudsons]. Early on the morning of 11th January 334 men of the 1st Paratroop Force left Davao in 28 transport aircraft. They began dropping on the Langoan air base just before 10 a.m. and had secured the airfield by noon. The supporting airborne force which arrived next day was the 2nd Paratroop Force of 185 men. Nine fighters also arrived from Davao. (Presumably these included the five Zeros which accounted for the four Hudsons lost in these operations.) The Tarakan invasion force left Davao on 7th January in 16 transports carrying the 56th Regimental Group and the 2nd Kure Special Naval Landing Force which landed before dawn on 11th January. Six Japanese mine-

General Brereton later described this attack as "the kind of operation we hoped to perform frequently in support of General MacArthur's forces in Luzon". Nine Fortresses led by Major Combs, made the 1,500-miles flight from Malang, refuelling at Samarinda, Borneo. They bombed from 25,000 feet and believed they sunk a destroyer besides severely damaging a contest.

sweepers were engaged by a Dutch shore battery and two of them were sunk. A Japanese minesweeper sank a Dutch sweeper as it was attempting to escape. There were five Allied air raids in the landing period and "a little damage was caused on the ground".

The next signal from A.C.H., Halong, to the Central War Room (dispatched 12th January) read:

Japanese now established Menado and Kema 359 miles from Ambon bases. Anticipate concentrated bombing from flying-boats based Lake Tondana as preliminary to invasion of Ambon. With present equipment Ambon could not resist for one day forces equal to those which took Menado [and] Kema. Again urgently request immediate reinforcement by fighters and dive bombers. Suggest Tomahawks and Wirraways respectively in largest number possible. Repeat only token resistance possible with present unsuitable aircraft all of which will certainly be destroyed in one day's action against carrier-borne forces. Enemy has definite sea control as well as air superiority and therefore present situation far worse than instances such as Crete. Predict Allies' supply line through Torres Strait and Darwin will be cut within week of capture of Ambon.

To this the Central War Room replied on the same day stating simply that the Halong message had been repeated to Bandung, and adding: "We cannot supply aircraft." A day later the commander of Gull Force sent yet another appeal emphasising the impossibility of the position without adequate air and naval support and adding: "I understand no such support can be expected. To avoid purposeless sacrifice of valuable manpower and arms I recommend immediate evacuation combined force." A day later Wing Commander Scott, commanding the air force section at the A.C.H., received a personal signal from the Chief of the Air Staff who explained that he had just read the signal of 12th January setting out the appreciation of the situation by the A.C.H. His delayed knowledge of the contents of this message had been caused by his absence on a visit to Bandung (whither, as mentioned, he had flown on 9th January in company with Generals Brett and Brereton for a conference with General Wavell). Burnett's message said, in part:

The position of Ambon is within the control of the Commander-in-Chief in N.E.I. and must form part of the whole strategical plan and cannot be considered alone. It must therefore be held until orders are received from the Supreme Commander, General Wavell. I feel sure you would be the first to protest if Australians were withdrawn leaving Dutch alone to meet the attack. Congratulate those concerned on good work accomplished.

Scott sent his "respectful acknowledgement" of this personal signal and gave his assurance that resistance with the remaining aircraft would be resolute, adding:

It cannot be anticipated, however, that the enemy can be turned back or even seriously inconvenienced by the Hudsons available. Greatly regret that my [signal] was considered to imply lack of Dutch-Australian solidarity. It is advised emphatically that all objective undertakings will be planned and executed in collaboration with Dutch [and] American officers and that the orders of the Supreme Commander will be implemented by Australians in this area in a manner which will not derogate from their reputation.

Scott's signal was sent on 14th January and it was not until the next day that Wavell formally took over command at ABDA Headquarters, Bandung. For aircraft reinforcements there was only one direction in which Wavell could turn—to the United States, where the utmost that could be done was, in fact, being done. But, as always, it seemed, time was serving the enemy. Plans resulting from the conference at Washington proposed that the strength of the U.S.A.A.F. in the Western Pacific should be two heavy, two medium and one light bomber groups and four fighter groups. And, though deliveries to the ABDA Area could not be maintained as planned—the schedule for the dispatch of six heavy bombers a day proved too exacting—20 Fortresses and 6 Liberators were on their way by 6th January, 45 Fortresses and 9 Liberators were being made ready for take-off and 160 of the same heavy-bomber types were to be sent as rapidly as they came from the factories. But the cry from all the combat areas was for fighters and these could not be flown from America. Thus the best use had to be made of the few that were available and, on the first day of Wavell's new command, a signal from his headquarters informed A.C.H., Darwin, that a detachment of Kittyhawks would be established to operate from Ambon, Kendari and Samarinda as soon as supplies of fuel could be provided and nine protected and camouflaged pens had been made at each of these airfields. ABDA Headquarters would arrange for the fuel supplies and A.C.H., Darwin, was to advise when the pens would be ready.<sup>7</sup>

On the same day North-Eastern Area, for so Northern Area had on this day become, requested R.A.A.F. headquarters to give urgent consideration to the withdrawal of the Hudson aircraft and crews from the Ambon area.<sup>8</sup> This plea was made "in view of losses sustained and probable further heavy losses" and because conservation of general-reconnaissance aircraft and crews was essential. It was recommended that the airfields in the Ambon area should be used as advanced operational bases, only the signals staff, sufficient ground staff for maintenance, and one member of the control staff remaining. The Air Board's reply was simply that the forces at Ambon were under the operational control of General Wavell with whom the situation was under discussion.

Laha, which had neither natural nor artificial camouflage, was the first base to experience the consequence of the increased aircraft range which the Japanese had achieved by their latest thrusts. About 10.30 a.m. on 15th January a single enemy naval fighter was seen overhead at 12,000 feet. One of three Dutch Buffalo pilots who had already earned the praise of their Allied comrades at the base for their tenacity—they could scarcely be induced to leave their aircraft—took off in a vain

 $<sup>^7</sup>$  It was estimated that even if labour was available for such construction work (which it was not) these pens could not be completed in less than three months.

<sup>8</sup> Operational pressure in the north and in the north-east was now intense and the acute situations at Ambon on the one hand, and Rabaul on the other, were operationally distinct. The Air Board therefore decided that Northern Area should be divided and so, on 15th January, North-Eastern Area was formed with headquarters at Townsville and North-Western Area with headquarters at Darwin.

attempt at interception. The "red" air raid warning had been given and four Hudsons on the airfield and six Catalinas at the Halong flying-boat base all took off. It was the practice among the Hudson crews, if sufficient warning was given, to take off and make for a large and friendly bank of clouds that, almost invariably, hung low about 50 miles from the base. On this occasion 12 Zero fighters swept down on the base in their absence. No serious damage was done but the two Dutch Buffalo pilots who had not taken off earlier now did so to meet the attack. Both aircraft were soon shot down but both pilots baled out safely. The Zeros were engaged by the Allied ground defences including those improvised by members of the R.A.A.F.

The Hudsons were now recalled to base and as they came in to land they were joined by three more Hudsons which had just arrived from Darwin. All had landed except one when the red alert came again. Two of the crews were able to get their aircraft off the ground immediately and the remaining four aircraft began to take off from the one runway simultaneously—two from either end. Despite this unorthodox and chancy procedure all were safely airborne. As they set course for Namlea, and at least temporary safety, 26 enemy aircraft loosed their bombs (126 of them 500-lb, others 25-lb) over the airfield. This attack was quickly followed by the return of the enemy fighters which swept the airfield from low level with their gunfire. All the anti-aircraft defences engaged them and an A.I.F. battery was given credit for shooting down one Zero. The enemy's main target was now the fuel dumps, but a Hudson that was being towed from one revetment to another was destroyed. In addition to this loss and to that of the two Buffaloes, two American Catalinas were destroyed at the flying-boat base at Halong where, though there was excellent camouflage, there were no defences other than a few small-calibre guns. At Laha the Dutch quarters were demolished and the runway was so cratered by bombs that it was unserviceable for 24 hours. There were no R.A.A.F. casualties, a fact which Squadron Leader Ryland attributed to the adequate provision of slit trenches both on the airfield and in the barracks area. In this series of attacks the enemy had now heavily underscored all the pleas that had gone out from the Area Combined Headquarters at Halong.

If the formation of ABDA Command was providing the Australian Chiefs of Staff with some measure of relief from operational responsibility in the Dutch islands to the north, there was no early prospect of such relief in the north-east. Eventually appreciable aid might come from

Warning methods appear to have been very varied in kind and efficiency. At Laha the variation was between the firing of three shots, the explosion of hand grenades on the beach and the firing of a Dutch cannon. Usually the period of warning was between five and ten minutes. At Halong the Dutch had a good system of spotters, stationed along the coast about two miles apart, who relayed warning of the approach of enemy aircraft with flag or lamp signals. These warnings enabled aircraft to take off on many occasions before the attack began. Namlea received warnings from Laha by wireless telegraphy. This was supplemented by an elementary but effective local system in which a Dutch soldier spotted from a hill to the north-west of the airfield and gave visual signals to another soldier at the runway.

the United States Pacific Fleet, but Admiral Chester Nimitz, who had assumed command of this fleet on 31st December, had a grave task before him. This task had two aspects of virtually equal importance—to safeguard the strategic triangle, Hawaii-Johnston Island-Midway Island, and to maintain the vital communications line between the United States, New Zealand and Australia through Samoa and Fiji. There were reports that the enemy was building up strength in the Gilbert Islands, particularly air strength. Bombers had struck at Nauru and Ocean Islands and Japanese submarines had fired shells into the United States bases on Johnston and Palmyra Islands. Not only was the American strength in capital ships depleted as a result of the Pearl Harbour attack, but the air strength in Hawaii was now described as "dangerously weak". In these circumstances the Australian Chiefs could see no near prospect of "outside" aid in their task of holding the enemy off the crucial island arc radiating eastward from New Guinea with Rabaul as its focal point. And Rabaul, admittedly pathetically weak in its defences, had small prospect of withstanding any serious enemy attack. A major disability was, of course, the impoverished state of the R.A.A.F. in operational aircraft.2 An appreciation prepared early in January by Wing Commander Garing,3 senior air staff officer at what then were Northern Area Headquarters, indirectly emphasised this unhappy fact by setting out the most important courses of action "open to" the R.A.A.F. in this area. These were:

To strike at Japanese bases and shipping wherever possible.

To obtain such warning as is possible of any attempted southward movements by the Japanese throughout the island area.

To keep open the shipping routes through the Coral, Arafura and Timor Seas.

To deny the enemy access to Rabaul and to the territories of New Guinea, Papua and the mainland of Australia.

These courses of action had in them something of the counsel of perfection which, to the commanders of operational units, and particularly to Wing Commander Lerew with his handful of aircraft in Rabaul, must also have had something of the quality of fiction. With the appreciation there were specific directions for the use of No. 24 Squadron's aircraft. The two Wirraway flights were to be kept dispersed in the Rabaul area (though there was yet no proper provision for dispersal) for the primary task of defending Rabaul itself. The squadron's single and hard-worked flight of Hudsons was to be operated from Port Moresby, Salamaua, Lae, Rabaul and Kavieng for seaward reconnaissance, photo-reconnaissance over enemy and enemy-occupied territory, the bombardment of enemy bases, and as an air striking force—an immense responsibility for a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> On 1st January 1942 Nos. 11 and 20 Squadrons each had 6 Catalinas and 2 Empire flying-boats on strength and 269 officers and other ranks between them. The strength at Station Head-quarters, Port Moresby, numbered 594. On 3rd January the disposition of the serviceable Catalinas was: Tulagi 2, Port Moresby 4; Vila, Rabaul, Noumea and Soraken, one each. At Rabaul on this date No. 24 Squadron had only 4 Hudsons and 6 Wirraways and approximately 130 officers and other ranks.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Air Cmdre W. H. Garing, CBE, DFC. 10 Sqn; SASO Northern Cd and North-Eastern Area 1941-42; comd 9 Gp 1942-43, 1 OTU 1943-44; Director of Tactics and Operational Requirements 1944-45, Regular air force offr; of Melbourne; b. Corryong, Vic, 26 Jul 1910.

few aircraft which could not operate as far as the Caroline Islands without long-range fuel tanks which, in turn, would greatly reduce their bomb-

On New Year's Day Lerew led the four Hudsons he then had available -Flight Lieutenants Erwin, Diethelm and Murphy were the captains of the other three aircraft—in an attack on Kapingamarangi Island. The crews observed five direct bomb hits and, as they left the target, a column of thick black smoke was rising to about 10,000 feet suggesting that a fuel store had been hit. The four aircraft returned safely to Rabaul after having been airborne five hours and a half. Two days later three Hudsons led by Lerew, with Diethelm and Flight Lieutenant Paterson piloting the other aircraft, again attacked this island. The take-off was at 1.35 a.m. and the Hudsons were over the target at 4.30. Two of them made low-level runs over slipways and waterside installations, starting four separate fires with their 250-lb general-purpose bombs. The third Hudson bombed the centre of the island, increasing the intensity of a large fire that had been started in a stores dump during the earlier attack. Again, on 6th January, crews captained by Lerew and Paterson made another strike on the island, the observed result being the destruction of a seaplane on a slipway.

While these operations were proceeding, Intelligence information filtering into the Central War Room in Melbourne pointed clearly to the urgent need to know just what the Japanese were doing at their bases in the Caroline Islands and particularly in Truk, the coral atoll group lying about 650 statute miles due north from Rabaul. An armed photographic reconnaissance was therefore planned. Two Hudson Mark IV aircraft—the latest type—which had just arrived from America, were selected for the task and two Hudson crews from No. 6 Squadron, then based at Richmond, New South Wales, one piloted by Flight Lieutenant Yeowart<sup>4</sup> and the other by Flying Officer Green,<sup>5</sup> were chosen to man them. So important and secret was the mission that the briefing of the crews was undertaken by Air Vice-Marshal Bostock, then Deputy Chief of the Air Staff, assisted by the Director of Naval Intelligence (Commander Long<sup>6</sup>), the R.A.A.F. Director of Intelligence (Wing Commander Packer) and the R.A.A.F. Staff Officer Operations (Squadron Leader Nicoll<sup>7</sup>). It lasted for four days. Yeowart and Green were told that they might have to fight their way into Truk contending with enemy radar direction-finding apparatus and Zeros. Their new aircraft (Yeowart's

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Sqn Ldr R. A. Yeowart, 270467. 22, 6 and 32 Sqns; 1 and 7 ADs (Test and Ferry) 1943-45. Accountant; of Brisbane; b. Brisbane, 22 Aug 1915.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Sqn Ldr R. M. Green, 250661. 21, 6, 32 Sqns, 1 PRU and 87 Sqn; Controller HQ Southern and North-Eastern Areas 1942-43; Instructor 1 OTU 1943. Clerk; of Melbourne; b. Melbourne, 26 Dec 1920.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Cdr R. B. M. Long, OBE; RAN. HMAS Australia 1917-18. Director of Naval Intelligence 1939-45.
B. Princes Hill, Melbourne, 19 Sep 1899. Died 8 Jan 1960.
<sup>7</sup> Gp Capt G. D. Nicoll, DFC, 210. Liaison duties USA 1940-41; SO Operations RAAF HO 1941; comd 1 GRS 1942, 14 Sqn 1942-43, 8 Sqn 1943-44; LO 10 Gp 1944; comd 1 OTU 1944-45; SO FEAF HQ 1945. Regular air force offr; of Toronto, NSW; b. Toronto, 30 Jan 1918.

already nick-named Tit Willow and Green's Yum Yum), were each fitted with two extra 105-gallon fuel tanks in the cabin and two 20-inch cameras—one in the nose and one in the standard camera well near the door. After the equipment, including the cameras, had been tested in a night flight the Hudsons were flown to Townsville where, on 3rd January, they were given their final orders and their code words—North Wind: Proceed on reconnaissance to Truk; East Wind: Return to Rabaul; South Wind: Return to Townsville direct.

From Townsville, on the morning of 4th January, Yeowart and Green set course for Rabaul direct. When they were near the Trobriand Islands and about one hour's flight from Rabaul they received warning that that base was being bombed. They immediately altered course and landed for refuelling at Lae on the north-east coast of New Guinea. When, eventually, they flew over Rabaul at 5.30 p.m. next day the airfield was closed in by a rain squall so they crossed to Namatanai on New Ireland where there was a landing ground. Though made two years earlier, this runway had rarely, if ever, been used. Palm trunks scattered across it in anticipation of an attempt by Japanese aircraft to land there had to be dragged away hurriedly before the Hudsons, circling in the dusk, their pilots anxiously flashing their landing lights, could come down with safety. That night Rabaul radio could be heard calling for news of the precious Hudsons but no reply could be sent as the aircraft batteries were now too low for transmission.

Next morning the Namatanai district officer, using a pedal transceiver radio set, obtained a weather report after allaying Rabaul's suspicions about the origin of the inquiry. Yeowart and Green then took off and landed their Hudsons at Rabaul at 11 a.m. on 6th January. Lerew was most enthusiastic about their mission, the operational instructions for which ended with the warning that reprisals against Rabaul could be expected. Trouble had developed in one of the engines of Green's aircraft—a carburettor diaphragm had cracked. The damage could not be repaired and Green and his crew were forced to withdraw from the mission. Yeowart and his crew-Flying Officer McDonnell<sup>8</sup> (second pilot), Sergeant Ellis<sup>9</sup> (wireless operator) and Sergeant Marriner<sup>1</sup> (rear gunner)—must undertake the mission alone. Enemy raids on Rabaul were expected with increasing frequency and the risk of losing his aircraft on the ground was such that Yeowart left on the same day for Kavieng on the northern tip of New Ireland where, with the aid of members of the 1st Independent Company and natives, the Hudson was quickly camouflaged with paw-paw trees, complete with fruit on the branches. The precaution was justified. On 7th January an enemy flying-boat, one

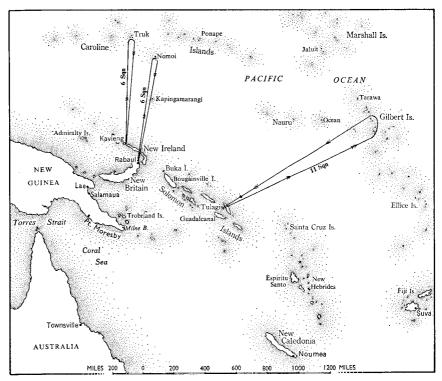
<sup>8</sup> F-Lt P. R. McDonnell, 260545. 6 and 32 Sqns. Commercial pilot; of Manly, NSW; b. Manly, 21 Oct 1918. Killed in action 4 Jul 1942.

Sgt M. C. Ellis, 407360. 6 and 32 Sqns. Shop assistant; of Tanunda, SA; b. Tanunda, 20 Jan 1917. Killed in action 4 Jul 1942.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Sgt F. C. Marriner, 401044. 6 and 24 Sqns. Salesman; of Northcote, Vic; b. Melbourne, 13 Feb 1916. Killed in action 19 Feb 1942.

from a formation that had raided Rabaul, broke off and descended to 5,000 feet to have a close look at Kavieng. Apparently the Hudson was not seen.

Yeowart was disturbed and perplexed when an A.I.F. captain in charge of airfield defence reported to him a conversation he had had that morning with his native "boy". "Massa," the boy had asked, "this fella baloose [aeroplane] come; when other fella come? Two fella baloose land Namatanai. Two fella go longa Rabaul. One fella come here. When



Truk and other long-range reconnaissance operations, January 1942

other fella come?" To this "intelligence" the boy added a further surprise by disclosing that "this fella baloose" had no bombs, but had "plenty camera" and was going to photograph the Japanese—accurate information that was news to the A.I.F. captain. Except that Yeowart had purposely not opened his bomb bay (as was customary when running up an aircraft's engines on a runway) and that this had been remarked on by the observant natives, he could not account for the boy's knowledge. When questioned by army officers about this the boy's unvarying reply was "No savvy".

But Yeowart had little time to speculate on the possibility of espionage. On the night of 8th January he received the signal North Wind. At first light next day, with throttles wide open and using the flaps, he took the heavily-laden Hudson off from Kavieng, the undercarriage brushing through tall kunai grass growing on a bank at the end of the runway. It was then 5.44 a.m. Four hours and a half later, just three minutes ahead of the estimated time of arrival over the target area, the Hudson swept from a severe rain squall and the crew were looking down over the starboard wing on Truk Islands. They gazed particularly and excitedly at the main island—Toll.

Lying in Toll Harbour were 12 warships that were either light cruisers or destroyers, one large warship thought to be an aircraft carrier, 3 merchant ships and one hospital ship. Several float-planes were circling low over the harbour in which 8 four-engined flying-boats were moored. An airfield had been built on a small island in the harbour by excavating the centre from a hill and using the earth to build up the reef at either end to form a runway. On this runway about 27 bombers were parked wingtip to wing-tip. Yeowart made a photographic run over the harbour at 13,000 feet. It was not until this run was half completed that anti-aircraft fire began. Marriner then reported aircraft taking off and climbing towards them, but Yeowart made a second run, this time over the island airfield. The ground fire was becoming accurate as the Hudson swung back over the harbour and, as the leading enemy aircraft began to close in, Marriner opened fire on it with a long burst of tracer, incendiary and armourpiercing ammunition (a combination carried, in part, for its scare value). As he did so he shouted to Yeowart, "For God's sake keep her going!" Yeowart dived the Hudson into the heart of a rain squall which, he said later, was worse than the risk of attack by enemy aircraft. When he levelled off at 500 feet, he had evaded the enemy fighters.

Having spent 25 minutes over the target and completed the task originally allotted to two aircraft, Yeowart set course for Kavieng where he landed without further incident. The tip of the Hudson's tail plane had been shot away, but this was the only damage the enemy had done. From Kavieng Yeowart flew on to Rabaul and landed precariously between recently-made bomb craters on the runway. At 2 a.m. on 10th January Lerew told Yeowart that he had a "hunch" that it would be wise to get the Hudson away from Rabaul immediately. Acting on this advice Yeowart took off from the airfield which, he said later, looked like a seaside amusement park with its red, green and white lights-lights placed to mark the bomb craters and the safe portion of the runway. As dawn broke the Hudson was over Milne Bay, on the south-eastern extremity of New Guinea. Flying safely at 15,000 feet, the crew intercepted an "air raid in progress" signal from Rabaul—Lerew's hunch had been right. When he landed at Townsville Yeowart's films were rushed to a darkroom for developing while he gave a report of his mission to Melbourne by secret telephone. With his crew he then waited anxiously for the films to be developed, seizing them before they had been properly washed and relaxing only when they were assured that the cameras had not failed.<sup>2</sup>

Lerew accepted the news of the enemy force Yeowart had found lying in Toll Harbour as confirmation of his already firm conviction that Rabaul would soon have to face a major attack. This conviction had developed swiftly since 4th January when 22 Japanese heavy bombers (Type-96 Mitsubishi, code-named "Nell") had swept over Lakunai airfield. Two Wirraways, one flown by Wing Commander Tindal,3 the armament officer of Northern Area Headquarters who was in Rabaul on a visit of inspection, and the other by Flight Lieutenant Brookes, took off but were unable to gain sufficient height and speed for interception. Flying in three V formations, the enemy "pattern" bombed the airfield from 12,000 feet, loosing more than fifty 60-kilogram (130-lb) bombs. Three bombs fell on the runway and 17 in the native compound and Rapindik Hospital area. The rest fell harmlessly in the sea. About 15 natives were killed and the same number wounded. There could be no question that these raiders had come from Truk and were some of the aircraft Yeowart had seen parked on the runway of the island airfield. About 7 p.m. on the same day 11 Type-97 Kawanisi (Mavis) flying-boats bombed Vunakanau, dropping between 30 and 40 bombs which fell harmlessly some distance from the runway.

Two days later 9 Kawanisi flying-boats again bombed Vunakanau from 12,000 feet. The raid came at 6 p.m. and this time there was practically no warning.4 This time the enemy scored a direct hit on the new directionfinding station, construction of which was almost complete, wrecking it and the adjacent aerial system and control hut beyond repair. A grounded Wirraway was destroyed, a Hudson damaged and the runway made temporarily unserviceable for other than Wirraways. Four Wirraways took off and despite the lack of warning one of them, flown by Flight Lieutenant Anderson,<sup>5</sup> succeeded in engaging one of the flying-boats. He made a climbing rear attack and closed to within 300 yards. In determined though vain pursuit he fired all his ammunition without apparent damage to the enemy aircraft, which returned his fire from the dorsal gun. Cloud cover for the enemy and failing light prevented any combat from the other Wirraways and the enemy formation got safely away. Though unsuccessful, Anderson had achieved the distinction of being the first fighter pilot to engage in air-to-air combat with a Japanese

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> As there were then inadequate photographic facilities at RAAF station, Garbutt—the air base for Townsville—the 280 films brought back by Yeowart had to be processed under a security watch at a commercial studio in the town. From an interpretation of these photographs and interrogation of the Hudson crew, P-O J. P. Deverteull quickly prepared a target map for operations against the Truk base.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> W Cdr A. R. Tindal, 76. Comd 24 Sqn 1941, HQ Northern Area 1941-42, HQ North-Western Area 1942. Regular air force offr; of Armidale, NSW; b. Eversley, Eng, 18 Jan 1916. Killed in action 19 Feb 1942.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The coastwatchers in the area—notably Sub-Lt C. L. Page, RANVR, who was stationed on Tabar, due east from Kavieng; Major J. H. McDonald, District Officer at Kavieng; and C. Chambers, who was on Emirau, to the north of Kavieng—observed and signalled the approach of most of the enemy air formations in this period. Feldt, The Coast Watchers, p. 41.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> F-Lt B, H, Anderson, 260770. 24 and 75 Sqns. Bank clerk; of Sydney; b. Sydney, 24 Oct 1916. Killed in action 22 Mar 1942.

aircraft in the South-West Pacific. This was also the first time that a Wirraway had come within firing distance of an enemy aircraft.

On 7th January Rabaul received its fourth raid. Between 18 and 20 Nells in two V formations with two of their number in the "box" (flying inside the leading V) dropped between 40 and 60 bombs; on the ground a Hudson and two Wirraways were destroyed and two Hudsons were damaged. The barracks at station headquarters, temporary repair hangars, and some stores were also damaged. Three Wirraways took off but they were unequal to the enemy's speed. Later one of the Hudsons that had been damaged—a bomb had exploded almost under its nose, ripping off parts of one wing and the ailerons and tearing holes along the full length of the fuselage—was repaired through the ingenuity of the squadron's engineer officer, Flight Lieutenant Kerr. The wing structure and ailerons were mended with sheet metal and angle-iron. Lerew refused to allow any other pilot to fly this aircraft until he had himself made a test flight in it. His report was: "It can be flown, but that is about all." Later it was safely flown to Townsville.

Next day an enemy aircraft was observed over Rabaul at a height of between 15,000 and 18,000 feet, presumably making a photographic reconnaissance. Japanese reconnaissance was also reported over Buka in the Solomon Islands by a Wirraway pilot who had gone there to obtain a report on the condition of the airfield. A section of the 1st Independent Company stationed at Buka prepared for the demolition of bomb stores and the runway surface if the enemy should attempt to land there.

These costly raids were only one of the factors that multiplied Lerew's problems. Every effort had been made to improve the signals communications. Radio installations had been developed chiefly through the cooperation of Amalgamated Wireless Australasia Ltd which had supplied the transmitters and receivers. Apart from the serious damage to these installations by enemy bombing there was concern over interference with transmission and reception—wireless-telegraph operational wave-lengths were being "jammed" by some outside agency and there was a fear that the single telephone land line on which Lerew had to depend for communication between the airfields and the signals station was being tapped, though an army patrol was unable to verify this. Enemy aliens, chiefly Germans, had not been interned and there were strong suspicions that through them information was reaching the enemy.

On 11th January, Lerew, in a signal to Northern Area and R.A.A.F. Headquarters, made an urgent appeal for labour and equipment for the construction of dispersal and splinter-proof pens for his few and precious aircraft; for four anti-aircraft guns for each airfield; and for six "modern" fighters with which to intercept unescorted enemy bombers.<sup>7</sup> He also

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Sqn Ldr A. C. Kerr, 262963. 24 Sqn, HQ Northern Area and North-Eastern Area. Fitter-general; of Balmain, NSW; b. Glasgow, Scotland, 19 Aug 1897.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> In a report about this time F-Lt Brookes wrote: "From present experience it would appear that the fire power of the Wirraway aircraft is inadequate to do serious damage to enemy flying-boats which, so far, are the only type of enemy aircraft encountered that can be overtaken by a Wirraway."

emphasised the need for the proclamation of martial law to control the civil population. His concern about the task for which he was held responsible was summed up in the last sentence of this signal: "Loss of Rabaul means loss of offensive." And to protect Rabaul he now had only 12 Wirraways.

The operations instructions for Yeowart's Truk mission had included supplementary orders that, if the photographs revealed satisfactory targets, Northern Area Headquarters were to plan a night-bombing attack by six Catalinas, to be carried out if and when the Central War Room ordered it. On 11th January Yeowart flew the precious target maps to Port Moresby and that same evening he assisted the station commander, Wing Commander Pearce, and Wing Commander Gibson,8 who was then commanding No. 20 Squadron at Port Moresby, to brief six Catalina crews from Nos. 11 and 20 Squadrons for an attack on Toll Harbour. Three of the Catalinas then flew to Lorengau and three to Kavieng for refuelling after which all six set out to attack the Truk base. After crossing the equator the crews encountered extremely bad weather and for the last 300 miles visibility was reduced to about half a mile. Intermittent fierce thunderstorms made flying conditions still worse. Though five of the Catalinas reached the vicinity of the target, all were forced to return without attacking it.

The Central War Room in Melbourne was now as sure as was Lerew in Rabaul that the enemy force lying in Toll Harbour was preparing for an early thrust south and that Rabaul was almost certainly the next objective. The inability of the six Catalinas to strike meant a serious loss of precious time, but until they could strike nothing could be done for they were the only combat aircraft the R.A.A.F. possessed capable of reaching the target with a reasonable bomb-load. About this time Lerew, aware that American Flying Fortresses were being staged through Australia to Java, signalled an urgent request that these heavy bombers should be diverted for "even one strike" on the enemy naval and air forces at Truk. As he later described it, this target was "a bomb-aimer's dream". However, these Fortresses then had only skeleton crews,9 and in any event the American view of Japanese intentions, considered in the light of Yeowart's reconnaissance report, was that the enemy's most likely objective was Suva, which would not be reinforced from America until the reinforcement of Samoa had been taken care of. General Brereton, moreover, had made it very clear that he was not to be dissuaded from his concentration on aid for General MacArthur's forces in the Philippines by any request for aid in defence of Australian territory.

On 14th January Yeowart and his crew made a photo-reconnaissance of Nomoi, 120 miles south-east of Truk, which was thought to be a Jap-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Air Cmdre W. N. Gibson, CBE, DFC, 79. 10 Sqn; comd 20 Sqn 1941-42; RAAF Port Moresby 1942; Director of Operations Allied Air HQ 1942-43; SASO RAAF Cd 1943, 1 TAF 1944-45. Regular air force offr; of North Sydney; b. Sydney, 28 Apr 1915.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Lerew could not have known, of course, that they were manned by scratch crews in at least some of which the navigators were mere cadets.

anese seaplane base. They found no activity there and an attack with gunfire on a Japanese lugger was the crew's only compensation for a long and hazardous flight in which, at 15,000 feet, they experienced temperatures so low that the Hudson shuddered as large pieces of ice were flung against the fuselage from the propellers. A similar reconnaissance of the Gilbert Islands, notable chiefly for its duration—21 hours—was made on 14th-15th January by a Catalina from No. 11 Squadron piloted by Squadron Leader Cohen, who, from Tulagi, covered nine separate islands in the group and took 100 photographs. No enemy naval units or aircraft were sighted and there was no evidence of any new enemy bases there. Had Yeowart, instead, made a second and equally-successful reconnaissance of Truk on this date, he would have brought back still more dramatic news, for by this time two aircraft carriers with escorts and auxiliary vessels and a number of transports were in Toll Harbour and on the point of moving south.

The Catalinas of Nos. 11 and 20 Squadrons were now called on to attempt an attack on the Truk base. The pilots chosen for the operation were Squadron Leaders Price<sup>2</sup> and Davies<sup>3</sup> and Flight Lieutenants Hemsworth,<sup>4</sup> Thompson<sup>5</sup> and Beaumont,<sup>6</sup> and Lieutenant G. H. Hutchinson<sup>7</sup> of the United States Navy, then serving with No. 11 Squadron. On 15th January, Davies, Hutchinson and Beaumont took their aircraft to Kayieng for refuelling while the other three went to Lorengau. In taking off from Kavieng the Catalina piloted by Davies crashed. All the crew and the aircraft were lost. Hutchinson brought his aircraft down at the scene of the crash in a vain attempt to rescue the crew. Beaumont's aircraft, alone of the three, reached the target, which again was obscured by stormy weather. This Catalina reached Truk an hour later than the three from Lorengau and, whereas they had failed to see the base at all, a break in the overcast gave Beaumont and his crew a brief sighting, sufficient for them to make two runs and drop sixteen bombs, though the weather closed in again almost immediately and they were unable to see the result of their attack. All four Catalinas returned to their base, but the luck of the weather was still very definitely with the enemy.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Gp Capt J. A. Cohen, DFC, 117. 10 Sqn; comd 11 Sqn 1941-42, RAAF Stn Rathmines 1942-43; Deputy Director of Training 1943-44; Senior Intell Offr, HQ RAAF Cd 1945. Regular air force offr; of Coogee, NSW; b. Moree, NSW, 19 Oct 1916. (In 1947 changed name to Richard Kingsland.)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> W Cdr T. McB. Price, DFC, 172. 9 Sqn (comd HMAS Sydney Detachment) 1939-41; seconded 19, 33 Bombardment Gps USAAF and comd 20 Sqn 1941-42; Deputy Director Operations AAF HQ 1942-43; comd 14 Sqn 1943-44; CFI 1 OTU 1944-45. Regular air force offr; of Adelaide; b. Adelaide, 14 Nov 1914.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Sqn Ldr T. H. Davies, 163. 9 and 11 Sqns. Regular air force offr; of Kensington, NSW; b. Melbourne, 22 Feb 1917. Killed in action 15 Jan 1942.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Sqn Ldr G. E. Hemsworth, AFC, 260275. 11 and 20 Sqns. Commercial pilot; of Manly, NSW; b. 2 Jan 1910. Killed in action 6 May 1942.

<sup>W Cdr C. F. Thompson, DFC, 260286. 20 and 11 Sqns; comd 43 Sqn 1943-44; liaison duties 1 TAF 1944-45. Builder's trainee; of Sydney; b. Waverley, NSW, 31 Aug 1916.
Sqn Ldr E. V. Beaumont, 260. 11, 9 and 20 Sqns. Regular air force offr; of Bondi, NSW; b. Sydney, 23 Jan 1918. Killed in action 24 Feb 1942.</sup> 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup>Lt Hutchinson was one of a number of Catalina pilots lent to the RAAF by the American Navy's No. 10 Patrol Wing, forced south from the Philippines.

The Japanese operations in this period and in this area were simple enough. A Pacific sequel to the attack on Pearl Harbour was a part of the plan for southern conquest. The Fourth Fleet which, with an amphibious force, had seized Guam and Wake Islands, had moved down to the Truk Islands and there was making rendezvous with part of the carrier fleet that had made the assault on Pearl Harbour. Thus augmented, the new task of the Fourth Fleet was to provide cover for a force that would make the next strike southward. It was the beginning of the concentration of these forces that Yeowart's reconnaissance mission had detected.

So it was, in mid-January 1942, that with powerful enemy forces poised to strike at Rabaul on the one hand and Ambon on the other, the Australian Chiefs of Staff faced a military situation for which they had no immediate answer. Without the aircraft to strike at the enemy before he struck and to meet his assaults when they came, they were virtually powerless. Those unhappy words signalled from Halong on 12th January—"only token resistance possible with present unsuitable aircraft"—were true of the whole Allied position throughout the Far East and the Western Pacific.