

## CHAPTER 18

### THE FALL OF RABAUL

**W**HAT the Rabaul garrison recognised as “softening-up” raids by the Japanese were resumed on 16th January when 40 bombs were dropped by Kawanisi flying-boats. There was no very serious damage, but the raid was taken as a pointer to what might be expected. As it happened, “enemy aircraft overhead” reports came from various coastwatchers in the next few days including those at Tabar Island and Pondo. Wirraway patrols were maintained each day from first to last light but there were no sightings of consequence, though the crew of one aircraft on patrol north of Kavieng engaged a lone enemy flying-boat without causing it any visible damage. Then, at 12.14 p.m. on 20th January, the coast-watcher on Tabar signalled that 20 enemy aircraft were heading for Rabaul. About half an hour later the raid began and it soon became clear that this was no “ordinary” one. The 20 aircraft sighted from Tabar were quickly joined by a force of 33 bombers which, coming in from the west, were not seen until they were almost over the town area. Only five minutes later watchers on Duke of York Island reported another 50 aircraft approaching—heavy bombers and dive bombers with a fighter escort. The time recorded for the beginning of the raid was 12.48 p.m. Two Wirraways, piloted by Flying Officer Lowe, who had Sergeant Ashford<sup>1</sup> as his observer, and Sergeant Herring,<sup>2</sup> with Pilot Officer Claire<sup>3</sup> as observer, were on patrol. But at the first sighting five more Wirraways took off. Two were from Lakunai, one piloted by Sergeant Hewett,<sup>4</sup> with Flying Officer Tyrrell<sup>5</sup> as observer and the other by Flight Sergeant Milne<sup>6</sup> (observer, Sergeant Harber<sup>7</sup>). The other three were from Vunakanau, their pilots and observers, respectively, being Sergeants Blackman<sup>8</sup> and Woodcroft,<sup>9</sup> Bromley<sup>10</sup> and Walsh,<sup>11</sup> and Little<sup>12</sup> and Sheppard.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sgt C. A. Ashford, 3210; 24 Sqn. Regular airman; of Enfield, NSW; b. Mortlake, NSW, 15 Aug 1915. Killed in action 20 Jan 1942.

<sup>2</sup> F-Lt G. R. Herring, 405410. 23, 24, 84 and 80 Sqn; Instructor 8 and 2 OTU's 1944-45. School teacher; of Balfes Creek, Qld; b. Thursday Island, 19 Jan 1921.

<sup>3</sup> F-Lt A. G. Claire, 273495. 24, 23, 30 and 36 Sqn. Clerk; of Kedron, Qld; b. Mackay, Qld, 11 Apr 1913.

<sup>4</sup> Sqn Ldr W. O. K. Hewett, 407428; 24 Sqn. B. Bordertown, SA, 6 Sep 1921.

<sup>5</sup> F-Lt J. V. Tyrrell, 3491. 24, 32, 24, 30 and 37 Sqn. Regular airman; of Melbourne; b. North Fitzroy, Vic, 21 Aug 1917.

<sup>6</sup> F-Sgt M. G. Milne, 407586; 24 and 75 Sqn. Salesman; of Glenelg, SA; b. Glenelg, 25 Mar 1915. Killed in action 6 Jun 1942.

<sup>7</sup> F-Lt R. S. Harber, DFC, 32803. 24, 31 and 92 Sqn. Accountant; of Northbridge, NSW; b. Mosman, NSW, 18 Jan 1918.

<sup>8</sup> P-O R. A. Blackman, 402844; 24 Sqn. Book-keeper; of Strathfield, NSW; b. Binnaway, NSW, 24 Dec 1921. Killed in action 20 Jan 1942.

<sup>9</sup> Sgt S. E. Woodcroft, 22630. 23 and 24 Sqn. Insurance clerk; of Brisbane; b. Brisbane, 16 May 1918. Killed in action 20 Jan 1942.

<sup>10</sup> Sgt C. F. Bromley, 405391; 24 Sqn. Jackaroo; of Richmond, Qld; b. Sydney, 11 Mar 1922. Killed in action 20 Jan 1942.

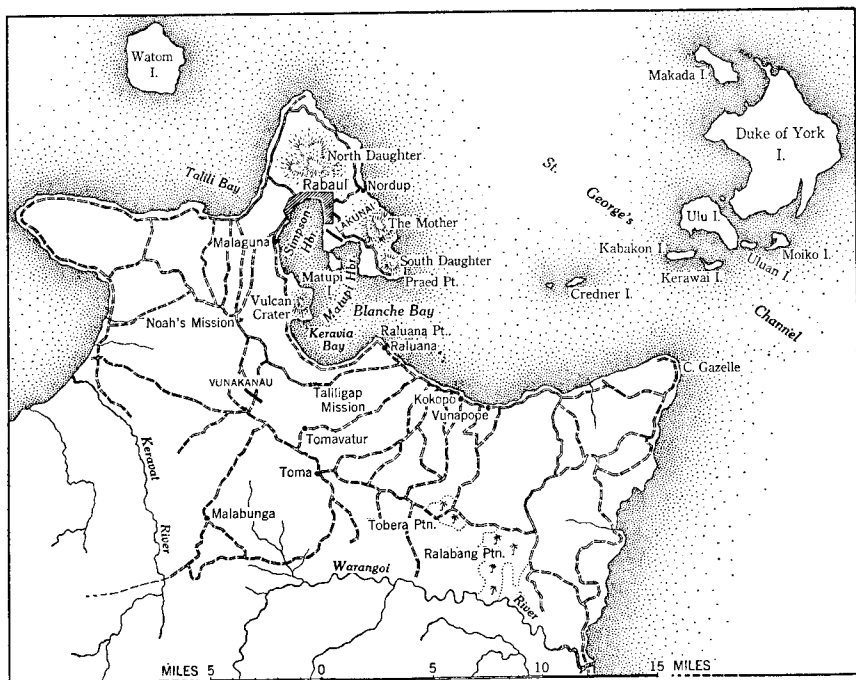
<sup>11</sup> Sgt R. Walsh, 5803; 24 Sqn. Cotton research student; of Toowoomba, Qld; b. Toowoomba, 27 Mar 1916. Killed in action 20 Jan 1942.

<sup>12</sup> F-Lt R. C. G. Little, 403059; 24 Sqn. Public servant; of Coogee, NSW; b. Richmond, Vic, 6 Dec 1914.

<sup>13</sup> W Cdr D. R. Sheppard, 288836. 24, 5, 4 and 30 Sqn. Salesman; of Adelaide; b. Adelaide, 31 Jan 1919.

Flight Lieutenant Anderson, who had been the first Wirraway pilot to engage an enemy aircraft, was taking off, with Pilot Officer Butterworth<sup>1</sup> as observer, when his engine failed and the aircraft crashed. Anderson and Butterworth were both injured and the aircraft had to be "written off".

There was some cloud over Vunakanau but the sky was perilously clear over Lakunai as those on the ground watched anxiously while the Wirraways that had been on patrol turned to meet the enemy. The main bomber formation was at 10,000 feet with Zeros flying cover for it. Lowe and Ashford were soon in combat with more than six Zeros. The engagement was brave but hopeless and the end came soon when the



Wirraway, completely outclassed in speed, manoeuvrability and fire-power, was shot down in flames from 5,000 feet. By this time Herring and Claire were also in grave trouble. After brief, one-sided combat with several Zeros, the Wirraway went into a spin, but Herring managed to regain control just in time to make a crash landing at Lakunai. Both pilot and observer had been wounded in the legs by enemy gunfire.

As bombs began to burst on the airfield the other five Wirraways were still climbing for sufficient altitude from which to make combat at all possible. As Hewett and Tyrrell reached position for an attack on one

<sup>1</sup> F-Lt C. A. Butterworth, 263496. 24 and 32 Sgns, 529 Sqn USAAF and 23 Sqn; CGI 5 OTU 1942-44. Clerk; of Croydon, NSW; b. Marrickville, NSW, 19 Jan 1919.



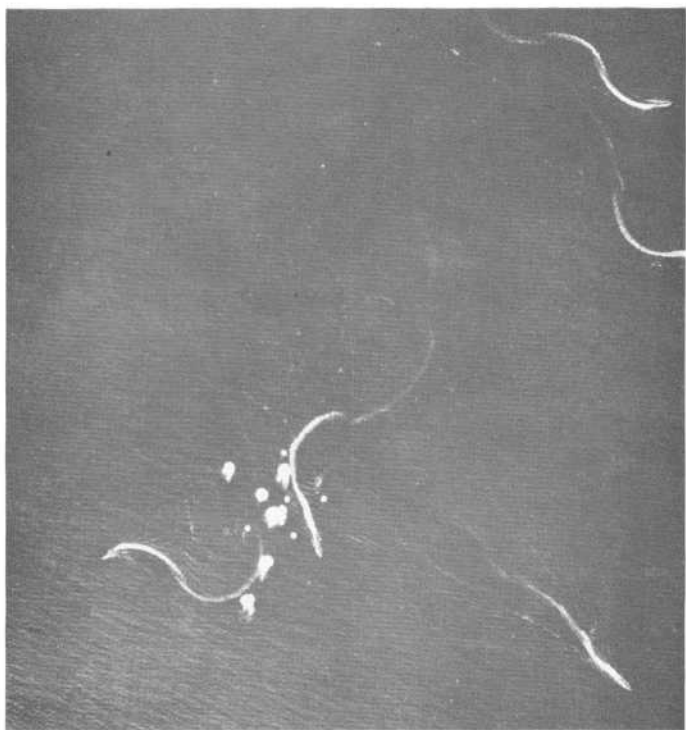
*(Australian War Memorial)*

Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Burnett, Chief of the Air Staff, congratulating Air Vice-Marshal W. D. Bostock on his appointment as Chief of Staff, Allied Air Forces, S.W.P.A., on 2nd May 1942.



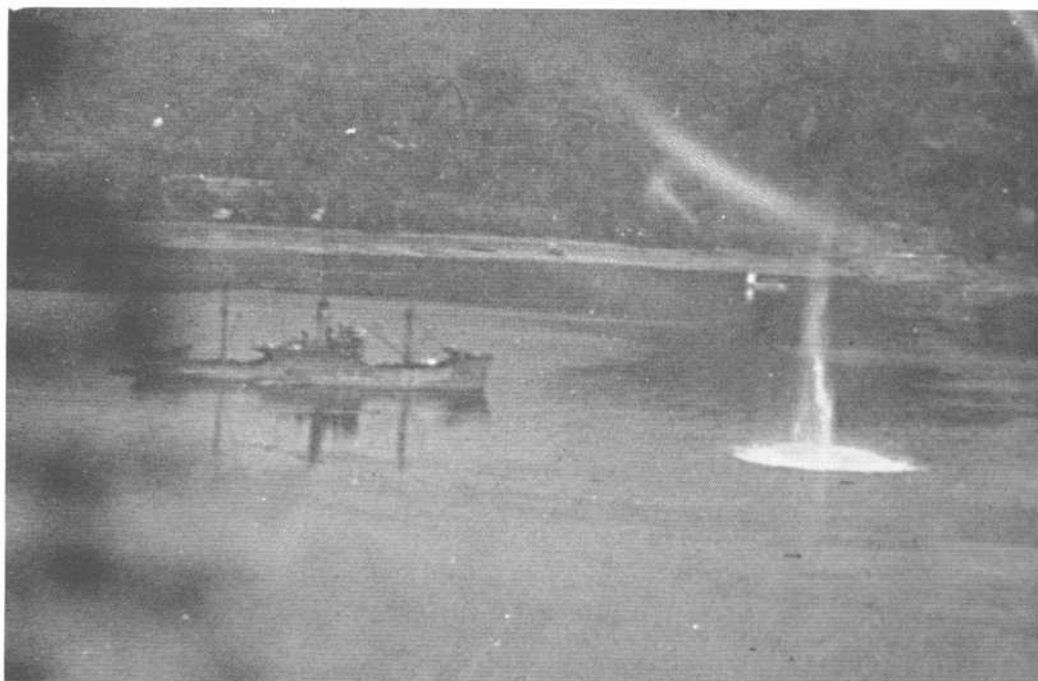
*(R.A.A.F.)*

Air Vice-Marshal George Jones, Chief of the Air Staff (seated), with senior R.A.A.F. officers on 7th May 1942, after his appointment on the 5th May. Left to right the four officers are: Gp Cpts C. S. Wiggins, Director of Communications; A. L. Walters, Assistant Director of Operations; V. E. Hancock, Assistant Director of Plans; and Air Cmdre J. E. Hewitt, Director of Intelligence.



Japanese shipping taking avoiding action while under attack by Allied Air Forces on 8th May 1942, during the Battle of the Coral Sea.

(R.A.A.F.)



(R.A.A.F.)

A surprise attack on Japanese shipping at Ambon by 9 Hudsons of No. 2 Squadron on 13th May 1942. One Hudson and crew captained by P-O J. H. Venn were lost when, in his mast-head attack, Venn's aircraft exploded simultaneously with the 3,000-ton ship which he hit and sank.



(R.A.A.F.)

A reconnaissance photograph, taken at 21,500 feet, showing the results of bombing by Allied aircraft of Japanese installations at Lae on 14th May 1942.



(R.A.A.F.)

The *Macdhui* on fire in Port Moresby harbour after being bombed on 18th June 1942.



(R.A.A.F.)

Pilots of No. 75 Squadron at Port Moresby, August 1942. From left to right: F-Lt L. D. Winten, Sqn Ldr L. D. Jackson, commanding officer of the squadron, and F-Lt J. W. W. Piper and F-O P. A. Masters.



(R.A.A.F.)

The Minister for Air, Mr A. S. Drakeford, and Sqn Ldr K. W. Truscott, commanding officer of No. 76 Squadron, at Strauss, Northern Territory, during a visit by Mr Drakeford to North-Western Area in November 1942. Sqn Ldr Truscott (third from left): Mr Drakeford; Mr M. C. Langslow, Secretary, Department of Air; and Air Cmdre F. M. Bladin, Air Officer Commanding, North-Western Area.

of nine enemy flying-boats in formation, a Zero dived on them. Hewett stalled the Wirraway out of a turn but the Zero pilot was waiting for him as he pulled out of it and raked the Wirraway with cannon fire. Pieces flew off the wings and fuselage and a bullet smashed Hewett's knee. He temporarily lost consciousness and the Wirraway went into a spin. Tyrrell, who had been standing up at his gun, was flung from the cockpit. He later recalled clutching desperately for the ripcord of his parachute which opened suddenly without his aid—apparently the cord had caught in the cockpit as he fell. He came down into the branches of a tree about 14 miles from the airfield and, after walking some distance, was picked up by a party of A.I.F. men who were searching for a supposed Japanese parachutist.

Hewett, despite his wound, had succeeded in pulling the Wirraway out of its spin. A friendly cloud helped him to evade a Zero that had followed him down to 4,000 feet, and he made a crash landing at Vunakanau without further injury to himself though his aircraft was severely damaged. Bromley and Walsh both lost their lives when their aircraft was shot down and crashed into the sea near Praed Point, an eminence on which the two 6-inch coast guns had been placed. Later a salvage party found that Bromley had been killed by a bullet. Blackman and Woodcroft were last seen in combat with several Zeros. No further report of them was received and the toll to the squadron mounted as they were listed as missing, believed killed; the most likely explanation was that they too had been shot down into the sea. Milne and Harber and Little and Sheppard made the best possible use of what cloud cover there was and engaged in a grim game of "tag" with a greatly superior force of Zeros. Little finally landed with part of his Wirraway's tail plane shot away and Milne came in safely with his aircraft undamaged. All 4 airmen escaped unhurt. The whole action had lasted less than 10 minutes. In that time, in the 8 crews that had taken off, 6 of their number had been killed and 5 wounded or injured. Three of the squadron's total of 8 Wirraways had been lost in combat, one completely wrecked in a crash just after take-off, and 2 seriously damaged in crash landings.<sup>2</sup>

With no air opposition left the Japanese formations continued to blast the base, striking at the shipping in Simpson Harbour, the wharf area and the two airfields. High-level bombing was followed by low-level fighter sweeps, the Zero pilots alternating bursts of gunnery with taunting

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<sup>2</sup> It has since been asserted that the action in which the Wirraways were lost on 20th January was the result of a misconception of his role by Lerew, the argument being that the Wirraways should have been used from alternative airfields as dive bombers against the enemy aircraft carriers. Apart from the extreme improbability of Wirraways with their quite inadequate performance and fire-power, being able to reach such targets before being shot down, and apart from the very reasonable doubt that the bombs they might have used (250-lb) would have been effective had they succeeded in scoring direct hits, what could 8 Wirraways have achieved, even with great good fortune to aid them, against the anti-aircraft fire of the carriers and their escort warships, plus the carriers' patrolling aircraft and land-based fighters? Further, the sightings of the enemy's invasion force were not reported until the day after the crushing air raid on Rabaul. Had the Wirraways not taken off to meet the enemy air attack—on the assumption that they were to be saved for dive-bombing operations—their chances of surviving the enemy's bombing and gunnery were remote, to say the least, for there were no adequate dispersal facilities or shelter pens.

aerobatic displays, and then the dive bombers came in. The anti-aircraft guns retaliated to the best of their ability, the crew of one scoring a direct hit on a heavy bomber which crashed into "The Mother", one of Rabaul's volcanic features, about four miles from the town. Several more hits were registered on other bombers but failed to bring them down, at least within sight of the gunners. Buildings at Vunakanau were severely damaged and in the harbour a coal lighter was sunk and the Norwegian merchant ship *Herstein* was hit, torn from her moorings and set on fire, so that she drifted, blazing fiercely and utterly helpless. One of the Wirraways that had made a crash landing was attacked by enemy fighters until it burst into flames and was destroyed. Suspecting that there were troop encampments among the coconut groves round Lakunai, the enemy fighters raked the area with gunfire while the dive bombers dropped light anti-personnel bombs, but in these attacks they failed to hit anybody.

The first word received by North-Eastern Area Headquarters of this big air attack was a signal which read:

Waves of enemy fighters shot down Wirraways. Waves of bombers attacking aerodromes. Over one hundred aircraft seen so far. Front seat gunnery on Praed Point.

Lerew then signalled:

Sending A16-38 [a Hudson aircraft that had been under repair in a dispersal area] to Moresby with casualties. Two Wirraways useless defence. Will you now please send some fighters?

The reply—"Regret inability to supply fighters. If we had them you would get them"—was the first signal Lerew had received that contained some note of appreciation not only of the situation but of what he and his diminutive force were enduring. He signalled back:

Wirraways and Hudsons cannot be operated in this area without great loss and sacrifice of skilled personnel and aircraft. Pilots and aircraft as good as equivalent types of Japanese aircraft doing most damage.<sup>3</sup> One squadron Type 0 fighters [providing cover] enables others to operate. As fighters cannot be obtained only one course if services of trained personnel valued.

Only 3 undamaged aircraft remained—2 Wirraways and one Hudson. Lerew therefore began to withdraw to Vunakanau what forces and equipment he had left at Lakunai.

Early on the morning of the 21st it was reported that 4 enemy cruisers had been sighted 65 miles south-west from Kavieng steaming on a course towards Rabaul. A later message stated that the cruisers were accompanied by "other vessels". At 4.30 p.m. Lerew received a signal ordering that all available aircraft were to attack these ships. "All available aircraft" added up to the single Hudson and possibly a damaged Wirraway at Lakunai which might be made serviceable as a dive bomber.

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<sup>3</sup> The reference was to the Japanese dive bombers.



Flight Lieutenant Brookes and an armourer went to inspect it only to find that the bomb-racks had been removed so that it could be used as a fighter. Meanwhile the Hudson, which had been successfully concealed from the raiders in a large clump of trees some distance from the Vunakanau runway, was wheeled out along what was more a quagmire than a taxi-way with the aid of about 100 natives. The crew—Squadron Leader Sharp<sup>4</sup> (pilot), Flight Lieutenant McGill<sup>5</sup> and Sergeants Vaughan<sup>6</sup> and Downes<sup>7</sup>—prepared for their formidable mission. The composition of the enemy force was now reported to be 2 aircraft carriers, 3 or 4 cruisers, a number of destroyers and between 5 and 7 transports. Once the aircraft was ready they took off but before they could reach their target night had come and they were forced to return without sighting the enemy ships.

Army engineers now began demolitions at Lakunai and at Vunakanau the runway was mined with 250-lb bombs to which an electric exploder was connected. The withdrawal from Lakunai was completed by 5 p.m. Conditions at Vunakanau were bad; the water-supply was doubtful and with facilities and buildings smashed by bomb explosions, messing arrangements were difficult and inadequate. Then a signal was sent from R.A.A.F. Headquarters through Port Moresby ordering the evacuation of all aircrew.<sup>8</sup> Apart from the one Hudson which was to take the wounded out, there were only 2 aircraft for this purpose—2 Wirraways. That same evening Little and Harber and Milne and Sheppard, left in these aircraft for Port Moresby by way of Lae, arriving there safely next morning. The only aircrew members Lerew had left were those belonging to the Hudson and his second-in-command, Brookes. He was now convinced that the position in Rabaul was hopeless. In a letter dated 12th December from Northern Area Headquarters, as it then was (and the senior staff officers were unchanged) consideration had been given to the possibility of just such a position. The letter contained this paragraph:

You are to be quite clear that, if the situation warrants it, e.g. a sudden attack on Rabaul, you are to take immediate and appropriate action, and that this action is at your discretion. If Rabaul is invaded it will be necessary to carry out a combined operation to extricate your own force.

With this in mind, and aware of the limitations of the force he now commanded, Lerew considered that nothing could be gained, and perhaps much lost, by trying to turn these airmen into soldiers in a few hours. He therefore sent this signal to A.C.H. Townsville, for repetition to the Air Board and Port Moresby:

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<sup>4</sup>Sqn Ldr J. Sharp, 225. 23, 24, 32 and 14 Sqns; SO Training RAAF Stn Darwin 1943-44. Regular air force offr; of Kogarah, NSW; b. Goulburn, NSW, 24 Sep 1918.

<sup>5</sup>Sqn Ldr F. R. McGill, 575. 23, 24 and 32 Sqns; Controller 9 Gp 1943, 73 Wing 1943-44. Regular air force offr; of Sydney; b. Sydney, 17 Jun 1918. Killed in aircraft accident 11 Dec 1944.

<sup>6</sup>F-O H. V. Vaughan, 400574. 23, 32 and 102 Sqns. Accountant; of Geelong, Vic; b. Larpent, Vic, 6 Nov 1911.

<sup>7</sup>F-O H. M. Downes, 11090. 24, 32 and 37 Sqns. Sound technician; of East Brunswick, Vic; b. Penshurst, Vic, 10 Feb 1919.

<sup>8</sup>Lerew says this signal was not received.

My orders were to take action if necessary in the event of attack. In consultation with Army and Navy [have] holed all fuel drums and destroyed publications. This necessary as Army cannot protect and you have given no indication any possible chance defend Rabaul. In meantime air force personnel stand every chance of being cut off. RAAF willing fight with Army but Army cannot handle untrained personnel. These men will be required by RAAF before long.—Lerew.

The reply was:

From AOC to Wing Commander Lerew. Begins. Rabaul not yet fallen. Assist Army in keeping aerodrome open. Maintain communications as long as possible. Ends.<sup>9</sup>

But, if the style of communications between Australia and Rabaul had first been set in the grand manner by the "Empire expects . . ." message from Townsville, the last word in heroic vein was Lerew's. The reply to his earlier signal was a rebuff to the discretion he had been specifically instructed to use in such a situation. The imp reappeared. Mixing raillery with a measure of very grim fact, he sent his final signal from Rabaul. When it reached Melbourne the cipher staff was puzzled until someone with a knowledge of Latin solved their problem by "decoding" the message—"Nos morituri te salutamus"—into the English translation of the Roman gladiators' salutation—"we who are about to die, salute you!" Little more than three hours later there was a reply. It was very strictly "Service" though its clear intention was that the chief gladiator was to be removed from the arena. It read:

Wing Commander J. M. Lerew to proceed Moresby to command Hudson squadron consisting of single flights from 24 Squadron, 23 Squadron, 6 Squadron. Squadron to be given provisional number by Air Board. Flight Lieutenant W. D. Brookes to assume command of 24 Squadron Rabaul detachment and is granted [rank of] Acting Squadron Leader as from 22 January.

But if, as it seemed, it was intended that Lerew should obey this order immediately, several factors had not been appreciated. One was that he had planned the evacuation of the wounded in the only aircraft that could take him out, and he had no intention of occupying precious space in it. There was also his conviction that, so far as the defence of Rabaul was concerned, the end was very close and, if any of his force was to escape as he intended and planned that they should, all the cooperation and leadership possible would be needed. He therefore read this latest signal with his "blind eye". At 3 a.m. on the 22nd Sharp, his Hudson filled with wounded men, took off from Vunakanau. Two or three lights placed at the far end of the runway were his only guide. Just after the Hudson became airborne one engine faltered, but it picked up again, and four hours later the overworked aircraft reached Port Moresby safely. After refuelling Sharp set off for Townsville. When about half the distance had been covered the faulty engine stopped altogether. All guns, ammunition and movable equipment were hurriedly jettisoned. For an hour and a

<sup>9</sup> Lerew considered that this signal did not take into consideration the time needed for carrying out demolitions.

half Sharp kept the Hudson flying on one engine until he was over Cooktown where he was able to make a safe forced landing. A new engine cylinder was flown to Cooktown and the Hudson, which had flown for 100 hours without even an engine inspection, was able to complete the journey to Brisbane, its burden lightened by the transfer of three patients to the aircraft that had brought the new cylinder.<sup>1</sup> As the pilot of the last aircraft to leave Rabaul before the invasion, Sharp carried about 300 letters, some of them in envelopes, some without.

At 7.41 on the 22nd—when the Hudson had landed safely at Port Moresby—the men who had written those letters were again under air attack, this time from 45 fighters and dive bombers. The damage was extensive. The fixed defences had now been silenced, including the 6-inch guns on Praed Point. Coastwatchers now reported the enemy convoy to be only about 20 miles away—off Watom Island to the north-west of Rabaul. With no effective weapons with which to repel any strong invasion force at the beach-head, some of the troops began moving back supplies of food and ammunition. Such few installations as had not already been wrecked were demolished and petrol dumps, stores and the operations room set on fire. Bomb detonators were thrown into the jungle in small quantities so that the remaining bombs could not be used readily. The civilians, numbering between 500 and 600, scattered into the bush.

Lerew conferred with Colonel Scanlan,<sup>2</sup> the commander of the garrison. While he was anxious that the remainder of his squadron should give any worthwhile aid they could, he knew their limitations. Some were no longer young, most were unarmed, few had fired more than five rounds from a service rifle and none had had any field training. The moral issue was difficult but Scanlan agreed that Lerew should accept the terms of his earlier instruction and use his own discretion. He therefore decided to evacuate his force, but with two qualifications—he must first be quite certain that the enemy did intend to invade Rabaul and he must also be sure that he did not leave Vunakanau airfield while there was a likelihood that the Japanese would send in paratroops. In the early afternoon he again conferred with Scanlan. There was no longer any doubt that Rabaul would soon be invaded and it seemed equally certain that the enemy was as aware as they were that paratroop landings would be superfluous. Lerew assembled his men, told them frankly of the situation and of his own position and received their assurances of cooperation and obedience to his orders. It was then about 3.30 p.m. A signal intended for transmission to Port Moresby announcing that the evacuation plan was to be carried out was drafted and coded, but the “keying” line to the transmitter had been broken and the signal could not be sent. Earlier, both North-Eastern Area Headquarters and Port Moresby had been informed

<sup>1</sup> “In Rabaul inspections were done at night and every effort was made to keep aircraft serviceable. Except for enemy action close to 100 per cent serviceability—i.e. better than under peacetime conditions—was maintained.”—Lerew.

<sup>2</sup> Col J. J. Scanlan, DSO, TX16307. (1st AIF: 7 Bn 1914-16; comd 59 Bn 1918.) Comd HQ NG Area 1941-42. Deputy Governor, Hobart Gaol; b. Albert Park, Vic, 19 Oct 1890.

of probable points at which survivors might be picked up if evacuation became necessary. One radio operator, Sergeant Higgs,<sup>3</sup> voluntarily left the rest of the squadron and set out alone for Wide Bay, where he knew of a plantation that had a teleradio set. He found that, though the plantation homestead had been abandoned, the teleradio set was still serviceable. Setting it for the Port Moresby frequency and using a code he had memorised, he transmitted this message:

24 Squadron party at No. 1 base. Send flying-boats. They will identify themselves with torch.

In a convoy of eight motor trucks Lerew's party, which included the staff of the advanced operational base under Flying Officer Robinson, left Rabaul immediately after the decision to withdraw had been made. There was considerable enemy air activity at the time but as they reached the open country the north-west monsoon came down bringing blinding rain which effectively screened their convoy from detection from the air. The first objective was the Warangoi River. Considerable portions of the route lay along the south-east coast with consequent risk of interception should the Japanese land at some point ahead of them. About 4 p.m. they passed through Kokopo. On the way several civilians and a few army troops joined the convoy bringing its strength to about 150. The mouth of the Warangoi River was reached about 5.30 p.m. Here the trucks were dismantled and made useless because there was no way of getting them across the river. The crossing proved a slow and anxious task. The stream was in full flood and two native canoes were the only available craft. It was necessary to go some distance to seaward, cross a bar, and then struggle back against the current to reach the other side. This operation continued throughout the night. Here Lerew separated into three parties the married men who had children, the married men without children and the single men. The next stage was to Put Put plantation. The way led along a jungle path in heavy rain. A swollen stream had to be crossed, the men alternately wading and swimming. At Put Put food was obtained. Here Lerew commandeered a ketch and, placing the married men's parties, numbering 33, under the command of Brookes, instructed them to sail the ketch by night round the coast to Tol plantation in Wide Bay. This they did successfully, reaching the plantation about 11.30 a.m. next day.

The main party faced the difficult task of getting across the bay at Put Put. A single native canoe that could take but two men at a time was, at first, their only ferry. An attempt to make a raft from fuel drums was unsuccessful, but eventually the plantation owner arrived in a small launch in the dinghy of which he towed the rest of the party across three men at a time. They then moved on to a mission station about two miles away. Next day they tramped on, still in almost continuous rain, along the

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<sup>3</sup> F-Lt F. G. Higgs, BEM, 265705. 24 Sqn, North-Eastern Area HQ, 22 OBU and 13 SU. Cost clerk; of Woonona, NSW; b. Carcoar, NSW, 10 Oct 1904.

beach and across many swift streams. After about 15 miles they reached Sum Sum. It was then about 5 p.m. A few minutes later aircraft were heard and the whole party was ordered to take cover. But the aircraft proved to be two R.A.A.F. flying-boats. Immediately there were frantic efforts at signalling from the beach. These were seen and accepted as genuine by the flying-boat captains, Flight Lieutenants Grey<sup>4</sup> and Mather.<sup>5</sup>

Both aircraft had left Port Moresby at 3.15 p.m. on the 22nd, to attempt an evacuation operation. While on their way they received word that Rabaul was being attacked by enemy aircraft so they diverted course to Samarai on the extreme south-eastern tip of Papua, where they stayed overnight. Taking off soon after 2 p.m. next day they flew along the southern coast of New Britain until they saw Lerew's party signalling to them. After all equipment had been destroyed—rifles were thrown into the sea—to lighten the burden of the flying-boats as much as possible, 50 men were taken out to Grey's aircraft and 46 to Mather's. Only a small party of airmen remained. These men, at Lerew's orders, set out in a yacht they found moored at Sum Sum, to sail to Tol



Escape routes from New Britain

and inform Brookes of the main party's evacuation and tell him that arrangements were being made to rescue his own party. At 7.22 p.m. the flying-boats took off and three hours later they alighted at Samarai aided by a flare path which Squadron Leader Cohen had laid for them.

The airmen who had left Sum Sum in the yacht arrived in Wide Bay safely on 24th January. They found Brookes and his men subsisting on native food and most of them suffering from dysentery. That evening Flight Lieutenant Grey brought his flying-boat down off Tol and took

<sup>4</sup> Sqn Ldr J. L. Grey, AFC, 261514. 11 Sqn; comd 33 Sqn 1942, 41 Sqn 1942-43. Commercial pilot; of Townsville, Qld; b. 9 Mar 1915.

<sup>5</sup> Sqn Ldr M. V. Mather, AFC, 260486. 11, 33 and 41 Sqn; Qantas Merchant Air Service. Commercial pilot; of Sydney; b. Abingdon, Berkshire, Eng, 29 Jul 1905.

on board 25 members of the R.A.A.F. and 24 others—a party of army signallers who had become separated from their main force, and the remainder of the civilians. Again the flying-boat alighted at Samarai by night. On the 25th Cohen flew a Catalina carrying 35 members of the R.A.A.F. and a quantity of gold bullion from Samarai to Port Moresby, and next day Mather took 42 passengers and Grey took 22 to Townsville.

Several members of No. 24 Squadron had not been evacuated. One was Sergeant Higgs, still standing by at the plantation teleradio. He had heard nothing for three days and then came the news he was waiting for:

To Higgs. Good show. The job is done. All safe. Make a break for home. Good luck. Lerew.

Higgs then quickly appropriated an 18-foot sailing boat, and, with two airmen whom he had picked up on the way to the plantation, set a course for Gasmata. His only navigation aids were a compass taken from a Wirraway and a school atlas. Approaching Gasmata an enemy aircraft carrier was sighted but by changing course he avoided detection. Three times enemy aircraft made attacks on the boat but each time it escaped. Calling at Samarai and several other islands for food and rest, the small party continued sailing until, 21 days out from Wide Bay, they arrived safely at Cairns.

There were now only three members of No. 24 Squadron about whose safety there was doubt. Warrant Officer Kelly,<sup>6</sup> a service photographer, was in hospital at the time of the withdrawal and was too ill to be moved. He remained behind and, with other patients and the gallant members of the hospital staff who stayed to care for them, was taken prisoner. Flying Officer Lempriere,<sup>7</sup> the squadron's Intelligence Officer, had risked being left behind to ensure that the signals office and its contents were destroyed. He reached Put Put after the main party had left and was captured some time later off Gasmata while trying to escape in a launch. The third man who had not escaped was Corporal Smallpage,<sup>8</sup> a signaller who voluntarily returned from the Warangoi River to endeavour to find a box of secret documents believed to have been left behind. He was not reported again and was later listed as missing.

Major-General Horii's *South Seas Force* began to disembark in Simpson Harbour at 2 a.m. on the 23rd. The force, about 5,300 strong, operated under the direct command of the Imperial G.H.Q. It included the *144th Regiment* (from the *55th Division* then in action in Burma), an engineer regiment and elements of a *Special Naval Landing Force*, part of which had been detached to take Kavieng.

<sup>6</sup> W-O J. F. Kelly, 882; 24 Sqn. Regular airman; of Brisbane; b. Brisbane, 1 Aug 1904. Drowned in sinking of *Montevideo Maru* 1 Jul 1942.

<sup>7</sup> F-O G. R. Lempriere, 262789. (2nd AIF: 1st AA Regt.) 24 Sqn. Wool broker and company director; of Sydney; b. Melbourne, 3 May 1904.

<sup>8</sup> Cpl R. C. Smallpage, 17462. HQ Northern Area, HQ Port Moresby and 24 Sqn. Prospector; of Kalgoorlie, WA; b. Broad Arrow, WA, 24 Oct 1900. Died while prisoner of war 4 Apr 1942.

In this latest movement on the extreme left of the Japanese southward advance the *South Seas Force* had naval cover from Vice-Admiral Inouye's *Fourth Fleet*—8 cruisers, 12 destroyers and 9 submarines—and air cover and support from the *24th Air Flotilla* and *5th Carrier Division*—*Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*. The *24th Flotilla* had approximately 27 bombers, 24 fighters and 10 Mavis flying-boats; and the *Carrier Division*, one of three divisions that made the assault on Pearl Harbour, had a strength of about 120 aircraft between the two ships. These were the aircraft that had made the pre-invasion bombing and fighter attacks on Rabaul and Kavieng and raided the northern Papua-New Guinea aerodromes.

Japanese Intelligence information on Rabaul was poor and a staff officer was flown over the base to add whatever he could by direct observation. The enemy's assessment of the Australian garrison's strength was: 3 large aircraft, 3 medium aircraft and 5 (plus) fighters with 500 troops whose number could be increased to 1,500 by adding the Volunteer Defence Corps and the police force.<sup>9</sup>

As most of the defending force had withdrawn to positions south of the harbour the landing was virtually unopposed, though a company engaged the Japanese at Vulcan on the Australian left flank. In a spirited fight this little force accounted for most of the enemy's total casualties of 16 killed and 49 wounded. The invaders' engineer regiment immediately went to work to fit the Vunakanau and Lakunai aerodromes for reinforcing aircraft units expected to arrive by the end of the month.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile the ground troops went about their task of establishing their latest and most vital base in the South-West Pacific Area.

The operational burden on the crews of the flying-boats of Nos. 11 and 20 Squadrons at this time could hardly have been heavier. The range and capacity of the Catalina ensured it constant sorties in this vast area of ocean, islands and waterways. The War Cabinet agreed that an order should be placed in the United States for the delivery of nine more of these aircraft and sought the good offices of the British Government to hasten delivery. That was on 20th January. On the 21st one of No. 11 Squadron's Catalinas, captained by Lieutenant Hutchinson, had been sent on patrol between Samarai and Lae. With the American pilot as crew were Flying Officer Rowe<sup>2</sup> (second pilot) and seven others. While the Catalina was still on patrol an emergency signal from Salamaua reported to Port Moresby that enemy fighters were over that base. As the Port Moresby operator was about to send a warning signal to Hutchinson he received one from him instead—"Being attacked by five fighters." A period of silence followed and then came a further signal,

<sup>9</sup> The enemy regarded their pre-war surveys of this area with suspicion because the reports on Guam had proved very inaccurate.

<sup>1</sup> At the end of January the *25th Air Flotilla* began moving to Rabaul to assume active operations in the New Guinea area.

<sup>2</sup> F.O. T. N. Rowe, 400293; 11 Sqn. Student; of Wallinduc, Vic; b. Armadale, Vic, 2 Oct 1919. Killed in action 21 Jan 1942.

simply, "On fire." That was Hutchinson's last signal for the Catalina was shot down in flames. A ground patrol from the Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit (ANGAU) found the wreckage later in the jungle between Lae and Salamaua. There was one survivor, Corporal Keen.<sup>3</sup>

When within about 40 miles of Lae, and flying at 1,000 feet, 12 enemy fighters were sighted flying in the opposite direction. Five of them attacked. Keen, who was manning a gun in one of the side "blisters" (an egg-shaped transparent hood that gave the gunner an increased field of vision), watched the fighters approach, holding his fire until they came within range. Then the leading aircraft opened fire and the blister was shattered. Keen replied and continued to fire as a row of bullet holes appeared in the fuselage alongside him. He saw the leading enemy aircraft falter and go into a dive and Rowe shouted, "You've got him!" Keen then realised that the Catalina's cabin was on fire. The Catalina began to lose height and the flames were now licking into the blister and on to Keen's back. It was impossible for him to get back into the cabin. He pulled on his parachute harness and baled out. One enemy fighter followed him down, the pilot shooting at him, but Keen escaped and landed unhurt in the jungle about a mile from where the flying-boat crashed. Natives found him and took him to a mission station, and ten days later he returned to Port Moresby. This was the first reconnaissance aircraft and the first Catalina shot down by enemy fighters in the Pacific area, a sad distinction and gained by a time margin of only about two hours.

On the same day a No. 20 Squadron Catalina was on reconnaissance when its crew sighted 4 enemy cruisers 65 miles south-west from Kavieng—it was they who gave warning that Rabaul was about to be invaded. Their signal added that they were within range of the warships' anti-aircraft fire. This message was received at Port Moresby at 12.41 p.m. At 2.16 p.m. the pilot, Flight Lieutenant Thompson,<sup>4</sup> was ordered to proceed to Salamaua. About half an hour later a signal was received from the aircraft stating only, "Rudder gone."<sup>5</sup>

The "Cat-boats", as they were affectionately dubbed, were not only needed for reconnaissance, they formed the only striking force that the R.A.A.F. possessed at this time capable of reaching the enemy at Rabaul. When the signal came, warning of the approach of the Japanese convoy when it was near Watom Island, 5 Catalinas were detailed for a night attack. One aircraft was damaged in take-off and could not proceed. The other 4—2 from Port Moresby, one from Gizo and one from Tulagi—searched the area in darkness and bad weather without result. Thus the

<sup>3</sup> Sgt T. H. Keen, 9351. 11 and 33 Sqns and 2 FBRD. Mechanic; of Gladstone, Qld; b. Townsville, Qld, 25 Jul 1915.

<sup>4</sup> Gp Capt R. H. Thompson, 461. 11 and 20 Sqns. Regular air force off; of South Fremantle, WA; b. Boulder, WA, 8 May 1917.

<sup>5</sup> It was later learned that the aircraft had been shot down by anti-aircraft fire. Two of the crew were drowned but Thompson, F-Lt P. M. Metzler (the second pilot) and the rest of the crew, after being in the water for two and a half hours, were picked up by a Japanese cruiser and became prisoners of war.



enemy was able to reach Rabaul unscathed. But in a night attack on 24th January, five Catalinas bombed the ships in Simpson Harbour. Cloud obscured the target for most of the time but the bombing was directed against the points from which the anti-aircraft fire came and the crews—captained by Squadron Leader Price, Flight Lieutenants Beaumont and G. E. Hemsworth, and Flying Officers Norman<sup>6</sup> and Higgins<sup>7</sup>—returned to report probable hits. Again on the night of the 26th, 3 Catalinas piloted by Hemsworth, Higgins and Flying Officer Duigan,<sup>8</sup> returned to the attack. Higgins reported a possible hit on an aircraft carrier and Duigan, who was over the target an hour later than the others, reported a ship blazing fiercely on the north-west side and another burning near the centre of the harbour.

There was a variation in these operations on 27th January when Cohen piloted a Catalina on a reconnaissance and attack mission to Kavieng. As the flying-boat approached the target three enemy fighters attacked. The lesson from the loss of the two Catalinas on the 21st could not be ignored. Cohen promptly jettisoned his bombs, turned steeply into a cloud bank and, evading the Japanese fighters, returned safely to Samarai. Rabaul was again attacked by four Catalinas on the night of 28th January. The results were not observed. On the 30th, aircraft captained by Price, Norman, Hemsworth, Higgins and Flying Officer Bolitho,<sup>9</sup> made the squadron's fourth attack in which a direct hit was scored on one ship causing, as Higgins reported later, "a red glow which quickly increased in intensity". The other crews reported that they had been unable to see the results of their bombing because they had been blinded by the glare of the searchlights. This time the anti-aircraft fire was heavier and more accurate than on the earlier raids.<sup>1</sup>

The composite squadron (soon to become No. 32 General Reconnaissance Squadron) to which Lerew had been formally and summarily posted had its origin partly in the concern which R.A.A.F. Headquarters felt for the need to strengthen its forces at Port Moresby. The first flight (four aircraft) of the new unit, that from No. 6 Squadron at Richmond, flew to its new base on 22nd January. The pilots were Flight Lieutenants Pedrina<sup>2</sup> and J. B. Hampshire<sup>3</sup> and the two pilots who had been assigned

<sup>6</sup> F-O A. L. Norman, 407006. 11 and 20 Sqn. Stores assistant; of Torrensville, SA; b. Torrensville, 29 Dec 1915. Died while prisoner of war on or after 4 Nov 1942.

<sup>7</sup> F-Lt B. H. Higgins, DFC, 400620; 11 Sqn. Journalist; of Wangaratta, Vic; b. Wangaratta, 3 Aug 1914. Killed in aircraft accident 24 May 1943.

<sup>8</sup> F-Lt T. L. Duigan, DFC, 400082. 11 Sqn, 380 Gp and 21 Sqn; Instructor OTU Rathmines 1943-44. Architect; of Colac, Vic; b. Kyneton, Vic, 16 Dec 1916.

<sup>9</sup> Gp Capt W. K. Bolitho, DFC, 407016. 20 Sqn; comd 11 Sqn 1944-45. Bank clerk; of Hackney, SA; b. Adelaide, 11 Feb 1913.

<sup>1</sup> The burden of operations which the Catalina crews were accepting at this time is indicated in the squadrons' statistics for December 1941 and January 1942: *December*: No. 11 Sqn—100 sorties, 778 flying hours; No. 20 Sqn—126 sorties, 983 flying hours. *January*: No. 11 Sqn—115 sorties (37 in attack), 1,113 flying hours (559 on attack missions); No. 20 Sqn—86 sorties (31 in attack), 890 flying hours (493 on attack missions). Total for both squadrons for two months—427 sorties and 3,764 flying hours.

<sup>2</sup> Sqn Ldr W. A. Pedrina, DFC, 264. 13, 6, 32 Sqn and 1 OTU (New Guinea Transport and Supply Flight). Regular air force off; of Hamilton, Vic; b. Hamilton, 20 May 1919. Killed in action 15 Dec 1942.

<sup>3</sup> W Cdr J. B. Hampshire, DFC, 392. 12, 13, 6 and 32 Sqn; comd 24 Sqn 1944-45, 25 Sqn 1945. Regular air force off; of Lindfield, NSW; b. Sydney, 30 May 1918.

the Truk reconnaissance mission, Flight Lieutenant Yeowart and Flying Officer Green. These two were still flying their long-range Mark IV Hudsons, a fact that led to Yeowart's being sent on a reconnaissance sortie to find out what enemy forces were in Rabaul Harbour. On the afternoon of the 23rd, with a crew of three, he took off. When the Hudson came out of the overcast over Rabaul he counted 14 transports lying in Simpson Harbour and, just outside, there was an aircraft carrier from which fighters were taking off. Near at hand a cruiser and a destroyer were escorting a large transport into port. Having climbed to 17,000 feet, Yeowart was just drafting a sighting report for transmission to Port Moresby when Sergeant Henry,<sup>4</sup> in the upper turret, reported six Zeros closing on them from 3,000 feet above. Yeowart, to gain speed and shake them off, dived into a storm cloud, emerging at 7,000 feet at a speed of about 300 knots. He continued the dive until almost tree-top level and, for the next half hour, circled under a low cloud. Having thus evaded the Zeros he set course for Salamaua. On landing the Hudson crew found themselves in the centre of a scene of destruction. The airfield was littered with wrecked aircraft and spattered with bomb craters. The Japanese investment of Rabaul had been accompanied by a series of "smothering" air attacks and Salamaua had paid heavily.

The first warning of these raids had come on 21st January when watchers at Madang reported more than 70 enemy aircraft—bombers with fighter escort—flying south-eastward. This formation divided into three groups which attacked Lae, Bulolo and Salamaua, respectively, the forces attacking Salamaua being estimated at 50 aircraft. The bombing of Salamaua (from about 8,000 feet) was followed by low-level fighter sweeps. Several commercial aircraft and a Hudson of No. 24 Squadron which was undergoing repairs were destroyed on the airfield, as were most of the buildings. At Lae, then the provisional capital of New Guinea, the attack was made by about 26 aircraft which spent about 40 minutes over the area. Civil airline workshops and stores, the town's power plant, and 6 aircraft on the ground were destroyed. Houses and public buildings, including the Government offices, were attacked by fighters but there were no casualties and the airfield runway was not damaged.

Other enemy air units attacked Madang and Wau at this time. At Madang a copra store was burned down and other buildings damaged. Five unescorted bombers scored hits on the commercial airline buildings at Wau, and one bomb hit the town's cinema. Since they had no opposition the bombers then flew low and fired their guns into rows of houses occupied by the native employees of a gold sluicing company, presumably mistaking them for military barracks.

The small garrison at Kavieng had been attacked by 40 bombers and 20 fighters on 21st January, two days before the invasion of Rabaul. There was, of course, no air opposition but the Australian army machine-

<sup>4</sup> Sgt R. C. Henry, 416181. 6 Sqn. Public servant; of Goodwood, SA; b. Adelaide, 14 Jan 1921. Killed in action 11 Feb 1942.

gunners gave an excellent account of themselves and claimed four enemy aircraft shot down. Bombs destroyed the copra sheds and other buildings and the army supply vessel, *Induna Star*, was damaged in the harbour. On the 23rd the enemy, landing at Kavieng and at Panapai close by, proceeded to demolish all buildings not already destroyed by the small garrison force before it withdrew.

In this period the Central War Room in Melbourne was being flooded by signals from the whole island area under its control—signals reporting enemy air attacks and the withdrawal of the token forces at outlying bases.

Kitava, in the Trobriand Islands, received a minor air attack on 23rd January. On the 25th Manus Island base reported a similar raid; from Lorengau there came the confident, if depressing signal—"Lorengau all demolished. All safe. In smoke." Next day Wewak was raided and on the 30th the Madang garrison signalled to Port Moresby: "Have destroyed runway Madang and prepared stores for firing."

The fall of Rabaul, like all military reverses, provided an important guide to the enemy's tactics and, of course, to the weaknesses in the defence. In this operation the role of the Japanese air units had developed from reconnaissance and photographic surveys to pattern bombing by squadron or multiple-squadron formations, then to high-altitude bombing with fighter escort, and finally to low-level attacks by fighters and dive bombers which were coordinated with the final invasion operations by the navy and army.

In the wider Pacific scene the full meaning of this latest achievement of the Japanese was not at once recognised. United States marines were fulfilling the American promise that Samoa should have first consideration in the reinforcement of Pacific bases—a strong force reached the island between 19th January and the day that Rabaul fell. One factor that Admiral Nimitz realised quickly was that the Japanese possession of Rabaul brought the Coral Sea within range of Japanese land-based bombers. He took the immediate precaution of ordering that all ships of his fleet entering what had been designated the Anzac Area must be escorted.

On 20th January Mr Curtin had sent a cablegram to Mr Churchill relating to the naval arrangements proposed for the Anzac Area. In this he noted that Admiral Nimitz was responsible not only for the security of the air ferry route and of convoys and supplies between the United States and Australia, but that his forces alone could provide the potential reinforcements for this area. He also emphasised that the situation then developing at Rabaul pointed to the need for much stronger forces in the Anzac Area.

There was some satisfaction when, on 26th January, the Australian Chief of the Naval Staff reported to the Advisory War Council that United States naval forces planned a sweep to the Gilbert Islands from Samoa and the Phoenix Group. To Australia this would be valuable chiefly in that it would provide diversion for the Japanese forces at Rabaul.

It had been suggested to Admiral Nimitz that this sweep might be extended to include Jaluit in the Marshall Group. The polite reply received from Nimitz was, "Appreciated. Will be glad to consider for future." Next day, following up Mr Curtin's message to Mr Churchill, a signal was sent to Nimitz pressing for a strong naval concentration in the Anzac Area and pointing out that the loss of Port Moresby would close Torres Strait, while the loss of New Caledonia would give Japan a base from which she could cut the sea and air ferry route between America and Australia and gain access to valuable chrome and nickel supplies. "Time factor suggests Japan, with so rich a prize in view, may act first," the signal stated. The force sought for the protection of this area was one strong enough to cope with an enemy force equivalent to that used for the capture of Rabaul—then estimated at one division of troops escorted by two 8-inch and two 6-inch gun cruisers and two aircraft carriers. At this stage the Advisory War Council had reports before it showing that there were 11 transports in Simpson Harbour, Rabaul, accompanied by cruisers, destroyers and aircraft carriers. It was assumed that the Japanese had landed and that the A.I.F. and militia garrison units were in action against the enemy. The prospect ahead could scarcely have been more grim for the Australian Chiefs of Staff and "outside" aid was the prerequisite for safety.