

CHAPTER 6

AIR ASSAULT ON RABAU

FROM the beginning of the struggle in the islands north of Australia the eyes of both protagonists had been fixed on Rabaul. During nearly two years of occupation it had become a central stronghold of Japanese martial power. From it the enemy filtered out reinforcements of arms, men and food supplies to their lesser bases in the South-West Pacific.

Rabaul had a deep and roomy harbour, capable of holding 300,000 tons of shipping, which sheltered supply vessels, barges and fighting ships. On 12th October 1943 there were about 329 enemy aircraft, mainly fighters, in the New Britain area, and round Rabaul five airfields were in use. Lakunai and Vunakanau airfields had been in existence when the Japanese seized Rabaul in January 1942. Vunakanau, which had been built by the R.A.A.F., was improved by the Japanese. They surfaced the runway with concrete to a depth of four inches and built 90 fighter and 60 bomber revetments. The Japanese made three more airfields in 1942 and 1943: Rapopo, completed in December 1942 at Lesson Point, with a concrete runway 4,600 feet long; Keravat, 13 miles south-west of Rabaul, begun as an army airfield in 1942, abandoned and then completed by the navy in 1943; Tobera, with a concrete runway stretching 3,600 feet and revetments for 75 fighters and 2 bombers, completed by August 1943.

The ground at Rabaul bristled with 367 anti-aircraft guns manned by well-trained army and navy crews who were ready at short notice to hurl a barrage of shells and bullets skywards at intruding Allied airmen, of whose approach they were warned by "spotters" and radio-location devices dotted around the island. Allied airmen considered Rabaul the "hot-spot" of the South Pacific.

At Rabaul was the headquarters of General Imamura, commander of the *Eighth Area Army*, and throughout New Britain was a garrison of about 100,000 (including labourers) whose equipment included artillery and tanks.¹ Along beaches where Allied amphibious attack might be expected the Japanese had skilfully placed underwater obstacles such as mines, concrete and log blocks and wire entanglements. Tank traps and ditches were dug behind the beach defences and covered farther inland by strong points. Imamura was prepared to hold Rabaul for years, if necessary, while the homeland, using goods from Japan's richly-endowed conquests, built its strength for the final battles which would give victory.

The Japanese, alarmed by their inability to hold the Allies in the Pacific, had searched for a new operational policy. Acrimony developed at headquarters in Tokyo between army and navy representatives. General Tojo proposed that the Japanese forces should abandon the Bismarcks

¹ Allied Intelligence estimated the garrison to be only about half this figure.

area and withdraw to a new perimeter running from the Marianas through Truk to Wewak, but Admiral Koga strongly opposed this course, demanding that Rabaul and its outer defences be held for as long as possible so that inner defences could be prepared. Koga's views prevailed, but it was recognised that it was no longer possible to fight a decisive battle in the Bismarcks, and the best that could be hoped for was that the garrisons there might gain time for the preparation of a counter-offensive in the Central and South Pacific in 1944.

The recapture of Rabaul was the principal task that General MacArthur was given after he took command in Australia in 1942, and all his earlier plans and the efforts of his men were aimed ultimately at this goal. He knew that Rabaul was very powerful and had expected a heavy air onslaught from it when his forces landed at Kiriwina and later at Lae. The enemy had then been capable of mounting such an offensive. However, it had not come, and it seemed to MacArthur that the Japanese were husbanding their strength until Rabaul was more closely pressed.

Until August 1943 the plan was still to capture Rabaul and use it as a base for the American Pacific Fleet's subsequent movement westward into the Philippines. In that month, however, the Combined Chiefs of Staff, meeting at Quebec, confirmed plans for a Central Pacific thrust into the Caroline Islands, and since this thrust would provide fleet bases it was suggested that it would not be necessary to occupy Rabaul. Instead it could be by-passed and neutralised, thus avoiding a costly and time-consuming campaign. MacArthur felt that to attack Wewak before taking Rabaul would involve great hazards and make success extremely doubtful. However, his objections were over-ruled, and a conference of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff decided that Pacific forces should attack the Gilbert Islands, Marshall Islands and western New Britain during the summer of 1943-44, and that new airfields should be captured at Ponape and the Admiralty Islands in the winter of 1944, and at Truk, the Marianas and Guam in the spring and summer of 1944.

The decision to invade Western Europe in the spring of 1944 was also finally approved at the conference at Quebec and the invasion day was fixed tentatively as 1st May 1944. In the meantime, the combined R.A.F.-Eighth American Air Force bomber offensive against Germany was "to continue to have highest strategic priority", and was regarded as an essential preliminary to the invasion of Europe.

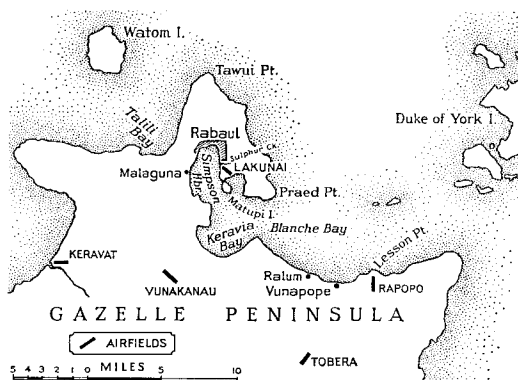
The next two advances in the South and South-West Pacific were to be to Bougainville and western New Britain respectively. Bougainville was to come first because General MacArthur wished bombers to be brought forward there to bombard Rabaul while his Sixth Army landed on western New Britain. This was considered essential because it seemed certain that the enemy would be provoked into a major effort when the New Britain landing was made; and South-West Pacific air forces, although by September 1943 they totalled 102 squadrons (Fifth Air Force having 59 and R.A.A.F. 43), were considered inadequate to cover the widely-

spread enemy points which would have to be attacked during amphibious operations to seize the Cape Gloucester area in New Britain and the operations on the New Guinea mainland. Meanwhile, Rabaul menaced Admiral Halsey's men who were to invade Bougainville, so MacArthur decided to "beat it down" from the air. The attacks were to start about 15th October.

At conferences in September between officers of the South-West Pacific and South Pacific commands MacArthur proposed the following outline plan and time-table for the Bougainville and western New Britain operations:

- a. Between 15th October and 1st November, South-West Pacific air forces operating fighters from Kiriwina Island will attack airfields and shipping at Rabaul for the purpose of neutralising Japanese air forces and destroying shipping.
- b. Between 20th and 25th October, South Pacific forces will occupy the Treasury Islands and selected positions in northern Choiseul Island.
- c. Between 1st-6th November, South-West Pacific air forces continue attacks on Rabaul.
- d. On or about 1st November, South Pacific forces land at Empress Augusta Bay, Bougainville, and establish air facilities from which daylight bombardment attacks on Rabaul may be protected by fighter aircraft.
- e. Between 25th December and January, South-West Pacific forces seize the Saidor and Cape Gloucester areas. During this period South Pacific air forces deliver neutralising attacks on Rabaul, assisted by South-West Pacific air forces.

The original plan for the invasion of Bougainville called for a direct assault on the southern coast of the island, but Halsey had observed that enemy positions there were being strengthened. He therefore decided to by-pass them and look for a place where opposition would be weak. Torokina on Empress Augusta Bay seemed suitable, being weakly held. MacArthur agreed to this, and, meanwhile, on 22nd September, issued orders for the occupation of western New Britain and instructed General Kenney to begin "intensive neutralisation attacks against hostile air and surface operations in the Rabaul area starting on or about 15th October".



Kenney was ready before 15th October. After great preparations at Dobodura the first big raid was ready to go on the 12th. Including 12 Australian Beaufighters of No. 30 Squadron, a total of 308 aircraft had been mustered, and the force was instructed to make the main attack in daylight. The same night 12 Beauforts of No. 8 Squadron were to attack

shipping in the waters around Rabaul. Patrol aircraft brought back news on 11th October that the Japanese had increased their strength at Rabaul. Photographs taken showed 294 aircraft, compared with 143 on 10th October. The increase had been mainly in fighter aircraft of which there were now 100 more. The increased strength at Rabaul, especially at Tobera airfield, was due in part to the withdrawal of a number of aircraft of the *26th Air Flotilla* from south Bougainville and in part to the arrival of reinforcements from the north.²

Led by Squadron Leader Boulton,³ the Beaufighters went to Dobodura on 11th October, where they were to be under the command of First Air Task Force for the operation. Next morning they took off at 8.15. They had been delayed at the airfield by a dust haze caused by the Mitchells which went before them. Because of this they were late at the rendezvous and had to go on alone.

No. 9 Group's base at Kiriwina, at this time still the closest Allied base (310 miles) to Rabaul, became a scene of feverish activity on this day. The distance from Dobodura to Rabaul was 390 miles and it was necessary for the American Lightning fighters to call at Kiriwina for fuel. Australian ground crews had to handle a continuous stream of these staging aircraft. From dawn to dusk the crews toiled at the task of refuelling, servicing the aircraft and controlling the flow of traffic. Above Kiriwina where they were joined by their escorts, the fleet of Liberators, Mitchells and Fortresses could be heard continuously.

About 10.45 a.m., after the rest of the force had attacked Rabaul, the R.A.A.F. Beaufighters were nearing the target at sea level when they saw two squadrons of Mitchells approaching head on. The Mitchells, thinking the Beaufighters were enemy Sally aircraft, opened out their formation and fired on the Beaufighters, fortunately without hitting any. A squadron of Lightnings which were above the Mitchells, escorting them, then got in position for an attack on the Beaufighters, but Boulton stopped the attack just in time by calling the Lightnings on the radio.

Another result of leaving Dobodura late was that the Beaufighters were without fighter escorts when they reached Tobera airfield at 10.55 a.m. Before they could begin the attack, eighteen Zekes and one Hap, some with their wheels down ready to land, attacked them. The Beaufighters, whose mission was to strafe airfields, not engage fighters, wheeled to starboard, maintaining their formation with the intention of avoiding a dog-fight. A running fight followed, however, lasting thirty minutes; some of the enemy fighters were damaged and two probably destroyed. One Beaufighter, piloted by Flight Lieutenant Stone,⁴ with Flying Officer Morris-Hadwell⁵ as navigator, disappeared two miles east of Tobera and was

² US Strategic Bombing Survey, *Interrogations of Japanese Officials*, Vol II, p. 417: Captain Takashi Miyazaki.

³ W Cdr W. T. M. Boulton, DFC, 216; comd 30 Sqn 1943-44. Regular air force offr; of Manly, NSW; b. Summer Hill, NSW, 25 Jul 1918.

⁴ F-Lt D. R. Stone, 3406; 30 Sqn. Regular airman pilot; of Malvern, Vic; b. Clifton Hill, Vic, 5 Dec 1914. Killed in action 12 Oct 1943.

⁵ F-O E. B. Morris-Hadwell, 1433; 30 Sqn. Radio technician; of Ballarat, Vic; b. Kidderminster, Worcs, Eng, 5 Oct 1917. Killed in action 12 Oct 1943.

considered to have been shot down in the engagement. Stone was last seen gaining height to attack enemy fighters. Wing Commander Emerton attacked one of the fighters and as he did so Rapopo airfield came into view. He then attacked the airfield from the lowest possible height, using full power. Three fighters closed on him making rear attacks for five minutes, but he broke away at a speed of 280 miles an hour. Enemy anti-aircraft weapons did not fire heavily on the Beaufighters because their own aircraft were in the air. The Beaufighter pilots could see destroyed and burning aircraft at Rapopo and big fires at Vunakanau where the Mitchells had made their low-level attacks.

Between 12 noon and 3 p.m. the fighters of Nos. 76, 77 and 79 Squadrons R.A.A.F. were sent up over Kiriwina to protect the American air escorts which were now arriving back from the mission, but the enemy sent no raiders to molest them. Eleven Beaufighters arrived safely, and after refuelling took off again for Dobodura for a second raid planned for the following day. An attempt in the afternoon to photograph the results of the raid failed when the Lightning sent by No. 75 Squadron was intercepted by two enemy fighters and, being unarmed, had to turn back to base.

Early next morning twelve Beauforts of No. 8 Squadron, led by Wing Commander Nicoll, attacked shipping in Simpson Harbour. Two torpedo attacks were made, but no results were observed. Foul weather saved Rabaul from a repetition on the following day. The Beaufighters' operation was cancelled altogether, except that some were sent to search for lost Lightnings, but the Fifth Air Force, frustrated by the weather on the way to Rabaul, turned some of its attack against Cape Gloucester, Cape Hoskins and Gasmata.

On 14th October General MacArthur made the raid on Rabaul the subject of a special communiqué, which declared that "the enemy has sustained a disastrous defeat from air attack at Rabaul . . . this operation gives us definite mastery in the air over the Solomon Sea and adjacent waters, and thereby threatens the enemy's whole perimeter of defence". General Arnold cabled congratulations to Kenney and his American and Australian units for this "Pearl Harbour in reverse". It was considered that the enemy at Rabaul had suffered as much from this attack as at Wewak in August. "Devastating blow at Rabaul" was the streamer headline across the front page of the Melbourne *Argus* of 14th October. "The raid (wrote Professor Morison later) was widely publicised as having 'knocked out' Rabaul; but the Bismarcks base was not even leaning on the ropes."⁶ Admiral Kusaka, the Japanese commander, admitted after the war that the raid of 12th October was most damaging, although the aircraft destroyed in the air and on the ground were far less than the 177 claimed in the General Headquarters communiqué. In fact when the war ended it was established that the Japanese during the whole of October 1943 had lost only 55 aircraft at Rabaul.⁷

⁶ S. E. Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, Vol VI (1950), p. 286.

⁷ US Bombing Survey, *Campaign Against Rabaul*, p. 23. In November an additional 35 were lost.

After the attack on Rabaul the Fifth Air Force switched its main effort back to New Guinea to aid the Australian infantry, while No. 9 Group continued to attack the New Britain bases. Night attacks were made by No. 8 Squadron on Gasmata and Cape Hoskins on 16th October, where, in spite of bad visibility due to cloud and rain, dumps were bombed from 8,000 feet. The bad weather which persisted next day caused the cancellation of a number of raids. On 18th October three out of four Beauforts sent to Cape Hoskins again bombed this target. The other aircraft was forced to turn back because of the weather.

On 20th October Allied Intelligence learned of the movement of an enemy convoy, including two cruisers and a number of merchant vessels from Truk to Rabaul via Cape St George. No. 9 Group ordered a torpedo and bombing attack on the convoy by the men of all three Beaufort squadrons. No. 6 Squadron sent seven Beauforts led by Flight Lieutenant Oates;⁸ No. 8 sent eleven, led by Nicoll; and No. 100 nine, led by Flight Lieutenant Tuttleby.⁹ They left base after midnight on 22nd October, No. 6 Squadron coming from Milne Bay to Kiriwina the day before.

The cruisers were discovered at Cape St George and Nicoll's torpedo bombers attacked first, dropping five torpedoes, but could see no result. The rest of the Beauforts then attacked with bombs and saw three bright flashes on the port side of a cruiser. The pilots of No. 8 Squadron saw a fire blazing on the rear ship and men were seen to enter the lifeboats. During the attack the defenders fired heavily with anti-aircraft weapons. Flying Officer Vincent's¹ machine, although not seen to be hit, did not reach the base and Vincent was presumed lost with his crew. Flying Officer Hales of No. 6 Squadron, attacking just before dawn, dived from 3,000 feet to 1,400 feet to land his bombs, one of which appeared to drop down the funnel of the cruiser. Few of the Beauforts were able to see the results of their attacks because of the heavy anti-aircraft fire.²

Twenty-one Kittyhawks of No. 76 Squadron had dive-bombed Gasmata airfield on 21st October and on the 22nd the squadron was joined by Nos. 75 and 77 Squadrons in another attack on this target. Forty-six pilots took part in the combined attack and nine out of every ten bombs struck the target, causing a number of fires. Because of their short range, it had lately become something of a rarity for fighters of No. 9 Group to have an opportunity of shooting down Japanese aircraft, although there was always a possibility that the enemy might raid the bases at Kiriwina and Goodenough which the group had the responsibility of protecting. The only explanation why the enemy did not attack Kiriwina, which was

⁸ Sqn Ldr A. J. R. Oates, DFC, 260822. 14 and 6 Sqn. Clerk; of Newcastle, NSW; b. Newcastle, 22 Nov 1922.

⁹ F-Lt C. E. Tuttleby, DFC, AFM, 2760. 7, 6, 100, 32 and 24 Sqn. Regular airman pilot; of Alington, Vic; b. Collingwood, Vic, 4 Oct 1908.

¹ F-Lt G. H. Vincent, 400866; 8 Sqn. Bank clerk; of Werribee, Vic; b. Essendon, Vic, 1 Jul 1918. Presumed died as prisoner of war, on or after 14 Jan 1944.

² The United States Joint Army-Navy Assessment Committee allows no sinkings of enemy vessels as a result of these attacks. However, the Beauforts may well have caused serious damage to one or more vessels.

providing a jumping-off point for heavy raids on Rabaul, appears to be that the navy air force at Rabaul was loth to attack in the New Guinea-Kiriwina area since it was an area of army air force responsibility, and the attacks should therefore be mounted by the *Fourth Air Army* from Wewak bases. However, the Fifth Air Force kept Wewak thoroughly bombed.

During October the enemy continued to attack Finschhafen, at times in some strength. On the night of 19th-20th October no fewer than 60 enemy planes attacked shipping in Langemak Bay and there was a heavy raid on Kiriwina on the night of 26th October, during which 75 bombs were dropped, killing and wounding a number of natives.

Beaufighters of No. 30 Squadron had been hunting for enemy Jakes which carried out regular patrols from Cape Cunningham to Cormoran Head late each afternoon. On the afternoon of 23rd October four Beaufighters lying in wait near Cape Orford discovered a Jake flying at a height of 1,000 feet. The Jake's pilot immediately dived his machine to about fifty feet above ground, but two of the Beaufighters had no difficulty in getting into position on its stern. After four short bursts from cannon at 150 yards the Jake caught fire and crashed into the hills two miles east of Cape Orford. Return fire damaged the Beaufighter, which was piloted by Flying Officer Drury,³ but it reached base safely.

As the time for Admiral Halsey's Bougainville landing approached, Kenney unleashed his bombers on Rabaul again. Forty-nine high-flying Liberators struck at Rapopo airfield dropping 105 tons of bombs from about 20,000 feet, at midday on 23rd October, while the Beauforts of Nos. 6 and 100 Squadrons struck at Gasmata and Cape Hoskins. On 24th October Kenney sent Mitchells escorted by Lightning fighters to bombard Tobera, Vunakanau and Rapopo airfields and the following day the Liberators were sent to bomb Lakunai. The aim was to destroy Rabaul's air power, and the enemy was replying to this threat by drawing fighter reinforcements from the Solomons, mainly Bougainville. On 25th October seventy enemy fighters, with aggressive and determined pilots at the controls, were in the air over Rabaul and fierce air battles ensued in which both sides lost aircraft.

Halsey, whose airmen were now heavily pounding enemy airfields in southern Bougainville, had asked for air missions by South-West Pacific forces against the airfield on Buka Island just north of Bougainville. Enemy planes which might operate from Buka could menace the landing of his marines at Empress Augusta Bay. Air Commodore Hewitt sent No. 8 Squadron to make an attack on the night of 25th October. Nine Beauforts loaded with high-explosive and incendiary bombs left Kiriwina at 7.30 p.m. and, some three hours later, in the face of heavy anti-aircraft fire, made a successful attack on the airfield, storage dumps and dispersal areas at Buka. They silenced an anti-aircraft gun by dropping a 2,000-lb bomb near-by. On the way to Buka the Beauforts had to fly through low cloud and rain squalls and bad weather continued during the return flight.

³ F-Lt E. G. Drury, 401924; 30 Sqn. Clerk; of Northcote, Vic; b. Bacchus Marsh, Vic, 7 Aug 1918.

One of the Beauforts, piloted by Flight Sergeant Somerville,⁴ could not find Goodenough, where it was to land. Somerville's aircraft, missing Goodenough, made landfall on the New Guinea coast near East Cape and while flying along the coast met more rain and low cloud. The aircraft struck the sea when the pilot tried to get down below the cloud. It sank immediately and although the pilot and Flight Sergeant Lee⁵ escaped into the water and were later rescued, the other two members of the crew were not seen again.

Beginning on 25th October, the Catalinas of Nos. 11, 20 and 43 Squadrons joined in the general air bombardment of the Japanese bases in preparation for Halsey's advance. The Catalinas were taken off all other duties and were directed to strike at Japanese aircraft on the ground at Kavieng every night for a week. The three aircraft that went out on the first attack were hampered by the bad weather and poor visibility which persisted but each bombed the target. Squadron Leader Bolitho of No. 20 Squadron made two runs over the airfield, meeting heavy anti-aircraft fire. His machine was hit twice at the end of his second run, but the damage was not serious. The weather was again bad next night when six Catalinas headed for Kavieng to repeat the attack and only two reached the target. Two which failed to reach Kavieng bombed Gasmata as an alternative, another bombed what appeared to be ships at Talasea, and the sixth, after searching for the target for forty-six minutes, gave up, jettisoned its bombs and returned to base at Cairns.

Towards the end of October and early in November No. 9 Group was most active. Kittyhawks, Beauforts, Bostons, Catalinas (from North-Eastern Area) and Beaufighters were all playing their part in bombing attacks, strafing, patrolling, barge sweeps and harassing night raids. The monthly tonnage of bombs dropped by the whole of the R.A.A.F. in the Pacific war theatre had increased to 254 in October, compared with 137 in May, and most of this effort was by No. 9 Group.⁶

In the bombardment of Rabaul, the R.A.A.F., following the doctrines of the R.A.F., preferred to make night attacks, while the American bombers adhered to American Air Force doctrine and attacked in daylight, escorted by long-range fighters. Day versus night bombing had aroused considerable debate in the United Kingdom, where the British put their faith in night bombing with lightly-armed bombers carrying big bomb loads, the Americans in heavily-armed bombers with relatively light loads, attacking in daylight. The same difference in policy cropped up in the smaller operations in the South-West Pacific. The R.A.A.F. had

⁴ F-O K. F. Somerville, 412204; 8 Sqn. Shop assistant; of Parramatta, NSW; b. Echuca, Vic, 20 Aug 1918.

⁵ W-O R. S. Lee, 412981; 8 Sqn. Bank clerk; of Mittagong, NSW; b. Mittagong, 6 Feb 1917.

⁶ The RAAF Operational Base Unit (No. 46) at Kiriwina was now being inundated with visiting RAAF and American bomber and fighter squadron men. On 5 November the transit camp intake was 90 RAAF and 895 Fifth Air Force. The following day the figure rose to 150 RAAF and 905 Fifth Air Force. Buildings were taken over to give temporary cover and extra tents found. Meals were being served on a 24-hour basis, extra trucks, jeeps, cooks and cookhouse assistants being supplied by the US Sixth Army to help. As most of the visitors had no eating gear (reported the commander) the base unit had to supply them. The commander complained that the unit lost 400 knives, 400 spoons and 400 forks in a few days!

thoroughly trained its Beaufort crews in night flying; but in any case it would have been most imprudent to send the slow and vulnerable Beauforts over Rabaul in daylight against strong fighter opposition.

On 29th October Fifth Air Force heavy bombers with their escorts were again over Rabaul in the middle of the day and bombed Vunakanau where they destroyed aircraft on the ground. The pilots saw a number of enemy warships leaving the harbour. That night at 10.15 Beauforts of No. 8 Squadron led by Nicoll were sent to bomb Tobera airfield at Rabaul. They dropped bombs in the dispersal area and a dump area east of the airfield runway. Two days later No. 79 (Spitfire) Squadron had its first success against enemy aircraft in the New Guinea area. Flight Sergeant Callister⁷ shot down an enemy search aircraft 40 miles north of Kiriwina. Callister got the aircraft in his sights at 800 yards and opened fire, closing to 600 yards. The enemy machine blew up and dived into the sea.

Meanwhile the northern Solomons campaign had begun. The landing in the Treasury Group by the 8th New Zealand Brigade on 27th October had been opposed on the beach and in the air, but the New Zealanders seized both Mono and Stirling without undue losses. On 1st November, while a diversionary attack was made on Choiseul Island, the 3rd American Marine Division landed at Empress Augusta Bay on Bougainville, surprising the Japanese commander who had expected a landing in southern Bougainville where he had concentrated most of his men. Vice-Admiral Omori, commanding a Japanese force of four cruisers and eight destroyers, left Rabaul on 1st November to destroy the American troop transports in Empress Augusta Bay. Six Beauforts of No. 8 Squadron armed with torpedoes and led by Squadron Leader Price,⁸ carried out a shipping sweep between Bougainville and Rabaul that day ready to strike at enemy vessels but the crews did not find Omori's squadron. However, an American naval force under Rear-Admiral Merrill attacked the force 50 miles north of the beachhead late that night when it was closing for an attack on the marine transports. In a furious torpedo and gun fight, lasting two hours, the Japanese lost a light cruiser (*Sendai*) and a destroyer (the *Hatsukaze*). The remaining vessels retired to Rabaul.

The Japanese commanders at Rabaul had been appealing strongly to Admiral Koga at Truk to send air assistance to meet the threat from Halsey and to beat off the air attacks which were plaguing them. Late in October Koga sent 300 fighters from the Combined Fleet. These aircraft began arriving at Rabaul on 1st November and as a result of this reinforcement Japanese air strength at Rabaul reached its peak for the war. The airfields had on them at this time 550 aircraft of which 390 were fighters. A number of float-planes at anchorages brought the grand total to 586.

⁷ F-Sgt I. H. Callister, 408963; 79 Sqn. Student; of Kew, Vic; b. Brighton, Vic, 18 Mar 1922. Callister was killed at Kiriwina airfield on 5 Nov 1943 when his machine collided with a Kittyhawk piloted by W Cdr Arthur, who suffered severe burns.

⁸ Sqn Ldr O. Price, 271702; 8 Sqn. Flying instructor; of Toowoomba, Qld; b. Brisbane, 19 Sep 1912. Killed in action 9 Nov 1943.

In consequence the enemy sent up 125 fighters next day (2nd November) when 75 Mitchells, covered by Lightnings of the Fifth Air Force operating through Kiriwina, arrived over Rabaul to raid shipping and the town area. Nine of the Mitchells were lost, and nine Lightnings. The Fifth Air Force claimed 68 enemy planes destroyed. That night the Beauforts were sent again to bombard Tobera airfield. All three squadrons took part, No. 6 Squadron operating from Vivigani, and Nos. 8 and 100 from Kiriwina. Six Beauforts of No. 8 Squadron attacked first at 10 p.m. and all their bombs fell south and south-west of the airfield. The other two squadrons attacked the target early next morning, although three of the fourteen Beauforts sent did not reach it because of mechanical troubles. One Beaufort was circling at 3 a.m. trying to find Tobera airfield when the enemy lighted a flare path and flashed a green light to him presumably believing he was a friendly aircraft. Taking advantage of this mistake the pilot dived his machine from 10,000 to 6,000 feet and made a run along the south end of the airfield dropping bombs as he went. Flying Officer Renouf's⁹ Beaufort was attacked over Wide Bay by night fighters and he was forced to jettison his bombs and return to base without attacking. At daylight on 3rd November eleven Beaufighters of No. 30 Squadron, with Bostons of No. 22 and Kittyhawks of No. 77, were ordered to make a combined attack on Palmalmal plantation on Jacquinot Bay. This target was heavily bombed and strafed. A Japanese 25-mm shell struck the leading Boston (Wing Commander Townsend¹ and Pilot Officer McClymont²) and exploded in the bomb bay, forcing Townsend to land it immediately on a submerged coral reef 200 yards off shore. The crew, who were uninjured, paddled ashore in a dinghy, hid the dinghy and then escaped into the jungle where they got in touch with friendly natives who fed and sheltered them.³ One of the Kittyhawks (Sergeant McDonald⁴) was also hit and on the way back to base his machine crashed into the sea. A covering pilot saw McDonald come to the surface, only to sink again.

The enemy losses in the October-November operations against Rabaul claimed by MacArthur's headquarters were lamentably exaggerated. On 29th November the American magazine *Life* published a photograph of a Mitchell bomber flying over Rabaul harbour, and underneath the photograph a caption read that in a series of raids the United States air forces had destroyed 140 vessels and 700 aircraft in and round Rabaul. Exactly

⁹ F-Lt C. W. B. Renouf, 273860. 7, 13, 32 and 6 Sqns. Clerk; of Ingham, Qld; b. Ingham, 19 Apr 1921.

¹ Gp Capt W. E. Townsend, 170. Staff Offr Training, 1 Training Gp 1941-43; comd 67 Sqn 1943, 22 Sqn 1943-44, 5 OTU 1944-45. Regular air force offr; of Hawthorn, Vic; b. Hawthorn, 25 Apr 1916.

² F-Lt D. McK. McClymont, 405491. 67 and 22 Sqns. Jackaroo; of Blackall, Qld; b. Sydney, 17 Oct 1921.

³ The natives later passed the two airmen from village to village and on two occasions pursuing Japanese nearly captured them. They lived on food stolen from gardens and on 21st December the natives delivered them to an Allied Intelligence Bureau patrol which arranged their return to safety. If it had not been for the loyalty of the natives who aided them at great risk to themselves they would probably have lost their lives.

⁴ Sgt R. W. McDonald, 419203. 75 and 77 Sqns. Draftsman; of Mont Albert, Vic; b. Marrickville, NSW, 13 Nov 1923. Killed in action 3 Nov 1943.

three weeks earlier Colonel Tormey of MacArthur's staff had given "background information" to a conference of press representatives at General Headquarters, Brisbane, in which he stated that in nine raids between 10th October and 2nd November the grand total of aircraft destroyed, probably destroyed or damaged was 732 and the number of vessels sunk or destroyed 138, in and round Rabaul. Included in this figure were seven destroyers and a heavy cruiser sunk; but in fact only one destroyer was sunk by aircraft in this period. The total aircraft claimed as destroyed was 522, but in fact for the whole two months October-November and if the Solomons area is also included with Rabaul, the Japanese lost only 203 aircraft. The policy followed in this period was in contrast with the one employed when R.A.A.F. Spitfires had been involved in the relatively unsuccessful operation over Darwin on 2nd May, mentioned earlier. General MacArthur, referring to that action in a letter to Mr Curtin on 11th June, had said:

In contrast with the Minister's (Mr Drakeford's) view that some more palliating impression should have been conveyed, it is imperative to bear in mind the complaint of the representatives of the newspapers on the Censorship Advisory Committee, who claim that too rosy a picture is presented by the communiqués. *The policy of G.H.Q. is to base the communiqué on the real facts.* We lost fourteen aircraft in this action and the enemy six for certain with four probably destroyed. Never previously have we suffered such a severe reverse in an air action in the SWPA. To follow any other course would do more to undermine the morale of the public and air personnel than to be as frank as possible without divulging information of use to the enemy.

Although the exaggeration of claims cannot be condoned, it should be pointed out that it occurred not only in the Pacific but in other war theatres. For example, in one case the American Eighth Air Force claimed that its bombers destroyed 107 German fighters in a mission over Europe whereas in fact they destroyed two.⁵

Professor Morison, the United States naval historian, later made some caustic comments about the claims made after the Fifth Air Force attack on Rabaul on 2nd November. He wrote:

The actual score was 20 planes destroyed, two small *Marus* totalling 4,600 tons and a 500-ton mine-sweeper sunk; doubtless some others damaged. Yet General Kenney could still write of this raid in 1949, "Never in the long history of warfare had so much destruction been wrought upon the forces of a belligerent nation so swiftly and at such little cost." Never, indeed, have such exorbitant claims been made with so little basis in fact—except by some of the Army Air Forces in Europe, and by the same Japanese air force which General Kenney believed he had wiped out. Even on that day the Japanese out-Kenneyed Kenney by claiming 22 B-25s [Mitchells] and 79 P-38s [Lightnings] as "sure kills".⁶

An American critic was later to condemn MacArthur for attempting to build up a legend of himself as a strategist without historical precedent

⁵ Correspondents at MacArthur's headquarters resented being made tools for the dissemination of false claims, but could do little about it. At press conferences the correspondents greeted the more glaring examples of exaggeration with guffaws and sardonic quips. However, under the rules of their accreditation they could not criticise communiqués, although they could and sometimes did refuse to send them to their principals.

⁶ Morison, Vol VI, p. 288.

by exaggerating the enemy's strength and losses and minimising his own. An attempted justification of this policy is that it builds up the morale of the fighting forces as well as of the people at home. The building up of military reputations may be a by-product of the policy. In fact such a policy runs a risk of damaging the morale of troops and civilians, who may discover that exaggerations are being officially circulated, lose faith in their leaders, and become resentful of what they consider the contemptuous attitude of men who will not trust them with the truth.

Admiral Koga considered that Rabaul should be held to the last so as to protect the fleet main base at Truk, but not to the extent of weakening his air and naval forces which he was trying to preserve for a decisive engagement with the main units of the American fleet. He had already sent 300 carrier aircraft which he allowed to be used in the defence of the Solomons, and a few days later, impressed with the serious situation in Bougainville, he followed this by sending Admiral Kurita with a task force of his best cruisers and destroyers with orders to destroy the American force at Empress Augusta Bay. The Allies were already aware of the fighter aircraft reinforcement of Rabaul and on 4th November one of Kenney's patrolling aircraft saw Kurita's task force south of Truk. The Allied Air Forces "situation report" next day reported that "a large enemy task force comprised of five heavy cruisers, three light cruisers and five destroyers, with four freighters and two corvettes, is proceeding to the Rabaul area from Truk". Photographs taken at midday on 5th November over Rabaul showed the following vessels in the harbour:

- 6 heavy cruisers
- 10-14 destroyers
- 1 tanker
- 12 merchant vessels
- 1 hospital ship

These naval reinforcements created a dangerous situation for Halsey's amphibious forces at Empress Augusta Bay, which faced possible annihilation. Halsey therefore called on his carrier task force to launch an attack from the carriers *Saratoga* and *Princeton*. Bombers from this force sank one destroyer and damaged nearly every destroyer and cruiser in the harbour. Kenney sent 27 Liberators and 67 Lightnings which arrived in the afternoon after the carrier aircraft attack. The Liberators dropped 80 tons of bombs on the waterfront area.⁷

That night, to follow up the assault on Rabaul shipping, Air Commodore Hewitt ordered four Beauforts from No. 8 Squadron to make a torpedo attack on a tanker and other enemy shipping in Keravia Bay.

⁷ Halsey considered this effort was "feeble" in view of the situation at the time. In his book *Admiral Halsey's Story* (1947), p. 183, he wrote: "The last thing our pilots saw as they ducked back into the clouds . . . was Kenney's bombers, eight of them. I have always resented the feebleness of his support at this critical time, and I told General MacArthur as much the next time I saw him."

Another four Beauforts of No. 100 Squadron were to attack simultaneously at Vunakanau airfield which is near Keravia Bay. Flight Lieutenant Quinn⁸ led the torpedo planes, one of which failed to leave Kiriwina because it became unserviceable. At 10.4 p.m. Quinn attacked a ship in Keravia Bay from a height of 150 feet. As he came in to attack a searchlight picked him up. He then dropped his torpedo but, because the searchlight blinded his vision, could not see if it struck the target. A second torpedo was dropped at another ship but hooked to the left and missed. A third torpedo was aimed at a cruiser and the pilot considered that he probably hit it. As the torpedo crews made for base they could see the Beauforts of No. 100 Squadron bombing Vunakanau airfield.

Hewitt, who was a former naval officer and Fleet Air Arm pilot,⁹ now planned to use his Beaufort squadrons in a large-scale torpedo attack on enemy naval and merchant shipping in Rabaul. The results of Australian torpedo attacks thus far had not been encouraging. The range of the Beaufort was limited and it was overloaded when carrying a torpedo. It was a good machine but rather obsolete in design and uncomfortable for the crew. There had been criticism of the continued use of the Beaufort as a torpedo-carrying aircraft and it was felt that a well-planned large-scale attack on a good target would either make or break it as a tactical weapon, and help the R.A.A.F. leaders to decide whether to retain the expensive torpedo-bomber training establishment at Nowra in New South Wales.

Accordingly every effort was to be made to gain a success. Aircraft were held back from flights so that many would be serviceable on the day. Conferences were held and the whole operation coordinated. The final plan was for twelve Beauforts of No. 8 Squadron to attack in formation on the night of 8th November in Simpson Harbour. The torpedo bombers, aided by a diversion created by the bombing of Rapopo and Vunakanau airfields by other Beauforts, would enter the harbour in two flights of six.

In order to obtain last-minute information on the weather and the position of the Japanese ships at Rabaul a reconnaissance Beaufort was sent out late in the afternoon of 8th November, and when this machine returned after being chased by enemy fighters over Rabaul, Lieutenant Greentree,¹ naval observer who flew in it, reported that heavy rain was falling in St George's Channel and in addition the Japanese, evidently expecting torpedo attacks, had disposed their ships to prevent an attack down the moon, and had grouped their cruisers so as to be able to send up a concentrated anti-aircraft barrage against low-flying aircraft.

In conference, Greentree and the torpedo bomber flight commanders said that an attack by a formation could not succeed, and Nicoll who was

⁸ W Cdr N. T. Quinn, DFC, 622. 2, 6 and 14 Sqn; comd 8 Sqn 1943. Regular air force offr; of Muswellbrook, NSW; b. Cessnock, NSW, 16 Mar 1916.

⁹ Air Cmdre Hewitt was a graduate of the Royal Australian Naval College, which he entered in 1915 at the age of 13, graduating in 1919. In 1925 he went to England for attachment to the Fleet Air Arm.

¹ Lt-Cdr L. R. Greentree, DSC, RD; RANR(S). HMAS's *Hobart* 1939-40, *Westralia* 1942; 8 Sqn RAAF 1943; HMAS *Australia* 1944; 804 and 832 Sqn Fleet Air Arm 1944-45. Ship's officer; of Bexley, NSW; b. Paddington, NSW, 18 Jul 1918.

to lead the twelve torpedo bombers recommended to Hewitt that the other Beauforts which were standing by to bomb the airfields should be diverted to the shipping so that the enemy would disperse and be easier to hit with torpedoes. Hewitt agreed but Wing Commander Hannah,² commander of No. 6 Squadron, informed Hewitt on the telephone that his bombs were not suitable for an attack on shipping. His Beauforts were therefore sent off to bomb the original targets assigned to them. Tempers were frayed on this night during discussions outside the operations room on the Kiriwina airfield. It was a moonlit night and a map of the Rabaul area was spread out in the open on the bonnet of a jeep. The senior officers crowded round it, while the torpedo bomber crews waited in the background for the word to go.

Hewitt was clearly anxious to see the carefully-planned mission carried out and wanted to know precisely why it could not go on as planned. The lives of the crews and the future of the Beaufort torpedo bomber were at stake, and time was running out. Hewitt suggested that three aircraft could carry out the mission (originally planned for twelve). Then Nicoll, and the two flight commanders, Price and Quinn, volunteered to go. With little time to lose, they entered their aircraft and took off together at 12.30 a.m.

The three Beauforts flying in formation were forced to go through a heavy electrical storm. There was thunder and lightning, and heavy rain was falling. As they approached Rabaul they found the weather had cleared and they flew towards their target at a height of less than 100 feet in a V formation. Outside Rabaul harbour the Beauforts formed into line astern with Nicoll leading, and the pilots sent their machines at top speed over the narrow neck of land from Talili Bay into the harbour.

A barrage of anti-aircraft fire greeted them. Nicoll dropped his torpedo in the northern end of the harbour and it struck a tanker, although Nicoll himself could not see the result. Shortly afterwards, with great heroism, Price attacked a little farther south, sending his Beaufort straight towards the middle of a line of cruisers from which a tremendous barrage of missiles was soaring towards him leaving dazzling trails of blue, red and orange. Price's aircraft was hit and apparently blown to pieces. Quinn, who was behind, saw Price turn in and later saw the barrage lift as his Beaufort neared the cruisers. Quinn was diving and weaving violently to avoid the searchlights and anti-aircraft fire. Greentree, the naval observer, saw a light cruiser off Keravia Bay and guided Quinn towards it. The torpedo was dropped and in the confusion Quinn, instead of making off, turned his machine back through the anti-aircraft fire again. The anti-aircraft fire was so intense that the aircraft was filled with cordite fumes. Just before dawn Nicoll and Quinn landed back at base at Kiriwina, but ground controllers waited in vain for Price's machine and he and his

² Air Cmdre C. T. Hannah, CBE, 112. Comd 6 Sqn and 71 Wing 1943-44; SASO Western Area 1944-45; comd Western Area 1945. Regular air force offr; of Nedlands, WA; b. Menzies, WA, 22 Dec 1914.

crew (Flying Officer Harrison³ and Flight Sergeants Allen⁴ and Hooper⁵) were posted missing.

Two days later, however, Hewitt directed that Nicoll be posted from No. 8 Squadron to the command of No. 7 at Townsville. He then appointed Quinn to the command of No. 8 in Nicoll's place. However, a report had been sent by a senior officer of the group to R.A.A.F. Headquarters, Melbourne, reporting an unsatisfactory state of affairs in the group. R.A.A.F. Headquarters cancelled Nicoll's posting and Hewitt himself was transferred back to his earlier position of Director of Intelligence at Allied Air Forces Headquarters, Brisbane.

The transfer of the commander of the R.A.A.F.'s most important and active group of squadrons then heavily engaged in support of MacArthur's offensive against New Britain was a serious matter, and the Minister for Air, Mr Drakeford, considered it necessary to bring it to the attention of the Prime Minister. On 17th November he wrote to Mr Curtin:

I am sorry to inform you that the C.A.S. has just reported to me that much dissatisfaction exists in regard to the administration of No. 9 (Operational) Group, New Guinea, by the present A.O.C.—Air Commodore J. E. Hewitt.

In his submission AVM Jones has informed me that, during his recent visit to New Guinea, it was quite apparent that morale and discipline of senior officers in No. 9 (Operational) Group were suffering as the result of Air Commodore Hewitt's administration, those views being later confirmed by reports submitted by senior officers of this HQ staff after their visits to New Guinea.

The C.A.S. informed the A.O.C. 9 (Operational) Group of the position, in the hope that the latter would adjust his methods, not only to ensure improvement in his administration, but also to secure the fullest cooperation of his senior officers—a condition imperatively necessary for operational efficiency and general well-being of the force.

The C.A.S. has now informed me, however, that he is convinced that the situation as between the A.O.C. and his senior officers is deteriorating, under which circumstance AVM Jones has now strongly recommended that the following changes be made in appointments

- a. Air Commodore F. W. F. Lukis, C.B.E., at present Air Member for Personnel to be AOC No. 9 (Operational) Group, vice Air Commodore Hewitt.
- b. AVM W. H. Anderson, C.B.E., D.F.C., at present commandant R.A.A.F. staff school, to be AMP (vice Air Commodore Lukis).
- c. Air Commodore J. E. Hewitt, O.B.E., at present AOC 9 (Operational) Group to return to his former post of Director of Intelligence at Allied Air Headquarters.

Mr Curtin agreed to the changes and expressed concern at "the unsatisfactory state of affairs that has arisen in connection with the administration of No. 9 Operational Group". He also reminded Drakeford that he, Drakeford, had earlier proposed that Hewitt should be promoted to the post of A.O.C., R.A.A.F. Command, in place of Air Vice-Marshal Bos-

³ F-O A. J. Harrison, 405191; 8 Sqn. Accounts clerk; of Geebung, Qld; b. Brisbane, 17 Nov 1916. Killed in action 9 Nov 1943.

⁴ F-Sgt G. W. F. S. Allen, 412875. 100 and 8 Sqn. Bank clerk; of Ashfield, NSW; b. Stanmore, NSW, 20 Aug 1921. Killed in action 9 Nov 1943.

⁵ F-Sgt T. C. Hooper, 405483; 8 Sqn. Student; of Albion Heights, Qld; b. Brisbane, 19 Jan 1922. Killed in action 9 Nov 1943.

tock, adding that MacArthur had opposed this on the ground that Hewitt was not an "adequate replacement". Drakeford replied next day defending Hewitt, pointing out that he had rendered excellent service and that "the present position may be largely, if not entirely, due to some temporary physical stress brought about by the strain of his important duties as A.O.C. of No. 9 Group".

Rabaul, even after many Allied attacks, was still immensely strong, and continued to be a serious threat to Halsey. The Beauforts of No. 6 Squadron bombed Vunakanau airfield on the night of 10th November. Conditions for bombing were perfect and the crews could clearly see the airfield and dispersal bays from 10,000 feet.

In response to a request from Halsey, Admiral Nimitz had sent him three more aircraft carriers (*Independence*, *Essex* and *Bunker Hill*) and aircraft from these together with those from *Saratoga* and *Princeton* made more attacks on Rabaul on 11th November. Some of Kenney's bombers joined in also, and, although bad weather greatly hampered the operation, preventing a coordinated attack, the carrier aircraft sank a destroyer and damaged other ships. Admiral Kurita was forced finally to withdraw his naval task force from Rabaul and every one of his ships that could steam returned to Truk. Admiral Koga recalled the remaining carrier air groups and sent them back to Japan for reorganisation into other units. Halsey had won the day. Bougainville was safe.

Hewitt had sent two more heavy night attacks against Rabaul on 14th and 17th November, using his three squadrons of Beauforts. He directed Beauforts of No. 6 Squadron to bomb shipping in the harbour on 14th November. The pilots found three groups of ships, one in the west side of Simpson Harbour, one in the centre of the harbour and the other off Lakunai. They made two hits or very near misses on a motor vessel and two direct hits on the stern of an 8,000-ton ship. Flight Lieutenant Oates scored the two hits on the 8,000-ton ship. He singled out his target and made a gliding approach from 10,000 feet, clearing Talili Bay by 400 feet and dropping to 150 feet over the harbour. His first four bombs entered the water running up to the side of the vessel and the last two entered the vessel. Later that night seven bomb-carrying and five torpedo-carrying Beauforts of No. 8 Squadron led by Flight Lieutenant Dorward⁶ also attacked the harbour. One of the Beauforts was lost. The Beauforts of No. 100 Squadron which also attacked the harbour could not see the result of their efforts.

⁶ Sqn Ldr E. A. Dorward, 251607. 23, 32, 8, 35 and 37 Sqns. Airline pilot; of Brighton Beach, Vic; b. Brighton, Vic, 26 Apr 1910.