CHAPTER 8

THE BISMARCKS BARRIER BROKEN

AFTER the lodgment of Admiral Halsey's marines at Empress Augusta Bay in Bougainville, only the final major task of the Elkton offensive—the capture of bases on New Britain—remained to be carried out. The original aim to capture Rabaul had been abandoned in favour of its neutralisation, but General MacArthur considered it necessary to land on western New Britain and other points such as Kavieng and the Admiralties, in order to break through the Bismarcks Barrier. The elimination of enemy power in the Bismarcks was necessary for the security of the advance of the Allies into western New Guinea, and beyond to the Philippines.

At the end of 1943 the plan was:

- 1. Seizure of bases on western New Britain in order to control Vitiaz Strait.
- Air offensive by Admiral Halsey's command on Rabaul from bases at Torokina.
- 3. Seizure of the Admiralty Islands.
- 4. Seizure of Kavieng, New Ireland.

The first plan made by General Krueger's Sixth Army for the New Britain operation called for a landing at Gasmata on 14th November, followed on the 20th November by two more landings, one at Cape Gloucester and the other at Tauali. However, close air support was to be given from airfields at Finschhafen, Lae and the Markham Valley; and late in October, the chief engineer reported that these airfields would not be ready in time. MacArthur therefore postponed the operation for two weeks.

MacArthur, on 23rd November, abandoned the Gasmata operation altogether because the Japanese, anticipating an attack there, had moved in reinforcements. General Kenney was in agreement since he did not need an airfield on the south coast of New Britain if he could have one at Cape Gloucester. The United States Navy also favoured Arawe, because it would provide harbours from which P.T. boats could operate in Vitiaz Strait. Moreover, it was anticipated that a regiment could take Arawe whereas a division would be needed to capture Gasmata. MacArthur set 15th December as the day for the Arawe landing and 26th December for the landing at Cape Gloucester.

The capture of Madang had been part of the task assigned to New Guinea Force, but General Blamey had expressed the view to General MacArthur that enemy bases in western New Britain should be seized beforehand to allow the undisturbed passage of transports through Vitiaz Strait. MacArthur, however, wanted a base established on the New Guinea side of Vitiaz Strait and eventually an intermediate objective, Saidor, was agreed on. The landing there, by American troops, was to take place immediately after the western New Britain landings.

Krueger expected that an attack on Cape Gloucester would be interpreted by the Japanese as a direct and immediate threat to the Rabaul bastion, and because of this there was some anxiety about the Japanese reaction. It was considered probable that enemy air forces would be unleashed against Allied forward bases particularly Finschhafen, Woodlark, Kiriwina and Goodenough in addition to the beachheads. But the effect of the Allied air offensive was likely to prevent the Japanese sending more than about 70 bombers and 100 fighters.

The Japanese knew that landings on western New Britain were imminent. To counter them, they planned to attack for three or four days from the time of the landings. The fighters would machine-gun, the light bombers would bomb in the daytime, and Bettys would make torpedo attacks at night. The Japanese had about 6,000 men round Cape Gloucester.

The task of the Allied air forces during this operation was to deny seaborne reinforcements and supply of the Cape Gloucester and Saidor areas by an intensive blockade established jointly with Allied naval forces. The plan, similar to that for earlier ELKTON operations, also called for very heavy preliminary air bombardment of the Cape Gloucester area prior to and during the period when the amphibious force was approaching. As soon as an airfield was prepared for use, one group of fighter aircraft was to be established there. Not only the Fifth Air Force and No. 9 Group, but Halsey's Thirteenth Air Force, New Zealand and American marine air units in the Solomons were to take an indirect part in the western New Britain operation. The main objective of Halsey's aircraft would be to attack Rabaul, and for this purpose the work of preparing air facilities on Bougainville was pushed ahead behind the defensive line which had been formed round Torokina.

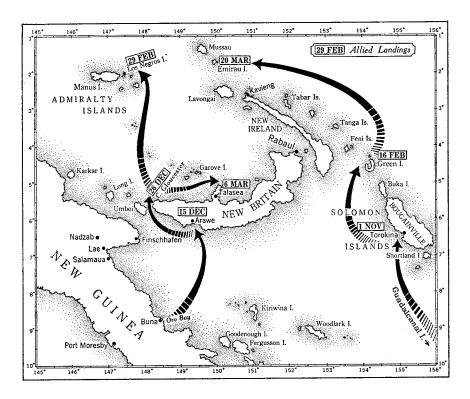
Fifth Air Force had given control of eleven American squadrons to No. 9 Group for the air operations against western New Britain, while the commander of the American First Air Task Force was to operate other American squadrons from Dobodura, and the new bases at Finschhafen, Nadzab and Lae. But these arrangements were cancelled when Arawe was substituted for Gasmata.

The air forces were set the task of making the most concentrated and sustained air bombardment yet made in the Pacific in preparation for the landing. Their work began on 20th November when 51 Liberators bombed Gasmata, followed by 70 Mitchells and 24 Liberators on 22nd November. On 23rd November four Beauforts of No. 100 Squadron made a night raid on a bridge over the Anwek River in the same area. They could plainly see the target in spite of weak moonlight and their bombs struck very close to it.

The Fifth Air Force directed four of No. 9 Group's squadrons to move during November, in preparation for the western New Britain air offensive. The two attack squadrons, Nos. 22 and 30, went forward to Kiriwina from Goodenough, and Nos. 6 and 100 Beaufort Squadrons moved from Milne Bay to Goodenough, where they occupied the sites vacated by the

attack squadrons. All four squadrons had completed their moves by 26th November. The Fifth Air Force was no longer attacking Rabaul and did not therefore need the use of Kiriwina as a staging-in base. The dispersal facilities which the construction engineers were continually expanding were sufficient to hold the concentration of six R.A.A.F. squadrons which occupied them by the beginning of December.

No. 9 Group had been reinforced in November by the arrival of No. 78 (Kittyhawk) Squadron. It was based at Kiriwina and commanded by Wing Commander Walker. Late in November the pilots escorted American Liberators during their missions against Gasmata.



The attack squadrons continued their normal raids on enemy barges, few of which could now be found, and also harassed the airfields at Gasmata and Cape Hoskins. No. 22, the Boston squadron, had completed twelve months in New Guinea by the end of November. In that period the squadron carried out 133 bombing missions totalling 638 sorties, and had lost 12 aircraft with 13 aircrew killed, 10 missing and 6 wounded. In view of the fact that the squadron never had more than 12 aircraft,

W Cdr G. F. Walker, DFC, 260312. Comd 78 Sqn 1943-44. Accountant; of Roseville, NSW; b. Strathfield, NSW, 6 Mar 1913.

with a maximum of 9 serviceable at any one time, the number of operations carried out was highly satisfactory. Maintenance facilities were meagre, parts scarce, and no new aircraft had been available to the squadron for the first ten months of its duty in New Guinea. Ground crews had done well to keep so many of the Bostons fit for operations for so long.

No. 9 Group's November activities were the most intense since it was formed, but with its greater strength and with the western New Britain campaign about to be launched, December promised even greater things. The month's operations began when twelve Beauforts of Nos. 6 and 100 Squadrons were sent to bomb dumps at Gasmata. Because of unpredicted winds, clouds and the darkness, only two aircraft found the assigned target. They bombed successfully while the others searched for and bombed alternative targets.

Kenney had sent his main bomber force against targets in New Guinea and western New Britain since the big raids on Rabaul in October and November. In late November and December only the Beauforts of No. 9 Group were bombing Rabaul pending the appearance there of aircraft from Halsey's command in the South Pacific. No. 9 Group planned a big raid on Rabaul by all three Beaufort squadrons for 4th December. It was to include high-level bombing attacks on the airfields and a sweep by six torpedo-carrying Beauforts led by Squadron Leader Quinn. Flying Officer Finlay,² who captained one of the Beauforts, described the mission:

I was flying on the port side of Squadron Leader Quinn. We searched the Duke of York Island area and then came down the coast from Tawui Point to Praed Point. We then turned into Blanche Bay (Rabaul harbour) on a course of 270°. At 7.38 p.m. I sighted a ship of 6,000 to 7,000 tons and I turned to starboard and attacked. I dropped [the torpedo] at approximately 1,000 yards, dead abeam and turned away to port. My gunner reported an explosion approximately thirty seconds later. I looked and saw a large fire burning on the ship—smoke and flames being very clearly seen. From that point I had to concentrate on flying my aircraft and did not see the ship again.

Quinn, meanwhile, had seen the stern of a big ship and was in the act of dropping his torpedo when his aircraft ran into an obstruction which he believed to be a steel cable or a mast. He was struck in the head and wounded but dimly remembered hitting the water. He and his observer, Pilot Officer O'Loghlen,³ were thrown into the water and although semi-conscious were able to cling weakly to the Beaufort's dinghy which had inflated itself. Japanese in small motor-boats were searching round the harbour picking up men who had jumped into the harbour presumably from a bombed ship. They had searchlights and one of these played on to Quinn's yellow dinghy. The Japanese were amazed to see two enemy airmen clinging to it. They quickly took the dinghy in tow

F-Lt R. H. Finlay, DFC, 405728; 8 Sqn. Machinery salesman; of Lismore, NSW; b. Ryde, NSW, 27 Oct 1916.

F-O R. B. O'Loghlen, 400662. 34 Sqn RAF, 8 Sqn. Clerk; of South Yarra, Vic; b. Melbourne, 15 Mar 1914. Drowned while prisoner of war, on or after 14 Jan 1944.

and handed the airmen over to the naval staff ashore. The other two members of Quinn's crew, Flight Sergeant Mainland⁴ and Flight Sergeant McDonald⁵ were either killed in the crash or drowned. Quinn and O'Loghlen were handled very roughly, then flogged. A Japanese speaking perfect English asked them what had attacked the ship. At naval head-quarters Quinn heard overhead one of the Beauforts which had come to bomb Lakunai airfield; it dropped a bomb 100 yards away. Quinn was subjected to third degree for four days, and then he and two American pilots who survived crashes during raids in November were trussed up, blindfolded, and bundled into a Betty bomber which took them to Japan for further questioning. Quinn survived the war in a Japanese prisoner of war camp but O'Loghlen was drowned when a ship on which he was being transported was sunk. While Quinn was being questioned the Beauforts were bombing Lakunai airfield very successfully, although the crews were unable to see well because of searchlight interference.

On 6th December Beauforts drawn from all three squadrons extended their bombing to Borpop airfield to the north-east of Rabaul on New Ireland. The following morning Mitchells and Liberators were hammering Cape Gloucester and Borgen Bay and in the afternoon sixty-three R.A.A.F. Kittyhawks from Nos. 75, 76, 77 and 78 Squadrons attacked the Gasmata dumps, diving from 13,000 feet to 3,000 to drop their 500-lb bombs.

The air-support plan for the Arawe landing called for an attack on Gasmata airfield by No. 9 Group, three days before the assault. Thirty-four Kittyhawks, 20 from No. 76 Squadron and 14 from No. 78, were ordered to carry out the attack. The Kittyhawks, led by Wing Commander Steege, 6 commanding officer of No. 73 Wing, came over the target in sections of four aircraft dropping bombs and machine-gunning from 1,000 feet down to tree-top level in spite of anti-aircraft fire. The pilots then formed up and returned to Kiriwina.

As the day of the assault approached No. 9 Group increased its pressure on the airfields at Rabaul. The maximum number of Beauforts was sent to bomb Lakunai on 13th December, and the night before the landing thirty Beauforts were again attacking this target. An enemy aircraft followed Beauforts of No. 100 Squadron from Lakunai back to Kiriwina and bombed and strafed the airfield as the Beauforts were landing; by following in the tracks of the Beauforts it avoided being detected by the radar station. A bomb dropped by the enemy aircraft hit one of the Beauforts as it was moving to its dispersal bay. The navigator, Flying Officer Jackson, was killed, and another crew member, Flying Officer

F-Sgt I. L. Mainland, 408815. 7, 6, 14 and 8 Sqns. Bank clerk; of Balldale, NSW; b. Warrnambool, Vic, 11 Jun 1915. Killed in action 4 Dec 1943.

^t F-Sgt D. McDonald, 401714; 8 Sqn. Factory employee; of Morwell, Vic; b. Morwell, 18 Aug 1913. Killed in action 4 Dec 1943.

⁶ Gp Capt G. H. Steege, DSO, DFC, 213. 11 and 3 Sqns; comd 450 Sqn 1941-42, 73 and 81 Wings 1943-44; SASO Eastern Area 1945. Comd 77 Sqn Korea 1951. Regular air force offr; of North Sydney; b. Chatswood, NSW, 31 Oct 1917.

F-O W. Jackson, 408522. 32 and 100 Sqns. Accountant; of Brunswick, Vic; b. Nhill, Vic, 22 Apr 1922. Killed in action 14 Dec 1943.

Walsh,8 seriously wounded, but the other two members of the crew escaped injury.

All through the morning from dawn on 14th December the Americans had sent squadron after squadron to bombard Arawe in preparation for the landing next day, and early on the morning of 15th December Beaufighters of No. 30 Squadron were sent for a first-light attack on Borpop airfield. They raked the whole area, including the operations room and anti-aircraft positions, with cannon and machine-gun fire.

Meanwhile, men of the 112th United States Cavalry Regiment (of the 1st Cavalry Division), after preliminary bombardment by the naval force, had gone ashore. A smaller landing, comprising 150 cavalrymen, which was sent in without covering fire in the hope that surprise would be achieved, was repulsed with 50 per cent casualties. A small party landed successfully at Pilelo Island where it destroyed a party of Japanese; the R.A.A.F's No. 335 Radar Station commanded by Pilot Officer Colley⁹ took part in this landing. There were 28 men in the party and they were the first Australian radar men to take part in an assault on enemy-held territory.

By accident, the landing at Arawe was discovered promptly by a Japanese patrol plane, and at 9 a.m. 33 enemy aircraft, sent by Admiral Kusaka, avoided fighter patrols of Lightnings, and bombed and strafed the landing area. Kittyhawks of No. 76 Squadron had been patrolling overhead since dawn, but had left the area for the base some minutes before the raiders appeared. The beach and the headquarters ship were attacked. The Japanese maintained their air attacks, sending out formations of between 20 and 30 aircraft. The R.A.A.F. radar party was heavily strafed when their equipment was being unloaded 36 hours after the landing. But, although constantly harassed by bombing and machinegunning, their equipment was working after 48 hours. At least 150 enemy aircraft attacked Arawe on 21st December, and, in addition to inflicting casualties, succeeded in sinking a number of Allied vessels.

The pilots of No. 79 Squadron who were again on standby at Kiriwina to protect the base against enemy raids were again disappointed when the Japanese sent no raiders. The squadron had shot down a Dinah on 28th November but little had happened since then, and a rueful comment in the squadron diary for December recorded:

The A.O.C. addressed air crew on two occasions but was unable to forecast greater operational activity against the enemy due to the reluctance of the Jap to do those things anticipated from him.

The pilots had become somewhat restive, but in December they were given the task of carrying out offensive patrols in New Britain and their spirits rose. The four Kittyhawk squadrons, on the other hand, were fully engaged. In December, No. 76 Squadron had to cut its training program because of the large number of operational sorties carried out.

<sup>F-O J. E. Walsh, 406225. 1 and 100 Sqns. Railway employee; of Fremantle, WA; b. Wooroloo, WA, 4 Aug 1913.
F-Lt J. G. Colley, 18606. Comd 335 Radar Stn 1943, 340 Radar Stn (Aitape) 1944. Electrical engineer; of Quambatook, Vic; b. Essendon, Vic, 8 Jun 1906.</sup>

By mid-December Admiral Halsey's forces in Bougainville, after some delay, had completed the construction of airfields at Torokina, and on 17th December South Pacific Command carried out its first major air operation over Rabaul: a fighter sweep by 80 fighters, 24 of which were Kittyhawks of the R.N.Z.A.F. based on Ondonga, New Georgia. While Halsey's airmen clashed with Japanese fighters in the daytime, No. 9 Group Beauforts continued to harass and cause damage to the enemy with night raids.

The comprehensiveness of the air support for the Cape Gloucester operation is described by the historians of the American Army Air Forces thus:

Beginning on 19 December, the Second and Third Air Task Forces used their fighter bombers and such mediums as were available to make sure that no opposition to the Gloucester landing came from the New Guinea fields at Madang, Alexishafen, and Wewak. The RAAF Beauforts, after a short break, resumed nightly harassing attacks on Rabaul on 13 December. On 17 December, SOPAC put seventy-six fighters over Rabaul; and two days later, P-38's and RNZAF P-40's escorted six Thirteenth Air Force B-24's to Rabaul. The B-24's mounted three more attacks—on 23 December when they were accompanied by another fighter sweep and on the 24th and 25th—and a SOPAC carrier force attacked shipping in Kavieng Harbour with bombs and torpedoes on Christmas Day. The usual reconnaissance was maintained, with RAAF Catalinas nightly covering the Kavieng area. In all, the enemy was being hit by a coordinated air attack which he hardly knew how to handle.¹

The Catalinas of Nos. 11, 20 and 43 Squadrons, which had played their part in preparation for the Lae and Bougainville landings, came into the picture again on 20th December when they joined in the bombardment of Kavieng and Gasmata in preparation for the Cape Gloucester landing. Including the dive bombers of No. 24, aircraft of no fewer than thirteen R.A.A.F. squadrons were regularly bombing New Britain and New Ireland in December. In addition to machine-gunning and cannon strafing, the R.A.A.F. dropped 205 tons of bombs from the time the campaign opened on 21st November until the landing at Cape Gloucester on 26th December. In the same period the Fifth Air Force, using heavy bombers as well as their medium bombers, dropped 3,926 tons of bombs in pre-invasion raids. As a result of this bombardment—very heavy for those days—and naval bombardment the marines walked ashore at Cape Gloucester on 26th December without opposition from the dazed and disorganised defenders.

Halsey had sent a carrier air task force to strike Kavieng on Christmas Day, but in spite of this raid and numerous forays over Rabaul by his land-based aircraft from Torokina, Japanese air reaction to the Cape Gloucester landing was heavy; on 26th and 27th December 300 enemy aircraft attacked at both Cape Gloucester and Arawe. The Japanese were aware of the threat to Cape Gloucester early in the morning and aircraft from Rabaul attacked the beachhead only an hour after the landing.

¹ Craven and Cate (Editors), The Army Air Forces in World War II (1950), Vol IV, p. 338.

Another attack soon afterwards was repulsed by American fighters, but in the afternoon a mixed force of dive and medium bombers escorted by fighters attacked the naval task force, sinking the destroyer *Brownson* and damaging three other destroyers. There were numerous enemy air attacks next day. However, the air offensive petered out by 28th December, and on the 30th the Cape Gloucester airfield fell to the marines. A few days later, on 2nd January, part of the 32nd American Division landed at Saidor and possession of this base and Cape Gloucester gave MacArthur complete control over Vitiaz Strait.

In January 1944 the squadrons of No. 9 Group and Australian Catalinas of North-Eastern Area continued to support the American invasion of New Britain by bombarding bases in New Britain and New Ireland, and patrolling surrounding waters in search of enemy barges. Support for the American ground forces in New Britain was No. 9 Group's responsibility, while the Fifth Air Force concentrated on New Guinea. For the Beauforts of Nos. 6, 8 and 100 Squadrons the main target was Rabaul, where the Japanese, in spite of severe losses, continued to maintain aircraft. These aircraft, however, were mainly fighters. The Japanese were, therefore, on the defensive at a time when the situation, from their point of view, called for a bomber offensive against the Allied advanced bases.

Forty-six Beauforts (fourteen from No. 6, twenty from No. 8 and twelve from No. 100) were directed to attack the dispersal areas at Lakunai on the night of 2nd-3rd January. Earlier, a Beaufort had been sent over the target to report the weather, which was considered to be satisfactory but several of the Beauforts ran into heavy cloud and rain and had to return to base without attacking. Mechanical failure and damage during take-off prevented other Beauforts from taking part. However, 35 aircraft, attacking singly in rapid succession, dropped 32 tons of bombs at Lakunai, causing fires along the airfield and in buildings at the south-eastern end. The Japanese ground defences opened fire on them and searchlights caught some in a cone of light. A Beaufort from No. 8 captained by Flying Officer Goodwin,2 arrived over the target with another Beaufort at 9.42 p.m. and was caught in these searchlights. Goodwin's aircraft did not return to base and, since no messages were received from it after its arrival over Rabaul, it was considered that it was shot down by anti-aircraft fire. A ship off shore near the Lakunai airfield was hit by bombs during these attacks and crews could see flames coming from it. On 3rd January Beaufighters of No. 30 Squadron and four Kittyhawks from No. 76 Squadron sank a lighter and then attacked a schooner which caught fire. It was settling into the water at the stern when they left the target.

The following night Air Commodore Lukis sent 32 Beauforts to bombard both Vunakanau and Rapopo airfields, but heavy cloud and rain forced many of these aircraft to turn back before reaching the targets, or

F-O J. A. Goodwin, 404827; 8 Sqn. Grocer; of Cairns, Qld; b. Chillagoe, Qld, 30 Nov 1915. Killed in action 2 Jan 1944.

to attack alternative targets, and two turned back because of mechanical trouble. However, four Beauforts found and bombed Vunakanau, and nine bombed Rapopo. The weather was the worst the crews had experienced during their night raids on Rabaul. In the next few days the Beauforts continued their heavy night attacks on the Japanese air installations, the last attack being on the night of 7th-8th January when they bombed Lakunai and Tobera airfields. The Beaufort night attacks had been a potent supplement to the efforts of the American Thirteenth Air Force, American naval air forces and the Royal New Zealand Air Force, which continued to bomb Rabaul during the day.

After the establishment of airfields at Empress Augusta Bay on Bougain-ville, the Rabaul area was within easy range of Halsey's aircraft, and during January the task of subduing Rabaul was allotted to South Pacific forces. The major portion of the Gazelle Peninsula on which Rabaul stands was included in Halsey's South Pacific command. As a result No. 9 Group no longer attacked Rabaul but was confined to the central part of New Britain, south of Wide Bay and east of Arawe. At Cape Gloucester on the western tip of New Britain, the Fifth Air Force continued to give direct support to the 1st Marine Division, in addition to bombing Wewak, Madang, Alexishafen, and other enemy bases on the New Guinea coast.

Lukis was disappointed with the role now allotted to No. 9 Group. He pointed out to General Whitehead, commander of the Fifth Air Force, that there was not likely to be any contact with enemy aircraft in central New Britain. The fighter pilots, he said, were again becoming restive at the continued lack of opportunity. Kiriwina, which they were assigned to defend, was not being raided, nor was it likely to be raided because the Japanese were on the defensive and rapidly declining in strength at Rabaul. Quips about "the Non-Ops Group" were going the rounds in the air force.

On 17th January Lukis sent 32 Beauforts to bomb an enemy camp and dump area on the Amgen River near Lindenhafen. With adequate fighter escort available the Beauforts could attack in daylight. The escort included sixteen Kittyhawks from No. 77 Squadron, seventeen from No. 76 and eight Spitfires from No. 79 Squadron. This force of 73 aircraft was the strongest R.A.A.F. force to be sent against a single target up to that time. Over the target the Australians met no anti-aircraft fire and their bombs caused many fires and explosions. The only loss was a Beaufort of No. 6 piloted by Flying Officer Wade.³ This Beaufort developed engine trouble and Wade turned for base. He jettisoned his bomb load but the bomber continued to lose altitude and he was forced to land it in the sea. The rubber dinghy failed to release from the aircraft and the crew were left floundering in the sea. However, Flight Sergeant Nash,⁴ the wireless operator, had been able to send out messages giving the

³ F-O H. M. Wade, 415201. 14 and 6 Sqns. Salesman; of Claremont, WA; b. Perth, WA, 9 Jan 1917. Killed in action 28 Mar 1944.

⁴P-O J. A. Nash, DFM, 410368. 14 and 6 Sqns. Cutter; of Auburn, Vic; b. Carlton, Vic, 10 Jan 1923. Killed in action 28 Mar 1944.

position of the Beaufort and after a few hours in the water the crew was rescued by an American Catalina.

Four days later the mission against Lindenhafen was repeated by a still larger force, 33 Beauforts, 35 Kittyhawks and 8 Spitfires taking part. They struck the target again the following day. Two Kittyhawks were lost, but both pilots were rescued unhurt from the sea. These operations were continued through January and February, the only opposition being from anti-aircraft fire from ground positions. A number of Bostons of No. 22 Squadron were hit by enemy fire when they raided Lindenhafen on 30th January. One Boston, piloted by Wing Commander Emerton, the commanding officer of No. 22, with Pilot Officer Gawne⁵ as observer, caught fire when hit and crashed into the ground near the Kabu River.

The marines were now pursuing the routed Japanese forces round Cape Gloucester. As the Japanese retreated eastward the American troops made a series of jumps by small craft along the northern and southern coasts of New Britain, visiting barge hideouts and seizing supplies. Cut off from their supplies, the routed enemy soldiers left behind sick, dead and dying in their path. Some of these wretched Japanese, too weak to go farther and abandoned by their fellows, waited until American patrols came into view and then killed themselves with hand grenades. Whole battalions of the enemy melted away, men dying from malaria, beri-beri, starvation and wounds, or drowning while trying to cross swollen rivers. Only a fraction of the troops in western New Britain met death in battle. The action of No. 9 Group in attacking escape routes, barge traffic, airfields, villages and strong-points, assisted in the destruction of the remnants of the enemy forces and in preventing their escape, or the movement of aid or reinforcements from Rabaul.

Meanwhile, the net was closing more tightly on Rabaul from the east. Admiral Halsey was making ready to land a force at Green Island only 120 miles due east of Rabaul. To cover this operation, Rabaul was to be neutralised by Halsey's air forces, while Kenney's squadrons concentrated on Wewak and Kavieng. Kenney struck first at Wewak in early February and then at Kavieng.

Australian Catalinas again played a part in the operation by carrying out night harassing raids on Kavieng. From early February single Catalinas from Nos. 11 and 20 Squadrons were engaged in this task. On the night of 7th February one of the Catalinas on this mission radioed an S.O.S. message stating that the aircraft was on fire. The Catalina, captained by Squadron Leader Todd,⁶ did not return to its base, and, although wide searches were made for it by aircraft of No. 9 Group, its whereabouts and the fate of its crew were not discovered until some time later. It was then learned that, after bombing

⁵ P-O T. J. Gawne, 408648, 90 Sqn USAAF, 33 and 22 Sqns. Ecclesiastical student; of Surrey Hills, Vic; b. Ararat, Vic, 26 Oct 1920. Killed in action 30 Jan 1944.

⁶ Sqn Ldr J. E. Todd, 271707. 20 and 11 Sqns. Commercial pilot; of West Ryde, NSW; b. Sydney, 3 Feb 1914. Died while POW 22 Jul 1944.

Kavieng, the Catalina was returning to base when a reconnaissance flare exploded inside it setting it on fire. The crew failed to get the flames under control and the captain made a forced landing at Jacquinot Bay. All the crew were able to leave the aircraft and reached the shore near Malakua. When challenged by Japanese, four of them escaped into the bush and eventually reached safety. The remaining six were taken prisoner and one of them, Flight Lieutenant Stacy, survived the war. Todd died of illness while a prisoner, and the Japanese said that the four remaining members of the crew were killed in an Allied bombing attack while imprisoned at Talili.

The night after Todd's machine was lost a Catalina of No. 20, captained by Wing Commander Havyatt,⁸ went from Cairns on a similar mission to Kavieng. The Catalina dropped bombs and incendiaries in the target area but, while over Kavieng, searchlights caught it in a cone of light and Bofors shells began to strike it causing considerable damage and wounding one of the crew. The effectiveness of the enemy defences, in spite of the cloud which prevailed at the time, indicated that the Japanese were using radar instruments.

On 15th February the landing at Green Island was made by part of the 3rd New Zealand Division. The New Zealanders quickly crushed the small enemy garrison and the construction of an airfield began immediately. Though Allied squadrons based on Green Island would be dangerously close to Rabaul, the enemy attempted only two raids on the invaders with a total of twenty-one dive bombers which attacked Allied shipping off Green Island some hours after the landing. Further evidence of enemy air weakness at Rabaul was indicated by his failure to intercept the air and surface bombardments of Kavieng and Rabaul which took place on 15th February. Most of the Allied planes which now attacked Rabaul were unmolested by enemy aircraft.

The third phase of the invasion of New Britain was a landing by elements of the 1st Marine Division on Willaumez Peninsula, 110 miles east of Cape Gloucester. This operation was an integral part of the New Britain campaign and had been laid down in a General Headquarters warning instruction of 6th May 1943. The task was to "neutralise or capture Talasea", a mission settlement on the peninsula. There was an airfield at Talasea and it was a strongly-held post which dominated the main escape routes of the Japanese garrisons retreating from the western end of the island.

In mid-February, squadrons of No. 9 Group began preliminary bombardments of Talasea in preparation for this landing. On 15th February, twenty-six Beauforts, escorted by Kittyhawks and Spitfires, demolished buildings there. The bombardment and strafing was repeated next day by a larger force. Frequent attacks were also made on the enemy airfield at

⁷ F-Lt B. P. Stacy, 406446. 9 and 11 Sqns. Bank clerk; of Claremont, WA; b. Perth, WA, 24 Feb 1910.

W Cdr H. G. Havyatt, 391. 10 Sqn; comd 107 Sqn 1943, 20 Sqn 1943-44. Regular air force offr; of Edgecliff, NSW; b. Hawera, NZ, 19 Jul 1919. Killed in action 21 May 1944.

Cape Hoskins which had to be kept unserviceable to prevent the staging in of enemy fighters from Rabaul. The landing at Talasea was made by a small force of marines on 6th March. They encountered scattered mortar and machine-gun fire but the enemy quickly retreated, and on 10th March the airfield was in American hands. That day two Bostons and four Beaufighters from No. 9 Group discovered two 16-foot wooden boats each containing about sixteen Japanese. Seven strafing runs were made by the Australian aircraft and one boat was sunk, many of the occupants being killed.

Through February and early March, the R.A.A.F. struck repeatedly at Japanese positions and bivouac areas at Jacquinot Bay, Pondo Point on the eastern shores of Open Bay, and targets at Kamalgaman, Kalai, Gavuvu and Ulamona.

In February, the Japanese command made two significant withdrawals. They withdrew their fleet from Truk, and their remaining aircraft from Rabaul.9 It was not that Rabaul itself was any longer of great importance to the Japanese. What was important strategically was that the Japanese had dribbled into this base over a period of some months hundreds of aircraft, especially carrier aircraft, which, with their crews, were lost in air battles and on the ground. The enemy was unable to commit carrier air groups in the defence of the Marshall Islands because they could not replace those they had lost at Rabaul with equally well-trained pilots. Finally, because they found it almost impossible to keep supplying Rabaul and because of the heavy raid on Truk by Admiral Spruance's carrier task groups on 17th February, they withdrew all remaining aircraft to Truk as reinforcements. The last vigorous interception in the air over Rabaul was on the 19th February. Next day all fighter aircraft left for Truk leaving only 30 damaged Zekes and 26 bombers. Rabaul had no air cover but nevertheless the commanders were ordered to stand firm. Kusaka and his staff officers met on the 20th February in an atmosphere of gloom but the conference ended with "Shikata ga nai-let's get to work".1

The offensive power of Rabaul had been destroyed without the need of an invasion and a costly land campaign. General Arnold estimated that the enemy lost nearly 900 aircraft in defending the base.² The effort of the R.A.A.F's three Beaufort squadrons, though relatively small compared with that of the American squadrons engaged, had contributed materially to this victory. The attack and fighter squadrons of No. 9 Group had also played their part indirectly.

In the weeks preceding the Japanese withdrawal of their aircraft, Rabaul was subjected to sustained bombardment. Frequently three powerful raiding forces would attack in one day. The terror of the air assault on Rabaul

⁹ At Rabaul, however, they rebuilt eleven aircraft from unserviceable machines, and with these made harassing raids on Manus, and elsewhere, and made communication flights to Truk, Bougainville and New Ireland.

¹S. E. Morison, History of United States Naval Operations in World War II, Vol VI (1950), p. 408.

General H. H. Arnold, Second Report to Secretary for War.

in this period and earlier is vividly described in the diary of the Reverend Father R. P. Poncelet, a Belgian-born Marist priest from Bougainville, who was interned at Vunapope in the Rabaul area and experienced the raids at the receiving end. Father Poncelet wrote:

In November, December and January the daily attacks continued. Clouds of American aircraft, bombers and fighters, arrived each morning. The sirens announced them with their strident whistling noise. . . . From time to time we witnessed aerial battles when the Japanese fighters dared to sally out to the attack. We could see aircraft falling in flames, either diving off to the right or turning away slowly to disappear finally into the sea or the bush. . . . One day I saw five aircraft swallowed up into the sea near Vunapope in several minutes.³

Until 11th February 1944 the mission where Father Poncelet was interned had not been attacked. But on that day he wrote:

The American aircraft, instead of coming from the direction of the sea, came by the interior of the island from the south-east. Suddenly two, then several, broke away from the group, dived, grew bigger and in an instant seemed quite close, as if they were swooping down onto us. "They're coming onto us!" someone shouted. Immediately everyone left the entrance [to the shelter] and jumped inside. We were hardly under the ground when a hail crashed down on the iron sheets of the roofs: it was aircraft which were shooting up the mission and the camp from a very low altitude. At the same time, several bombs fell and burst above us, causing formidable explosions and bringing about falls of earth into the trench. . . . Brother Lamkamp, not having had time to take cover, had received a machine-gun bullet in the stomach. He died of it. . . What disaster there was everywhere: bombs had fallen around the house of the Sisters of Our Lady breaking things, making holes, flinging everything far and wide . . . bodies of Japanese were lying about, torn and covered with dust. A Sister was already gathering up human remains in a bucket: a neck, a hand, a whole head.

Father Poncelet described how the Japanese took refuge in the interior of the island, leaving behind them heaps of munitions and mountains of supplies which burned slowly for days and weeks. He said:

We waited the disembarkation of the Americans: they were being announced on all sides. But it was false news. "What a pity," we often thought during the night, "that they have missed their opportunity: they would have gone into Rabaul without difficulty!" Only the American aircraft continued their visits. . . . Little by little the Japanese regained their courage and came back towards the sea and by night evacuated on motor lorries all the supplies and munitions left to them on the shores and went and hid them inland, where they were becoming stronger.

The Japanese Combined Fleet had waited many months at Truk for a favourable moment to engage the American Fleet, and the order to withdraw given by Admiral Koga in February marked a new phase in the Pacific war. Koga ordered part of the fleet to Palau and the remainder to Singapore. The force which arrived at Singapore during February included the III Air Fleet under Admiral Ozawa, and the battleships Yamato and Nagato.

The absence from Truk of the Japanese Fleet and the appearance of part of it at Singapore was reported promptly to General MacArthur.

⁸ Patrick O'Reilly et Jean-Marie Sédès, Jaunes, Noirs et Blancs, Trois Années de Guerre Aux lles Salomon (1949), pp. 244 et seq.

The news enabled him to proceed more freely with his coming advance into the Admiralty Islands, but also caused fears to be expressed that the Japanese Navy intended to sortie into the Indian Ocean and either attack naval units in Indian waters, or bombard Fremantle in Western Australia. General Headquarters reasoned that a foray against Fremantle, if attempted, would be intended by the Japanese to divert MacArthur's forces and the American Navy from their threatened offensives in the Pacific. Neither MacArthur nor the American Pacific Fleet were diverted. MacArthur continued with his offensive, but made plans immediately to strengthen Western Australian defences by moving air reinforcements.

Land-based aircraft would be able to give reasonable security to the west coast and they could use the airfields already available. On 28th February General Headquarters directed Kenney to be ready to:

- 1. Concentrate a striking force of sixty heavy bombers in Western Australia on twenty-four hours' notice.
- 2. Reinforce this heavy bomber striking force with medium bombers when directed by this headquarters (G.H.Q.).
- 3. Provide three fighter squadrons for the defence of Perth.
- 4. Operate heavy and medium bombers from Darwin, Corunna Downs, Geraldton and Carnarvon.
- 5. Supply the air forces operating in Western Australia by air in an emergency.

The Australian Prime Minister, Mr Curtin, on 4th March cabled Mr Churchill asking for an opinion on the Japanese naval moves:

In view of recent attacks on Truk and the movement of part of the Japanese fleet from that base, could you inform me of the opinion of your naval advisers about the probability of Japanese incursions into the Indian Ocean and whether they are likely to attempt a diversion to relieve the pressure in the Pacific. If so, are they capable of, or likely to attempt, anything more than raids, what are the probable objectives and what is our capacity to defeat such attacks?

The answers to Curtin's questions were contained in a cablegram which Churchill had sent the previous day and which had crossed Curtin's. Churchill in this message said:

We have studied this new development which has interesting features. The Japanese must have appreciated that Truk, where normally they stationed half their fleet, was becoming too exposed, and evidently withdrew before the recent American attack. The choices with which they were then faced were either to concentrate their whole fleet in Japanese waters, or to move a part to Singapore, using the Pelews [Palaus] as an advanced base. . . . The absence of the Japanese battle fleet from the Pacific gives the Americans a very clear field. . . . Possibly the Japanese intend to raid our communications between Calcutta and Ceylon, or elsewhere in the Indian Ocean. Nevertheless, it is not thought that serious danger, either to India or to Western Australia, is likely to develop. Our battleship squadron in Ceylon is well posted. Our shore-based aircraft there are strong. Japan has only four fleet carriers and eight battleships fit for operations. She is threatened from the Pacific and the Bay of Bengal and must keep her fleet intact for the later stages of the war. We, therefore, consider it unlikely that the new move indicates offensive intentions by Japan. This of course does not preclude the possibility of occasional offensive sorties.

The British assessment of the situation was reassuring and there appeared to be no cause for alarm until, on the afternoon of 7th March, an American submarine which was cruising north of Lombok Strait received a radar contact from two heavy vessels. The submarine did not actually sight these vessels, but from Intelligence sources it was known that two battleships escorted by destroyers had left Singapore on 4th March sailing in the direction of Surabaya. The Australian Chiefs of Staff Committee reported to the Government on 8th March that there was a possibility that this force had entered the Indian Ocean, and in view of the possibility that Fremantle might be the objective, action was taken as follows:

- (a) all local defences were manned;
- (b) five submarines in Fremantle were ordered to form a patrol to seaward;
- (c) all necessary steps to clear the harbour by p.m. on Thursday were being taken;
- (d) General Headquarters had taken steps to send air reinforcements to the west coast forthwith.

A conference was called at Allied Air Headquarters in Brisbane, and General Kenney then ordered No. 380 Bombardment Group to return from New Guinea to its base at Fenton in the Northern Territory. If the threat to Fremantle developed this group would move to Cunderdin or Geraldton. He also ordered Air Vice-Marshal Bostock to take charge of the air defence of Western Australia and send a number of his squadrons there. Accordingly, on 8th March, Bostock signalled all Australian air force areas concerned ordering them to carry out emergency dispositions as follow:

No. 43 Squadron to move to Darwin.

Nos. 452 and 457 Squadrons to Perth as fighter defence squadrons.

No. 18 Squadron to Potshot (Exmouth Gulf).

No. 31 Squadron to Potshot (Exmouth Gulf).

No. 84 Squadron from Horn Island to Strauss to take the place of the Spitfires in the defence of North-Western Area.

No. 120 Squadron to Potshot from Canberra.

Each squadron was to move in two parts, the first part to consist of the aircraft with their crews, and the second of maintenance men and equipment sufficient for fourteen days. Routine operations which interfered with the preparations were to be cancelled. Extra fuel supplies and 500-lb bombs were sent to the west by sea, and a large number of American Dakota air transports were allotted to carry light equipment and maintenance crews.

Air Commodore Brownell,⁴ the Air Officer Commanding, Western Area, had been organising air defences around Perth and Exmouth Gulf since the first hint of a possible Japanese naval attack. The Australian army placed transports and equipment at his disposal, and he rushed bombs and supplies to Cunderdin for the use of heavy bombers. Brownell

Air Cmdre R. J. Brownell, CBE, MC, MM. (1st AIF: 9 Bty, 3 Fld Arty Bde, and RAF.) OC RAAF Cd, WA 1939; comd RAAF units Far East 1940-41; AOC 1 Trng Gp 1941-42; AOC Western Area 1943-45. Regular air force offr; of Perth, WA; b. Hobart, 17 May 1894.

told Bostock that he considered it wrong to base three squadrons at Potshot, which the enemy was unlikely to attack, and moreover the squadrons would be much too far away to aid effectively in the defence of

Perth. However, Darwin might be the enemy target and the squadrons at Potshot could return more rapidly to Darwin if they remained there.

News of the emergency in Western Australia leaked out to the public rumours spread of a coming Japanese invasion or air The rumours were raid. strengthened by the sudden disappearance of all Allied shipping from Fremantle harbour. Armv garrisons strengthened. were The Volunteer Corps was called to duty and manned anti-aircraft batteries.

R.A.A.F. Command's instructions signalled North-Western Area caused a stir in that area also. Wing Commander Jeffrey, commander of No. 1 Fighter Wing, told squadron commanders that a "Japanese naval task force was loose in the Indian Ocean headed in the general direction of the Perth area". On the afternoon of 8th March he passed on the order to Nos. 452 and 457 to fly to Pearce and have the first echelon



ready to begin operations against the enemy on Friday, 10th March.

The men of these squadrons as well as those of Nos. 18, 31, 120 (at Canberra) and 84 (at Horn Island) were imbued with a sense of urgency, and worked feverishly all night. By dawn next day the aircraft were ready to go. No. 457 took off at 8 a.m. and No. 452 at 8.30 a.m. for Derby despite a bad weather report. The clouds were so low and dense that the Spitfires were in danger of running into one of the many cliffs

that abound in the area. Some of the pilots could not safely proceed to Derby and landed instead at Wyndham. Twenty-four machines of No. 84 from Horn Island had to turn back when they ran into heavy cloud, and one of them disappeared into the sea. The coastal bases through which the squadrons were being sent did not have sufficient men or adequate refuelling equipment for the sudden demands made on them, and this enforced long delays.

The Dutch pilots of No. 120 flew their Kittyhawks across the Nullarbor plains through Ceduna, Forrest and Kalgoorlie. At Kalgoorlie, Dakota and Kittyhawk aircraft were landing every ten minutes and ground crews were engaged continuously on inspections and refuelling.

At Potshot the weather was the worst possible. On 10th March severe cyclonic storms struck the area and converted the airfield into a swamp. The camp was flooded out, and stores and equipment dispersed in depressions were covered with four feet of water. Aircraft wheels sank in the muddy ground.

Meanwhile, the Spitfires were coming down the west coast. Alternate dust and drenching tropical rains accompanied by high winds made flying difficult, while mosquitoes, blinding heat and flies made living conditions on the ground uncomfortable. One Spitfire crashed at Carnarvon while another had a forced landing at Gingin. A final hazard for the weary pilots was a dense pall of smoke around Perth caused by bushfires.

Five hours after landing at Guildford on 12th March sixteen Spitfires of No. 452 with their "scarlet-eyed, bearded, sunburned and unkempt pilots" were ready to meet enemy raiders in the air. No. 457 also had fourteen aircraft ready and the two Spitfire squadrons together with No. 85 Squadron (armed with Boomerangs) assumed the defence of the Perth-Fremantle area. All three squadrons were concentrated at Guildford, instead of Pearce as originally intended. No. 25 Squadron, flying Vengeances, was to make dive-bombing attacks if the enemy force came within 200 miles of the coast.

Brownell had ordered maximum seaward patrols by his reconnaissance planes (Beauforts, and Catalinas of the American Navy's No. 10 Patrol Wing) but no sign of the enemy naval force was found. Similar night searches were made by the Catalinas of No. 43 from Darwin, again without result.

On 10th March the radar station at Geraldton reported the approach of an unidentified aircraft. There were three indications of this aircraft and on the advice of Brownell, Lieut-General Gordon Bennett, commanding III Corps, ordered the sounding of the air raid sirens in Perth-Fremantle. The fighter squadrons were warned, hospitals evacuated and air raid wardens sent to their posts. However, no raid developed and the "all clear" was sounded.

The whole emergency operation turned out to be abortive. The Japanese had no plan to attack in Western Australia or elsewhere in the Indian Ocean. The Japanese Fleet had left Truk because it was afraid it would risk destruction from American carrier aircraft if it remained as it had

virtually no air support there.⁵ Admiral Koga left Truk for Japan on 10th February in *Musashi*. The move of the fleet from Truk proved to be a fortunate one for the Japanese Navy because the carrier attack they feared was in fact launched against Truk on 17th and 18th February, a few days after it moved out. The *Third Fleet* went to Singapore to train its carrier pilots, and on 2nd April it left Singapore for Mindanao.

For the R.A.A.F. and American air transport command the operation provided experience in the rapid movement of squadrons. The Spitfires failed to reach Perth in the time required but they were handicapped by the worst possible weather and the lack of refuelling and servicing equipment on the way. On 20th March Kenney signalled Bostock informing him that the danger had passed and ordering the return of all squadrons to their proper stations at the discretion of R.A.A.F. Command.

⁶ US Strategic Bombing Survey, *Interrogations of Japanese Officials*, p. 518: Vice-Adm Shigeru Fukudome.