

DEVIL BOATS VS. THE TOKYO EXPRESS

HOW THE HEROIC ACTIONS BY A GROUP OF PT-BOATS FOILED JAPANESE ATTEMPTS TO SUPPLY THEIR TROOPS ON "STARVATION ISLAND" — GUADALCANAL

BY KEITH WARREN LLOYD

Rear Admiral Raizo Tanaka and his "Tokyo Express" attempted to resupply the beleaguered Japanese garrison on Guadalcanal on the night of 3 December 1942. The squadron of eight destroyers was spotted by an Australian coastwatcher during the early afternoon and attacked by American aircraft some 160 miles northwest of Guadalcanal, resulting in only minor damage to the *Makinami*. The destroyers continued on to Guadalcanal's Tassafaronga Point, evaded the patrolling PT-Boats, and pushed overboard 1500 tethered oil drums filled with food and medical supplies before making a clean getaway.

Only 310 of the drums would float onto the beaches of "Starvation Island," as Japanese soldiers had begun to call Guadalcanal. An insufficient number of men had been assigned to retrieve the supplies, and most of them were already weak from hunger and sickness. Many clusters of floating barrels simply drifted away with the current before they could be recovered, or the



Rear Admiral Raizo Tanaka would attempt on 3 December 1942 to resupply starving Japanese troops on Guadalcanal from his incoming force of eight destroyers. Known as "Tenacious Tanaka," he was a specialist in the heavy torpedoes carried by his destroyers. The concept was actually clever — fill drums with food and supplies and dump them near the coast where waves would bring them ashore. Unfortunately, it didn't work. Many starving Japanese troops would drown trying to pull the overly-heavy drums onto the beach. The next day, the floating drums gave Marine Wildcat pilots excellent target practice.

ropes that connected them parted under tension. All were sunk by strafing Grumman Wildcat fighters after they were discovered bobbing in the

swells of Ironbottom Sound the following morning.

"The loss of four-fifths of this precious material was intolerable when it had been transported at such great risk and cost, and when it was so badly needed by the starving troops on the island," wrote the highly frustrated Tanaka.



Night-time warfare off Guadalcanal for the PT-Boats was a dangerous occupation since the Japanese were particularly adept at fighting in darkness.