

“DESTROY THE



LAE CONVOY!”

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN HISTORY, LAND-BASED BOMBERS DESTROY AN ENEMY FLEET

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A skip-bombing North American B-25 Mitchell takes out a Japanese freighter heading for Lae. The B-25 and Douglas A-20 Havoc were much more effective in attacking Japanese ships than the four-engine B-17 and B-24 heavy bombers.

There are those who will always consider the battle of Midway the turning point of the Second World War in the Pacific. Yet, the fanatical forces of Imperial Japan had no thoughts of giving up on their dreams of offensive conquest after the eventful summer of 1942. Nine months later the Japanese would snatch at another target the Allies could not afford to lose — Australia. Like the previous summer off Midway, Allied air power would destroy this threat, but in a very different fashion.

For the first time since the inception of air power in warfare, land-based warplanes would annihilate a surface fleet on the open ocean. While carrier-borne planes had shown their bite and power at Pearl Harbor, Coral Sea, and Midway, the Battle of Bismarck Sea would witness island-based bombers and fighters wiping out a task force that, had it accomplished its mission, could have tipped the momentum of the Pacific war back in favor of the Axis.

When the Imperial Japanese Navy flotilla departed the enemy stronghold of Rabaul and headed for the port of Lae on 28 February 1943, the men aboard it knew precisely what they had to do, how to do it, and the tasty implications of success. First, though, they had to reach New Guinea.

On Rabaul, the commander-in-chief of all 8th Area Japanese forces in the southwest Pacific, Gen. Hitoshi Imamura, was growing impatient at the deadlock in the theater's ground war.

“We must strike now [at New Guinea,]” he told his staff. “Before the Allies can reinforce their exhausted Army and depleted Air Force.”

Imamura planned to occupy all of New Guinea, and then use its Port Moresby as jumping-off point for an invasion of Australia, whose coast was only 100 miles away across the Coral Sea. The Japanese called their New Guinea offensive Operation 157. The commander of the Japanese 18th Army in New Guinea, Gen. Hatazo Adachi, figured all he needed was a convoy to reinforce his stalled troops.

The Allies had little except their already-overworked air presence to oppose this offensive. The American

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