

Solomon Islands The Isolation

By John M. Elliott

Japan's initial objective of acquiring the "Southern Resources Area," the Netherlands Indies and Malaya, was quickly achieved. The aggressive philosophy of Imperial Headquarters, bolstered by the succession of early victories, ordered a further advance. These additional gains overextended the Japanese capability of consolidating and strengthening the early conquests. This dissipation of resources, more than anything else, hastened the downfall of the Japanese Empire.

Part of this further expansion was to take Port Moresby in southeastern New Guinea and move into the Solomons. After the planned Battle of Midway, further expansion south was to occupy New Caledonia, Fiji and Samoa, cutting the lifeline between the United States and Australia. The field

headquarters for this push against the U.S./Australia supply line was at Rabaul. Located on the eastern end of New Britain, with an excellent deep water harbor, it was a prize whose capture dominated the Allied planning. However, in 1942, Rabaul was far too ambitious an objective and one which could only be achieved by the gradual island-by-island approach. Because of the lack of carrier air support, each succeeding step had to be within the range of land-based fighter and light bomber aircraft. The terrain of the Solomon Islands is basically jungle and hills extremely difficult to traverse, which tended to localize land combat and put a premium on air and sea power. Guadalcanal, New Georgia and Bougainville had sizeable harbors and airfield sites which made them logical



Campaign of Rabaul

stopping points in a deliberate advance on Rabaul. Airfields established on these islands by the Japanese to assist in the attacks on Guadalcanal were of equal importance to the Allies in their northern advance.

With a toehold firmly established on Guadalcanal, the slow inexorable advance up the Solomon Island chain began towards the isolation of Rabaul. From the beginning of the war, the Japanese Mitsubishi A6M-2 Zero had been the nemesis of Allied airmen. Faster and more maneuverable than the Allied fighters, it had the drawback of light construction and lack of adequate armor protection for fuel, ammunition and oxygen supplies. The best technique in the beginning was to

Marine torpedo bombers taxi up the line leading to the runway of the Bougainville airport, bound for the skies over the enemy's shipping lanes.

CVEs Named After Sites in the Solomon Islands

CVE- 60 USS Guadalcanal
CVE- 67 USS Solomons
CVE- 72 USS Tulagi
CVE- 78 USS Savo Island
CVE- 88 USS Cape Esperance
CVE- 94 USS Lunga Point
CVE-100 USS Bougainville
CVE-104 USS Munda
CVE-108 USS Kula Gulf
CVE-111 USS Vela Gulf
CVE-114 USS Rendova
CVE-115 USS Bairoka
CVE-119 USS Point Cruz
CVE-121 USS Rabaul



Naval Aviation in WW II

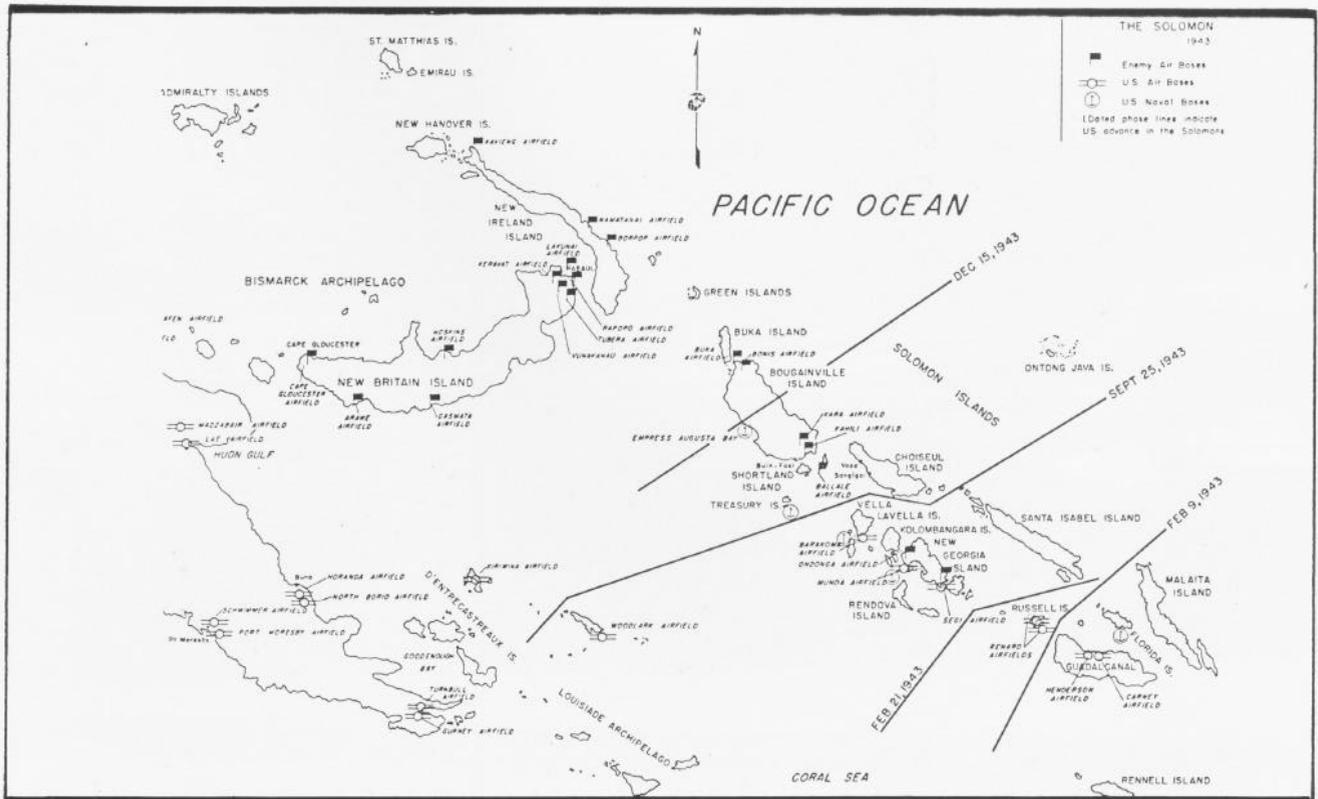
make a diving pass through the enemy formation and not try to engage in a dogfight with the more nimble aircraft. When guns could be brought to bear, the Zero was usually severely damaged. As tactics were improved with such innovations as the "Thatch Weave," the odds became better for the Allied aviators.

Conceived in 1938, the F4U Corsair was accepted by the Navy in 1941. This was the heaviest U.S. Navy fighter to date built around the largest engine available. While its "gull wing" made possible a short and rugged landing gear to withstand the rigors of carrier operations, its problems in landing kept it from being accepted for carrier use. Desperate for an advanced fighter aircraft, the Navy assigned the early production aircraft to the Marine



An Avenger undergoes maintenance under primitive field conditions.

Southwest Pacific



Corps to use from land bases. A field rework facility was established by ABG-2 at NAS North Island, Calif., to incorporate a number of modifications to eliminate some of the problems and make the *Corsair* combat ready.

Relief from tactical disadvantage came with the introduction of the F4U-1 *Corsair* to the Solomon skies by VMF-124 on 12 March 1943. Nick-named "Whistling Death" by the Japanese because of the noise made by the air passing through the oil cooler and intercooler, the *Corsair* soon replaced the F4F *Wildcat* in all fighter squadrons. As the pilots learned the superior capabilities of the *Corsair*, and weaknesses of the *Zero*, the kill ratio began to climb so that at the end of the war it was estimated to be 11 to 1. Besides its survivability in combat, the *Corsair* had much greater range than the *Wildcat*, which permitted fighter sweeps against Japanese airfields as far north as Kahile and Buin on the southern end of Bougainville.

In November and December 1942, the Japanese built an airfield at Munda Point on New Georgia, the next large island north of Guadalcanal. This field was to bring their fighter aircraft within shorter striking range of the southern Solomons. While it was the Japanese hope for reentry into lower Solomons, it was the Allied hope for another step north towards Rabaul. The location, rather than any significant strategic advantage, made the Russell Islands the first objective after Guadalcanal was secure. When operational, the airfield at Banika moved Allied air some 60 miles closer to Rabaul. This applied pressure on the Japanese airfields on Rendova and Munda Point in the New Georgia group, which came under attack in June. Weeks of bitter fighting culminated in the conquest of the New Georgia group. This provided ComAirSols with airfields at Munda, Segi Point and Barakoma which advanced against Japanese-held positions in the northern Solomons.

Interception of Japanese messages told of a visit by Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto to Bougainville on 18 April 1943. Good as the *Corsair* was it didn't have the range to fly this mission, necessitating its being flown by

U.S. Army Air Force P-38s. Flying low and skirting wide around the New Georgia chain to escape enemy radar, the formation arrived at the target site along with the admiral's flight. Several quick passes and both "Betty" bombers were shot down and crashed in the jungle. The loss of the planner for the Pearl Harbor raid, Battle of Midway and Commander in Chief of the Combined Fleet was a telling blow to the spirit of the Solomon Island defenders and a portent of things to come. In order not to reveal the fact that some Japanese codes were being read, news of the victory could not be released. Also, flights of P-38s were sent to the area on subsequent days to make it appear to have been a chance encounter and not a planned execution.

From the beginning of the war, Germany was seen as the major threat. The Allies made a decision to use the major portion of their assets in the victory over Germany and then turn their efforts against Japan. By mid-1943, there was a growing realization that the air and naval base at Rabaul might not have to be captured by force, but could be neutralized by aerial blockade as had been so effective against other bypassed strong points in the march north. The final decision to strangle Rabaul by air was made by the Combined Chiefs of Staff at the Quebec Conference in August 1943. The decision was also made to open a second offense through the central Pa-

cific. The concept of Europe first meant that two campaigns would be fought in the Pacific with the troops and material available.

Bougainville, the largest and last island of the Solomon chain, was invaded on 1 November 1943. By the first week of January, strikes against Rabaul were being mounted from the fields in the Empress Augusta Bay area. While the exploits of the fighter pilots received the bulk of the air publicity, it was the relentless day-to-day attacks of the bombing community that made the advances of the ground troops possible. Large-scale fighter sweeps, which had been developed during the neutralization of Kahile and Buin, were designed to eliminate the air strength at Rabaul and keep it from attacking the troops fighting on Bougainville. In addition to those sorties, large-scale SBD and TBM strikes were made against the enemy airfields and supply installations in the Rabaul area. The heavy losses of Japanese aircraft during the early stages of the Bougainville campaign included many carrier-based aircraft sent from Truk to bolster the Rabaul air defenses. The loss of these carrier aircraft and crews was later felt during the forthcoming battles in the central Pacific.

From the first days at Guadalcanal, night raiding aircraft had been a problem for which there was little relief except anti-aircraft guns and searchlights, with a few aircraft working with the lights. This problem had



Marine Corsair fighter planes taxi out from their revetments on the fighter strip on the Russell Islands in answer to a 'scramble' call to meet enemy planes coming down from Bougainville.

Naval Aviation in WW II

been recognized and observers sent to England in 1941 to learn the equipment and tactics being used against night raiding German aircraft. However, there were no suitable aircraft in the U.S. for this mission. Twenty-four of the first F4Us were modified into night fighters with the designation F4U-2. These went to the Navy and had the normal six machine guns in the wing in addition to the radar antenna on the right wing. Marine aviation had to be satisfied with the Lockheed PV-1, equipped with airborne radar and six .50-caliber machine guns in the nose.

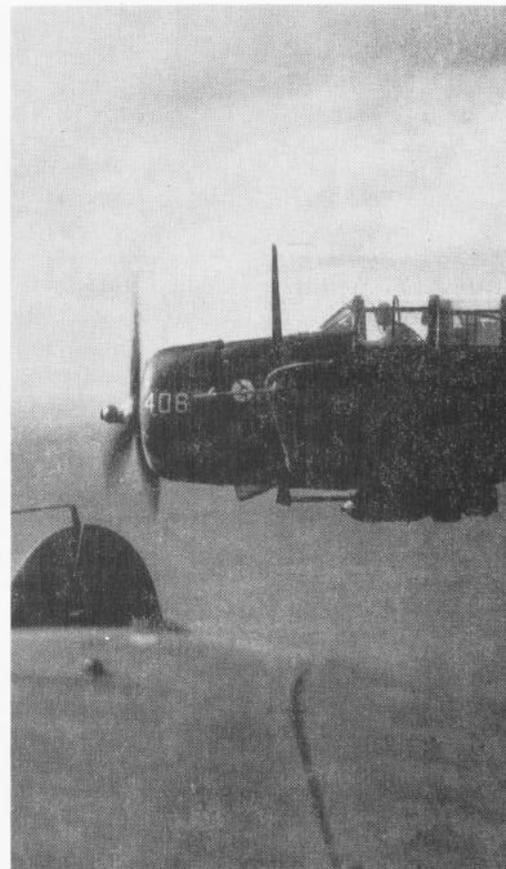
The "teething" problems of the *Corsair* applied to the F4U-2, as well, so that it was not until the Bougainville campaign that night-fighter aircraft were used in combat. With the rudimentary equipment and the early stage of training in working with the Ground Control Interception (GCI) radar installations, the results were all that could be expected. In addition, there was a reluctance of ground commanders to shut off the searchlights and cease firing the AA guns. VF(N)-75 shot down 4 enemy aircraft while VMF(N)-531, during a longer period, accounted for 12 in the months it was in combat. The Japanese quickly learned that it was not safe to risk their dwindling supply of aircraft in ar-

A Douglas SBD-5 of VMSB-341 flying from Green Island during the latter half of 1944.

reas protected by the GCI/night-fighter teams, just as they had learned not to risk their ships in an area in which they did not possess air coverage.

Realizing that the battle for the Solomons was lost, the Japanese withdrew all remaining aircraft from Rabaul to Truk on 17 February 1944. Rabaul's fate was sealed, not by advancing forces in the Solomons but by the carrier air raids of TF 58 on 17 and 18 February against their bastion, Truk, in the Carolines. This strike was an attempt to catch the entire Combined Fleet in its lair after aerial reconnaissance by two Marine PB4Y-1s from VMD-254 had made the thousand-mile flight from the Solomons and photographed the installation. Seeing these long-range aircraft, the Japanese realized what was in store for them. The Combined Fleet and all aircraft were sent north to save them for another day. Rabaul, the once unattainable fortress, was left to die on the vine.

Just prior to the air evacuation of Rabaul, a landing was made at Green Island north of Bougainville. When the



fighter and bomber strips became operational, it provided a base just 115 miles away from Rabaul from which constant strikes could be flown. It also sealed off the northern approach to the Solomon Sea placing the enemy forces to the south in an untenable position.

Any remaining hope of relief from the north was lost with the landings on Los Negro in the Admiralties and Emirau in the St. Matthias Group on 29 February and 20 March, respectively. Thus, the strong point of Kavieng on the northern tip of New Ireland was also bypassed and rendered impotent.

While the Solomon Island campaign came to a close, the area still had a purpose to fill as a massive staging area for troops and supplies for the further advance towards General MacArthur's objective, the capture of the Philippines.

A Second Marine Air Wing Corsair fighter splashes down after the Leathernecks captured this airfield on Munda during WW II.





The initial use of aircraft rockets in WW II took place in this area with TBMs from Bougainville and SBDs at Green Island using 5-inch aircraft rockets against targets in the Rabaul and Bougainville areas.

An event with more potential though also occurred. On 27 September 1944, Special Task Air Group 1 arrived at Sterling Island, southwest of Bougainville, and Green Island with its Interstate TDR-1 assault drones. Pilots had flown these aircraft up from the Russell Islands. Then the manual controls were neutralized and a 1,000-pound general purpose bomb was hung under the fuselage. The aircraft were flown, under radio control from a following TBM, to targets in the Bougainville and Rabaul area. Being guided by a television camera in the nose of the drone, the controller would dive the aircraft into the target – this at a time when few had even heard of television. While the results of these strikes were inconclusive, they did prompt Tokyo Rose, the Japanese propagandist, to broadcast stories

Nov 8: The Naval Ordnance Test Station, Inyokern, Calif., was established for research, development and testing weapons and to provide primary training in their use. It initially supported the California Institute of Technology which, through the Office of Scientific Research and Development, was undertaking the development and testing of rockets, propellants and launchers.

Nov 30: A department of Aviation Medicine and Physiological Research was authorized at the Naval Air Material Center to study physiological factors related to the design of high-speed and high-altitude aircraft.

Dec 15: Observation Fighter Squadron (VOF) 1, first of three of its type brought into existence during WW II, was established at Atlantic City, N.J., with LCdr. W. F. Bringle in command.

Dec 17: Commander Aircraft, Solomons, joined in the air campaign to re-

duce the Japanese naval base at Rabaul with a fighter sweep of Navy, Marine Corps and New Zealand planes led by Marine Ace Maj. Gregory Boyington. Intensive follow-up attacks through February 1944 assisted in the establishment of encircling Allied bases. Rabaul remained under air attack until the war's end, the last strike being delivered by Marine Corps PBJs on 9 August 1945.

Dec 20: The Naval Air Training Command was established at Pensacola, Fla., to coordinate and direct, under the Chief of Naval Operations, all Naval Aviation training in the Primary, Intermediate and Operational training commands.

Dec 20: Two *Catalinas* of Patrol Squadron 43, at Attu, flew the first Navy photoreconnaissance and bombing mission over the Kuriles.

about the American suicide pilots. Kamikaze strikes were yet to be conceived by the Japanese. After expending approximately 50 drones, the squadron returned to the United States. Little did any of us who watched these strange little airplanes skitter off the deck realize we were watching the granddaddy of the formidable cruise weapons of today.

As the boring days of "milk runs" to the bypassed Bougainville, Rabaul and Kavieng bastions passed, events elsewhere brought the return to the Philippines to a reality. In preparation for the landing on Luzon and the capture of Manila, General MacArthur requested Marine dive-bombers to scout the advance and protect the flanks of his attacking force. All six remaining SBD squadrons at Bougainville and Green Island were assigned this mission. Extensive training programs were established at Bougainville for the aviators, ground controllers and the Army staff they were to work with. While deployed on Luzon, these hours of training developed a close-knit working team which finally provided the air-ground close support function Marine aviation had striven for since the days in the jungles of Haiti and Nicaragua.

One feature of operations of the South Pacific Forces in the Solomons was the cooperation and lack of inter-service friction between all services. No one branch could claim a major portion of the success. This was particularly evident in the operation of Aircraft, Solomons, which first operated under rear admirals, then a major general of the Army and finally a major general of Marines.

The campaigns in the Solomons did not have the massive fleet and ground forces nor the grandeur of the later central Pacific campaigns. Yet, it was in these jungles that the lessons were learned in jungle fighting and amphibious operations that made later successes possible. ■

Before his retirement in 1990, Mr. Elliott was assistant historian in the Naval Aviation History Branch, Naval Historical Center.