

CHAPTER 3

CRISIS IN PAPUA I: 9 – 16 SEPTEMBER 1942

As noted in Chapter 1, the first week of September brought bad news for the Allies on the Kokoda front. The hard-pressed Australian 30th Brigade had been forced into a series of fighting withdrawals which had brought the IJA troops onto the southern slopes of the Owen Stanleys. The dry lake bed at Myola, where large quantities of rations and supplies had been air-dropped, had been abandoned and captured by the Japanese. Reinforced by the newly arrived 21st Brigade, the Australians had made another stand at Efogi, a short distance south of Myola, during 6-9 September.

While the Japanese had around 4,000 troops between Kokoda and Efogi, the nature of fighting on a narrow and jungle-clad mountain trail meant that only around 1,500 IJA troops were on the frontline, mainly from the 144th Infantry Regiment. Facing them were a similar number of Australian troops. An advantage the Japanese possessed was the availability of a small but crucial number of artillery pieces which had been painstakingly disassembled and hauled across the mountains.

While the Australians lacked artillery, they did have the availability of air support from nearby Port Moresby. Between 1 and 8 September, P-39s flew 109 ground attack sorties over the area, including against Kokoda, Myola and Efogi. The P-39s (recorded mostly as “P-400s” in Allied records) strafed with 20mm cannons and machine guns, and on most occasions also dropped a single 100- or 300-pound bomb. Illustrating the difficulty of these missions, the War Diary of the 21st Brigade reported nine “P-400s” bombing and strafing Efogi at 1100 on 7 September. However, the last “stick” of bombs was dropped over Menari, which was the next village south of Efogi and well behind the Australian lines. Fortunately, there were no casualties.

It will be recalled that a squadron of A-20As was being hastily equipped with 0.50-inch calibre machine guns and bomb racks to tote small 20-pound fragmentation bombs (called “parafrags” when equipped with parachutes). The first of these specialised low-level attackers arrived at Port Moresby in late August and flew their first mission against Lae on the last day of that month. They comprised three flights, each of six machines, drawn from the 8th and 89th Bombardment Squadrons.

Between 2 and 9 September, the A-20s flew 43 sorties against targets along the Kokoda Track.¹ A typical raid occurred at Efogi at 0815 on 7 September. Each of eight bombers dropped 8 x 100-pound bombs, and in total some 6,000 0.50-inch and 1,200 0.30-inch machine gun rounds were expended. The War Diary of the 21st Brigade recorded:

8 A-20s dive-bombed and strafed Efogi. Excellent job.

This was a successful attack, and Japanese records show 11 men were killed and another 20

¹ In addition, seven sorties were flown against the Salamaua area on 3 September, when three 13th BS B-25s also struck nearby Mubo.