

CHAPTER 4

Yokohama *Kokutai* (fighter wing)

The fighter *buntai* of the Yokohama *Ku* (colloquially termed “Hama” *Ku* when it arrived the theatre) was created on 1 April 1942. Lieutenant Sato Ri’ichiro was transferred from the Yokosuka *Ku* to command the wing on 15 May 1942. His executive officer was Warrant Officer Hirahashi Yomichiyo, with deputies Warrant Officer Kurozawa Fumiro and Warrant Officer Kofuji Hisateru. The *buntai* arrived by ship at Rabaul on 3 June 1942, with an allocation of a dozen A6M2-N Rufes, and one or possibly two spares. The detachment flew its first sortie two days later over Rabaul and experienced its first aerial combat on 10 June when a pilot attempted unsuccessfully to attack 19th BG B-17s near Rabaul.

The *buntai* advanced to Halavo Beach near Tulagi in sections throughout the first days of July 1942, from where it conducted its first CAP on 5 July. The *buntai* claimed one of two 435th BS LB-30 Liberators conducting a reconnaissance on 10 July, however neither bomber was lost. During a similar encounter on 17 July with a lone 435th BS B-17E, FPO1c Hori Tatsuo was shot down and killed. The unit’s second combat loss occurred on 23 July when Seaman1c Matsui Saburo was killed while engaging another Fortress.

On 4 August during an interception by seven Rufes against a flight of Espirito Santo based B-17Es, Sea1c Kobayashi Shigeto collided with one of the bombers, and he too was killed. On 7 August most of the unit’s inventory was wiped out during an early morning strafing attack on the Halavo base by USN Wildcats during the USMC Tulagi invasion. Separately one Japanese and one USN witness observed a Rufe flee during the attack. If this were the case it would have headed for the Shortland Islands, where at least two Yokohama *Ku* Rufes were already present, flown there on 4 August led by *chutaicho* Warrant Officer Kofuji Hisateru. The details of the escape of a Rufe from Tulagi, if it occurred, are unclear. Regardless, two or possibly three Yokohama *Ku* Rufes survived the 7 August strikes. Many of the unit’s pilots and ground crew fled to the mountains behind the base only to be hunted down and killed by US marines over the next few weeks.

Meanwhile from 26 August to 1 September the surviving pilots in the Shortlands flew missions from the island bases led by Kofuji. The *buntai* was disbanded on 2 September and its two (or possibly three) surviving Rufes were reassigned to the *Kamikawa Maru* fighter *buntai*, recently arrived at the Shortlands (see Chapter 7).

Yokohama *Ku* Fighter Pilots

Buntaicho Lieutenant Sato Ri’ichiro (killed with 13 others on 19 September 1942 in mountains behind Tulagi)

Warrant Officer Hirahashi Yomichiyo (POW captured in mountains behind Tulagi)

Warrant Officer Kofuji Hisateru (transferred to the *Kamikawa Maru* air detachment at