

INTRODUCTION

The steamy and deceptively beautiful Solomon Islands were almost unknown to the outside world at the beginning of the Pacific War. Yet from August 1942 the location witnessed one of the bloodiest and most hard-fought military and naval campaigns of WWII, which at various junctions could have teetered in favour of either belligerent.

This first volume of *Solomons Air War* chronicles the critical initial phase of the air campaign during August and September 1942, which was centred on the struggle for Guadalcanal. It is the first of a new companion series to the existing *South Pacific Air War* volumes which chronicle the wider regional air campaign from the start of the Pacific War in December 1941 until the US invasion of Guadalcanal on 7 August 1942. On that date the air war splits into two distinct theatres from the Allied point of view: the South West Pacific Area (SWPA) and the South Pacific Area. Thus, the need to create two separate series, bound to each respective theatre.¹

The authors acknowledge past seminal works in respect to Guadalcanal and the Solomons campaign, so why the need for a new series? Virtually all works focus on either the land or sea struggle, giving lesser attention to aerial activity. Often too there is little or only confused detail from the Japanese side. The best existing work on the Guadalcanal air war is John Lundstrom's magisterial *The First Team and the Guadalcanal Campaign*, first published in 1994. Lundstrom's purpose was to focus on USN fighter combat, with excellent cross-references to Japanese sources, the first author to do so. However, in taking that approach he bypasses much of the wider activity by USMC, USAAF and other Allied squadrons, including bomber and support units. Also overlooked are the non-fighter USN squadrons, namely those operating PBYS and the carrier-based SBD and TBF detachments which operated from shore bases.

Furthermore, his work ends around early 1943, and beyond this juncture the Solomons air war accelerated in both pace and diversity to a degree which is almost overwhelming. Indeed, the initial concept for this new series was to begin at the start of 1943 but doing so would have left an obvious gap. In retrospect we are pleased that we overcame some hesitancy and have made the considerable effort to commence with the obvious start date of August 1942.

In this regard the authors have obtained considerable new primary source Japanese material and have tried where possible to use primary Allied source material as well. We trust that this approach justifies the *Solomons Air War* series to deliver a comprehensive, balanced and hopefully fresh take on the wider air campaign.

When General Douglas MacArthur assumed command of the SWPA in April 1942, the eastern boundary with the South Pacific Area was defined by the 160th meridian. This split the Solomon Islands and cut directly over Guadalcanal itself. At that time, the South Pacific Area was purely administrative and had no over-arching command structure. It was not until mid-May that Vice Admiral Robert Ghormley, USN, arrived in the area to take up command. He travelled from

¹ *South Pacific Air War Volumes 4 & 5* continue with the chronicle of the New Guinea / SWPA theatre from 8 August until the end of December 1942. Additional future volumes will continue the series into 1943.