

CHAPTER 7

20-24 OCTOBER: PRELUDE TO THE JAPANESE OFFENSIVE

On 20 October there were a total of 43 serviceable aircraft available to Cactus Air Force, as noted in the table below. Compared to the last figure available prior to the 14 October battleship bombardment of Henderson Field, i.e. 11 October, this represented a decrease of 45% in overall serviceable aircraft.

Cactus Air Force - Serviceable Aircraft		
	Oct 11	Oct 20
F4F	45	17
SBD3	16	18
TBF	6	nil
P-400	3	4
P-39	8	4
Total:	78	43

However even this glaring statistic masks a more substantial problem, as during the four days from 15 to 19 October 20 Wildcats and 28 Dauntlesses had flown in from Espiritu Santo. Without these reinforcements, Cactus Air Force would have had no serviceable fighters or dive-bombers by 20 October. Precious few other reinforcements were immediately available, as the few squadrons then in the New Hebrides or New Caledonia had been stripped bare of excess aircraft. For example, the only dive-bombers now available for the defence of the entire New Hebrides were just eight VS-3 SBDs.

Such hard facts caused Geiger on 20 October to state that:

Past experience required 50% replacements SBDs and F4Fs every 10 days. Should Jap pressure continue, CACTUS will require 18 F4Fs and 18 SBDs with 100% reserve flight crews every 10 days.

The only replacement aircraft immediately *en route* were eight SBDs and two TBFs aboard the USS *Enterprise*. Nor were other aircraft easily available in Hawaii, with some of the Marine squadrons there still operating old F4F-3s and SBD-1/2s. Accordingly, only VMSB-131, operating twelve TBF-1s, was suitable for deployment. On 27 October this unit with its aircraft was loaded aboard the new escort carrier USS *Nassau* in Hawaii. The *Nassau* had just arrived from California with twenty SBD-3s that were also destined for the South Pacific.

Otherwise, it was a case of scraping the bottom of the barrel just to find two USAAF fighter squadrons to deploy. The 44th Fighter Squadron, then based on Oahu and equipped with P-40s