

CHAPTER 7

No. 201 *Kokutai*

Formed from the Chitose *Kokutai* in the Marshall Islands on 1 December 1942, No. 201 *Ku* left the Marshalls for Japan in February 1943, leaving their Zeros behind to be transferred to other units. In late June 1943 it was ordered to join the 21st *Koku Sentai* and allocated an authorised strength of 45 Zeros which, alongside 27 D3A2 Vals assigned to No. 552 *Ku*, were loaded aboard the carrier *Unyo* for delivery to Truk. Further aerial deliveries saw all No. 201 *Ku*'s fighters arrive in the South Seas theatre by 15 July 1943, realising an inventory of 18 Model 22s and 42 Nakajima-built Model 21s.

No. 201 *Ku*'s *hikocho* throughout its South Seas deployment was Commander Nakano Chujiro, with *hikotaicho* Lieutenant Kawai Shiro. This latter officer was a highly experienced veteran who had originally arrived in the New Guinea theatre in January 1942 as a *chutaicho* with the Chitose *Ku*. Kawai subsequently led No. 4 *Ku* until it was amalgamated into the Tainan *Ku* in April 1942.

By mid-July 1943 about half of No. 201 *Ku* had taken up station at Buin with 25 Zeros, flying their first combat mission on 21 July. This was a late afternoon sweep against Rendova of 15 Zeros led by Lieutenant Arai Tomoyoshi, flying in formations of four-fighter *shotai*, an operational practice recently instituted by No. 204 *Ku* which was also based in the Bougainville forward combat zone at this time. No enemy were encountered. Meanwhile, the rest of No. 201 *Ku* remained at Rabaul performing defence and convoy protection duties.

By October 1943, No. 204 *Ku* had suffered horrendous pilot losses due to combat, malaria and dengue fever. Accordingly, it was withdrawn from Bougainville operations on 8 October, leaving No. 201 *Ku* as the sole defenders of Buin. By this stage Allied air raids and attrition from combat had also depleted No. 201 *Ku*'s Zero inventory and in late October its nine surviving airworthy fighters at Buin were flown to Buka while the entire ground echelon was evacuated back to Rabaul by sea. By the end of the month both Buin and Ballale were classified as unsuitable for fighter operations and both bases were effectively vacated by the aerial units, leaving behind only reduced garrisons. The unit was soon withdrawn entirely to Rabaul, led by Lieutenant Oba Yoshio, the only operational officer still alive following months of intense combat.

The largest combat fought by No. 201 *Ku* unfolded on the morning of 14 September 1943. The unit launched 20 Zeros alongside other Zero units in a series of sorties which at one time totalled 117 Zeros aloft to defend Buin from USAAF Liberators escorted by their own substantive fighter escort. From this combat, FCPO Okumura Takeo was awarded the highest number of kills for one mission for any IJN unit during the Pacific war: nine fighters and one bomber. The Japanese claimed a total of 60 kills for the day. However, the claims were fanciful given that the total American losses were only five aircraft. In turn, American claims were for 18 victories against five Japanese fighters actually downed. No. 201 *Ku* was withdrawn