

# CHAPTER 1 : LUCKY SHOT

## The Wirraway's Only Victory

**Buna, 26 December 1942**

*The swift and decisive defeat of RAAF Wirraways at Rabaul in January 1942 resulted in the type being permanently withdrawn from use as a fighter. However nearly a year later, the Wirraway would score its one and only aerial victory. Through a combination of skill and good luck, its pilot scored a quick and decisive kill. To this day the victim is often wrongly proclaimed as a "Zero".*

In November 1942, No. 4 Squadron, RAAF, commenced operations in New Guinea with Wirraways serving in an army co-operation role. Aircraft were detached to Popondetta to support the 7<sup>th</sup> Australian Division and to Dobodura to support the American 32<sup>nd</sup> Army Division. Meanwhile, on 18 December 1942, the JAAF arrived at Rabaul in the form of sixty 11<sup>th</sup> *Sentai* Nakajima Ki-43 Mark I *Hayabusa* fighters. The contingent constituted the first IJA fighter unit in New Guinea. It arrived with high expectations, having won prestige through its combat history in Indochina.

In mid-December 1942 bloody fighting was occurring around Buna and Gona in northern Papua. Separated from their main logistics base at Port Moresby by the towering Owen Stanley Ranges, the Allies needed additional air transport capacity to support their troops. As a stopgap, RAAF Lockheed Hudsons from No. 1 Operational Training Unit, based at Bairnsdale, Victoria, were deployed to Port Moresby for use as transports.

After establishing itself at Rabaul, the 11<sup>th</sup> *Sentai* initially confined itself to local patrols before it was tasked to interrupt the critical Port Moresby / Buna air transport corridor. Accordingly, the unit's Nos. 1, 2 and HQ *chutai* were transferred to Malahang airfield, several miles north-west of Lae. They were led there by Major Tanaguchi Masayoshi, the 11<sup>th</sup> *Sentai's* deputy commanding officer and Executive Officer.

Tanaguchi's personal diary records that on 24 December 1942 he led thirteen Mark 1 *Hayabusas* on a fighter sweep to Buna, however they were forced to turn back in the face of marginal weather. Two days later on 26 December the weather was still poor, but such was the desperate condition of the Japanese troops in the Buna-Gona pocket that Tanaguchi authorised the mission. This would result in the 11<sup>th</sup> *Sentai's* New Guinea combat debut.

At 0953 hours, fifteen Ki-43s were led southeast at 13,000 ft by Captain Miyabayashi Shigenori towards Dobodura. It took just over an hour to cover the journey, in a flight dodging cloud and squalls. Upon approaching the area, Miyabayashi descended the formation down to 1,000 feet to strafe several Hudsons they observed taxiing along Pongani's grass strip. After their first