

CHAPTER 4 : TAKEHASHI MEETS DEBLANC

JAAF *Hayabusa* sole combat with USMC Wildcats

Munda, Solomon Islands, 31 January 1943

In January 1943 the Japanese were running supply convoys to their new air bases at Munda and Kolombangara in the northern Solomons. When one convoy was attacked by aircraft from Guadalcanal's Cactus Air Force on the last day of the month, a landmark combat took place where JAAF Hayabusa fought USMC fighters for the only time.

A small convoy consisting of the 6,732-ton naval auxiliary transport *Toa Maru No.2 Go*, torpedo boat *Hiyodori* (essentially a small destroyer) and subchaser *CH-23* departed Rabaul late on 28 January for Vila, Kolombangara Island, in the northern Solomons. The ships were carrying elements of the No. 6 Kure and No. 7 Yokosuka Special Naval Landing Forces (SNLF) together with a cargo of cement and ammunition.

On 30 January the ships anchored overnight at Faisi in the Shortlands, where air cover was provided by locally based F1M2 Pete floatplanes of the IJN No. 958 *Kokutai*. The following day the convoy would make the relatively short journey through the upper part of The Slot before turning into the Vella Gulf and making their way to Vila on the southern side of the volcanic Kolombangara Island.

This was a relatively routine voyage which *Toa Maru No.2 Go* had already done twice in recent weeks. Further cover for the convoy would be provided by eleven *Hayabusa* of Captain Fujita Juro's No. 3 *chutai*, 11th *Sentai*, which had flown into Munda from Bougainville two days earlier. They were due to be reinforced on 31 January by a further nine *Hayabusa* under Lieutenant Kimura Toshio from No. 1 *chutai* from Rabaul.

Since leaving Rabaul, the convoy had been regularly reported by Coastwatchers and Guadalcanal's Cactus Air Force was on standby to respond. Early on 31 January a patrolling VP-12 PBV dropped two 500-pound bombs and a pair of depth charges on the *Toa Maru No.2 Go*, but all failed to find the mark.

That morning, as the convoy moved southwards into The Slot, three pairs of Petes began protective overlapping patrols, each of about two and a half hours, that would provide cover for most of the day. Warrant Officer Kamakawi Yinchi led the first from the observer's seat, and Petes originally assigned to seaplane tender *Sanyo Maru* took turns as well - these had remained behind in the Solomons when the tender had been towed to Truk on 9 January 1943 following damage incurred from a recent B-26 attack.

By mid-afternoon Coastwatchers reported the convoy heading into the Vella Gulf and noted