

## INTRODUCTION

This volume is the third in a trilogy that chronicles aerial warfare in the South Pacific during the critical six-month period from Pearl Harbor in December 1941 until shortly after the Battle of the Coral Sea in June 1942. The latter is often depicted as a standalone naval action, which it was not. The full picture also involves land-based aviation, both Allied and Japanese. This aspect substantially influenced the strategies of both sides and explains the condition and disposition of forces when the crucial carrier battle unfolded. Furthermore, these land-based units played a larger role in, and had more effect upon, the Coral Sea battle than is usually portrayed.

This third volume begins with the convoluted arrival of two squadrons of USAAF P-39 Airacobras to defend beleaguered Port Moresby. These reinforcements were sorely needed, as the defenders, worn down to three Kittyhawks, faced an unrelenting aerial assault by Nell and Betty bombers and deadly Zero fighters of the famed Tainan *Kokutai*.

Against this backdrop, in early May 1942, complex Japanese plans for a seaborne invasion of Tulagi and Port Moresby were playing out. These movements led to both Japanese and American fleet carriers being drawn into the Coral Sea region. As these forces interacted with land-based air power, the culmination of events was the world's first carrier-to-carrier combat during the Battle of the Coral Sea.

First, Tulagi was occupied with almost flawless military precision. Then, over a period of four days, several powerful carrier strikes were launched by both sides as the defenders in Port Moresby nervously waited for the anticipated invasion. Ultimately, the Americans were forced to retire with the loss of USS *Lexington*, while the invasion convoy remained intact and the Japanese still possessed an undamaged and powerful carrier in the *Zuikaku*. At this point the Japanese commanders made a grave error in turning back their force and postponing the invasion.

Meanwhile, land-based air power from both sides continued a gruelling and unrelenting campaign. Utilising rear bases in Queensland, USAAF B-25C Mitchells, B-26 Marauders and B-17E Flying Fortresses continued a bloody assault on the key Japanese-held bases at Lae and Rabaul, with at times heavy losses. These types were supported by RAAF Hudsons and Catalinas, which maintained a close watch on the Coral Sea and other parts of New Guinea.

By the middle of June, the complex aerial campaign continued unabated despite decisive events at Midway. By targeting Port Moresby's small and vulnerable harbour, the Japanese threatened to cut off the vital supply route that fuelled and armed the Allied air forces.

Never before has such a detailed chronicle of this air war been published and for the first time Allied accounts are matched with Japanese records. Depicted with precise colour heraldry and illustrations, this volume can be trusted as the most accurate and detailed account of the May – June 1942 South Pacific campaign produced to date.

Michael John Claringbould & Peter Ingman  
Canberra, March 2019