



*The voyage of Lexington leading to the air combat east of Rabaul on 20 February 1942. Indicative search patterns of both Allied and Japanese aircraft are illustrated.*

the next morning. As was routine practice, SBDs had been sent out to search 300 miles ahead of the task force. Overhead of the carrier, six Wildcats flew Combat Air Patrol while the CXAM radar scanned the skies for contacts. Depending on conditions, it could detect aircraft at a distance of up to 80 miles.

Meanwhile, at dawn three Mavis climbed away eastwards from Simpson Harbour, and began long patrols in search of the suspected American carrier, with each assuming a 15-degree variant heading to search assigned sectors. Best efforts returned nil sightings for the first few hours; however, Lieutenant (jg) Sakai Noboru and crew were approaching their outer turn point when they spotted TF-11 at 1030 hours. Sakai accurately radioed its position as 460 miles north-east of Rabaul. The American force was hard to miss: one carrier and 14 escorts, exactly as Japanese intelligence had suspected.

From *Lexington* the CXAM radar established an unidentified bogey 35 miles distant: this was Sakai's silver flying boat. On *Lexington's* wooden flight deck, the engines of six Grumman F4F-3 Wildcats were rumbling in eagerness for launch. A green dome light on the superstructure authorised the flight deck officer to salute away the first Wildcat. Once airborne, the Wildcats