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Part Three

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General Progress of Operations in the Southeast Area (from early October 1943 until late February 1944)

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General Progress of Operations in the Southeast Area (from early October 1943 to late February 1944)

I. The Great Shift in Operational Policy in the South Central Pacific Area

A. General Conditions in September 1943.

On 8 September ITALY had surrendered unconditionally to the Allied Forces, depriving the Axis camp in EUROPE of one of its main props and leaving GERMANY open to pressure on two fronts, the east and the south. Rumors of a second front on the Atlantic coast were becoming strong, and the Axis found itself completely on the defensive, with the initiative wholly in the hands of the Allies.

The greatest effect felt in the Far East as a result of the change on the European front was that it had now become possible for a powerful portion of the British Fleet to re-inforce the Indian Ocean area, thus bringing a new threat to bear on our Indian Ocean front.

With his well-established key positions for advance in the Southeast area and his threat to our north from the Aleutians area, the enemy had thrown a powerful ring around our occupied areas and was in a position to carry out aggressive operations in independent or simultaneous thrusts.

The fighting power of our naval air forces had been whittled away in successive operations, particularly at MIDWAY and in the Southeast area, and recovery was so painfully slow as to offer no hope of competition with the rapidly increasing strength of the enemy. The powerful enemy submarines were a menace to our sea-lines; our shipping losses mounted so that new construction could not match losses, and we found it increasingly difficult to provide our vast operational areas with the desired quantities of supplies.

In short, like it or not, our forces, their initiative lost, were now forced into a defensive position. Furthermore, although Japan's national strength and military potential at that time naturally imposed limitations on our maintenance of defensive fronts, the absolute necessity for the purposes of an extended war of placing the Southern resources areas and the homeland outside the range of the enemy's large planes dictated a large defensive sphere, with the result that we maintained a

longer fighting front than our national resources could justify. This subsequently constituted a major reason for the loss of operational flexibility.

#### B. Shift in Imperial Headquarters Operational Policy

Our forces, regarding eastern NEW GUINEA, the northern SOLOMONS, and the MARSHALLS as a national defense sphere in the South Central Pacific to be held at any cost, had made great sacrifices in an all-out effort to secure the area, but the military situation in the Southeast area arising from the disparity between our fighting strength and that of the enemy made it apparent that, although we had risked all in the effort to do so, we could not hold it, and its neutralization came to be considered a matter of time. Judging that Japanese impotence in the Southeast area centering on TABAUL would result in the weakening of the MARSHALL and GILBERT ISLANDS area and, accordingly, diminish the probability of our being able to hold the latter for an extended period, JAPAN decided to contract her national defense sphere to the line running between the Banda Sea area and the CAROLINE ISLANDS, stiffen defenses along that line, muster strength, particularly in the air, for a counter-thrust, and then deal a decisive blow to the advancing enemy.

This shift in operational policy, decided upon at Imperial Headquarters in mid-September 1943, was embodied in Imperial Headquarters Navy Section Directive NO 280 on 30 September, a resume of which follows.

##### 1. Operational Policy.

The Imperial Army and Navy will, in close co-operation, fight off the advancing enemy in key sectors of the Southeast area and make every effort toward extended warfare, meanwhile rapidly building springboards for the launching of counter-operations in strategic locations from the North-of-Australia area to the Central Pacific area and preparing strength for a counteroffensive calculated to deal a decisive blow to the advancing enemy. Everything possible will be done to rout the enemy before his attack is set and break his will to fight.

##### 2. Outline of Operational Policy

a. Our forces will endeavor to defeat the advancing enemy in key locations in the Southeast area from east of eastern NEW GUINEA to

the SOLOMON ISLANDS and hold out there as long as possible.

b. By, roughly, the spring of 1944, JAPAN will equip and strengthen the defenses of operational bases in key locations from the North-of-Australia area to the CAROLINE and MARSHALL ISLANDS, put the Philippines area on an operational basis, increase the counterattack potential of land, sea, and air forces, and otherwise expedite counterattack preparations.

c. In the event of attack by the enemy, an attempt will be made to thwart his plans by utilizing the bases to which reference is made in the preceding paragraph in order to mass fighting strength of all types, launch a counterattack on the enemy's main front, and rout him before he can get his attack started.

d. Insofar as circumstances permit, an effort will be made to begin aggressive operations in the North-of-Australia area after the middle of 1944.

The direction of the attack will be studied separately and the required preparations made.

e. The following aspects of Southeast area operational policy will be particularly emphasized.

(1) The defense of key locations focussing on RABAU in the Bismarck Archipelago and Bougainville Island areas will be strengthened and efforts made to hold them as long as possible. Everything possible will be done to supply and hold key areas on the west shore of DAMPIER STRAIT and in northern NEW GUINEA.

(2) Large quantities of munitions will be quickly stockpiled in the above areas. In particular, efforts will be made to expedite the transportation of supplies to the New Guinea area.

(3) Air and sea strength will be used to try to destroy the advancing enemy before he lands. In the event that the enemy lands, attempts will be made to block his counteroffensive plans by attacking in the early stages of the landing.

Q. Southeast Area Operational Policy of Combined Fleet Headquarters

The change in operational policy at Imperial Headquarters caused the

following points to be emphasized by Combined Fleet Headquarters in its operational policy for the Southeast area:

1. Until Japan's rear line of defense is completed, the enemy advance from the Southeast for a major counterattack will be held in that area.
2. In view of the extreme difficulty of reconnoitering and crushing independent operations in the vast sea area which will be at the enemy's disposal once he is permitted to push his way from the Southeast inside our inner line, every attempt will be made to seek out and destroy him; particularly his surface strength, while he is still within the confines of the Southeast area.
3. Strong emphasis will be given the transportation of supplies needed for an extended war in the Southeast area.

Such was the form assumed by the Combined Fleet's Southeast area operational policy; emphasis on the foregoing three points and willingness to commit crucial battle forces if conditions so required.

#### D. Operational Policy of the Southeast Area Force

When the Southeast area was changed from a crucial battle front to a holding front by decision of Imperial Headquarters, the highest headquarters in the area resolved, after due consultation, to adopt the following policy.

1. A defensive stand was to be adopted with RABOUL as the ultimate point of resistance.

To this end, strategic areas in the ADMIRALTIES and NEW IRELAND, the most weakly defended of Rabaul's outposts, were to be strengthened.

2. In view of the fact that the region around DAMPIER STRAIT was the strategic key point for blocking enemy operations against the PHILIPPINE ISLANDS, efforts were to be made to hold it as long as possible.

Additional supplies were to be forwarded to increase our power of endurance in the area.

3. Since BOUGAINVILLE ISLAND was not only the strongest of Rabaul's outposts but also the strategic key point for checking enemy advances in the Central PACIFIC, every effort was to be made to drive off the advancing enemy and hold the island.

The southern part of BOUGAINVILLE surrounding SHORTLAND BAY was to be the principal point in the island's defense, with only partial forces assigned to the defense of the northern section.

4.. A policy of local self-sufficiency was to be adopted in order to enable the troops in the area to hold out unaided for an extended period.

## II. Isolation of RABAU

When, at the end of September, the Southeast became a holding front by decision of Imperial Headquarters, all crucial battle plans for the area were dropped, operational policy thenceforth consisting merely of a whittling-down campaign against the enemy which relied upon the momentary use of crucial battle forces when conditions were favorable. Meanwhile the enemy, loudly proclaiming his intention to capture RABAU, was gradually advancing from the northern SOLOMONS and areas on both sides of DAMPIER STRAIT to tighten his ring around RABAU. On 27 October he landed on MONO ISLAND as a preliminary to the invasion of BOUGAINVILLE, and on 1 November he inaugurated a large-scale landing operation at TAROKINA.

Prior to these events, the commander in chief of the Combined Fleet, in an effort to check the enemy's rapid advance in the Southeast and gain time to strengthen Japan's rear line defenses, had decided to send the carrier air strength (1st Air Squadron) of the 3rd Fleet to the Southeast area around the middle of October to undertake the cutting of the enemy's supply route (a project known as the RO Operation), but changing conditions in the Marshalls area delayed the advance of the 1st Air Squadron plane units, and it was not until 28 October that the operation was activated. Since the RO Operation stemmed from a great decision, the decision to transfer the total mobile strength of the carrier air force, the backbone of the Navy, to ground bases in order to take advantage of the favorable strategic conditions prevailing in the Southeast area to destroy enemy surface strength from the land, it was naturally expected that it would leave the remainder of Japan's surface strength partially paralyzed.

It so happened that the beginning of the operation coincided with the enemy landing on TAROKINA, with the result that after 5 November a series of air battles developed off BOUGAINVILLE ISLAND, lasting around 20 days and enabling us to strike some fairly telling blows against the enemy. These battles did not check Allied operations in the Northern Solomons area, however; the enemy succeeded in building a strong airfield at TAROKINA and increased his air attacks against RABAU, KAVIENG, and southern NEW BRITAIN.

With the strategic areas of the northern SOLOMONS in his grasp, the enemy proceeded to launch attacks in rapid succession against areas on both sides of DAMPIER STRAIT, which constituted an important segment of the circle around RABAU, landing at MERKUS CAPE on 15 December, at TULUVH on the 26th, and near GALI on NEW GUINEA on 2 Jan 44, completing the seizure of the strait with the last of these operations.

At that time our forces were strengthening the defenses of the New Ireland-Admiralties area, our only rear line of communications. The enemy's new offensive gradually swung in that direction, landings beginning in the GREEN ISLANDS on 15 February and in the Hein area of the ADMIRALTY ISLANDS on the 29th.

In addition to surrounding RABAU by a succession of rapid moves in the Southeast, the enemy embarked on a vigorous major offensive in the Inner South Seas, invading the GILBERTS between late November and early December 1943, mounting a massive assault against the MARSHALLS in early February 1944 which resulted in the occupation of all strategic points there by the middle of the month, and inflicting heavy damages in a surprise task force attack on TRUK on 17 February. Our new national defense line—the line connecting western NEW GUINEA, the CAROLINES, and the MARIANAS was now directly threatened.

As a result of orders issued at this time by the Commander-in-chief of the Combined Fleet incorporating all the mobile air strength of the Southeast Area Force into the Inner South Seas forces, the Southeast area was left with no air strength, and RABAU, compelled to face the enemy with ground resources alone and completely isolated, was abandoned.



The following paragraphs describe the progress of operations in the northern part of the BISMARCK ISLANDS and the northern Solomons and Dampier Strait areas.

### III. Operations in the Northern Solomons Area

#### A. The Defensive Situation in the northern SOLOMONS

As the area around SHORTLAND BAY was the strategic key point in the northern SOLOMONS, it received first priority in defensive preparations, only small forces being deployed in the Gazelle, Kieta, and Buka areas. It was thought that the enemy's main landing would be made in the southwestern part of BOUGAINVILLE ISLAND, with a subsidiary landing in the Buka area. Possible landings on other fronts were to be met by the transfer of ground strength and counter-landings by an amphibious group. In general, the deployment of strength early in October was as follows:

##### 1. BOUGAINVILLE ISLAND.

- a. The greatest importance was attached to the southern part of BOUGAINVILLE ISLAND, particularly the zones surrounding the Buin airfields. The Army established 17 Army Headquarters in the area and provided a force of approximately 15,000 troops, the nucleus of which was the 6 Division, for ground defense, while the navy was represented by 8 Fleet Headquarters and around 6,800 1 Base Force personnel, the latter assigned primarily to the defense of loading installations and the Buin airfields (1 and 2 airfield zones).

Around 5,000 men (4 South Seas Garrison Unit and smaller forces) and navy heavy artillery forces were deployed on the islands around SHORTLAND BAY for the defense of its outer perimeter.

The airfield on BALLALE ISLAND in SHORTLAND BAY was defended entirely by naval forces.

The principal ordnance of the naval forces deployed in the Buin-Shortland area was as follows:

14-centimeter guns..... 8  
 12-centimeter guns..... 3  
 8-centimeter guns.....21  
 12-centimeter anti-aircraft guns.....10  
 8-centimeter anti-aircraft guns..... 7  
 7-centimeter anti-aircraft guns.....27  
 25-millimeter machine guns.....70  
 13-millimeter machine guns.....40  
 Searchlights.....16

- b. There were 2,000 to 3,000 army troops and some navy look-outs in the GAZELLE area.
- c. There were 4,000 to 6,000 army troops and around 200 naval personnel in the KIETA area. The naval forces were equipped with two 8-centimeter guns and one 13-millimeter machine gun.

## 2. BUKA ISLAND

Around 5,000 army and 1,000 navy troops were assigned to the defense of the airfields on both sides of BUKA ISLAND.

Principal ordnance possessed by naval forces was as follows:

8-centimeter guns..... 2  
 12-centimeter anti-aircraft guns..... 4  
 8-centimeter anti-aircraft guns..... 2  
 25-millimeter machine guns.....36  
 13-millimeter machine guns..... 3

3. A land combat unit of around 190 men was stationed on MONO ISLAND, principally for lookout duty.

## B. Counter-attack Operations on MONO ISLAND.

### 1. Conditions prior to the enemy landing.

Radio intelligence around the middle of October having indicated a strong possibility that an enemy task force would raid WAKE or the Marshalls area, the commander-in-chief of the Combined Fleet ordered the submarine I-36 to reconnoiter HAWAII in order to obtain information concerning the

enemy's movements, and on the 17th the plane carried by the submarine had successfully done so, confirming the fact that the fleet, except for four carriers, four battleships, five cruisers and 17 destroyers, was not anchored there. On the basis of this information, the commander-in-chief concluded that the powerful remaining elements of the enemy fleet had probably already begun operations and that he might be able to contact them in the areas mentioned in the radio intelligence report. Resolving to intercept them in the Wake or Marshalls area, he departed TRUK on the 17th for BROWN with the greater part of the Combined Fleet, thereby temporarily postponing the strengthening of the Southeast area by the planes of the Air Squadron.

In the Southeast area, meanwhile, the enemy was making an attack in force on FINSCHHAFEN, and after the 17th air strikes against BUIN, BALLALE, and RABAU were intensified, with the BUIN and BALLALE airfields, in particular, being put out of operation by repeated raids over a period of several days. It appeared that the enemy was planning a new operation in the area. After the 18th it became impossible to use the Ballale airfield for hours at a time, and the same situation prevailed at BUIN after the 21st; for all practical purposes, the airfields on BOUGAINVILLE were useless as operational bases.

Since, contrary to expectations, no change was evident in the enemy situation in the MARSHALLS, the Combined Fleet left BROWN for TRUK on the 24th, arriving on the 26th, on which date the Commander-in-chief cancelled the alert in the Marshalls area and took immediate steps to dispatch the carrier planes of the 1 Air Squadron to the endangered Southeast area.

2. The enemy landing on MONO ISLAND and our counter-attack.

At 0420 hours on the 27th, a patrol plane on the lookout for enemy activity in the northern Solomons area reported the discovery of a large convoy composed of 15 transports and three cruisers proceeding north at a point 10 nautical miles southeast of MONO ISLAND. The commander of the 8 Fleet, who was in command of surface forces in the Solomons area, immedi-

ately ordered an alert. At 0720 hours the Mono Island Garrison Unit ceased communications with the message, "Enemy landings commenced 0340 hours. We have engaged them." From this it appeared that part of the landing force had been in advance of the element discovered by the patrol planes. The enemy completed his landing at 0730 hours and retired toward VELLA LAVELLA.

When the commander of the Southeast Area Fleet learned of the Mono landings, he ordered that the focal point of interception operations be changed from the New Guinea to the Solomons area, at once instructed the base air force to attack the vessels in the Mono Island area; directed the submarine in the locality (RO-105) to proceed to MONO at full speed, and organized a combined assault force composed of the NAGARA and 10 destroyers, which were in the RABAU area, in preparation for a night raid against the invasion forces.

At 1130 hours, 39 Zero fighters and 10 carrier bombers proceeded to the Mono Island area, where at 1330 hours they discovered and attacked a force made up of several cruisers and a number of transports. They reported the sinking of two transports and two cruisers.

### 3. Abandonment of the Solomons counter-attack disposition

As air reconnaissance of the central SOLOMONS before dawn on the 28th revealed no signs of enemy activity, the commander of the Southeast Area Fleet cancelled his Solomons interception assignments and once again began to concentrate on the attack in New Guinea area.

## C. The RO Operation

### 1. Operational strength

The operational strength available, consisting of the carrier air strength of the 1 Air Squadron and the base air force of the 11 Air Fleet, may be summarized as follows:

- a. 1 Air Squadron (ZUIKAKU, SHOKAKU, ZUIHO) - 82 fighters, 45 bombers, 40 attack planes, 6 reconnaissance planes. Total: 173 planes.
- b. 11 Air Fleet (25 Air Squadron, 26 Air Squadron) - 312 fighters, 96 bombers, 144 medium land attack planes, 24 attack planes, 24 reconnaissance planes. Total: 600 planes. The figures given for the 11 Air Fleet represent authorized strength. As a result of heavy losses in successive air operations, its actual operational strength at that time had declined to approximately 200 planes.

### 2. Operational objective

The operational objective decided upon by Combined Fleet Headquarters

in mid-October had been to destroy enemy shipping in the New Guinea area, but when the operation was activated the military situation had been changed by the appearance of an enemy task force in Solomons waters, for which reason the objective was revised to become an attack on enemy vessels in the SOLOMONS.

### 3. Tactical command

The commanders of the 11 Air Fleet and the 3 Fleet were in joint command, and since there was a perfect mutual understanding between the two, tactical command functioned smoothly.

### 4. Activation of the operation.

On the 28th the commander-in-chief of the Combined Fleet ordered the 1 Air Squadron to proceed to the Southeast area and directed that the RO Operation be activated. As all elements of the 1 Air Squadron did not reach their destination until 1 November, however, the enemy landing on TAROKINA coincided with the beginning of the operation, which meant that the air interception battle in the Bougainville area became the RO Operation. The six air engagements off BOUGAINVILLE were the major air engagements of the RO Operation.

## D. The Tarokina Counter-attack Operation

### 1. Conditions prior to the enemy landing

After the landing on MONO ISLAND, the enemy became temporarily inactive in the Solomons area; there was no sign of activity by surface forces. After about the 29th the enemy again intensified his air raids against airfields in the Buin, Buka, and Rabaul areas, but the Japanese, not anticipating a rapid succession of attacks in the Solomons, continued to concentrate on NEW GUINEA in their offensive planning.

### 2. The enemy landing on TAROKINA and our counter-attack plan.

a. At 0750 hours on the 31st a search plane reported that a large enemy convoy composed of three cruisers, 10 destroyers and 30-odd transports of various types was proceeding westward at a speed of 10 knots from a point 20 nautical miles and 220° off GATUKAI ISLAND, and at about 1330 hours the first and second elements of an enemy convoy, the former consisting of eight destroyers and 19 transports of various types

and the latter of four cruisers and nine special transports, were sighted southwest of RENDOVA ISLAND proceeding northwest at 10 knots.

b. At 1430 hours the four enemy cruisers and the eight destroyers were proceeding northwest from a point northwest of GANONGGA ISLAND; at 2230 hours, after bombarding BUKA ISLAND, they turned south. At 0420 hours on the 1st, after bombarding SHORTLAND, they made a feint to the south.

c. The first and second enemy transport elements which had previously been sighted southwest of RENDOVA ISLAND began landings in the vicinity of CAPE TAROKINA at about 0700 hours on the 1st.

d. Upon receiving the first report on the enemy's situation on the 1st, the commander of the Southeast Area Fleet immediately took the following measures:

- (1) Ordered the activation of the interception operation in the Solomons area and once again shifted the center of attack from NEW GUINEA to the SOLOMONS;
- (2) Ordered the Combined Assault Force (5 Squadron, 3 Destroyers Squadron) to attack the enemy near MONO ISLAND that night.  
(The sortie was ultimately delayed for a day by circumstances involving support of the counter-landing force);
- (3) Altered the base air force for an attack on the enemy convoy.

e. Measures taken by the Combined Fleet to cope with the enemy landings.

On receiving word that a large enemy force had landed on TAROKINA, the commander-in-chief of the Combined Fleet, determining to make an attack employing the entire mobile strength of the Combined Fleet, made the following dispositions with the aim of strengthening the Southeast area:

- (1) The entire 2 Fleet was put under the command of the commander of the Southeast Area Force.
- (2) The air strength of the 12 Air Fleet, with the exception of flying boats and forces deployed in the KURILES, was ordered to prepare to move to the Southeast area.
- (3) The 14 Squadron, the KAMIKAZE MARU (tanker) and the HISAGO MARU (tanker) were ordered to join the Southeast Area Force.

In view of the fact that the planes of the 1 Air Squadron were already enroute to the Southeast, this action of the commander-in-chief put the entire mobile surface and air strength of the Combined Fleet under the command, either direct or delegated, of the commander of the Southeast Area Fleet.

Southeast Area Fleet Headquarters apparently experienced some difficulty in deriving maximum effectiveness from its suddenly increased strength. In particular, strong protests were made against the use of surface ships in the waters south of NEW BRITAIN, which lay within the area dominated by the enemy's light planes. Combined Fleet Headquarters, however, convinced that this was the last opportunity to take advantage of the strategic situation in the Southeast area, was firmly determined to strike a decisive blow at the enemy's surface strength and acted accordingly.

3. Counterattack against the enemy landing force.

a. At 0605 hours on the 1st, 44 Zero fighters and nine carrier bombers launched the counterattack with an initial air strike against the enemy landing convoy at the mouth of the TAROKINA RIVER. Three attacks were made on the landing force during the day by a total of 104 Zero fighters and 16 carrier bombers, which succeeded in sinking two transports and a cruiser and setting many large landing barges afire. Our losses were 17 Zeros and five bombers.

Meanwhile, enemy air elements using an advanced base at MUNDA attacked SHORTLAND with a total of 344 planes (14 times) and BUKA with a total of 134 (twice), establishing complete aerial supremacy over BOUGAINVILLE and rendering powerful assistance to the landing force. Thirty-one enemy transports entered the Gazelle Bay Anchorage that day.

b. Counter attack by the combined Assault Force.

The Combined Assault Force (5 Squadron - MIYOKO, HAGURO; 3 Destroyer Squadron - SENDAI, three destroyers; 10 Squadron - AGANO, three

destroyers) under Rear Adm OMORI, commander of the 5 Squadron, left RABAU on the 1st at 1530 hours and proceeded south charged with the duties of (1) supporting the transport division (six destroyers) transporting the army force (approximately 930 men) scheduled to stage a counterlanding near TAROMINA CAPE and (2) establishing contact with and destroying enemy ships in the vicinity of GAZELLE BAY. Shortly after its departure, it was discovered by enemy planes, and at 1945 hours the SENDAI was bombed. Meanwhile, an enemy surface force made up of three battleships, six cruiser, and a number of destroyers had shelled SHORTLAND at dawn on the 1st and was cruising in the area. This fact, taken in conjunction with the activities of the enemy air force, led to the conclusion that it would be difficult to make a counterlanding that night; the commander of the Southeast Area Force decided to give up the attempt, send the transport division back to RABAU and let the Combined Assault Force concentrate on finding and destroying the enemy fleet first.

The HAGURO was bombed at 2324 hours, but no damage was suffered. As the force advanced southward a report by a plane from the HAGURO at 2338 hours revealed the existence of an enemy cruiser and three destroyers 330° and 50 nautical miles off MUTUPINA POINT. Since the enemy was about 20 nautical miles northeast of the Omori Force and still outside its range of vision, the force continued in alert formation, executing a 360° turn. At 0045 hours, while endeavoring to ascertain the enemy's situation, the SHIGURE, followed by the SENDAI, located him (at 0113 hours it was discovered that there were two groups composed of seven cruisers and five or six destroyers) proceeding southward at a point about 10,000 meters east southeast, and shortly thereafter the force was subjected to an opening bombardment. Since it had not as yet gone into battle formation, it started from an extremely disadvantageous position, each unit joining the battle separately with such a lack of coordination that friendly vessels collided on two occasions. Moreover, the distances were too great for



night action, the 5 Squadron being barely able to make contact with the enemy by firing illumination shells. The engagement continued unsatisfactorily amidst widespread confusion, until, as the tide of battle was against us and considerable damage was being inflicted by the enemy's accurate radar fire, it was finally decided at 0134 hours that the entire force would retreat. At 0245 hours it broke contact with the enemy and started back to RABOUL.

The general outcome of this night action, known as the Battle off BOUGAINVILLE, was as follows:

a. Damage inflicted

- (1) heavy cruiser - sunk
- (2) large destroyers - sunk
- (3) heavy cruisers - sinking fairly certain
- (4) 1 heavy cruiser or destroyer - sinking fairly certain.

b. Losses suffered

SENDAI and HATSUKAZE - sunk. (HATSUKAZE sank after collision with MYOKO)

MYOKO - slightly damaged (One shell hit; collision with HATSUKAZE)

HAGURO - slightly damaged

SAMIDARE, SHIRATSUYU - slightly damaged (collision between SAMIDARE and SHIRATSUYU)

c. The carrier aid force joins the battle.

At 0511 hours on 2 November, the carrier air force of the 1 Air Squadron, which had completed its advance to RABOUL on the 1st, discovered 15 or 16 enemy transports at a point 135° and 130 nautical miles off CAPE ST GEORGE. It immediately sent out an attack unit composed of 89 Zero fighters and 18 carrier bombers, which sighting and attacking three cruisers, three destroyers and two large transports at 0605 hours, demonstrated the force's outstanding agility by sinking a destroyer, setting fire to both transports and a cruiser, and shooting down six enemy planes in this, its first attack after joining the battle.

At 1140 hours on the same day, 58 carrier planes and 57 base air

force planes intercepted a large enemy formation (about 100 B-25's and 100 P-38's) attacking RABAU and in a single engagement shot down the tremendous number of 36 B-25's and 85 P-38's. After this attack, large-scale attacks on RABAU by enemy planes ceased for several days.

In addition to attacking RABAU in force on the 2nd, enemy aircraft also completely neutralized BUKA, and at about 0630 landings began in the vicinity of HAMON (26 transports) and CAPE MOLTKE (two transports), proceeding successfully with only token resistance from our air forces. On the 3rd, 39 Zero fighters and eight carrier bombers from the carrier air force, after having attempted without success to locate and attack an enemy convoy in the vicinity of MONO ISLAND, struck the Hamon landing area, achieving some results in a battle with enemy planes there.

d. Concentration of our strength and obstruction by the enemy.

- (1) At 1125 hours on the 2nd, the 14 Squadron, which had been incorporated into the Southeast Area Force and was transporting army units to RABAU under the direction of the force Commander, was subjected to a bombing attack by 19 enemy planes at a point 60 nautical miles north of KAVIENG. Hits were sustained by the GOKOKU MARU and the KIYOSUMI MARU, the last of which, unable to maneuver, had to be towed to KAVIENG by the ISUZU. The GOKOKU MARU continued on its course, both ships entering their designated anchorages on the 4th.
- (2) At 0430 hours on the 4th, the tankers NICHIEI MARU and NISSHO MARU, bound for RABAU with supplies for the Southeast area under a two-destroyer escort, were crippled by enemy bombs at a point 180 nautical miles north of KAVIENG and had to be towed to TRUK with the aid of the CHOKAI and a destroyer from the 2 Fleet.
- (3) Between 0915 and 1050 hours on the 5th, the 2 fleet, which had been assigned to the commander of the Southeast Area Fleet and had entered Rabaul anchorage early that morning, was hit heavily by about 150 light and 50 heavy planes.

Although 49 of the raiders were shot down by 59 intercepting Zero fighters, the fleet suffered enough damage to impair its operational movements, and it was decided to remove all vessels able to navigate to TRUK on the same day.

A more detailed summary of conditions at that time follows:

- (a) Strength at anchor in RABAU (Listing included 2 Fleet only):
  - 4 Squadron (TAKAO, MAYA, ATAGO),
  - 7 Squadron (SUZUYA, MOGAMI),
  - 8 Squadron (CHIKUMA),
  - 2 Destroyer Squadron (NOSHIRO, five destroyers);
- (b) Strength in action: MOGAMI, TAMANAMI, CHOKAI, SHIZUNAMI:
- (c) Damages suffered: ATAGO - Three near misses, 18 killed (including captain), 20 seriously wounded; TAKAO - 11 hits, large hole Starboard side forward at waterline, three killed, 14 wounded in varying degree; MAYA - one hit, fire in port engine room; CHIKUMA - one near miss; MOGAMI - One hit, fire amidships, 26 killed and wounded; AGANO - Bomb hit, AA guns out of commission, 11 wounded in varying degree; NOSHIRO - Bomb hit, 14 wounded in varying degree; FUJINAMI - Bomb hit, 13 wounded in varying degree; Two shipborne planes burned, five slightly damaged;
- (d) It was decided that the entire strength of the 2 Fleet except the MAYA, which required emergency repairs, and the 2 Destroyer Squadron, which was to participate in the counterlanding operation, would retire to TRUK. They departed immediately, passing outside the range of enemy air raids on the 6th and arriving in TRUK on the 8th;
- (e) Although many factors were responsible for the heavy damages suffered, the main cause lay in the fact that, in order to be able to employ surface units to follow up results accomplished by land-based aircraft, we had brought such

units into an area where the operational zones of the enemy's light planes and interceptors and our own overlapped;

- (f) The end of our concentrated use of surface forces in the Southeast area.

In view of the successive damages sustained by surface forces in the Southeast area, experiences significant of the difficulties encountered when a fleet possessing inferior air resources attempted combined air and sea operations in a region where friendly and enemy aerial supremacy spheres overlapped broadly, no subsequent plans for large-scale concentrations of naval strength were made.

The transportation of the supplies, ordnance, and personnel necessary for extended operations in the Southeast was continued by high-speed transports and Naval vessels.

e. The first air battle off BOUGAINVILLE.

The enemy task force which inflicted such heavy damages on the 2 Fleet when it raided RABAU on the 5th, had been sighted at a point 140° and 150 nautical miles off CAPE ST GEORGE by one of our search planes before the raid (at 0700 hours), but inasmuch as the plane had identified the vessels as five heavy cruisers, seven destroyers, and two large transports, it had not been definitely concluded that a task force was in action. After the search plane returned, however, investigation revealed that the two large transports were definitely aircraft carriers, and our air forces were preparing for an immediate attack when the enemy struck the first blow at 0915 hours. Directly after the air interception battle at RABAU, a search for the enemy was begun, our search planes establishing contact at 1255 hours at a point 145° and 235 nautical miles off RABAU. Four carrier attack planes were sent out at 1445 hours for tracking purposes, followed by 14 carrier attack planes from the carrier air force at 1515 hours. At 1715 hours the attack unit found and attacked the enemy, reporting a major success; one large enemy carrier was blown up and sunk, one medium carrier set ablaze and later sunk, and two heavy cruisers and one cruiser or destroyer sunk. Our losses consisted of four carrier attack planes which failed to return. Imperial Headquarters, referring to this engagement the first air battle off BOUGAINVILLE, particularly commended the outstanding work performed single-handed by the air forces.

## f. Counterlanding at TAROKINA

As the Tarokina operation was the first systematic counter-landing operation undertaken in World War II on a basis of Army-Navy co-operation, a good many doubts were entertained as to its success, but contrary to expectations, it was accomplished without bloodshed. A summary follows:

## (1) Enemy situation at the time.

The enemy landings had occurred over a wide area, extending from CAPE MOLTKE in the north to the northern coast of MUTUPINA POINT in the south, and troop reinforcements, and supplies were being rapidly unloaded under cover of powerful naval and air support. On the morning of the 6th, the day of our counterlanding operation, the enemy was unloading six transports on the north coast of MUTUPINA with the support of two cruisers and 11 destroyers. His air force had neutralized the Buin and Buka areas, rendering the Buka airfield temporarily inoperative.

## (2) Tarokina counterlanding plan

## (a) Strength employed.

Unit	Strength	Mission
Transport division	Four destroyers	To transport 850 army troops
Screening unit	Two destroyers	To cover outer flanks of transport division anchorage and provide direct protection for the division
Support unit	One light cruiser, five or six destroyers Commander Flagship 10 Squadron	To support transport division and drive back enemy units resisting counterlanding.

## (b) Landing plan

Landing point - South bank of TAROKINA RIVER.

Time of landing - 2400 hours on the 6th.

Landing boats - One large landing barge, one small landing barge, and one cutter to each ship.

Anchorage point - Five kilometers off coast.

Security at anchoring point - Flank coverage of anchorage by two destroyers.

Supporting illumination and bombardment - In general none, (to avoid detection).

(c) Course chosen

The transport division was to travel south along the western coast of BOUGAINVILLE ISLAND, with the support unit proceeding as it considered best within sight of it.

(d) Air force co-operation

The air forces were assigned the task of reconnoitering enemy movements and driving back any units resisting the landing.

(3) Progress summary

The operation, originally planned for the night of the 5th, was postponed to the 6th because of the great confusion which ensued when the 2 Fleet was heavily attacked by the enemy planes immediately after anchoring at RABAU. For the most part, the units concerned acted as scheduled in coordination with the landing program of the counterlanding force on the 6th. Just as the transport division was about to dash into the anchorage area, to discover five or six enemy cruisers and destroyers nearby and retired to the north for the time being in order to conceal our plans, after which it returned, ascertained that the enemy was no longer in the area, and was able to enter without interference. Because of the fact that it anchored at a point slightly north of the prearranged location, the landing force was obliged to land in two groups, one on either side of the mouth of the TAROKINA RIVER, but its approximately 850 men succeeded in reaching the shore safely at 0130 hours on the 7th.

The support unit, operating slightly to the northwest of the prearranged location, also failed to encounter the enemy, and both units returned to RABAU without incident on the morning of the 7th.

In conjunction with this operation, 700 Army troops and 25 tons of supplies were transported to BUKA in a light cruiser and a destroyer and successfully unloaded at 0125 hours on the 7th without enemy interference. The air forces assigned to support the counterlanding operation searched for the enemy over a radius of 300 nautical miles from RABAU, but due to the failure of part of the planes to return, an overall picture of the enemy situation could not be obtained.

g. Attack on enemy convoy off TAROKINA on the 8th.

It having been reported at 0645 hours on the 8th that 16 enemy transports, escorted by cruisers and destroyers, had anchored at MUTUPINA POINT and were sending reinforcements ashore, 71 Zero fighters and 26 carrier bombers proceeded to attack them at 1000 hours. Brushing aside 60 enemy planes sent up to stop them, our aircraft succeeded in sinking two transports and three destroyers, severely damaging a heavy cruiser, damaging and starting a fire on a transport, and shooting down 12 planes. Five Zeros and 10 carrier bombers failed to return.

h. The second air battle off BOUGAINVILLE.

Upon receipt of a search plane report at 1230 hours on the 8th that there were three enemy battleships and four destroyers in the vicinity of MONO ISLAND, search planes, tracking planes, and attack units carrying torpedoes were dispatched successively between 1500 and 1600 hours. At 1620 hours contact was definitely established approximately 252° and 50 nautical miles off MUTUPINA POINT, and at 1712 hours an attack which lasted until 1800 hours was launched by the 3 Fleet Attack Unit (nine carrier attack planes) and continued by the base air force attack units (two groups of six medium attack planes each). The enemy apparently had scattered his forces in two or three

groups. Damages inflicted were: 3 Fleet (1 Air Squadron): 1 battleship Sunk, 2 cruisers Blown up and sunk, 1 cruiser Set afire, 3 cruisers or destroyers Set afire; 11 Air Fleet: 1 battleship (King George class) Sunk, 2 battleships (Renown class) Sunk, (Each hit by two or three torpedoes.), 1 destroyer Set afire (Sinking virtually certain.), 1 cruiser Set afire; Four carrier attack planes and six medium attack planes failed to return.

As it was impossible to tell whether or not the 3 Fleet and the 11 Air Fleet had attacked the same targets, an accurate assessment of the damages inflicted was difficult.

1. The air battle on the 11th (Including the third air battle off BOUGAINVILLE).

(1) When the BO Operation was finally well under way, the tempo of air operations was greatly accelerated, with the result that expenditures of strength due to operations also gradually increased. A table showing the strength of units participating in the BO Operation as of the 10th follows:

Unit	No of operational aircraft	Planes expended
11 Air Fleet	About 170	44 (22%)
1 Air Squadron (3 Fleet)	About 100	39 (21%)
Total	About 270	83 (25%)
Reinforcements expected: 16 fighter planes, 12 attack planes		

- (2) After receipt of the information listed below before sunrise on the 11th, dawn attacks were twice planned and twice cancelled. The information:
- (a) 0445 hours - one large carrier, one medium carrier, and 10 other vessels in ring formation 100 and 30 nautical miles off MOWE ISLAND; (b) 0500



hours - three cruisers and five destroyers 180° and 15 nautical miles off MONO ISLAND on a 90° course; speed, 18 knots; (c) 0745 hours - four battleships, three destroyers, two transports, and 10 fighter planes on a 40° course east of MONO ISLAND.

- (3) From 0700 to 0800 hours approximately 200 enemy fighters and bombers attacked RABAU in three groups. The Japanese sent up 68 Zero fighters to intercept them and shot down 39 enemy planes, but six of our planes failed to return, and the damages listed below were incurred by surface vessels seeking refuge outside Rabaul harbor. (Thanks to a squall inside the harbor, warships anchored there escaped attack): AGANO One torpedo hit aft; After engine room and rudder damaged; SUZUNAMI Sunk; HAGANAMI Heavily damaged; unable to navigate. For the most part, the damage was done by tank force carrier planes. The commander of the Southeast Area Fleet ordered the MAYA, the CHOGI, and three destroyers anchored at RABAU to return to TRUK immediately.
- (4) A reconnaissance plane unit which took off at 0945 hours to search for the task force which had attacked RABAU was followed at 1000 hours by an attack unit consisting of 67 Zero fighters (of which 32 planes from the 11 Air Fleet turned back halfway), 27 carrier bombers (of which seven turned back), and 14 carrier attack planes. Receiving a report at 1055 hours from the reconnaissance planes dispatched earlier that a large enemy force had been sighted at a point 300° and 120 nautical miles from MONO ISLAND, course 230°, speed 24 knots, weather...

(message cut off), the attack unit headed toward the enemy, at 1200 hours establishing contact and launching an attack which developed into a furious and heroic 20-minute battle.

Damage inflicted: 2 aircraft carriers - One or two bomb hits; 1 cruiser or destroyer - Blown up and sunk; 3 cruisers or destroyers - Set afire; 2 fighters - Shot down.

Damaged sustained: Failed to return - 14 attack planes, 17 bombers, 2 fighters, 2 reconnaissance planes.

This air battle was called the third air battle off BOUGAINVILLE.

Heavy losses were suffered in the engagement, not only because the impossibility of assembling planes in the air (caused by imperfect co-ordination between the carrier air force and the base air force) forced some pilots to turn back and prevented the attack unit from controlling the skies over the task force, but also because a daylight raid was made against an enemy fully prepared for a counterattack.

- (5) After the failure of the daylight air raid against the enemy task force, the commander of the Southeast Area Fleet, deciding to crush the enemy in a night attack, organized an attack unit composed of numbers of base air force medium attack plane units with ample night action experience, and issued orders for an attack.

At 1700 hours a search plane discovered three battleships, two heavy cruisers, and four destroyers 210° and 35 nautical miles off MUPUPINA POINT, and at 1910 hours another sighted a group of 15 or 16 destroyers and cruisers and a vessel resembling an

aircraft carrier (possibly a transport) proceeding in triple column formation 260° and 20 nautical miles off MURUPINA POINT. In both cases, however, contact was lost due to bad weather. The attack unit set out in two groups, one of five medium attack planes at 1530 hours and one of six medium attack planes at 1600 hours. The second returned without sighting the enemy, but the first located the battleship force at 1745 hours and succeeded in attacking it. Damage inflicted: 1 battleship - One torpedo hit, 1 cruiser - One torpedo hit, 1 destroyer - One torpedo hit, sinking virtually certain.

Damage sustained: Two medium attack planes failed to return.

- j. Transfer of carrier air force to TRUK and reinforcement of base air force in Southeast area.

At the end of the third air battle off BOUGAINVILLE, an Imperial Rescript praising the results accomplished in the MO Operation improved the morale of all forces tremendously. The cumulative losses suffered in successive battles, however, had put the carrier air force in a position where further combat would rob it of even a skeleton force around which to rebuild; heavy losses among vitally essential crew members, in particular, had drastically reduced combat strength. Accordingly, the Commander-in-Chief of the Combined Fleet withdrew the 1 Air Squadron (3 Fleet) from the MO Operation force on the 12th, sending it to TRUK, and in turn diverted 27 carrier bombers from the Marshalla area to the Southeast. On the 13th the 1 Air Squadron moved to TRUK, and on the 15th 26 carrier bombers advanced to KANAKU. Losses suffered by the 1 Air Squadron prior to the time of its transfer were as follows:

sustained: Two medium attack planes failed to

order of the Southeast Area Fleet also ordered  
mines EO-104 and EO-109 to attack the enemy  
co, but they were unable to establish contact.  
r battle off BOUGAINVILLE.

evening of the 16th, word was received from the  
r of the 3 Fleet of the presence of an enemy  
re south of BOUGAINVILLE ISLAND (army intelli-  
and at 2300 hours tracking planes, which were  
ned at once, sighted a large enemy force (three  
i carriers and about 20 cruisers, destroyers,  
30° and 65 nautical miles off MUTUPINA POINT.  
back units, consisting of six medium attack  
(one of which turned back), three medium attack  
and five carrier attack planes respectively,  
rtied one after another, the first leaving at  
hrs, and launched an attack at 0055 hours on  
h which continued until 0330 hours. Poor visi-  
forced the planes to strike singly, but excellent  
were achieved.

inflicted: Large carrier 1 - blown up and sunk,  
carriers 2.- sunk, Cruisers 3 - sunk, Uniden-  
type 1 - sunk.

sustained: Four medium attack planes and one  
r attack plane failed to return. One medium attack  
severely damaged.

on enemy convey off TADUKINA.

receipt of information on the 17th that eight trans-  
and 10 destroyers were tied up in TADUKINA BAY in  
a of unloading, 55 Zero fighters and 10 carrier  
s certified at 0425 hours, staged an attack at 0530