



Battle of the Bismarck Sea

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‘Please extend to all ranks my gratitude and felicitations on the magnificent victory which has been achieved. It cannot fail to go down in history as one of the most complete and annihilating combats of all time. My pride and satisfaction in you all is boundless.’

General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in the South-West Pacific, 4 March 1943

The Battle of the Bismarck Sea, which took place on Australia’s doorsteps from 2 to 4 March 1943, has a special place in Australia’s military history. It was a defining battle that thwarted Japan’s attempt to secure a permanent foothold in Australia’s nearest neighbour, which was then the Australian territory of Papua and territory protectorate of New Guinea. While action in the battle occurred at sea, it was Allied air power that was the deciding factor. The success of air power was only made possible through a series of carefully planned and orchestrated operations, which today would be collectively termed a joint operation.

Japan was providing vital logistics support from Rabaul to their New Guinea base in Lae. The Allies missed an opportunity to intercept a Japanese convoy in January 1943 but they knew well that further convoys were needed to support the Japanese advance over the Owen Stanley Range to their final prize of

securing Port Moresby, the capital of Papua. Intelligence reports were filtering into the Allies from a number of sources that included Australian Coastwatchers who had oversight of all shipping that left Rabaul harbour, the monitoring of Japanese communications, air reconnaissance and the use of radar surveillance.

On 1 March 1943, a patrolling US Liberator aircraft sighted an enemy convoy outward-bound from Rabaul. The convoy consisted of eight troop transports escorted by eight destroyers with air cover being provided by Zero aircraft operating out of both Rabaul and Lae. This was a much bigger convoy than the one that landed Japanese troops at Lae on 7 January. At first, bad weather hid this second fleet from Allied reconnaissance aircraft, and the convoy was not sighted again until the following day.

In a seemingly unconnected operation, on 2 March, six Boston aircraft from the RAAF’s No 22 Squadron made a dawn raid on Lae airfield. While easily seen as just another raid, the attack was in fact mounted to prevent Japanese aircraft intended as the fighter escort for the convoy from operating from the airstrips, thereby ceding air control over the convoy to the Allies.

Searching United States Army Air Force (USAAF) Liberator aircraft relocated the convoy mid-morning. Eight Flying Fortresses

were launched, followed shortly afterwards by 20 more. The Flying Fortresses attacked the convoy from 6500 feet using 100 lb demolition bombs, and one transport was sunk. Later in the day, a further attack was conducted by 11 Flying Fortresses, but this attack yielded no results. After dusk, RAAF Catalinas from No 11 Squadron shadowed the convoy throughout the night, with the purpose of providing detailed information on the movements of the convoy to the various Allied headquarters located throughout the South West Pacific. Throughout the night, the extremely poor weather conditions favoured the Japanese convoy. A lone Beaufort from No 100 Squadron made an unsuccessful torpedo attack while the Japanese transited Vitiaz Strait.

On the morning of 3 March, eight Beauforts from No 100 Squadron made an unsuccessful dawn torpedo attack. This was a precursor to a more coordinated attack to be made later, which involved RAAF Bostons, Beauforts and Beaufighters working in unison with USAAF Flying Fortress, Mitchell and Boston aircraft. By 0930 hrs, more than 90 Allied aircraft rallied at the rendezvous point over Cape Ward Hunt to synchronise their strike on the convoy. Their attacks were made in three waves and from different levels with split-second timing.

Firstly, 13 USAAF Flying Fortresses bombed from medium altitude. In addition to the obvious objective of sinking ships, these attacks were intended to disperse the convoy by forcing vessels to break their tight convoy grouping to avoid being hit.

Secondly, 13 RAAF Beaufighters from No 30 Squadron hit the enemy from very low altitude, lining up on their targets as the bombs from the Flying Fortresses were exploding. The Australians' job was twofold:

to suppress anti-aircraft fire, and to target the ships' executives located on the bridge of the ships. The Beaufighters initially approached at 150 m (around 400 feet) in line-astern formation. The pilots then dived to mast-level height, set full power on their engines, changed into the abreast formation, and approached their targets at 420 km/h (around 225 knots).

It seems that some of the Japanese captains thought the Beaufighters were going to make a torpedo attack because they altered course to meet the Australians head-on, to present a smaller profile. Instead, this exposed the bridge of the vessels and made them better targets for strafing as the Beaufighters altered their heading in response and raked the ships from bow to stern, subjecting the enemy to a storm of cannon and machine gun fire.



Japanese vessel under attack. Credit: Department of Defence

With the convoy now dispersed and in disarray, the third wave of attackers was able to concentrate on sinking ships. Thirteen USAAF Mitchells made a medium-level bombing strike and made low-level 'skip bombing' attacks while, simultaneously, a mast-level attack was made by 12 other specially modified USAAF Mitchells, commonly referred to as 'commerce destroyers' because of their heavy armament. The commerce destroyers were devastating, claiming 17 direct hits. Close behind the

Mitchells, USAAF Bostons added more firepower.

Following the coordinated onslaught, Beaufighters, Mitchells and Bostons intermingled as they swept back and forth over the convoy, strafing and bombing selected targets at will. The Japanese ships were now listing and sinking, their superstructures smashed and blazing, producing great clouds of smoke. Above the surface battle, 28 USAAF Lightning fighters provided air defence for the strike force. In their combat with the Zeros, which were attempting to protect the convoy, three of the Lightnings were shot down, but in turn the American pilots claimed 20 kills. The only other USAAF aircraft lost was a single Flying Fortress, shot down by a Zero.

By midday on 3 March, the Allied aircraft then returned to Port Moresby for refuelling and rearming.

The attacks on the convoy continued throughout the afternoon. Again, USAAF Flying Fortresses struck from medium level, this time in cooperation with USAAF Mitchells and five RAAF Bostons from No 22 Squadron, flying at very low level. At least 20 direct hits were claimed against the by-now devastated convoy.

On 4 March, Allied aircraft attacked Malahang airfield near Lae and destroyed many enemy aircraft and ground installations. This was the last to be seen of the invading Japanese convoy. In the days following the attacks, RAAF and USAAF aircraft patrolled the Huon Gulf area between Lae and Rabaul in what was described by official historian Douglas Gillison as 'the terrible yet essential finale',

destroying barges and rafts crowded with Japanese survivors.

The Battle of the Bismarck Sea provides a classic example of the effective integration of a wide range of air power roles. For the loss of a handful of aircraft, the Allied air forces had sunk 12 ships – all eight of the troop transports and four of the eight destroyers – and killed nearly 3000 enemy soldiers. The brilliantly conceived and executed operation had smashed Japanese hopes of regaining the initiative in their New Guinea campaign and eliminated any possibility that Australia might be invaded. It also allowed the Australian Army to prepare for the Salamaua and Lae campaigns later in 1943.

General MacArthur described the battle as 'the decisive aerial engagement' of the war in the South-West Pacific Area.

Key Points

- Allied Air Forces involved in the Battle of the Bismarck Sea included elements of the United States Army Air Force, the Royal Australian Air Force, the Royal Air Force, the Royal New Zealand Air Force and the Netherlands East Indies Air Force.
- The Japanese convoy was decimated by a three-wave attack made over three levels, with the majority of ships lost at the expense of only a few Allied aircraft.
- The success gained in the Battle of the Bismarck Sea paved the way ahead for other Australian and Allied operations in New Guinea.

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