

north coast of New Guinea from as far west as Babo eastwards to Lae. This included a 1,400-yards runway on Wakde Island, one of 1,300 yards on a site inland from Hollandia Bay, a large airfield at Wewak which already had 77 dispersal bays, and road construction at both Madang and Alexishafen. There were, too, reports of comparable activity on Cape Gloucester.

Rabaul remained, of course, a South-West Pacific Area responsibility and, while the long-range reconnaissance and heavy bombers of the S.O.P.A.C. air units could now well care for the whole of the Solomons, Buin and Buka were within more convenient range of S.W.P.A. bases.

Late in January, Kenney—"after adding up all the columns of figures showing what I had to fight with"—had written to General Arnold pointing out that in the last three months he had received from the United States a total of 89 aircraft. In that period his losses "from combat, accidents, wear and tear and all other causes combined" totalled 146 and his total strength was 537 of which about 200 were constantly under repair.⁹ The greatest weakness was in heavy bomber strength and, with Rabaul more conspicuous than ever among the air targets, this was worrying. In January the base had been attacked by the Fifth Air Force 13 times. These raids had been made chiefly at night with a maximum force of 12 heavy bombers. More experienced, and therefore more confident, the crews were now bombing from medium altitude (5,000 to 9,000 feet) and at times from as low as 250 feet. A notable variation was a daylight attack on 5th January when a force of Flying Fortresses dropped 40 500-lb and 24 1,000-lb bombs on shipping in Simpson Harbour. Two of the aircraft were lost through intense anti-aircraft fire and fighter interception. In one of these aircraft Brigadier-General Walker, the gallant and able commander of 5th Bomber Command, lost his life. The crews returning from this raid, which was made from 8,500 feet, claimed to have either sunk or left burning nine enemy ships.¹

The much over-worked heavy bombers now required considerable nursing. No. 43 Group, which had been operating in the area for six months, had a strength of 55 Flying Fortresses, about 20 per cent of which were regularly under overhaul. Only about 50 per cent of the remainder could be counted on as available daily for combat missions. Even then about 25 per cent of this final total was needed for regular reconnaissance, which reduced the group's striking strength to only 12 or 14 aircraft for regular attack operations. However, the striking strength could apparently be substantially increased by temporarily suspending Flying Fortress reconnaissance and, after adequate warning and by making a special effort, releasing more aircraft from the overhaul and maintenance shops. There was proof of this on the night of 14th-15th February when 32 Flying Fortresses and four Liberators—the largest bomber force yet used—dropped 50 tons

⁹ *General Kenney Reports*, pp. 185-6.

¹ A subsequent survey by the Joint Army-Navy Assessment Committee reported that only two Japanese ships were sunk at Rabaul in January, one of them, the *Kelfuku Maru* (5,833 tons), on the 5th.