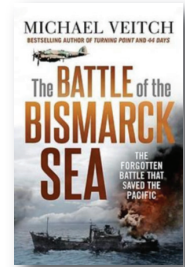


BOOK REVIEW:

The battle of the Bismarck Sea: the forgotten battle that saved the Pacific

by Michael Veitch

Hachette Australia: Sydney; 2021; 342 pp.; ISBN 9780733645891 (paperback); RRP \$32.99; Ursula Davidson Library call number 950.15 VEIT 2021



Why another book on the Battle of the Bismarck Sea? The official history¹ outlined the battle and placed it in its World War II context. McAulay's² seminal work fleshed out the detail from both the Allied and Japanese perspectives. A plethora of other histories and memoirs have examined the battle, many based on primary sources.

Michael Veitch is an Australian author, actor and ABC television and radio broadcaster, best known for his roles in television shows and for his books on World War II aviation, marine science and travel. *The battle of the Bismarck Sea* is his tenth book. It is a summary of the extant body of work on the battle, much of which is listed in a bibliography at pp. 329 – 332. It draws only on those secondary sources and presents no new primary material. There are no end notes, and where direct quotations are made, the partial citations of the original sources do not include page numbers. Hence, the book will be of limited value to historians.

The book recounts that, by the end of 1942, on the verge of having to withdraw from both Guadalcanal and Papua, Japan resolved to hold its position in New Guinea. To this end, it decided to reinforce its New Guinea garrisons, by sending additional infantry divisions by sea from Rabaul.

An initial convoy in January 1943, which sailed from Rabaul to Lae through the Solomon Sea along New Britain's south coast, was attacked by Allied air forces, largely ineffectively. The reinforcements enabled a Japanese advance from Salamaua to Wau with a view to capturing the strategic Australian airfield there, but the Japanese attack failed.

The Japanese immediately began planning a second convoy to transport the 51st Division to Lae. A convoy of eight troop transports, eight escorting destroyers, some 100 land-based fighter aircraft and several submarines was assembled at Rabaul.

Meanwhile, the demoralised United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) in the South-West Pacific Area received a new commander, General George C. Kenney, who was determined to forge a new instrument of American air power capable of destroying Japanese naval forces in the area. He was ably assisted by Group Captain William 'Bull'

Garing DFC, the senior air staff officer of the Royal Australian Air Force's (RAAF) Northern Area Command, who would devise the tactics for attacking convoys; and Major Paul Irving 'Pappy' Gunn, USAAF, who would modify the American aircraft to increase their lethality and enable the new attacking techniques of masthead-level bombing and skip bombing. So, the United States 5th Army Air Force came into being. It would be supported by several RAAF bomber and fighter squadrons from Northern Area Command.

The second Japanese convoy departed Rabaul on the night of 28 February 1943 under dense cloud cover bound for Lae, this time along New Britain's north coast through the Bismarck Sea and thence south through the Vitiiaz Strait into the Huon Gulf. On 1 March, the convoy was briefly sighted in the Bismarck Sea by Allied reconnaissance aircraft and a transport, the *Kyokusei Maru*, was sunk off the north-western tip of New Britain on 2 March during another brief sighting. The convoy turned south into the Vitiiaz Strait that night and delayed there for several hours awaiting air cover.

The main battle occurred at the southern end of the Vitiiaz Strait on the morning of 3 March. Over a period of some 30 minutes, successive co-ordinated waves of Allied fighter and bomber squadrons attacked the convoy from different altitudes and from different directions. All seven remaining Japanese transports and four of the eight escorting destroyers were sunk.

That afternoon, hundreds of Japanese survivors were observed floating on rafts and wreckage in the Huon Gulf, some being rescued by Japanese destroyers. Kenney and Garing ordered that every effort be made to prevent the survivors from reaching Lae. On 4 March, Allied aircraft strafed the Japanese survivors.

It is estimated that some 3000 Japanese were killed during the battle. A similar number were rescued by destroyers and submarines and were delivered to Lae or returned to Rabaul, but the 51st Division had been destroyed as a fighting force. The USAAF had lost six aircraft and 13 aircrew; the RAAF none. It had been an annihilating victory. Japan would never attempt to reinforce New Guinea by naval convoy again.

The book, written in a journalistic style, is well researched. In Veitch's hands, the story becomes an exciting yarn. It is likely to appeal to readers of all ages and backgrounds who are unfamiliar with the battle; and to those already familiar with it who seek a one-volume summary of the literature written in an entertaining manner.

David Leece

¹Gillison, Douglas (1962). *Royal Australian Air Force, 1939-1942* (Australian War Memorial: Canberra), especially Chapter 32 "Wau and the Bismarck Sea", pp. 679-707.

²McAulay, Lex (1961). *Battle of the Bismarck Sea: 3 March 1943* (St Martin's Press: New York).