

THE TIPPING POINT

THE BATTLE OF THE BISMARCK SEA, MARCH 1943

By March 1943 the Japanese were using Rabaul on New Britain as a vital strategic base to supply troops for fighting the Allies in New Guinea. Convoys between Rabaul and Lae had to be stopped — permanently. Australian aviation historian **JARRYD CRIPPS** commemorates the 80th anniversary of the Battle of the Bismarck Sea, a model of American-Australian airpower co-operation

WHEN CONSIDERING PIVOTAL and major battles of the Second World War, those most likely to come to mind might be the Battles of Britain, Midway, Coral Sea, or the fight for Stalingrad or D-Day. An Australian might think of Tobruk and Kokoda. There is a good chance, however, that few would think of the Battle of the Bismarck Sea, a short series of events in 1943 that may nevertheless be described as a tipping point in the south-west Pacific — a battle that virtually wiped out an entire Japanese division and showcased the ruthless potential of Allied airpower.

SETTING THE STAGE

At the beginning of 1942 Japan swept through the Asia-Pacific region in a rapid advance. Malaya fell, then the Philippines, and Japanese forces continued sweeping south until the significant, important, and “impenetrable” British fortress



A USAAF Douglas A-20 makes its escape at mast-top height during a skip-bombing attack. Although this particular photograph was taken in March 1944 after the Battle of the Bismarck Sea, it dramatically illustrates the skill and nerves of steel required for the skip-bombing technique, which was used for the first time operationally in the Pacific during the Bismarck Sea actions in early March 1943.

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