



# Soldiers in the air

A narrative about 1st Battalion, Fiji Infantry Regiment platoon commanders' flights from their Ibu outpost to the Allied Empress Bay base - and then leading American dive-bombing missions on the hidden Japanese targets they have discovered on their jungle reconnaissance patrols deep in enemy territory

Ibu outpost, Bougainville, Solomon Islands, 29th December 1943 - 15th February 1944.



**Seated in the cockpit of an Allied dive-bombing aircraft, a former master of Christ's College, Christchurch, Captain P.H. Williams, directed the craft's pilot over jungled mountains of Bougainville to well behind Japanese forward troops. Consulting a map, and noting landmarks, Captain Williams changed the pilot's course from time to time, watched the impenetrable miles of tall foliage below, and eventually indicated: "There's your target."**

**Behind the leading machine a flight of dive-bombers turned towards the ground and let go a bombload, and a strafing spray into the jungle. Climbing out of their dive, they headed for the home base.**

**Below the Japanese, believing themselves hidden from aerial observation, and attack, took bewildering stock of fresh damage and casualties.**

They could not know that an officer of the Fijian Military Forces had accompanied the pilot of the leading aircraft, knowing exactly where the Japanese positions were. This dual role of ground patrol and air attack leader is one that a number of Fijian Force officers have taken on. Captain Williams has led several such attacks: 2/Lieut. B.I. Dent, of Timaru, later killed in action, had led one, and Lieut. Isireli Korovulavula another. Just another practical example of the value of the Fijians' work on Bougainville, these instances reveal the uncanny accuracy of their reconnaissances. Having noticed, on patrol, big enemy concentrations, an officer notes all he can about the immediate neighbourhood, pin-points the enemy positions on his map, returns to his outpost base, flies from the small strip there in a Cub aeroplane to the main Allied base at Empress Bay, explains the task and target, and himself accompanies the pilot of the lead aircraft on the bombing mission. END

Above article appeared 'Bay of Plenty Beacon', May 6th, 1944.  
Story written between January 1st - January 27th, 1944.

\* A reconnaissance of the area was made, and a suitable site near the Ibu perimeter was found, a remarkable coincidence when it is considered that Ibu is 1,700 feet up on the slopes of the Crown Prince Range. Work began at once with the aid of bayonets, entrenching tools and some axes dropped by planes, and by the end of the third day a Taylor Cub landed and took off from the strip. The evacuation problem was solved. The field was given the name "Kameli Strip" in memory of the soldier who had been killed on a recent patrol.

Work on the strip proceeded and the area was lengthened by felling a number of trees to give a flight gap in to the strip. Landing and taking off the small planes on the tiny strip was a very tricky undertaking and during the following weeks, several planes were wrecked, fortunately without injury to the occupants. END

\* Excerpts from: The History of Fiji Military Forces 1939 - 1945

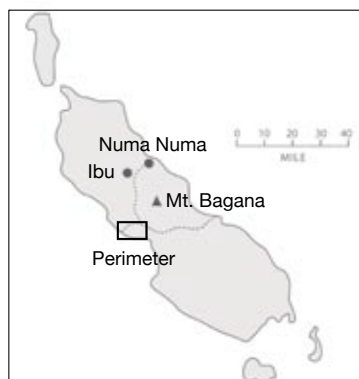


The tiny airstrip and outpost of Ibu, 1,700 feet up in the Crown Prince Range, over twenty miles behind enemy lines, Bougainville.



Cub planes evacuating sick and wounded from Kameli airstrip, Ibu outpost. Fence keeps wild animals from entering the airstrip.

Because of the dense jungle cover preventing any accurate observation from the air, information obtained by the Fiji commandos reconnaissance patrols, was of immense value in giving the exact site of Japanese bivouacs, munition dumps, recording the movement and dispersion of the enemy and their defense areas, so the artillery fire and dive-bombing could be directed on them with precision.



### Ibu outpost

Ibu outpost and Kameli airstrip were over 20 miles outside the Allied Empress Bay defensive perimeter, and within 5 miles of the Japanese headquarters where up to 20,000 troops were quartered.

The outpost was 1,700 feet high atop the Crown Prince Range.



David Duncan

“Bouncing through typical Bougainville weather, the “grasshopper” wings up the Laruma canyon through Jap-held country. Often the tiny planes drew small arms fire from the jungle, where a forced landing would have been fatal. It took 20 minutes to fly from Torokina headquarters to the Ibu outpost”.



David Duncan

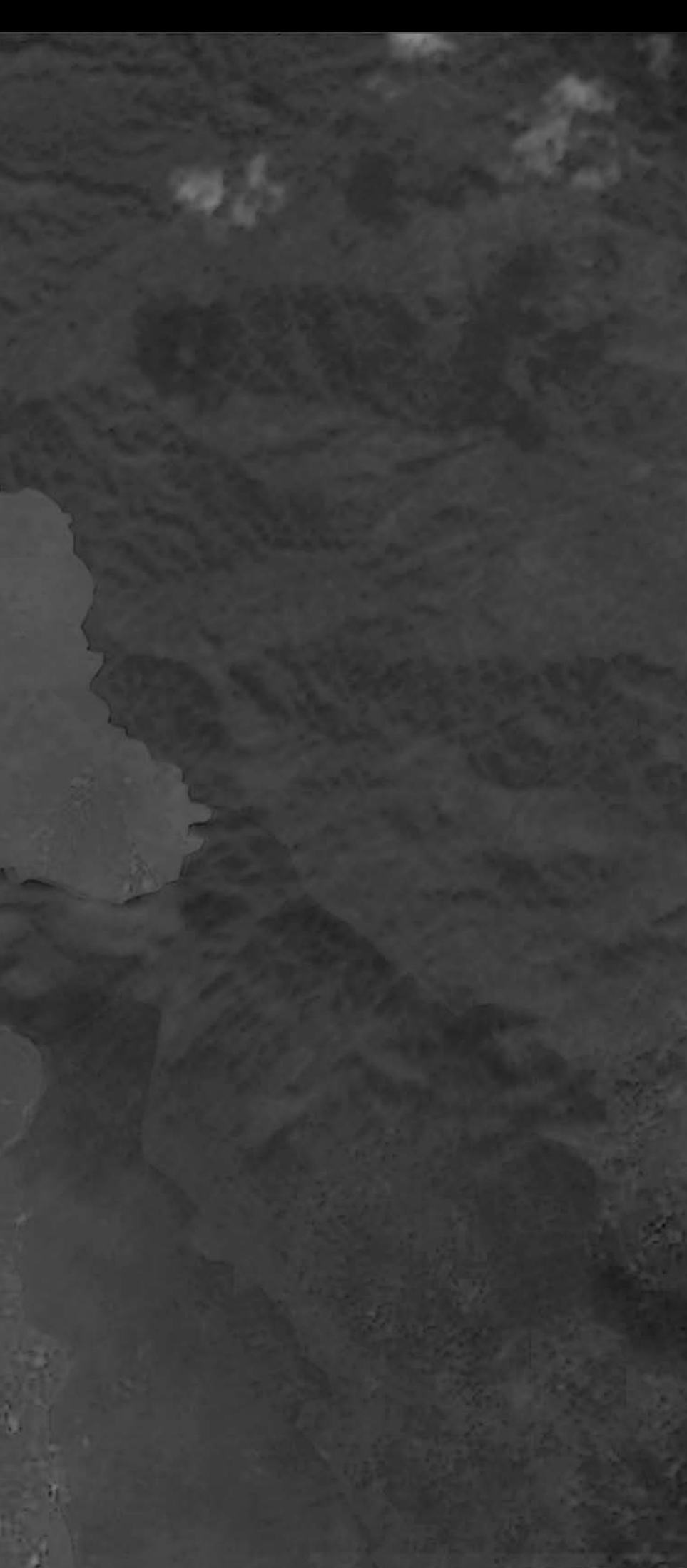
View from Cub plane looking towards Mt Bagana.



David Duncan

A Corsair takes-off from Torokina airfield.





**“I have had quite a lot of aeroplane rides lately, not for pleasure actually, but it was quite thrilling at times, especially in the dives.”**

2nd Lieut. Bruce Dent.

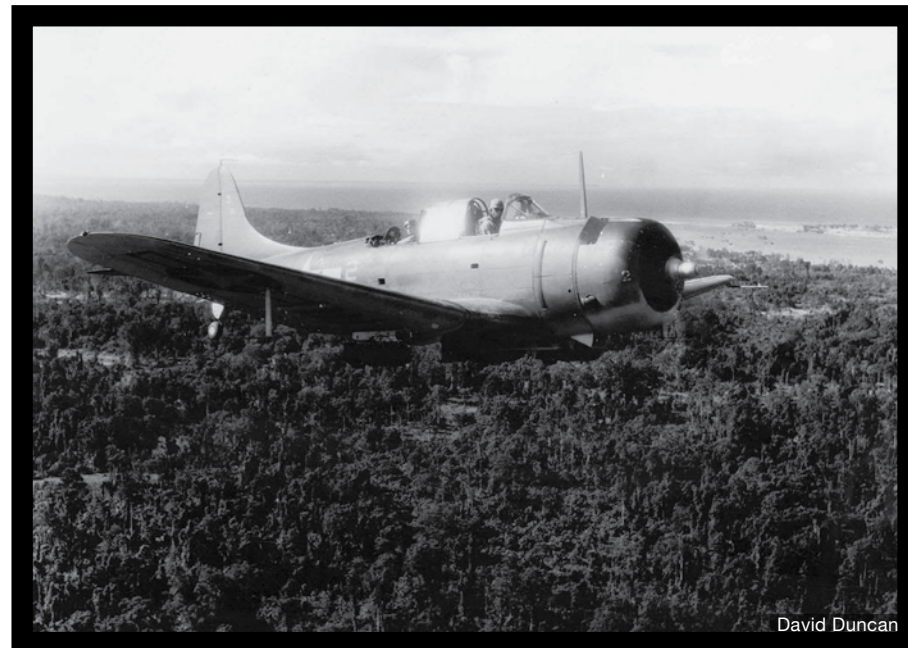
Above: Excerpt from ‘A’ Company combat and reconnaissance platoon commander 2nd Lieut. Bruce Dent’s letter to his sister Beverly 29-2-1944.

Left: An American Douglas Dauntless dive-bomber leads the attack on a coastal heavy gun emplacement hidden under the dense jungle canopy and covered with expert Japanese camouflage. Japanese heavy anti-aircraft guns open fire on the dive-bomber.



David Duncan

When in radio range and able to observe the target, reconnaissance patrols would call in airstrikes or naval bombardment action - on occasion this proved deadly with Fijian troops being injured or killed by the 'friendly' fire.



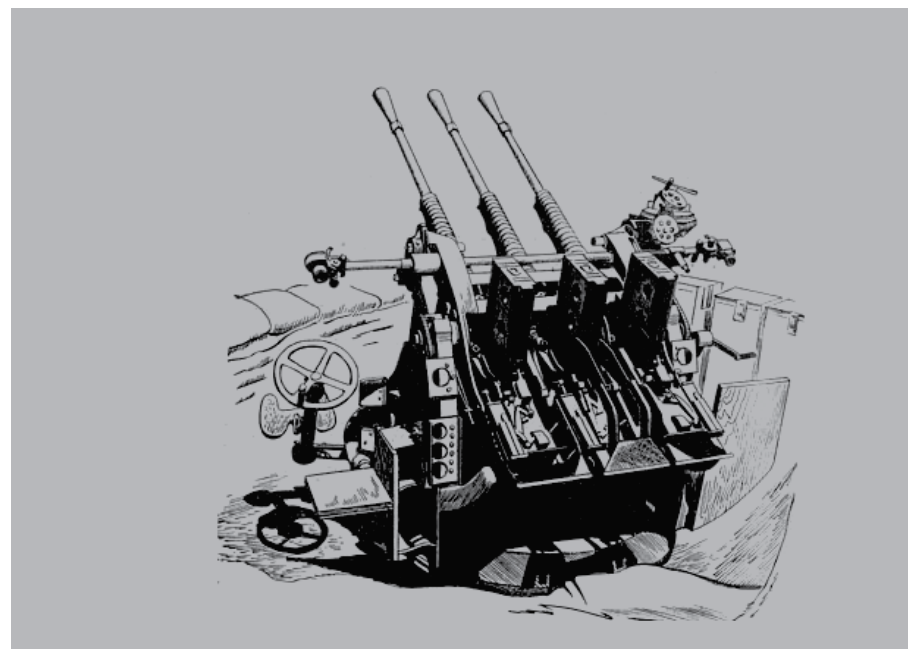
David Duncan

A Douglas Dauntless dive-bomber heads from Torokina on a bombing mission.



David Duncan

A Corsair plane called in by Fiji commandos, fires it's rockets at the hidden Japanese position.



Japanese heavy anti-aircraft gun.



David Duncan

Above image: 2nd Lt. Bruce Dent and his platoon of Fijian commandos just before leaving the Ibu outpost for Pipipaia.

2nd Lt. Bruce Ingham Dent. 285658  
 1st Battalion, Fiji Infantry Regiment.  
 Platoon Commander 'A' Company. 2nd Coy.  
 Killed in action. Machine-gun. 1200 hours, March 25th 1944.  
 Age: 22.  
 Student.

Awarded Military Cross (posthumous) leading combat and reconnaissance patrols between 31st January and 2nd February 1944, deep in Japanese held territory in the vicinity of Pipipaia, Bougainville.

### Lieut. Isireli Korovulavula

... received the news that Lieut. Isireli Korovulavula, who had been missing with a Cub plane since 27th January had been found alive. On 27th January, Lieut. Korovulavula after leading a bombing strike was returning to Ibu in a Cub plane piloted by 2nd Lieut. C.W. Cross, when the weather closed in and after several hours of flying the plane crashed in a tree to the north of the uninhabited mountains. The pilot and Lieut. Isireli Korovulavula were unhurt and managed to climb out of the plane and down to the ground 50 feet below.

They could see no landmarks and unluckily the compass had broken. For ten days they wandered without food through the mountains in continuous bad weather, until on the morning of the 5th of February, Lieut. Isireli climbed a tree and saw an island which turned out to be Vuka. Realizing that they had been traveling in the wrong direction they turned to retrace their steps, but not wishing to go near the coast they kept to the very steep mountain trails, at times sliding down sheer rock faces. As they got weaker and weaker progress became much slower until at last Lieut. Cross, after having been carried by Lieut. Isireli over much of the ground, could go no further. By this time Isireli was very weak and could only travel short distances at a time. He built a small shelter for his partner in distress, and set off alone hoping against hope that he would come across someone from whom he could obtain help. He struggled on for a further seven days and then was found in a very distressed condition by friendly natives. He was given food and clothing and his wounds dressed.

As Lieut. Isireli Korovulavula could not remember where he had left his companion, having wandered for days in a semi-conscious state, it was decided that a search would be futile. The natives contacted the Australian Coast Watching party who helped Lieut. Korovulavula back to the coast. For his outstanding courage and devotion to his comrade, Lieut. Isireli Korovulavula was awarded the M.C. and received a commendation from the Commanding Officer of Lieut. Cross's unit.

Excerpt from: The History of Fiji Military Forces 1939 - 1945

Footnote: The target that Lieut Korovulavula had discovered in the jungle was attacked by Dive-bombers.



Cub observation plane spotting Japanese troops on ground during the major mopping-up operation, Bougainville 8th April 1944.



The Cub plane (left image) pilot flies low to the ground for more accurate observation

### **Battle of Bougainville**

During the Battle of Bougainville: 8th March 1944 - 27th March, and the following major mopping-up operation, the Cub played a vital role as a plane to spot the Japanese on the ground.

They flew low to the ground - this made them vulnerable to enemy fire, and many were shot down.

Over this period the Fiji Infantry Regiment patrolled outside the defensive perimeter, and would radio-in Japanese positions for dive-bombing attacks, and/or artillery bombardment. It is unknown whether F.I.R. officers flew in the dive-bombers and directed any of these attacks.

### **2nd Lieut. Bruce Dent's solo flying**

"Did you know I have been doing quite a lot of flying and, not for pleasure either, but as part of my work. That will make you surprised, I'll bet, but I have got about 8 hours to my credit. I can now claim the unique experience of having fought on land, on sea, and in the air. I will be able to tell you more about it when I see you, but it was quite thrilling in the air and by far the best way to have a crack at the nips. I have really had some amazing experiences- some I think may make your hair stand on end- but which are every day experiences up here."

Letter sent to Bruce Dent's sister Nona, 1944.

NARRATIVES	EVENT /YEAR	CREATED
"Mopping-up operation"	- 26.3.1944 - 10.4.1944	Oct 2016
"Soldiers in the air"	- 29.12.1943 - 15.2.1944	Nov 2016