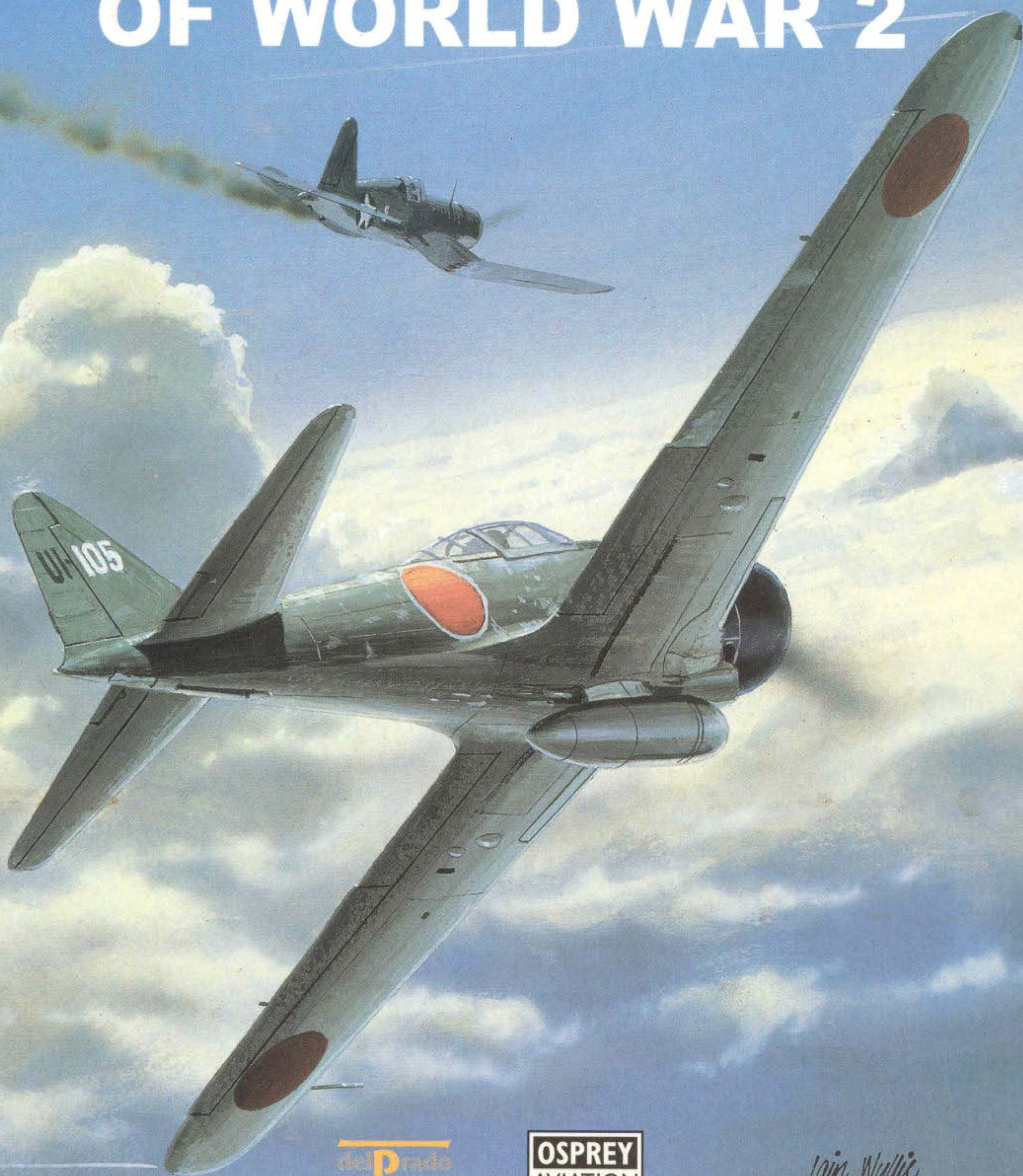


# AIRCRAFT

OF THE ACES: MEN & LEGENDS

## IMPERIAL JAPANESE NAVY ACES OF WORLD WAR 2



del Prado  
publishers

OSPREY  
AVIATION

Iain Wyllie



# **IMPERIAL JAPANESE NAVY ACES OF WORLD WAR 2**







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#### Front Cover

CPO Hiroyoshi Nishizawa of the 251st AG manoeuvres his A6M3 Model 22 into position to deliver a final killing blow to an already smoking Marine Corps F4U Corsair over the Solomons. The great ace recorded his first claim against a Corsair on 7 June 1943 over the Russell Islands, his victim almost certainly being one of three VMF-112 shot down on this date. All of the American pilots were recovered, and the USMC until itself lodged claims for eight victories. From June through to 21 August 1943, CPO Nishizawa engaged in numerous fierce actions with F4Us over Rendova, Buin and Vella Lavella. During this period, the ace participated in the destruction of 45 Corsairs, which were attributed to his unit rather than him, as per the Japanese Naval Air Force (JNAF) GHQ directive prohibiting individual victory credits

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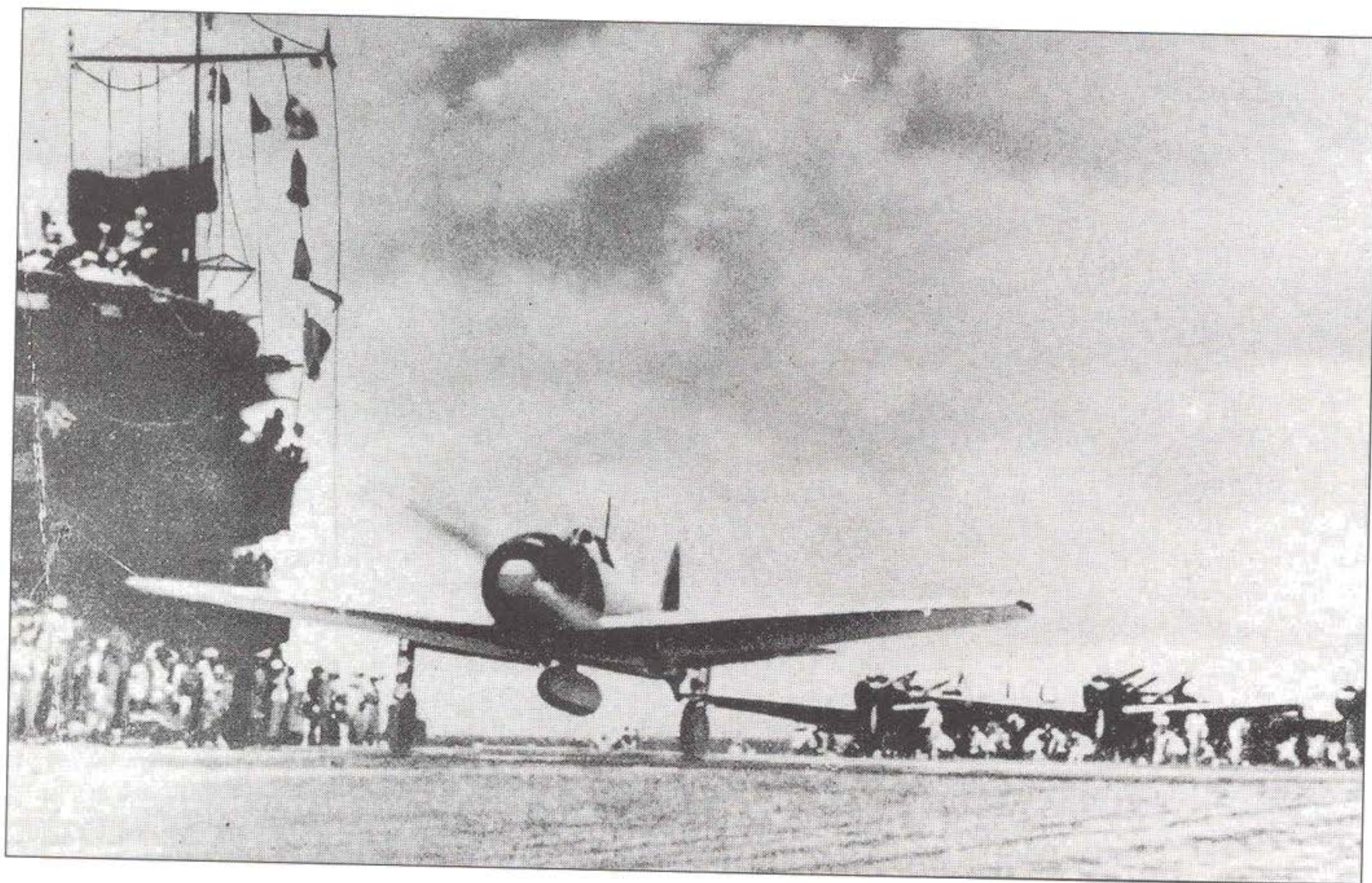
# EARLY MONTHS OF THE PACIFIC WAR

**W**hen Japan unleashed the might of its military forces against the Americans at Pearl Harbor and in the Philippines, it did so with the most modern aircraft and highly-trained pilots that it possessed at any time in its history. While some units in the Japanese Navy Air Force (JNAF) were still flying Type 96 'Claudes', all of the fighter aircraft committed to the Pearl Harbor and Philippines missions were A6M2 Zeroes, many flown by veterans of the China War.

The conflict in the Pacific grew out of economic and political discontent felt in Japan against 'Western Imperialists' – namely the United States and Britain. Japan's successful forays into Manchuria and China had allowed its military to test and perfect its arsenal of offensive weapons, especially its fighters and bombers. It also allowed JNAF and Japanese Army Air Force (JAAF) aircrew to perfect tactics that would give them the advantage over the air arms of the Western powers in the first critical months of war. Success on the Chinese mainland throughout the 1930s led Japan's military leaders to grow overconfident in their forces' ability to wage war on a much larger scale in Asia, an illusion manifesting itself in the dramatic upsurge of fanatical nationalism that swept the nation.

By the summer of 1941 Japanese leaders knew that conflict was inevitable, and so ordered their forces to prepare for war whilst the politicians still it carried out diplomatic negotiations in Washington DC. Adm

Lt Saburo Shindo, flying A1-102, starts his take-off run along the deck of the *Akagi* as part of the second wave attack on Pearl Harbor. Shindo served as division officer within the carrier squadron at this time, and was one of the few Pearl Harbor veterans to survive the war



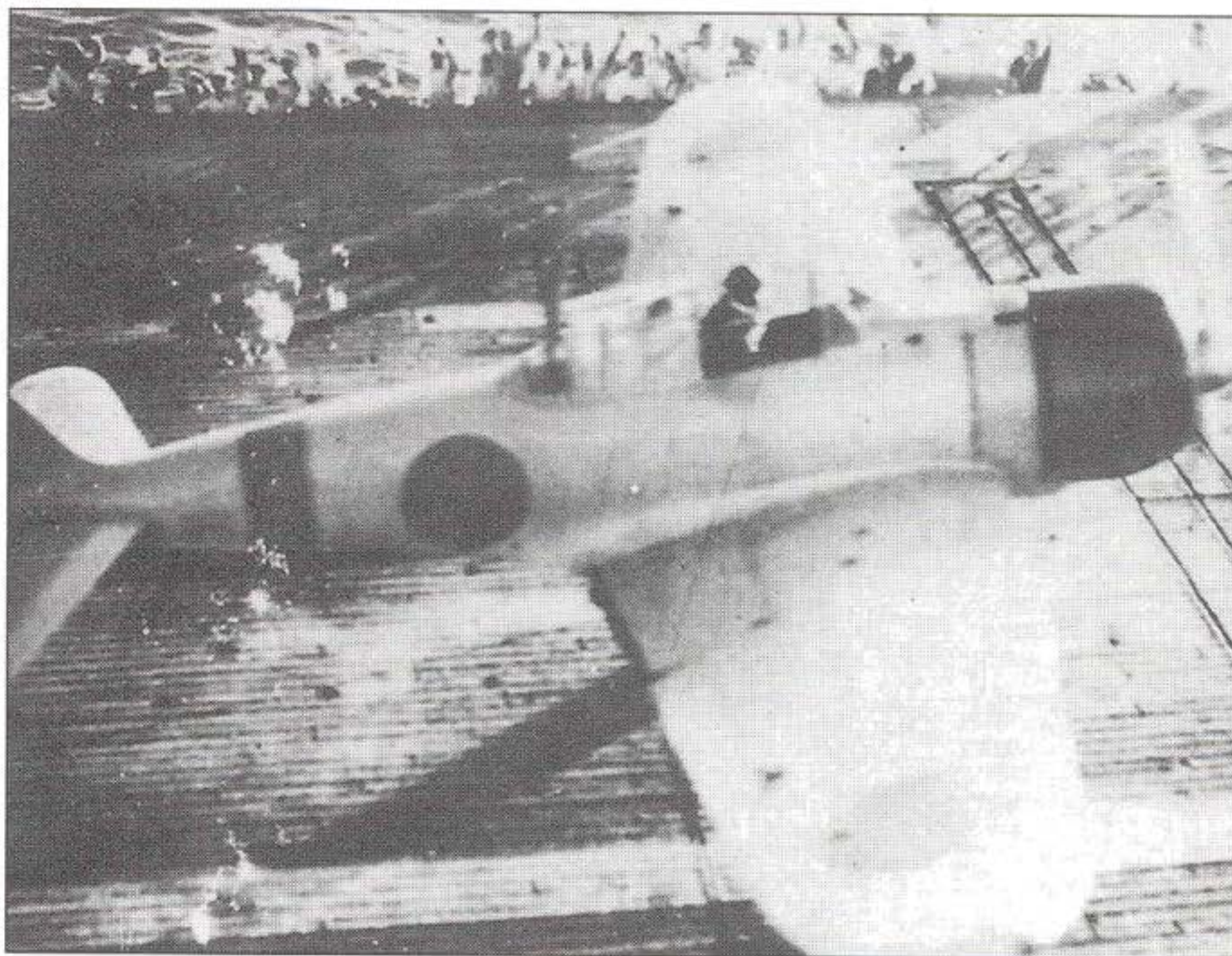


Isoroku Yamamoto, C-in-C of the Combined Forces, was given orders to undertake an all-out assault on US forces at Pearl Harbor, in the Hawaiian Islands. The date of the strike was set for 8 December 1941, and his force comprised 23 warships, including six fleet aircraft carriers, and 350+ aircraft.

By the time political negotiations failed, the carriers had already positioned themselves some 200 nautical miles north of Pearl Harbor. At 01.30 (Tokyo time) bombers began roaring off the flightdecks.

Zero pilots played a key role in assuring the success of the surprise assault. In order to prevent the vulnerable torpedo- and dive-bombers being molested as they manoeuvred into position to make their runs, A6Ms strafed parked aircraft and shot down any that managed to launch. Not all of the Americans who sortied were 'easy pickings', however.

Lt Iyozoh Fujita found himself under attack as he led his men toward Wheeler Field, and in the wild dogfight that ensued, Japanese aviators were taken aback by the aggressiveness of their American counterparts – their opponents could have been 2Lts George Welch and Ken Taylor of the 47th Pursuit Squadron (PS), flying P-40Bs. Fujita poured fire into an aircraft below him, which smoked but escaped. Not wishing to push his luck any further, Fujita signalled to his men to withdraw and head



**PO3/c Shimpei Sano clears *Akagi*'s island in A6M2 Zero 21 Al-111 as he too launches with the second wave attackers bound for Pearl Harbor. Sano was later killed during the Battle of Midway**

**A6M2s of *Shokaku*'s fighter squadron run up as the carrier sails into wind for a dawn launch north-east of Hawaii. Six Zeroes from this unit participated in the first wave attack, strafing Kaneohe and Bellows airfields**





Sporting ten cherry blossoms, the tail of Zero X-183 reveals the score of PO2/c Yoshiro Hashiguchi, who saw action with the 3rd AG over the Dutch East Indies at the start of the Pacific War. He later enjoyed further success over Darwin, Rabaul, and Guadalcanal. Attaining the rank of chief petty officer, Hashiguchi was finally posted missing in action on 25 October 1944 when his carrier was sunk. He achieved over ten victories

Two great aces are seen as student pilots in this May 1941 class photo. Takeo Tanimizu (standing, second from right) and Shoichi Sugita (standing to Tanimizu's left) were classmates at Tsukuba Air Base, where they flew the Type 93 Intermediate Trainer, seen here as a backdrop. Their class graduated in March 1942 – prior to the Midway disaster. Subsequent training was notably inferior as the JNAF rushed to graduate pilots to make good the Midway losses



simply being relieved that they had survived their first day of war. They also grieved for their comrades who had not returned.

The Pearl Harbor attack had been a spectacular success, for the US fleet in the western Pacific had been crippled with one bold stroke and the enlisted men and officers of the JNAF now considered themselves invincible. However, senior men at Naval GHQ (including Adm Yamamoto himself) were far from elated, for they had failed to catch their primary targets at anchor – aircraft carriers. They would come back to hurt them.

Japanese Navy Academy graduates were open-minded and worldly wise, differing greatly from their army counterparts. In their cruises to the West as midshipmen, they saw at firsthand the industrial might and capa-

bilities of the great economic superpowers, leading some to secretly believe that Japan could never win this new war.

Coinciding with the strike at Pearl Harbor, Japanese forces launched an all-out attack in the Philippines, Hong Kong and the Dutch East Indies – with very little in the way of natural resources, Japan needed the oil reserves, rubber and mineral wealth of the Dutch East Indies to fuel its war effort.

From their base in Formosa, the Tainan and 3rd AGs raided Clark and Iba airfields in the Philippines in advance of the bombers, thus neutralising any fighter opposition. Despite the warnings radioed to their forces in the Philippines during the Pearl Harbor attack, the Americans were once again caught unprepared, resulting in the US Army Air Corps (AAC) losing half of its aircraft destroyed or damaged in one raid.

Veteran fighter pilots like POs Kuniyoshi Tanaka, Saburo Sakai, Kaneyoshi Muto and WO Sadaaki





Akamatsu tangled with P-40s in lopsided dogfights, although the majority of American aircraft were destroyed on the ground. With another raid on 10 December, US air power in the Philippines was decisively crushed.

The success of these lightning strikes further boosted the morale of the JNAF, and set a new distance record for the Zero. The entire round-trip distance from Formosa to the Philippines was more than 1000 miles, such an incredible way for a single-engined aircraft that the Americans believed that they had flown from carriers – strict flight formation and fuel conservation training had paid off handsomely.

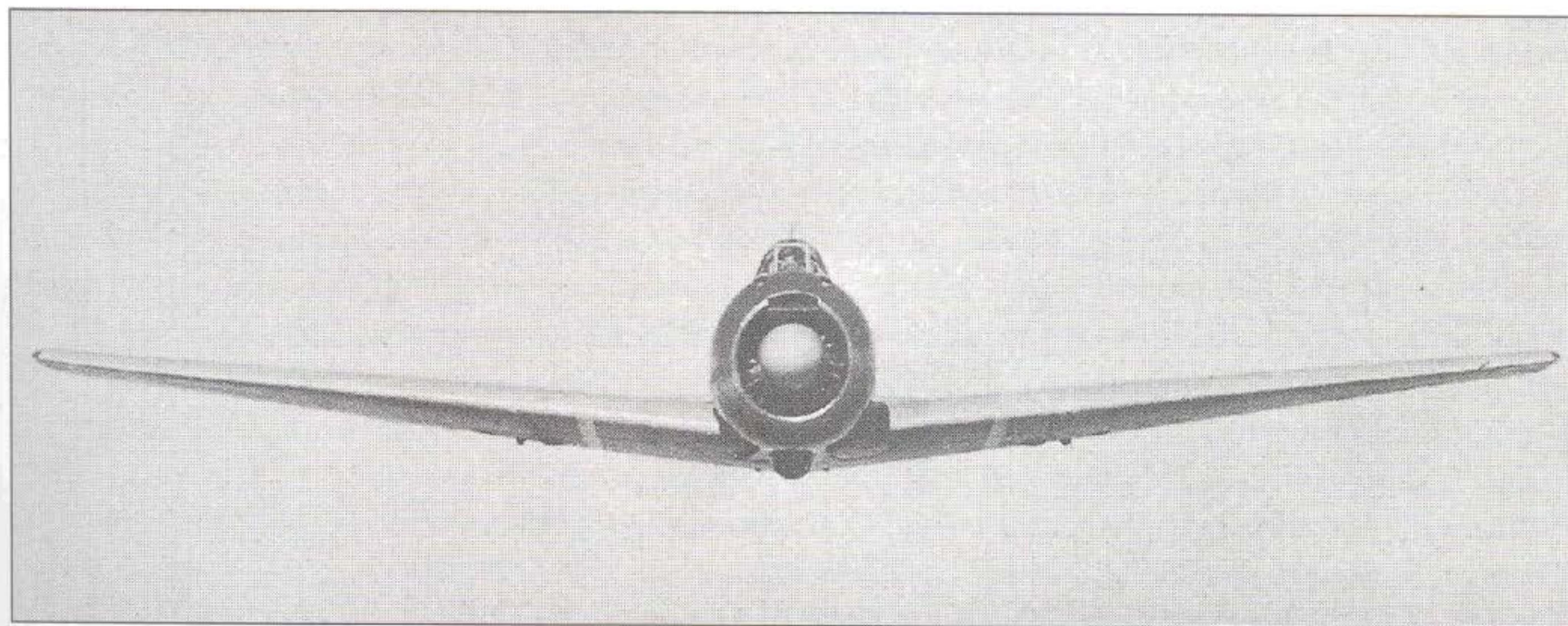
With the Philippines neutralised, the JNAF directed their attention to the Dutch East Indies. Attempting to defend the latter was the RAF, the Netherlands East Indies Army Air Force and surviving elements of the USAAC, and although they fought to near annihilation to thwart the invasion, they were overwhelmed by a superior enemy. Dutch F2A Buffaloes and Hawks, in particular, proved to be little more than ‘cannon fodder’ for the A6M2s, as Saburo Sakai later noted, ‘The Buffaloes were rough, inferior, aircraft. They never stood a chance against our Zeros.’

RAF Hurricanes and P-40s of the USAAC’s 20th PS fared a little better than the Buffaloes, but the destruction of their airfields (and critical supplies and aircraft) allied with the total confusion and panic on the ground prevented them from effectively mounting an organised counter-attack. The Java campaign concluded in the first week of March 1942 when organised resistance ceased, and thousands of Allied soldiers surrendered. Once again air support had proven to be pivotal in the Japanese *Blitzkrieg* of the early months of the Pacific War. Now the JNAF turned their attention to New Guinea and Australia.



PO2/c Yoshiro Hashiguchi is seen seated in his A6M2 Zero X-183 whilst part of the 3rd AG in late 1941. The aircraft’s rudimentary ring-bead gunsight is just visible in this photograph

The last sight that many an Allied pilot glimpsed in his rear-vision mirror prior to being shot down during the early months of the Pacific War. This particular Zero is a clipped-wing A6M3 Model 32, examples of which reached the frontline just in time for the Japanese foray across the Asia-Pacific rim





# MIDWAY

Fought on 4-5 June 1942, the Battle of Midway marked the turning point in the Pacific War, as at last the Allies defeated the might of the Japanese fleet. When the engagement was over, the JNAF had lost four carriers and more than ten per cent of its veteran fighter pilots.

Emboldened by its dramatic victories at Pearl Harbor and in the Philippines and the Dutch East Indies, the Japanese High Command decided to capture the strategically crucial island of Midway in order to further threaten American Pacific Forces in Hawaii. Its capture would consolidate their hold on the Solomons, and help isolate Australia from the USA.

Adm Isoroku Yamamoto, Commander-in-Chief of the Combined Fleet, devised an elaborate plan to take Midway. He sent two small expeditions to attack targets in the Aleutians, thus hoping to divert the American Pacific Fleet to the north – the capture of the Aleutians would also prevent the Americans from attacking Japan. Meanwhile, the main body of the First Carrier Strike Force (led by ViceAdm Chuichi Nagumo), consisting of the carriers *Akagi*, *Kaga*, *Soryu* and *Hiryu*, supported by battleships, cruisers, and over 250 aircraft, steamed toward their target.

The Japanese plan was doomed to failure, however, for unbeknown to them, American cryptographers had succeeded in breaking the Japanese naval codes. Therefore, although commanding a numerically inferior force, Adm Chester Nimitz held the crucial advantage of surprise. He would be further aided by a series of incredible tactical blunders by the Japanese, which added greatly to their catastrophe.

The battle commenced in the early hours of 4 June when 36 Zeroes sortied as escorts for 72 torpedo- and dive-bombers sent to attack Midway airfield. The large strike force was quickly detected by radar, and every available aircraft on the island was airborne within ten minutes to oppose the raiders. At 06.20, combat was joined when Maj Floyd B Parks led VMF-221 (comprised of seven Buffaloes and five Wildcats) against the invaders – a further 11 Buffaloes and a single Wildcat provided backup.

In the ensuing dogfight, the Marine pilots were overwhelmed as they attempted to out turn their Japanese opponents in their nimble Zeroes. Thirteen brave Buffalo pilots paid with their lives as only ten of the twenty-five aircraft that sortied returned – most in damaged condition.

The Americans also sent out torpedo-bombers to attack the carriers, but they too were decimated before a single torpedo could strike home. Lt Iyozoh Fujita made a name for himself during this engagement, for he downed no fewer than ten enemy aircraft as the Americans swarmed toward the carriers. However, a second strike force would turn the tide of battle, for as the Zeroes tore into the torpedo-bombers, SBD Dauntless dive-bombers from the *Yorktown* pushed through unmolested to deliver fatal blows to the carriers *Akagi*, *Kaga* and *Soryu*.

The Japanese swiftly retaliated by despatching 'Val' dive-bombers from the surviving carrier *Hiryu* to attack the *Yorktown*. By the time the 'Vals' had completed their attacks the American carrier was well ablaze, but although 'Kate' torpedo-bombers followed up the dive-bombers' good



work by striking the vessel twice with torpedoes, the stubborn carrier refused to die – on 6 June a third torpedo from a Japanese submarine finally sent *Yorktown* to the bottom.

The battle was not quite over, however, for aircraft from the *Enterprise* located the surviving Japanese carrier *Hiryu* and quickly reduced her to a gutted hulk. She was scuttled by her crew the following morning.

The loss of four fleet carriers, experienced pilots and aircrew and entire squadrons in a single engagement stunned the Japanese. In the subsequent scramble to make good their aviation losses, the JNAF recalled many veteran pilots from land-based units across the occupied territories back to Japan to serve as instructors. The mass training of pilots quickly began in earnest, but in order return units to their previous strengths, the entrance requirements were lowered and the flight training syllabus shortened – these factors combined to produce pilots ill-equipped for frontline flying. The JNAF would pay dearly for Midway.

## Lieutenant Commander Iyozoh Fujita

Iyozoh Fujita was one of two naval aviators who was recognised as having shot down ten enemy aircraft in one day. The son of a doctor and a midwife, he was born in Shantung Province, China, in November 1917. He became interested in pursuing a naval career while attending high school, where his scholastic aptitude earned him entrance into the Naval Academy at Etajima in the Class of 1938. The young ensign completed flight training in June 1940.

When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, Lt(jg) Fujita sortied from the carrier *Soryu* as a flight leader in the second wave fighter escort. He strafed ground targets and his Zero was hit by return fire, and as related in the previous chapter, while gathering the escorts for their return, his formation was jumped by either P-36s or P-40s and a wild dogfight ensued. Managing to disengage from the action in his damaged Zero, Fujita led his men back to the carrier where, upon landing, a piece of his engine broke off.

JNAF pilots entered 1942 in high spirits and with total confidence in the Zero. At the time a naval aviator needed to have completed between 50-100 hours' flying time and four-five landings to achieve carrier qualification, and even the youngest fleet pilot had at least 500 flight hours.

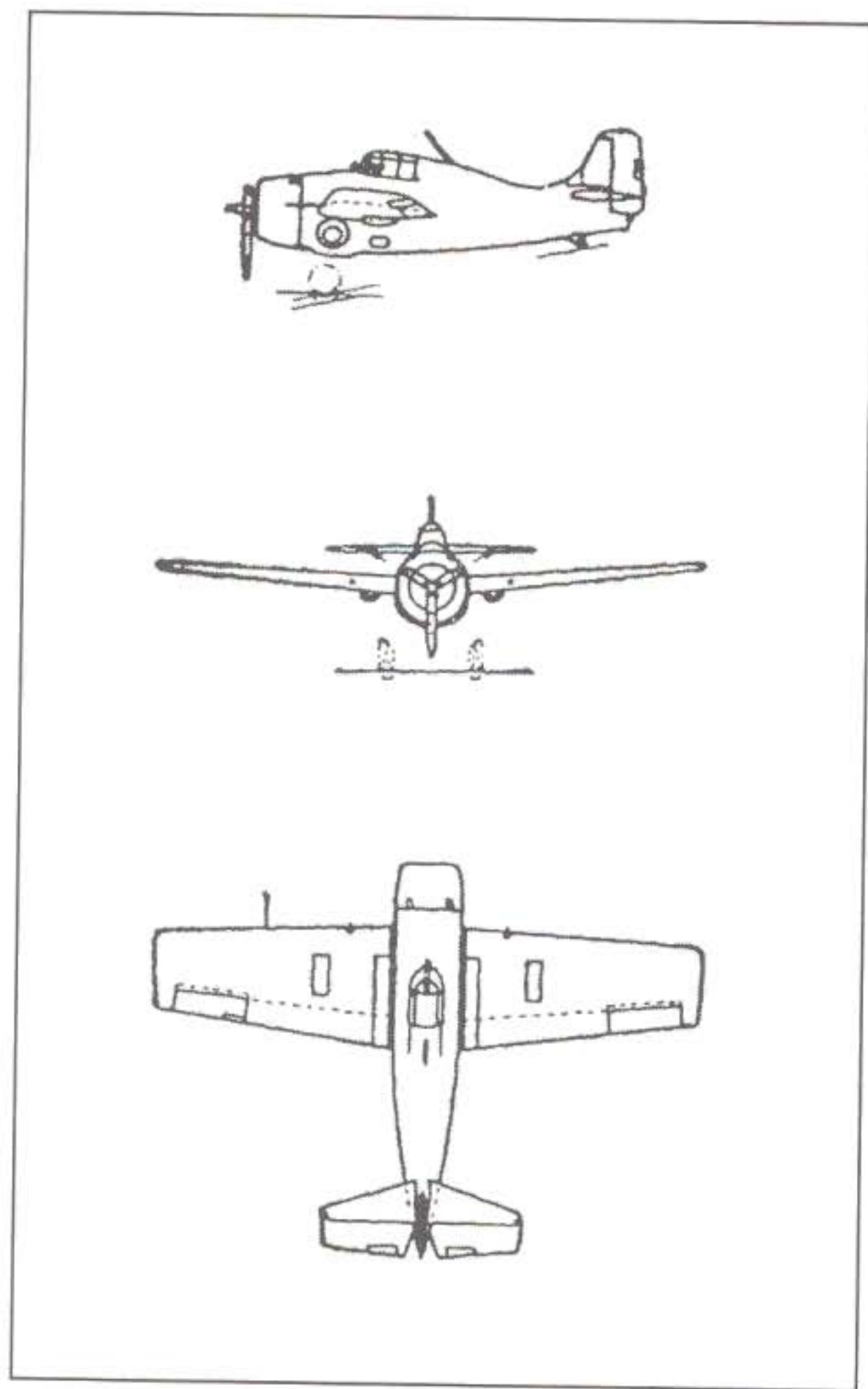
One of those pilots entering the Midway action buoyed by his previous success was Lt Iyozoh Fujita. He carried this confidence into action with him on 4 June when he intercepted a large number of torpedo-bombers during a combat air patrol over the carrier task force. Directed into position by shipboard radio vectoring, Fujita chose the previously untried tactic of diving headlong into the formation rather than attacking the group from the rear. Sweeping through with his guns continuously blazing, he was stunned to see two or three aircraft falling away smoking.

'This is the method!' Fujita exclaimed as he continued his attacks, subsequently shooting down four torpedo-bombers (three jointly) and three fighters (two jointly). Unfortunately, his aircraft was then hit by friendly fire and he had to ditch in the sea. Bobbing up and down in high waves with no hope of rescue, he resigned himself to death, but fortunately he was picked up by a destroyer after just four hours in the water.



Lt Iyozoh Fujita found his shooting eye during the Battle of Midway, becoming a double ace in just one day. He is one of just a handful of Pearl Harbor Zero pilots to have survived the war





グラマン F4F-2  
F4F-3  
(Grumman)  
機 関 戦

諸元及性能	最大速度 約五三〇時軒	航続距離 約一、八〇〇軒	武装 機銃六	翼長 約一〇米
識別上ノ特徴	一、中翼、單葉 二、無線コアンテナ 三、無線コアンテナ 四、主翼端ハ矩形 五、主翼端ハ矩形 六、主翼端ハ矩形 七、主翼端ハ矩形 八、主翼端ハ矩形 九、主翼端ハ矩形 十、主翼端ハ矩形			

‘After Midway, many surviving pilots were pulled out to become instructors’, lamented Fujita. ‘Removing veteran pilots from frontline units caused us to loose fighting strength. In the end, it was a tremendous burden for our pilots. I think about ten per cent of our veteran pilots were lost at Midway.’

The next assignment for Lt Fujita was as division officer on the carrier *Hiyo*. He saw combat in the Solomons and at Guadalcanal, and in November 1943 was appointed group leader of the 301st AG, under the command of Cdr Katsutoshi Yagi.

As an experienced frontline pilot, Lt Fujita made repeated requests for better armament and gunsights, but although manufacturers listened to his recommendations, few if any improvements came forth.

Prior to the end of the war, Lt Fujita fought in the battles at Iwo Jima, Formosa and in defence of the home islands. He ended the war at Fukuchiyama airfield, waiting for the final all-out attack against the invading Americans which never materialised.

Lt Cdr Fujita’s final kill total is unclear, as according to historians he achieved 11 victories, whilst other sources place his score at 42. ‘I shot at that many, and my bullets did hit them, but how many went down, I don’t know’, says this modest gentleman. The number of recognised destroyed was seven.

Postwar, Iyozoh Fujita flew as a pilot for Japan Air Lines before retiring in 1978. The past president of the Zero Fighter Pilots Association, he was a guest panelist at the Battle of Midway Symposium held at Naval Air Station (NAS) Pensacola in 1988.

These documents formed part of the official JNAF wartime recognition publication used by all units to instruct pilots on the shape and performance of their foes



# NEW GUINEA, RABAU AND THE SOLOMONS

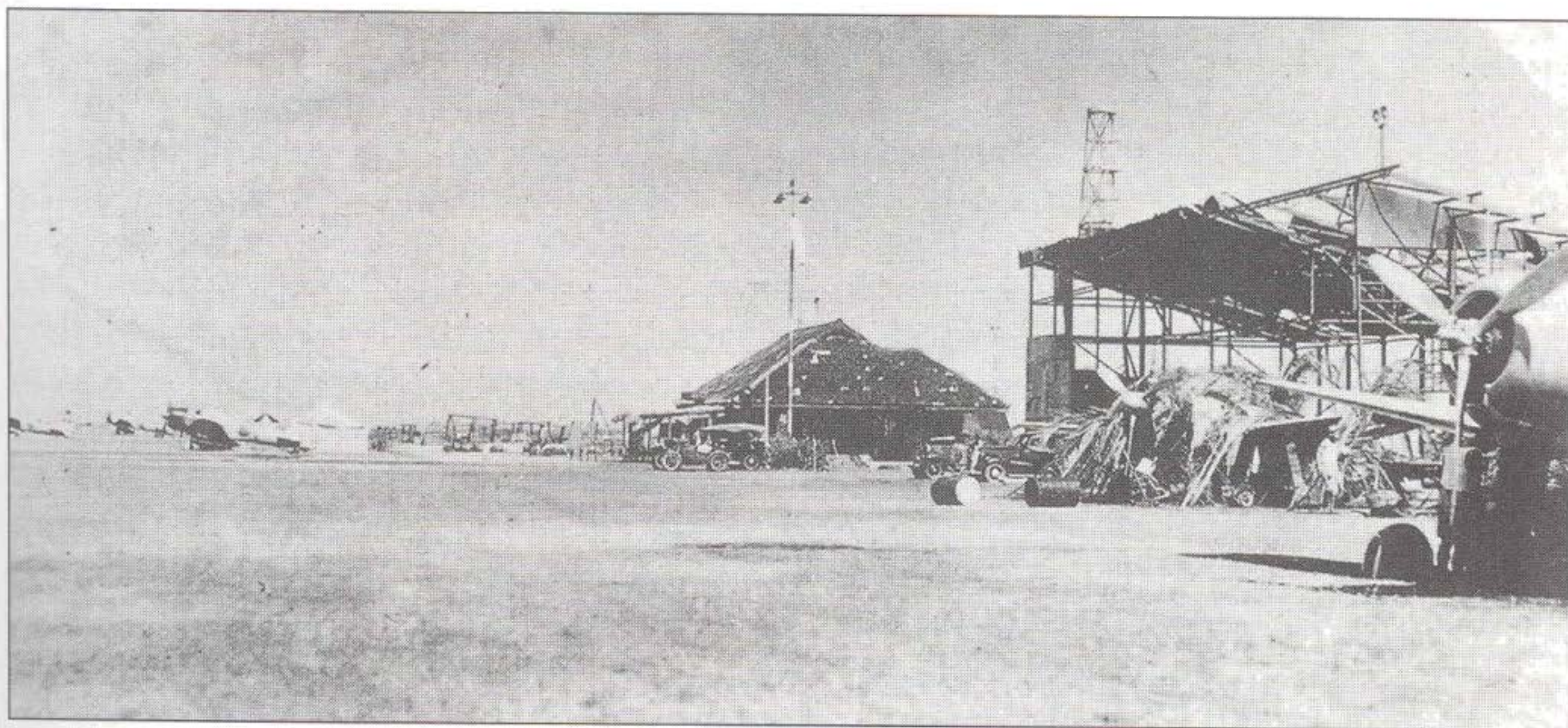
In January 1942, Japanese forces invaded the South-east Pacific islands of New Britain and New Ireland after carrier pilots from ViceAdm Chuichi Nagumo's task force had quickly overwhelmed the defenders at Rabaul, on New Britain, and Kavieng, on New Ireland. They also destroyed the enemy's air defenses at Lae and Salamaua, along the north-eastern coast of New Guinea.

In order to isolate Australia from the USA, it was also necessary to conquer the Australian garrison at Port Moresby, so the JNAF poured aircraft into Rabaul, whilst advance contingents of fighters and bombers were positioned even closer to the target at forward bases at Lae and Salamaua.

Spearheading the aerial assault against Port Moresby (commencing on 24 February 1942) was the 4th AG, which was joined in March by the Tainan AG at Rabaul – the latter group moved the following month to Lae, and from then on aerial action was brisk as many young neophytes who had participated in the one-sided actions over the Philippines and the Dutch East Indies became hardened veterans fighting the Australians and the Americans. And while pilots from both sides claimed an extraordinary number of kills, loss records painted a more conservative picture.

Bravery and skill were exhibited by pilots on both sides, and victories were hard won. Saburo Sakai, who was the senior enlisted pilot in the Sasai Squadron of the Tainan AG, later spoke of their difficulties in-theatre; 'Our 20 mm cannons were big, heavy and slow firing. It was extremely hard to hit a moving target. Shooting down an enemy aircraft

This panoramic view illustrates just how rudimentary the facilities were at Rabaul for the Tainan AG in 1942. An important staging area for JNAF aircraft in the Solomons, the airfield at Rabaul was used as a central base for satellite strips at Lae (New Guinea) and Buin (Bougainville)







**Mechanics labour over a Zero 21 at Lakunai airfield as Mt Hanabuki belches smoke in the background – the active volcano being a familiar landmark for pilots approaching Rabaul. Field modifications performed on the Zero included sawing off the radio mast and removing the useless radio to in order to save weight**

was like hitting a dragonfly with a rifle! It was never easy to score...our opponents were tough!

The Japanese force, set to invade Port Moresby was turned back during the Battle of the Coral Sea on 7 May, its defeat allowing the defenders quickly to reinforce their ranks. Jungle warfare raged on while both sides incessantly attacked each other's airfields and supply depots. The nature of the jungle terrain and myriad tropical diseases also inflicted casualties on both sides.

On 7 August the 1st Marine Division landed on Guadalcanal, this audacious attack stunning the Japanese at Rabaul. To counter the threat, missions previously flown

against targets in New Guinea were quickly redirected to Guadalcanal, resulting in Zero pilots at Rabaul flying their longest missions to date – a round-trip of over 1100 miles. The Japanese counterattack proved unsuccessful, however, with the Americans pouring enough men and equipment into the region to overwhelm the defenders on Guadalcanal. In the skies overhead, US Navy and Marine Corps F4Fs exacted a heavy toll on Japanese units, with even modestly damaged aircraft seldom making it back to Rabaul. By February 1943 Guadalcanal had fallen.

As the Allied Forces moved quickly up 'The Slot', so the Japanese retreated to Bougainville. In the wake of the defeat Naval GHQ ceded the defence of New Guinea to the army, JAAF units duly leaving Rabaul so as to provide aerial support for their forces at Wewak and other bases.

On 18 April 1943 the navy suffered a further crippling blow when P-38s from Guadalcanal ambushed a flight of two 'Betty' bombers and six Zero escorts over Bougainville. In one of the bombers was Adm Yamamoto, C-in-C of the Combined Fleet. News of the admiral's death was greeted with shock in Japan, and it severely rocked the morale of the men in the frontline.

Although the 204th AG continued to oppose Allied intrusions up the Solomons chain, it too was decimated during long-range missions to Guadalcanal. Whilst attempting to defend their bases at their bases at Buin and Kahili from marauding B-24s, JNAF pilots were quickly set upon by overwhelming numbers of escorting P-38s, P-40s and F4Us. To add to their already desperate plight, many veteran Zero pilots were badly weakened by malaria and other tropical ailments, allowing them to be easily shot out of the sky by their relatively novice opponents.

In October 1943 the 201st and 204th AGs were pulled out of Bougainville and sent to Rabaul. During the last few days of that month reinforcement aircraft from New Ireland, Japan and aircraft carriers flooded into the airfields.

The beginning of the end for the JNAF on Rabaul commenced on 12 October when the USAAF's Fifth Air Force sent a force of over 350 air-



craft to bomb the great stronghold into submission. Low flying B-25s and Beaufighters strafed the airfields, B-24 'heavies' bombed shipping in Simpson Harbour and P-38s roamed the skies looking for enemy fighters. A series of heavy raids in October and November further reduced Japanese aircraft stocks on Rabaul, and shattered the defenders' morale.

CPO Tetsuzo Iwamoto – the top scoring ace at Rabaul – remarked; 'Prior to the beginning of 1943, we still had hope and fought fiercely. But now, we fought to uphold our honour. We didn't want to become cowards . . . We believed that we were expendable, that we were all going to die. There was no hope of survival – no one cared anymore.'

The harsh tropical environment added to the decline of the JNAF at Rabaul, for unlike their Allied counterparts, the Japanese failed to control the mosquito problem which devastated whole units with malaria. The Allies, on the other hand, sprayed and dusted their bases frequently with the insecticide DDT, which was unavailable to the Japanese. The latter also lacked quinine (the anti-malaria medicine) and its synthetic substitute Atebin. Even if these had been available, Allied submarines and aircraft greatly reduced the number of cargo ships bringing medical supplies to Rabaul. So bad was the malaria problem that many veteran Zero pilots claimed that ill health was the leading cause of casualties at Rabaul.

Carrier pilots, who were not exposed to these health problems at sea, adopted a slightly more positive attitude, which often helped them to survive. PO Takeo Tanimizu explains; 'Fate determines at birth when and where you will die. Since there was nothing I could do about it, I didn't worry too much about dying, and concentrated on my duty.'

Fellow carrier ace CPO Sadamu Komachi survived his battles with the Grumman F6F Hellcat because he respected its fighting abilities; 'They were fast and manoeuvrable, and their pilots were good. They'd get on your tail and shower you with bullets! It was awful!'

Allied fighters slowly whittled down the JNAF at Rabaul to the point where the 20th AG had only one operational Zero left by 17 February 1944. When US carrier aircraft attacked the Japanese naval bastion at Truk and destroyed most of the island's fighters on the ground, orders were given to evacuate all airworthy machines immediately to Truk. By 25 February all that was left on Rabaul were a dozen 'junked' Zeroes which could not make the exodus and a few seaplanes. Rabaul would be bypassed by the Allied forces and allowed to 'wither on the vine'.

## Ensign Saburo Sakai

As Japan's most famous Zero fighter ace, Saburo Sakai claims that his greatest wartime success was not scoring 60+ kills, but having never lost a wingman in over 200 dogfights. Born to a poor farming family in Saga Prefecture in 1916, the son of a Samurai joined the navy in May 1933 in order to escape the shame of having failed at school.

While serving aboard the battleship *Kirishima* as a sailor, Sakai became fascinated with aircraft and decided to become a pilot. After failing the entrance examination twice, he passed on his third attempt and was accepted into flight training. In November 1937 Sakai graduated at the top of his class, being awarded the Emperor's silver watch.

As a member of the 12th AG, he saw action in the China War, achiev-



ing his first aerial victory on his first combat mission on 5 October 1938. Sakai was at the controls of one of fifteen 'Claudes' bounced by I-16s during a mission to Hankow, and in the subsequent engagement he broke almost every rule in the book and was nearly killed. Sakai eventually shot down an enemy aircraft by using up his entire ammunition supply, and upon his return to base the young neophyte was severely chastised, rather than congratulated, by his commander for his inferior performance.

By 3 October 1939 PO2/c Sakai had become a seasoned pilot, and on this date he proved it by chasing down 12 DB-3 bombers that had raided Hankow Airfield in a surprise attack. Although slightly wounded, Sakai jumped into his 'Claude' and took off alone in hot pursuit. The running gunfight ranged over 150 miles, and culminated in the demise of one of the bombers. News of his daring assault preceded him back to Japan, and Sakai returned home to a hero's welcome.

In June 1941 PO1/c Sakai was posted to the Tainan AG, with whom he participated in the raid on Clark Field, in the Philippines, on the first day of the Pacific War. He destroyed two B-17s on the ground and claimed one P-40 shot down, although the latter type, flown by Sam Grashio, managed to escape with a big cannon hole in its wing.

On 10 December Sakai engaged a B-17C of the 14th Bombardment Squadron in the air for the first time, which he duly downed, the Japanese pilot being both shocked by the sheer size of the Flying Fortress.

With the Philippines captured, the Tainan AG commenced operations in the Dutch East Indies, where Sakai once again battled the B-17;

'There was no weakest area of the B-17. Every time was a close call. A particular incident I remember was in February 1942 over Balikpapan, Borneo, before I developed any method of attacking the bomber. There were two Zeroes and seven B-17s. I did everything I could to kill this aircraft but was not successful. Nothing worked!'

On 28 February 1942 Sakai encountered a DC-3 transport while on a lone patrol mission east of Surabaya, Java. Pacing the aircraft, when he pulled alongside to inspect it before shooting it down he noticed a blonde-haired woman and a small child peering at him through a fuselage window – Sakai spared the transport, letting it go on its way.

In April 1942 the Tainan AG was transferred to Rabaul, Zero pilots rotating between here and Lae during the fight with American and Australian units based at Port Moresby.

Sakai also conducted a personal war against the officer class, who regarded the enlisted pilots as expendable. As a result, his men were fed monotonous meals and denied tobacco, so he ordered his wingman to steal from the officers' mess and gave his approval for his men to smoke in direct violation of orders. Faced with discipline and morale problems, the CO of the group eventually ordered that improvements be made.

As the senior pilot in the Sasai Squadron, Sakai tutored his comrades (including the unit's CO, Lt(jg) Junichi Sasai) in the art of dogfighting. Many of his pupils went on to become aces.

On 22 July 1942 eight Zeroes intercepted a lone RAAF Hudson (A16-201 of No 32 Sqn) whilst flying a fighter cover mission over Buna. Anticipating an easy kill, Sakai chased after the twin-engined bomber, whose pilot, Plt Off Warren F Cowan, whipped his aircraft around and made a head-on attack at Sakai. Outnumbered eight-to-one, Cowan remained





on the offensive, scattering the Zeroes into wild disorder, before Sakai eventually shot him down. As the only living eyewitness to this action, Sakai wrote a testimonial to the Australian Defence Minister in 1997, requesting that Cowan and his crew be cited for bravery. It was denied.

On 7 August 1942, during the first long-range mission to Guadalcanal, PO1/c Sakai shot down a Wildcat flown by future ace Lt J J Southerland of VF-5, who parachuted to safety. As Sakai rejoined his flight, he was ambushed by a lone SBD flown by Lt Dudley H Adams of VS-71, the American pilot succeeding in firing a bullet through the cockpit of the Zero, which just missed the startled pilot's head by inches. Stung into action, Sakai downed the Dauntless, killing tail-gunner Harry E Elliot in the process. Lt Adams managed to parachute to safety, however, and was subsequently awarded the Navy Cross.

Having despatched two aircraft already on this mission, Sakai spotted what he thought were eight Wildcats in the distance – they were, in fact, SBD dive-bombers of VB-6, led by Lt Carl Horenburger. Unaware that he had been spotted, Sakai raced in for the kill, only to find himself in a trap as the tail-gunners opened up with their twin .30 guns, severely wounding the JNAF ace. In an epic four-and-a-half hour flight, Sakai returned to base after having been given up for dead. Permanently



The first long-range mission flown from Rabaul to Guadalcanal on 7 August 1942 nearly cost the life of CPO Saburo Sakai. Given up for dead, he is shown here just minutes after landing making his way to headquarters to give his report. Sakai received shrapnel wounds to his face (the wounds to his eyes were so severe that he eventually lost the sight in his right one), chest, left leg and elbow



Lt(jg) Junichi Sasai wore this silver belt buckle for good luck. It was made by his father and presented to him when he went off to war. Japanese legend says that the tiger will roam over a thousand miles on its hunt, but will always return home safely. Sasai presented this to the wounded Saburo Sakai, who was being shipped home for hospitalisation. About two weeks later Sasai failed to return from a mission to Guadalcanal

Sakai's torn leather helmet and silk scarf bears testimony to his fierce encounter with SBD gunners on 7 August 1942. A .30 cal tracer bullet missed his right eye by inches, leaving its mark on the goggles, whilst bullet fragments shattered the lens and left him permanently blind in that eye. Sakai stuffed his silk scarf under his flying helmet to stop the bleeding



blinded in one eye, he sent back to Japan for further hospitalisation.

Upon recovery, Sakai frustratingly found himself in the role of instructor, teaching an ever-shrinking training syllabus to larger and larger classes of increasingly more youthful pilots.

In June 1944, he was at last thrust back into frontline flying, being ordered to Iwo Jima to join the Yokosuka AG. On 24 June he engaged in a wild combat with Hellcats of VF-1, -2 and -50, claiming three destroyed. However, his unit lost a staggering 23 Zeroes in reply.

With no hope of turning the tide against the invading Americans, the Yokosuka AG was ordered to resort to *kamikaze* suicide attacks. On 5 July Sakai duly set out with two wingmen on a one-way mission, nine Zeroes escorting eight torpedo-bombers on a futile sortie. Before they could reach the target, they were bounced by Hellcats, and disobeying orders to refuse combat and stay with the bombers, Sakai fought back and downed a Hellcat. Despite the efforts of the escorts, all the torpedo-bombers were swiftly destroyed, leaving Sakai and his two charges to battle darkness, bad weather and low fuel states in their struggle to return to base.

Twenty-four hours later Sakai and the remaining Zero pilots evacuated back to Japan, where he returned to instructing due to his lack of a further combat assignment. Transferred to the 343rd AG in December 1944, Sakai trained pilots destined for the new Shiden-Kai 'George'.

The great ace's last combat occurred on 17 August 1945 when (two days after the surrender announcement) he sortied with other pilots of the Yokosuka AG against a B-32 Dominator sent to photo-recce Tokyo. By his reckoning, he destroyed or damaged over 60 aircraft during his career.

In 1982 Saburo Sakai shook hands with Harold L Jones, one of the SBD gunners who wounded him. A resident of Tokyo, he occasionally gives motivational lectures, and continues to write books. Although blind in his right eye, Sakai has achieved three 'holes-in-one' playing golf!

## Chief Petty Officer Sadao Uehara

Sadao Uehara was one of Saburo Sakai's original wingmen from the early days of the war. He entered flight training in June 1938 and graduated in October 1941, being immediately posted to the Tainan AG.

The opening day of the Pacific War saw Uehara flying against airfield targets at Luzon, in the Philippines, and on 19 February 1942 the young novice claimed his first victory when he shot down a P-40 of the 17th PS.

Uehara was one of the few original Tainan AG pilots to survive through to November 1942, when the unit was reorganised. By the time he returned to Japan, the following victories were recorded in his logbook; three P-40s, four F4Fs and a single P-39, TBF and B-25 (unconfirmed) – he also shared in the destruction of two B-17s, a PBX a C-47 and a Spitfire. After the disaster at Midway, many veteran pilots were pulled out of frontline duty to become instructors, Uehara included, and like most of those affected by this decision, he hated his new assignment.

In September 1944, in anticipation of the American invasion of the Philippines, the newly-reformed 201st AG (II) was activated at Davao. By this stage in the war the need for veteran pilots had reached such an acute level that even instructors were brought back for active combat duty, Sadao Uehara being duly transferred to the 306th Sqn of the 201st





PO/c Sadamu Komachi poses aboard the carrier *Shokaku* in early 1942. His exploits were well publicised in his home prefecture newspapers, and he gained a reputation for being a daring pilot

AG. He claimed his last victory (a F6F Hellcat) within days of joining the unit, but soon fell seriously ill in the tropical environment and was sent back to Japan in December. CPO Uehara ended the war as an instructor.

By his own reckoning, he destroyed over 13 aircraft during the war. About three years after VJ-Day, he told his old flight leader, Saburo Sakai, 'I hated you for being so severe to me in the early days. But thanks to you, I survived the war!' Uehara became an accomplished helicopter pilot after the war. He was killed in a helicopter accident on 27 August 1988.

## Warrant Officer Sadamu Komachi

Standing over six feet tall, Sadamu Komachi was one of the tallest Zero pilots in the JNAF, his daredevil skills and exploits being frequently chronicled in his prefecture's newspapers, which made him famous.

He was born in Ishikawa Prefecture in April 1920, and enlisted in the navy after turning 18. Komachi commenced his career as a fighter pilot after graduating from flight school in June 1940, his first assignment seeing him serve aboard the carrier *Shokaku*. On the opening day of the Pacific War he flew as protective cover over the Pearl Harbor attack fleet.

During the Battle of the Coral Sea in May 1942, Komachi recorded his first victories when he claimed two F4F Wildcats (one shared) and a dive-bomber. It was a Wildcat which also came close to nearly killing him on 24 August when he fought against F4Fs of VF-6 over Guadalcanal during the Battle of the Eastern Solomons. Spotting his prey below him, he dived down to make his kill. However, another Wildcat flown by Lt Albert Vorse quickly latched onto Komachi's tail and opened fire. Caught by surprise, the JNAF pilot feigned death by putting his Zero into a wild uncontrollable spin for 6000 ft. Vorse was so convinced by this desperate manoeuvre that he claimed a victory (his fifth out of an eventual tally of 11.5) and Komachi managed to cheat death.

During this combat much precious fuel had been consumed, and on his way back to base Komachi tanks ran dry and he was forced to ditch. He resigned himself to death while clinging to a floating drop tank, but a destroyer plucked him from the water at night using searchlights.

Rabaul – known as the 'Graveyard of Fighter Pilots' – was Komachi's next battle assignment, flying briefly with the 204th AG before transferring to the 253rd at Tobera airfield. Whilst here he became a specialist in the use of the aerial burst bomb (Ta-Dan) against formations of B-24s.

On the night of 18/19 February 1944, Rabaul and neighbouring areas were attacked by five American destroyers (*Farenholt*, *Buchanan*, *Landsdowne*, *Lardner* and *Woodworth*) of DesRon (Destroyer Squadron) 12. In column formation, they shelled various targets and launched 15 torpedoes against ships docked in Keravia Bay. Rabaul's coastal guns, designed for short distance firing only in anticipation of enemy landing attempts, remained silent, so PO1/c Komachi, livid with anger at their inability to fight back, volunteered to attack the enemy.

A single Zero, armed with two 60 kg bombs, roared off into the night. Purple flashes off the coast pinpointed the American destroyer convoy, whilst fires started by the vessels' shelling could be seen up and down the coast. Off Kokopo, the daring Zero pilot commenced his strafing attacks, which remained unchallenged by the ships. It was only when Komachi



Pilots of the Tainan AG pose for the newspapers back home on 9 June 1942. In the front row, from left to right, are ; PO3/c Sadao Uehara, unidentified, Seaman 1/c Kenichiro Yamamoto and PO3/c Keisaku Yoshimura. Standing, left to right, are; PO1/c Saburo Sakai, PO3/c Seiji Ishikawa, war correspondent Hajime Yoshida and unidentified. Seconds after this photo was taken an air raid alarm sounded and the pilots scurried off into action



dropped his bombs (which missed) did the destroyers' anti-aircraft batteries responded fiercely. Komachi made repeated strafing attacks, then headed for home after exhausting his ammunition supply. He made the following report, 'I attacked the destroyers and set small to medium fires on three of them. I chased them out of the bay'. In reality the vessels had suffered very little damage, for the fires he had seen on the destroyers were actually the canvas gun covers burning away – in their haste to fire back, the ships' gunners had simply fired through the 'tarps'!

When the main element of the 253rd AG was withdrawn north to Truk on 19 February 1944, Komachi went with them and continued his struggle against the B-24s using aerial burst bombs from the island base. At this time he received the rare honour of a commendation from his superiors for his technical skills.

On 19 June 1944 15 Zeroes under the command of Lt Cdr Harutoshi Okamoto left Truk for Guam, in the Marianas. Unknown to the Zero pilots, who were running short of fuel, the airfield at Orote had just been raided by US carrier aircraft. The incoming flight of Zeroes was seen by the departing F6Fs, which quickly turned around and attacked at low altitude. In a head-on encounter with Ens Wendell Twelves of VF-15 at less than 200 ft, Komachi was caught off guard and his Zero took hits in the engine. Skilfully ditching his burning aircraft into the sea, he suffered serious burns to his face and body, but managed to swim ashore and eventually return to Japan by submarine – Komachi's Zero was one of two shot down Ens Twelves, these being his first kills. The Hellcat pilot would go on to score a further 11 victories.

Back in Japan, Komachi served with the Yokosuka AG until the end of the war . . . and a few days beyond. On 18 August 1945 he participated in the second interception of B-32 Dominators of the 386th Bomb Squadron over Tokyo, damaging the aircraft flown by Lt John R Anderson. Although the attack on the B-32s was legal under international law (Japan was still technically at war until the official surrender documents were signed on 2 September 1945), Komachi was fearful of Allied reprisals, and went 'underground' until US Occupation Forces left his country.

WO Sadamu Komachi flew around 2500 hours during World War 2





A6M2-N floatplane fighters are seen under inspection by mechanics aboard the seaplane tender *Kamikawa Maru* in August 1942 – the ship was en route from Yokosuka to the Shortland Islands, in the Solomons. On 13 September WO Kawamura became the first pilot within the unit to score a victory when he engaged an SBD dive-bomber preparing to land at Henderson Field, on Guadalcanal. The 'Rufes' also frequently engaged B-17s over the Solomons

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### Petty Officer Third Class Toshiaki Honda

Saburo Sakai's faithful wingman, Toshiaki Honda was also a character within the Tainan AG when out of the cockpit, his antics bringing comic relief to his comrades in the miserable environment of the tropics. He was born in Fukuoka Prefecture in 1919, and prior to his enlistment in the navy, he had worked as a ticket collector on a city tram.

Honda was accepted for flight training and graduated in June 1940. He became a member of the Tainan AG and flew his first combat mission during the attack against Clark Field on 8 December 1941 as the third man in the flight of Saburo Sakai and Ichio Yokogawa. Tangling with P-40s of the 21st Pursuit Squadron over the airfield, Honda failed to score.

After the assault on the Philippines, the Tainan AG ranged over the Dutch East Indies, then proceeded to the forward base at Rabaul. Once here, the group alternated between Rabaul and Lae. While at the latter airfield pilot morale sharply declined due to both the poor quality of meals and inequities between officers and enlisted pilots. Honda, who had a reputation as a scrounger, was duly ordered by Sakai to pillage the officers' mess kitchen for food to bring back to his squadronmates. Success in his task soon led to carelessness, as Honda was caught and beaten by an irate officer, who only stopped when Sakai fired his pistol at him – a court martial offence. Summoned before Cdr Yasuna Kozono, Sakai explained his actions and his mens' complaint, and astonishingly the incident was 'forgotten about' and the cuisine dramatically improved!

While Honda was not a gifted pilot, he was quite aggressive, and on 17 April 1942 he claimed three P-40s shot down over Port Moresby. He always told others, 'As long as I fly with Sakai, I'll never be shot down!'

On 13 May newcomer to the unit WO Watari Handa (see China War chapter) requested the loan of Honda from Sakai for a sweep over the airfield at Port Moresby. Despite Honda's protestation, Sakai ordered his wingman to go, and the Zero flight was duly bounced by seven P-39s of the 36th FS over the target. Capt Paul G Brown and 1Lt Elmer F Ghram



PO3/c Toshiaki Honda was the best wingman Saburo Sakai ever had, and also the most mischievous – Sakai grew suspicious of his wingman's endless supply of clean underwear, only to discover that Honda was stealing his! When confronted by Sakai, Honda admitted to the dastardly deed. The former later ordered him to steal food from the officer's mess





caught Honda in a crossfire and the Zero exploded, killing the pilot.

Due to his fighting spirit, Toshiaki Honda was given a rare two rank posthumous promotion to petty officer first class, his citation stating that he had flown 47 missions, achieved five personal kills and 18 assists.

### Petty Officer First Class Masuaki Endo

For those Zero pilots who fought through the tough combats over New Guinea and Guadalcanal in 1942, the invaluable experience gained in battle only served to make them better pilots. Masuaki Endo was one of the few veterans from the Tainan AG to have survived these epic battles.

Born in Fukushima Prefecture in December 1920, Endo enlisted in the navy and graduated from flight training in October 1941. In February of the following year he was posted to the Tainan AG, advancing with it to

Mitsubishi F1M 'Pete' observation seaplanes are seen moored at their coastal base on Shortland Islands. The F1M was extremely manoeuvrable, and carried two forward firing 7.7 mm machine-guns plus a flexible weapon of the same calibre for the observer. The 'Pete' could also be armed with two 60 kg bombs under the wings



A pair of F1Ms carry out a coastal patrol. The heavy weathering of the aircraft's central float indicates just how much use this 'Pete' has seen



Rabaul and Lae. A consistent scorer throughout the early months of war, Endo seemingly led a charmed life as his comrades fell one by one.

On 7 August 1942 the group flew the first long-range mission to Guadalcanal from its base at Rabaul – a one-way distance of over 560 miles. Seventeen Zeroes escorted twenty-seven 'Betty' bombers to counterattack the American landings on Guadalcanal, PO2/c Endo flying as second wingman to Lt(jg) Junichi Sasai. In his first combat with carrier fighters, the 21-year-old ace claimed an F4F and a pair of SBDs.

Subsequent missions to Guadalcanal took a heavy toll of veteran pilots, but Endo still cheated death through a combination of his flying skill and luck. In November 1942 the few surviving pilots were ordered back to Japan while the unit was reorganised as the 251st AG.

In May 1943 Endo returned to Rabaul as a member of the 251st, but failed to survive his first month back in action. On 7 June, the Japanese sortied 81 Zeroes and clashed with over 100 American and New Zealand fighters over the Russells. PO2/c Endo reportedly downed a P-38 (none were lost) before his aircraft was set on fire following a head-on attack by a P-40 flown by Lt Henry E Matson of the 44th FS. Determined to take his foe with him, Endo rammed his flaming Zero into the Warhawk, Matson parachuted out at 18,000 ft with burns to his face, neck and hands, and a mouthful of powdered Plexiglas. Endo was killed. Subsequently rescued, Matson was duly credited with two A6Ms destroyed.

Masuaki Endo received official recognition for 14 victories.

## Lieutenant(jg) Junichi Sasai

Junichi Sasai earned the title 'Richthofen of Rabaul', and despite seeing combat for only a short period of time, his legacy as a great fighter-leader lives on to this day.

Born on 13 February 1918 in Tokyo as the son of a naval captain, young Junichi was always destined join the service as an officer when he reached an appropriate age. His early childhood was marked by ill health, resulting in him often being absent from school and teasing by his classmates. A regime of hard physical exercise and diet improved the youngster's health, however, and by the time he enrolled in high school, Junichi was fit enough to earn his Blackbelt in Judo – his outstanding achievements in school won him acceptance to Etajima (Naval Academy).

Sasai graduated in 1939 and was commissioned an ensign. He entered flight training and completed the course in November 1941, his tenacious spirit earned him the nickname of 'Gamecock'. By the time Japan entered the Pacific War the following month, Sasai had joined the Tainan AG. He flew with the group on a raid to Luzon (in the Philippines) on 10 December, but he experienced engine trouble and was forced to abort.

Following victory in the Philippines, the Tainan AG saw considerable action in the Dutch East Indies, where it provided air support for ground troops. Sasai's first victory was recorded on 2 February 1942 over Maospati, Java, when he destroyed a Dutch Buffalo. Sixteen days later he claimed a P-40E of the 17th PS with just 280 rounds of machine-gun fire.

The Tainan AG advanced to Rabaul in April 1942, being reorganised with new officers, equipment and pilots soon after its arrival. Lt(jg) Sasai



PO3/c Masuaki Endo on 4 August 1942 at Rabaul. He was one of the few Tainan AG pilots to survive its first combat tour, which ended in November 1942. He returned from Japan to the Solomons in May 1943, but lasted barely a month before being killed



Dubbed the 'Richthofen of Rabaul', Lt(jg) Junichi Sasai was a compassionate officer who treated his enlisted men with respect, unlike most of the officer pilots at Rabaul





**PO1/c Toshio Ota was the leader of the scoring race within the Tainan AG in 1942. Popular within his squadron because of his congenial ways, Ota nevertheless exhibited tremendous fighting spirit once in the air**

was duly given command of the 2nd Squadron, and pilots alternated between Rabaul and their forward base at Lae. Within 2nd Squadron ranks were many experienced enlisted pilots, including PO1/c Saburo Sakai. The latter was most impressed with his new commander, for he showed genuine compassion towards his men unlike other officers. To insure his survival, Sakai personally tutored the young lieutenant in the art of dogfighting, and once Sasai found his shooting eye, he blossomed into a first rate pilot.

On 4 May 1942 he demonstrated his marksmanship by bouncing a flight of three P-39s and shooting them all down in less than 20 seconds. Sasai continued to score multiple victories, achieving his personal best of five in one day on 7 August 1942 over Guadalcanal. This feat was tempered by the serious wounding of his mentor Saburo Sakai during the same mission, and before the latter was sent back to Japan, Sasai gave him a personal memento – his special tiger belt buckle – which he claimed would protect him from further harm.

On 26 August Sasai led a nine-aircraft formation tasked with protecting 'Betty' bombers sent to strike at Henderson Field, on Guadalcanal. They were attacked over the target by 12 Wildcats from VMF-223, led by Maj John L Smith and Rivers J Morrell. Sasai failed to return from the mission.

In a letter to his family prior to his death, Sasai claimed 54 victories, and stated that he hoped to break the record of German World War 1 ace, Baron Manfred von Richthofen (who achieved 80 kills). According to the Naval All Units Proclamation No36, Sasai flew 76 missions with the Tainan AG and attained 27 recognised victories. He was promoted two grades to lieutenant commander for distinguished service.

### **Petty Officer First Class Toshio Ota**

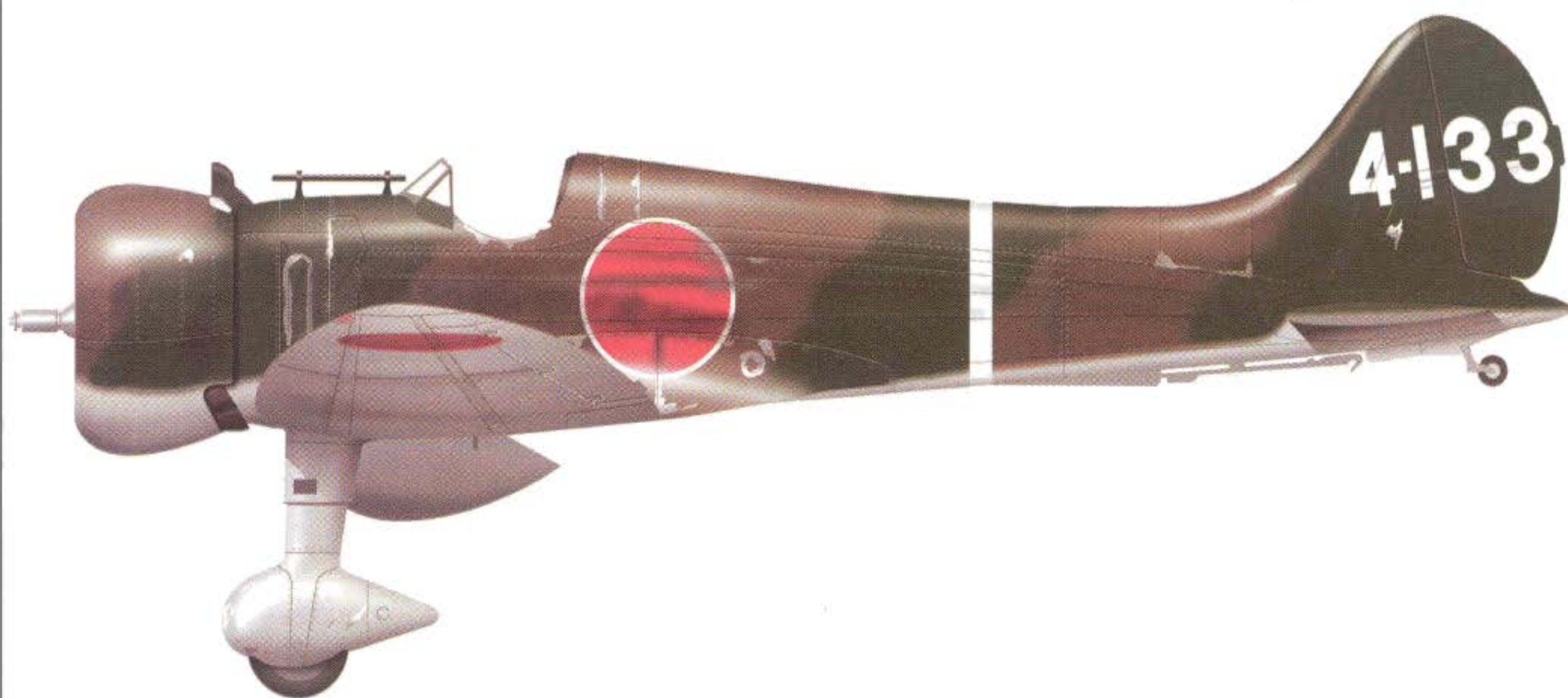
Toshio Ota belonged to the 'Clean Up Trio' in the Tainan AG, which was the premier JNAF unit operating against the Allies in New Guinea. The remaining trio members were Saburo Sakai and Hiroyoshi Nishizawa, who were two of the top aces in the air group at the time.

Ota was born in March 1919 to a farming family in Nagasaki Prefecture, and as a youth he was enthused with aviation and joined the navy at Sasebo in 1936. He was accepted into flight training in January 1939 and graduated in September. The China War was by then in its second year, and the exploits of JNAF pilots had received considerable newspaper coverage at home. Anxious for action, Ota passed through the Omura and 12th Air Groups before heading to China in June 1941. However, by the time he arrived in-theatre the air action had diminished considerably and he saw no combat.

With the outbreak of the Pacific War, Ota flew as a member in the 3rd Squadron of the Tainan AG in the aerial assault on Clark Field on 8 December 1941, claiming one aircraft shot down. After this action, he sortied to the Dutch East Indies, where he was wounded over Balikpapan, Borneo, in a running gunfight with a B-17 – Ota was subsequently grounded for a number of months because of his wounds.

The Tainan AG was ordered to their new base at Rabaul in April 1942, Ota being transferred to Lt(jg) Junichi Sasai's 2nd Squadron upon arrival.

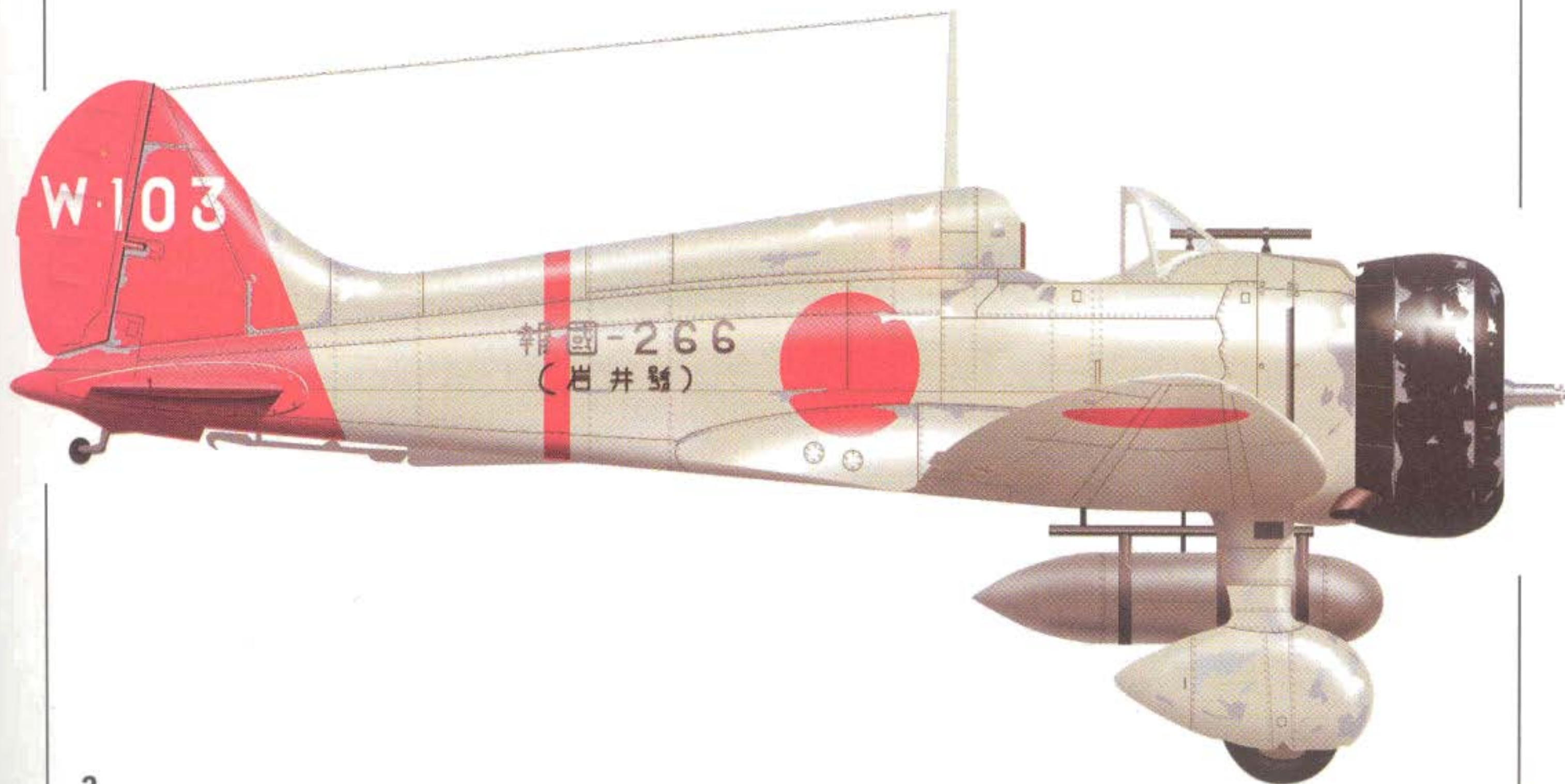




**1**  
**A5M2a Type 96 Model 2-1 of the 13th AG, flown by PO1/c Tetsuzo Iwamoto, Nanjing, China, February 1938**

The white unit marking '4' was used by the 13th AG between October 1937 and November 1940. Iwamoto noted in his diary that '4-133' was a distinguished aircraft which he flew

from the first days of the China War, and in every major engagement he fought in. He also wrote that it had the most victories in the unit. This Type 96 was flown by many pilots

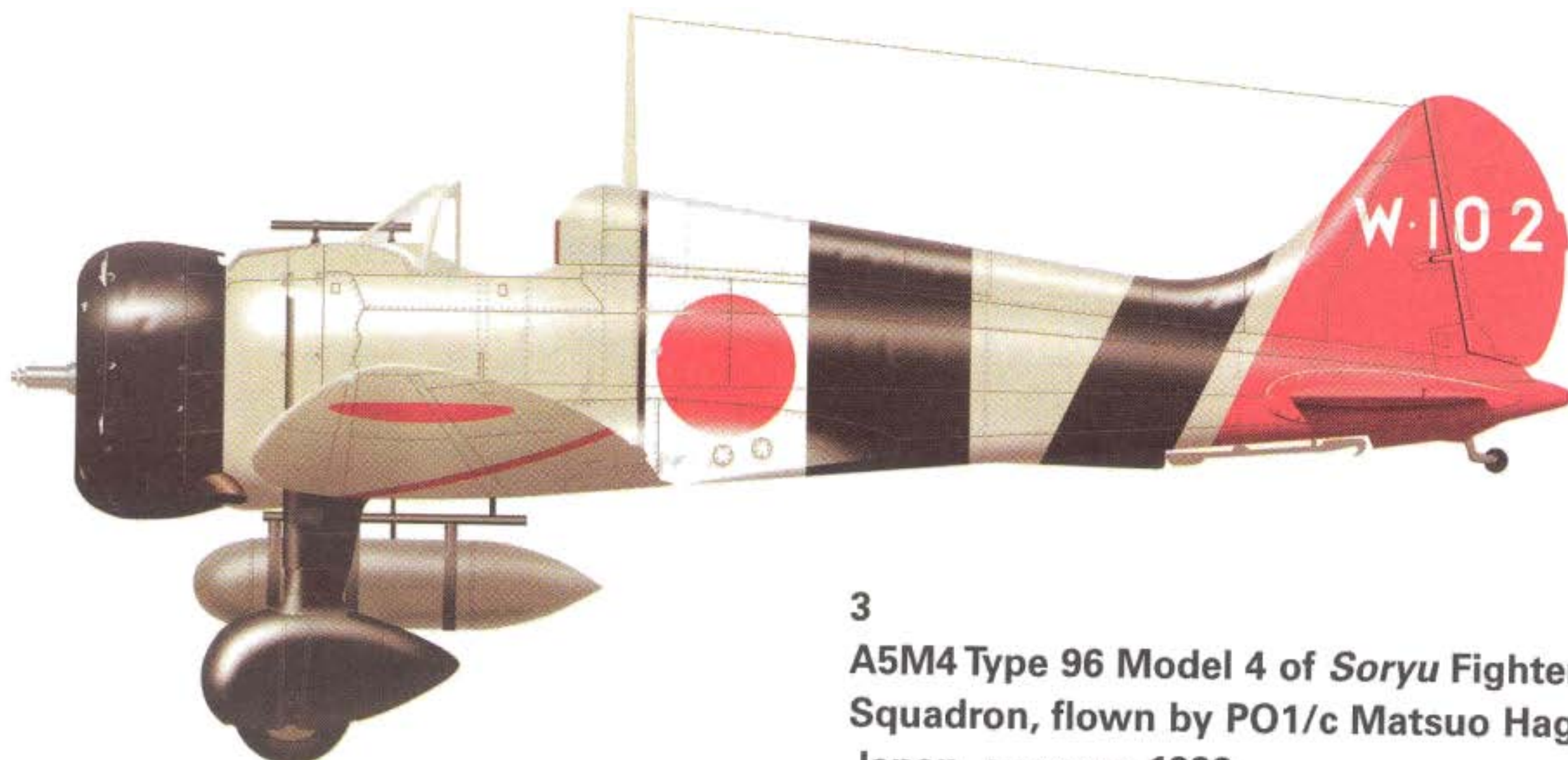


**2**  
**A5M4 Type 96 Model 4 of the Sorya Fighter Sqn, flown by PO2/c Hideo Oishi, East China Sea, November 1938**

The unit designation 'W' was used from the end of 1937 through to 1940. The inscription on the fuselage indicates that this fighter was presentation aircraft No 266,

purchased by a Mr Iwai and donated to the navy – a common practice during the China War and the first months of the Pacific war.





**3**  
**A5M4 Type 96 Model 4 of Soryu Fighter Squadron, flown by PO1/c Matsuo Hagiri, Japan, summer 1939**

With a maximum speed of 270 mph at 9845 ft, the Type 96 could fly circles around the new Zero fighter – in mock

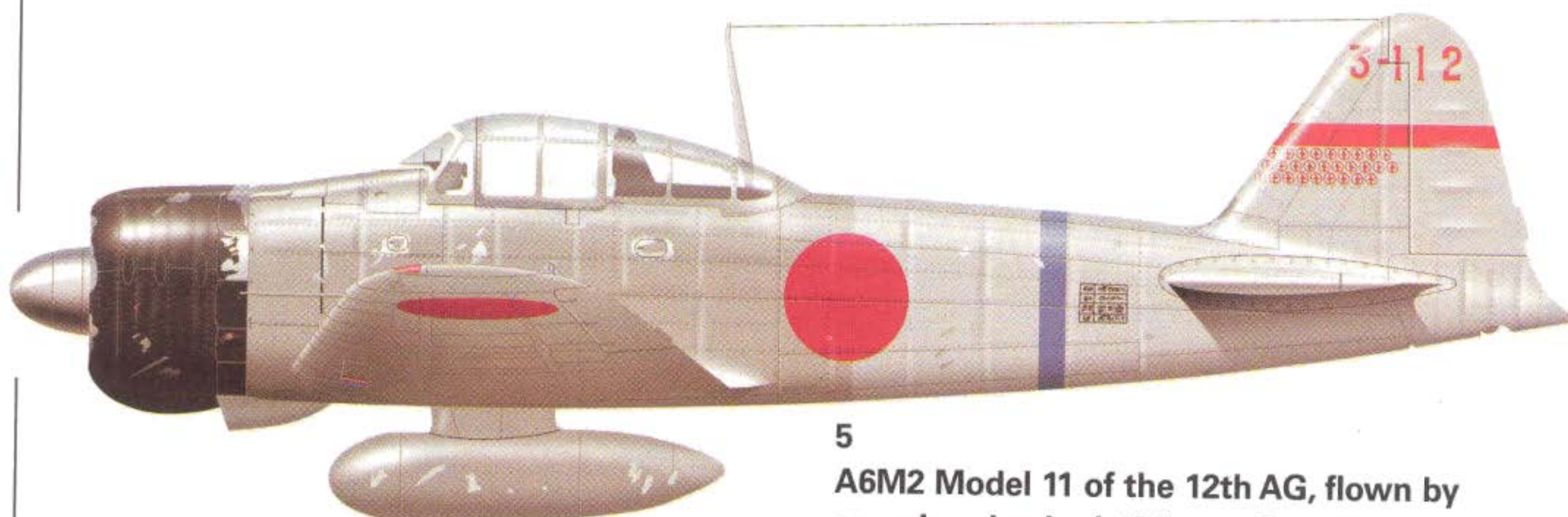
dogfights, the '96 won every time. Matsuo Hagiri went on to enjoy a distinguished career during World War 2.



**4**  
**A6M2 Model 11 of the 12th AG, flown by WO Koshiro Yamashita, Hankow, China, 1940**

The 12th AG used the number '3' as their unit designation, followed by the individual aircraft number, in 1940-41. The

distinctive red swallow in a circle victory markings were frequently found on many of their Zeroes during this period.

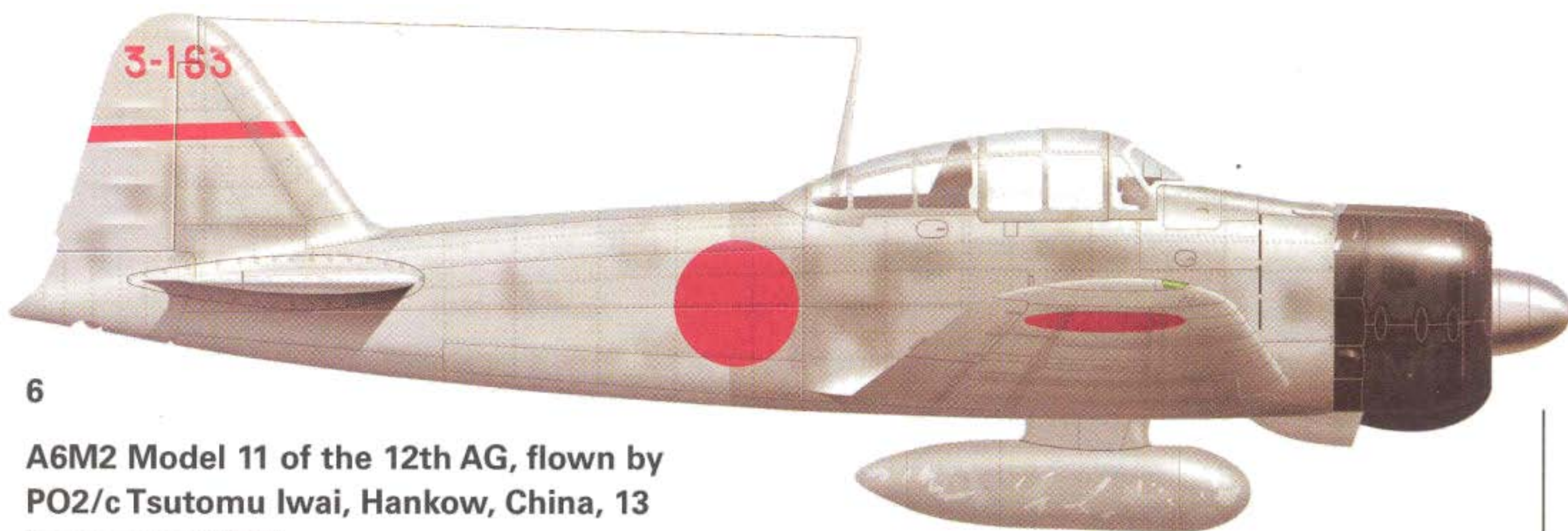


**5**  
**A6M2 Model 11 of the 12th AG, flown by squadron leader Lt Minoru Suzuki, Hankow, China, 1940**

This fighter was flown by numerous pilots (including Lt Suzuki), most of whom contributed to the 28 victories painted on its tail. This high-scoring Zero was returned to Japan and

exhibited at the Naval Academy after its tour of China ended in late 1940. Lt Cdr Suzuki finished the war as a squadron leader in the 205th AG in Formosa, having scored eight kills.



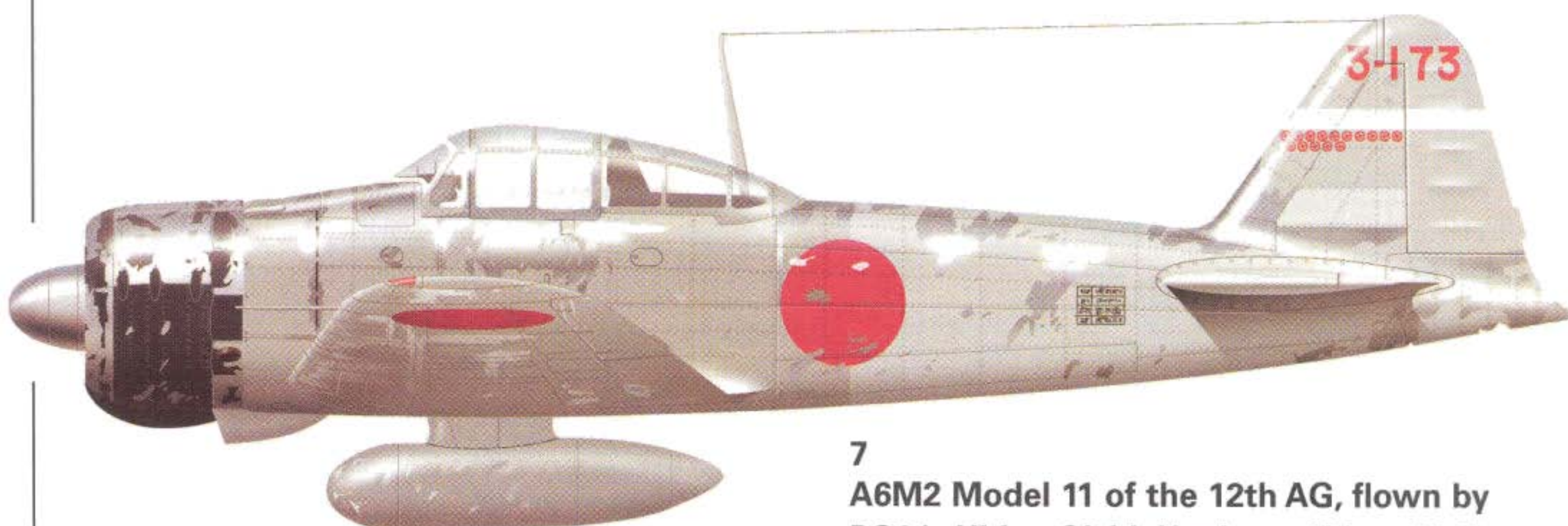


6

**A6M2 Model 11 of the 12th AG, flown by  
PO2/c Tsutomu Iwai, Hankow, China, 13  
September 1940**

During the famous engagement over Hankow on this date, 13 Zeroes destroyed 27 enemy fighters without suffering a single loss – Iwai downed two. He later served in almost

every theatre of the Pacific War, including home defence, and lived to see the end of the conflict, having scored 11+ victories.

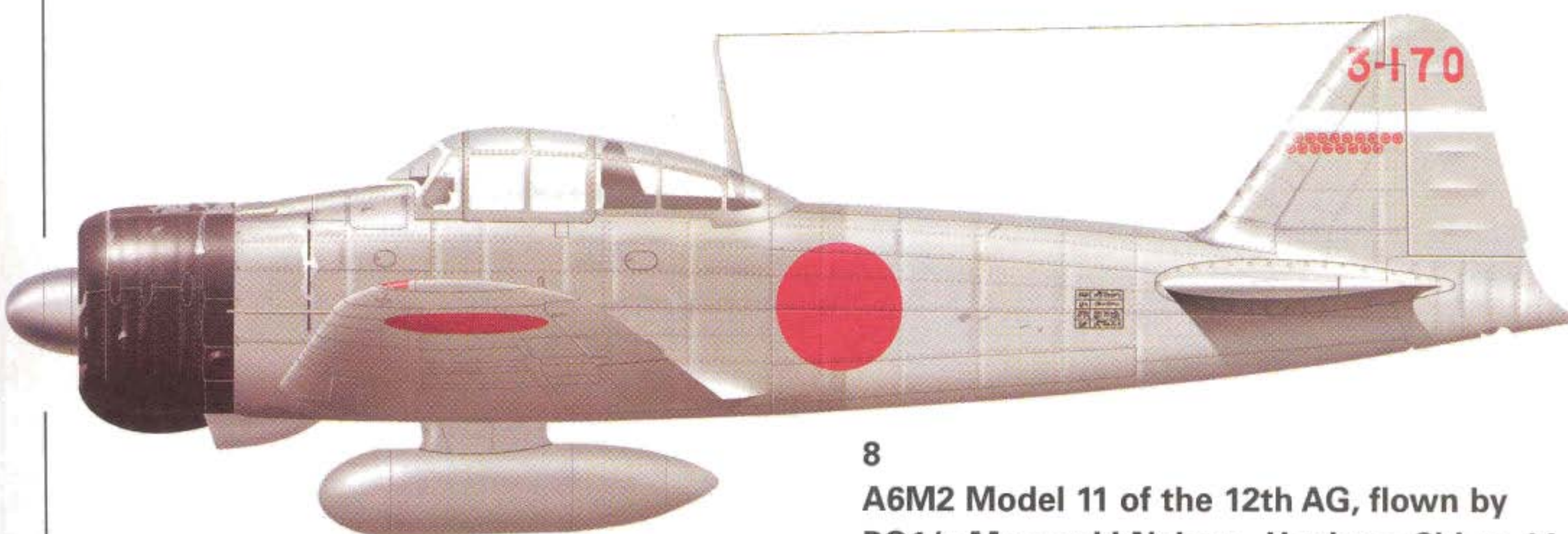


7

**A6M2 Model 11 of the 12th AG, flown by  
PO2/c Hideo Oishi, Hankow, China, 1941**

reduce weight. Oishi had achieved six victories before he was killed in aerial combat over the Philippines on 12 September 1944.

Although the radio equipment in the Zero was virtually useless from the word go due to static, there was no need for pilots to remove them (as in later years) in order to



8

**A6M2 Model 11 of the 12th AG, flown by  
PO1/c Masayuki Nakase, Hankow, China, 14  
March 1941**

victories in China. On 9 February 1942 he became one of the first JNAF aces killed during World War 2 when his aircraft was shot down by ground fire during a strafing attack on armoured cars in the Celebes. The 18-victory ace received a double posthumous promotion to the rank of ensign.

On this date young novice Nakase downed six Soviet I-152s in his first action, becoming one of the early JNAF 'ace-in-a-day' pilots. His total ammunition expenditure amounted to just 110 rounds of 20 mm cannon shell and 575 7.7 mm machine-gun bullets – Nakase later gained another three



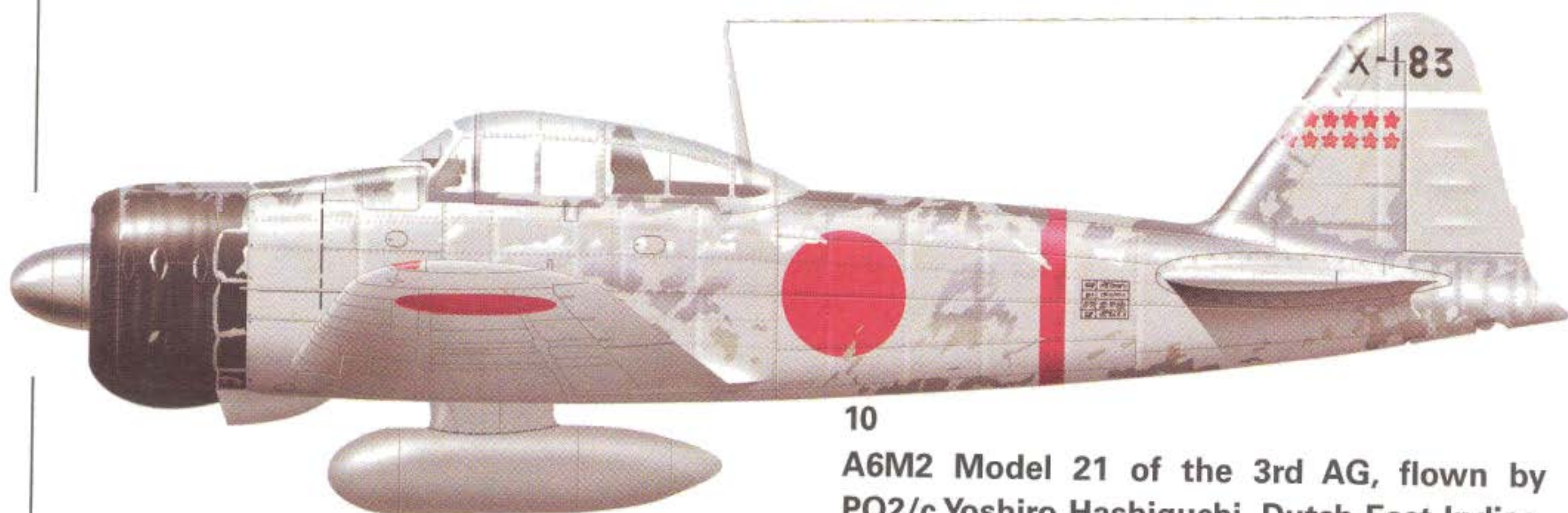


9

**A6M2 Model 21 of the Tainan AG, flown by Airman 1/c Masaaki Shimakawa, Formosa, October 1941**

The Tainan AG utilised both the 'V' unit designation (from October 1941 through to October 1942) and a diagonal fuselage stripe to marking their Zeroes. This aircraft was further personalised through the addition of the kanji character 'Shima' inside the red sun emblem on the fuselage

– this was a temporary marking made from crushed chalk and water, and it served as aid to identifying the pilot during carrier landings (training) and long-range flights. Each pilot in the squadron painted the first kanji of his surname onto his aircraft.

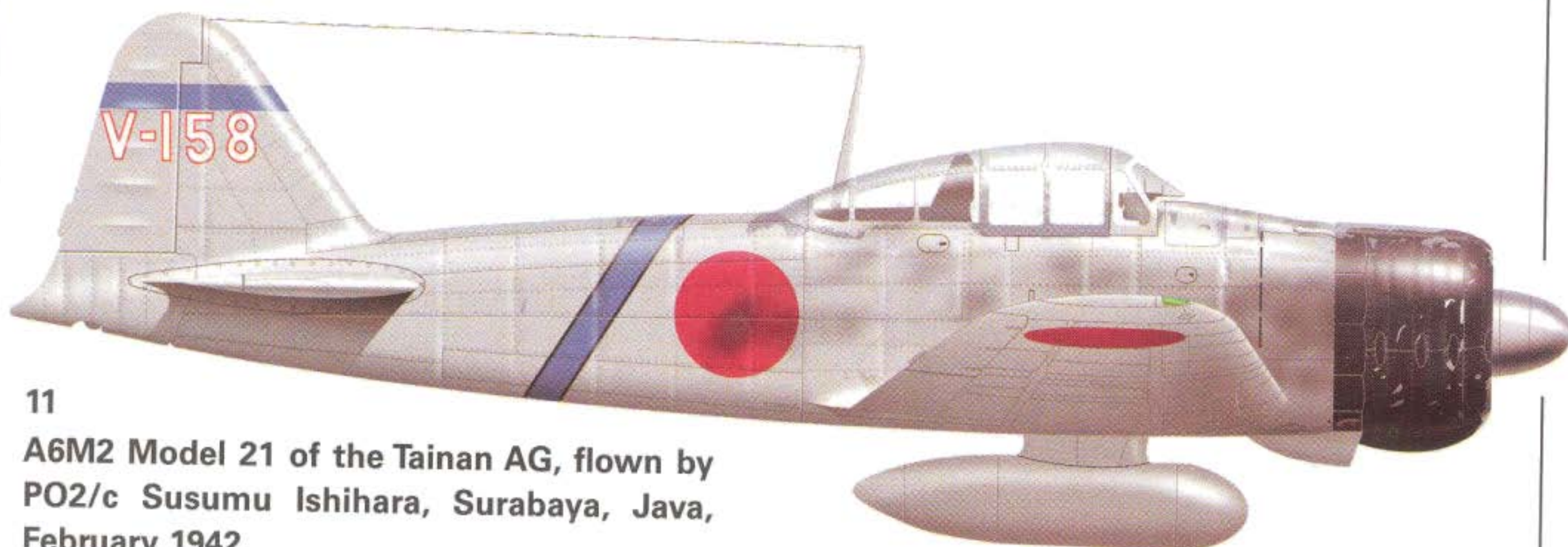


10

**A6M2 Model 21 of the 3rd AG, flown by PO2/c Yoshiro Hashiguchi, Dutch East Indies, February 1942**

The 'X' unit designation was used by the 3rd AG from April 1941 through to October 1942. Various pilots flew 'X-183', adding their victories to its score, although most of the kills

were achieved by Hashiguchi. He later fought in the Solomons and the Philippines, where he met his death on 25 October 1944 having scored over ten victories.



11

**A6M2 Model 21 of the Tainan AG, flown by PO2/c Susumu Ishihara, Surabaya, Java, February 1942**

Ishihara flew this aircraft during the Dutch East Indies campaign, performing mostly ground attack and patrol

roles. He later saw considerable action in the Solomons battles and ended the war with over 30 victories.

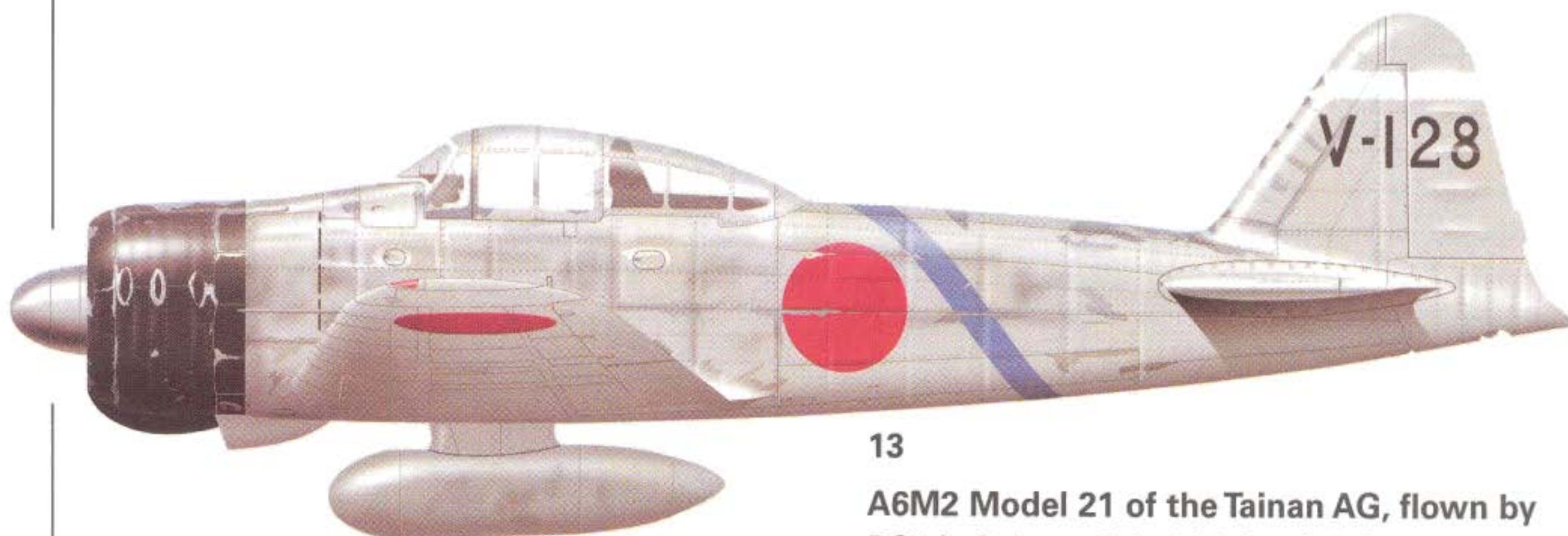




12

**A6M2 Model 21 of the Tainan AG, flown by PO2/c Yoshisuke Arita, Bali, February 1942**

This presentation aircraft was flown by Arita prior to his death in aerial combat over Port Moresby on 1 May 1942.

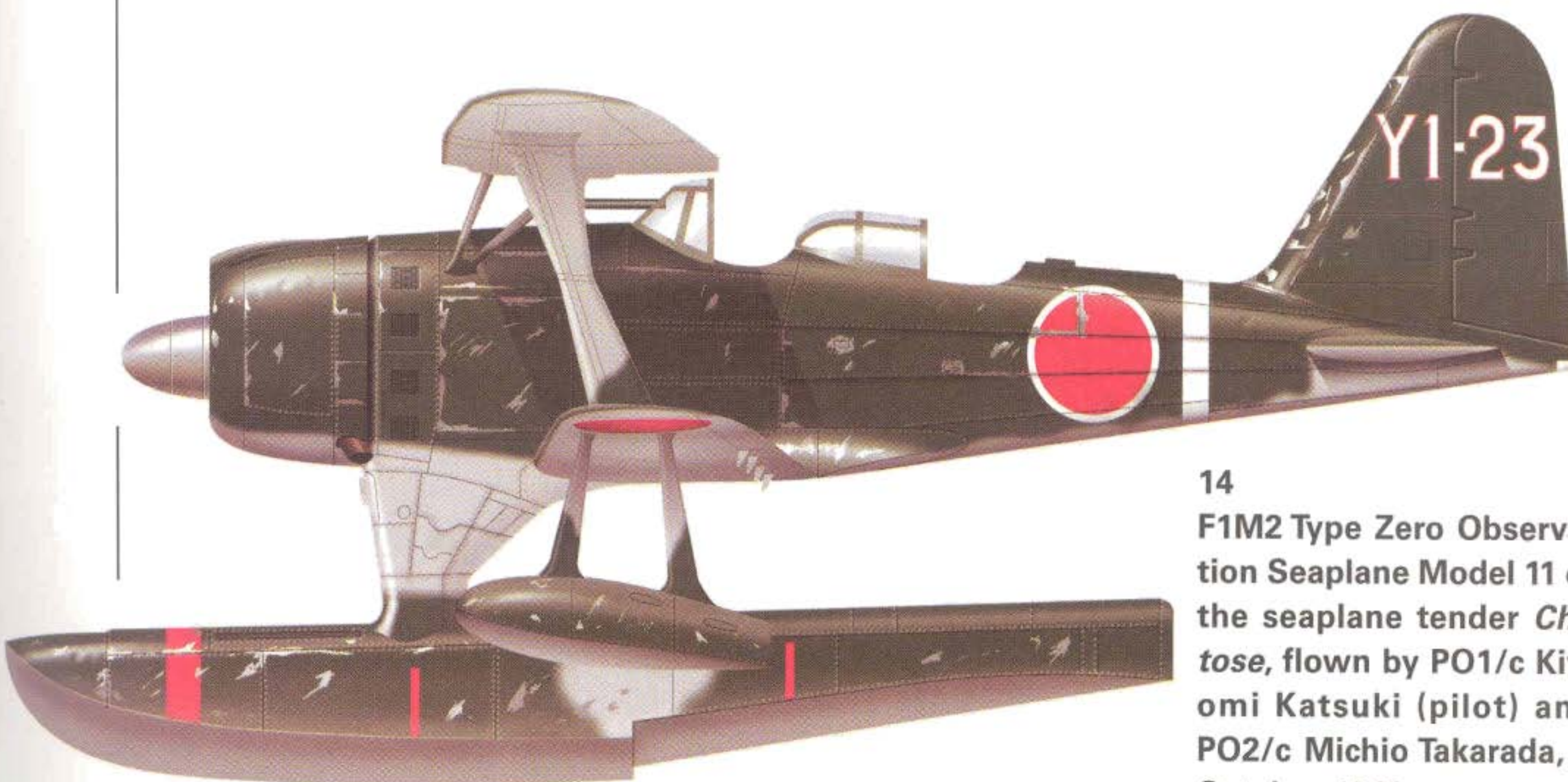


13

**A6M2 Model 21 of the Tainan AG, flown by PO1/c Saburo Sakai, Rabaul, 7 August 1942**

Wearing the white tail stripe of a flight leader, 'V-128' was the mount of CPO Sakai during his eventful long-range mission to Guadalcanal on 7 August. He claimed three kills during the sortie, but was also

seriously wounded by SBD gunners from VB-6. Given up for dead, Sakai flew for nearly five hours before gliding his Zero into Rabaul's Lakunai airfield out of fuel.



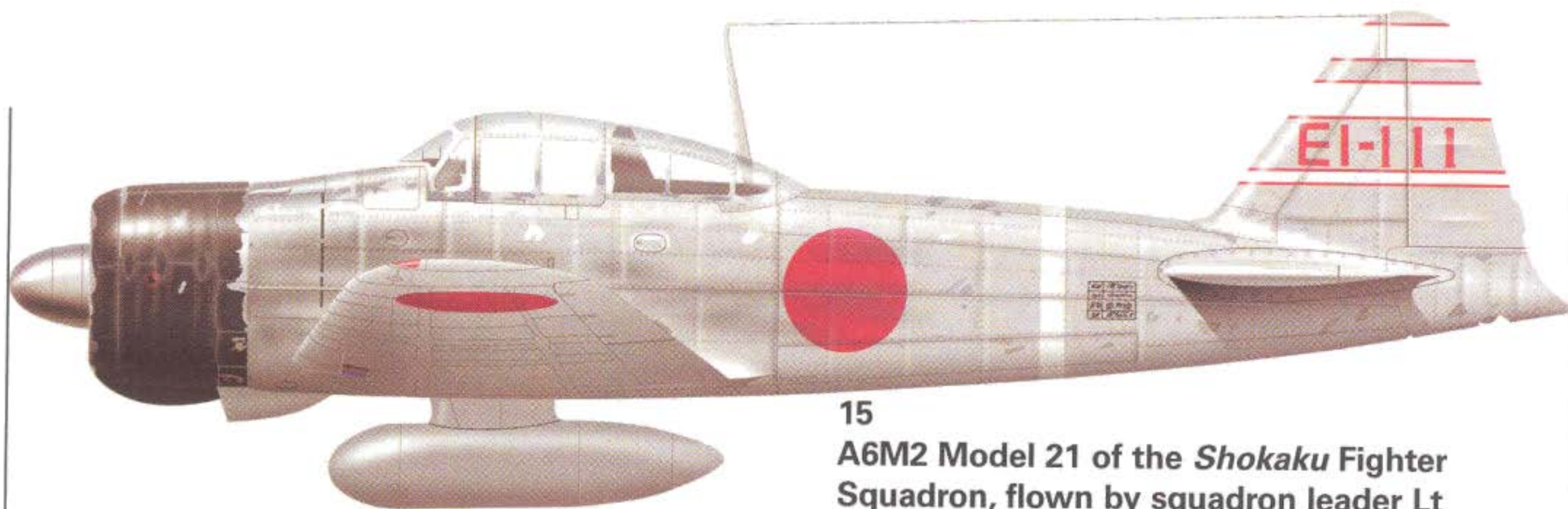
14

**F1M2 Type Zero Observation Seaplane Model 11 of the seaplane tender *Chitose*, flown by PO1/c Kiyomi Katsuki (pilot) and PO2/c Michio Takarada, 4 October 1942**

Although the biplane *fighter* era ended with the introduction of the Type 96, the F1M2 (codenamed 'Pete') was nevertheless produced in quantity during World War 2. The

team of Katsuki and Takarada were flying 'Y1-23' on 4 October 1942 when they rammed and destroyed a B-17 which was about to attack the seaplane carrier *Nisshin*.

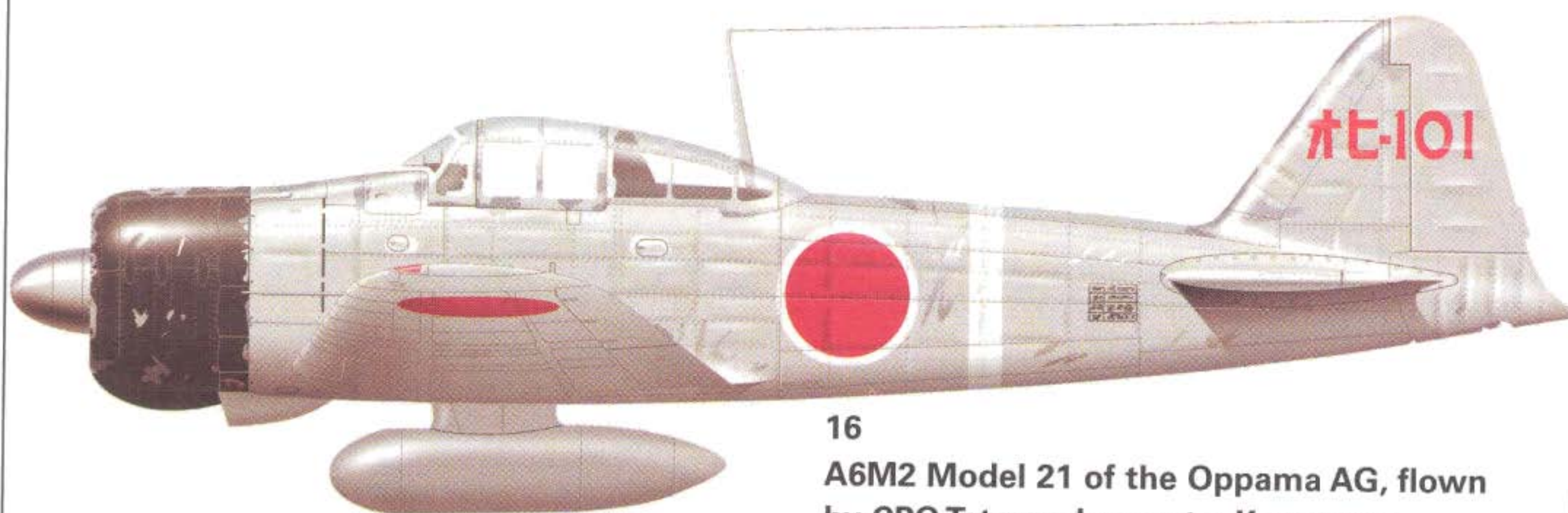




**15**  
**A6M2 Model 21 of the *Shokaku* Fighter Squadron, flown by squadron leader Lt Hideki Shingo during the Battle of Santa Cruz, 26 October 1942**

Lt Shingo led his Zeroes in the second wave attack on the US Task Force, during which they claimed five aircraft shot down. The tail code designation 'EI' was used from

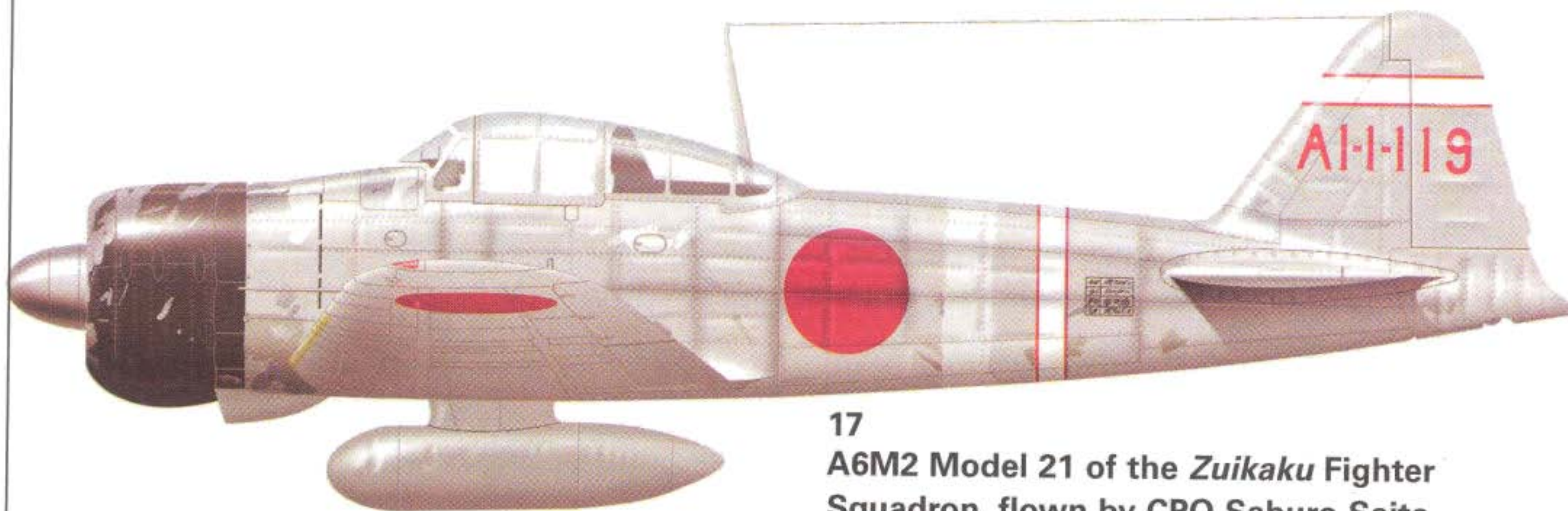
September 1941 through to October 1942. Shingo survived the war and later became a jet fighter pilot in the Japan Self Defense Air Force.



**16**  
**A6M2 Model 21 of the Oppama AG, flown by CPO Tetsuzo Iwamoto, Kanagawa Prefecture, Japan, 1943**

Following the loss of many veteran pilots at Midway, Iwamoto was pulled out of combat in August 1942 and sent home to become an instructor. In November of that same year a JNAF directive redesignated all named land-based

units going overseas with numbers. The unit designation on this aircraft (written in Japanese phonetic characters and preceding its number '101') reads O-Hee (Oppama Aviation).

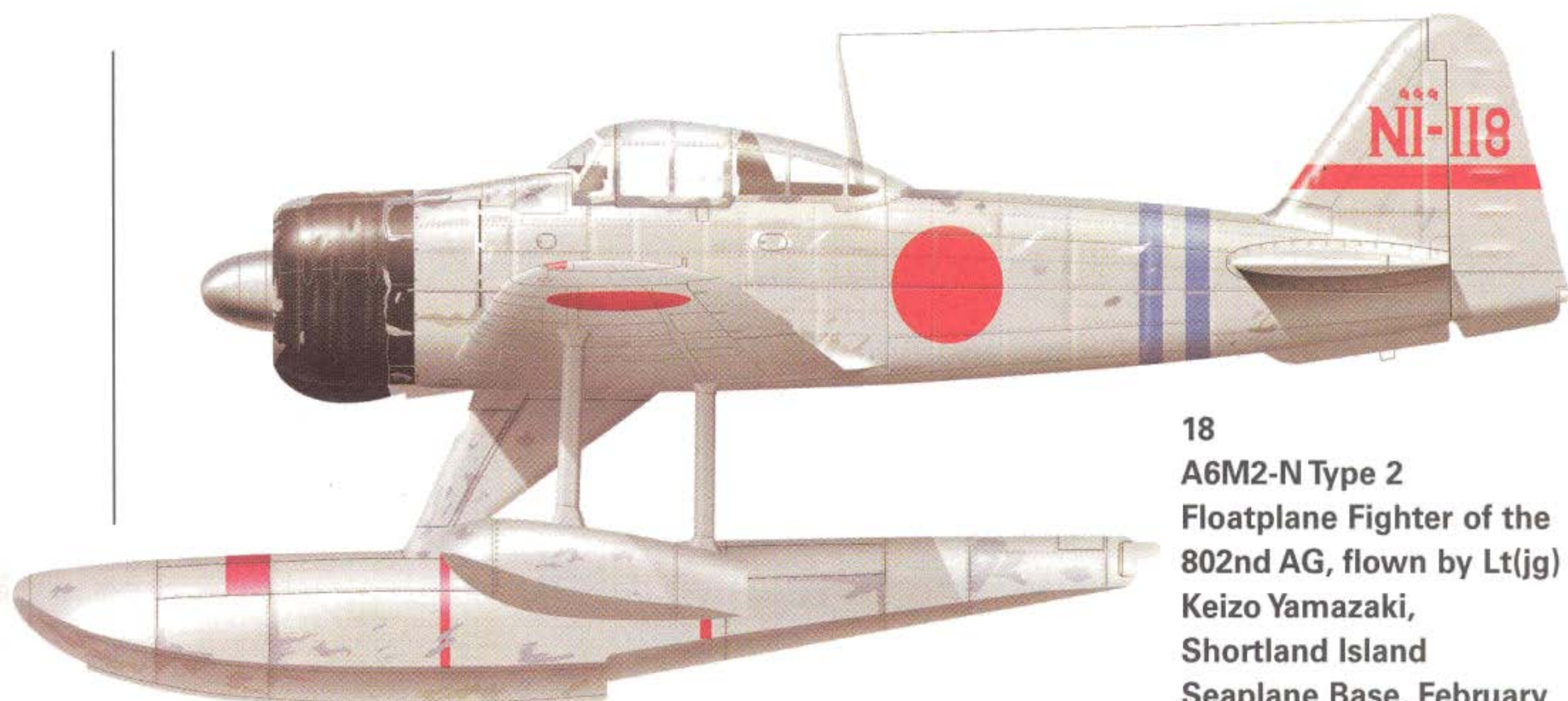


**17**  
**A6M2 Model 21 of the *Zuikaku* Fighter Squadron, flown by CPO Saburo Saito, Rabaul, January 1943**

The *Zuikaku* Fighter Squadron was reorganised following the carrier's return to Japan after the Battle of Santa Cruz (October 1942). The unit designation 'AI-1' replaced 'EI1', and was used until November 1943. The squadron assisted in the evacuation of Guadalcanal, before being temporarily

based ashore at Rabaul and Buin. Saito scored his first victory on 1 February 1943 when he jointly shot down a Wildcat of VMF-112 near Savo Island. He was wounded on 24 October 1944 near Luzon and never flew again, having scored over 18 victories and completed 2118 flying hours.

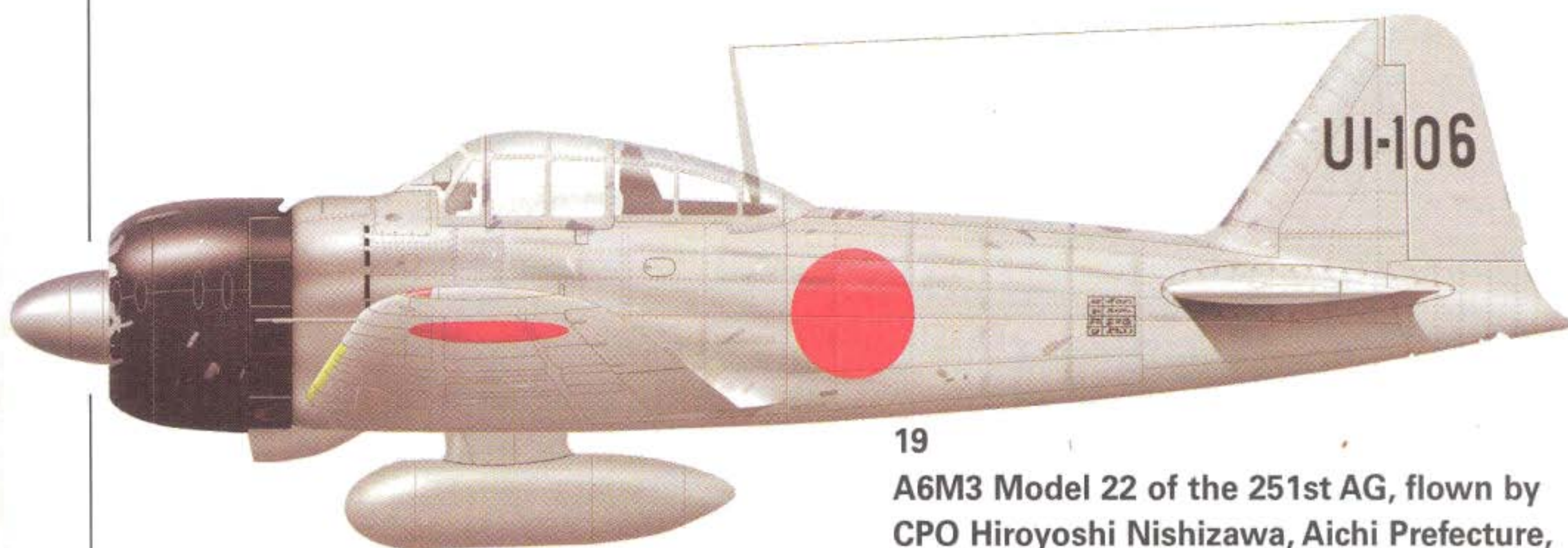




**18**  
**A6M2-N Type 2**  
**Floatplane Fighter of the**  
**802nd AG, flown by Lt(jg)**  
**Keizo Yamazaki,**  
**Shortland Island**  
**Seaplane Base, February**  
**1943**

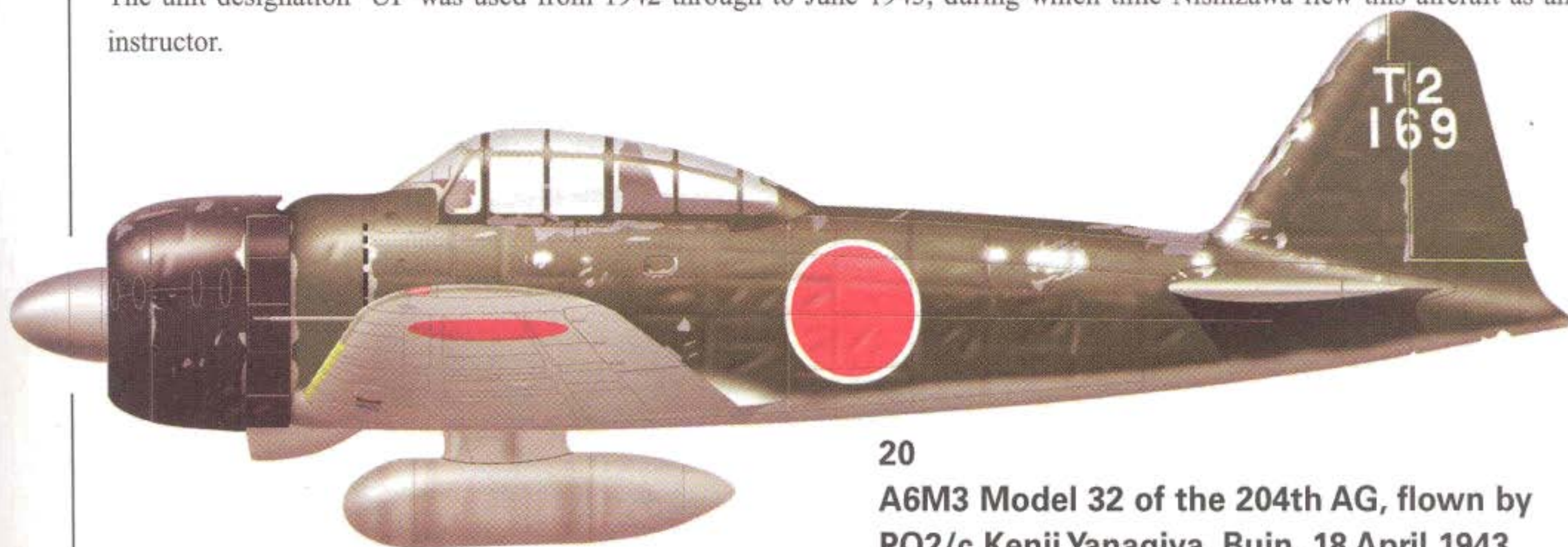
Codenamed 'Rufe' by the Allies, this aircraft was one of two successful floatplane designs utilised by the JNAF, the great benefit of this type of fighter being its ability to be based almost anywhere along an island coastline – tents would

provide housing for pilots and groundcrew. On 13 February 1943 Lt(jg) Yamazaki claimed a P-39 probable flying this fighter, whilst various other pilots also enjoyed success with it – these kills were marked with small red hatchets on the tail.



**19**  
**A6M3 Model 22 of the 251st AG, flown by**  
**CPO Hiroyoshi Nishizawa, Aichi Prefecture,**  
**Japan, Spring 1943**

The unit designation 'UI' was used from 1942 through to June 1943, during which time Nishizawa flew this aircraft as an instructor.

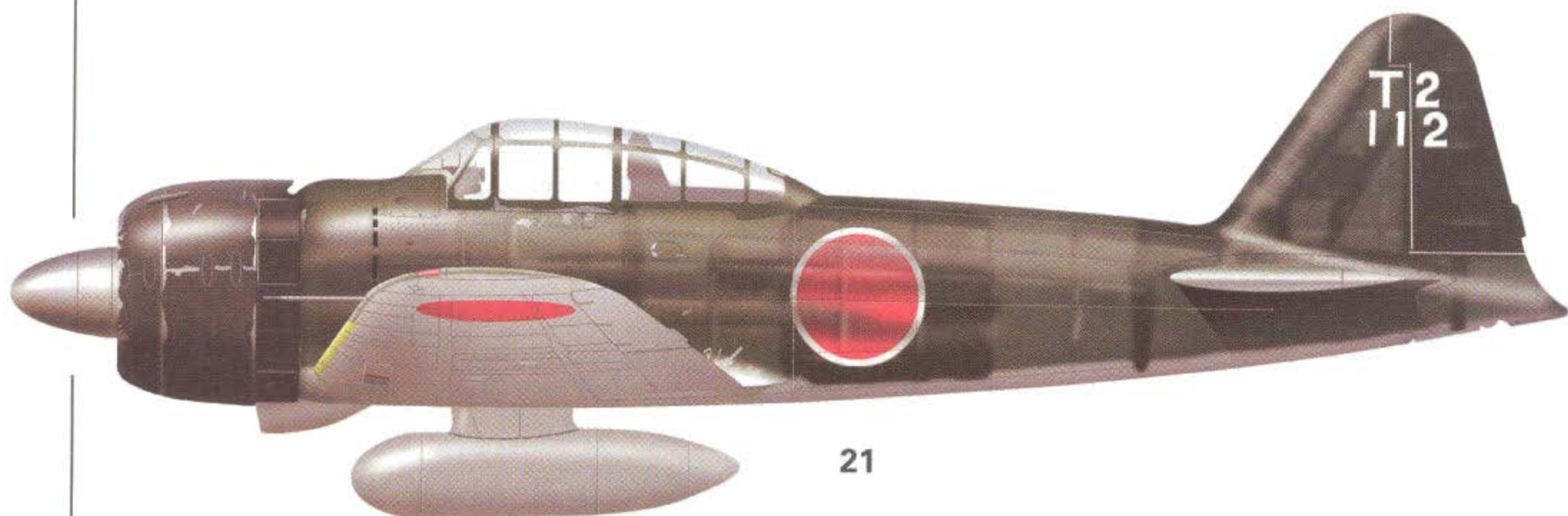


**20**  
**A6M3 Model 32 of the 204th AG, flown by**  
**PO2/c Kenji Yanagiya, Buin, 18 April 1943**

Yanagiya flew 'T2-169' on the ill-fated Adm Yamamoto escort mission, during which he claimed a P-38 probable. Note that this aircraft lacks a radio mast, which has been cut off in order to save weight. Unshielded ignitions in the

engine interfered with radio reception, rendering it virtually worthless – pilots also discarded the radio equipment too. Understanding commanders did nothing to stop the practice.



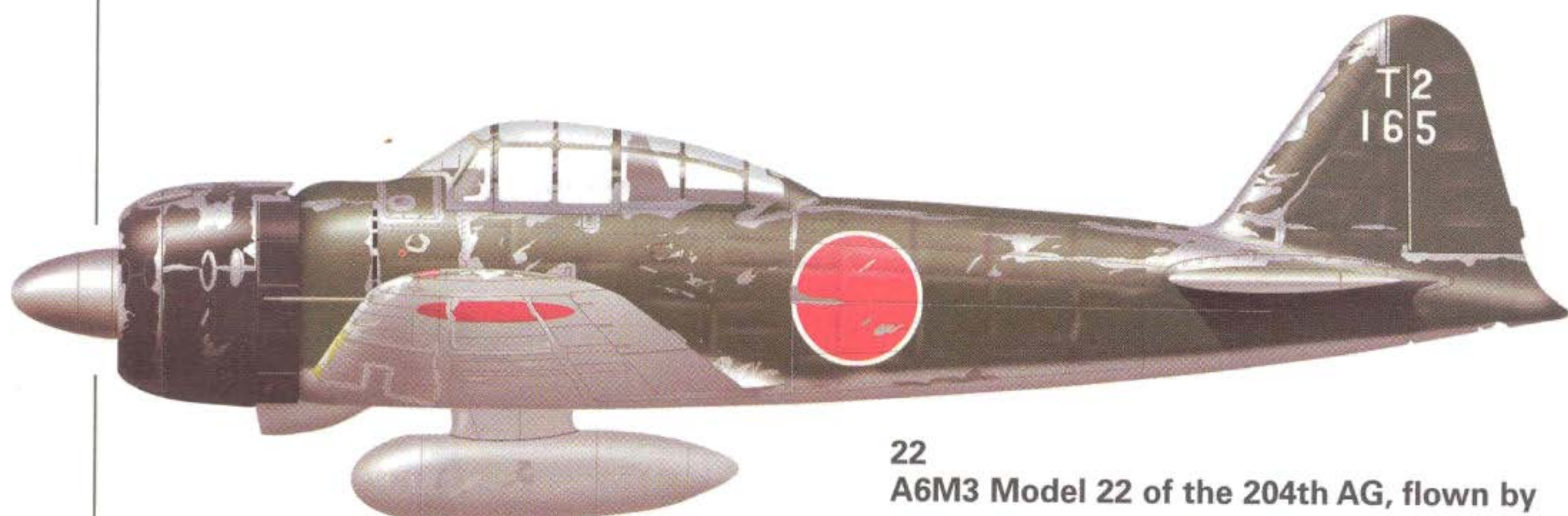


21

**A6M3 Model 22 of the 204th AG, flown by WO Matsuo Hagiri, Buin, summer 1943**

Hagiri had shot down six enemy aircraft during his two-month stay with this unit., before being wounded in aerial combat with F4U Corsairs and RNZAF P-40s on 23

September 1943 over Kahili. Prior to being hit he had claimed two victories. Hagiri subsequently returned to Japan for hospitalisation.

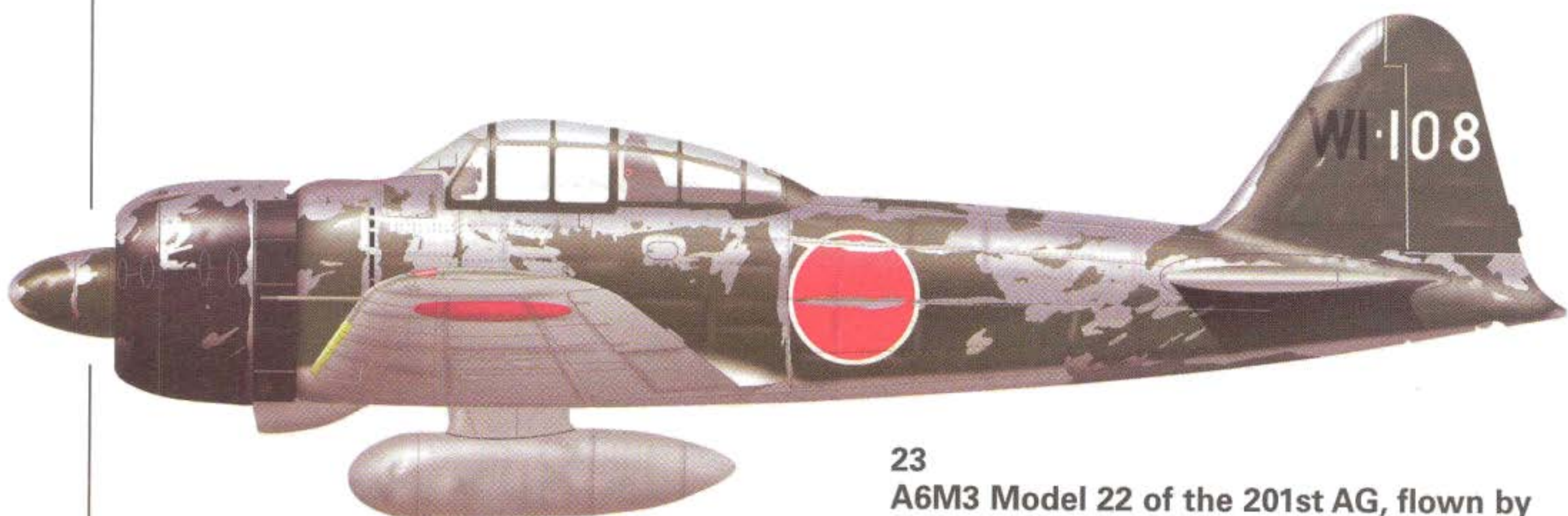


22

**A6M3 Model 22 of the 204th AG, flown by PO2/c Shoichi Sugita, Rabaul, June 1943**

Even experienced pilots like Sugita did not have their own assigned aircraft, flying whatever fighter was available at

the time. During the month of June he destroyed or damaged two F4Fs, three F4Us and three unspecified aircraft.



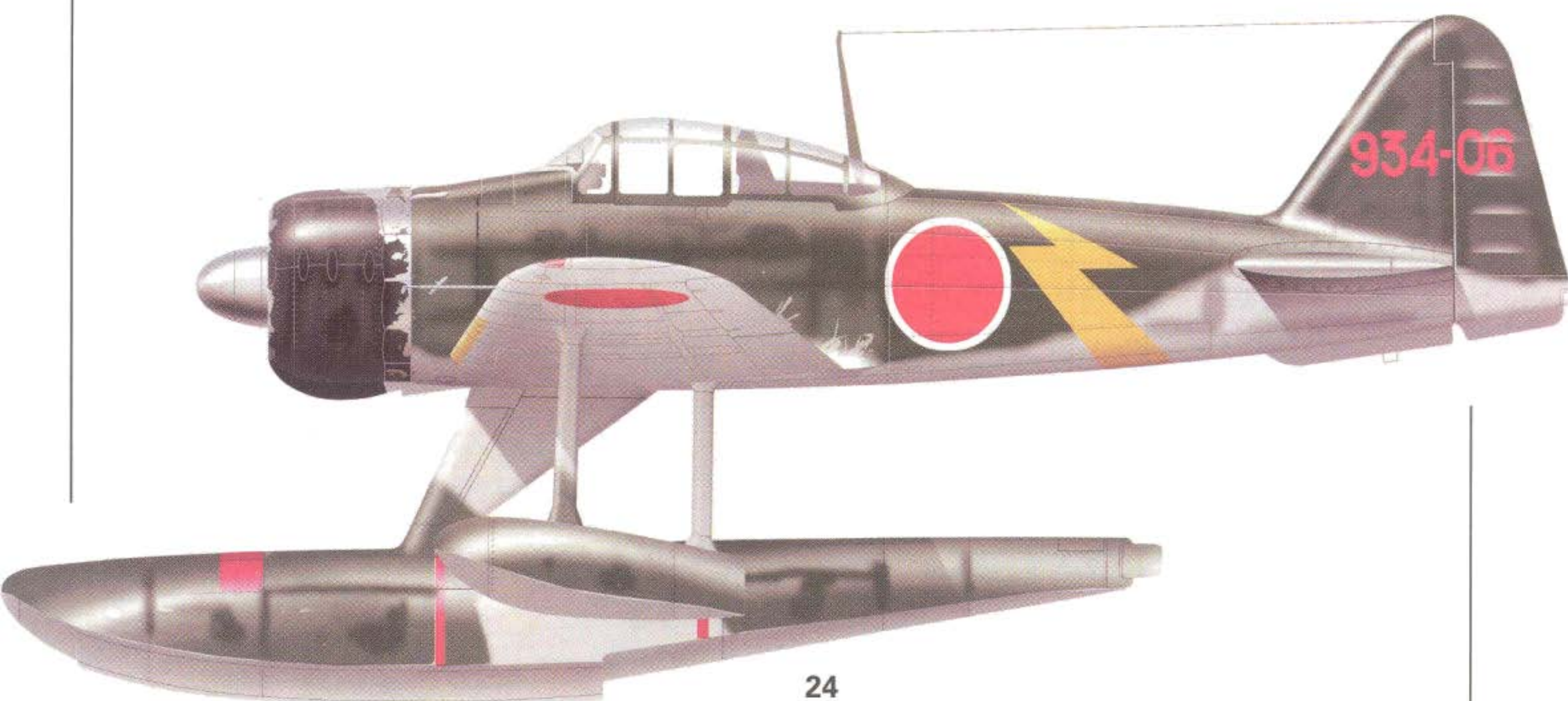
23

**A6M3 Model 22 of the 201st AG, flown by CPO Takeo Okumura, Buin, September 1943**

The unit designation, 'WI' was used from June 1943 through to 1944, during which time CPO Okumura set the JNAF

record for shooting down the most number of enemy aircraft in a single day – ten on 14 September 1943 over Buin.



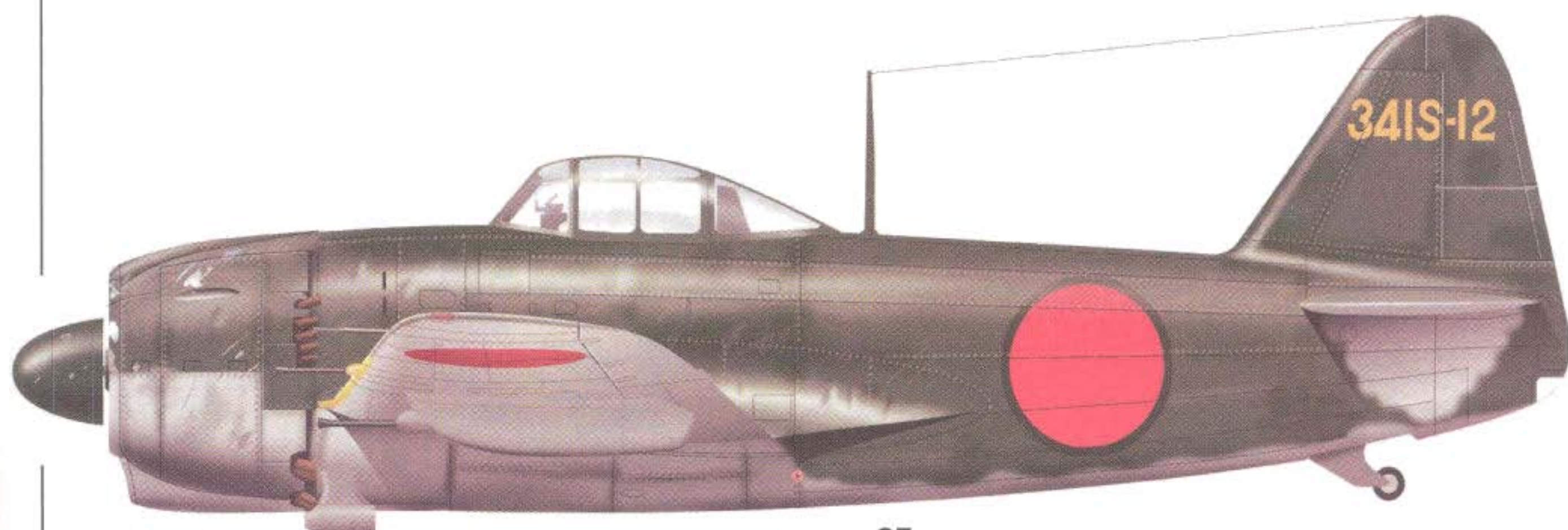


24

**A6M2-N Type 2 Floatplane Fighter, 934th AG, flown by CPO Eitoku Matsunaga, Banda Sea/Ambon Island, September 1943-44**

Reputedly the top floatplane ace of the Pacific War with eight kills, Matsunaga survived the war and has since

shunned publicity, thus relegating his career into historical obscurity.



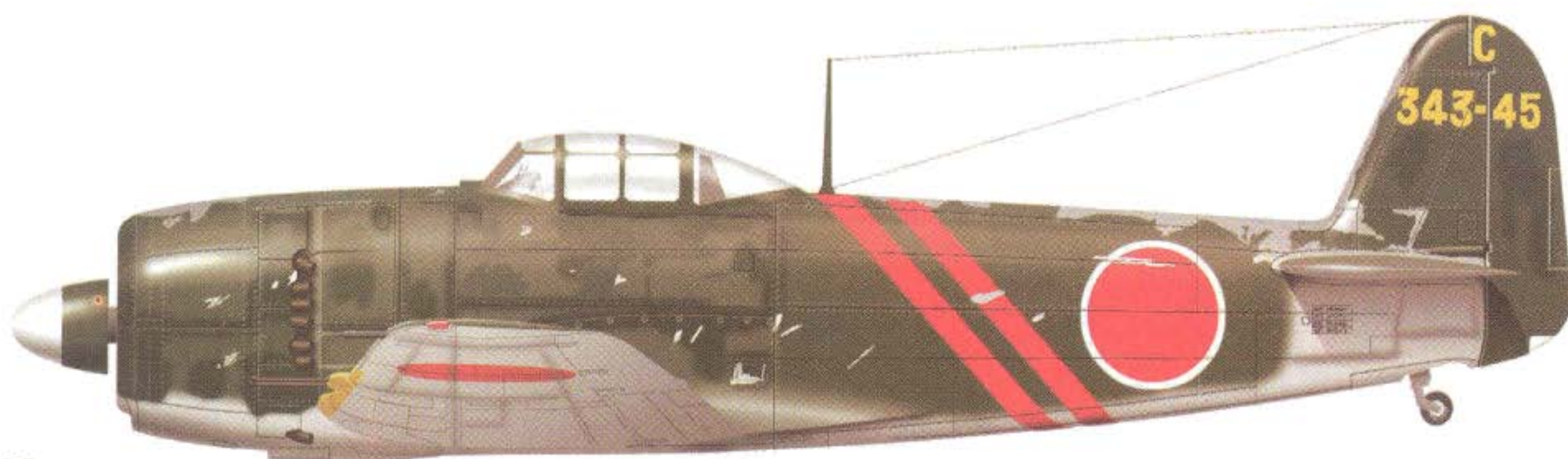
25

**N1K1-J Shiden 11 of the 341st AG, 402nd Squadron, the Philippines, mid-1944**

The 341st AG was to be armed with the new Shiden fighter in 1943, but due to production delays it did not receive its first aircraft until February 1944. A modified and further developed land-based version of the 'Rex' floatplane, the Shiden was modified extensively, and finally gained acceptance into JNAF

service. Despite the 'George's' highly-regarded automatic combat flap system, it was plagued by engine and undercarriage problems, leading Lt Iyozoh Fujita, Midway air hero and division officer of the 402nd Squadron, to sum the much-touted fighter up with just two words – 'No good!'



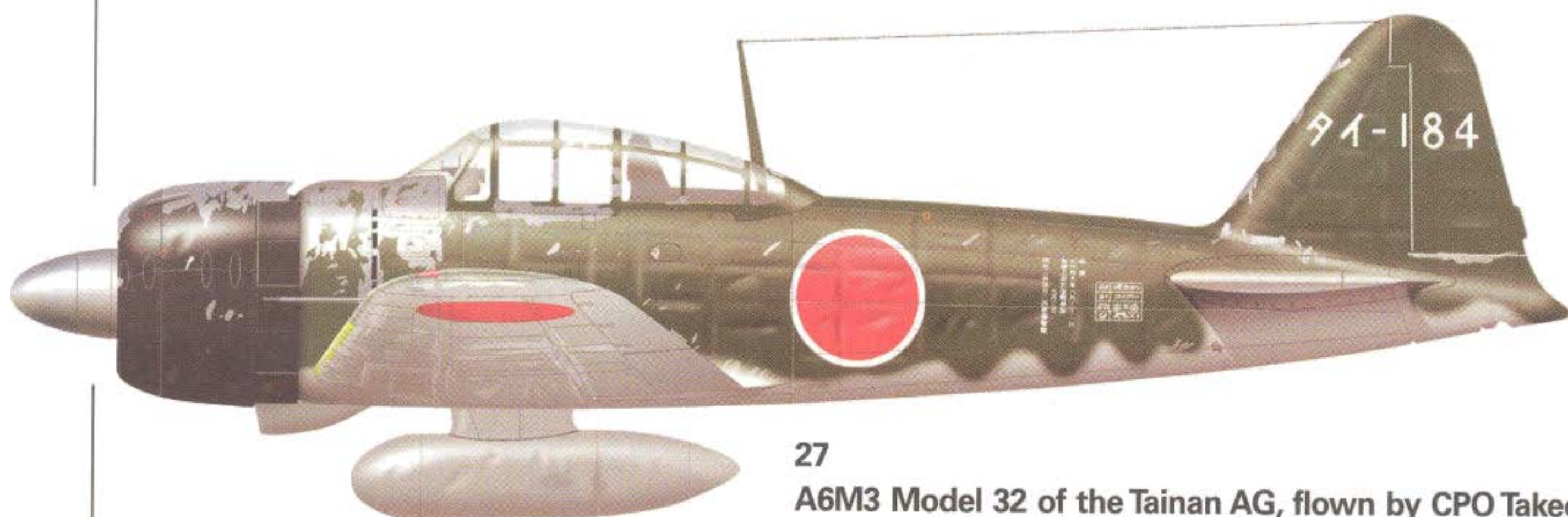


26

**N1K2-J Shiden-Kai 21 of the 343rd AG, 701st Squadron, flown by squadron leader Lt Takashi Oshibuchi, Kyushu, April 1945**

The letter 'C' on the tail of this 'George' denotes that it belongs to the 701st Squadron, whilst the double red diagonal fuselage stripes indicate a squadron leader's aircraft. On 16 April 1945 Oshibuchi led 32 'Georges' to Okinawa during the No 3

Kikusui Operation, the fighters subsequently claiming 20 F6Fs destroyed for the loss of nine N1K2-Js. Oshibuchi was killed on 24 July 1945 in '343-C-13' when he was downed by VF-49's Lt George M Williams over the Bungo Straits.

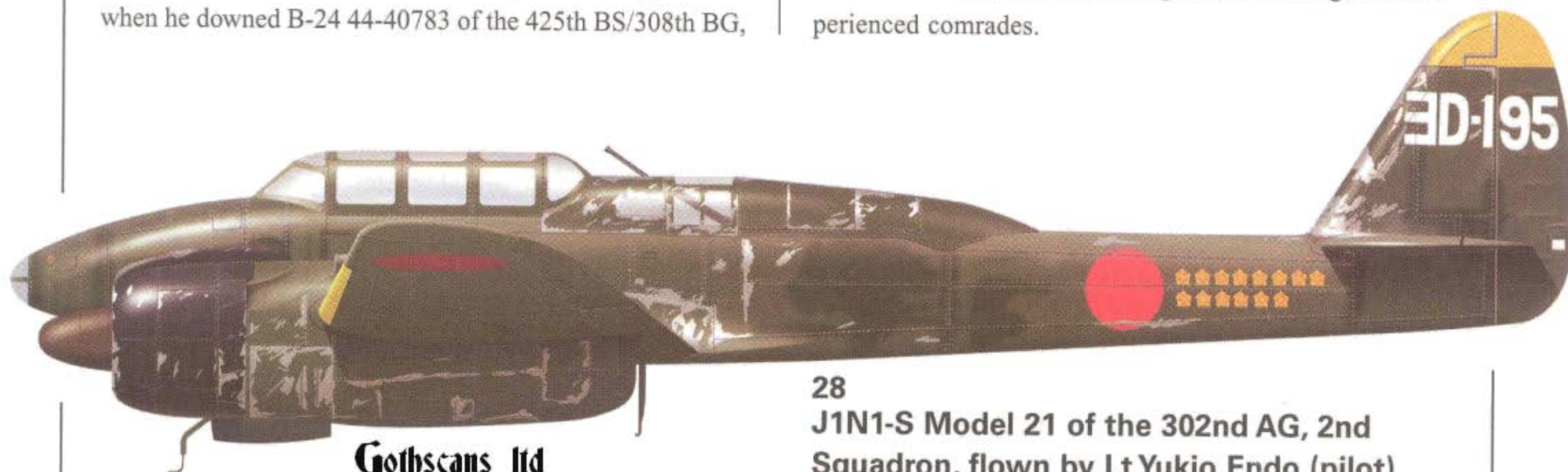


27

**A6M3 Model 32 of the Tainan AG, flown by CPO Takeo Tanimizu, Tainan, Formosa, September 1944**

This aircraft belonged to an operational training unit, rather than the famous Tainan AG, which was active over New Guinea in 1942. The unit designation in phonetic characters read Tai, followed by the aircraft number '184'. Tanimizu was flying this aircraft on the night of 31 August 1944 when he downed B-24 44-40783 of the 425th BS/308th BG,

flown by 1Lt Norman B Clendenen. The kanji inscriptions on the rear fuselage reads, 'Combat diary. 31 August 1944, participated in combat over Takao. 3 September, the same. Downed one B-24'. Pilots rarely had inscriptions painted on their aircraft, Tanimizu doing so to encourage his inexperienced comrades.



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28

**J1N1-S Model 21 of the 302nd AG, 2nd Squadron, flown by Lt Yukio Endo (pilot) and CPO Osamu Nishio (observer), Atsugi airfield, January 1945**

This Gekko's victory markings consist of five double cherry blossoms (destroyed) and nine single blossoms (probables), these successes having been achieved by Endo

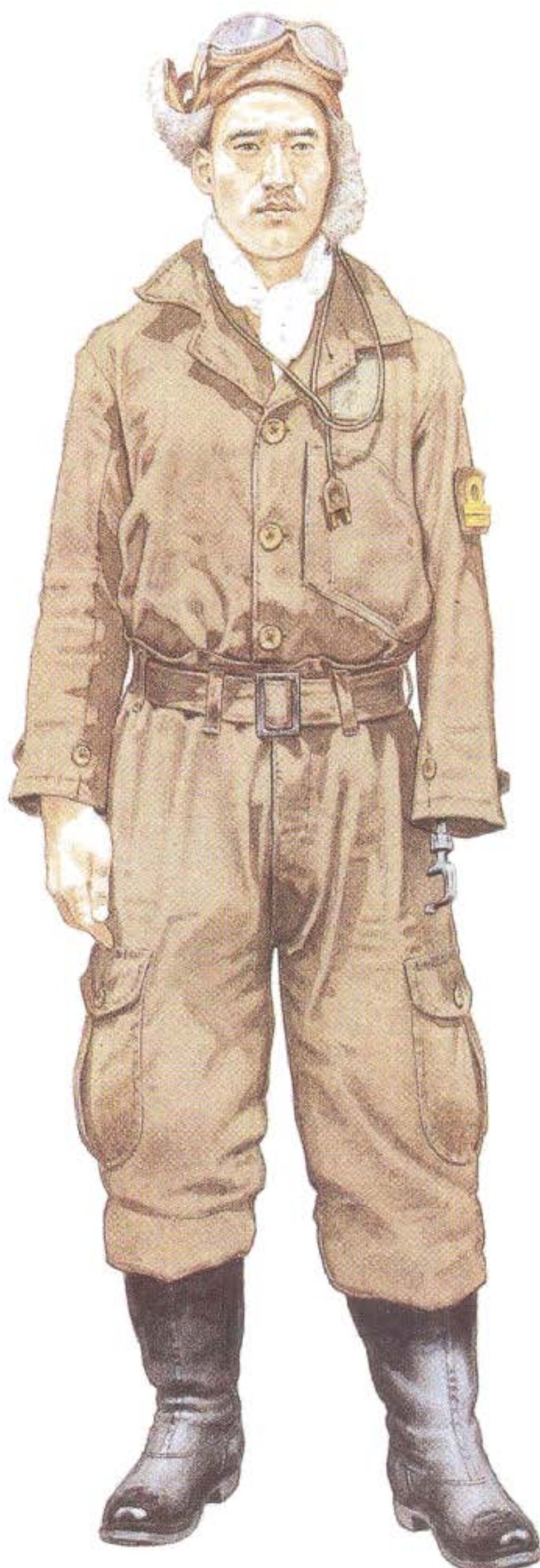
and Nishio. At the time of their deaths on 14 January 1945, the pair had been credited with at least eight B-29 victories.





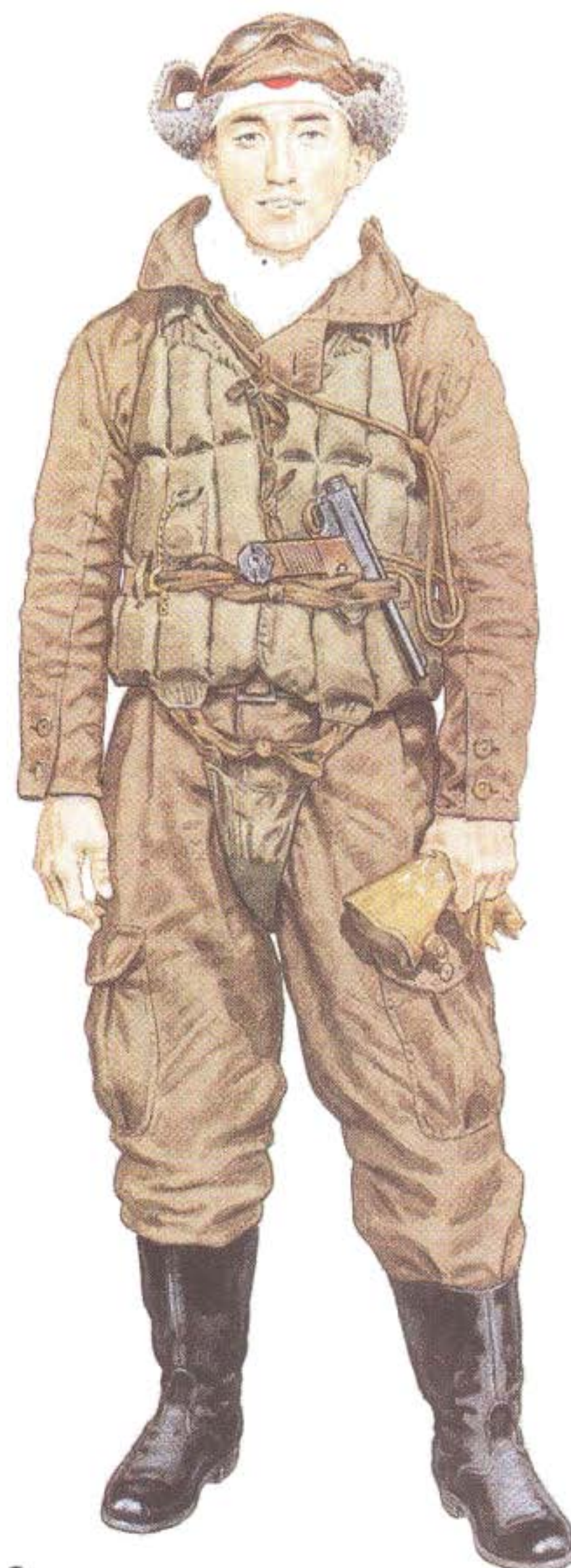
1 This is what the completely outfitted carrier pilot looked like in 1941-42.

PO3/c Sadamu Komachi is seen ready for action whilst serving aboard *Shokaku* at the time of the Pearl Harbor raid, wearing his one-piece winter flightsuit, which was waterproofed, but not fireproof, and trimmed with a white rabbit fur collar. His headgear comprised a woollen toque and winter helmet, whilst over his kapok life jacket (which offered its wearer some protection from flying shrapnel) he wears a Type 97 parachute harness with a white cloth name tag on the right vertical strap. Komachi's gauntlets, which are stuffed into his right leg pocket, are made from deerskin.



2 After having had his hand amputated by the tail gunner of a B-29 in January 1945, Lt Yutaka Morioka of the 302nd AG returned to duty sporting an iron claw!

He is seen wearing an early style (button sleeve) brown gabardine summer flightsuit and a winter (rabbit fur-lined) helmet. A small green cloth name patch is sewn onto his left breast, but it has been left unmarked, for the suits were often reissued to other pilots. Home defence pilots like Morioka did not carry pistols unless their mission took them away from the Japanese mainland – to Iwo Jima or Okinawa, for example. A head-phone cord dangles around his neck. JNAF aviators often wore silk scarves as part of their attire.



3 PO1/c Takeo Tanimizu wears typical JNAF flying gear whilst aboard the carrier *Junyo* in May 1942.

He is attired in a one-piece brown gabardine summer flying suit, which is quilted inside (lined) for additional warmth while at sea. Tanimizu's kapok-filled life jacket is of an early style, boasting a small utility pocket which contains his watch. Many pilots carried a pistol, although this was not for personal protection, but instead to be used as an instrument with which to commit suicide in order to prevent capture – Tanimizu's is an 8 mm Nambu (Nagoya 1st series, produced in November 1941 and serialised 2147), which belonged to the carrier's arsenal. It had an eight-shot capacity, but only five rounds were loaded to prevent magazine spring weakness. Holsters were too bulky, so the usual method of securement was with a rope lanyard. In his hand is a summer issue gauntlet.





4 Winter and high altitude flying over Atsugi made heavy flying gear a must for flight instructor Lt(jg) Sadaaki Akamatsu of the 302nd AG in early 1945. The late style winter flightsuit (zippered sleeve as opposed to the early button sleeve) has a rabbit fur collar and is quilted inside. Of interest is the custom-made winter flying helmet worn by the pilot – some officer pilots, for whatever reason, had custom helmets specially made for them. The standard issue item was made from sheepskin. Akamatsu wears typical short black flying boots with leather soles and rubber heels.



5 Just back from the China War, newly-promoted PO1/c Kaneyoshi Muto of the 12th AG gives off the impression of being a seasoned veteran in his petty officer's blues. On his left breast are three medals – the Golden Kite, Rising Sun 1st Class and the China Incident medal. On the lower right-hand side of Muto's tunic is an air medal, whilst his right sleeve carries two *Zenkosho* (good conduct stripes) and a sleeve rating depicting a naval aviator, Petty Officer 1st Class.



6 PO2/c Saburo Sakai of the 12th AG is depicted at Nanchang air base, in southern China in 1939. He is wearing typical two-piece tropical work fatigues and a floppy (but quite functional) 'Daisy Mae' hat. In the heat of the tropics pilots would wear these work clothes beneath their unlined summer flightsuits.



He soon made a name for himself by doggedly pursuing a lone B-17 for over an hour before finally bringing it down.

Ota's congenial personality and aggressive fighting spirit soon caught the attention of Saburo Sakai (the unit's top scorer), and as with Lt(jg) Sasai, Sakai also tutored the former in dogfighting techniques. His protégé caught on very quickly, and soon a scoring race had developed between himself, his instructor and Hiroyoshi Nishizawa. Ota proved his ability on the 7 August mission to Guadalcanal, when he claimed four Wildcats destroyed in his first encounter with American carrier fighters.

On 21 October PO1/c Toshio Ota participated in a bomber escort mission to Guadalcanal which encountered Wildcats of VMF-212 head-on at high altitude. Although Ota quickly downed Marine Gunner 'Tex' Hamilton (a seven-kill ace), who parachuted out but was never recovered, he in turn had 1Lt Frank C Drury (six kills) whip around onto his tail in a tight climbing turn as the Zero flashed before him. The Wildcat pilot's aim was deadly accurate, and Ota fell to his death – Drury claimed two A6Ms during this sortie.

Toshio Ota was given a posthumous promotion to the rank of warrant officer, and according to his air group's record, he had scored 34 victories.

## Warrant Officer Hiroyoshi Nishizawa

It was only after his death that Hiroyoshi Nishizawa rose to fame, thanks to the memoir of his comrade Saburo Sakai. Indeed, he was at one time thought to have been the JNAF's top ace. Born on 27 January 1920 in Nagano Prefecture, Nishizawa was the son of a saké brewery manager. He joined the navy in June 1936 as a result of seeing a JNAF recruiting poster, the youngster working in a thread mill at the time. His boyhood dream of becoming a pilot was realised when he completed flying training in March 1939. When the Pacific War began, Nishizawa was flying Type 96 'Claudes' with the Chitose AG in the Marshall Islands, and he duly accompanied the group to Rabaul, where he joined the 4th AG in February 1942. Nishizawa recorded his first victory on 3 February 1942 over Rabaul whilst still flying the thoroughly obsolete 'Claude'.

When elements of the Tainan AG arrived at Rabaul from the Dutch East Indies in April, Nishizawa was transferred into the 2nd Squadron, where he found himself in the company of PO1/c Saburo Sakai. The latter tutored the gaunt and sickly loner, together with PO2/c Toshio Ota, and together the threesome became famous as the 'Cleanup Trio'.

Nishizawa quickly mastered the art of dogfighting, scoring his first victory (a P-39) with the Tainan AG on 1 May over Port Moresby. The following day two P-40s fell to his guns, the group's American opponents throughout the month of May being the USAAC's 35th and 36th FSs.

Nishizawa's most successful day came on 7 August 1942 when, during a long-range bomber escort mission to Guadalcanal, he claimed six VF-5 F4Fs in his first encounter with American carrier fighters. Although the great ace's A6M sustained some damage, he returned safely to base.

In November, surviving pilots of the Tainan AG were transferred to the 251st, with those few who had survived the combats over Guadalcanal being held in high esteem by the JNAF.

On 14 May 1943 33 Zeroes escorted 18 'Betty' bombers sent to strike

PO1/c Hiroyoshi Nishizawa is seen as an instructor in Japan in 1943. He was not well suited to this task as he had very little tolerance for his trainees, and thus hating his assignment. Nishizawa was simply a skilled fighter pilot who could not teach







**Veteran fighter pilot WO Shigeo Fukumoto led Rabaul's 'Guerrilla Air Force' of eight Zero fighters after the 253rd AG had retreated to Truk. Having survived the war with an impressive score of 72 victories, he was killed in a road accident in December 1945**

at shipping in Oro Bay. Opposing them was the 49th FG, who scrambled up three squadrons of P-40s. In the huge dogfight which ensued, Nishizawa claimed one Warhawk shot down and two more as probables, plus recorded his first victory over a P-38 – the JNAF claimed 15 victories in total, but the only USAAF loss was a solitary P-38 (from the 9th FS).

It was inevitable that sooner or later Nishizawa would test his skills against the gull-winged F4U Corsair – arguably the best fighter on either side in the region. This contest occurred on 7 June 1943 over the Russells, when 81 Zeroes tangled with USMC and RNZAF fighters. Four Corsairs of VMF-112 were lost in this action, although three of the pilots were saved – Nishizawa's claims for the mission were one F4U and a New Zealand P-40 destroyed. For the rest of the summer of 1943 he fought daily battles with Corsairs and P-40s in the areas of Rendova and Vella La Vella, the former fighter being his toughest opponent. Marines from VMF-121, -122, -123, -124 and -221 all traded fire with 'The Devil', but failed to bring him down, resulting in Nishizawa being awarded a coveted ceremonial sword from Adm Jinichi Kusaka, CO of the 11th Air Fleet.

In September the 251st AG was re-rolled as a nightfighter unit, and PO1/c Nishizawa was transferred to the 253rd AG, based at Tobera Airfield (Rabaul). He flew with his new unit for just a month, however, for he was ordered to return to Japan in October to serve as an instructor as part of the JNAF's efforts to cure their fighter pilot shortage. The following month he received promotion to warrant officer. Nishizawa hated his new assignment likening it to baby-sitting. He had very little patience with his trainees, many of whom would have been rejected for flight training just three years earlier, and after repeated requests for a combat assignment, he was transferred to the 201st AG in the Philippines in time to participate in the counterattack against the American naval fleets.

The first successful *kamikaze* suicide attack occurred on 25 October 1944 when Lt Yukio Seki and four other pilots attacked US carriers in Leyte Gulf. WO Nishizawa had played a pivotal role in this mission by leading the four escort fighters which had cleared the path for Seki by downing two patrolling Hellcats. He subsequently told his comrades that he would die soon, and requested a *kamikaze* assignment, although this was swiftly turned down because of his value as a fighter pilot.

On 26 October Nishizawa boarded a bomber used by the Navy's 1021 Transport Group and left Cebu Island for Mabalacat (near Clark Field) to pick up some replacement Zeroes. A frantic SOS radio message was received from the transport, but it failed to arrive at its destination and nothing more was learned of its fate.

In 1982, the circumstances surrounding Nishizawa's death were finally resolved. The aircraft had been intercepted between Puerto Gallera and Calapan, on the northern tip of Mindoro Island, by two Hellcats from VF-14 that were in the process of returning to their carrier.

'I stayed below a thin stratus cloud layer and my wingman stayed on top', recalled F6F pilot Harold P Newell. 'The aircraft popped out of the clouds slightly to my right in a left hand turn. It was at close range and I opened fire. After several short bursts the port engine and inboard wing section were in flames. The aircraft went into an increasingly steep diving left turn and I continued firing until the fuselage started shedding pieces and the fire increased.'



Hiroyoshi Nishizawa was posthumously elevated two ranks to lieutenant junior grade and issued a citation. According to the Naval All Units Proclamation No 172, Nishizawa attained a personal tally of 36 victories and two damaged while serving with the 201st. Shortly before his death, Nishizawa had reportedly told his last CO, Cdr Harutoshi Okamoto, that he had achieved 86 kills – postwar, he has been linked with scores of 147 and 103, but both tallies are pure fiction.

In May 1982, Harold P Newell met and shook hands with Nishizawa's mentor, Saburo Sakai, at a reunion in California.

## Petty Officer Second Class Enji Kakimoto

Enji Kakimoto was born in Oita Prefecture in April 1920, and when the China War broke out in July 1937, he was so imbued with national spirit that he left his family farm and enlisted in the navy at Sasebo. The exploits of Japanese aviators over China excited young Enji, who initially served as a sailor aboard the cruiser *Myoko* following his enlistment. Once back ashore, he found that performing guard duty at various air bases was just as monotonous as farm labour, so he applied for, and was accepted into, flight training. He graduated in the 47th term flight class in October 1939. Kakimoto's biggest day in action came during the fierce dogfight over Guadalcanal on 7 August 1942 when, as PO1/c Saburo Sakai's wingman, he claimed an F4F Wildcat and an SBD over Tulagi.

Just 20 days later PO2/c Kakimoto was shot down while escorting 'Val' dive-bombers on a mission to Rabi, New Guinea, ditching his Zero into the sea and swimming ashore. Captured by 'friendly' natives soon after reaching land, the young aviator was eventually turned over to the Australians. When Kakimoto failed to return from the mission he was declared missing and presumed killed in action.

Unbeknown to his squadron mates, Kakimoto had been shipped back to Australia, where he was imprisoned at the huge Cowra PoW camp in New South Wales. He played dumb with his captors, submitting to their questions and giving them misleading information. His fellow comrades remembered him as a militant hothead, who helped organise a breakout in a gesture aimed at erasing the shame of having been captured.

On 5 August 1944, more than 1100 Japanese PoWs broke out of the camp, and over 230 were either killed attempting to do so, or committed suicide rather than be recaptured – within nine days, all escapees had been accounted for. Although one of the main conspirators in the 'Cowra Breakout', Kakimoto never actually left the confines of the camp, choosing instead to throw a rope over a rafter in his hut and hang himself.

PO2/c Enji Kakimoto scored over five victories in his short career and now lies buried in the Japanese War Cemetery at Cowra.

## Ensign Kenji Okabe

Kenji Okabe is honoured in JNAF history as having been the pilot who initially set the record for the most number of victories achieved during one mission.

Born in Fukuoka Prefecture in May 1915, Kenji joined the Navy and entered flight training in the 38th term class along with fellow sailor

PO2/c Enji Kakimoto (seen here on 4 August 1942) was one of just a handful of Zero pilots who became a PoW. He helped organise the mass breakout from Cowra PoW Camp, in Australia, in 1944







PO3/c Kenji Okabe is seen in 1942 whilst serving aboard the *Shokaku*. He set a naval record of eight enemy aircraft destroyed in a day during the Battle of the Coral Sea

Saburo Sakai. Upon graduation in November 1937, he was assigned to the 12th AG and went to the China War. However, there was very little enemy air activity to be found, and Okabe saw no combat. Unlike Sakai, he then became a carrier pilot and their careers took different paths.

When Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, PO1/c Okabe was assigned to the carrier *Shokaku*, although his part in the raid consisted of flying combat air patrols over the carrier task force. His baptism of fire finally came on 9 April 1942 when JNAF carrier pilots attacked the British naval base at Trincomalee, on the island of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) – Okabe claimed the destruction two No 261 Sqn Hurricane IIs.

He subsequently made a name for himself during the Battle of the Coral Sea on 8 May 1942. During a combat air patrol over the *Shokaku*, Okabe attempted to thwart determined attack by SBDs against his carrier. Protecting the Dauntlesses were F4F Wildcats, which constantly interfered by drawing his flight into dogfights while the dive-bombers tried to deliver their bombs. SBD pilot Lt John J Powers managed to break through the fighter barrier to hit the carrier, causing extensive damage and put it out of action – he was killed in the process, however, later being posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions.

When the fighting ended Okabe claimed three SBDs and three F4Fs destroyed, with a further a pair of Wildcats as probables – a new JNAF record had been set. Despite his best efforts, Okabe's carrier had been so badly damaged that he was forced to ditch, from where he was rescued.

By July 1943 Okabe was back on his old ship, and in November the *Shokaku* Fighter Squadron flew to Rabaul to help shore up the flagging defense of the base in the face of relentless Allied air attacks. The Coral Sea veteran participated in a number of intercept missions whilst ashore, adding more victories to his tally.

Okabe's carrier fighter career ended when he transferred to the Omura AG in Japan. He fought briefly in the Philippines from October 1944 until he returned to Japan towards the end of the year, and then went on to see further action during aerial attacks over Okinawa in April 1945 with the 601st AG. After failing to halt the US invasion of Okinawa, Okabe's unit was all but grounded as it strove to conserve fuel and build up its aircraft inventory for the final battle which never came.

Ens Kenji Okabe claimed over 50 victories in his career.

## Warrant Officer Kenji Yanagiya

Kenji Yanagiya would have been considered an 'average' Zero pilot but for fate, as he was the sole surviving escort pilot of the disastrous Adm Yamamoto mission. He was born in March 1919, and enlisted in the navy as a seaman recruit in January 1940 at Yokosuka Naval Station. Subsequently plucked out of the ranks for flight training, he completed his course at Oita Air Base in March 1942 and was assigned to the 6th AG.

In October 1942 Yanagiya was sent to Rabaul to serve with the 204th AG, and he recorded his first victory with the group on 5 January 1943 during an attack on Buin, on Bougainville, by P-38s (from the 339th FS) and B-17s. Although Yanagiya claimed a twin-engined Grumman XF5F-1 Skyrocket as his victim, this was an experimental fighter which never saw service – two P-38s were lost on this mission.

On 18 April Yanagiya, and five other pilots, was assigned to escort two



'Betty' bombers conducting an inspection tour of the frontlines – the lead bomber carried Adm Isoroku Yamamoto, Commander in Chief of the Combined Fleet. Sixteen P-38s from Guadalcanal intercepted the Japanese flight off the south-west coast of Bougainville, and Adm Yamamoto's bomber was shot down by 1Lt Rex Barber before the Japanese could take any effective action. The other 'Betty' was also destroyed. In the ensuing dogfight, Yanagiya claimed one P-38, but it was to be a hollow victory. Having failed to protect their leader, yet having all returned to base unscathed, the escort pilots were given every opportunity to redeem themselves through glorious death – within three months four were dead.

On 8 June 1943 Yanagiya was severely wounded in combat while on a mission to Guadalcanal. His right arm was amputated and he was sent home to Japan for further hospitalisation. By October of 1944 Yanagiya had recovered enough to become an instructor, but he never saw combat again. He ended the war with at least eight victories and married the nurse who had taken care of him.

In April 1988 Yanagiya shook hands with Rex Barber and the surviving P-38 veterans from the Yamamoto Mission at the Adm Nimitz Museum in Fredericksburg, Texas.

## Warrant Officer Hiroshi Okano

Although a late starter in the Tainan AG, Hiroshi Okano had risen to prominence by the end of the war. Born in Ibaragi Prefecture in May 1921, he enlisted in the navy in June 1938. The start of the Pacific War found Okano flying in the Marshall Islands with the Chitose AG, although he was posted to the Tainan AG at Rabaul in late May 1942.

On 25 June, the Tainan AG sortied 25 Zeroes from Lae to attack Port Moresby. Along the way, they intercepted six B-17s escorted by 24 escort fighters, and in the wild dogfight that ensued, Okano claimed his first kill.

In December 1942 he was transferred to the 201st AG and returned once again to the Marshall Islands. There was no enemy air activity to be found in this region, however, and Okano's unit spent most of its time training and conducting patrols. In February 1943, the group was recalled to Japan, where the pilots underwent more training.

As the air war over the

Kenji Yanagiya was the sole wartime survivor of the Zero escorts assigned to protect Adm Yamamoto during his fateful frontline tour in April 1943. He was amazed by the celebrity status accorded to him for his role in the mission by American historians and veteran P-38 pilots alike when he visited the USA in 1988







PO3/c Hiroshi Okano scored six victories with the Tainan AG and a dozen more with the 201st AG in the Solomons. Of the 21 pilots in his training class, only he and two others survived the war



A happy PO Sekizen Shibayama is seen in the cockpit of a 'Claude' whilst serving as a flying instructor. Posted to Rabaul in late 1943, he flew as part of the 'Guerrilla Air Force' after the JNAF had officially departed the area. Shibayama, and a handful of other pilots and mechanics, performed a commendable job in an impossible situation

Solomons intensified, the 201st AG was rushed to Buin in July 1943. The many months of training now paid off for PO1/c Okano for he quickly blossomed in combat, scoring around a dozen victories in this theatre of operations. In November now CPO Okano was transferred to the 331st AG, with whom he participated in combats over western New Guinea, before returning to the mainland.

WO Okano ended the war attached to the 701st Squadron of the 343rd AG – the so-called 'Squadron of Experts'. He achieved 19 victories.

## Warrant Officer Sekizen Shibayama

Sekizen Shibayama was one of 'Rabaul's Last Eagles', a member of a guerrilla fighter squadron abandoned to its fate on New Britain.

Born in Saitama Prefecture in December 1923, he joined the navy and entered flight training in June 1940. After graduation in May 1942, Shibayama fulfilled the role of flight instructor at Yatabe airfield until posted to the 201st AG at Rabaul in September 1943 – he was subsequently transferred to the 253rd.

On 11 November Shibayama took off to intercept American carrier aircraft attacking Rabaul. As the novice pilot attempted to climb to altitude he experienced engine trouble, forcing him to unwittingly dive into a formation of eight Hellcats. In the resulting melee, future 10-kill ace Lt A B 'Chick' Smith of VF-9 clobbered Shibayama's Zero, sending it down in flames. The Japanese pilot glided his aircraft into Simpson Harbour and was later rescued – Smith claimed two A6Ms on this date.

Suffering from both a leg injury and malaria, Shibayama was grounded and saw no further action until the 253rd retreated to Truk Island where, as one of a handful of sick and injured pilots, he was left behind as the group continued its retreat northwards. A number of mechanics had also been abandoned on Truk, and they set about salvaging around a dozen Zero fighters from wrecks, thus creating a new squadron. Because of his combat experience, Shibayama and WO Shigeo Fukumoto were tasked with training half a dozen other pilots during the lull in fighting.

On 3 March 1944 seven Zeroes encountered a flight of F4Us of VMF-223 during a training flight over Tobera Airfield. In the short combat which ensued, the Japanese claimed five victories, including one to Shibayama (no F4Us were actually lost). Another scrap followed nine days later, this time involving F4Us from VMF-222. The Japanese claimed two, but again no Corsairs were lost – two Zeroes were, however, destroyed.

For the remainder of the war, Shibayama flew a number of patrol and bombing missions against American forces, and by August 1945 the unit was comprised of just two airworthy Zeroes. When Sekizen Shibayama was notified of the final surrender at Kara (Buin) airfield, he was awaiting orders to make a solo suicide attack against approaching enemy warships. By his own reckoning he had attained 13 victories.

In August 1971 the veteran ace was reunited with his old Zero after it had been recovered from Simpson Harbour. The remarkable reunion took place in Bakersfield, California, and an examination of his seat revealed that a .50 cal 'slug' had missed his 'crown jewels' by inches. Today, Shibayama resides in Tokyo.



## Chief Petty Officer Takeo Okumura

During the Pacific War few fighter pilots became a 'double ace-in-a-day', Takeo Okumura being one of those in this elite band – his claim of ten places him in the same league as top US Navy ace Cdr David McCampbell, who set the American record of nine destroyed and two damaged.

This extraordinary JNAF ace was born in Fukui Prefecture in February 1920. He enlisted in the navy at Kure in June 1935, and opting for a career in aviation, he was selected for flight training in February 1938. Okumura graduated in September of the same year.

Arriving in China just in time to participate in the final aerial actions of the conflict, Okumura was good from the very start. On 7 October 1940 seven A6M2 Zeroes of the 14th AG escorted 27 G3M 'Nell' bombers sent to raid Kunming. Whilst in the vicinity of the target CAF I-15 biplanes fighters attempted to intercept the 'Nells' but the Zeroes made short work of them, downing 13 in a matter of minutes – Okumura was credited with destroying four of them in what had been his first engagement.

As this mission clearly proved, the new Zero was vastly superior to anything the Chinese could boast in their arsenal, and fighter opposition all but ceased following the A6M2's introduction in August 1940. Indeed, Okumura's quartet of kills on 7 October were the 20-year-old pilot's only victories of the China War. Returning to Japan, he subsequently helped train pilots until July 1942, when he was assigned to the carrier *Ryujo*.

It was in the Solomons that Okumura became a master of dogfighting. On 24 August, he was escorting torpedo-bombers sent to attack American ships at Guadalcanal when they were intercepted by into Wildcats led by legendary ace Capt Marion Carl of VMF-223. A turbulent dogfight ensued, and Okumura became separated from his flight, who reported him lost upon returning to *Ryujo*, although he later returned alive – Carl claimed four kills (out of an eventual tally of 18.5) during this action.

When Okumura's first tour of duty in the Solomons ended, he had achieved 14 recognised aerial victories. He returned to Japan in December, but was posted back to the frontline in July 1943 as a member of the 201st AG, flying from their base at Buin.

Okumura's ten-kill haul came on 14 September during a massive Allied attack on Buin. The Japanese sortied over 200 Zeroes from the 201st and the 204th AGs in opposition, and in three separate missions during the course of the day, Okumura accounted for an F4U, a B-24 (shared), two P-40s, five F6F Hellcats and an SBD. After the battle, Adm Jinichi Kusaka, CO of the 11th Air Fleet at Rabaul, presented the ace with a ceremonial sword for distinguished service. Frustratingly for Okumura, individual credits were no longer being recorded due to a naval directive issued in June 1943, although his claim was unofficially touted as being the highest one-day score ever achieved by a JNAF pilot in action.

Eight days later Okumura failed to return from a bomber escort mission against a convoy sighted near Cape Cretin, New Guinea, the 35 Zeroes sortied being attacked by P-38s (432nd FS) and P-40s (35th FG).

CPO Takeo Okumura was subsequently recommended for a double rank promotion due to his distinguished record, but this was never realised. Four of his victories from the China War were officially recognised, and it is said he achieved roughly 50 victories in the Solomons.



**CPO Takeo Okumura became a double ace-in-a-day when he downed ten aircraft during three missions on 14 September 1943. He received a coveted ceremonial sword from ViceAdm Jinichi Kusaka for his actions**





Rabaul's 'King of the Night', PO1/c Shigetoshi Kudo, poses with a ceremonial sword and citation from VAdm Jinichi Kusaka in July 1943. His pioneering efforts against four-engined bombers over Rabaul helped the JNAF formulate night-fighting tactics that were later flown against B-29s over Japan

## Ensign Shigetoshi Kudo

Shigetoshi Kudo was a renowned pioneer nightfighter pilot in the JNAF who helped formulate effective techniques to counter bombers in the South Pacific. Born into a farming family in February 1920 in Oita Prefecture, he joined the navy in 1937. Kudo's path to becoming a premier fighter pilot was unspectacular, for his first role in the JNAF was as a mechanic. Switching to flying, he trained as a reconnaissance pilot and in October 1941 was assigned to the Tainan AG, with whom he duly saw combat in both the Philippines and Dutch East Indies.

During the early morning of 29 August 1942, B-17s from Port Moresby raided Rabaul, and somehow Kudo managed to get above the formation in his C5M Type 98 'Babs' recce aircraft and claim a bomber destroyed and a second as a probable thanks to the use of an aerial burst bomb. These night raids were designed to rob the Japanese defenders of much-needed sleep, rather than to destroy important targets (bombing accuracy was minimal). Allied bomber crews considered such sorties as 'milk runs', because anti-aircraft fire was inaccurate and there were no nightfighters in-theatre.

Rabaul's first effective nocturnal fighter was the J1N1 Gekko ('Irving') fast twin-engined long-range recce aircraft. It was equipped with a pair of upward and downward firing 20 mm cannon, which were initially deemed as being ridiculous by staff officers at Naval GHQ and fiercely resisted. Cdr Yasuna Kozono, deputy commander of the Tainan AG and instigator of the weapons fitment, persisted with the arrangement, however, and when the first Gekko arrived at Rabaul on 10 May 1943, CPO Shigetoshi Kudo was ordered to go and test it in combat.

Eleven days later, at 0320, Kudo scored the first Gekko nightfighter victory over Rabaul after he and observer Lt(jg) Akira Sugawara encountered B-17E 41-9244 of the 64th BS, flown by Maj Paul Williams, at 0320. Slipping beneath the Flying Fortress undetected, Kudo raked the undersides of the bomber with devastating effect. More was yet to come before daybreak, however, for Kudo and Sugawara found another B-17 at 0408, although they failed to get into an effective firing position. Twenty minutes later, he manoeuvred his aircraft beneath a second 64th BS B-17 (41-9011) and sent it down in flames. CPO Kudo had expended 178 rounds in destroying two B-17s. Cdr Kozono's 'wild scheme' had been fully validated.

During the course of June, CPO Kudo destroyed a total of five B-17s at night, with a sortie on 26 June resulting in a double victory – the sole survivor from either crew was 2Lt Jose Holguin from B-17 (41-2430) of the 65th BS, who parachuted into Japanese territory and was made a PoW.

Kudo's last recognised night kill occurred on 7 July 1943 when he downed a Hudson over Buin airfield. The following month the 23-year-old 'night hawk' was awarded a coveted ceremonial sword by Adm Junichi Kusaka, commander of the 11th Air Fleet at Rabaul, in recognition of his distinguished service.

Initially, the Americans believed that their night losses were due to operational reasons, although it wasn't long before they realised that JNAF nightfighters were the culprits. Consequently, the USAAF changed from night to daylight attacks, thus putting the Gekkos out of business.





Following this tactical change Kudo returned to Japan in February 1944 and was assigned to the Yokosuka AG. He was severely injured in a landing accident in May 1945 whilst still flying with this group, his wounds effectively ending his war career – in 1960, Kudo died from complications resulting from his old landing injury.

Ens Shigetoshi Kudo, the pioneer nightfighter pilot, achieved nine recognised aerial victories, earning him the moniker of 'King of the Night' for his nocturnal prowess.

## Warrant Officer Hideo Watanabe

The Allied counter offensive in the Solomons began taking such a toll of Zero fighter units, and their irreplaceable commanders, that veteran

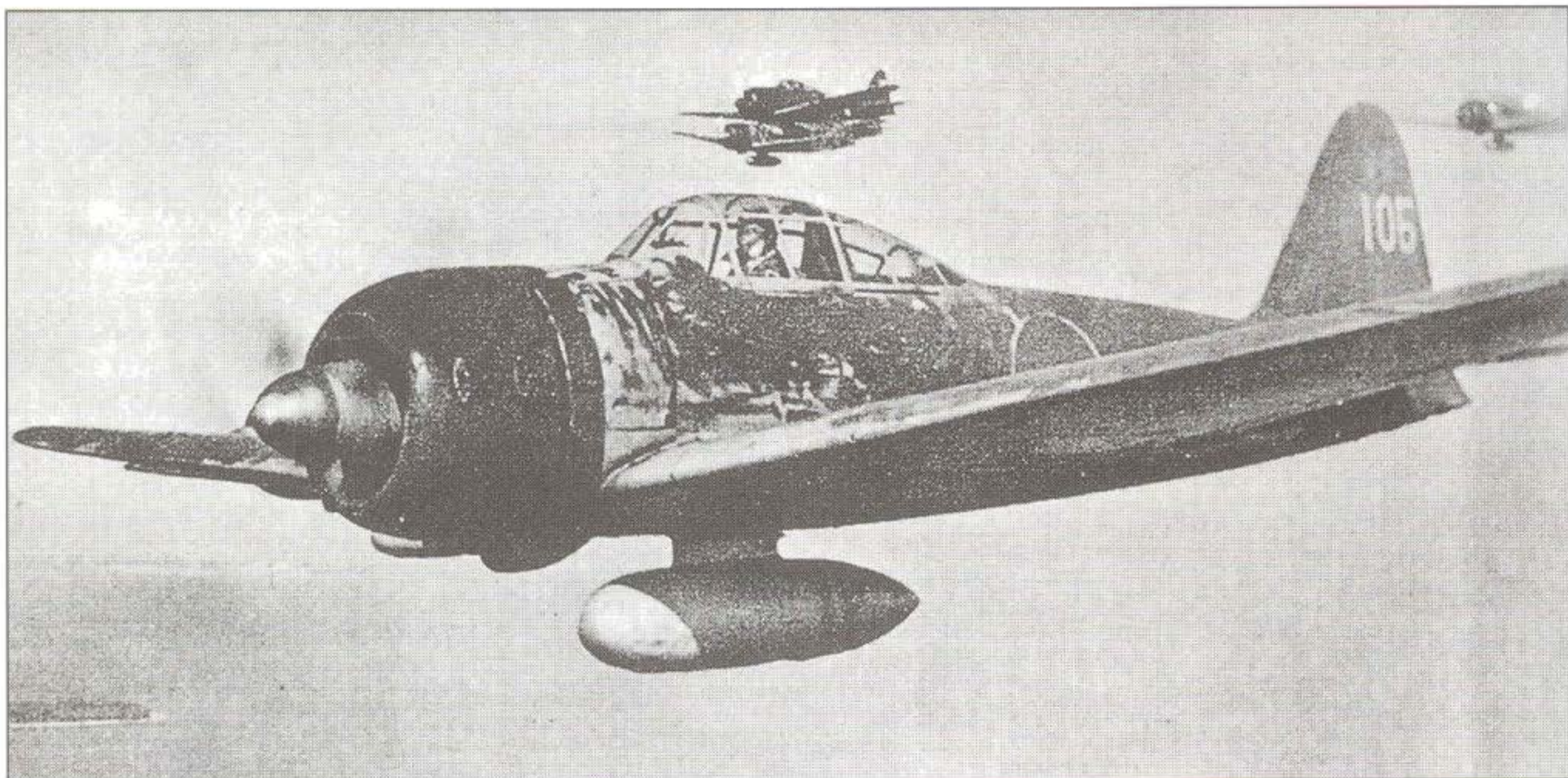
A mix of green and grey 'Rufes' of the 802nd AG are seen lined up at their Imieji base in the Marshall Islands on 27 May 1943. The second aircraft from the left is N1-118 (seen on the previous page in detail), flown by Lt Keizo Yamazaki.

Seaplanes could make a base in any area of calm water, with tents providing shelter for pilots and mechanics alike

Pilots and mechanics stand to attention awaiting inspection, again on the Marshall Islands







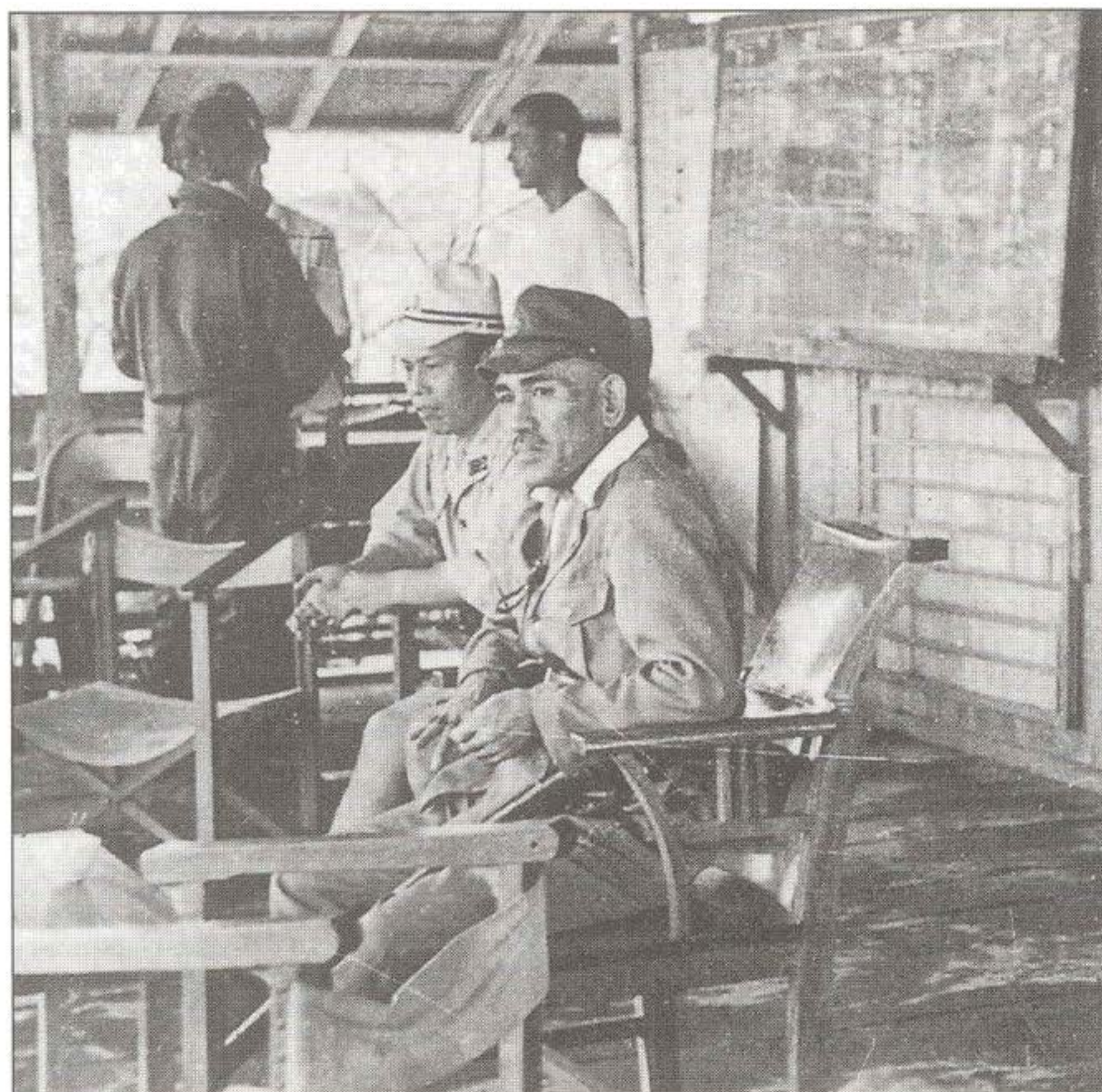
A6M3a Zero 22s of the 251st AG are seen in a rare air-to-air photograph heading out on a patrol from Rabaul in 1943. The tail code of this fighter was originally UI-105, but at various times the prefix 'UI' was painted out with the hastily applied green daubed over the remainder of the aircraft's previously grey fuselage. This particular fighter was one of many flown by veteran ace Hiroyoshi Nishizawa, and it is seen here carrying a 330 l (72.6 imp gal) drop tank

enlisted men such as Hideo Watanabe were forced to step into positions of leadership – a role in which the young pilot performed admirably well.

Born into a farming family in Fukushima Prefecture in June 1920, Watanabe joined the navy at Yokosuka soon after turning 17 and completed his flight training in November 1941. As one of the last pilots trained prior to the outbreak of the pre-Pacific War, Watanabe was posted to the Marshalls-based Chitose AG in March 1942. About a year later he transferred to the 204th AG at Bougainville, seeing much action.

June 1943 proved to be a disastrous month for the 204th, for it lost a number of veteran flight leaders. On the 7th CPO Yoshimi Hidaka (20 victories) and PO1/c Yasuji Okazaki were both killed, whilst PO2/c Kenji

VAdm Jinichi Kusaka (in the dark cap) was CO of the JNAF at Rabaul. He had previously headed the Naval Academy at Etajima prior to his appointment to the 11th Air Fleet in the South-East Pacific. Kusaka instituted the unofficial awarding of ceremonial swords to pilots for distinguished service, and he served at Rabaul from 1942 until the end of the war





Yanagiya was severely wounded – these three veterans had been a part of the escort for the ill-fated Adm Yamamoto mission. On 16 June another crippling blow was delivered when group leader, Lt Zenjiro Miyano, and Lt(jg) Takeshi Morizaki (squadron leader and Yamamoto mission escort pilot) failed to return. With a lack of qualified officer pilots and a shortage of warrant officers, CPO Watanabe assumed command of the squadron and flew as formation leader.

Watanabe plunged into the enemy formations with as much vigour as his predecessors had done, trying to lead his demoralised pilots through example. This tactic almost cost him his life, however. In the late afternoon of 26 August he single-handedly attacked a B-24 which had raided Buin, quickly shooting it down – he also claimed a Wildcat (none were involved in this combat). Escorting the Liberators on this day were F4U Corsairs from VMF-214 and -215, these aircraft engaging the Zeroes soon after Watanabe's audacious attack. The JNAF ace was hit hard by a Corsair that manoeuvred in behind him, a fragment from a .50 cal round striking him in the back of the head and exiting through his right eye.

In order to shake off his assailant, the wounded pilot violently threw his Zero into a dive, only pulling up at wave top height. Despite his injuries Watanabe somehow made it back to base and carried out a safe landing. While recovering in the hospital at Rabaul, Adm Junichi Kusaka, CO of the 11th Air Fleet, honoured the young aviator with a ceremonial sword for distinguished service. He duly returned to Japan by ship for further hospitalisation, and in June 1945 he was posted to the 1081st Transport Group. Hideo Watanabe was officially credited with 16 victories. He now resides in Fukushima Prefecture.



CPO Hideo Watanabe assumed a position of leadership within the 204th AG despite being an enlisted man. For his fighting spirit and distinguished service, he was awarded a ceremonial sword by ViceAdm Jinichi Kusaka

## Warrant Officer Ryoji Ohara

Ryoji Ohara gained considerable combat experience in the Solomons fighting F4U Corsairs – and lived to tell the tale. Born in Miyagi Prefecture in February 1921, he joined the navy as soon as he was old enough, and subsequently graduated from flight training in July 1942.

Ohara was sent to the 6th AG base at Buin in October as a replacement pilot, recording his first victory on 23 October 1942 when his unit fought ten Wildcats of VMF-212 over Guadalcanal (no US aircraft were lost).

On 13 May 1943 Ohara was flying as wingman to air group leader Lt Zenjiro Miyano when a combined force of 54 Zeroes attacked Marine F4Us over the Russell Islands. Diving out of the sun from 24,000 ft, the JNAF pilots bounced the flight of five VMF-124 Corsairs, which were circling at 20,000 ft. Ohara managed to shoot down the Marine's leader, Maj William Gise, on his first pass before a wild dogfight ensued.

Upon disengaging from the battle, Ohara became separated from his flight, and was set upon by two Corsairs. One of his opponents was 1Lt William Cannon, who chased Ohara half way to New Georgia Island, before the Japanese pilot chose to fight for his survival. On a desperate counterattacking manoeuvre, Ohara fired on his pursuers and claimed one destroyed – Cannon's Corsair was holed three times by 20 mm rounds but still made it home. Having seen off his attackers, Ohara was forced to make an emergency landing at Kolombangara Island, where he counted 38 bullet holes in his Zero. Ohara fought with distinction with

WO Ryoji Ohara was known to his comrades as the 'Killer of Rabaul'. He held his own against the dreaded F4U Corsairs in wild dogfights across the Solomons, one of his early victims being Maj William Gise, CO of VMF-124







Lt Zenjiro Miyano was the first JNAF pilot to adopt the effective four-fighter flight formation used by the Americans. Under his leadership, his unit claimed over 200 victories

the 204th AG before returning to Japan and joining the Yokosuka AG. He subsequently flew home defence missions until 17 August 1945, his last sortie seeing him engage photo-recce B-32 Dominators over Tokyo.

Dubbed the 'Killer of Rabaul', WO Ryoji Ohara claimed 48 kills. After the war he joined the Japanese Self-Defence Air Force, before running a simulator school for airline pilots. Now fully retired, he lives in Tokyo.

## Lieutenant Zenjiro Miyano

Zenjiro Miyano was the great leader of the 204th AG whose innovative ideas – he was the first JNAF pilot to adopt the effective 'fighter four' formation – and leadership skills remain revered to this day. He was born in Osaka and entered the Navy Academy with the 65th Class, graduating from flight training in April 1940.

As a member of the 12th AG, Miyano was posted to the China War, but arrived too late to see combat. He subsequently became a division officer in the 3rd AG and participated in the raid on Luzon on the first day of the Pacific War. During this sortie he claimed his first aerial victory.

When the 3rd AG moved into the Dutch East Indies, Miyano continued to fly combat air patrols. On 3 March 1942 he led his Zeroes on a long-range attack against the Western Australian port town of Broome, destroying 22 aircraft (predominantly flying boats full of Dutch evacuees) and numerous installations and vehicles. While returning to base with his two wingmen, Miyano encountered a Dutch DC-3 flown by Capt Ivan Smirnoff, Russia's second highest scoring ace (with 12 victories) of World War 1. The Dakota was packed with military personnel, and their families, fleeing Bandung, on Java, for the safety of Australia. The three Zeroes fired repeatedly at the transport, and although Smirnoff was wounded in the attack, he still managed to crash land the damaged aircraft on a beach. Prior to take-off, Smirnoff had been entrusted with a small sealed box containing a fortune in jewels, and this was accidentally lost in the water during the evacuation of the aircraft. Some of its contents was later recovered over the next few years.

The following month the 6th AG was organised, with Lt Miyano as its division officer. Embarked on the carrier *Junyo*, Miyano and his men headed for the Aleutians, with plans to assault Midway after the completion of their initial task. On 3 June Miyano led a six-Zero escort for 'Val' dive-bombers as part of a multi-carrier attack force sent to strike at Dutch Harbor. The following day at around 1800 hours, Miyano led his Zeroes back to the target, although this time P-40Es from the USAAF 11th FS opposed the strike. The Japanese were credited with six Warhawks destroyed while the Americans claimed a Zero and three 'Vals'. The *Junyo* failed to participate in the Battle of Midway, surviving the disaster to return to port on 24 June.

Due to the fierce counterattack by Allied forces in the Solomons, an immediate need for both fighters and pilots was conveyed to the Naval High Command, and on 7 October 1942 Lt Miyano led 27 Zeroes (along with equipment and ground personnel) aboard the carrier *Zuiho*, bound for Rabaul. Once fully assembled on land, the unit moved to their forward base at Buin, where the 6th AG was reorganised into the 204th AG.

Once in the frontline, Lt Miyano immediately set about analysing



American fighter tactics and devising his own countering manoeuvres, which included copying the USAAC's successful four-aircraft flight formation and developing new fighter-bombing tactics. In March 1943 Miyano became group leader, and while most officers were inexperienced and relied on enlisted men to insure their survival, he was always in the lead, setting an example to others (claiming many kills in the process).

On 16 June 1943 Miyano's luck ran out, for he was shot down and killed while escorting dive-bombers sent to attack enemy positions at Lunga. His score stood at 16 at the time of his death.

The Naval All Units Proclamation No 72, issued in conjunction with a posthumous double promotion to the rank of commander, stated that Lt Miyano's unit had destroyed 228 aircraft in the air and damaged 76.

## Lieutenant Chitoshi Isozaki

Chitoshi Isozaki was one of the 'grand old men' of the navy's fighter force, having seen frontline service for over 13 years. Widely respected throughout the ranks, he had the rare distinction of attaining officer status from his humble beginnings as a seaman recruit.

Isozaki was born on 12 January 1913 in Aichi Prefecture, and after graduation from middle school, he joined the navy. Entered flight training in October 1932, he graduated in March of the following year and then served as a flight instructor. One of his pupils during this tutorial phase in his career was the renowned ace Saburo Sakai.

When the China War erupted in 1937, Isozaki flew combat missions from the carrier *Ryujo* and *Kaga*. At the end of 1939, he was posted to the 12th AG and engaged in further combats, but scored no victories.

In October 1941, now WO Isozaki was transferred to the Tainan AG and served in the Dutch East Indies, before returning to Japan to serve as an instructor once more at Omura airfield when his former unit was posted to Rabaul.

In April 1943 Isozaki was promoted to the rank of ensign after more than ten years of service. It was rare for enlisted men to reach officer status, and Isozaki's promotion was a testament to his skill and leadership. In the same month, he was ordered to join the 251st AG at Rabaul.

On 16 June 1943 Ens Isozaki recorded his first kill when he fought US and New Zealand fighters over the Russells. By the time he was sent home to Japan in March 1944, he had served with both the 204th and 201st AGs at Bougainville and Rabaul, and achieved close to a dozen victories.

In Japan, Isozaki served briefly with the 302nd AG at Atsugi alongside fellow old timer Ens Sadaaki Akamatsu – they both trained pilots hard, and several veterans credit their survival to these two 'old masters'.

In May 1945 Lt(jg) Isozaki joined the elite 343rd AG, which was equipped exclusively with the Shiden-Kai ('George') fighter. As a division officer in the 301st Squadron, he saw very little combat in the remaining months of the war.

Chitoshi Isozaki logged more than 4000 flight hours during his career. This modest gentleman stated that he never knew exactly what his tally was, but 12+ victories seems to be accurate. As a respected senior member of the 343rd AG and Zero Fighter Pilots Association, he ran a small noodle shop in Matsuyama City until he passed away on 20 June 1993.



Although Lt Chitoshi Isozaki saw service during the China War, he failed to score his first victory until June 1943. Despite being overwhelmed by the Americans, Isozaki was still able to achieve more than a dozen victories by war's end

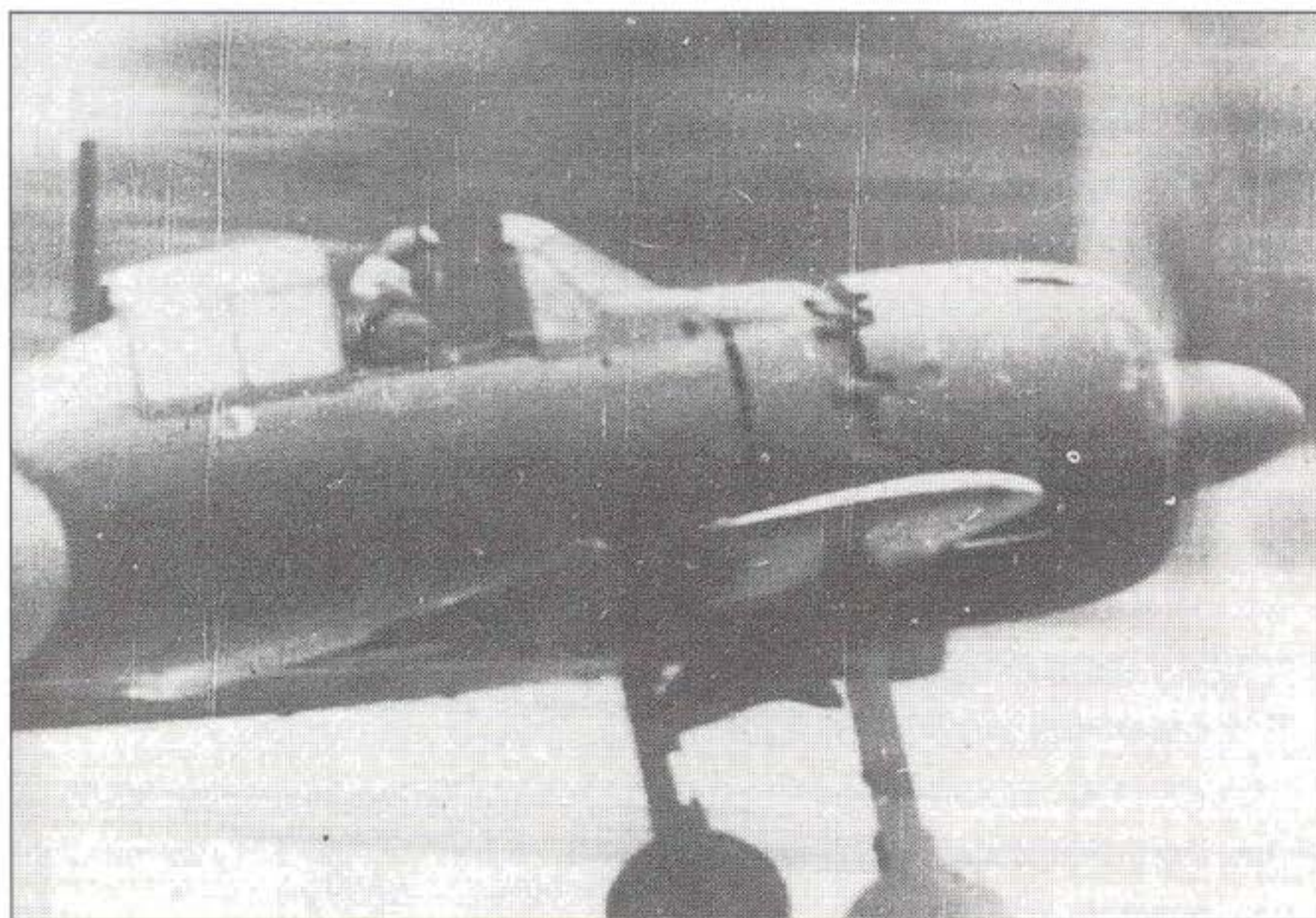


# CENTRAL PACIFIC TO THE PHILIPPINES

**B**y mid 1944 the fate of Japan's war effort was sealed as the American naval 'juggernaut' bypassed various enemy strongholds in the South Pacific in their race toward the Philippines. Allied submarines prowled the sea lanes while aircraft bombed and strafed airfields, shipping and supply depots.

As the Allied forces pounded Rabaul, Adm Chester Nimitz led his fleet through the Central Pacific. The pattern adopted by the Americans would see heavy naval bombardment firstly soften up Japanese defences, before Marines, followed by army infantry, stormed the islands. Using such tactics, the Gilbert Islands were under Allied control by the end of November 1943. In the immediate aftermath of invasion, US Navy engineers immediately created airstrips in the Gilberts to enable aircraft to attack the Marshall Islands. The latter subsequently proved difficult for the Japanese to defend, as hundreds of small coral atolls were scattered over 400,000 square miles.

Pilots prepare to climb into their fuelled and armed up A6M5cs somewhere in the Philippines in 1944



With his Sakae 21 throbbing away in front of him, and his silk scarf ballooning out around his neck as the slipstream builds up with the increased acceleration of the fighter, an anonymous A6M5 pilot takes off to do battle with superior Allied forces perhaps for the last time (via *Aerospace Publishing*)



The 252nd AG had been providing a modicum of air defence for the Marshalls from their bases on Roi and Wake Islands since February 1943, although they had seen very little action until September when B-24s began to raid their airfields. On 5 October 1943, US carrier aircraft attacked Wake Island, with Hellcats from the carriers *Cowpens*, *Essex*, *Lexington* and *Yorktown* overwhelming the 26 Zeroes sent up to oppose the strike – 16 A6Ms failed to return.

When the alarm sounded at Roi, Lt Yuzo Tsukamoto mustered six Zeroes as escorts for seven 'Betty' bombers sent to bolster Wake's defences. Rather than help defend the island, the formation simply became more Hellcat 'fodder' as it was intercepted by navy fighters some 30 miles short of their destination. Only three aircraft, including Tsukamoto's, eventually landed on Wake.

With few aircraft remaining, the 252nd AG tried to counterattack, but were detected by Allied radar and intercepted every time. Although about 30 Zeroes remained on Taroa by December, carrier air raids on the island destroyed most of the fighters on the ground, while the rest were shot down in one-sided dogfights. Their last combat occurred on 29 January, and like most of the preceding engagements, achieved nothing.

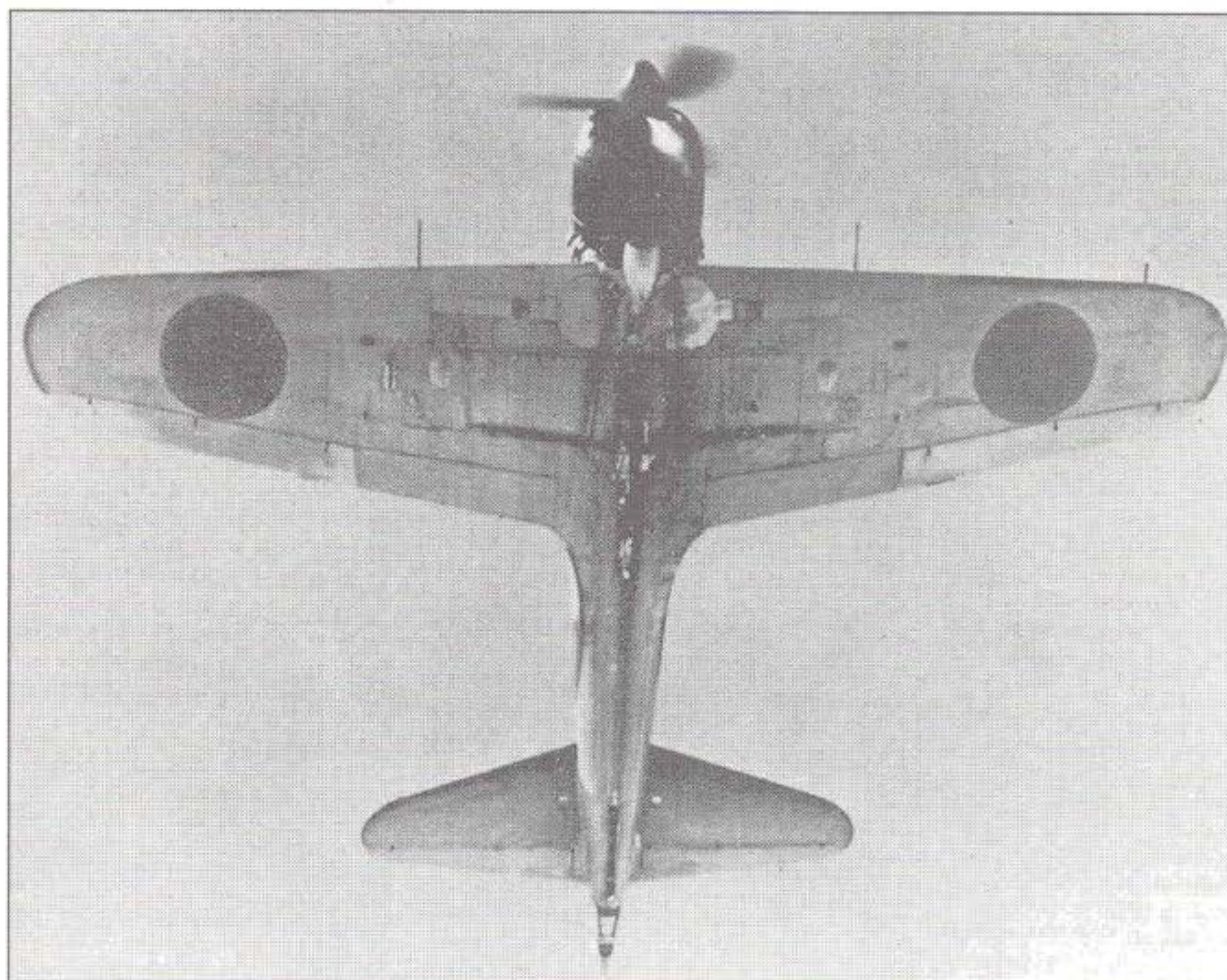
The path was now wide open for an assault on the Marianas Islands. Should they fall, Allied forces would then be centrally placed for a direct attack on Japan, the Philippines and New Guinea. JNAF land- and carrier-based aircraft assembled to defend against the anticipated onslaught, and on 11 June 1944 the bombardment of Guam commenced.

On 19 June, Adm Marc Mitscher's US Task Force 58 – composed of 18 carriers and over 475 Hellcats – engaged VAdm Jisaburo Ozawa's carrier armada of nine carriers and over 450 aircraft. The Battle of the Philippine Sea was the last time the Imperial Navy possessed enough strength to challenge the US Pacific Fleet. Although strong in numbers, JNAF squadrons were hampered by a lack of co-ordinated battle tactics and well-trained pilots. The end result was the total overwhelming of Japanese formations by swarms of marauding Hellcats, who cut them to ribbons – the aerial massacre was so one-sided that it was dubbed the 'Marianas Turkey Shoot' by participating F6F pilots. The 343rd AG was literally destroyed in this action, being forced to disband on 10 July.

When the smoke had finally cleared from the two-day battle, the Japanese had lost the carriers *Shokaku*, *Taiho* and *Hiyo*, and suffered crippling damage to the *Zuikaku* and *Chiyoda*. Also lost were over 300 aircraft and veteran pilots and aircrews. This was Japan's worst military disaster to date, and it effectively 'broke the back' of the JNAF in the Pacific.

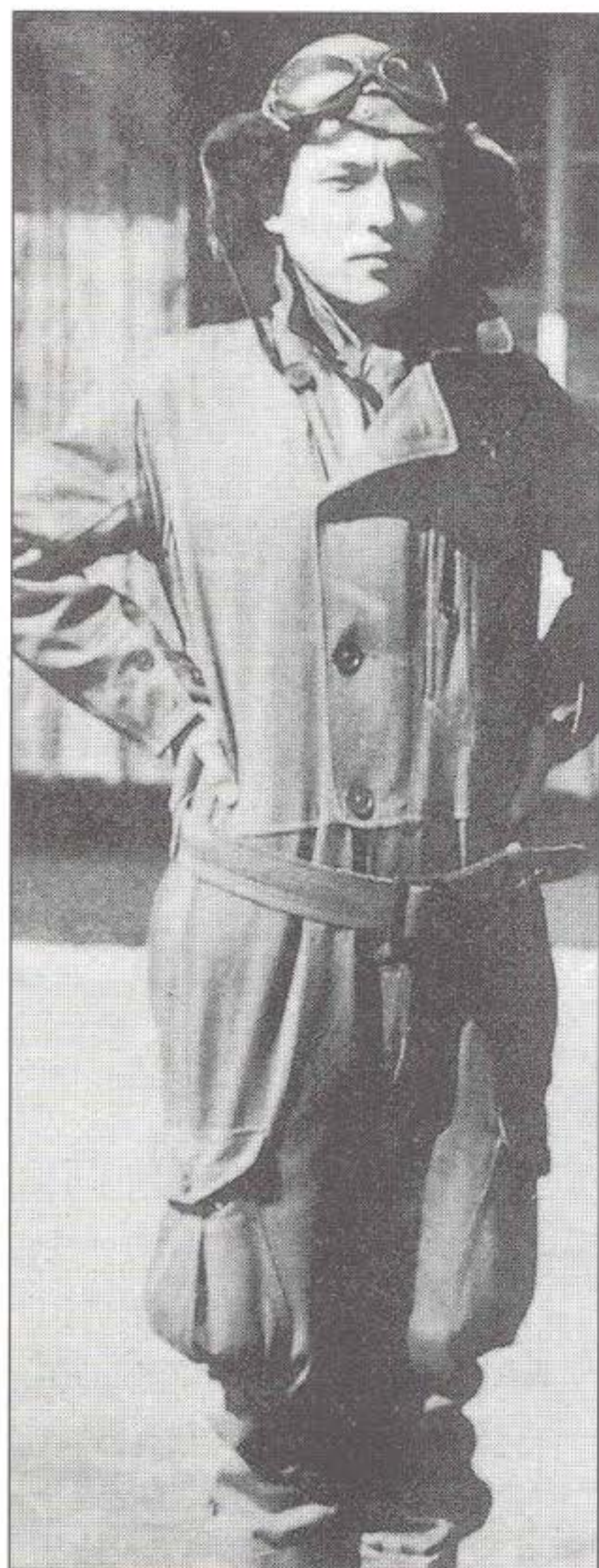
RearAdm Joseph Clark, commanding TF58.1, now headed for another show down at Iwo Jima.

This underside view of an A6M5 Zeke 52 reveals the staple JNAF fighter in near-perfect planform. The Model 52 was the most prolific of all Zero variants, with over 6000 being built





Ens Isamu Miyazaki was a chivalrous pilot who spared the life of an opponent flying a badly damaged Hellcat. His unit was destroyed in the Marshall Islands, although he survived, ending the war with 13 victories



His pilots had scored heavily on 15 June over the island, and they now wanted an encore – the ‘Marianas Turkey Shoot’ had simply whetted their voracious appetite. Although Iwo Jima was just a tiny volcanic island, its strategic position made it a highly-valued prize, for Zero fighters based there posed a serious threat to B-29s sent to bomb Japan.

The Yokosuka AG was ordered to Iwo Jima in June, arriving during a lull in the bombardment. On the 24th, in their first combat over the island, pilots from the unit – as well as members of the 252nd and 301st AGs – were badly mauled by TF58.1 Hellcats. Over 80 Zeroes had sortied, and only around half had returned.

The second and third combats for Iwo Jima’s Zeroes occurred on 3-4 July when, despite heroic efforts by the defenders, the Yokosuka AG lost 22 veteran pilots, including their leader, Lt Sadao Yamaguchi (an accomplished ace with 12 victories). American warships later destroyed many aircraft on the airfields with their ‘big guns’, leaving the distinguished Yokosuka AG to become a unit without aircraft. The survivors were evacuated back to the mainland, and the island was abandoned to its fate.

As the US Task Force swept through the Central Pacific, the Japanese prepared for the onslaught by ordering the 1st Air Fleet at Davao, in the Philippines, to stop the Allied advance. This was an impossible task, however, for the fleet’s units lacked trained pilots, fuel and aircraft. ViceAdm Ozawa’s humiliating defeat at the Battle of the Philippine Sea forced the JNAF to adopt desperate measures in their fight with the Allies.

The invasion of the Philippines commenced on 23 October 1944 with troop landings on Leyte. The subsequent naval clash, christened the Battle of Leyte Gulf, saw the demise of Japan’s two greatest battleships, the *Yamato* and *Musashi*.

With events going from bad to worse for the Japanese, ViceAdm Takihiro Onishi – CO of the 1st Air Fleet – gave birth to the dreaded *Kamikaze* Suicide Corps, his radical idea being to equip a Zero fighter with a 250-kg bomb and have volunteers crash themselves into the decks of aircraft carriers. The few remaining ‘fighter’ Zeroes were to act as escorts to protect the *kamikazes* from prowling enemy aircraft, plus record their results.

‘We had no criticism about the *kamikaze* operations because we thought we had to die inevitably’, recalled former Zero pilot Masahiro Mitsuda. ‘We thought nothing of whether it would be a futile effort or not’.

Even officer pilots like Lt Cdr Iyozoh Fujita (hero at Midway) echoed these sentiments; ‘We had few planes and no fuel to train pilots, so we had no other choice’.

With no hope of survival, pilots volunteered in droves for a chance to strike back at the enemy in a wave of hyper patriotism. As a further incentive, those *kamikaze* who died were promised double rank promotions.

The first successful suicide attack occurred on 25 October when bomb-laden Zeroes from the 201st AG sank the escort carrier *St Lo* and damaged six others. The news of this initial success spread like wildfire, renewing the sagging morale of an entire nation.

Allied forces were quick to enact countermeasures, however, with combat air patrols and destroyer pickets serving to insulate the carriers in their first line of defence. Further success therefore became more and more elusive as hundreds sortied into oblivion – the 201st AG wrote their obitu-



ary in the Philippines campaign.

Whilst Allied land forces invaded Luzon and became bogged down in ground action, the naval units continued their advance toward Japan.

## Ensign Isamu Miyazaki

Isamu Miyazaki once spared the life of an US fighter pilot, which was a chivalrous act totally foreign to the JNAF's philosophy of giving no quarter to the enemy.

Born in Kagawa Prefecture in October 1919, he enlisted in the navy in 1936 and served as a common sailor, before volunteering for fighter training. He completed the course in November 1941, and 12 months later he advanced to Rabaul with the 252nd AG.

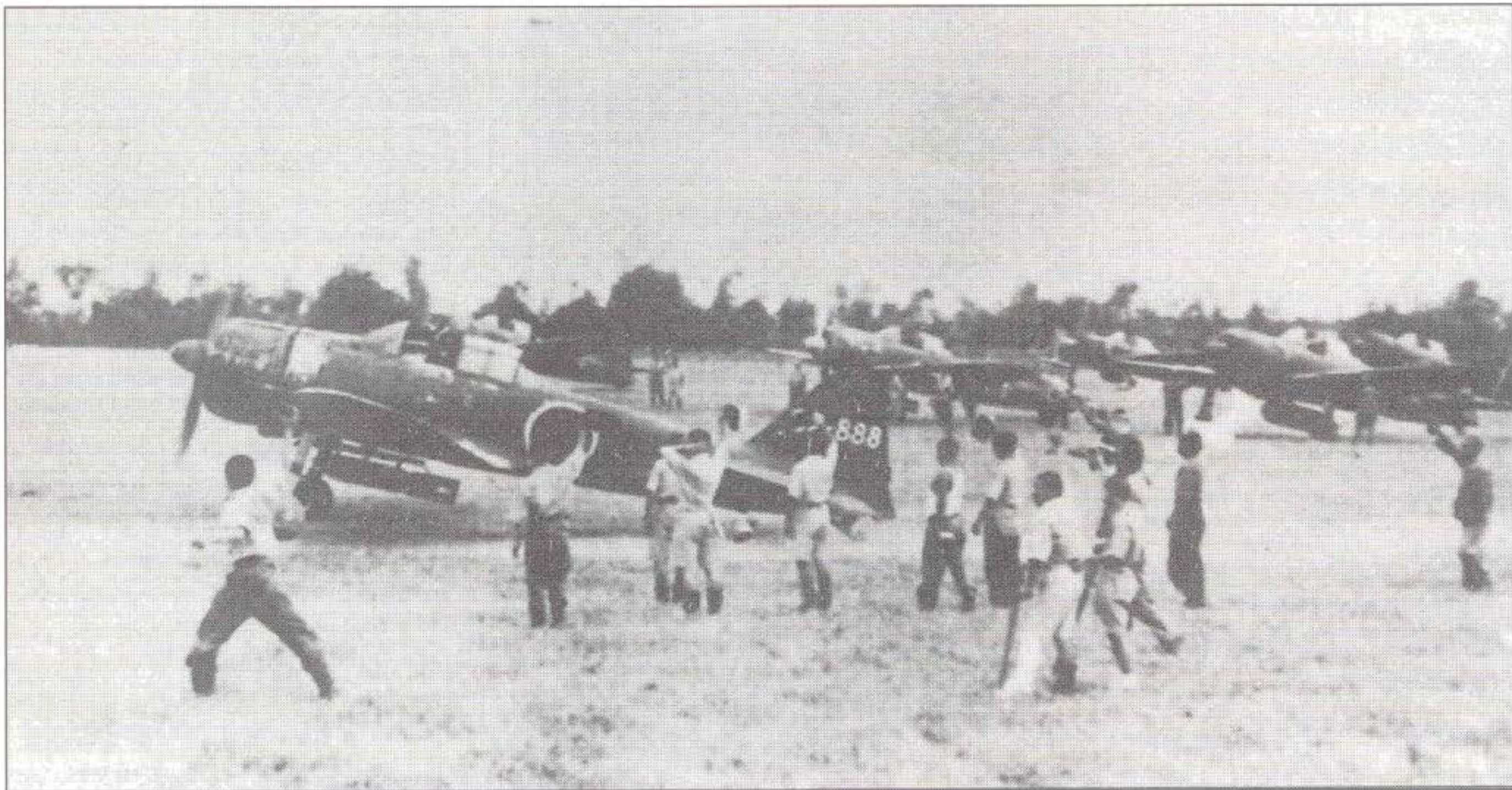


Ens Saburo Saito scored his first victory on 1 February 1943 – an F4F over Guadalcanal. Later fighting over Rabaul and Bougainville, he destroyed eight enemy aircraft during a one-week period. Saito claimed his final kill on 24 October 1944 east of Luzon, although he was seriously wounded during the same action when he force-landed on the shore of Lamon Bay. Repatriated to Japan, he ended the war with at least 18 victories

Veteran pilots of the famous Yokosuka AG fought an overwhelming number of Hellcats over Iwo Jima during June and July 1944. The aces seen are; Ryoji Ohara (48 victories, front row, left), Masami Shiga (16 victories, back row, 2nd from left), Tomita Atake (10 victories, 3rd from left), and Kiyoshi Sekiya (11 victories, right)







Mabalacat Airfield, in the Philippines, is seen on 25 October 1944 as Lt Yukio Seki's *kamikaze* flight, with accompanying escorts, prepares to sortie in the first successful suicide attack carried out against US warships

The caption for this official US Navy photograph reads, 'A Japanese *kamikaze* pilot taxiing his bomb-laden "Zero" fighter to take-off position on a Philippine airfield during the Leyte operations in October-November 1944. His comrades cheer as the plane passes between them

On 12 November Miyazaki was of 30 Zeroes escort 19 torpedo-equipped 'Betty' bombers sent to attack American transports off Lunga Point. Marine pilots of VMF-112 and -121, together with USAAF P-400s, intercepted the Japanese formation and a great dogfight ensued – Miyazaki's first action ended with the destruction of an F4F.

The 252nd AG flew sorties from Rabaul, Ballale (Bougainville), Lae and Munda, during which time Miyazaki gained considerable experience through hard fought battles over the Solomons.

On 1 February 1943 the 252nd was ordered to the Marshall Islands, where the level of combat lessened until the autumn, when American carrier fighters attacked the Gilbert Islands. Miyazaki subsequently fought B-24s which had come to soften up targets for the impending invasion.

On 30 January 1944 Miyazaki fought in his air group's last battle. In his







The great ace WO Hiroyoshi Nishizawa became a reluctant instructor in the mass training of Zero pilots, and he is shown here in 1944 with his trainees. Back in the frontline, he provided the escort on 25 October 1944 for Lt Yukio Seki's *kamikazes*. The following day Nishizawa was shot down and killed in a transport aircraft



Ens Yoshinao Kodaira commenced his combat career in China, and later fought in the Battles of the Coral Sea and the eastern Solomons, and over Guadalcanal. During the Battle of Leyte Gulf he shot down a Hellcat, but on 8 November he was injured in a take-off accident and sent back to Japan. He ended the war with 11 victories



WO Kazuo Sugino first entered combat on 2 November 1943 over Rabaul when he shot down two aircraft. He later joined the 634th AG and saw considerable action over Formosa and the Philippines, before ending the war as an instructor for *kamikaze* pilots. In over 495 missions he claimed 32 victories



A veteran of Rabaul, CPO Takeo Tanimizu subsequently served in Formosa with the Tainan AG during the summer and winter of 1944, battling with USAAF B-24s and P-51s. On 3 November 1944 he was shot down by a P-51 over Amoy Harbour, China, and survived with critical burns. Upon his recovery he volunteered for the *kamikazes* but was rejected



This rare photograph shows a training camera attached to the top wing of a veteran A6M2 Zero 21 – this modification was used strictly for tuitional purposes only. Lt Masatake Hayasaki (right) was an instructor pilot in the 256th AG at Lunghwa Airfield, Shanghai, China



Lt Ayao Shirane was a respected fighter-leader whose unit introduced the new 'George' fighter into combat against the Americans over the Philippines



second sortie four Zeroes fought an uneven dogfight which saw three of them sustain damage, forcing them to withdraw. Now alone, Miyazaki chanced upon a solitary damaged Hellcat flying 30 metres above the sea, and he tailed the American until satisfied that his opponent could not fight. Flying alongside, he stared at the pilot, who 'had such a pitiful expression on his face', the ace later recalled, that "I didn't have the heart to shoot him down, so I let him go'. Ens Fletcher Jones of VF-10 eventually ditched his fighter, but was drowned.

With the destruction of the 252nd AG, Miyazaki returned to Japan in February as one of only three surviving pilots. In January 1945 he joined the elite 343rd AG, flying home defence sorties until the surrender.

Isamu Miyazaki achieved at least 13 victories.

## Lieutenant Commander Ayao Shirane

When asked who were the greatest fighter-leaders of the JNAF, Ayao Shirane's name is always mentioned, along with Mochifumi Nango and several others. Shirane was born into a prominent family in Tokyo (1916), his father later becoming a cabinet secretary in the Japanese government. He graduated from the Naval Academy at Etajima in the 64th Class.

As a 'deck officer' graduate of the academy, Ens Shirane was given flight training and completed his course in March 1939, becoming a fighter pilot. Posted to the 12th AG in China, he participated in the raid on Chungking on 19 August 1940 when the new Zero fighter made its com-



bat debut – Lt Tamotso Yokoyama led a dozen Zeroes on a bomber escort mission, although no enemy fighters were encountered.

On 13 September Lt(jg) Shirane led the 2nd division (six fighters) of 13 Zeroes, commanded by Lt Saburo Shindo, in the Zero fighter's true baptism of fire. After escorting 'Nell' bombers to Hankow, Chinese fighters rose to challenge the Japanese, and in the ensuing one-sided dogfight, the 13 JNAF fighter pilots claimed the destruction of all 27 enemy fighters. Shirane himself accounted for one aircraft destroyed – his first aerial victory. Adm Shigetaro Shimada, CO of the China Area Fleet, later issued a special unit commendation to mark this historic event.

When the Pacific War broke out, Lt Shirane was serving on the carrier *Akagi* as a division officer. Although he did not fly on the Pearl Harbor raid, he did participate in the Battle of Midway in June 1942, when he led 18 'Val' dive-bombers and nine Zero escorts in an attack on Midway Island itself. Upon completion of their task, the Shirane group returned to their carrier to perform combat air patrols over their ship, although they could not prevent the *Akagi* from being attacked by US dive-bombers – the vessel sank that night.

Lt Shirane was then transferred to the carrier *Zuikaku* to assume duties as their division officer. He stayed on in this position, seeing action in the Battle of the Eastern Solomons and the Battle of Santa Cruz, until November 1942, when he was posted to the land-based Yokosuka AG.

In November 1943 Shirane was assigned to the newly-organised 341st AG, this unit having originally be formed to make use of the new Shiden ('George') fighter. However, deliveries were seriously delayed, and it wasn't until February 1944 that the first handful of aircraft arrived just in time for training exercises to commence. In July the air group was split into two squadrons, and Shirane became CO of the 401st. Despite intensive training, the unit experienced numerous setbacks due to the inexperience of its pilots and design defects which plagued the new fighter.

In October Lt Cdr Shirane took his unit to Mabalacat airfield, on Luzon, where they saw immediate action. Attacking enemy forces at Leyte, they suffered heavy casualties at the hands of numerically-superior USAAF fighter groups.

On 24 November 1944 Ayao Shirane was killed in aerial combat with P-38s from the 433rd FS near Ponson Island, on the western coast of Leyte Island. At the time of his death he had nine officially recognised aerial victories to his credit.

Lt Cdr Shirane's superb organisational skills, and his ability to lead the rank and file, endeared him to both his subordinates and superiors.

## Ensign Minoru Honda

This young pilot had a miraculous career that even included returning from the 'dead'! Honda credited his wartime survival to the following three rules: 1) don't be over anxious for a kill; 2) know how and when to escape; and 3) keep nervous, be alert and spot the enemy first.

Minoru Honda was born in Kumamoto Prefecture in 1923, enlisting in the navy and entering flight training in October 1939. Whilst still under instruction he nearly killed himself when his aircraft became entangled with a target tow. He had vowed to hit his target at whatever cost due





Ensign Minoru Honda suffered a great indignity at the hands of his superiors when he returned alive from a mission after being declared killed. He harboured a passionate hatred for the officer class, and also voiced his opposition to the *kamikaze* suicide attacks

to his prior inferior performance, and luckily for him, the target fell away at the last moment and his life was spared, although he subsequently received a severe reprimand from his superiors.

In April 1942 Honda was assigned to the Kanoya AG, his first combat occurring when he and his flight of eight intercepted nine RAF Buffaloes over Singapore. In his excitement at seeing the enemy, he failed to release his drop tank or fire his guns! In one of the worst displays of aerial combat discipline, Honda remembers, 'we all broke off individually and climbed and dove like wildmen. There wasn't a single kill on either side, and everyone escaped unharmed'. The 19-year-old neophyte with 95 hours of flight time in the Zero duly became separated from the rest during the aerial melee, and was the last to return to base. Another severe reprimand followed.

In September Honda advanced to Rabaul, where he fought in many aerial engagements over eastern New Guinea and the Solomons. During this period he was forced to make an emergency landing on Kolombangara Island, and when approached by a group of curious natives, Honda held up a bag of candy in one hand and a Browning automatic in the other. The natives were friendly, and tended to his needs for ten days until he was rescued.

In the meantime, PO1/c Honda had been written off for dead. For distinguished service, he had been given a rare posthumous double promotion, and expecting a hero's welcome on his return, he was once again chastised! His immediate superiors did not want to make a corrections in the casualty report for a lowly enlisted man, so for seven days straight, Honda was ordered to fly long-range combat missions alone into enemy territory in the hope that he would not return alive. Finally, when a senior officer learned of this matter, he was taken off the suicide missions, brought back to 'life', and stripped of his double promotion – such an increase in rank for a living enlisted man would have been unprecedented.

In April 1944 Honda was transferred to Fighter Squadron 407, and later fought in the Philippines. Here, he trained young novices for *kamikaze* attacks, which was a task that left him totally demoralised. Honda bitterly complained to his superiors about the stupidity of using his subordinates as human bombs.

His last assignment was with the elite 343rd AG flying home defence sorties against B-29s attacking southern Japan. Although a strict and unforgiving leader according to his surviving comrades, Honda owed his life to his tough training.

'One of our big problems was that we were educated that mind over might could win a war', Honda stated after the war. 'We fought by spirit while we were told that the Americans were lazy so-and-so's. This was not true. American pilots were very brave and extremely courageous. Yet unlike us, they would not take stupid chances. Our leadership wasn't as flexible as our enemy's. The Americans learned from their mistakes and developed better planes and battle techniques, while we clung religiously to the one-man Zero fighter "lone wolf" approach . . . what a mistake!'

Honda downed at least 17 enemy aircraft, although he estimates that he hit between 40 and 50 before he stopped counting. After the war, he became a test pilot and spent a lot of time in the USA flying the Mitsubishi MU-2.



# APPENDICES

## Flying Units of the JNAF

The flying units of the JNAF were organised much like their opposite numbers within the Allied air forces. Japan's navy and army had their own air services, there being no independent air force like the German *Luftwaffe* or the British Royal Air Force.

The working component of the JNAF was the Air Group (*Kokutai*). *Kokutai* is used to denote JNAF air groups whereas *Sentai* is used for the JAAF. There were about 90 air groups within the JNAF, and depending on the size of the unit, these controlled between 36-64 (or more) aircraft.

Air Groups were either identified by names or numbers. Named groups are associated with a particular air command or base (Yokosuka Air Group, Sasebo Air Group). With a few exceptions such as the Tainan Air Group, most units that went overseas dropped their names and were given number designations (Kanoya Air Group became the 253rd Air Group for example). Air groups with numbers between 200 and 399 were fighter units, whilst those in the 600 to 699 range controlled a mix of aircraft. Float-plane units were numbered between 400 and 499. Carriers were too small to accommodate entire air groups, so the units on board took their names from the vessel they were embarked on (*Shokaku* Fighter Squadron for example).

The Air Group was divided into three or four squadrons (*hikotai*), with each squadron having between 12 to 16 aircraft. It could be commanded by a lieutenant (junior grade), a warrant officer, or even an experienced chief petty officer.

The majority of the pilots were enlisted men and not officers, unlike many of their Allied counterparts. Contrary to popular belief, while many non-aviation officers did not associate with their enlisted subordinates, officer pilots went to great lengths to form a bond. Said one Zero pilot:

'These green lieutenants didn't know how to fight and would get shot down right away. So he was assigned a veteran enlisted man to protect him. If he was unpopular, the wingman might become "separated" during combat and the officer would surely die. *Do you understand?*'

The smallest operational unit in the squadron was the flight or section (*shotai*), which consisted of between three and four aircraft – four flights were usually found in the squadron. Initially, the flight consisted of three aircraft.

However, Lt Zenjiro Miyano was the first to effectively copy and refine the four-fighter flight formation from the Americans in 1943. Positions one and three were flown by seasoned veterans, while positions two and four were occupied by neophytes. This combination assured a higher rate of survival for the new pilot, plus allowed him to learn critical combat skills from his mentor. By 1944, the three-fighter flight had been mostly discarded. Through hard experience, it had been found that the 'odd man out' in a three-fighter flight usually became separated in combat and was shot down.

## JNAF Air Groups of World War 2

The following list of naval air groups is not presented in numeric order since the establishment of the units was not carried out sequentially. Only fighter air groups of any significance are listed – carrier squadrons are not listed.

### Yokosuka

Established 4/30 at Yokosuka. Japan's first naval Air Group fought over Iwo Jima and participated in the home defence. Disbanded at the end of the war

### Chitose - 201st

Established 10/39 at Chitose, Japan. Reorganised as the 201st AG 12/42 at Roi, Marshall Islands. Reorganised again 3/44, disbanded at the end of the war

### Kanoya - 253rd

Established 4/36 at Kanoya, Japan. The unit helped sink the British battleship HMS *Prince of Wales*. Reorganised 11/42 as 253rd AG. Fought at Rabaul and in the Solomons. Disbanded 7/44

### Genzan - 252nd

Established 11/40 at Genzan (Wonsan), Korea. Participated in the Battle of the Coral Sea. Renamed 252nd AG 9/42, disbanded at end of war

### 1st

Established 4/41 at Kanoya, Japan. Fought briefly in China. Disbanded 9/41



**Tainan - 251st**

Established 10/41 at Tainan, Formosa. The most famous JNAF unit due to its spectacular early successes, it also boasted the most aces, including Saburo Sakai and Hiroyoshi Nishizawa. Reorganised 11/42 as 251st AG. Disbanded 7/44

**3rd - 202nd**

Established 4/41. First unit solely of fighter aircraft, it gained a fierce reputation early in the war. Took part in the attacks over the Philippines, Dutch East Indies and Darwin, Australia. Reorganised as 202nd AG 11/42, disbanded 7/44

**4th**

Established 2/42 on the island of Truk and saw duty over Rabaul and eastern New Guinea. The unit was merged with Tainan Kokutai 4/42

**2nd - 582nd**

Established 5/42 at Yokosuka Air Base, Japan. Active over eastern New Guinea and Guadalcanal. Reorganised as 582nd AG, it had claimed around 220 victories when the fighter unit was disbanded 7/43

**6th - 204th**

Established 4/42 at Kisarazu Air Base, Japan. Took part in the attacks at Dutch Harbor (Aleutians), Midway, eastern New Guinea and Rabaul. Reorganised as 204th AG 11/42. Disbanded 4/44. Over 1000 aerial victories claimed

**281st**

Established 2/43 at Maizuru Air Base, Japan. Active in the northern Kurile Islands, before transfer to the Marshall Islands and Rabaul. Unit was totally destroyed by 2/44, their pilots fighting as infantrymen during the invasion of Kwajalein and Roi (Marshall Islands). The top JNAF ace, Tetsuzo Iwamoto, saw much action with this unit

**261st**

Established 6/43 at Kagoshima Air Base, Japan. Fought over Peleliu Island, Saipan and Yap. Disbanded 7/44

**331st**

Established 7/43 at Saeki Air Base in Japan. Limited actions in Burma and Calcutta, and also fought over Borneo and the Philippines. Disbanded 5/44

**254th**

Established 10/43, provided air defence for Hainan Island and Hong Kong. Later fought over Formosa and the Philippines, where it was destroyed. Disbanded 1/45

**263rd**

Established 10/43 at Genzan, Korea. Fought over Tinian, Peleliu and Guam. Disbanded 7/44

**321st**

Established 10/43 at Mobara Air Base, Japan. First night-fighter unit. Fought over Tinian and Guam. Disbanded 7/44

**381st**

Established 10/43. Fought over Biak, Borneo, Celebes and French Indochina. Disbanded after the war

**265th**

Established 11/43 at Kagoshima Air Base, Japan. Fought at Saipan and the Marianas. Disbanded 7/44

**301st**

Established 11/43 at Yokosuka Naval Base, Japan. Fought at Tinian and destroyed at Iwo Jima. Disbanded 7/44

**341st**

Established 11/43 at Matsuyama Air Base, Japan. Fought over Iwo Jima, Formosa and the Philippines using the new Shiden ('George') fighter. Some pilots flew *kamikaze* suicide attacks. Destroyed in the Philippines by 1/45

**153rd**

Established 1/44, fought over western New Guinea. Reorganised as a reconnaissance and nightfighter unit 7/44. Disbanded after the war

**343rd**

Established 1/44 at Matsuyama Air Base, Japan. Fought at Guam, disbanded 7/44. Second formation established 12/44 at Matsuyama as an elite unit of hand-picked veterans flying the Shiden-Kai. Disbanded after the war

**221st**

Established 1/44 at Kasanbara Air Base, Japan. Fought over Formosa and the Philippines. Destroyed by 1/45

**256th**

Established 2/44 at Lughwa airfield, Shanghai. Fought over Shanghai, Philippines and Formosa. Disbanded 12/44

**203rd**

Established 2/44 at Atsugi Air Base, Japan. Fought over the northern Kurile Islands of Japan, Okinawa, Philippines, Formosa and home defence. Disbanded after the war

**302nd**

Established 3/44 at Kisarazu Air Base, Japan. Guarded the Imperial Capital against B-29 attacks and also fought over Okinawa. Disbanded after the war

**131st**

Established 7/44 at Yokosuka Air Base, Japan. Fought over Okinawa and home defence. Disbanded after the war



332nd

Established 8/44 at Iwakuni Air Base, Japan. Fought over the Philippines and home defence. Disbanded after the war

352nd

Established 8/44 in Japan. Fought in the home defence, disbanded after the war

210th

Established 9/44 at Meiji Air Base, Japan. Fought at Okinawa and the home defence, disbanded after the war

721st

Established 10/44 as a *kamikaze* suicide unit at Konoike Air Base, Japan. Flew suicide attack missions at Okinawa using Zeroes and piloted rocket bombs (Ohka). Disbanded after the war

205th

Established 2/45 at Taichung Air Base, Formosa. Participated in *kamikaze* attacks at Okinawa. Disbanded after the war

Aerial Victory Claims by JNAF Pilots

In the American and Commonwealth custom, the shooting down of five or more enemy aircraft entitled the pilot to call himself (herself in the USSR) an ‘ace’. He joined an elite fraternity of fighter pilots whose exploits were widely publicised in the military and national press. As the victories mounted, his achievements were recognised with the awarding of medals and promotion through the ranks.

Although the Japanese adopted many of the concepts of flight from the West (Europe in particular), in its culture, the trait of individuality, which was so valued in the West, was shunned. Since early school days, Japanese children are taught to work and sacrifice for the benefit of the group. In a military context, this often manifested itself in basic training – both before and during World War 2 – when drill instructor lined up their trainees and struck them for the shortcomings of a single individual in the group. In war, teamwork was critical, and there could be no prima donnas. When an individual accomplished a distinguished feat, the group received the honours.

During the China War, and in the early part of the Pacific campaign when Japan was on the offensive, various units did record individual credits in their mission reports. However, in June 1943 navy GHQ issued a directive prohibiting the continuation of this practice, this measure being taken in an effort to promote greater teamwork – most units adhered to the new policy.

As with fighter pilots the world over, Japanese aviators

did keep personal scores, and for morale purposes they would paint victory markings on the aircraft. Since pilots flew aircraft on an availability basis, the number of ‘kill’ markings on the aircraft could be deceptive, for it was the fighter, rather than the pilot, which scored the victory.

There was no established rule for determining a victory. Many pilots would claim the destruction of an aircraft which was seen to smoke in the air, believing that it would never reach home. The Japanese had gun cameras, but they were only used for training purposes. The claim was usually taken on face value and added to the group’s score.

As the war turned against the Japanese, and surviving pilots fought with tenacity, many simply stopped counting. Although a few leading aces received rare personal citations and ceremonial swords for outstanding service, in general pilots had no incentive to inflate their claims in the hope of winning such honours because they were literally fighting for their lives.

Despite this, claims by JNAF pilots cannot be taken at face value. The inflated totals resulted from both confusion in combat and from a very liberal method of scorekeeping. During the early part of the war, many pilots received official recognition from the government for their victories, but this does not imply that these victories were ‘confirmed’.

Postwar, Japanese historians have recognised the problem of inflated totals, and tried to compensate by systematically reducing the scores by percentages. WO Takeo Tanimizu claimed 32 victories during the war, but historians have reduced his score to 18. Likewise, the top JNAF ace, Lt(jg) Tetsuzo Iwamoto, claimed 202 victories, although his tally has now been reduced to ‘about 80’ – It is a fact that no Japanese pilot ever reached 100 victories.

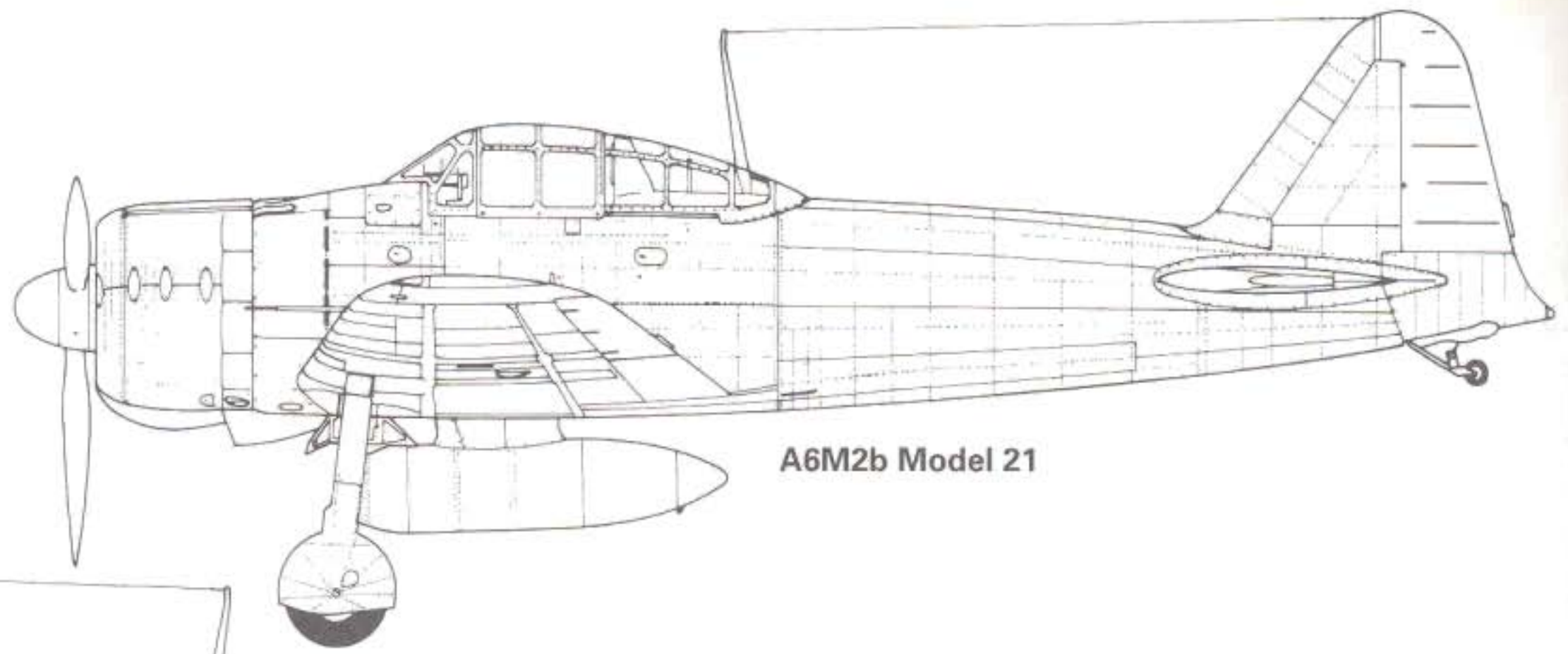
Since there is no basis for verifying claims, the postwar reduction of scores seem arbitrary. Likewise, accepting the claims on face value would also be grossly inaccurate.

The following list of JNAF aces was compiled from numerous sources. These scores are simply unverified claims either made by the pilots or attributed to them. The numerical scores represent a mixture of confirmed, unconfirmed, probable, damaged and imagined victories.

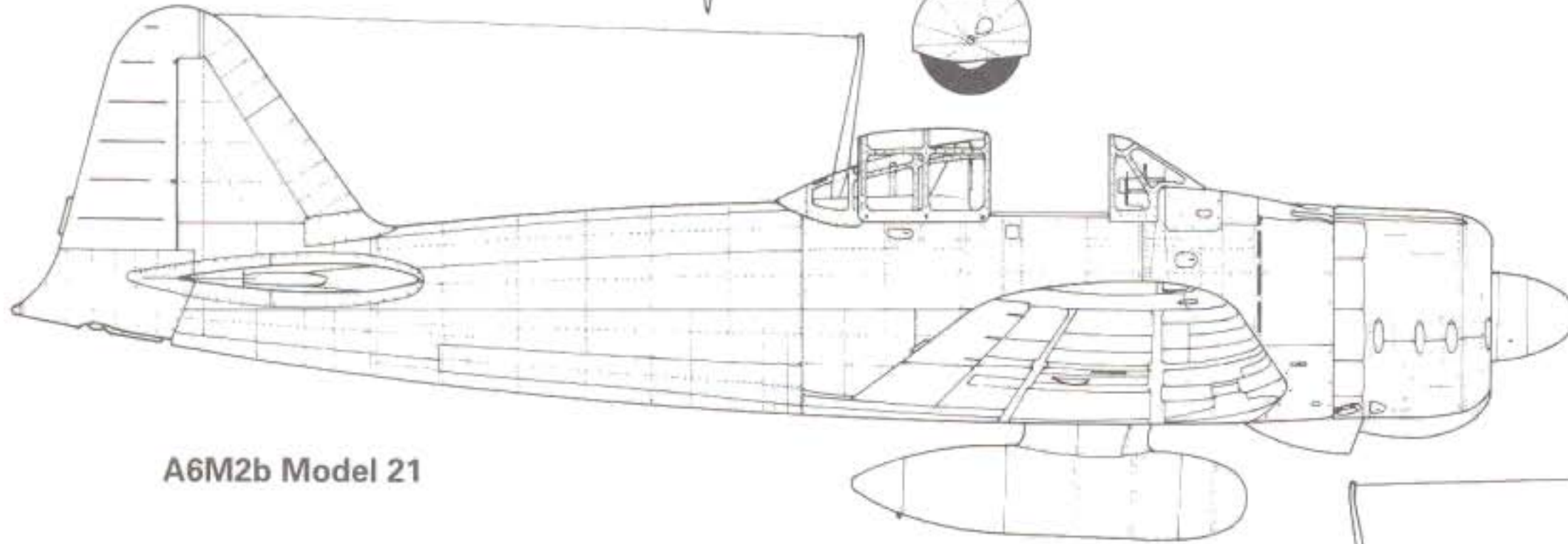
JNAF Top Ten Aces Listing

Rank	Name	Score
Lt(jg)	Iwamoto, Tetsuzo	202
CPO	Sugita, Shoichi	120+
WO	Nishizawa, Hiroyoshi	86
WO	Fukumoto, Shigeo	72
Ens	Sakai, Saburo	60+
CPO	Okumura, Takeo	54
Lt(jg)	Sasai, Junichi	54
WO	Okabe, Kenji	50
Lt	Kanno, Naoshi	48
WO	Ohara, Ryoji	48

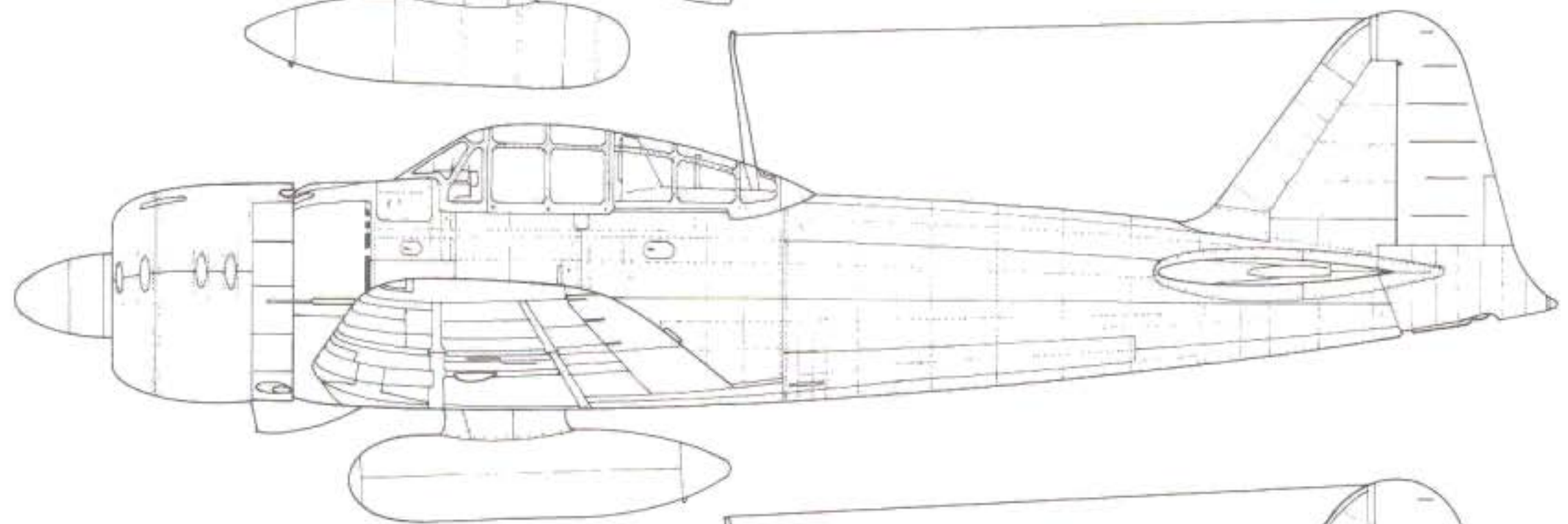




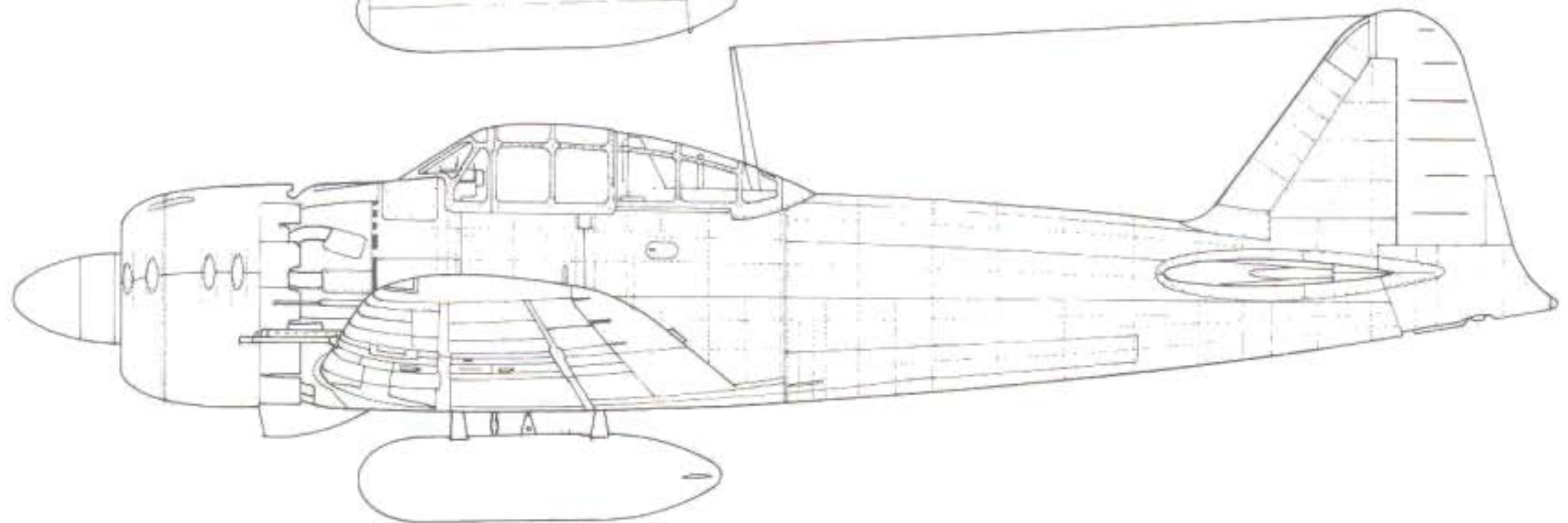
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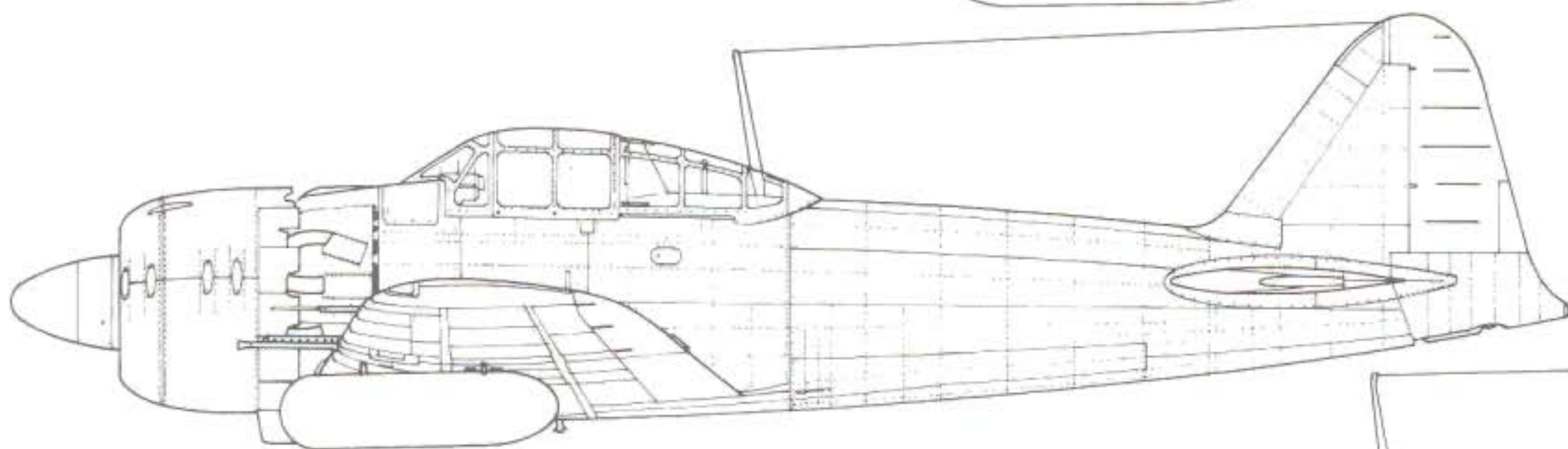
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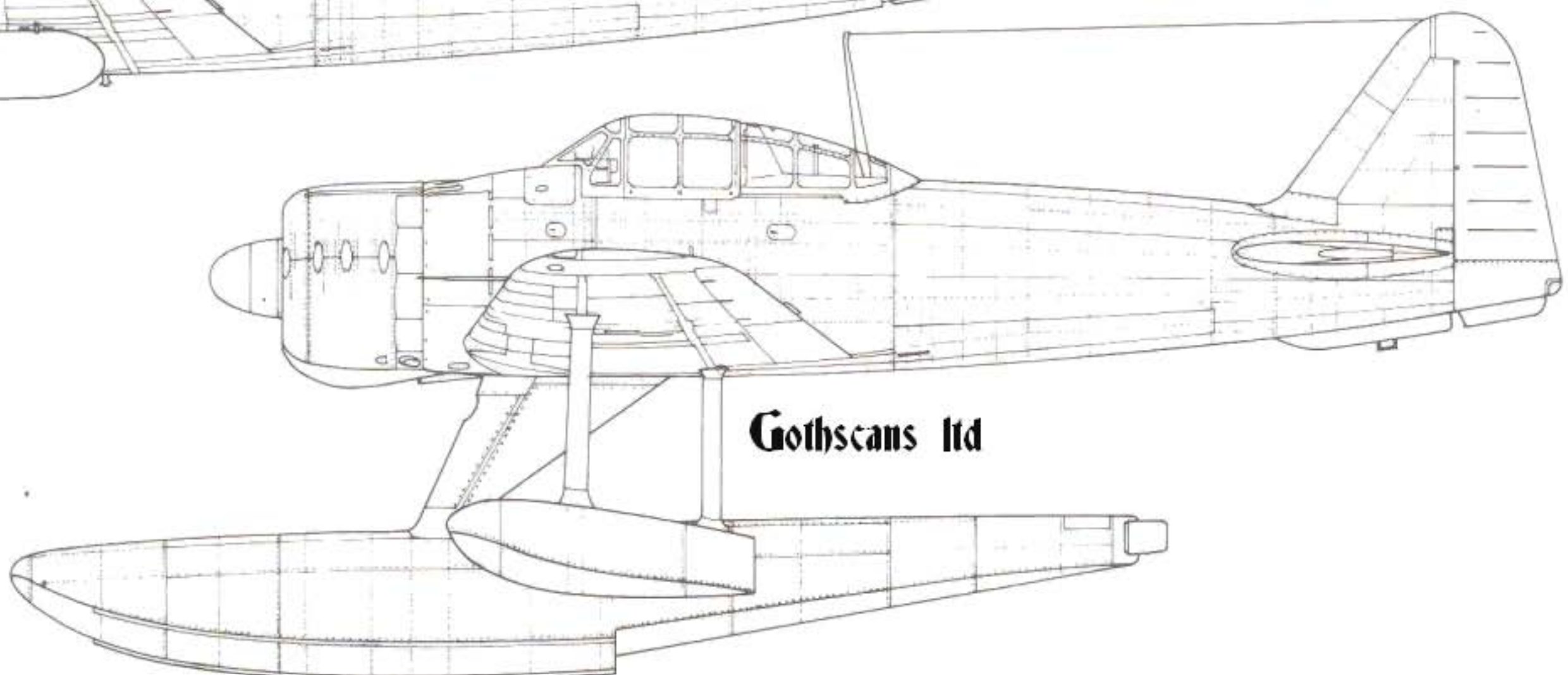
A6M3a Model 32 'Hamp'



A6M5c Model 52 Hei



A6M7 Model 63

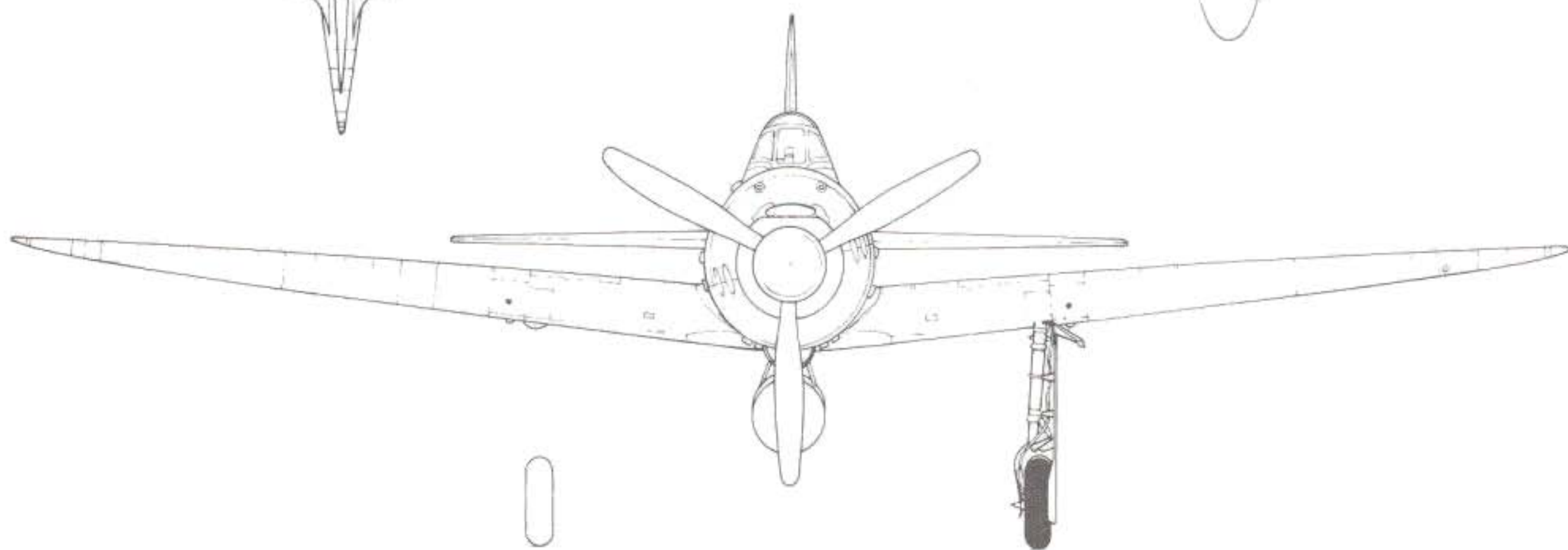
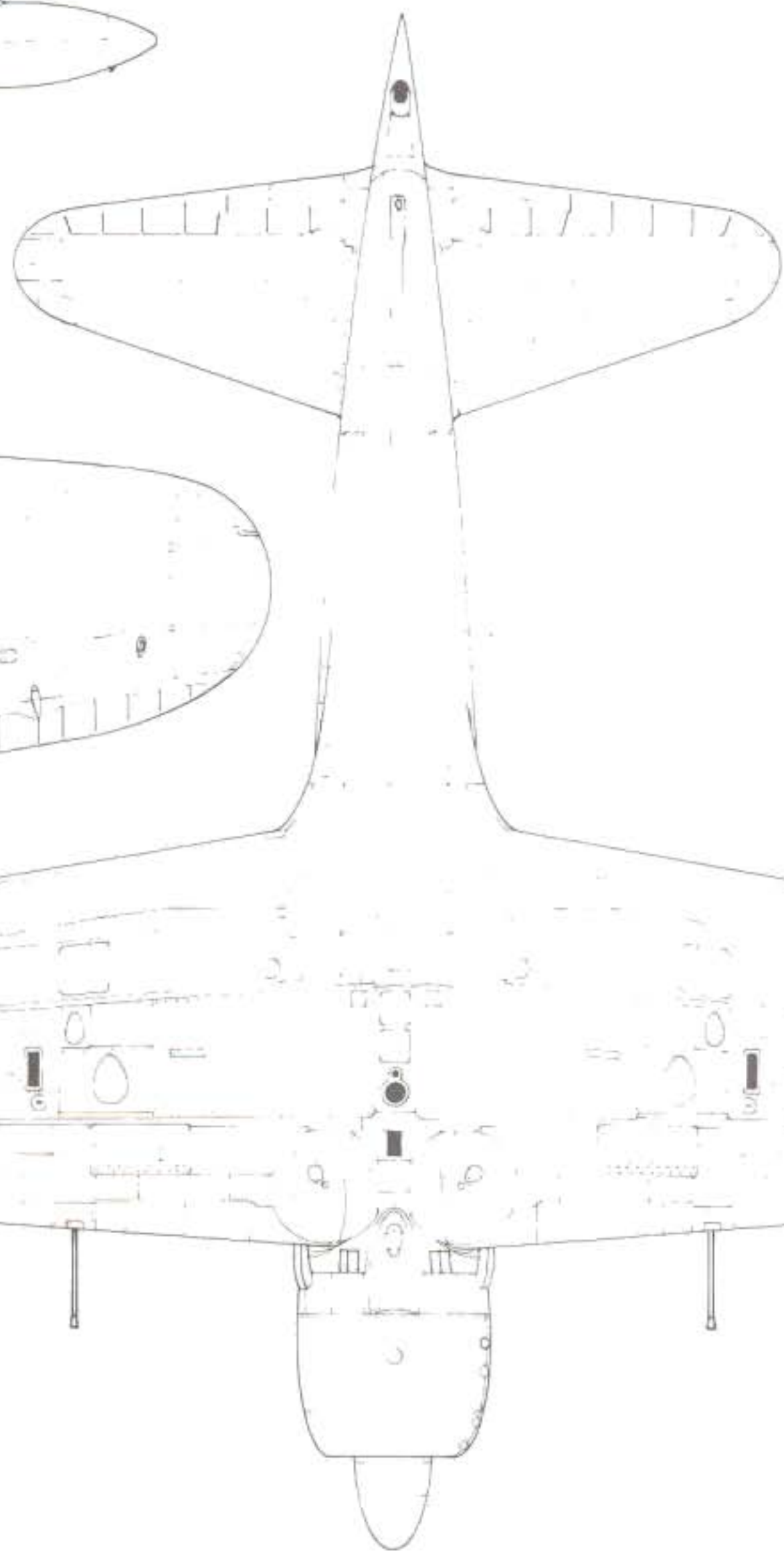
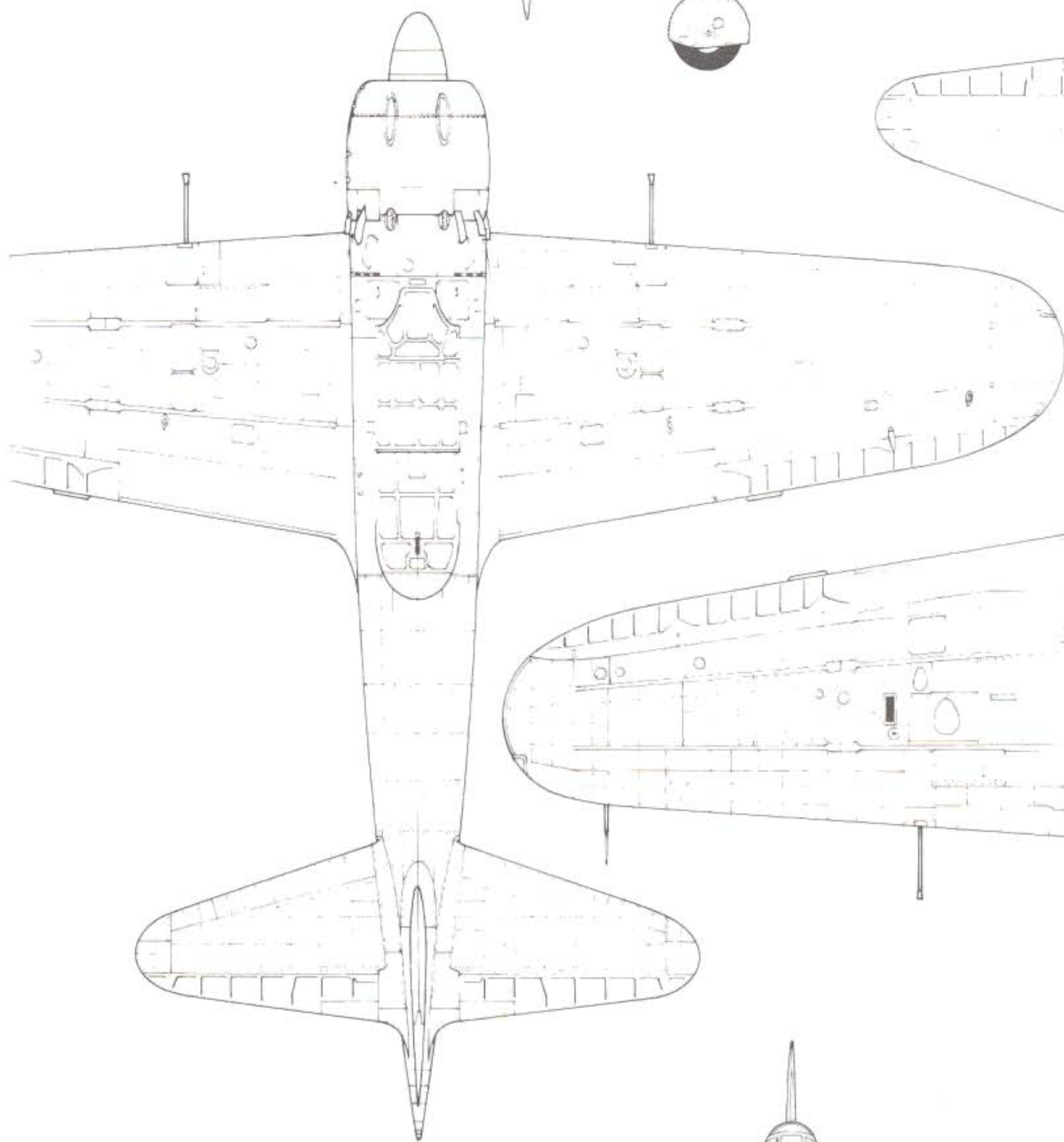
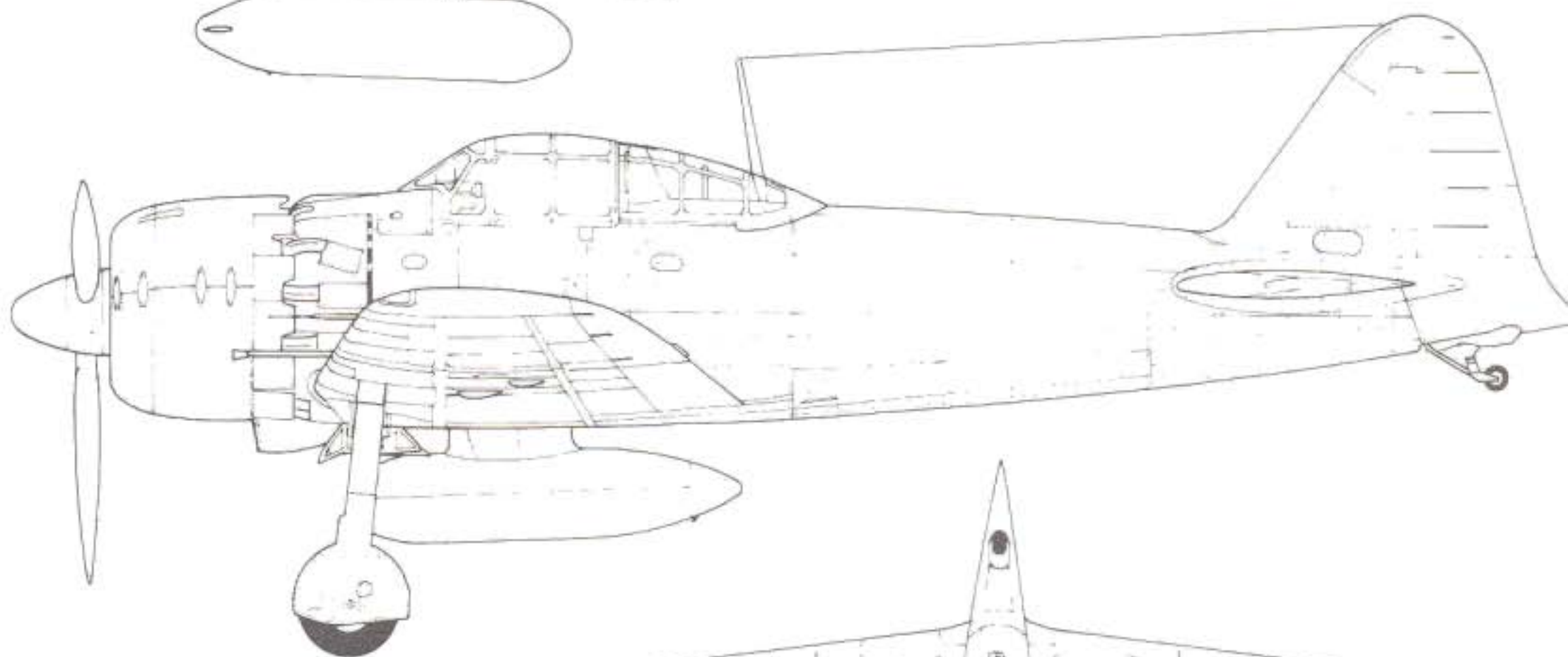
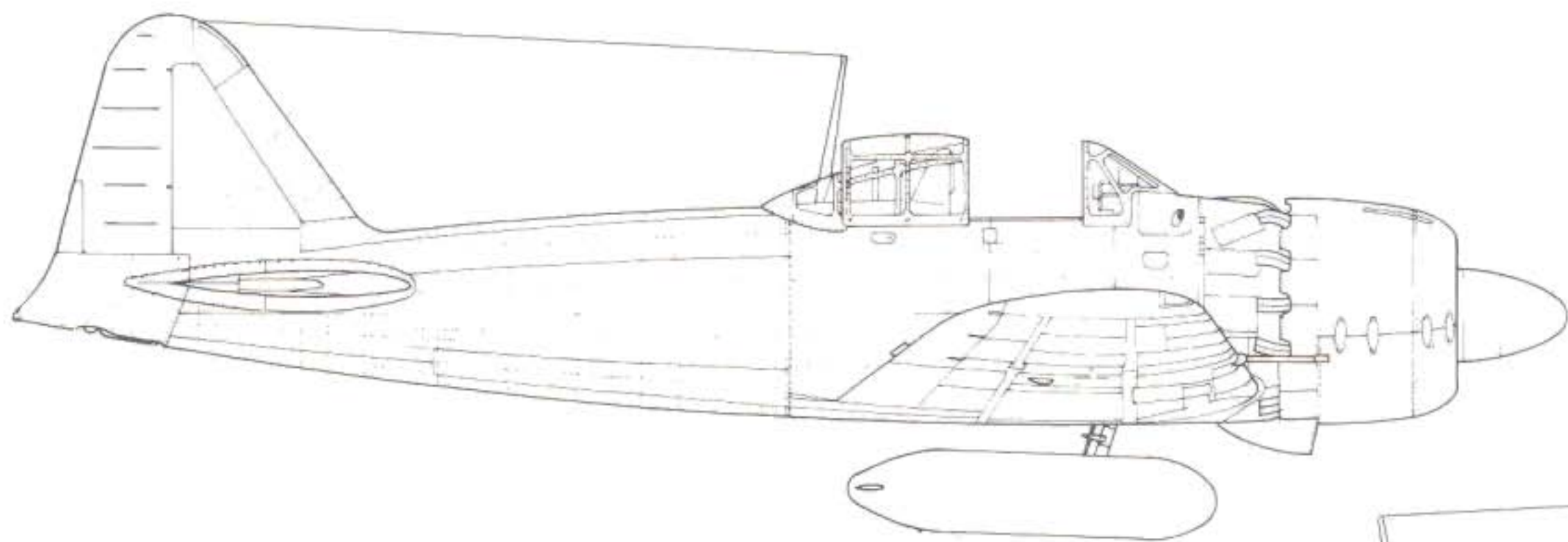


A6M2-N 'Rufe'

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All views on this page are of an A6M5 Model 52, and are to 1/72nd scale – as are the remaining scale drawings in this appendix





The outcome of the Pacific War was heavily influenced by the results of naval battles between the



engaged by the Allied forces, Pacific. Pilots like Nishizawa, Sugita and Sakai scoring

Imperial Japanese fleet and the US Navy. One of the key elements was Japan's large fighter component, which had gained experience over Manchuria, China and Mongolia in the late 1930s. Flying A5Ms, at least 21 pilots achieved "acedom" securing air superiority for the invaders. Manufacturer Mitsubishi derived much from these campaigns, producing one of the best fighters of the War, the A6M Zero-Sen. Navy pilots proved to be highly skilled when

more than 60 kills apiece. Following a series of key carrier battles, navy pilots began to operate predominantly from shore bases in New Guinea, the Philippines and finally the Japanese home islands. New fighter types like the Raiden, Shiden/Shiden-kai, Gekko and later versions of the Zero only helped delay the inevitable defeat, and hundreds of naval pilots paid the ultimate price in the final months of war as *kamikazes*.



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