

ALONE AND SHOT UP On August 7, 1942, badly wounded Japanese ace Saburo Sakai disengages from his American adversaries and embarks on an epic 640-mile flight back to his base at Rabaul, New Britain.



SAMURAI OF THE AIR

LEGENDARY ZERO PILOT **SABURO SAKAI** WAS JAPAN'S MOST RECOGNIZED ACE, BUT FEW KNEW THE MAN BEHIND THE LEGEND BY BARRETT TILLMAN





SABURO SAKAI IS PROBABLY JAPAN'S BEST-KNOWN PILOT OF WORLD WAR II, WITH THE POSSIBLE EXCEPTION OF CAPTAIN MITSUO FUCHIDA OF PEARL HARBOR INFAMY.

In a seven-year combat career, Sakai survived horrible injuries and impossible odds, and almost got a chance to kill Lyndon Baines Johnson. The fact that Sakai never made a combat launch from an aircraft carrier in no way detracts from his significance as a naval aviator and Japan's third-ranking fighter ace.

Sakai came to prominence in 1957 when his memoir, *Samurai!*, was published in English, with Japanese journalist Fred Saito and American Martin Caidin as coauthors. It became an instant classic and is still in print today, well after his death. Yet the man behind the legend remains little known, and his career deserves a reappraisal.

Sakai Saburo (to render his name in proper Japanese order) was born to an impoverished Kyushu farming family in 1916. Sakai admitted that he was a poor student and, lacking other options, enlisted in the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) in 1933. Upon completion of harsh recruit training, he reported aboard the battleship *Kirishima*. Over the next three years the young sailor demonstrated the persistence that would come to characterize his combat career. He passed the entrance exam for flight school on the third try.

IJN pilot training was the most rigorous in the world at the time. Attempting to compensate for centuries of isolation, Japan rushed to catch up with the West in a few decades—and succeeded. But the price was brutally steep by Western standards, as “attrition” had a literal meaning in prewar training. All-or-nothing wrestling matches, acrobatics without a net and prolonged swimming tests were just part of the regimen. While the success ratio was small (35 percent in Sakai's class), the resultant airmen were at least as good as any in the United States or Europe.

The hard work paid off. Sakai graduated in his enlisted pilot training class late in 1937, receiving a silver watch from the emperor as the outstanding trainee of the year.

Asked about his carrier training, Sakai produced a pad and pencil. Speaking through an interpreter, he sketched a flight deck with notations of 17 meters (about 56 feet) wide with six arresting wires. The glide slope for IJN tailhookers was 5 to 5½ degrees, depending upon aircraft type, with a light landing system similar to today's visual approach slope indicator (VASI) arrangement. The Japanese used no landing signal officers other than a sailor stationed aft with a red flag in the event of a waveoff. Because of the light weight of IJN aircraft, catapults were deemed unnecessary.



In the summer of 1938, Sakai was assigned to the 12th *Kokutai* (air group), flying Mitsubishi A5M fighters from Formosa (now Taiwan). The trim little fixed-gear monoplanes, later codenamed “Claude” by the Allies, were delightful to fly, and Sakai made his mark in them. On October 5, his flight was intercepted by Chinese-flown, Soviet-built Polikarpov I-16s near Hankow. In the ensuing air battle, Sakai broke formation, flamed an I-16 and was nearly downed himself. His flight leader was not pleased; the lieutenant did all the talking while Sakai did all the listening.

A year later Sakai was wounded in a Chinese bombing raid and returned to Japan for treatment. However, by 1941 he was well established as a petty officer, flying A6M2 Zeros with the Tainan *Kokutai*, still based on Formosa. He came to know the legendary fighter intimately, logging some 1,500 hours in the type.

Sakai and 43 other pilots of the Tainan *Kokutai* made aviation history on December 8, 1941, taking off from Formosa and flying 1,100 miles round trip to Clark Field in the Philippines—at the time the longest fighter mission ever attempted. After peeling off from the Mitsubishi G4M1 “Betty” bombers they had escorted, the Zeros attacked targets of opportunity. Sakai claimed a P-40 Warhawk shot down and two B-17s strafed on the ground.

The record-setting missions required extreme fuel economy, and Sakai was proud of his reputation as a gas miser. In remaining airborne for 10 hours or more he explained, “I personally established the record low consumption of less than 17



gallons per hour; on average our pilots reduced their consumption from 35 gallons per hour to only 18.

“To conserve fuel we cruised at only 115 knots at 12,000 feet. We lowered propeller revolutions to only 1,700 to 1,850 rpm, and throttled the air control valve to its leanest mixture. This furnished the absolute minimum of power and speed, and we hung on the fringe of losing engine power at any time and stalling.”

Two days later Sakai and squadron mates attacked a B-17 over Clark Field and shot it down. Though he described the combat in detail, Sakai

GLORY DAYS Before he became one of Japan’s top aces in World War II (opposite), Sakai started out over China, flying Mitsubishi A5Ms with the 12th *Kokutai* (top). Above: The young pilot smiles from an A5M’s cockpit.



"CLEANUP TRIO" Sakai (circled) poses with members of the Tainan Kokutai, including fellow aces Hiroyoshi Nishizawa (standing at far left) and Toshio Ota (seated to Sakai's right).



STRONGHOLD IN THE SOLOMONS

Ground crewmen at Rabaul's Vunakanau airfield ready an A6M2 Zero for its next mission.

was not among the five pilots credited with the victory. The bomber pilot was Captain Colin Kelley Jr., who remained at the controls so his crew could bail out. Posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, Kelly became one of America's earliest WWII aviation heroes.

From that point on, Sakai was engaged in near-continuous combat. After returning from the

Philippines, he flew in the East Indies and New Guinea, fighting Dutch, Australian and American aircraft. For Sakai, it was the best period of the war. With his wingmen and fellow aces, he went from success to success, once even looping in formation over an Allied airfield. His tally of enemy aircraft destroyed or damaged climbed toward 50.

On June 9, 1942—five days after the Pacific turning point at Midway—Sakai intercepted a dual-axis American attack on his base at Lae, New Guinea. The combat turned to hash on both sides, owing to poor timing by the Americans and confused intercepts by the Japanese. After the optimistic claims were sorted out, a Zero was confirmed downed for two B-26 Marauders destroyed or crashed and one crew lost.

Representative Lyndon B. Johnson (D-Texas) should have been in one of the missing Marauders. Granted a short-term commission as a Reserve lieutenant commander, Johnson was on a tour of the Southwest Pacific, gaining political points for the 1942 election before President Franklin D. Roosevelt "recalled" uniformed congressmen.

Trading places with an Army Air Forces colonel at the last minute, Johnson missed the Lae combat when his B-26 turned back due to a generator failure. However, the politically attuned General Douglas MacArthur awarded the congressman a Silver Star for "coolness under fire" and "returning with valuable information." According to Pulitzer

Prize-winning biographer Robert Caro, LBJ had the medal presented repeatedly on the campaign trail, regaling voters with eyewitness accounts of 14 Zeros shot down over Lae. In truth, Johnson probably never got within 80 miles of the target.

By early August, Sakai and the Tainan *Kokutai* were based at Rabaul, New Britain. On the 7th, U.S. Marines landed at Guadalcanal and Tulagi in the southern Solomon Islands, and Rabaul launched an immediate counterattack. Again demonstrating the Zero's exceptional reach, Sakai flew nearly 650 miles southeast to engage American carrier pilots for the first time.

Unlike many of his previous opponents, Sakai found U.S. naval aviators consistently competent and aggressive. In one of the best-documented dogfights of the Pacific War, he jumped into an uneven combat between his wingmen and an F4F-4 Wildcat. Sakai tangled with Lieutenant James J. Southerland of Fighting Squadron 5 (VF-5) off the carrier *Saratoga*. Sighting the lopsided contest, Sakai gaped as the Grumman seemed to outmaneuver the Zeros. "There was a terrific man behind that stick," he said.

Actually, Sakai's eager friends made high-speed passes at the Wildcat, overshooting with excess momentum. It was a common mistake that U.S. pilots often exploited. But Sakai chose his time and rolled into an effective gunnery pass. Badly hit, the F4F streamed smoke and leveled out. Sakai briefly flew next to Southerland, able to describe his features. When Southerland bailed out of his riddled, smoking Wildcat, the Japanese ace felt a rare emotion—gratitude that a skillful enemy had survived.

Moments later Sakai attacked an SBD-3 Dauntless dive bomber from USS *Wasp* and shot it down. That pilot also parachuted to safety, though his radioman-gunner died.

Running low on fuel, Sakai gathered his two wingmen and was preparing to return to Rabaul when he spotted a formation of carrier bombers. Though author Martin Caidin described them as TBF-1 Avengers, they were in fact SBD-3s from *Enterprise*. Setting up a 6 o'clock low approach, thinking the airplanes were fighters, Sakai had just tripped his triggers when the sky exploded.

The Dauntless gunners had seen him coming.

Caught in a crossfire, Sakai's Zero took several hits. His windscreen was holed and a .30-caliber round clipped the top of his head. Stunned and disoriented, he instinctively pulled back on the stick and was lost to sight by friend and foe.

Thus began an epic of aviation survival. With blood covering his face, unable to see from his right eye and in constant pain, Sakai fought a grimly determined battle to remain conscious. His first-aid efforts were useless in the windswept cockpit, and eventually he tore off part of his scarf to use as a bandage.

For four hours and 45 minutes Sakai navigated

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homeward, lapsing in and out of consciousness. Lucidity ebbed and flowed—at some point his mother's voice came to him, scolding him for a growing urge to give up. At length he forced himself to ignore the pain and dizziness of blood loss, fighting partial blindness and paralysis in an effort to concentrate on landing.

Sakai was lifted from the cockpit with bullet or fragment wounds in the left arm, leg and chest. He was sent to Yokosuka Naval Hospital, where doctors solemnly informed him that he was permanently blind in his right eye and would never fly again.

Sakai not only flew again, however, he returned to combat. Nearly two years after his epic escape over Guadalcanal, he was based on Iwo Jima, still flying Zeros but now as a warrant officer in the Yokosuka *Kokutai*. On June 24, 1944, he was one of 57 Zeros that intercepted three squadrons of carrier-based F6F-3 Hellcats. Separated from his inexperienced

SURVIVAL SAGA

After his narrow escape from Guadalcanal on August 7, Sakai, surrounded by airfield personnel, gives his mission report before going to the hospital.



SAKAI TIMED HIS BREAKS TO PERFECTION, ROLLING AND SKIDDING TO AVOID PASS AFTER GUNNERY PASS.

ONE-EYED ACE

Sakai warms up his A6M5 for a mission with the Yokosuka Kokutai from Iwo Jima.

wingmen, Sakai found himself trapped at low level by Hellcats from *Hornet* and *Bataan*. Despite the odds and his visual handicap, Sakai timed his breaks to perfection, rolling and skidding to avoid pass after gunnery pass. When lowering clouds afforded a chance, he broke off and returned to base. Ground personnel who witnessed part of the uneven combat were astounded to find no bullet holes in his fighter.

Others were not so skillful or fortunate. Between the American strikes of June 25 and July 5, Iwo's fighter garrison was annihilated. Sakai himself led a suicide mission on the latter date, but failed to find the reported American task force in worsening weather and darkness. Rather than follow orders, he led his small formation back to the sulfurous island, preserving planes and pilots for another day.

For the final 12 months of the war, Sakai served in various home establishment units. He checked out in the IJN's ultimate fighter, the Kawanishi NIK2-J "George," but saw very little additional combat. In August 1944, he was promoted to ensign—a record-breaking 11 years from enlistment to commissioning. He made lieutenant (junior grade) a year later, just before the war ended.

Samurai! contained significant errors, some apparently originated by coauthor Caidin. The book states that on the night of August 14-15, 1945, the evening before Tokyo's surrender, Sakai and an Ensign Jiro Kawachi intercepted a B-29

and shot it down. In 1985 Sakai told historian Henry Sakaida, "What was written in *Samurai!* was totally false. I never flew at night and there was no Ensign Jiro Kawachi!"

Yet Sakai did fly an additional mission that remains controversial even today. On August 17, two days after the emperor's capitulation, Sakai and other IJN pilots intercepted a U.S. reconnaissance aircraft near Tokyo. The fighters attacked the Consolidated B-32 Dominator, new to combat with the 386th Bomb Squadron, and inflicted damage. Sakai was later quoted as saying that the B-32 mission was a provocation, and the Americans should have allowed the situation to settle down.

Sakai faced an uncertain future in the fall of 1945. As a "militarist" he was barred from government employment, and in any case his partial blindness would have prevented a return to military service.

Sakai had married late in the war, his bride keeping a dagger in case her husband was killed. After a period as a Buddhist acolyte (during which he reputedly adopted a pacifist philosophy), he established a printing business. His wife died after the war, leaving two stepchildren. Sakai remarried and with his wife Haru had a daughter, Michiko, who was educated in America and married a U.S. Army officer.

Meanwhile, Sakai spoke out against Japanese militarism. He wrote numerous books that were controversial in Japan owing to his criticism of Emperor Hirohito, who cooperated with the militarists, and Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, for flawed strategy in dispersing his forces. Sakai also decried the kamikaze program as brutally wasteful of young lives. In Japanese culture, that was risky business, since criticism of superiors is seldom condoned.

Ironically, for much of his life Sakai was better known in the U.S. than in Japan, thanks to the enduring success of *Samurai!* That it contained numerous errors has not distracted from its appeal.

Martin Caidin copyrighted the English-language version in his name, rather than jointly with Sakai. Consequently, Sakai confided late in life that he never received any U.S. royalties. However, he considered the arrangement worthwhile owing to the many friendships and contacts he made in America. Top Marine Corps ace Joe Foss noted with pride that he became Sakai's most valued American friend.

While touring the U.S., Sakai was surprised to learn that his hosts believed he was credited with 64 victories. He never claimed a specific figure, though his logbook showed that he engaged more than 70 Allied aircraft. The Japanese military typically made extravagant claims, and while the IJN stopped crediting individual victories in 1943, some diligent historians have estimated that Sakai's actual tally probably was more like 15.





RISING SUN Jack Fellows' depiction of Sakai in V-103 over New Guinea in 1942.

With a delegation of the Zero Fighter Pilots Association, Sakai attended the 1970 meeting of the American Fighter Aces Association in San Diego. There a P-51 Mustang ace approached Sakai and his translator. "Please tell Saburo that I read his book twice," he said. "The feelings that he described were the same that I felt in combat, and I am glad that we can share that understanding."

Another reunion of sorts was arranged by Henry Sakaida, who identified the SBD gunners who had nearly killed Sakai over Guadalcanal. One of them, Harold Jones, exchanged gifts and recollections with the Japanese ace near Los Angeles in 1983. Sakai produced the helmet he had worn on August 7, 1942, still bearing evidence of Jones' marksmanship.

A recurring topic in Sakai's conversations was leadership. The IJN relied heavily upon noncommissioned aircrew, often commanded by relatively inexperienced officers. Japanese aces took pains to look out for the good leaders while sometimes ignoring the other kind.

Sakai also found opportunities to fly. In 1991 he participated in a symposium hosted by the Champlin Fighter Museum in Arizona with translator Jim Crossley. I had just arrived with them from Sky Harbor Airport when warbird owner Bill Hane rolled out his P-51D, *Ho Hun!* Doug Champlin offered to spring for the gas if Sakai would like a ride. Moments later, wearing an oversized flight suit, the Zero ace launched on a memorable flight. Hane gave him a fine ride with low-level passes and aerobatics.

Upon alighting, Sakai bowed gratefully to his hosts, and Champlin asked Crossley what the visitor thought. Crossley laughed, "Saburo-san says, 'Mustang is almost as good as Hellcat!'"

Inevitably Sakai drew attention whenever he interacted with American military men. In Sep-



tember 2000, he was invited to a formal dinner at Atsugi Naval Air Station, courtesy of the U.S. Navy, prepared to make a presentation. There he collapsed from a heart attack and died at 84. Only a handful of fellow Zero pilots attended the funeral at Sagami Memorial Park in Kanagawa, as many veterans resented Sakai's public statements.

Throughout his civilian years, Sakai was often asked by Japanese schools and corporations to appear as a motivational speaker. His theme was constant: "Never give up."

He never did. †

Author Barrett Tillman has more than 40 books and 750 articles to his credit. He interviewed Saburo Sakai three times between 1970 and 1991. Additional reading: Sunburst: The Rise of Japanese Naval Air Power, by Mark Pattie; and Zero!, by Jiro Horikoshi and Masatake Okumiya.

FORMER ENEMIES

Sakai shows his bullet-riddled flying helmet to Harold Jones, the SBD-3 gunner who almost shot him down on August 7, 1942.