

Convenient Fiction

By Pacific Correspondent
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On 21 January 1944, the Japanese War Ministry proclaimed that the Emperor had been informed of an intrepid action whereby five enemy aircraft had been shot down by a single army pilot. A myth which perpetuates to this day had been born.

Several myths of aerial combat endure unquestioned to this day. Reference to official records of the era can result in an unpleasant surprise when the truth is actually far different. Victory claims in air combat are often exaggerated and sometimes to the extreme. Benefit of the doubt can be given in situations where records do not align or where there are gaps in the data. On the other hand, occasionally a claim appears so glaring that it invites further query as to how, and why, it was perpetrated in the first place. Often there is no one answer, for the myth has acquired a life of its own due to its size and impact, particularly if it was officially sanctioned.

The achievement of Japanese pilot Sergeant-Major Satoru Anabuki in allegedly shooting down five aircraft over Rangoon in a single action on 8 October 1943 was, arguably, and remains, the most celebrated story of the Japanese Army Air Force in W.W.II. The account dominated front pages of Japanese newspapers at the time, was later repeated in Anabuki's own biography (*Soku no Kawa*), and is often published in the Japanese language.


The story continues to be told in numerous reputable historical works in English.

Born to a rural family in Kagawa Prefecture, Satoru Anabuki (more familiarly called 'Satoshi') graduated from the Imperial Army youth flying training program after successfully completing the required academic, military and aeronautical subjects. After three years of flying, and at nineteen years of age, in July 1941 he joined the 50th Fighter Regiment, then operating the Ki-27 fighter

RIGHT: Sergeant-Major Satoru Anabuki poses with his replacement Ki-43-II, which replaced his original Ki-43-I named 'Kimikaze'. His alleged destruction of five enemy aircraft over Rangoon in a single engagement on 8 October 1943 dominated front-page space of most Japanese newspapers.

ABOVE: A 9th Photo Reconnaissance Squadron F-4 Lightning flies over Burma in October 1943. These unarmed aircraft were the only Lightnings operating over Burma in this timeframe. Anabuki claimed two Lightnings on the mission, but the 9th PRS lost no aircraft on 8 October 1943. (Artwork by info@aerothentic.com)





which was to be later codenamed 'Nate' by the Allies.

From the earliest accounts of this infamous mission, including the official proclamation, Anabuki is credited with three B-24 Liberators and two P-38 Lightnings. This is a mighty score for a fighter equipped with only two forward-firing machine guns (the approximate firepower of a Sopwith Camel). Four days after the alleged incident, Anabuki's feat was first reported in the Rangoon English-language newspaper *Greater Asia*. This inaugural version, penned by journalist Eiji Suzuki, describes how the weather was hazy and that all of Anabuki's victims fell while withdrawing westward over the sea southwest of Rangoon. The newspaper's front page printed a photograph of a Liberator that was in fact shot down on the night of 9/10 October 1943 by Sergeant-Major Daisuke Nishizawa of the 64th Fighter Regiment. This photo was shortly thereafter reprinted on the front page of Japan's foremost newspaper, *Asahi Shimbun*, suggesting Anabuki's achievements.

On 21 January 1944 the Japanese War Ministry proclaimed that the Emperor had been informed of Anabuki's intrepid action in shooting down five enemy aircraft, part of which cites, "*Air-Sergeant Satoru Anabuki, upon receipt of information at 1215 hours on the afternoon of 8 October last year, that enemy planes had appeared in the skies over Bassien, took off to intercept the enemy raiders as the fourth fighter of the Tomomune detachment [Takashi Tomomune, 1st chutai leader] of the Nitta air regiment [Major Shigetoshi Nitta, Commanding Officer of the 50th Fighter Regiment]. While Anabuki was nursing his plane upwards and trailing somewhat behind his unit due to engine trouble, he sighted the enemy in the direction of Thamaingtaw; this was a formation of eleven B-24s escorted by two P-38s. Anabuki immediately decided to crush the raiders single-handedly. He plunged his plane into the enemy formation and surprise-attacked the closest P-38. He knocked it out with one stroke from the upper rear. Continuing his attack on the enemy formation with repeated rushes, Anabuki brought down two B-24s and another P-38. Despite a wound received to his left hand, he continued his lone battle. With ammunition ex-*

hausted, he deliberately swooped down on one of the B-24s, clipped its tail and sent it hurtling to destruction. In the aerial duels, he single-handedly accounted for a total of three B-24s and two P-38s. His fighter was damaged compelling him to make a forced landing, after which, with calmness and composure, he succeeded in returning alive to his base two days later."

Anabuki was then still attached to the 3rd chutai, but flew with Tomomune's 1st chutai on this particular occasion. Most of the 50th Fighter Regiment was then in the process of returning to Burma from Malaya after the monsoon season and was transiting through Mingaladon (Rangoon) airfield prior to regrouping at its new forward base at Heho. This part of the official account at least presents the true circumstances of the time.

At first blush however, Anabuki's claim of five aircraft invites further query. First is the question of a single-engine fighter, apparently trailing with engine trouble, having sufficient airspeed to successfully engage a formidable enemy force. Secondly, Anabuki was separated from his comrades, leaving no witnesses and the haze conveniently explains why there were no ground observers. A relatively small fighter somehow tears off the tail of a heavy bomber, without breaking apart itself, and all of his victims crash into the water distant from Rangoon, precluding the retrieval of wreckage. Finally, Anabuki's fighter force-lands in a remote location where battle damage cannot be verified. According to Anabuki's own biography published years later, his first P-38 victim crashed into the Rangoon River but he was over jungle when he commenced attacking the Liberators. This varies with Suzuki's original report. Even so, no photographs or records of Anabuki's victims were published.

Nobody contests the date however. Offi-

cial records, Anabuki's diary and Suzuki's article all cite 8 October 1943. However, scrutiny of all relevant official records indicates that no Allied raid on Rangoon occurred on 8 October 1943. Perhaps Anabuki mistook B-25 Mitchells, with their two engines and rudders, for P-38s. He may even have encountered RAF Wellingtons which were also operating in the theatre. However, the clearly recognisable features of Anabuki's alleged victims (Lightnings and Liberators) do not lend themselves easily to mistaken identity. Regardless, none of these types was in the vicinity, nor lost, on this date.

Anabuki stated that only two P-38s were escorting the Liberators. Such a small fighter escort for a substantial bomber formation defies established USAAF practice of the time. Still, there is rationale in why such a small number would seem credible to Anabuki's squadron cohorts. To date they

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ABOVE: An artist's impression of Anabuki's Ki-43-II that he force-landed in Burma on 8 October 1943. The fin and rear fuselage carry the flamboyant lightning bolt marking which so clearly defined the three squadrons of the 50th *Sentai* in red, yellow and white to denote the first, second and third squadrons respectively. (Artwork by info@aerothentic.com)

had only seen P-38s operating singly or in pairs. The only 'P-38' presence in Burma in October 1943 was the 9th Photo Squadron operating F-4 and F-5 unarmed reconnaissance versions of the P-38 fighter in ones or twos. Japanese pilots in Burma were thus familiar with the distinctive type and had already shot down several including two the previous month. However, we can be decisive on the 'P-38' question. The 9th Photo Squadron lost no aircraft on 8 October 1943 nor did they fly any missions. No P-38s or their derivative types were lost over Burma on this date.

What of the Liberators? The RAF operated two squadrons of Liberators over Burma in this timeframe. Number 160 Squadron was based on Ceylon flying SAR missions. It sustained only one loss that month on 26 October 1943. The other unit, 159 Squadron, was based in India and sometimes bombed Rangoon. However, it only flew night missions. Its sole loss in October 1943 was over Rangoon on the night of 9/10 October 1943 as mentioned above. By process of elimination the only B-24 contenders remaining are those of the USAAF 7th Bombardment Group. These often attacked Rangoon and did lose aircraft there in October 1943. However, on the day in question the unit's only mission was against Lashio, a location hundreds of miles north of Rangoon. Regardless, it lost no aircraft that day.

Did Anabuki have prior form in overclaiming? His combat claims prior to 8 October 1943 mostly accord with patterns of the time. Anabuki's first kill was claimed on 22 December 1941, flying a Ki-27, while covering the

Japanese invasion of the Philippines. His claim of one P-40B destroyed that day cannot be verified but is credible under the circumstances. He claimed two more victories in the Philippines on 9 February 1942, one probable and one damaged. His record this far is excellent for a greenhorn pilot, reflecting realistic claims. Anabuki's detached 3rd *chutai* then returned to Japan to re-equip with the Ki-43-I before proceeding to Burma to join the main body of the 50th Fighter Regiment. The key Japanese fighter units in Burma at the time were the 50th and 64th Fighter Regiments, each equipped with three squadrons (*chutai*). In the 50th FR, the first *chutai* named its aircraft after birds, the second after moral exhortations, and the third after types of wind. These names were usually painted in kanji on the rudders of the fighters. Originally assigned to the third *chutai*, Anabuki named his new Ki-43-I fighter 'Ki-mikaze', a clever play on words reflecting the name of his wife Kimiko.

Anabuki took his new aerial mount into the Burma skies in October 1942. Two months later he claimed seven victories in just three missions, including three Hurricanes of which two can be confirmed. Both fighter regiments to date had mostly confined their operations to Burma and India with the rare exception of sometimes attacking American bases in western China. The first upgraded Ki-43-IIs started appearing on the regiment's flight line in February 1943. On 15 May 1943 the 50th Fighter Regiment escorted bombers to Kunming. Anabuki claimed four victories on this mission. However, in this engagement

no American aircraft were shot down, let alone sustained major damage. A week later Anabuki claimed two Hurricanes. In fact two Hurricanes were de-

stroyed and eight damaged but his claims were obscured among the nineteen Japanese claims. A week later he again claimed a Hurricane and a possible Spitfire (no Spitfires were yet operational over Burma) in his last combat prior to the looming 8 October 1943 Rangoon mission. It could be argued that on this mission Anabuki actually encountered enemy aircraft, engaged in combat, and honestly mistook the results. However, were this the case, it is difficult to discern which Allied aircraft these might have been, for none flew over Rangoon on the day.

What might have motivated Anabuki to make up such a story? There are some attractive hints that suggest possibilities. Regardless of what actually transpired, something traumatic clearly occurred to Anabuki. He encountered engine trouble early in the mission, separating him from his comrades. His fighter crashed for some reason, likely due to his faltering engine and, in the process, he probably injured his hand. Anabuki traipsed home alone, nursing the painful hand, walking through uninhabited jungle and harsh terrain for two days. Perhaps the ordeal shook his confidence and, fearing possible reprimand from his masters, he fabricated the story in order to justify his actions. Alternatively, perhaps the stressful survival made him miss his family, wife and Japan. Poignantly, if early repatriation to Japan were his motive, then it was successful, for he was returned home early a few months later.

Would Anabuki have been confident that his account of destroying five aircraft in one encounter would be accepted given there were no witnesses? This is answered by the interrogation of Lieutenant Noriyuke Saito of the 50th Fighter Regiment who became a POW after being shot down in northern Burma in late October 1943. During inter-



rogations, Saito accurately related Anabuki's Rangoon claims, which had already become folklore among Rangoon's pilot cadre, including the correct tally of five alleged victories. Saito was asked, in the context of Anabuki's claims, what sort of check was made on combat claims. His response is recorded as, "...that these were always accepted without question, it being beneath the dignity of a Japanese air warrior to make false claims."

Anabuki's claims up until May 1943 contain flaws but no more than his contemporaries and do not reflect intentional deceit, with one possible exception. The mission to Kunming with an unfounded claim of four fighters reflects an exponential call. Perhaps Anabuki was becoming disgruntled that other pilots were being awarded group claims that he regarded as rightfully due to him? By the end of the war, Anabuki, citing his own diary entries, allocated himself more victories than officially recognised (51 according to his own tally versus the official score of 25). Thus, with nobody with whom to share the score, and no witnesses, Anabuki may have calculated that the five fabricated claims would be accepted and, thus, re-address his due balance. Anabuki adorned the tail of his first Ki-43 with victory markers, which was unorthodox behaviour of the times. This action underlines his enthusiasm for combat accreditation.

It is regrettable that many historians repeat an account like Anabuki's without substantiating the true circumstances from primary source material. His story contains factual assertions easily checked against Allied records. A review of official communiqués, intelligence documents and applicable Allied unit records shows this event did not happen. Furthermore, he had ideal opportu-

nity to fabricate. Intriguingly, Anabuki himself expresses doubt in his own post-war account that he actually dispatched the second P-38. Was this a conscious effort to downplay his claims?

When Anabuki returned to Japan in early 1944 he was briefly assigned to a non-combat role before returning to the Philippines where he flew combat in Ki-84 'Frank' fighters, later again against B-29 Superfortresses over Japan. He survived the war and became a respected officer in Japan's Self-Defence Force. Anabuki's reputation should not be depreciated because of the revelation that he did not intercept any Allied aircraft over Rangoon on 8 October 1943, let alone destroying five. He was not positioned at the time to foresee that his spurious claim would quickly outpace any control he might have wished to exercise over it. Neither was he placed to deny the claim after the war, for to do so would have impugned the authority of the Emperor who had acknowledged the event. Thus his fabrication, harmless at the time, should be better judged against the harsh framework of October 1943 rather than the more comfortable perspective of seven decades later. History nonetheless deserves the truth, which is that five Allied aircraft did not fall to an impeded solitary fighter over Rangoon on that day.

With thanks to Rick Dunn for his original research on this matter.



ABOVE: An unknown Army pilot poses with his Ki-43-II before deploying overseas. Note the starter spline on the central part of the spinner that was engaged to start the engine as required. Remote starters were mounted on trucks and drove a shaft mounted on a wooden A-frame to do the job.

BELOW: The clean lines of the Ki-43-II are shown in this photo of a 24th Sentai fighter, location unknown. Allied pilots in all theatres consistently confused this fighter as a Japanese 'Zero', and vice versa.

