

Unwelcome Intruder

International Correspondent Michael John Claringbould

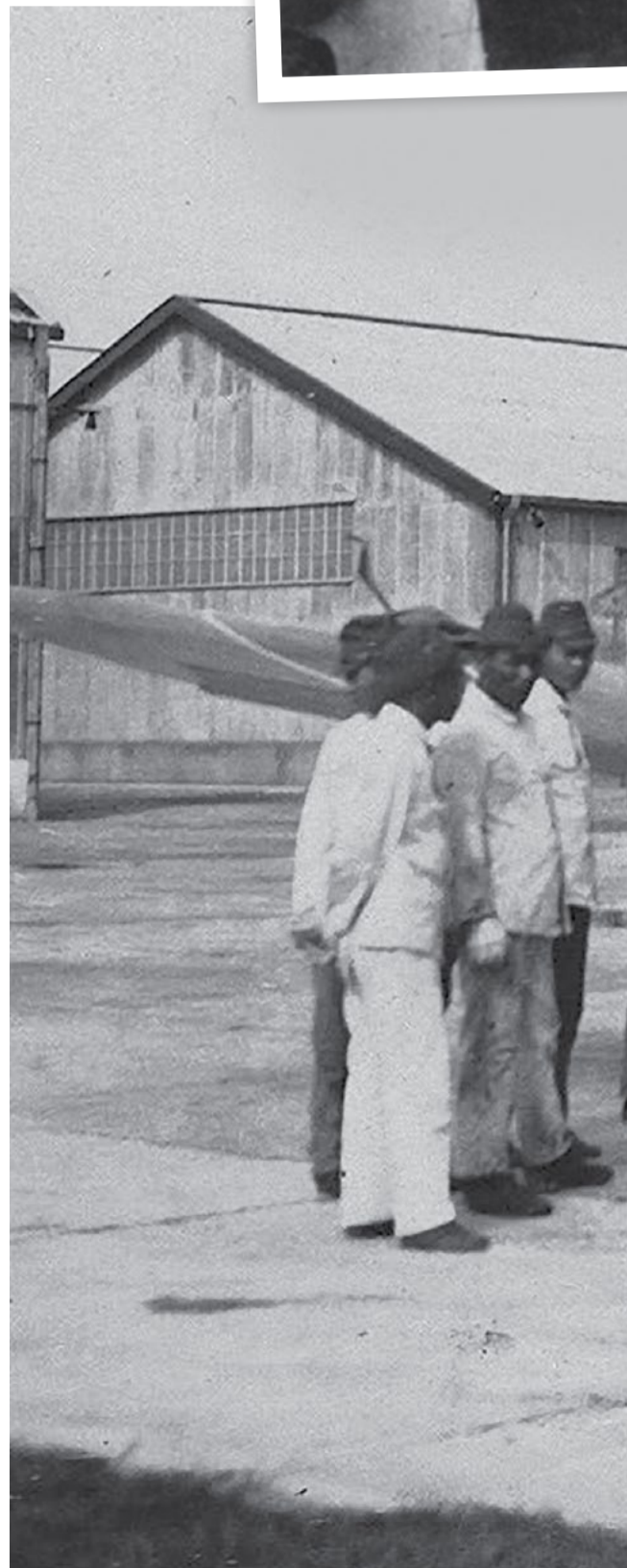
Like the Spitfire, the Japanese 'Babs' land-based reconnaissance aircraft evolved from a proven civilian pedigree. This obscure type not only scoured Australian skies from Katherine to Cairns, it also played an instrumental role in the Japanese decision to use a carrier force to deliver the knockout blow to Darwin on 19 February 1942. Allocated the codename 'Babs' by Allied intelligence in mid-1942, the Japanese called it the *Rikujoh teisatsu-ki*, abbreviated by its crews to *Riku-tei*. Manufactured by Mitsubishi, its sleek lines betrayed the close design relationship it had with its famous cousin, the 'Zero' fighter. Indeed, the Navy version of the 'Babs' shared the same reliable radial engine. In a rigid system where the Imperial Japanese Army and Navy zealously determined which purpose-built designs they adopted, and then refused to share them, the admired 'Babs' was operated by both services - surely a compliment to its superior performance. The Imperial Army called it the Ki-15, and the Navy the C5M, although, for contract reasons, the Army and Navy used different engines. Unarmed, and crewed by a pilot and observer, the aircraft's fuselage housed vertical and oblique reconnaissance cameras. The observer had the option of using an additional hand-held camera.

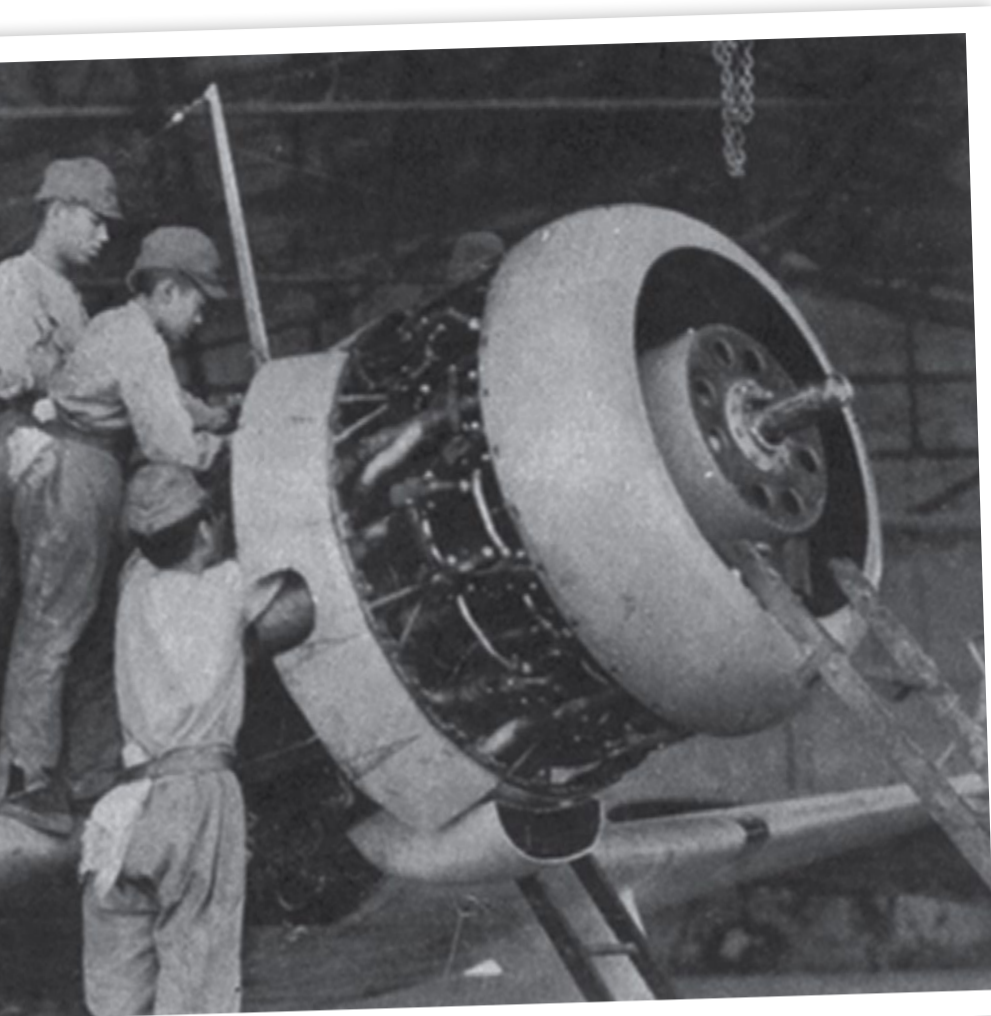
The prototype Ki-15 was commissioned by the Army and, despite its fixed undercarriage, was found to be remarkably fast. Following initial flight-testing, the newspaper *Asahi Shimbun* purchased the second prototype and later christened it 'Kamikaze' before that term took on its later ominous meaning. In 1937 'Kamikaze' attracted worldwide attention when it became the first Japanese-built aircraft to fly to Europe. As a gesture of diplomatic goodwill, after logging more than 51 hours flight time in four days, it arrived at Croydon Airport, London, England in time for the coronation of King George VI. The celebrated flight

also established a world record and, as a result of its reputation, a handful of Ki-15s were sold to other newspapers and civilian mail operators in Japan.

The Imperial Army pressed the Ki-15 extensively into military operations in China/Manchuria prior to Pearl Harbor. Before the Japanese declaration of war against the U.S., both the 3rd and Tainan Naval Air Groups operated the aircraft on clandestine flights over the Philippines. Their base was the large occupied island of Tainan (modern-day Taiwan) and the first of these espionage flights was flown by a 3rd Air Group Ki-15 on 1 December 1941. Similar missions were conducted on 2, 3, 4 and 5 December, including overflights of Clark and Del Carmen airfields. On these missions the Tainan Group focused on reconnoitering the Luzon Straits for Allied shipping, while the 3rd Group focused on Philippine air bases. As these missions ran contrary to international law, all participating aircraft had their markings, including the rising suns on both the fuselage and wings, painted over. Poignantly, and in Japanese acknowledgement of the illegality of their operation, aircrew were issued cyanide tablets in case of capture.

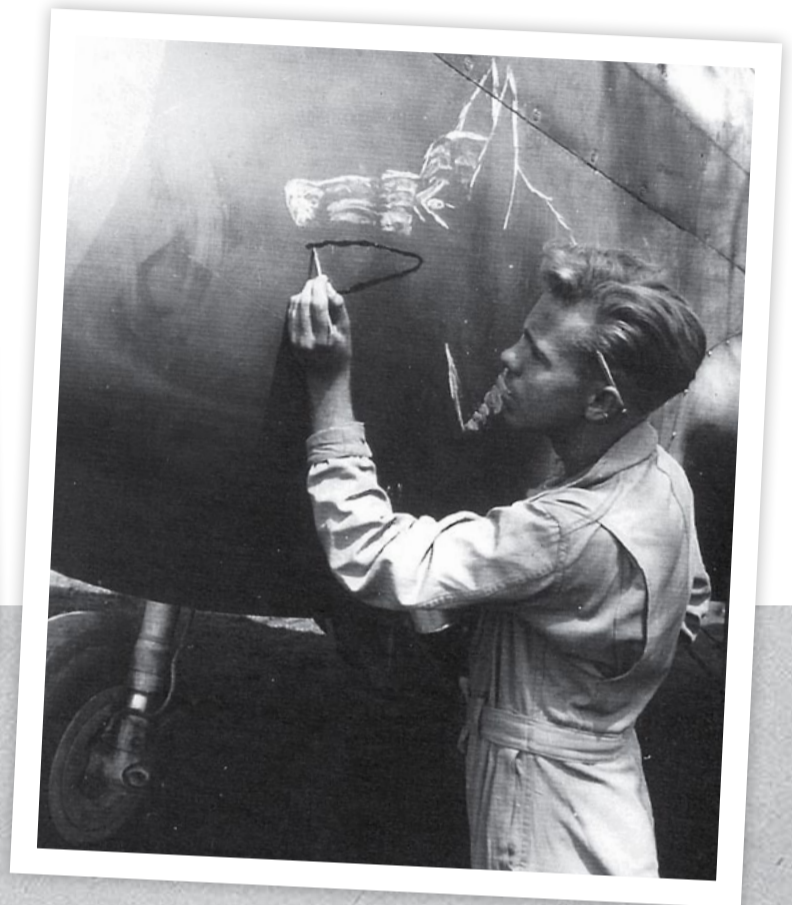
The first Ki-15 to operate over Australia did so on 10 February 1942 when the 3rd Air Group, then based at Namlea Drome on Ambon, dispatched one to reconnoiter the port of Darwin. It departed at 12:20 hours and throttled back to loiter in Australian airspace for nearly an hour. This landmark flight was unobserved and, after nearly a nine-hour flight, the crew of PO1 Takeshi Takahashi and PO2 Yoshimaru Kizaki touched down at Namlea at 19:10 hours. The tired men reported that the harbour contained one aircraft carrier, one heavy cruiser, one light cruiser, one hospital ship and thirteen cargo ships. In addition, they provided a detailed breakdown of the thirty or so aircraft spread over the airfield. Such bounty was considered a worthy target for a



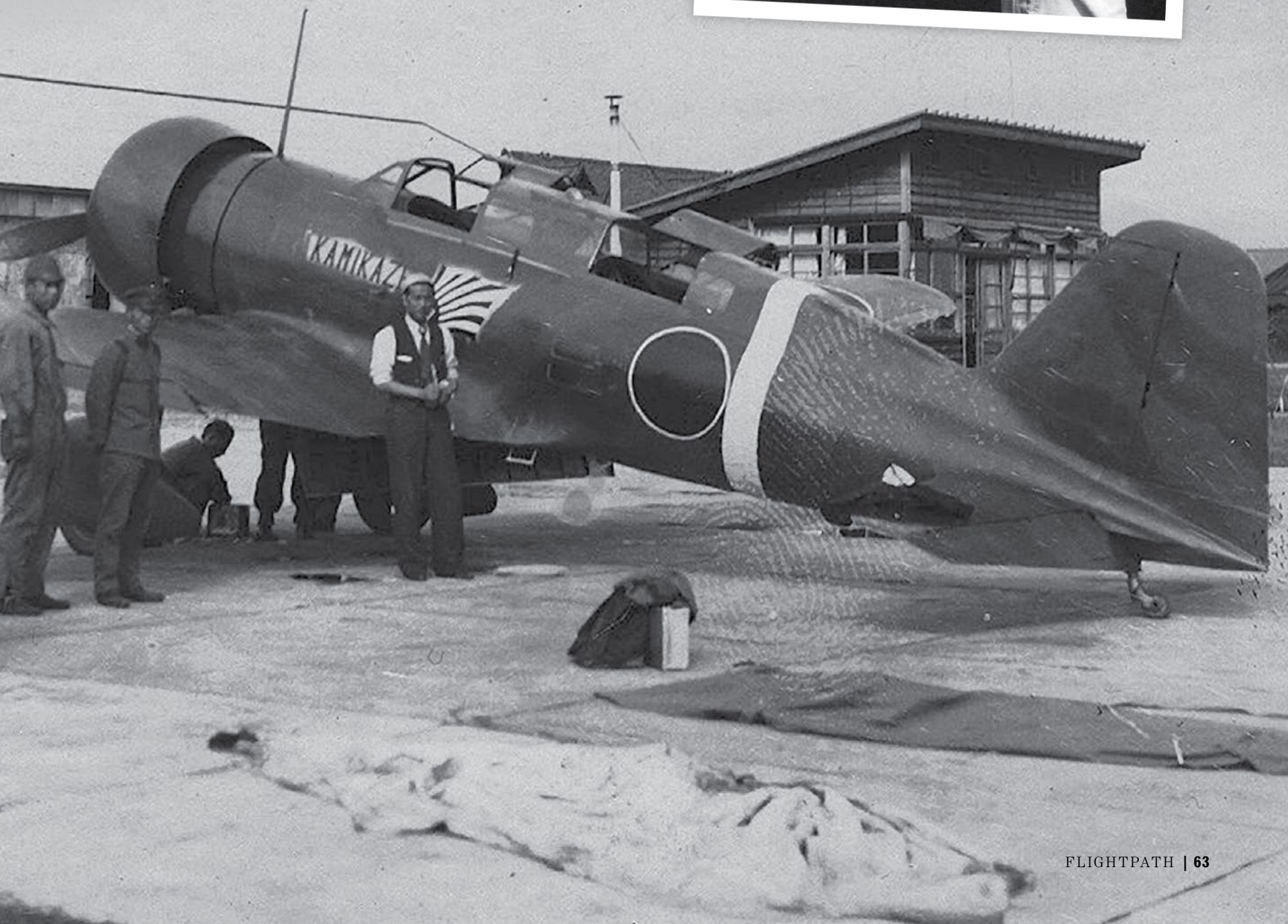


LEFT: Junior naval trainees in Japan receive instruction on the workings of a C5M1. The performance and reliability of the aircraft's engine was such that when reconnaissance units in the Dutch East Indies and Rabaul received replacement twin-engine reconnaissance J1N1 'Irvings', they discovered the new twin's high altitude performance was no superior to that of the 'Babs'.

BELOW: A rare photo of the squadron artist painting a wolf's head on the cowl of Poleschuk's P-40E Warhawk 'HuYebo', allocated squadron number 95 [Ziegler collection via Bob Alford]



This is where it all began. The second prototype Ki-15 was acquired by the newspaper *Asahi Shimbun* and was named 'Kamikaze'. The 1937 diplomatic goodwill flight from Tokyo to London landed in time for the British Empire King's coronation and established the pedigree and credentials of the type.



Japanese carrier strike force and planning to obliterate the port began.

Meanwhile, the recent deployment of the USAAF's 49th Fighter Group's (FG) P-40E Warhawks to the Darwin area meant that future incursions, if discovered, would no longer be immune from attack. Thus, on 22 March 1942, the first Ki-15 was shot down over Australia with assistance from the leading edge technology of radar. Two enemy missions were conducted over Australia's top end on this day. The first was a raid against Katherine, by G4M1 'Betty' bombers of the Takao Naval Air Group, and the other was a separate reconnaissance of the Darwin area. At 08:00 hours a composite formation of a single 3rd Air Group C5M2 escorted by three, possibly four, A6M2 'Zeros', led by Lieutenant Takeo Kurosawa, departed Koepang for Darwin. One of the 'Zero' pilots is identified in Japanese records only by the

surname Tokaji and is listed as failing to return to base. This indicates that four fighters were originally rostered for the mission. We do not know whether Tokaji was lost to mechanical problems or the weather.

This same day was also the one that saw the new radar technology come into play in the form of No. 31 RDF (Radio Direction Finding). Positioned at Dripstone Cliffs, overlooking the Timor Sea on Darwin's northern coast, it was well located to monitor aerial intrusions into Australia's north. The culprit C5M2, crewed by pilot/ commander FPO1/c Shigeki Mori and observer FPO3/c Shinobu Nagasawa, was first sighted about 12:00 hours by a coastwatcher based on Bathurst Island. Shigeki Mori had just been assigned to the 3rd Naval Air Group. The appearance and bearing of the aircraft was transmitted to Darwin which in turn quickly relayed the information to a

49th FG combat air patrol comprising four P-40Es. Heavy thick cloud had meanwhile separated the American flyers into two two-aircraft sections.

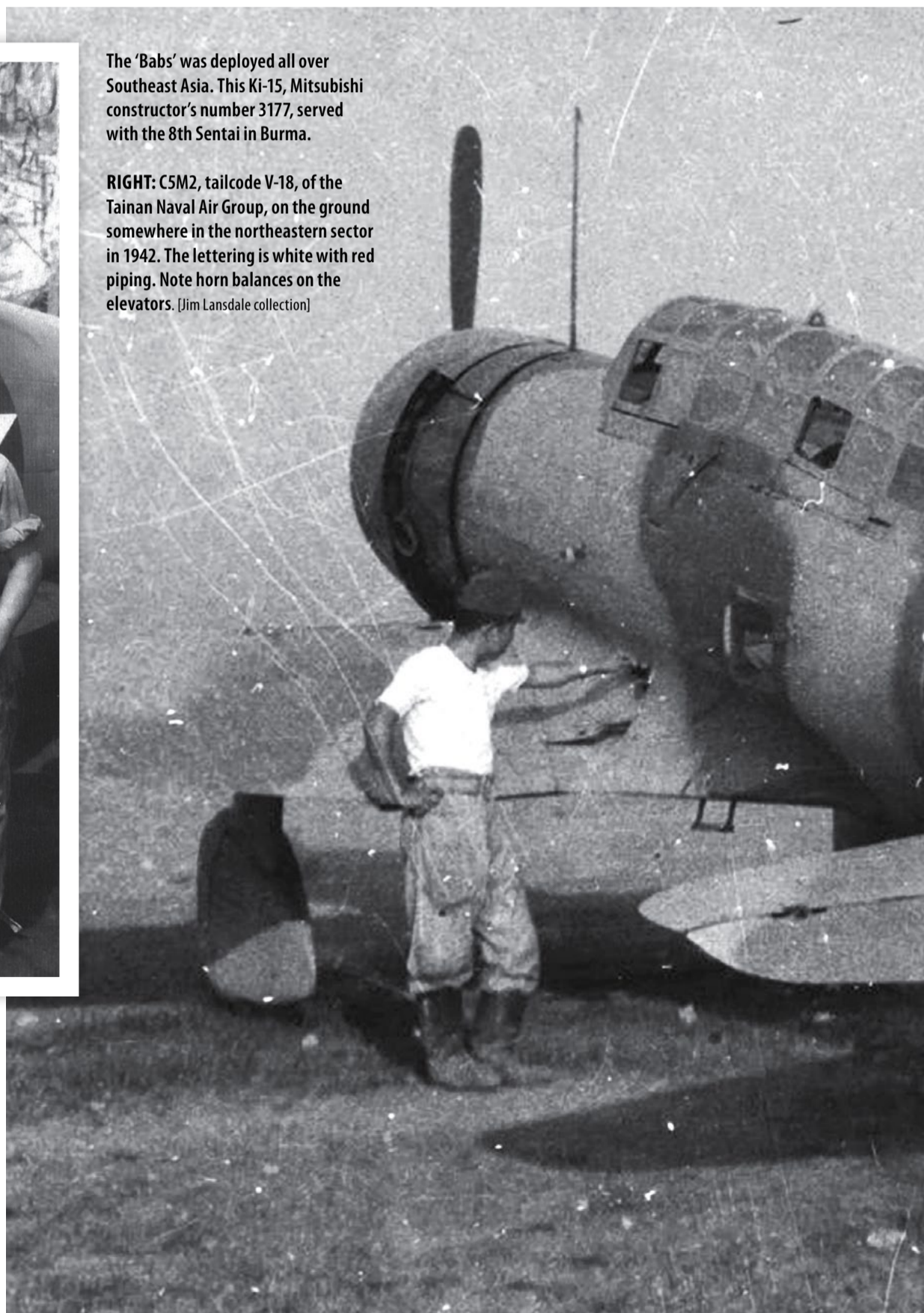
Locating a solitary aircraft in such vast space was a technological achievement of the time but, remarkably, the new radar set did not also establish the three or four 'Zero' fighters that must have been close by. This could be explained by the distracting arrival, at the same time, of nine G4M1 'Betty' bombers, led by Lieutenant Yoshinobu Kusahata, whose target was Katherine airfield, a further sixty kilometres inland. However, there may be a better explanation. The fighter pilots were confident of no enemy challenge that day. None had been encountered on previous missions and they had no reason to expect them now. Thus they had likely calculated there was no threat to their charge so, half an hour before reaching the



ABOVE: During the combat over Northern Australia on 22 March 1942, Poleschuk (who was of Russian origin) flew his P-40E named 'HuYebo'. The word reflects an approximate pronunciation of Russian slang which translates as "nothing of worth" which is what his Commanding Officer, Major Paul Wurtsmith, thought about Poleschuk's landings when he was first assigned to the unit. [Ziegler collection via Bob Alford]

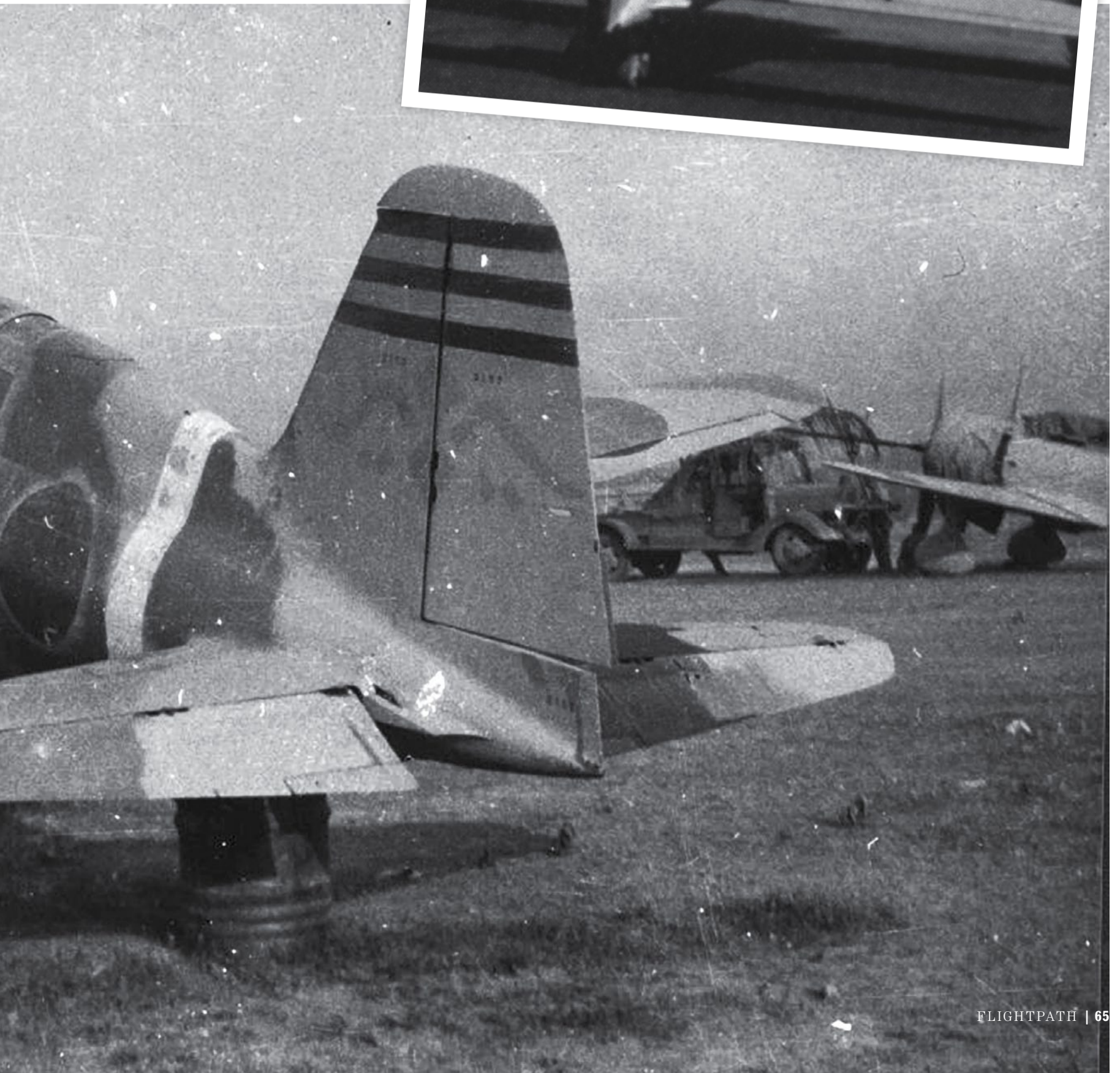
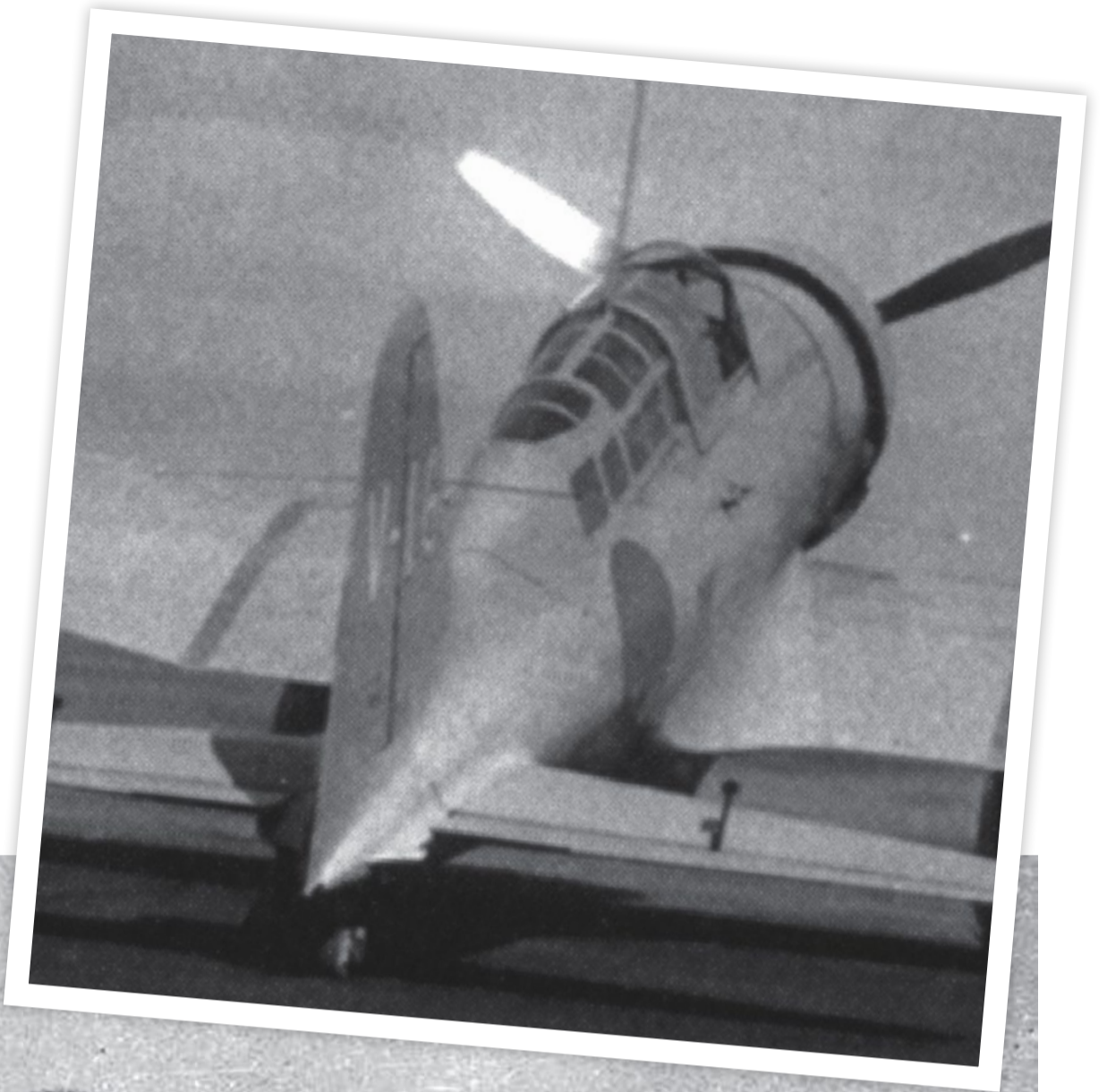
The 'Babs' was deployed all over Southeast Asia. This Ki-15, Mitsubishi constructor's number 3177, served with the 8th Sentai in Burma.

RIGHT: C5M2, tailcode V-18, of the Tainan Naval Air Group, on the ground somewhere in the northeastern sector in 1942. The lettering is white with red piping. Note horn balances on the elevators. [Jim Lansdale collection]



Australian coast, they broke off in search of prey at a lower altitude and, therefore, accidentally escaped radar detection.

The fighters strafed the civilian airfield at Parap but no damage was reported. They returned to Koepang where they landed at 15:20 hours after a lengthy mission of just over seven hours. Meanwhile, the Warhawk duo of Second Lieutenants Clyde Harvey and Steven Poleschuk intercepted the lone reconnaissance aircraft at 20,000 feet and shot it down in flames. It splashed into the water offshore Port Patterson. Poleschuk later reported, "*We sighted one Nakajima, Type 97 [sic]. I do not think our approach was observed. I delivered a 30 [degree] beam attack at less than 200 feet [and] fired one hundred rounds. The enemy made a 180 diving turn to left and then shallow climbing turn to right...and was shot down in flames.*" Harvey's report is



Lt Clyde Harvey, flying a P-40E Warhawk with the squadron number 95, pulls up from a firing pass on the aircraft flown by FPO1/c Shigeki Mori on 22 March 1942. Both he and fellow pilot Steven Poleschuk later submitted incorrectly that they had dispatched a "Nakajima, Type 97". This was excusable. At this early stage of the war no USAAF pilots knew the type existed, let alone what it looked like. [Artist impression by author]



more succinct; "We were on patrol at 20,000 feet – time 10.00 am - We sighted a Nakajima Serial #3 (sic) at 19,000 feet. I made a diving attack on the enemy and he started a steep turn. The Nakajima started burning and pilot jumped in chute. We then returned to our base." The crewmember who reportedly jumped from the stricken aircraft was never found and Japanese unit records simply report the aircraft as missing.

Back at Darwin there was a critical matter to settle however. As both pilots had fired at the 'Babs', and as neither wanted a shared victory, they flipped a coin to secure the prize. Poleschuk won.

Unobserved Over Cairns

In the first few weeks of June 1942 at the forward base of Lae, recently arrived C5M2 'Babs' assigned to the Tainan Naval Air Group conducted familiarisation and training sorties, somehow weaving their arrivals and departures in between Allied air raids. The first reconnaissance mission for the group's New Guinea 'Babs' detachment was a solo reconnaissance of Horn Island conducted on 17 June 1942. Two days later, another 'Babs' reconnoitred Kieta on Bougainville Island. Their next sortie was a dual mission to Cooktown and Cairns over the northern Australian mainland on 24 June 1942. Two aircraft commanded by Lt(jg) Kiizuka Shigenori and WO Hasegawa Kameichi were air-

“as neither wanted a shared victory, they flipped a coin to secure the prize”

borne from Lae at 08:05 and 08:45 hours respectively to reconnoitre the two towns. They loitered over Cairns for twenty minutes, from 11:20 hours, and Cooktown for 35 minutes from 11:50 hours respectively.

These seven-hour missions were taxing on the crew but minimal commentary on the mission sheets indicates they were both routine. There is no indication in Australian records that Allied air defences detected these early flights to Cairns and Cooktown. Surprisingly, the direct route to both targets crossed the Papuan coast near Kairuku where there was an Australian observation post. The outpost apparently failed to sight these pioneering flights. Other *Tainan* pilots who also made flights over Australia on

these early reconnaissance missions include FPO2c Shimizu Eisaku, FPO2c Kamipeppu Yoshinori, FPO2c Iwayama Takashi and FPO2c Kudō Shigetoshi.

First 'Babs' Loss in New Guinea

The first 'Babs' to be lost in New Guinea occurred on 4 August 1942, courtesy of the RAAF, when a battle unfolded between four Tainan Naval Air Group 'Zeros', one 'Babs' from the same unit, and eight 76 Squadron RAAF Kittyhawks. Flight Lieutenant P.H. Ash, returning from a patrol, jumped the 'Babs' and was credited with shooting down a "dive-bomber" to the north-west of the strip. His Kittyhawk was slightly damaged by machine gun fire. The combat claim marked 76 Squadron's first kill and, while other kills were credited to Flying Officer M. Bolt, with another shared equally between Sergeants Dempster and Carroll, these claims are unsubstantiated, as all 'Zeros' escaped unscathed. The Australians descended swiftly onto the Japanese from a height of 23,000 feet. In the fierce combat the four Japanese pilots claimed five enemy shot down – a serious exaggeration for the day as total RAAF losses comprised Flying Officer Grosvenor's badly shot up Kittyhawk, and Kittyhawk A29-98 'N' of 75 Squadron destroyed on the ground.

In the confusion of combat, the four Rabaul-based Japanese fighter pilots became separated and used much precious fuel. At 15:45

九八式陸上偵察機

C5M2, tail code X-14, from the 3rd Naval Air Group cruises over the Northern Territory in early 1942. Apart from its Darwin missions, a solitary aircraft from this unit also accompanied the strike force of nine A6M2 'Zero' fighters on the 3 March 1942 mid-morning attack against Broome, staging from the Celebes via Timor. The 3rd's aircraft were coded X-10 to X-18 while those from the Tainan Naval Air Group bore V-10 to V-18. Unfortunately the Japanese unit records reveal no tail code data for any of the missions over Australia. [Artist impression by author]



hours FPO1c ōta Toshio and FPO3c Endō Masuaki landed at Gasmata, short of Rabaul, where they were able to top-up and proceed home. Also short of fuel was FPO2c Matsuki Susumi who landed at Lae at four o'clock where he would overnight before returning to Rabaul the next day. At 16:25 hours WO Takatsuka Tora'ichi, who had trailed behind the other three, topped up at Gasmata before following ōta and Endō back to Rabaul.

During the battle, at 13:20 hours, Australian troops reported a fighter going down in smoke some miles away in the foothills. This was Ash's victim, FPO2c Hanahiro Keiryū's C5M2 'Babs', not the "dive-bomber" as credited. Its wreckage was first located by an Australian patrol three days later in the Stirling Range near Warpie village. A more exhaustive search of the crash site was conducted on 20 August 1942. This exercise turned up target maps of the Port Moresby and North-east Australian areas. Confirmation that the wreckage was that of a 'Babs' is summarised in the report's statement that the aircraft was, "a two seat monoplane manufactured by Mitsubishi". Limited remains of the crew included, "one hand only on the grip of the machine gun", indicating the remains of WO Hasegawa Kameichi, who was Hanahiro's observer for the mission, and



likely the one who had inflicted damage to Ash's Kittyhawk.

As to the type itself, there is a sad ending. Not one intact example of this fine Mitsubishi aircraft survives anywhere.

Sources include *inter alia*, *kodoshochō No. 3 Kokutai, kodoshochō Tainan Kokutai*, microfilm 49th FG, and special thanks to research by Luca Ruffato, Bernard Baeza, Rick Dunn and Bob Alford.

ABOVE: A Tainan C5M descends towards Lae after photographing Cairns on 24 June 1942. The flight was unobserved by any Australian authorities as the 'Babs' loitered over the town for twenty minutes. Not surprisingly, details of this landmark flight appears in no Australian histories. [Artist impression by author]