

Wide of the Mark

The official record of 75 Squadron RAAF's Kittyhawks during their early 1942 deployment to defend Port Moresby is impressive: 22 enemy aircraft destroyed in combat, 29 damaged, and 35 destroyed or damaged on the ground. However, the Kittyhawks only shot down six Japanese aircraft and badly damaged no more than five, with perhaps seven destroyed on the ground. Japanese claims against the Kittyhawks, however, were equally exaggerated and inaccurate. South Pacific Correspondent **Michael John Claringbould** sets the record straight.

The official claims do not depreciate the critical strategic value of the deployment or sacrifices made by this small band of pilots under the command of John and Les Jackson. The squadron created an enviable reputation from this first deployment and the Japanese ledger adds colour to the unit's history. Of the four Kittyhawk pilots who scored aerial kills - Wilbur Wackett, John Piper, Les Jackson and Peter Masters - it appears Piper, remarkably, was mostly responsible for three of the squadron's four bomber kills.

Disappointingly, most writing about this period provides limited insight, if any, into commensurate Japanese operations and losses. This is because researchers still incorrectly assume that Jackson's pilots mostly fought 'Zeros' from the Tainan Naval Air Group (*kokutai*). Based on this false premise, errors are further compounded by referencing the English edition of the book 'Samurai'. Essentially a work of fiction, the book contains numerous errors. Its source, former Tainan *kokutai* pilot Sakai Saburo, in fact flew his first and only combat mission against the Kittyhawks on 2 May 1942, right at the end of the squadron's Port Moresby deployment! On this mission Sakai was credited with one fifth of a kill against Sergeant Don Munro. Japanese pilots commonly shared victories unless circumstances were clearly otherwise. A rare occasion where they did not unfolded on 28 April 1942 when the squadron's commanding officer, John Jackson, was shot down by FPO2c Izumi Hideo.

'Samurai' arose from a series of post-war interviews with Sakai conducted by Japanese journalist Fred Saito. Saito then sold his translated manuscript to American author Martin Caidin who made widespread editorial changes without ever meeting or consulting Sakai who, in turn, received no royalties from the publication. Sakai separately published his more historically accu-

ABOVE: The first batch of No. 4 *kokutai* 'Zeros' to arrive at Lae from Rabaul did so on 11 March 1942. Documents pertaining to an airshow at Tokyo's Haneda airport in 1941 reveal that Nakajima-built 'Zero' HK-500 (tailcode F-110) was donated to the war effort by the Second Patriotic Women's Association of Taiwan. It was later destroyed on the ground at Lae. The single black band on F-112 indicates this was a flight leader's (*shotaicho*) aircraft.

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rate memoirs in Japanese, under the title 'Sakai Saburo's Air Combat Record', in the early fifties. The fiction in 'Samurai' is exposed when official IJN documents, unavailable at the time of its publication, are consulted. These illuminate this period of the early New Guinea air war, but none are available in English.

'Samurai' contains alleged accounts of combat with Australian Kittyhawks nearly a month before Sakai arrived at Lae! Fabrications abound with a good example being the description of the loss of 'Miyazaki Yoshio' over Port Moresby. Sakai's account includes combat with RAAF Kittyhawks,

however he confused the event with a later clash of 1 June 1942 in which a lone P-39 Airacobra dived vertically and dispatched Warrant Officer Miyazaki Gitaro. There was no such person as 'Miyazaki Yoshio', but this fictional pilot continues to appear in publications, who allegedly engaged RAAF Kittyhawks which had in fact departed Port Moresby a month prior.

'Samurai' also recounts how Sakai, FPO1c Nishizawa Hiroyoshi and FPO1c Ota Toshio performed an aerobatic routine over Port Moresby, termed '*danse macabre*' in the text. This aerial theatre, allegedly of 17 May, fails historical scrutiny. No



ABOVE: Pete Masters (left) and John Piper are primarily responsible for four of 75 Squadron's six aerial kills; Masters a 'Zero' and Piper three G4M1 'Betty' bombers.

RIGHT: Les Jackson scored the squadron's first 'Zero' kill on 5 April 1942. P02c Yoshi'e Takuro bailed out into foothills about thirty kilometres northeast of Port Moresby, but was never found.



reports exist in either Japanese or Allied records which remotely resemble Sakai's account. The alleged incident has become a staple of aviation folklore, simply because no historian has wished to challenge the mythology surrounding a popular hero. Had this 'airshow' happened, most of the defenders at Port Moresby would have either witnessed the incident or heard about it. More to the point, Japanese flight discipline forbade such activity - three flight leaders, all without radios, leaving behind their wingmen for frivolous reasons was unthinkable. On the plus side, the personal anecdotes and character depictions in 'Samurai' do provide unique and accurate descriptions of what it was like to be a 'Zero' pilot in New Guinea after the departure of 75 Squadron.

The Real Enemy

Who, then, were the 'Zero' pilots who fought Port Moresby's Kittyhawks? They comprised the recently-formed fighter wing of No. 4 Naval Air Group (*kokutai*), formed on 10 February 1942 from a cadre of pilots who had fought with the Chitose *kokutai*. Although this fighter detachment had a nominal strength of three squadrons (*chutai*), on 15 February it had only sufficient 'Zeros' to equip one until the other two squadrons received their allotment of aircraft on or after 9 March. The rest of its fighters were A5M4 'Claudes' delivered to Rabaul from Truk and still in Chitose markings. Three lieutenants led the three *chutai* - Okamoto Harutoshi, Iwasaki Nobuhiro and Kawai Shiro. Okamoto led the first 'Zero' attack against Port Moresby



TOP: Tainan *kokutai* pilot Sakai Saburo flew his first and only combat mission against 75 Squadron's Kittyhawks on 2 May. Sakai was the third-highest scoring pilot in the Tainan *kokutai*, scoring between four and five confirmed victories during the New Guinea campaign.

MAIN IMAGE: A pair of No. 4 *kokutai* Mitsubishi A5M4 'Claudes' conduct an early morning patrol over Lae in mid-March 1942. These fighters were delivered to Rabaul from Truk where they had served with the Chitose *kokutai*. Several still had high-visibility red tails ('hoantoshō', meaning 'safety paint'), a safety marking adopted by the Imperial Japanese Navy in 1933. [Jim Lansdale]

on 28 February, while Kawai was posted to Rabaul from the Tainan *kokutai* fighter detachment to Palau. Both were key officers in the genesis of the Japanese naval air force in Rabaul.

This brief, but significant period is obscure even in Japanese records, however sufficient documents survive to reveal its murky side. Both Kawai and Iwasaki were directly involved in the execution of Australian POWs at Gasmata in March 1942. The date is unclear, but recorded as “before the Lae operation” of 8 March. In early March, No. 4 *kokutai* based a detachment of ‘Claude’ fighters at Gasmata, on the island of New Britain, south of Rabaul, close to where Australian POWs were housed. Kawai, described as “spirited and rough”, was concerned they were located too close to his operational fighters so asked Rabaul’s permission to dispose of them. He supported his argument by underlining the lack of ships to take them to Rabaul, all having been commandeered for the Lae invasion. Kawai and Iwasaki subsequently insisted to Rabaul that the POWs should be executed. Iwasaki made frequent trips between Gasmata and Rabaul to make representations and eventually returned with written or-

ders, signed by No. 4 *kokutai* Air Officer Commander Takashi Miyazaki, stating that the executions should take place “as per the request of the air unit”. A warrant officer took command of the execution because no Naval ratings volunteered for the firing squad as they had become friendly with the prisoners. Soldiers from maintenance crews and an anti-aircraft battery formed the squad instead and two riflemen were assigned per prisoner. Both Kawai and Iwasaki were present at the execution.

On 4 March, the ship *Komaki Maru* delivered ‘Zero’ fighters to Rabaul for assignment to No. 4 *kokutai*. A week later, seven were flown to Lae along with several A5M ‘Claudes’. The first operational mission flown by the ‘Zeros’ from Lae was conducted against Horn Island on 14 March, during which Iwasaki was lost to USAAF Warhawks. Meanwhile, Tokyo ignored Rabaul’s constant urgings for more ‘Zeros’ mainly because the priority was to replenish Japan’s inventory of carrier-based aircraft. In addition, Tokyo thought that seizing New Guinea would be little trouble. If things went to plan Rabaul and Lae would soon become backwater bases with little need for reinforcement.

During this fledgling Lae period, aside from their officers, the ubiquitous No. 4 *kokutai* pilots who fought the RAAF Kittyhawks included Yoshino Satoshi, Goto Tatsusuke, Ota Toshio, Izumi Hideo, Nishizawa Hiroyoshi and Miyazaki Gitaro. On 1 April an administrative change saw the Lae detachment absorbed into the Tainan *kokutai*, but this change on paper had no real impact on No. 4 *kokutai* operations until twenty ‘Zeros’ arrived from Rabaul on 14 April. Even then, the amalgamation saw the fighter element of No. 4 *kokutai* adopt Tainan *kokutai* pilots while still operating the same ‘Zeros’. Even when Lae’s ‘Zeros’ then fell under administrative command of Tainan officer Captain Saito Masahisa, Kawai remained squadron leader (*buntaicho*) at Lae where the ‘Zero’ complement never exceeded twenty during their fight with the Kittyhawks.

When 75 Squadron’s operations were brought to a halt by attrition in the first week of May 1942, the Lae ‘Zero’ wing was in the midst of reinventing itself from No. 4 *kokutai* operational procedures to the ways of the Tainan *kokutai* pilot cadre which had arrived in New Guinea from Bali. The new breed bristled with talent. New commanders arrived at Lae including *hikotaicho* (group commander) Lieutenant-Commander Nakajima Tadashi and *buntaicho* Lieutenant (jg) Sasai Jun’ichi, who flew his first combat from Lae on 23 April. These two talented officers were joined in early May by two more skilled *buntaicho*, Lieutenants Yamashita Masao and Yamashita Joji. The latter firebrand brought with him more pilots drawn from the Chitose *kokutai* which further bolstered Lae’s potency. These reinforcements enabled the Lae wing to mount missions up to three *chutai* in strength (27 fighters). However, it was Port Moresby’s Airacobras that faced this new threat and paid accordingly.

Bombers were also the victims of the Kittyhawks, but determining the realities of combat is relatively straightforward. Bombers (and large H6K ‘Mavis’ flying boats) from No. 1, No. 4, Genzan and the Yokohama *kokutai* targeted Port Moresby during the March to May 1942 timeframe. Examples of the ‘Mavis’ were never intercepted by the Kittyhawks, and No. 1 and Genzan *kokutai* G3M2 ‘Nells’ suffered no combat losses, leaving all bomber losses to No. 4 *kokutai*, which fortunately left detailed records. In conjunction with ‘Zero’ losses, these show that the Kittyhawks scored only six aerial victories during their 44-day deployment - 21 March, one ‘Betty’ bomber flown by FPO1c Kawai Heihachi (shot down by Wilbur Wackett); 24 March, one ‘Betty’ flown by FPO1c Nakamura Tatsuo (John Piper); 27 March, one ‘Betty’ flown by FPO2c Itsuda Inao (John Piper); 5 April, Tainan *kokutai* ‘Zero’ flown by Yoshi’e Takuro (Les Jackson); 10 April, one ‘Betty’ flown by FPO1c Kawarazaka Kuni-mori (probably John Piper); and 11 April, one ‘Zero’ flown by Flyer1 Tanji Jufuku (Peter Masters).





LEFT TO RIGHT: Lt Kawai Shiro, described during his Gasmata posting in Japanese records as “spirited and rough”, was a quintessential leader in No. 4 *kokutai*.

Among its many errors, ‘Samurai’ describes the loss of the fictional ‘Miyazaki Yoshio’ over Port Moresby to RAAF Kittyhawks. This account confuses the loss of WO Miyazaki Gitaro in June 1942, photographed here in China before he reached New Guinea.

FPO1c Ota Toshio at Lae in June 1942. He was a fresh arrival from Bali when he participated in the 17 April mission which shot down Barney Cresswell. Lae’s ‘Zeros’ still operated under de facto command of No. 4 *kokutai* during the last weeks of April 1942. Indicative of this is that the operations log designates Ota as “unassigned” for the mission.

The 29 Japanese aircraft damaged in combat needs to be qualified, as combat damage sustained by Japanese airframes, in most cases, was minor. Records show any damage was usually quickly fixed. Witness the combat of 26 April where four ‘Zeros’ were damaged by Kittyhawks - one suffered five bullet holes and the other three sustained one hit each. All had been returned to service by the next day. G4M1 ‘Bettys’ and G3M2 ‘Nells’ received more hits simply because they were larger targets, however, again, damage was usually minor. Using extrapolations from Japanese unit records, a figure of five aircraft seriously damaged in combat with RAAF Kittyhawks would be generous, but the emphasis should be on the word ‘seriously’.

Likewise, the numbers of aircraft destroyed by strafing attacks at Lae needs critical examination. The most effective strafing raid by RAAF Kittyhawks took place on 22 March and the Japanese ledger from this raid was one G4M and five ‘Zeros’ destroyed. After this the Japanese widely dispersed their parked aircraft. April’s records reveal ten aircraft were “heavily damaged or destroyed”, however many of these would have been damaged by USAAF Mitchell and Marauder bombers. Thus, it appears that the tally for the Kittyhawks is approximately seven airframes destroyed on the ground.

First Kittyhawk Lost to the Zero

Kittyhawk pilot Wilbur Wackett (CAC General Manager Lawrence Wackett’s son) was the first 75 Squadron pilot shot down by a ‘Zero’ on 22 March 1942. Was it a ‘Zero’? Five A5M4 ‘Claudes’ were on charge with No. 4 *kokutai* at Lae at the time, but the unit record fails to state which types of fighters were aloft that day. The Japanese recorded they had encountered ‘Supermarines’ (Spitfires) in the combat log. Wackett’s gunsight failed, along with most of his guns, and as he broke away his engine faltered when hit by gunfire so he dived into cloud for cover. There he unsuccessfully tried to perform an engine restart by switching tanks and energising the emergency fuel pump. The engine seized at 1000 feet over water, halfway between Lae and Salamaua. Wackett swam for shore, after a clean ditching, with his revolver, canteen and throat mike (which remained attached to his neck). He returned to Port Moresby after a month-long trek through the jungle.

Despite claims against ‘Zeros’ made by the Kittyhawks, both No. 4 *kokutai* pilots (FPO1c Yamazaki Ichirobei and FPO3c Kikuchi Keiji) downed in this encounter were instead courtesy of 32 Squadron RAAF Hudsons. Astonishingly, Yamazaki’s ‘Zero’ has still not been located even though Yamazaki himself noted he bellied it into grass near a river, probably since silted over by rising waters. After recovering from bruises, Yamazaki returned to duty on 12 April 1942.

75’s First Zero

The aerial victory of 5 April 1942 by Les Jackson is remarkable as it was the first ‘Zero’ shot down by the squadron and was the only time an Imperial Navy pilot bailed out over Port Moresby due to aerial combat (the bailout of Nagatomo Katsuro of 28 February 1942 was due to ground fire). These essentials are obscured by the fact that the incident left behind a mystery - what happened to the Japanese pilot who Jackson shot down? PO2c Yoshi’e Takuro’s Mitsubishi A6M2 crashed into a creek on the southern slopes of the Astrolabe Range, about thirty kilometres northeast of Port Moresby, but Yoshi’e bailed out safely. An Australian patrol located the wreck and nearby parachute. There was no sign of the pilot, but attempts had evidently been made to stuff the parachute out of sight in a treetop. The next day news was received that the pilot had been walking around and had lit a fire near the base of a tree, leaving behind a piece of parachute harness. The lost pilot wore a white singlet with navy blue neckband, khaki shorts and sandals. It appears Yoshi’e wandered the rugged area at the base of Mount Wariarata’s cliffs, looking for a path back to Lae, and eventually died of exposure.

PO2c Sakai Yoshimi Versus Cresswell

Japanese records also illuminate matters previously unknown to history. The 17 April loss of Squadron Leader Bernard ‘Barney’ Cresswell is a case in point. Seconded to Port Moresby as commanding officer of 76 Squadron RAAF to gain combat experience, Cresswell launched at dawn that morning from 7-Mile for a familiarisation flight over Lae with Flying Officer Jeffrey Woods. About an hour after they turned back from Lae, they ran into seven ‘Zeros’ led by Warrant Officer Yoshino Satoshi, one of the first No. 4 *kokutai* ‘Zero’ pilots to arrive in Lae. Woods was caught unawares when attacked from his port

quarter and dived into cloud, losing contact with Cresswell, who he never saw again. Woods was pursued for fifteen minutes before finally making the southern Papuan coast at Kerema. He then turned left and followed the coast back to 7-Mile at an altitude of only 500 feet. Meanwhile Cresswell's Kittyhawk crashed and burned out on a hill near the remote village of Bulwa. Australian soldiers in the vicinity recovered Cresswell's body.

Yoshino's two wingmen who took on the two Kittyhawks were PO3c Honda Yoshiaki and PO3c Goto Tatsusuke. One or more of this trio obviously shot down Cresswell, however, given Imperial Navy pilot training, there is little doubt that 24-year-old flight leader Yoshino led the chase. Once his flight rejoined the others, the seven 'Zeros' then continued onwards to Port Moresby. On the southern side of the Owen Stanley Mountains, PO2c Sakai Yoshimi fell from formation and descended into the jungle. The reason for the unexpected fatality is unclear, but it is probable that either he or his mount had been damaged in the encounter with Cresswell. For obvious reasons Cresswell's combat remains undocumented from the RAAF side.

After shooting down the Australian, the 'Zeros' engaged in a ferocious fight when they reached Port Moresby where Les Jackson encountered them, "... then saw Zero

chasing one P-40 (A29-21 P/O A Whettlers) which was returning to base. I chased this Zero for approximately 20 miles and delivered an astern attack, opening fire at 100 yards. As I commenced firing Zero banked to left and I saw tracers were entering at rear of the cockpit. I stalled P-40 and got burst into engine which immediately poured out dense black smoke. Zero was then at 1,000' and zooming upwards and stalled. At time I noticed that cowling (engine) was shot away immediately in front of where black smoke was pouring out. Aircraft last seen diving from stalled position still smoking heavily and at 600' immediately behind me. I turned and flew at 50' but the Zero was not in the air. Position east of swamps, 25 miles N.W. of base. Own damage nil."

In fact only one of his numerous rounds hit the 'Zero', wounding PO3c Goto Tatsusuke. Jackson was not to know he had taken on Cresswell's killers. Goto's cowling had not been shot away underlining that many detailed combat reports from both sides do not reflect the aerial victories so desperately needed. Nonetheless, Goto's mount, likely tailcode V-152, never flew again as it was written off at Lae when its wounded pilot brought it in for a rough landing.

The benchmark applied by fighter pilots themselves is 'kills in combat', and here we see RAAF pilots Les Jackson, Edmund

Johnson, John Jackson, Barry Cox, Don Brown, 'Barney' Cresswell, A. H. Boyd, Wilbur Wackett, Oswald Channon, Michael Butler and Bob Crawford shot down by 'Zeros' (twice in some cases). In the process, the squadron lost thirteen Kittyhawks to combat against 'Zeros', for a return score of two 'Zero' kills, three if PO2c Sakai Yoshimi is included. This makes a ratio of just over six Kittyhawks lost for every 'Zero'.

It should be underlined that the Japanese equally over-claimed. In fact, their claims from their strafing runs against Port Moresby were more ambitious than those submitted by the Kittyhawks for their attacks on Lae. This was a desperate time for Australia and this war had two clear-cut sides. Both need to be balanced against each other and reconciled so that the sacrifices and true nature of combat can be properly appreciated.

Sources:

inter alia POW interrogations AWM series 54, book 'Eagles of the Southern Sky' kodochocho for No. 4 and Tainankokutai, 75 Sqn RAAF logs, Japanese Monograph Series #92, research by Luca Ruffato, Osamu Tagaya and Ed DeKiep.



Lt Okamoto Harutoshi led the first squadron of the No. 4 *kokutai* detachment at Lae. His assigned 'Zero' was F-115 which had two black bands around the fuselage, portrayed here in combat with a Kittyhawk. F-115 was destroyed by RAAF Kittyhawks during a strafing attack against Lae on 22 March 1942. Okamoto previously led the first 'Zero' attack against Port Moresby on 28 February 1942, and was a key officer in the genesis of the Japanese naval air force in Rabaul.

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