




Memoirs of a
JAPANESE
FIGHTER PILOT

BY RON WERNETH

The last-ditch efforts of the squadron of aces

Peering out of the Navy Club window, I begin to realize how beautiful Tokyo looks in springtime. The cherry blossoms are in full bloom and the locals are sitting outside, eating their lunches and enjoying the sunny day. Seated in front of me is a man—old enough to be my grandfather—who is recalling a tale that happened long ago.



This Zero belonging to the Planes of Fame Museum is believed to be the only Japanese airplane still flying anywhere in the world. This is especially noteworthy considering it is still using its original engine. Only a very few Georges, as flown by Ryoichi Yamada, are known to exist in any condition, much less a flyable one. (Photo by Budd Davisson.)

His age seems to melt away as he remembers the great Pacific air war. As his quick mind reaches back through the years, in a soft voice he explains a forgotten page in WW II history. The man's name is Ryoichi Yamada—one of the original Japanese Navy pilots who flew with the “squadron of aces” (the 343rd Air Group) during the summer of 1945. It was a time Japanese Navy pilots would never forget—the sweltering heat, the ever increasing Allied aerial armadas, airplanes that were poorly built by unskilled workers and a shortage of vital supplies. They knew their war was probably lost,

but they strove to win their battles, however small. They were, after all, warriors. After a successful island-leaping campaign that included the capture of vital enemy strongholds Iwo Jima and Okinawa, the Allies were literally on Japan's doorstep and were preparing to exercise the final knockout blow. They also had an excellent re-stocking system for vital supplies—something that Japan could never develop. The Japanese forces became so desperate that they began to mount “Divine Wind” suicide attacks, popularly known as kamikaze.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF HENRY SAKAIDA

The 301st Squadron of the famous 343 Kokutai (Air Group or AG) photographed in January, 1945 at Matsuyama Air Base. Capt. Minoru Genda, the CO of the unit, is pictured in the middle of the first row. Lt. Naoshi Kanno (48 victories) is second from the left in the first row. Famous ace CPO Shoichi Sugita (120-plus victories), is third from the right in the second row. Sugita's wingman, PO 1st Class Tomoichi Kasai (10 victories) is in the last row, fifth from the left.

A group of pilots from the 343 Kokutai. On April 15, 1945, over Kanoya Airfield, PO 2nd Class Toyomi Miyazawa (fourth from left) and Shoichi Sugita were shot down and killed by Lt. Cdr. Robert A. Weatherup of VF-46. Petty Officer 2nd Class Tsuneharu Tamura (second from right) was in Sugita's flight but was forced to abort and survived.

The Japanese Imperial Navy Air Force was weakened, but not quite defeated. In the midst of the gloom, one squadron began to shine brightly—the 343rd Air Group. This squadron of aces was masterminded by Capt. Minoru Genda, who was the man behind the successful attack on Pearl Harbor. Genda had himself transferred out of the Naval General Staff

to command this elite unit. The 343rd AG was a hand-picked group of Japan's experienced pilots and was created to turn the tide of the air war over Japan. Genda's plan for winning was simple: first, he would use the best airplane available at that time, the Kawanishi Shiden Kai (Allied code name, "George"). Second, he would call on Japan's most experienced pilots to fly it. Among the pilots that flew with the unit were Lt. Naoshi Kanno (48 kills), Chief Petty Officer (CPO) Shoichi Sugita (120-plus kills) and Ensign Kaneyoshi Muto (35 kills).

Genda also believed in the value of accurate reconnaissance data; for this, he relied on the 4th Reconnaissance Squadron, which flew with a high-speed carrier observation plane called the Saiun, or "iridescent cloud." Genda theorized that success in the air would be achieved by the improvement of air-to-air communications and formation combat, so he stressed the importance of this to his men; in fact, the 343rd AG was the only unit to have fighters with properly



working radios! The Yokosuka AG had discovered that the simple modification of adding resistors to the spark-plug wires made the Shiden Kai's Type 3 radio function perfectly. After hearing this, Genda ordered his entire unit to be retrofitted to improve air-to-air communications.

Last, Genda employed a couple of simple, yet efficient, psychological tools to boost the men's morale. To inspire his men, he posted banners in the front of the 343rd AG barracks. Also, he gave each squadron a popular name.

The 343rd AG consisted of five squadrons: 401st, 301st, 407th, 701st and the 4th Reconnaissance Squadron. The 301st became the Shinsen-gumi, or "elite guard"; the 407th was called Tenchugumi or "heavenly punishment unit"; the 701st Ishin-tai was the "imperial restoration unit"; and the 4th Reconnaissance Squadron, the Kiheitai, or "commando unit." It is not known whether the 401st Squadron, which was a training squadron, had a special name, but it did have the largest number of late-term flight-school pilots. Veteran pilot Lt. Naoshi Kanno commanded the 301st Squadron, which suffered the greatest number of casualties of all five squadrons. Well-known Japanese ace Saburo Sakai reportedly said that Kanno was a bad leader because he was much too reckless in combat, hence, his unit had the most losses. Lt. Takashi Oshibuchi's squadron, the 701st, suffered the fewest casualties.

Ryoichi Yamada tells a vivid tale about a mission that he will never forget: the day on which his brother-in-law, Squadron Leader Takashi Oshibuchi, was killed in combat. June 1945 marked the beginning of the end for the Japanese aviators; the War was drawing to a close and the Allied juggernaut was in high gear. Allied pilots even began to complain about the lack of action. U.S. Task Force 38.1 was assigned to attack the great Japanese naval town of Kure.

During the War, the city had a population of more than 400,000 people and was the greatest Asian military port of that time. It was also a premier Japanese

ship-building center; the country's ultimate battleship, the Yamato, was built there. Consequently, the city was a prime Allied target during the summer of 1945.

Now, more than half a century later, as he sat sipping his green tea and savoring the sight of cherry blossoms, Yamada told his tale:

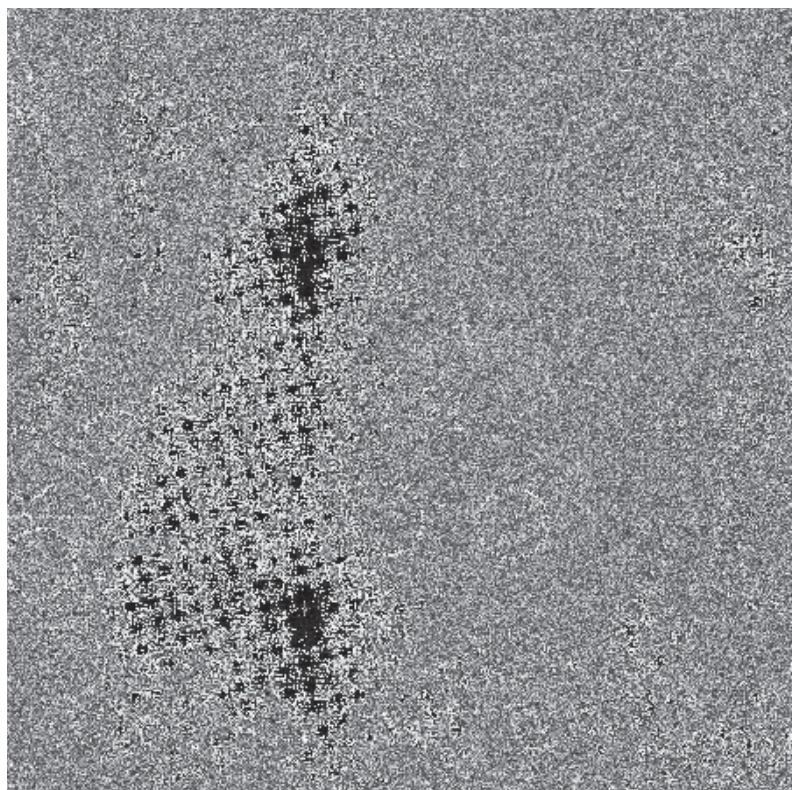
"On the morning of July 24, 1945, when the tide of war was unfavorable, about 500 carrier planes from the enemy task force that approached off Tosa came northward and were in striking distance of the Kure naval harbor area. Upon receipt of the information, the 343rd AG decided to intercept them with all of our airworthy Shiden Kais. However, we only had 21 fighters because of heavy fighting and insufficient replenishment.

"In spite of such unfavorable conditions, Commander Genda said this, 'The 343rd AG should stop the enemy offensive by destroying their planes one after another if we find them.' At



Ryoichi Yamada (left) and Minoru Genda

Kure Naval Base just before the massive Allied attack on July 24, 1945. The primary targets are circled.





This aircraft (s/n 5341) was on loan from the National Air and Space Museum. It was restored over a three-year period by the Champlin Museum and rolled out in November 1994 (photo by Robert Mikesh).

FLYING THE “GEORGE”

By 1944, the tide of the Pacific War had begun to turn. Instead of advancing, the Japanese were now on the retreat. Faced with several major defeats and an increasing number of new, advanced Allied fighters such as the P-38 Lightning and the Corsair, the Imperial Japanese Navy Air Force needed a new tool with which to wage war. Its solution was the Kawanishi N1K1-J Shiden Kai (Violet Lightning). The Allies' code name for the aircraft was “George.” The first variant of the aircraft, the model 21, was fitted with a powerful Nakajima NK9H Homare 21 radial engine (1,990hp), automatic combat flaps and pilot armor. Armament consisted of two fuselage-mounted 7.7mm machine guns, two wing-mounted 20mm cannons and an additional two 20mm cannons mounted in underwing gondolas. In later variants, the armament was changed to four 20mm cannons; finally, a specialized bomber version of the fighter was produced with four underwing bomb-racks.

How did the aircraft fly? Early reports from flight trials judged that the George had excellent handling, but the company test pilot complained of excessive propeller torque during takeoff and poor visibility during taxiing, which was caused by a tall undercarriage. Even with these problems, the fighter was rushed to the front because it was desperately needed for the defense of the Philippines. Unfortunately for the Japanese, several of the fighters were destroyed on the ground by large, prelanding U.S. Navy fighter sweeps. The Japanese suffered additional

losses due to the persistent engine and undercarriage problems. Lt. Cmdr. Iyozoh Fujita—a seasoned veteran of several major aerial battles including Midway and Pearl Harbor—was one of the first pilots to fly the aircraft in combat. He also was chosen to be one of the first naval aviators to fly the still new George during the battle for the Philippines. Fujita had this to say about the fighter: “The problem with the George was the mechanical failures. There was a lack of spare parts because the transports were being sunk. Out of 36 aircraft, maybe only eight were flyable. The Shiden was not that bad an aircraft. When everything worked right, it flew very well. The automatic combat flaps worked well, and the armament was very powerful, so in that way it was not a bad airplane.”

Another pilot who flew the fighter during its early days was Lt. Ryoichi Yamada. During our meeting, Yamada told me, “The Shiden was the first land-based fighter that Kawanishi built. One of the characteristics of the aircraft was that it had a mid-wing and long landing-gear struts. It had a high-horsepower engine that should have generated 2,000hp, but the engine actually produced around 1,800. The design of the airplane was good, but the machine tooling that produced the components for the fighter was not. The materials were poor quality, so the engine could never produce 2,000hp. It was probably faster than the Hellcat, but the turning performance and maneuverability were not very good. If you were rough with the stick, you would go into what the pilots called



When the Champlin Museum restored the "George," many of the internal components were missing; if an original part could not be located and reinstalled, it was remanufactured (photos by Robert Mikesh).

autorotation. During this movement, the aircraft would go out of control, or sometimes, it went into a spin. It turned in a way that the pilot could not predict. For example, during an aerial melee over Manila with U.S. fighters, a squadron mate of mine went into autorotation when our unit engaged them. His aircraft then went into a spin and crashed into the ground. In autorotation, you do not know what will happen, whether you will go into a spin, or flip over. It is totally unpredictable."

Yamada also commented on the innovative automatic combat flaps: "They worked very well; however, in spite of them, handling the plane was still a problem. The combat flaps worked well in tight turns, and they would work smoothly. But, there still were handling problems with the aircraft. After the war, I flew advanced American jets such as the F-104 with the Japan Self Defense Force, but they never had that type of equipment. The F-104 had combat flaps as well, but they were not automatic like those on the Shiden. The design of the automatic combat flaps was a Japanese invention."

During a ferry flight, Yamada discovered another problem with the George—unpredictable brakes. After landing, Yamada's aircraft flipped over when the brakes locked up. He said the brakes would not work sometimes, and then, all of sudden, they would catch and lock up. According to him, this problem also caused many nose-overs. Yamada survived because he held on to the bottom of the instrument panel. Yamada recalls that pilots normally did not survive this type of crash. After learning how he survived the accident, Japanese authorities decided to make it the emergency procedure for that type of crash. Incredibly, after this measure was implemented, no airman was killed during a nose-over crash in a George.

Back in Japan, Kawanishi engineers were busy working on solutions to these ongoing troubles. The

N1K2-J Shiden Kai ("Improved Lightning") was born. Of the original design, the aircraft retained only the wings and armament. To solve the undercarriage and visibility problems, the undercarriage was redesigned with shorter main-gear struts, and the wings were moved to the lower part of the fuselage. Furthermore, the tail surfaces and fuselage were redesigned.

Lt. Cdr. Yoshio Shiga, the official test pilot of the 343AG, was chosen to test-fly the new variant of the fighter. He later recalled these early crucial flight tests: "The Shiden Kai was a good airplane. It was heavily armed and structurally strong—combat-worthy. The fighter was able to spray lots of cannon shells at the enemy, and it was much better than the Zero in that respect. The Shiden Kai could be compared to a lively downtown girl. Fuel quality was down to 85 octane when the gas was mixed with oil extracted from pine-tree roots, which was a volatile oil. Hence, the performance of the Homare engine was much lower than catalog. However, even under these conditions, pilots such as Oshibuchi and Kanno said that the Shiden Kai was good up to around 30,000 feet. In my opinion, the Shiden Kai could deal with the F6Fs, but had a hard time against P-51s."

The aircraft also had trouble against the B-29s. This was because the Shiden Kai had a poor climb speed, and the engine was not powerful at higher altitudes. Toward the end of the War, engineers were working on a new prototype of the Shiden Kai, designated the N1K5-J, that featured an upgraded Homare 44 radial engine with a mechanically driven 3-speed supercharger. This proposed variant of the venerable fighter would have been used to intercept high-flying Superfortresses. Unfortunately for the Japanese, during a B-29 raid, the prototype N1K5-J was destroyed prior to completion. Thus ended wartime development of the aircraft, and another page in the history of the Japanese aviation industry closed.



GEORGE is the unlikely Allied nickname for the best Japanese naval fighter produced in quantity during World War II. The official Japanese name and designation was Kawanishi N1K2 Shiden (Violet Lightning). This outstanding land-based fighter sprang directly from a floatplane fighter design, the N1K1 REX. Many countries used floatplanes for scouting and reconnaissance duties, and to hunt submarines and surface ships, but only Japan built and fielded fighters on floats. The Japanese Imperial Navy intended to use these specialized aircraft to gain air superiority above a beachhead to support amphibious landing operations where carrier or land-based fighters were unavailable. The Kawanishi N1K1 (Allied codename REX) was the only airplane designed specifically for this purpose to fly during World War II.

This airplane, from the National Air & Space Museum collection is on display in the World War II Aviation (UHC) at the Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center in Chantilly, VA. (Photo courtesy of National Air & Space Museum)



World War II
Aviation

9:04 a.m., 21 Shiden Kais from all three squadrons took off from Omura base with the head of the 701st Squadron, Lt. Takashi Oshibuchi, in the lead.

“Lt. Oshibuchi was a member of the first student class [68th term] when I entered the Naval Academy. Our relationship was not a simple one, like that of a senior and junior, or a squadron leader and a division leader, but it was a close relationship, between a 1st class and a 4th class student. We trusted each other. He was a rare person in the Navy Air Corps in the sense that there was no other officer who was so trusted both by his seniors and by his men. It was largely due to his splendid leadership. All of the pilots in his squadron were determined to ‘die together with our leader.’

“Lt. Oshibuchi was a warrior of gentle character. Once in a fight, however, he threw away the gentleness and showed his persistent fighting spirit. Oshibuchi went to the forward position during any combat engagement. His capability to lead a large formation in the air was also superb. He was popular among his men, and they were proud of him. Often, his men boasted about him to other members of the 343rd AG. Because of the atmosphere that he created around us, strangely we had no fear of 500 enemy planes attacking our squadron in combat.

“Under the command of Lt. Oshibuchi, the 21 Shiden Kais waited for the enemy planes over the Bungo Strait. Suddenly, the voice of Cmdr. Genda came on the wireless phone giving us instructions. Soon, numerous spots appeared before my eyes, and they looked like scattered sesame seeds. Luckily, the enemy did not see us and they kept heading south, toward their carriers. After finishing their raids on Kure, formations of about 30 planes each were coming toward us at short intervals. There was a reported figure of 500 aircraft, so there would be flights of 10 and several additional echelons. Suddenly, my eyes were filled with half of them—probably 250 aircraft! It was an overwhelming sight!

“We intended not to attack from the front of enemy aircraft because even with

the strength of 21 Shiden Kais, we would be tortured to death by the enveloping attack from succeeding flights. Our squadron decided to attack the rear of the formation. It would take some time for the preceding formations to turn back to aid the aircraft under attack. In the meantime, we would destroy the target formation and retreat like a bolt of lightning! We wanted to attain the maximum effect with the least cost. However, it was difficult to follow these tactics because of the limited flying time of our Shiden Kais. Hence, Lt. Oshibuchi decided to attack a formation that was flying at a longer interval behind the preceding formations.

“We made a steady and careful approach, trying not to be noticed. Our pilots took a position almost straight ahead of the enemy formation, and Lt. Oshibuchi suddenly nosed down. It was a diving attack from behind and above at an altitude of 6,000 meters. Simultaneously, after seeing Lt. Oshibuchi begin to dive (his signal to attack), the planes of both the 701st and 407th Squadrons charged and we were brought into a swirl of heated fighting. Flying in line with the lead plane, I also fired my first burst of the 20mm cannons at an enemy plane and then climbed to prepare for a second burst. At the same time, the enemy formation became disordered, and the Shiden Kais flying cover began to attack the succeeding enemy formation that approached. The battle became a large melee in an instant!

“During the fight, I was separated from Oshibuchi’s plane. I glanced around for him and was relieved to see Flight CPO Jiro Hatsushima, the third man of our flight, escorting his plane tightly. I thought he would be all right with Hatsushima covering him, because Hatsushima was an excellent pilot. During all of the confusion, with planes crossing back and forth, I caught a glimpse of our leader’s plane—together with Hatsushima—dogfighting at a fairly far distance from me. That would be the last time that I saw his plane. At the same time, I was busy gripping the shooting

“MADMAN” GENDA

Minoru Genda was the innovative mastermind behind Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor. What was “Madman” Genda really like? He earned that nickname because of his outspoken views on the supremacy of aircraft over battleships. Ryoichi Yamada came to know him during the closing months of WW II, when Genda took command of the 343rd AG—Japan’s “squadron of aces.” Yamada recently gave his views on Genda:

“Genda was short and probably the minimum height to become a pilot. He was a smart, hard worker and hated to lose! Genda was one of the elite, and serious about any task he took on. He graduated from naval college with top grades and pioneered the use of naval aircraft. In 1941, when Adm. Yamamoto first envisioned the Pearl Harbor attack, he called Rear Adm. Takijiro Onishi. Onishi immediately requested Genda’s help, and he single-handedly planned the attack. He was really an exceptional figure.”

Yamada also spent quite some time commenting on Genda’s personal ideas: “Only select, elite members of the naval college would be allowed to stay in foreign countries. Genda was in London during the Battle of Britain, and that was very beneficial to him for planning tactics. He also traveled through the United States and reviewed their armed forces. At that time, the Germans were really driving through Europe, and everybody thought that they would win, but not Genda. He told other Japanese Navy officers that Germany would lose. While Genda was still in the naval college, he reported that battleships were useless in modern warfare and that Japan should build more carriers. This all happened at a time when both the Japanese and Americans had a firm belief in the mighty battleship!”

What was it like to be under the



command of Genda? “I knew Genda as the commanding officer of the 343rd AG. He did not give out strange orders that got in the way of pilots. Genda would never give irrational orders. He was liked by both pilots and aircrew—down to the last man. Because of his experience in seeing the Battle of Britain, he really stressed the importance of good communications and early warning systems. He even built small plotting boards to track the aerial movements of the enemy. When Genda became the Commander of the 343rd AG, he initiated the most advanced communications and early warning systems in all of Japan.”

Genda was a true pioneer in the early days of carrier aviation, and he has earned a place in the annals of history for being the man behind the attack that brought the United States into WW II.

GENDA WOULD NEVER GIVE IRRATIONAL ORDERS. HE WAS LIKED BY BOTH PILOTS AND AIRCREW—DOWN TO THE LAST MAN. HE REALLY STRESSED THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD COMMUNICATIONS



Leading airman Yoichi Saiki (407 Squadron) was killed after shooting down a VBF-17 Hellcat on March 19, 1945. The white 03 in the red hinomaru was a temporary whitewash used for training and maintenance purposes. The wooden brace on the vertical fin was used to secure the rudder to prevent wind damage.

knob of my aircraft and thinking, 'Be careful; not too far,' while battling the enemy aircraft.

"Awhile later, I stopped fighting because of a lack of fuel and ammunition and I returned to Omura air base. I waited a long time, but Lt. Oshibuchi and CPO Hatsushima did not return. We destroyed 16 enemy planes, which didn't include another two or three planes that were added during later research. Unfortunately, six pilots were lost, including Lt. Oshibuchi and CPO Hatsushima. On the same day, the 343rd AG was given an Emperor's commendation for service. However, I cannot forget the vacancy that was left in our minds because of the deaths of our comrades, and celebrating with sake was not in order that day."

Officially, the Americans lost 20 aircraft during their raid on Kure, but the actual losses were 26. The 343rd AG lost six of its own men, but it put in claims for 16 U.S. planes destroyed. According to official 343rd AG records, Oshibuchi made three firing passes on the enemy aircraft and was hit in the engine. He then dived, became separated from his group during the heavy fighting and was lost.

Hatsushima was simply listed as MIA. Besides the terrible loss of Oshibuchi and other pilots, the unit also lost ace Kaneyoshi Muto. Muto—nicknamed "Kin-Chan," which means "little gold"—participated in heavy fighting over the Solomons, Philippines, New Guinea and China and later home defense over Japan. Muto's death was a great loss to the unit.

American participants from VF-49 also have vivid memories of their mission on July 24, 1945. Lt. j.g. Jack Gibson recalls, "We heard a call from some fighters ahead that they had been jumped by enemy planes. We immediately joined up to go to their aid. As we approached the planes ahead, I noticed two planes coming toward us, and I went with my wingman, Lt. j.g. George M. Williams, to investigate. Their planes had wing tanks, and as we approached, they dropped them and started to dive for the water. By now we could see that they were 'Georges,' and we started to close on them. Our section split and I followed one, while Lt. Williams closed in on the other. With the addition of water injection, the F6F-5 had no trouble at all in closing on the George. The Japanese pilot tried to turn inside me, but every time he started a turn, I would fire a short burst in front of him, and that would always bring him back to straight and level. When I got in effective range, my first burst knocked his wheels down. I overran him and had to pull up in a wingover to drop back on his tail. He then tried skidding turns without success. By this time, I began to get my bursts into the cockpit and his plane started to smoke. He finally fell over on one wing and went straight into the water, without burning."

Lt. Williams had this to say about the skirmish: "Lt. Gibson tally-ho'd two enemy fighters under us on the water. We made a 180-degree turn and gave chase, each taking one. I closed rapidly on my plane, which I am reasonably sure was a George. Just as I came into range of his tail, he executed a very tight turn, which I attempted to follow but in which I was not successful. Before I blacked out, I shot about a three-second burst, and I think that it killed or wounded the pilot. When



Ryoichi Yamada in 1999
(photo by Ron Werneth).

I came to, I found that he was falling in a tight spiral trailing a great cloud of smoke. Just before he struck the water, another group of U.S. fighters followed him down and fired into his plane.”

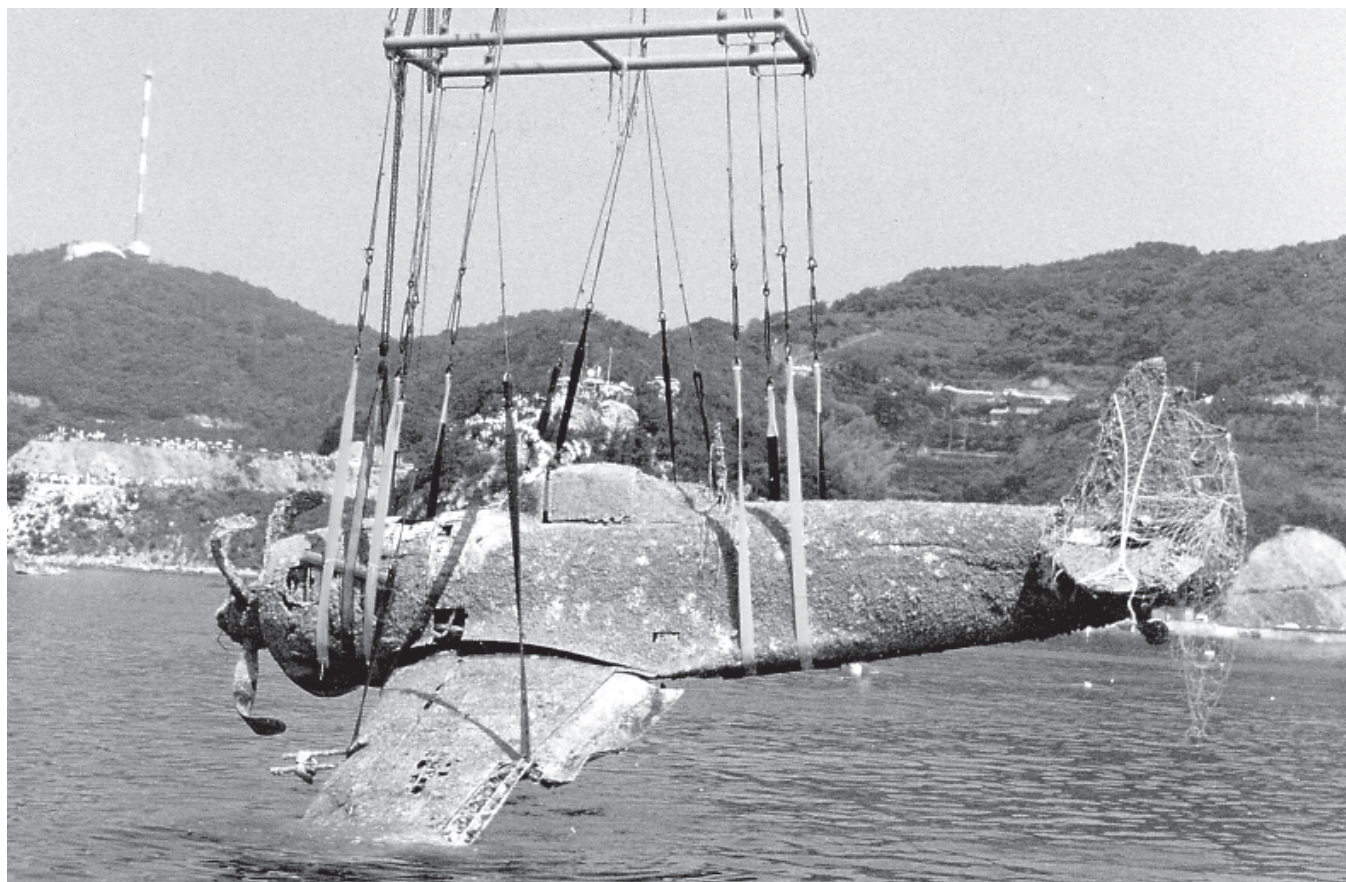
After their fateful mission of July 24, 1945, the 343rd AG did not participate in any further largescale aerial battles, mostly owing to a lack of experienced pilots. With heavy losses to the 343rd AG, including the veteran pilots Oshibuchi, Kanno, Muto and Sugita, fighting the vast Allied air armadas became increasingly difficult. Nevertheless, the unit earned its place in the history books. According to Genda, the unit accounted for about 170 enemy aircraft shot down and lost 74 pilots. This was all done in six months, with limited supplies and while flying against a numerically superior adversary.

Yamada continued to serve his country after the War by flying T-33s, F-86s, F-104s and F-4s with the Japanese Self Defense Air Force. He also trained in the United

States and flew several types of high-performance American jets, including F-15s and T-38s. In 1981, Yamada retired from a successful military career with the rank of general.

As Yamada finished his story, one could sense relief—as though it had been hidden in his heart since the War and only now could his feelings be released. Unfortunately, many of Japan’s veterans feel either that they cannot tell their stories or that no one would be interested in them. It is my sincere hope that, as more accounts are published, people will get a greater understanding of the Japanese Navy aviators who fought and died in the Pacific skies. †

EDITOR'S NOTE: Ron Werneth's books: *Fall of the Japanese Empire: Memories of the Air War* and *Beyond Pearl Harbor: The Untold Stories of Japan's Naval Airmen*, offer first-hand accounts of pilots who served on both sides of the conflict.



This “George” was one of the aircraft that was shot down on the mission of July 24, 1945. Research showed that it belonged to the 301st Squadron of the 343rd Kokutai Air Group. It was recovered from Hido Bay on July 14, 1979. The George was never completely restored. Instead, it was just repainted, and the original bullet holes were retained. Today, this rare wartime veteran is on display in Nan-Yo recreation park in Uwajima, Japan.

PHOTO COURTESY OF HENRY SAKAIDA