

The Folly of Numbers

By South Pacific Correspondent Michael John Claringbould

The word 'ace' is enshrined in both the lexicon and mythology of aerial warfare. Comparisons are readily made of 'aces' of both friend and foe, building reputations and setting myths in concrete. Accurate aces' scores will always remain among the more controversial subjects in the field of aviation history.

The concept of 'ace' was initially imposed by U.S. and Commonwealth culture when a score of five or more enemy aircraft entitled the pilot to the desirable title of 'ace', thus admitting him to awards and public endorsement. The concept originated in France, during W.W.I. Neither the Japanese Army nor Navy Air Forces in W.W.II recognised or promoted an 'ace' system. Achievement in battle was emphasised as a collective achievement.

However, a question mark should appear over the term itself. Air combat is chaotic by nature, and it is often impossible to make a balanced judgment of individual encounters even when well documented. Discussion of the subject to date continues to be opinion rich and fact poor.

BELOW: The Japanese would have been amazed to discover that 70% of all U.S. Fifth Air Force losses in New Guinea were operational, and nothing to do with combat. This F-5 of the 8th Photo Reconnaissance Squadron was written off at Tadjji after losing control on landing.

LEFT: The scoreboard of a P-40N at Hollandia in late 1944. At this stage of the war the skies were almost denuded of Japanese aircraft. The skill level of enemy pilots had been seriously degraded since the Japanese opened the Pacific theatre in 1942.



It is more difficult to quantify Japanese operational versus combat losses in the Pacific, however it is safe to state that far more Imperial Army Air Force aircraft were destroyed on the ground than in the air, such as this Ki-61 set afire from strafing in late 1944.

It is rare that we are sufficiently privileged to be able to accurately compare combat claims against actual results. Often as the data is either simply not there, or its paucity means it is too complex from which to draw definitive conclusions. However, a particular theatre and timeframe enables a study of combat claims with accuracy. The theatre is New Guinea, and the timeframe is from mid March to November 1942. The comparisons are accurate, as aside from seaplane detachments, there was only one Japanese fighter unit then operating in New Guinea skies - the *Tainan* Naval Air Group (NAG). Furthermore, we are privy to precise Allied losses and claims in this timeframe, including the Kittyhawks of 75 Squadron RAAF. The records of the *Tainan* NAG are detailed, in many cases more so than their Allied counterparts.

Allied combats on all days in this timeframe can be accurately aligned, however the results surprise. Saburo Sakai is the best known Japanese pilot from this era, largely through post-war publication of his memoirs in English. Whilst Sakai is credited with 64 aerial victories, this number is a fiction, attributed to his biographer Martin Caidin. This figure was never endorsed by Sakai himself, who is on record as being surprised by the total and querying its basis.

Here are the facts; Sakai scored only 4.3 victories with the *Tainan* in New Guinea (the decimal is due to several kills being divided equally among participants). He later downed an SBD Dauntless and an F4F Wildcat over Guadalcanal on 7 August 1942, pushing his total to 6.3, and he has one previous confirmed kill over China raising the total to 7.3 (his earlier three claims over China cannot be substantiated). He also claimed a B-17 on 10 December 1941 over Clark Field, but U.S. records don't support this, or his other claims over Borneo and Java. When he returned to duty after recuperating from medical issues in June 1944, he made further claims, again none of which can be substantiated. Thus if Sakai is given full benefit of the doubt, it can be concluded he scored somewhere between 7.3 and 11 victories, a long way from 64.

Another famous Japanese 'ace' is Nishizawa Hiroyoshi. He is credited with varying numbers of aerial kills, up to 120, from different 'authorities'. Nishizawa's most



conservative score of 36 is recognised by the Japanese ZeroSen Association, a score officially granted him by the Imperial Japanese Navy in W.W.II. During his time with the *Tainan* NAG in New Guinea he recorded 25 individual and 12 shared kills, of which only 3.9 can be substantiated. When he returned to combat with No. 251 NAG in May 1943, he claimed a further five kills, and from June 1943 this unit ceased to record individual victories. He transferred to No. 253 NAG in September 1943, however neither did this unit record or acknowledge individual victories. Nishizawa reported a total of 86 definite victories to his Commanding Officer Okamoto Harutoshi when he departed Rabaul in October 1943. Newspaper articles in

ABOVE: The 105th Naval Air Detachment was created to stay behind to fight on from Rabaul after the Navy Air Force evacuated the area. This rare photo is the only one of the unit in existence. L to R, front row: Yoshio Sakamoto (958th NAG), Yoshinobu Ikeda, Sekizen Shibayama, Jiro Nagai, and Katsushi Hara (958th). Standing left to right: Nobuo Miwata, Takashi Kaneko, Masajiro Kawato, Kingo Seo, Minamigawa, Shigeo Terao (958th), Isao Kochi, Fumio Wako, and Toshikazu Umezu (958th). Masajiro Kawato wrote his memoirs which border on fiction. He made a living by selling his books at airshows which claimed *inter alia* that he shot down Pappy Boyington. The truth is anything but, and former Zero pilots who were at Rabaul shunned Kawato at reunions for his colourful claims. [Zero pilot Yoshinobu Ikeda]



LEFT: A definite claim which occurred over Guadalacanal on 7 August 1942 was re-lived when the two former adversaries met in 1982 in America. Left to right: E.E. Rodenburg and unknown (both members of SBD squadron VB-6), Tainan NAG pilot Saburo Sakai and SBD rear gunner Harold Jones. Sakai is showing his damaged flight helmet to Jones, who wounded him that day. [Henry Sakaida]

“ In other words, for every fourteen ‘definite’ claims, only aircraft one was actually shot down. ”

Japan at the time of his 1944 death credit him with more than 150 victories.

In Japanese wartime culture, particularly when someone was killed in combat, the military went overboard to praise the deceased. Even where a pilot died of sickness, publicly the military would state that “he died heroically in combat.” If ambushed and shot down, a letter to his family would state that he “died heroically in aerial combat after shooting down one plane” When the Imperial Japanese Navy bulletin promulgated in 1944 that Nishizawa shot down 36 planes, such claims were never contested; neither of course were Allied records available from which to substantiate such claims. Nonetheless, such figures have been accepted as being the truth. And yet, when we compare Nishizawa’s claims against actual results, using the same calculus as applied to Sakai, we come up with a score of around twelve.

A more extreme Japanese case study is that of Army pilot Anabuki Satoru with an acknowledged score of 51. This number derives from a self-assessed score allegedly made on the basis of his diary. During the Burma campaign, his self-proclaimed score stood at 48, contrasting his official score of 30 kills. His greatest single action allegedly occurred on 8 October 1943 over Burma. On this day he maintained he shot down two Liberator bombers and two P-38s, followed by a ramming attack on a third Liberator. This action has been immortalised in Japan via art and articles, however the day’s score is not simply a case of optimism, but a complete fabrication. No matching mission appears in U.S. records for the day.

However it is grossly unfair to focus only

on the Japanese, as over-claiming was common to all sides. In 1942 the *Tainan* NAG lost a total of twenty-five Zero fighters in New Guinea to aerial combat, with most losses operational. That is the definitive figure; 25, no more, no less. The 8th Fighter Group operating Airacobras from Port Moresby claimed 45 ‘definite’ Zeros in this timeframe and about twenty ‘probables’, with 35th Fighter Group Airacobras claiming similar numbers. Aerial gunners in B-26 Marauders and B-17s claimed a further 226 Zeros. If you add the claims made by 75 Squadron RAAF Kittyhawks (who in reality shot down a total of three Zeros) and RAAF Hudsons, the total number of Zeros claimed by the Allies in New Guinea in 1942 is approximately 356. In other words, for every fourteen ‘definite’ claims, only one aircraft was actually shot down.

The first pure fighter-versus-fighter combat in the Pacific between the U.S. and Japanese Army Air Forces occurred when twelve Lightnings of the 39th Fighter Squadron took on eight Oscars of the 11th Japanese Army Air Force Regiment. This resulted in U.S. claims of ten kills (plus probables) and Japanese claims of two kills and two probables. What actually occurred? Only one Japanese fighter was shot down outright, with another damaged, force landing on its way home. Only two P-38s were damaged, including one from a mid-air collision with a Japanese fighter (the damaged one which force-landed).

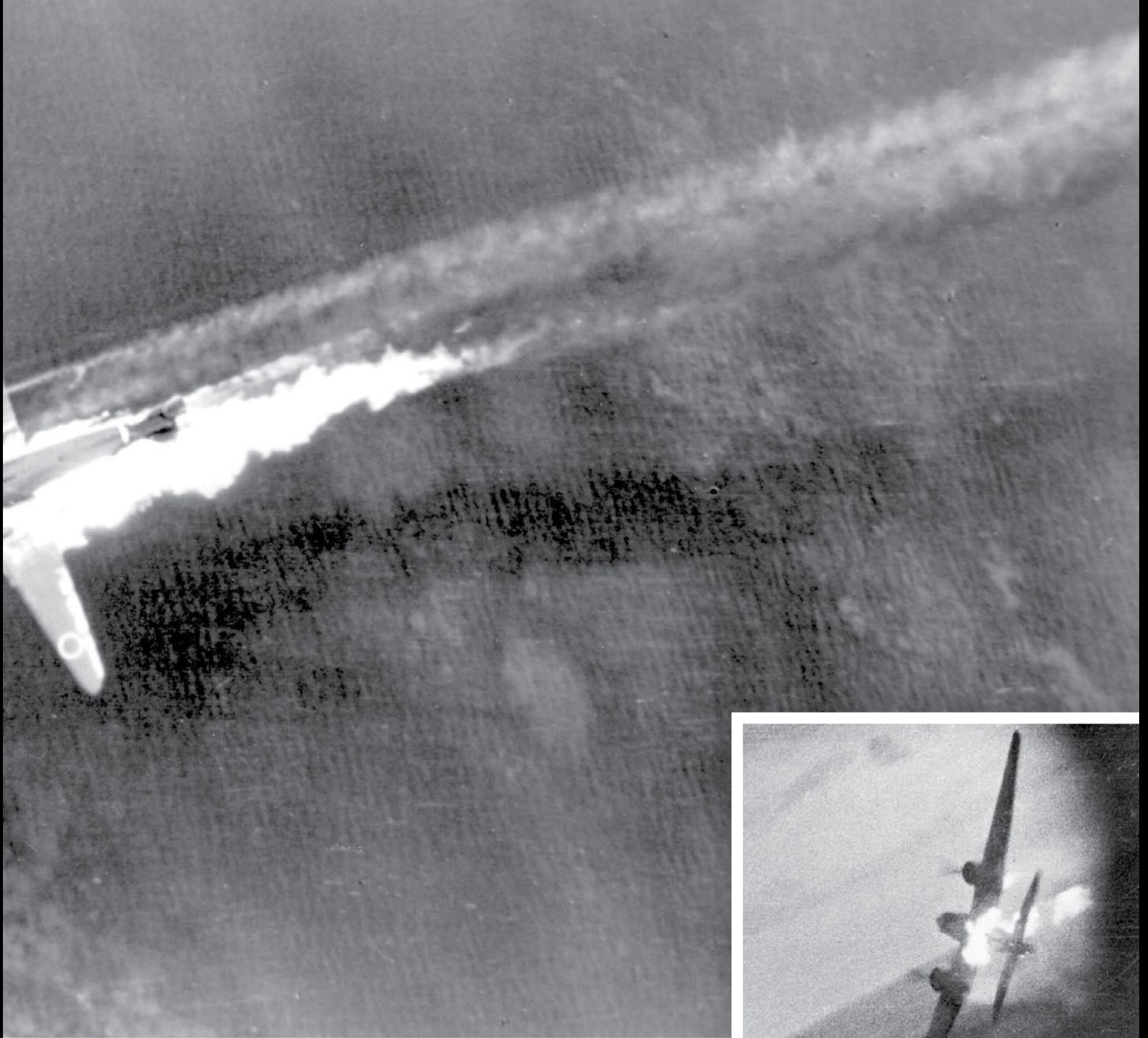
Why is the gap between claims and reality so wide? There appears to be little, if any, dishonesty in the claims; it is apparent that most pilots made claims in good faith. There are key reasons for the disparity however.

A ‘Tess’ - the Japanese version of the C-47 - is shot down over the Philippine Sea. Destruction of enemy aircraft was not always this obvious.



The first is that because aerial combat was so fleeting it was common for several pilots to attack the same enemy aircraft. Thus when an enemy was already damaged, and was attacked by more fighters, often separate claims would be submitted for what in fact was a cumulative kill. Second, in New Guinea’s humid tropical air, it was common for wingtips to produce vapour contrails. Thus in high ‘g’ turns it would appear that an enemy had been hit when it was simply a vapour trail. Third, the Japanese Zero had a tendency to emit a thick puff of black smoke from its exhaust when the throttle was suddenly advanced - resulting in more claims from an adversary who thought he had damaged the engine.

The last reason, perhaps the most poignant and least understood, is also the most fascinating. Combat psychologists have established that human beings under extreme pressure will often see what they want to see. Given that their very survival is at



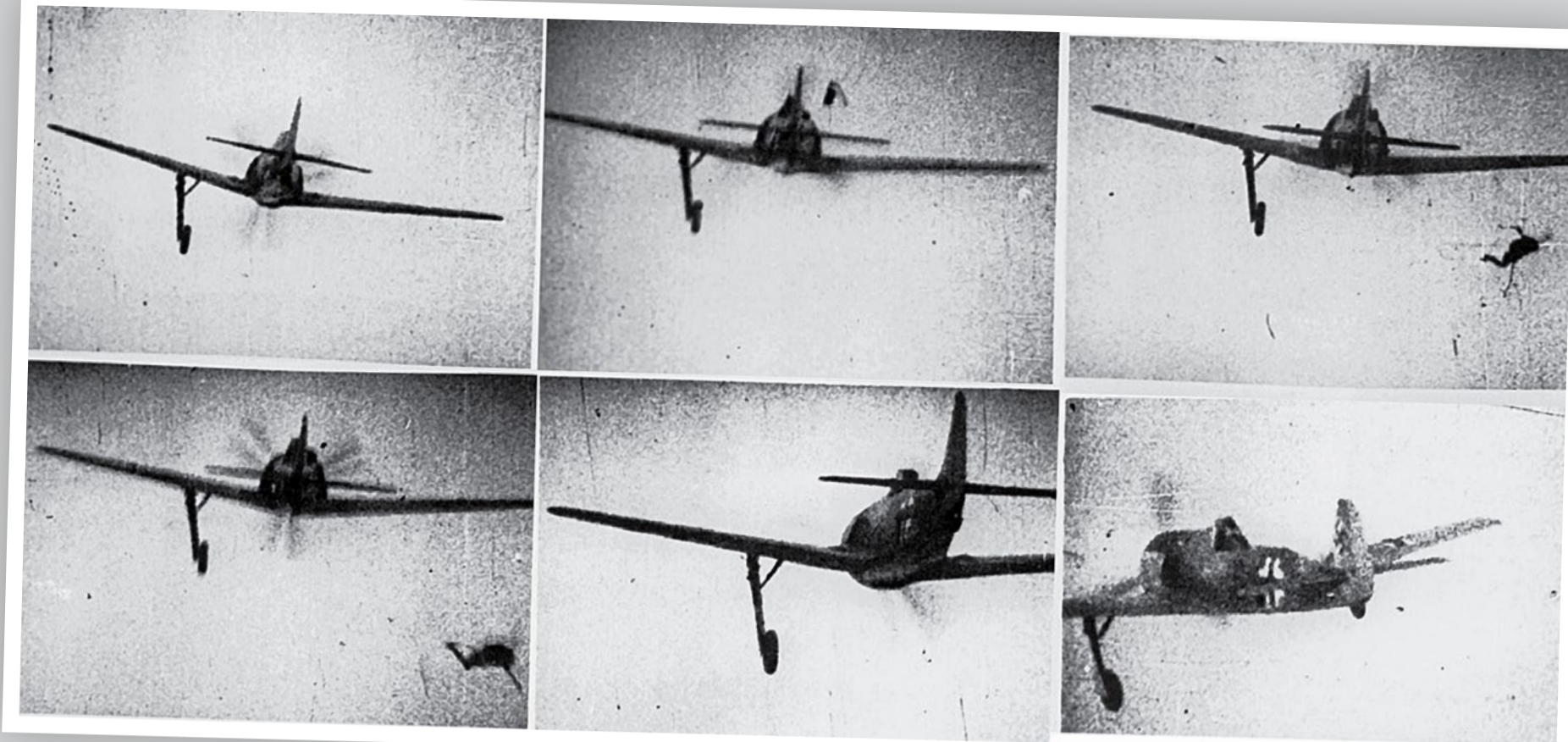
stake, this is hardly surprising, although how and why the brain works like this is still not clear. A quintessential example is revealed in a detailed combat report submitted by a key 75 Squadron RAAF pilot from an engagement to the west of Port Moresby on 17 April 1942. The destruction of his adversary is described in detail, including seeing cowling parts fall from the aircraft, albeit with the final admission that the claimant did not see the fighter crash but concluded that he did. In fact, the Zero only sustained damage that day; Goto Tatsusuke sustained a solitary hit which also holed his leg. He wrestled the fighter back to Lae where he crash-landed tail number V-152 and wrote it off, however after brief recuperation Goto would live to fly another day. The RAAF report is truthful in the sense the pilot submitted what he believed he saw, however the damage to Goto's fighter was superficial at best. It is a case study of human behaviour under extreme pressure.

RIGHT: A still from camera gun footage. It shows the Ju 88 shot down over northern France by the Hawker Typhoon Mark IB flown by Flying Officer J M G "Plum" Plamondon RCAF of No. 198 Squadron RAF. Cannon shells strike the fuselage of the Ju 88 which burst into flames and crashed from 50 feet shortly after.



BELOW RIGHT: The scoreboard of Louis Curdes of the 3rd Air Commando Group at Lingayen in April 1945. The scoreboard includes Japanese, Italian, German, and U.S. victories. The Italian victory was an Mc.202 claimed over Sardinia, the Japanese one a 'Dinah' he claimed on 7 February 1945 offshore Formosa. This feat made him only one of three U.S. 'aces' to have shot down enemy aircraft from all three Axis Powers. The American victory represented a C-47 he forced to ditch when it failed to identify itself. No-one was injured.





ABOVE: A FW190 is shot down by a Spitfire 1942, gun camera footage was often not as conclusive as this 'victory'.

On the other side of the ledger are many cases where no claims were submitted and yet the contrary occurred. A quintessential example occurred earlier that same day, 17 April 1942, when Commanding Officer of 76 Squadron RAAF, Squadron Leader Barney Cresswell embarked on a familiarisation sortie with another Kittyhawk pilot, F/O Woods, towards Lae. This flight constituted Cresswell's first combat mission. They had encountered thirteen Zeros headed the opposite direction. It is clear from the combat reports that both sides were equally surprised. The badly outnumbered RAAF pilots took their only sensible option; a bolt for safety back to Port Moresby. It is now clear that

Cresswell put up a fight before losing his life, as three Zeros expended ammunition from the encounter. A while after the Zeros headed to Port Moresby after the encounter, Sakai Yoshimi fell away from formation and crashed into the jungle. Either he - or his fighter - sustained damage from Cresswell's guns, and yet Cresswell received no credit for the 'kill'. This era of history is full of such analogies. The most iconic attack on the U.S. in W.W.II - Pearl Harbor - has still to produce an accurate comparison of the day's combat of U.S. versus Japanese aircraft.

Claims vary considerably, depending on whose side you were on, and in which theatre you fought; RAF intelligence deduced from

captured 1942-43 records of the Luftwaffe 12th Flying Corps that German claims were not only accurate, they actually slightly under-claimed. Moreover, official German radio broadcasts after the fact generally reflected actual losses, with some exceptions; these were termed "propaganda nights" by the RAF.

To what degree can 'aces' be confirmed from other wartime eras and different theatres? The early war over Europe is particularly problematic, as Luftwaffe records, although available, are mostly scattered and uncoordinated. A U.S. historian is working on the matter at present, however results are still years away. Gun cameras were introduced later in the war, however even they are inconclusive; for example film taken from the P-38 was notoriously unreliable until the camera was moved from the nose to the left bomb shackle.

There are countless examples of badly hit aircraft deliberately diving away and returning successfully to base. The bottom line is that the number of accounts where both sides' claims have been accurately dissected is miniscule. When they are, and the eventual dissection of such history is inevitable, I wager that most 'aces' will be demoted.

Of course, the numbers game can be viewed as frivolous; numbers are not necessarily a reflection of the eminence or significance of encounters. There is a cogent argument that the concept of 'ace' should be viewed as trivial compared to the more substantive factors at play in the great aerial theatres of W.W.II not to mention the Great War. Nonetheless, it would be nice to know, one day, what numbers really

happened over the world's skies in days past, as opposed to multifarious fiction which has become enshrined in so-called 'fact'.

Sources: 'Eagles of the Southern Sky', and official U.S. and Japanese kodo-chosho records.



ABOVE LEFT: Sometimes claims work in reverse; on 17 April 1942, Commanding Officer of 76 Squadron RAAF Barney Cresswell, lost his life over New Guinea when he tangled with the Tainan NAG. In a combat not witnessed from the Allied side, he hit a Zero fighter flown by Sakai Yoshimi who later fell away from formation and crashed. Cresswell received no credit for the 'kill'.



ABOVE RIGHT: Several Japanese flying boats were claimed in the Solomon Islands theatre by B-17 gunners firing at close range. Most of these claims indeed occurred and are substantiated by Japanese records. Japanese army officers were sometimes aboard as observers, as seen in this photo taken in the observers' area behind the spacious cockpit.