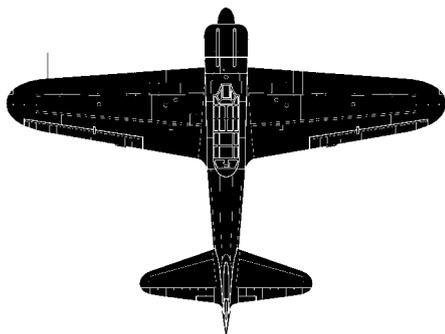


Airpower Classics

Artwork by Zaur Eylanbekov

A6M Zero



The Zero was, when it appeared, the world's best carrier-based fighter. At the outset of the Pacific War, the Japanese Imperial Navy Air Service fielded 521. Its performance in the Dec. 7, 1941 Pearl Harbor attack and the months immediately afterward, when it showed phenomenal speed and agility, gave it legendary status. Months later, when a captured Zero was examined, it was evident that the Zero was no miracle weapon but was, rather, the embodiment of intelligent design compromises focused on specific requirements.

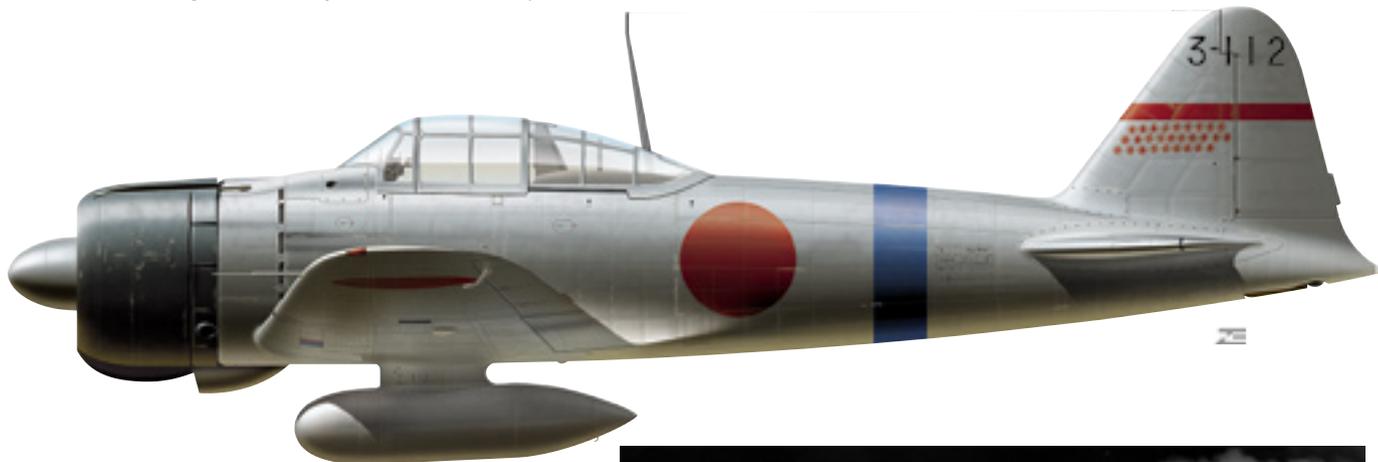
Its genesis was in 1937. In that year, Tokyo specified that Japan's next carrier fighter should have high speed, swift climb, major armament, long range, and excellent maneuverability. Zero designer Jiro Horikoshi fulfilled all of those requirements in a fighter that combined elegant aerodynamic shape and light weight structure, but he did so by employing every conceivable weight-saving measure. The

airplane had no heavy armor or self-sealing tanks. It was a fighter built for expert pilots, flying offensive missions, but the lack of toughness proved to be a major combat vulnerability.

Japan produced more Zeros than any other type of aircraft. It came in nine major variants, used by both carrier-based and land-based forces. It was modified extensively during the war to compete with potent new American aircraft and their well-trained pilots. However, the Zero was essentially obsolete by 1943, and Allied pilots flying Navy F6F Hellcats and USAAF P-38 Lightnings began to score heavily. Still, Zeros fought on to the end, increasingly flown by *kamikaze* pilots. In fact, *kamikazes* sank the escort carrier *St. Lo* and damaged three more. For those forced to face these fighters in combat, the Zero was and always will be the very symbol of the Rising Sun's airpower.

—Walter J. Boyne

This aircraft: Japanese Imperial Navy Air Service A6M2 Model 11 #3112 as it looked in 1941 when piloted by Lt. Minoru Suzuki. Tail fin bears markings for 28 kills by Suzuki and an earlier pilot.



In Brief

Designed by Mitsubishi ★ built by Mitsubishi, Nakajima ★ first flight April 1, 1939 ★ crew of one ★ number built 10,449 (3,879 by Mitsubishi; 6,570 by Nakajima) ★ **Specific to A6M5:** one 14 cylinder Nakajima Sakae radial engine ★ typical armament, 7.7 mm and 13.2 mm machine guns in cowlings, two wing-mounted 20 mm cannons ★ max speed 351 mph ★ cruise speed 207 mph ★ max range 1,194 mi ★ weight (loaded) 6,025 lb ★ span 36 ft 1 in ★ length 29 ft 11 in ★ height 11 ft 6 in.

Famous Fliers

Many "Zero Aces," including: Lt. (j.g.) Tetsuzo Iwamoto (202 victories claimed); CPO Shoichi Sugita (120 claimed); WO Hiroyoshi Nishizawa (87 claimed); Ens. Saburo Sakai (64 claimed); WO Takeo Okumura (54 claimed). **Other notable:** Test pilot Katsuzo Shima.

Interesting Facts

Named "Type 0" for last digit of Imperial Year 2600, when it entered service ★ built of T-7178 aluminum, top-secret type made for the Zero ★ *kamikaze* versions carried a 250 kg bomb ★ 79 took part in Pearl Harbor attack ★ called "Zeke" by Allied intel ★ several on display in Japan, China, Britain, US ★ first action (1940) came against China, not against US.



Early in the war, the Zero ruled the sky.