



**THE TERRITORY  
REMEMBERS  
75 YEARS**

Commemorating the Bombing of Darwin  
and defence of Northern Australia

Kaname Harada - Zero fighter pilot of the first air raid on Australia  
(Harada Collection)

# The Territory Remembers

## Interview with Kaname Harada, Zero pilot

By Dr Tom Lewis

**The Territory Remembers interviewed the last Zero pilot known to be alive for the project. Kaname Harada flew a Zero in the aircraft carrier raid on Darwin on 19 February 1942. He spoke from his home in Nagano, north of Tokyo.**

Harada first explained that in WWII he understood the geography of northern Australia only a little. He knew there was an island called Celebes in a Dutch colony. There, he said, we established a base, and from there we attacked Port Darwin in Australia, and Port Moresby. But the first attack, in which he participated, came from aircraft carriers, and that was from where he launched his Zero on 19 February 1942.

The interview took place in Nagano, north of Tokyo, in June 2015, on camera, with questions written by Dr Tom Lewis, TTR Historian, and presented in Japanese by Hiromi Loveday. Harada has no English, and so the questions and answers were then translated back into this account.

### How did you join the Navy?

I entered Nagano Junior High School in 1929. I found I was lacking the ability to compete with all the other classmates soon after entering the school. When I was thinking of choosing the right path for myself and what I could do for Japan in the future, I heard that with the Navy you could sail around the world by ship. It sounded really attractive to me and I wanted to join the Navy. So I applied for it and became a member at Yokosuka in 1933.

### What was it like with the social and political concerns at

### the time you joined the Navy?

When I joined the Navy, the population was very sparse in the northern part of China, and there were few means of transportation. Also agricultural technology was a bit backward, whereas the population was growing rapidly in Japan resulting in people migrating to places like Brazil. Japan helped to build a railroad to improve traffic, and young people working together with local people in the northern part of China so that they were able to produce more crops with our agricultural techniques.

It was all ok until then, but I think it went a bit overboard, as the military became involved in this.<sup>1</sup> It was misleading behaviour and other countries took this as an invasion. It led to the ABCD (America, Britain, China and the Dutch) line – the term ABDC line was a Japanese name for a series of embargoes against Japan by foreign nations. I think not only ABCD nations, but also all the other nations started to think that Japan became a loose cannon and they wanted to stop it before it was too late.

I was only 17 years old at that time, and I was not fully aware of what Japan had done to other people, but all the other nations didn't seem happy with what Japan had was doing. Then the country came to the point where they couldn't go back to where things were. So I was only a child but I wanted to be useful and sacrifice my youth and my life for Japan under the circumstances. When I look back, I was so innocent.

### Did you think the naval airplane you flew, the Zero, was

## **better than the Army's fighter?**

It seems that the Navy airplanes were developed under UK leadership whereas the Army's were developed by France. There was not much difference between the two, but the throttle levers were completely opposite to rev up the engine.<sup>2</sup>

Both the Navy and Army were confident, sometimes over-confident of their techniques, so it is competitive in a good sense, but we look down to each other in a bad sense. What I think was disadvantageous for the Navy was that their military policemen consisted of selected Army, and when both Army and Navy got in trouble, the Navy were always considered the bad men.

## **What advice did your flight instructor give?**

Mr Ejima who was my instructor was the person who worked his way up to the top from the ranks. He was my first venerable teacher, and was one of the top instructors. In the exercise, he yelled out to me "no, no, idiot, what are you doing!" from the back of the plane during taking off and landing. I felt terrible. Even after all the efforts I had made to convince my parents to become a pilot, my path that I chose, and how hard I worked to enter the school, I thought maybe I am not meant to be a pilot after all if I get scolded by him like that all the time.

That night I went to see Mr. Ejima and said "Thank you for teaching me many things but I know what my limit is, and I don't think I am a gifted pilot. Please send me back to the team where I was. I am fine and I am ready to give up on this." And he said, "You misunderstand it. I scold students who have potential. The more I yell out, the more the person has potential. I try to maximise their abilities, not that I hate the person. I think you have a talent for this and I will keep yelling out to you. Please take this as my encouragement."

I thought this could be the way to grow up. He is the person who I look up to giving me attention. I decided to keep going. Next day, he was as strict as yesterday. I was puzzled. He just convinced me to stay. I got confused if what he said yesterday was true... I was like, "Oh well... whatever" then I took my hands off the plane controls... he then surprisingly said, "Oh you are doing good, that's it! Keep going!" Before that, I was so nervous because he was telling me off. But all of a sudden, everything was changed from the moment I stopped pushing my plane around too much. Wow, this is it. I can fly!

Right from there, I realised that I was wrong... subconsciously I was arrogant towards my plane. I was always trying to manoeuvre my plane. Each plane has its own character depending on who made it. Also each pilot has a different personality influencing the same aircraft. I was too immature to know this.

I never forgot when I did fly by myself the first time, for so long this was what I had dreamed of.

It was my happiest moment flying alone. I said to Mr. Ejima "I am back" when I got back, and he said "Yep, well done". Even one of our top teachers said, "You are the best student amongst all of them." Thanks to them, I received a silver watch from his Majesty the Emperor.

The human being should not be arrogant.

## **What was the impression at the time of the outbreak of the Pacific War? How did you feel about it?**

At that time, I was being a pilot for a Zero fighter aircraft when I received a letter of appointment to transfer to the Soryu, the aircraft carrier, in September 1941 without any prior notice.

The year of 1940, Soryu's planes were just flying over Chongqing in China, as they were not formal battle formations yet. Then under the name of the test model, 13 Zeros shot down the total of 28 fighters of the allied nations such as United States, United Kingdom, China, the Netherlands and the Soviet Union within the blink of an eye.

Jiro Horikoshi graduated from the Aviation laboratory within the engineering Department of the University of Tokyo. He was asked by the Imperial Navy to design and develop prototype a new fighter because our airplanes were always getting damaged every time we attacked Chongqing where people migrated from Nanjin. He and his team made a desperate effort towards making the best plane in the world. The prototype was completed in 1940, and accepted. The new fighter was named as OO or Zero.<sup>3</sup> This encouraged the Japan to fight against America and the rest of the world. Of course was not Admiral yet, he was Vice-Admiral at that time.

Vice-Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto believed that "Taikan-kyoho shugi" would no longer be a critical factor for a success in a battle. (Taikan-Kyoho Shugi means that the strongest warships will have an advantage.) He said that the use of the good airplane was the factor in victory or defeat. This excited us and we anticipated that we would be the ones to be Zero pilots in future.

We believed the Zero was the best fighter of all, and were confident believing that as long as we had the Zero, we would never lose.

## **Why did you have to attack Port Darwin?**

We attacked Port Moresby and Port Darwin to be destroyed as these were their important base and naval ports.

It went well with Port Moresby but Port Darwin was not so easy. When I was flying to support others, a B17 flew at me so I shot it down, as well as shooting at dozens of merchant vessels and warships.

We believed now we were ready to retake back Guadalcanal but...we saw the size of the country of Australia; such a big country situated the southernmost edge of other side of the world made me nervous to think it is not going to be so easy, it will be nowhere near an effortless war.

## **Was a big battle expected at Port Darwin?**

I didn't know much about the Australian war fleet in the first place. We expected a hard battle, but it was not. There was no one waiting in ambush for us, so we were relieved. Eventually I saw a B17 fly over, but that was it.<sup>4</sup>

We expected the fighter aircraft would fight back, but they showed no intention of it.<sup>5</sup> But I don't know what two of the B17s came out for, because they didn't shoot us down. The ships and boats at the Port were covered with fire, and a bomb I saw I dropped hit the heart of the vessel, [and I

saw] the first spark and then the next moment the vessel disappeared.

I have never seen a ship blown up, and sunk in the sea like that. I did not have much oppressive feeling about war at that time. I understood that the Japanese were advancing southwards rapidly, and it was a fear for the world.<sup>6</sup>

### **Did the plane fly from the ground or an aircraft carrier at the Port Darwin?**

Carriers. During the Southern strategy, our aircraft carriers went to the Celebes, and the base was built there. We used it for our Southern strategy and Indian Ocean strategy, so that aircraft carriers could undergo maintenance and supply.

The battleship HMS Prince of Wales and the battlecruiser HMS Repulse got sunk by Japanese aircraft off the coast of the Malay Peninsula. Also [General] Percival's troops were coming up [from Singapore] to the north. The Lieutenant-General Yamashita was in China so he and his troops were sent to the Malay Peninsula. The Japanese advanced rapidly at that time.

### **How did you handle the Zero in attack?**

I think it depended upon our commanders. First of all, Zero had a drop tank with 300 litres capacity. This was ditched when we got closer to their territory. It was heavy and slowed the speed. We switched to the body tank for air combat. However, combat needs power and uses fuel four times as much as normal due to the full revolution of the engine.

Even so, we did fly to Guadalcanal from Rabaul and had a battle and then came back. The Zero can fly long distances, whereas the Spitfire is faster than the Zero. The Hurricane came to attack and then they quickly run away. Our strategies were how to chase them to attack them. Both sides had to study for offence and defence. That's war.

Let me give you an example. The Zero aircraft has an ability to shoot 7mm machine gun, but this doesn't work anymore against the US and UK fighters as they investigated and studied our bullets and they created the bullet-proof equipment for this. Also the iron-plate was attached to protect their pilots from our bullets. They studied about the bulletproofing, but 20mm bullets cannot be avoided. But for us, we did not have many bullets, only 60 of the 20mm bullets, so we cannot waste them.<sup>7</sup>

We both studied about each other. We shot a small coloured bullet [tracer] in front of them, so they turned a bit, as they didn't know the size of the bullet. And we shot again, and they flew away. Even if the flight speed is between 50 and 60 km difference, the bullet may get too close by flying straight, something like that.

While we were attacking Port Darwin, and Guadalcanal, we also attacked the Naval port of Trincomalee and the shore of Colombo, Ceylon on the 5th and 6th of April 1942. We thought of flying from the Dutch base but we were told to go directly from an aircraft carrier.

### **Which one is more dangerous – ground attack, or air war?**

With the fighters the air war is more dangerous. On the ground, soldiers try to hide in the buildings such as schools and temples. A strafing run at the soldiers on the ground while they are escaping, and then bomb the building. It is less fearful than fighting in the air with fighters. Of course

there's a risk as they attack us as well. They use high angle gun from the ground, but it is not scary for fighters as we just dodge the bullet, it explodes. For fighter aircraft, ground attack is safe and not scary.

### **What were the air combat actions like between the fighter aircraft?**

We sunk battleships at the Ceylon base, or captured the Malay Peninsula. United Kingdom brought hundreds of the Hawker Hurricane fighters to wipe out the Zero. They waited for the Zero to come into the sky in Colombo, Ceylon.

As for Japan, six aircraft carriers were sent there: Akagi, Kaga, Soryu, Hiryu, Shokaku, and Zuikaku. Each of them carried twelve or thirteen fighters and total of 67-8 aircraft.

It was between the 2nd and the 6th of April 1942, when we were flying into Ceylon from the carrier in the Indian Ocean. They were waiting for us and coming towards us for attack. They made an attack and then left quickly. We chased them and almost destroyed everything of theirs.

They looked like they were saying "Please stop. Don't shoot me" and they looked in pain.

But if I don't, I would be the one who got shot down and killed in a battle. I got carried away by the fact that if I don't find them to shoot down first I would get killed, otherwise I wouldn't have done it. Ultimately one or the other will die, such an extreme fate.

People were talking about the ABCD encirclement but I didn't feel that affected us much yet. To take control of the Southern quarter (South Pacific), in the meantime, both Army and Navy continued to advance rapidly to the South. Predominantly the Taiwanese fleet aimed at the Rabaul fleet, and all the other Japanese fleet and their air stations were trying to reach the southern quarter. Easy battles; triumph continued until the battle of Midway, that was a turning point in the Pacific War.

It is war, to make normal people who have their own families in their country like everyone else does, to kill each other without any personal reason to fight for. It had come to my realization when I was in Ceylon Island as a soldier. When our twin engine heavy aircraft took off from the aircraft carrier, our captain assured us that we had to fight there and return in one hour and then he would take us home. When we realised that one hour had already passed, we were in hurry to fly back to the aircraft carrier. On the way to back, we encountered an unknown bogey which was bigger than Hawker Hurricane (I had checked it later and known it was Fairy Fulmar) so we started firing at the aircraft. The enemy was good at manoeuvring and initially eluded us, but we finally shot him down and it crashed into the rice field yet we saw the pilot was still alive. We were going to kill him but we decided to leave him and return back to our troops quickly as we were afraid of being late for the departure of the aircraft carrier. Yet it was too late and found that our ship had already gone. So we flew back to the enemy's aircraft to crash into it as we thought we would be dying anyway and did not want to die for nothing. Unfortunately, the pilot had already escaped from the aircraft and it would be just a waste of our lives to crash into the empty aircraft so we attempted to find other target to attack.

In the meantime, a young pilot from Akagi, who was also late for the departure, came and smiled at us and reported that he managed to shoot three fighter planes down. He seemed not to be worried about himself as he may have believed that we could handle the situation and find the way to back to the ship. Because we were more experienced than him, with a markings of squad leader recognisable on our aircraft, I was thinking that we should not commit suicide there which would have resulted in leaving this young pilot alone and maybe we might have better chance of survival if we worked together.

We were flying side by side and searching any signs of the aircraft carrier on the ocean yet we did not find anything but a rag of cloud. I felt hopeless and about to give up but, strange to say, a formation of cloud became to look like my mother and she called me to come over. Although we were unsure if we could find the aircraft carrier in our direction, and as the fuel tank of our aircraft was almost empty, we steered our aircraft to the cloud wishing to see my mother and thinking I would not regret it even it was a wrong decision. It was the first moment to realise how much I loved her and cared about her.

All of a sudden, we saw the young pilot's aircraft descending so we followed him, feeling sorry for him as he might have run out of fuel. But he managed to spot the aircraft carrier and landed on it successfully. After we landed on our aircraft carrier, I found that there was no fuel left in the tank, and I thought that my mother had saved us. A similar experience has happened to me twice since. We were told that all Japanese soldiers never mentioned their parents but said "Long live the Emperor" when they were killed in the battle. However I have never heard any soldiers actually saying that when they were dying.

### **What did you think of Australia back then?**

I thought Australia was a most southern, green country which possessed rich natural environment. Also Australia was the most reliable, allied country for USA. So we thought that all Australian prisoners of war were very loyal to USA and attempted to escape from the camp to join the US army.

Nowadays, since a long time has passed after World War II, the complexity associated with international relationships and issues is beyond my understanding. All I can say is that I feel extremely sorry for what happened in the past although I am proud of the fact that I dedicated myself to defend my country during the period.

I have been languishing, having mixed emotions of pride and shame, which includes that I have done a great job and even my nation called me a champion at one stage, yet the reality is I carelessly took away the people's lives.

That is the reflection of my life what I had done for the sake of war. My senior soldier consoled me as I was uncontrollably suffering about the past. He said "Don't be so harsh on you. You didn't do it for your own benefit. It couldn't be helped. What you need to do is to admit the fact that you killed the opponents, but at the same time you keep on serving as much as you can. It will become atonement."

So, the early childhood education that I have been doing<sup>8</sup>

tells people to pass down the history to generation to generation; not to experience the ordeal ever again will lead up to atonement. Also my wife said "Darling, what I want you to do is to continue just focusing on your charity work."

I have no idea how far my intention of the early childhood education will spread out to the public, but at first, I am going to attempt communicating and tell my story to the teenage girls who are over middle school age and will be a mother in the future, and also to the young generation who are going to enjoy their youth.

We all should educate the young people as our obligation from bottom of our heart and appreciate and try to take care of peace.

I reflect upon myself everyday. Just up to recently, I was forcing myself to attend the gatherings for people who lost their loved ones at wars. But once leaving home for the Anniversary Meetings, what happens to me is... the times when I meet people, I get too overwhelmed by their emotions. So, for me to not only get there, but also receiving their agony of what they were going through on those days, I have fainted and was taken by the ambulance to the hospital twice. I still have the strong commitment and would like to visit when am invited, but I might mess up their special memorial days, so I explain the reason of my absence due to my health condition, but I tell them my heartfelt feelings towards the gatherings.

On other days, the groups consisting of the bereaved family members of my fellow soldiers visited me. I knew some of the people, who were my late fellow comrades' loved ones who were left behind. Being in this particular situation, I got a terrible flashback and it really shocked my system. This is my biggest problem. By the same token, I am supposed to feel this way because I am a human being who feels the other's pain and I want to make atonement for it.

I say to them "I really would like to attend the Anniversary Meeting, but as I have just explained what had happened to me. Please send my sincere message to the attendants for me." I know I should go and tell them my thoughts with my voice but if I do, I might ruin the special day and possibly upset or worry them. Therefore, I am ask them to find someone who can represent what's in my mind instead.

My advice to the young people is that they should make the most of their youth. That's theirs and that time never comes back again. Their young days and mine could be a bit different, but I deeply hope the young people spend wonderful and memorable youthful days.

Because as the time goes by, you'll realise that there is no guarantee you live a short time. I have lived 99 years and have learnt what is the most painful thing in life. When I became over 80, I have felt unbearable loneliness. I can't find any more depressing state than that. When youth, you have willpower, vitality and capability to overcome obstacles or hardship. But when you get older, you cannot help but get caught up with loneliness. This is the fate of how you feel when coming into old age. That is what I would like to tell young people from my very own experience that the loneliness in late life is the most harsh

and painful thing.

Now, what we need to do to create the foundation of life is to get married in the early age, have a family and get along nicely with the neighbours. Also bring up children well and pass down the truth of their history to emphasise the peaceful life they live in didn't come naturally. Even it gives you a bit of hardship, you may avoid what I have been going through. There have been countless innocent victims in the world, but each life is a gift.

If your living may get better, you'll look after the home town more. It is said that "The country is destroyed; yet mountains and rivers remain and spring comes to the castle; the grass is green again." My hope is that as each hometown gets better, the county of Japan would become a happier place to live and this influence spreads the rest of the whole world. Once Syogo Yamashita said the future of our country rests on Mother's shoulders. At the end of the day, I believe the deep trust between mother and children, the warmth of mother's lap, the true affection with children, those things may be the root of maintaining the peace.

**Credit:** Translated by Ms Kayoko Watanabe-Skillas and Ms Asako Kobayashi, with assistance from Ms Kathleen Bresnehan, all from the Australian-Japanese Association of the Northern Territory.

#### Notes

1. Ed: Japan invaded northern China – Manchuria – in 1931, and turned it into a puppet state. Gradually further incursions were made into China, and open war broke out in 1937.
2. Ed: Japan, like the USA, had not embraced by the time WWII started the concept of a separate air force. They both had air components of their land and naval forces instead. The Imperial Japanese Navy operated their aircraft in the main from aircraft carriers at the beginning of the war, but as their conquest spread, began to operate in a major way from land as well. The Imperial Japanese operated a slightly different range of aircraft from bases around Asia.
3. Ed: So-called because in the Japanese calendar it was 1940 when the machine was produced, and that year ended in a double-zero, so the aircraft was known as the "Zero-sen" fighter. It was named "Zeke" by the Allies, following the convention of using male Western names for fighters, and girls' names for bombers, but the Allies generally adopted the Zero name too.
4. Ed: it is unclear what Harada means here. There were no B-17s in Darwin then. It may be that he has confused the place and time of the incident.
5. Ed: Harada said later off camera (from which this interview is transcribed) that he was not in the foremost fighters in the 188-strong aircraft armada. Nine of the 10 defending P-40 Kittyhawk USAAF aircraft were shot down very quickly by the first Zeroes.
6. Ed: This may well have been the destroyer USS Peary. Lieutenant Herb Kriloff, who was nearby on the speeding USS William B Preston, describes (see this book's relevant chapter) how Peary was hit and momentarily disappeared. There are several photos in existence which show her severely down by the stern and on fire. The raid started at 0956 at the boom net and 0958 at the town wharves. Peary is thought to have sunk by 1010.
7. Ed: here Harada is talking about the "back armour" that many Allied pilots demanded in the early stages of the war. It was not fitted behind the seats of fighters to save weight, but the best and classic way to attack a fighter was from above and behind and out of the sun, to give the element of surprise. The "20mm bullets" are cannon ammunition, much heavier, thicker, and more deadly than machinegun bullets.
8. Ed: in his later years Harada paid for and saw opened a kindergarten in his local area of Nagano, north of Tokyo.

*Harada first explained that in WWII he understood the geography of northern Australia only a little. He knew there was an island called Celebes in a Dutch colony. There, he said, we established a base, and from there we attacked Port Darwin in Australia, and Port Moresby. But the first attack, in which he participated, came from aircraft carriers, and that was from where he launched his Zero on 19 February 1942.*

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