

2002

Burma Banzai: The Air War in Burma through Japanese Eyes

A. Sutherland Brown
atholl@shaw.ca

William Rodney
Royal Roads Military College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh>



Part of the [Military History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Brown, A. Sutherland and Rodney, William "Burma Banzai: The Air War in Burma through Japanese Eyes." *Canadian Military History* 11, 2 (2002)

This Feature is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Canadian Military History* by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Burma Banzai

The Air War in Burma through Japanese Eyes

Atholl Sutherland Brown and William Rodney

The possibility of meeting Japanese pilots who flew in Burma during the Second World War occurred when the authors decided to attend the Commonwealth Aircrew Reunion, *A Gathering of Eagles*, scheduled to be held in Perth, Australia, 2-10 September 2000. Since Perth is, in effect, half way around the world we determined to continue the journey following the meetings and circumnavigate the globe, pausing en route in Burma (Myanmar). The decision to visit Burma in turn stemmed from Sutherland Brown's service there in WWII. It also prompted us to think it would be interesting as well as useful if we could meet Japanese aircrew who also flew in that theatre during the Burma campaign. As a consequence one of us wrote to the Military Attache at the Canadian Embassy in Tokyo, Captain S. Verran (N), citing who we were, listing our wartime service, our desire to meet Japanese counterparts, and asked if he could put us in touch with veteran organizations that could facilitate such an encounter. He responded immediately and suggested we contact Renichi Misawa, the President of the All Burma Veterans Association of Japan, as well as with a Japanese national in London, England, Masao Hirakubo, OBE, who had extensive contacts among ex-servicemen. Subsequent correspondence with them yielded additional names and addresses of possible contacts, and ultimately resulted in five pilots and Mr. Misawa, an anti-aircraft gunner with the 33rd Imperial Army at Imphal, agreeing to talk to us.¹ We eventually met on 28 August 2000 at 10:30 am at International House in Tokyo's Roppongi district. Mr. Munechika Ashiba, General Manager, at International House, very ably and enthusiastically acted as translator.

Punctual despite one who had to travel for two hours by train, well turned out, six small wiry men - we both towered a head above them - met us that morning in a small conference room. They seemed to know one another, thus adding a touch of informality to the occasion. At 75 years of age, Mr. Nagai was the youngest; at 86, Mr. Ito was the oldest. Indeed, Nagai after the establishment of the Japanese Defence Force re-enlisted and trained on F-86 and Lockheed F-104 aircraft in the United States. From the outset they were friendly, outgoing and, it soon transpired, willing to answer our questions and comments directly, and despite the inevitable delays of translation, without hesitation or diffidence. Three understood English to varying degrees but seldom spoke the language. Before and following the meeting we have had correspondence from some of them in English.

As we knew, and the Japanese airmen reiterated, they served in the Army Air Force, which was essentially a tactical force geared primarily to the actions of their ground troops. All five of our respondents were fighter pilots who flew "Oscars" (the American code name for the Nakajima Ki.43 single seater of various marks), part of the Fifth Air Division in Burma.² Ito and Yashuda both served with what Ito termed the great 64th Sentai (Squadron).

Historical Background

Burma emerged as a major operational arena following the succession of Allied defeats and retreats in late 1941 inflicted by Japanese forces bent on conquering India. They swept through



Malaya, Singapore, the East Indies and a non-resistant Siam (Thailand) and into Burma by the beginning of March 1942. The topography, rivers, railways and locations of major airfields in Burma and its neighbours were significant factors in the campaign. At the onset of the monsoon in 1942 British and Indian units, blessed with little modern weaponry, withdrew with great difficulty across the Chin Hills in northern Burma into India where, during the ensuing stalemate, they and their allies gradually regrouped their forces. While the litany of disasters on land unfolded, the Royal Navy was fortunate to escape the attempt of a major Japanese task force to eliminate its capital ships

and bases in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in April 1942, a possibility which the British never envisaged and for which they were completely unprepared.³

The build up for a return to Burma proceeded slowly for the South East Asia Command, isolated at the end of a long supply line, commanded the lowest priority for reinforcements and equipment. In addition, much of what was sent was not of the first order.⁴ Meanwhile, the Japanese were not idle. Using prisoners of war as forced labour together with Tamils dragooned from the rubber plantations of Malaya, they built a railway from Bangkok to Moulmein as a strategic overland supply route

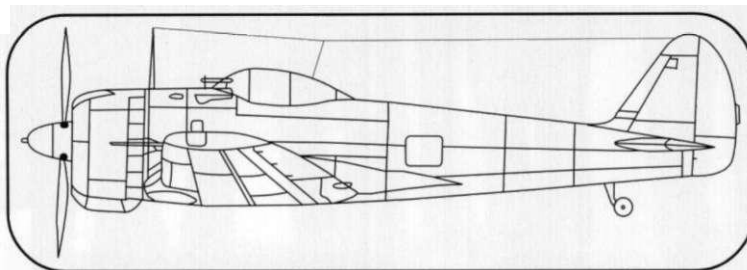
to Burma to provide the means for a renewed assault upon India.⁵ That attempt began in March 1944 during the dry season when the Japanese forces mounted two major attacks, a feint in the Arakan followed by a main thrust directed upon the Imphal area in the northern Chin Hills where mountains rise to 10,000 feet.

For their part the Allies countered by launching an offensive intended to retake Burma and reestablish the land supply route to China. By then the RAF, United States Army Air Force (USAAF) and the Indian Air Force were in the ascendant, having gradually achieved air superiority, provided significant assistance to the ground forces throughout their bitter hand-to-

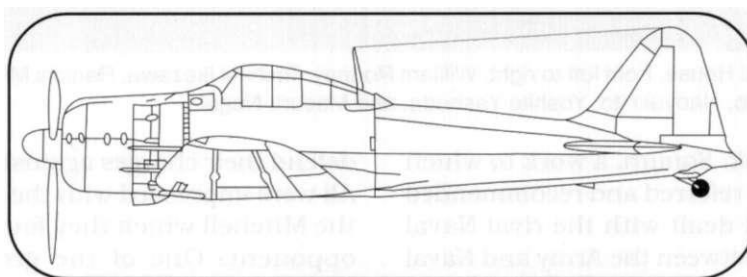
hand actions in the dense jungle of the rugged Chin Hills. Misawa gave eloquent testimony of the Allies dominance in the air when he confirmed that he only twice saw Japanese aircraft, and that their ground forces were constantly harassed by Hurricane fighter-bombers. Indeed, the Hurricane and Vengeance dive bombers were credited with virtually liquidating some Japanese positions without infantry assistance.⁶ As the XIVth Army's offensive developed, RAF, RCAF and USAAF aircraft of Troop Carrier Command transported complete Divisions from the Arakan to Imphal and to reserve in the Brahmaputra valley. That army was then supplied with men, munitions, rations and equipment throughout the rest of the Allied offensive in what became the largest and most remarkable operation by airborne forces ever attempted during the Second World War. For example, during the two months preceding the recapture of Rangoon on 2 May 1945, the airlift provided the army with over 2,000 tons of munitions and supplies daily, more

than the infamous Bang-kok railway could provide. The resultant defeat in Burma was the greatest suffered by the Japanese land forces during the war. Of the approximately 330,000 Japanese troops in the theatre, two thirds were killed or died of disease and starvation.⁷

The campaign in Burma has been overshadowed, both contemporaneously and



Nakajimi Ki-43 Hayabusa, codenamed "Oscar."



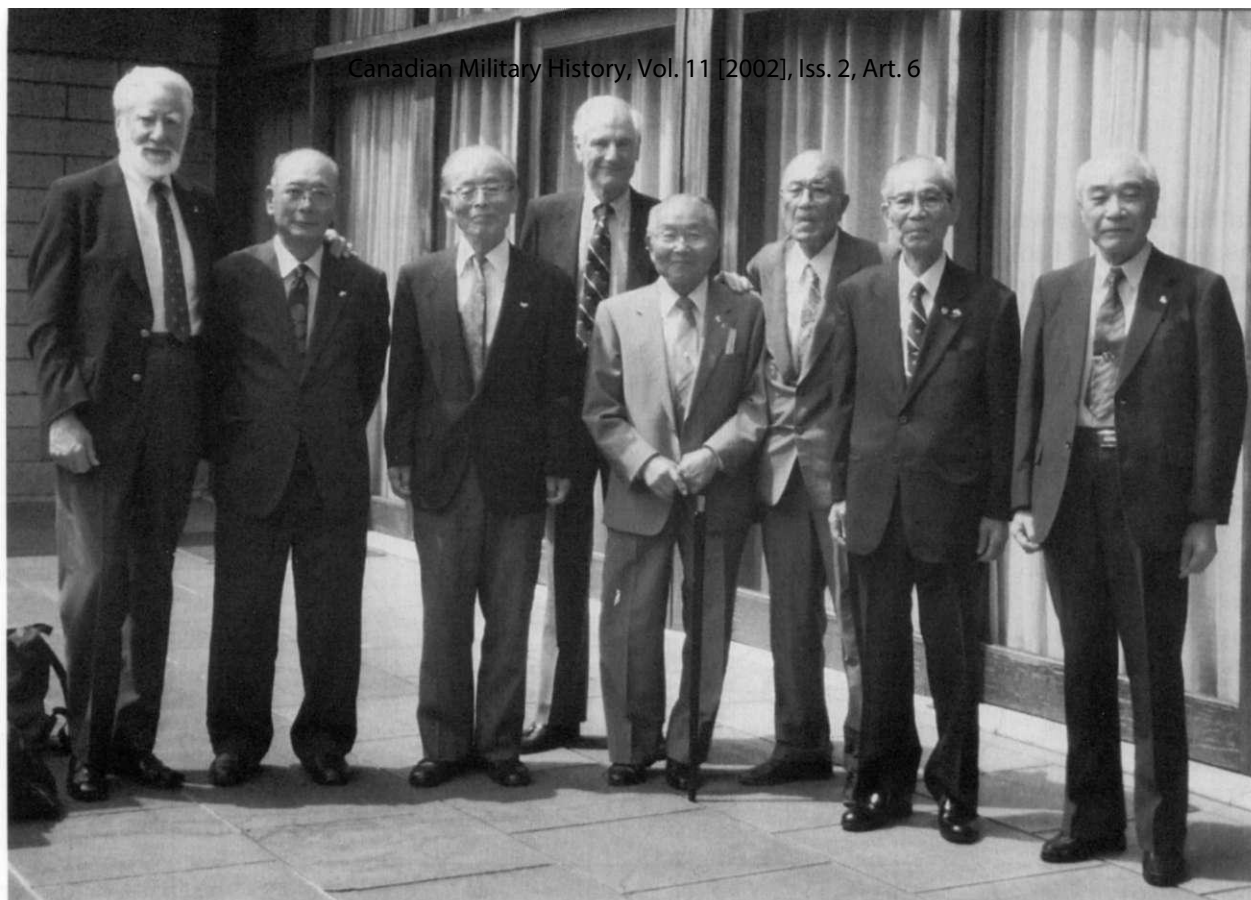
Mitsubishi A6M Reisen, codenamed "Zero."

subsequently, by events in Europe, Africa and the Pacific. As such, the Allied victory in Burma remains relatively unknown in the West as well as Japan. The libraries in Tokyo we visited en passant held few histories of Burma or accounts of the air or ground struggles in that country. Exhibits and references in the Japanese National War

Museum reflect a similar situation: abundant material on the Pacific War, but only a display two metres long dealing with Burma which omitted mention of the air war in that theatre. It was there, however, that the Japanese airmen whom we interviewed fought, and unlike most their contemporaries, survived.

The Interviews and Comment

One of the first questions we asked the group dealt with their flying training. In many respects it paralleled our own, but with some marked differences. They underwent approximately 150 hours of preliminary flying training followed by some 40 hours of operational instruction. Flying schools were mostly overseas in Taiwan, Korea or Manchuria. As fighter pilots they were not considered expert until they had 500 or more hours. Aerobatics were heavily emphasized, a point corroborated by Saburo Sakai, Japan's leading ace with 64 victories to



The pilots at International House, from left to right, William Rodney, Toshimi Ikezawa, Renichi Misawa, Atholl Sutherland Brown, Haruo Matsumoto, Naoyuki Ito, Yoshito Yashuda, and Masura Nagai.

his credit, in his *book, Samuri*, a work to which the group repeatedly referred and recommended to us even though it dealt with the rival Naval Air service.⁸ Rivalry between the Army and Naval air services was obviously strong, although the army pilots did not overtly admit to it we had the impression that they rather resented the senior service's air arm apparent favoured status. They seemed to feel that their Oscar, especially the later marks, was comparable to the Navy's vaunted Zero even though it lacked the two cannons with which the later was armed. Both fighters had long range. With wing tanks the Oscars could fly from bases at Heho or Meiktila to Imphal and return, a flight of approximately six hours, including time over target.

Unfortunately, as previously noted, all our respondents flew Oscar fighters. It would have been advantageous and illuminating to have spoken to other airmen who had flown Army Mitsubishi Ki.67 bombers (codenamed Betty) or Mitsubishi Ki.462 (codenamed Dinah) unarmed reconnaissance aircraft.⁹ The five pilots praised the Oscar for its responsiveness, its manoeuvrability, and its long range. The latter characteristics were particularly appreciated during escort duties with formations of Bettys attacking airfields when they were forced to

defend their charges against Allied interceptors. All were impressed with the Spitfire Mk.VIII and the Mitchell which they found a tough durable opponent. One of the group, Ito, who was severely wounded during an encounter with a Spitfire over Imphal, particularly praised the British aircraft for its speed, its supercharged Rolls Royce engine, great service ceiling, tight turning radius, and its fire power. Compared to the Oscars two 12.7 mm (.50 calibre) machine guns, the Spits' two 20 mm cannons and four machine guns were devastating. None of the pilots encountered Thunderbolts; they knew little of the Mosquito; and were unaware of the Beaufighter or its significant role in Burma. One of the pilots, Yasuda, produced a single sheet that listed their understanding of the Allied Order of Battle, which misidentified 177 Squadron as a night fighter squadron and did not list 211, another Beaufighter squadron.

When they were not flying escort duties or seeking Allied aircraft to challenge, our Japanese group stated they were engaged mainly in ground support. It was surprising to us they did not seriously attempt to interdict the Douglas Dakota or Curtiss Commando transports that were the XIVth Army's life line. Two of the group stated they did engage Dakotas but it was clear from the discussion that such interceptions were not

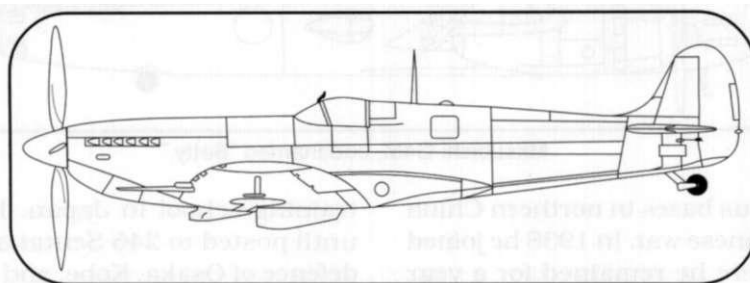
a priority and that they had no specific orders to concentrate operations against the Allied air lift. Their operational briefings, which were carried out by the Squadron commander, centred mostly on the tactical requirements of the day. They did not know the sources of his information. Our impression was there were few intelligence officers with their squadrons, and that because the requisite information was not of a high order, the Japanese commanders failed to divine the significance of General William Slim's strategic use of air transport.

They confirmed their units lacked vectoring capability, which in turn suggested to us that the Japanese radar facilities in Burma were numerically limited and technically inferior to Allied equipment. Our respondents acknowledged they had little information about their radar units, or their effectiveness, and what existed they believed was largely used in the defence of Rangoon and Meiktila. They were unaware of any airborne interception radar used by their Air Force in Burma and agreed that such equipment probably did not exist in their theatre.¹⁰ For the most part the fighter Sentais depended on map reading and familiarity with the terrain for navigation, factors which were particularly inhibiting during the monsoon. They operated mainly from Heho in the Shan Upland, Meiktila in the central plains and Mingaladon near Rangoon.¹¹ None had operated from the forward hard surfaced strips of Magwe or Prome both of which had been attacked during 1943 by the Beaufighter squadrons which had damaged Oscars caught on the ground.¹² Although the group confirmed taking part in operations over Imphal during the monsoon they also stated that during periods of bad weather their units withdrew to Chiangmai and other bases in southern Siam. We considered their comments as further confirmation that their Sentais lacked radio homing aids, and that instrument flight training had been discounted in favour of skills considered to be vital in aerial combat. The Japanese Sentai were very mobile because

ground crew were chiefly assigned to bases and only specialists travelled with the squadrons.

When we raised the question of morale, particularly in the light of their casualties and defeat in Burma, the five fliers agreed unanimously that their spirits never flagged. They considered themselves to be an elite force, and claimed they were treated as such, given superior billets, (no barracks), had an

abundance of good food unlike 33rd Army which was starving in the Chin Hills; and to their and our amusement, enjoyed unlimited saki. As they pointed out the Japanese Army Air Division

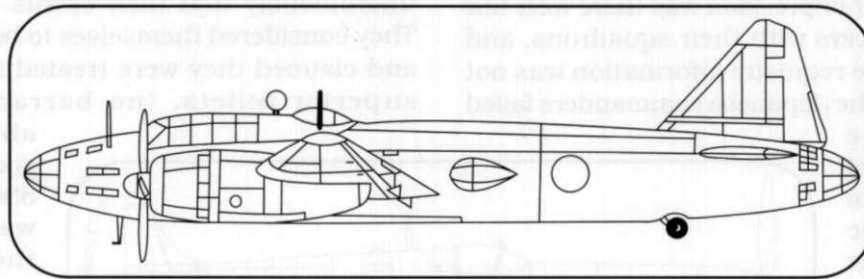


Supermarine Spitfire

produced its own saki. They acknowledged the frequent resort to what might be called squadron pep meetings intended to maintain Squadron morale, a very different approach compared with the laid back ethos which characterized RAF units.

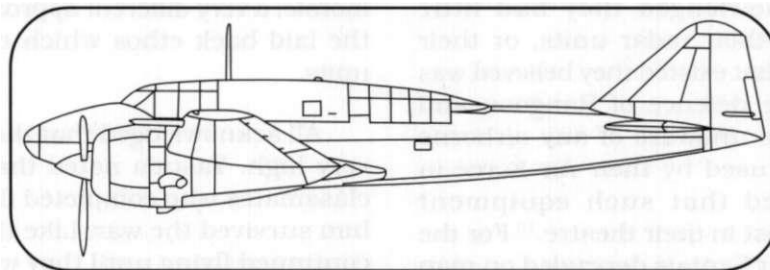
All acknowledged that their casualties were very high. Yasuda noted that only four of his classmates who completed flying training with him survived the war. Like the *Luftwaffe*, they continued flying until they were killed, or were so severely wounded or struck down by tropical diseases that they were unfit for further service. They envied our system of operational tours and the so-called rest periods available to Allied aircrew. The group also questioned us. Matsumoto asked what we thought of their Kamikaze operations. We said we admired the volunteer's courage, but failed to understand the philosophy upon which the policy was premised. All appeared to agree with that view and seemed to feel that the "Divine Wind" was a flawed concept and a poor military policy. Interestingly, Ito, the oldest of the group, who was badly wounded over Imphal, had briefly, in accordance with the Bushido tradition, considered diving his Oscar into Allied troops or equipment, before deciding to try to return to the 64th Sentai's base at Meiktila, which he did. After hospitalization there and recuperation in Siam he returned to the squadron for further active duty.

It is perhaps best to provide a summary of Yasuda's war as an example to convey the nature and extent of our respondents service careers. It also provides an inkling as to their qualities. Born in 1916, Yasuda enlisted in the Japanese Army Air Force in December 1936. After completing basic training he was posted as a ground equipment crewman to a squadron. He served briefly in Korea before



Mitsubishi G4M, codenamed "Betty."

being moved to various bases in northern China during the Sino-Japanese war. In 1938 he joined the 64th Sentai where he remained for a year until his admission to the Klimagaya Army Air Flying School. On completion of flight training in July 1940 he rejoined the 64th, by then based in Manchuria, and moved with it to Canton, China. When the Japanese advance into Southeast Asia began, Yasuda's squadron, by then equipped with Oscars Mk.IIs, moved to successive bases in Malaya, including Kota Bharu, from which he took part in the methodical destruction of British air power.



Mitsubishi Ki-46, codenamed "Dinah."

At the beginning of 1942 Yasuda's Sentai transferred to Ipoh for the assault upon Singapore. There he scored the first of his 10 victories, knocking down two RAF Hurricanes. Service followed in Sumatra and western Java before the 64th moved to Chiangmai, Siam, for operations against Burma where the Squadron encountered Major-General C.L. Chennault's Flying Tigers as well as RAF fighters.¹³ On one operation toward the end of April 1942 Yasuda force landed behind Allied lines as a result of an oil leak and took four days to walk back to his own side. On 23 November, flying from Mingaladon, he suffered severe facial burns as a result of an encounter with B-24 Liberators,

but parachuted to safety. With the Sentai re-equipped with Oscar Mk.IIs in early 1943, the unit was assigned to ground attack duties in support of the Japanese troops around Akyab. By then, as he pointed out, the Allies were beginning to achieve air superiority, and the

increasing loss of experienced instructor pilots together with his injuries, resulted in his return to Klimagaya flying

training school in Japan. He remained there until posted to 246 Sentai in May 1945 for the defence of Osaka, Kobe, and Kyoto. It was on 14 August 1945 that Yasuda achieved his final victory, his 10th, when he shot down a P-51 Mustang. In the course of his flying service Warrant Officer Yasuda accumulated over 3,500

hours, an astonishing number for a fighter pilot.

Undoubtedly our meeting with the Japanese veterans was a small step

towards reconciliation, a process which is still regarded with suspicion in Japan and in Allied countries whose forces served in the Pacific and Southeast Asia. Several of our guests had been involved in overt acts of reconciliation. As former flyers we found our Japanese counterparts to be little different from ourselves, and despite the language barrier we were soon "hanger flying" in a modest and limited fashion. Flyers are flyers, and we were drawn together by a common love of flying. With great pride and pleasure Ito and Yasuda, who also sported an RAF tie, showed us photographs of themselves at a combined Japanese-British veterans meeting in England in 1993 at Biggin Hill, one the Battle of Britain front line airfields. Misawa, as President of the All Burma Veterans Association, had also been involved in reconciliation in Britain. The group, like Saburo Sakai, felt it was time to put the

past aside. Clearly, our respondents were able and brave men who carried out their assignments under increasingly difficult operating conditions. We also shared another aspect of wartime service. Airmen, because of the nature of their duties, were rarely involved in the direct confrontations which characterized the clash of armies, and too often led to atrocities.

Denouement

The day after our meeting with the Japanese group Captain Verran suggested that we visit the Tokyo War Museum, and arranged for us to do so. On our arrival we were ushered into a small conference room, sparsely but elegantly furnished, where we were given tea and questioned by a Shinto Chief Priest and his Deputy whilst surrounded by acolytes. The Priests asked some surprising questions: where and how we were trained; how many flying hours had we accumulated; where had we served during the war? Throughout the interviews we were photographed repeatedly. Afterwards, we were led to the Shinto Shrine associated with the Museum, taken to a small well where we were ritually cleansed, then about turned to face an Altar where, as instructed, we commemorated the war dead. Afterwards, we concluded that the ceremony was intended as an act of reconciliation, but we wondered what use it, the proceeding interview and photographs might be put. The Museum visit, in essence, symbolically concluded our meeting with the Japanese veterans, a most interesting and memorable occasion. As a light aside we have attributed our subsequent well-being during a month in Southeast Asia to our having been purified and blessed at the Museum's Shinto shrine; but perhaps copious beer also helped.

Notes

1. The contingent included Toshimi Ikezawa, Naoyuki Ito, Haruo Matsumoto, Renichi Misawa, Masaru Nagai and Yoshito Yasuda. Their names are given in the western style with surnames last.
2. A radial-powered single-seat fighter similar in configuration to the Folke-Wulf 190, the Oscar had an all-up weight of 5,500 pounds, was armed with two 12.7 mm (.50 calibre) fuselage mounted machine guns, and

had a range of over 1,000 miles. Although provision was made for some armour at the pilots back few were so equipped. Maximum performance was achieved short of 20,000 feet. In contrast the Spitfire Mk.VIII loaded weight was 7,767 pounds with a normal range of 660 miles and a service ceiling of 41,500 feet.

3. Michael Tomlison, *The Most Dangerous Moment* (London: William Kimber, 1976).
4. For various aspects of this, see: Christopher J. Argyle, *Japan at War* (London, Arthur Barker Ltd., 1976); Henry Probert, *The Forgotten Air Force: The Royal Air Force in the War Against Japan, 1941-1945* (London, Brassey's, 1995); Hilary St. George Saunders, *The Royal Air Force, Vol. III, The Fight Is Won* (London, EMSO, 1954), William J. Slim, *Defeat into Victory* (London, Cassell, 1956); Atholl Sutherland Brown, *Silently into the Midst of Things: 177 RAF Squadron in Burma, 1943-45* (Lewes, East Sussex, The Book Guild, 1997); and "Forgotten Squared: Canadian Aircrew in Southeast Asia, 1942-45" in *Canadian Military History*, Vol.8, No.2, 1999.
5. Clifford Kinvig, *The River Kwai Railway: The Story of the Burma-Siam Railway* (London, Brassey's, 1992).
6. *Jane's Fighting Aircraft of World War II*, (London, Bracken Books, 1989).
7. Kinvig.
8. Saburo Sakai, *Samurai* (London, White Lion Publishers, 1957). He died at age 84 about a month after our interviews. Sakai became a symbol of reconciliation and an outspoken advocate for Japan confronting its war guilt head on.
9. The Betty was the standard Army heavy bomber with twin radial engines adapted from a Naval aircraft and which raided Calcutta and Bengal airfields in 1942-43. The Dinah, also twin-engined radial-powered photo-reconnaissance aircraft, was designed for fast flight at high altitudes with a range of 1,800 miles (2,800 km). Dinahs could not evade Spitfires when they arrived in mid-1943.
10. Martin Streetly, *Confound and Destroy, 100 Group and the Bomber Support Campaign* (London: Macdonald and Jane's, 1978). He notes that the Japanese in Burma and Indo-China were extremely ill equipped with radar and that their bombing operations were daylight raids with fighter escort.
11. See airfields on Map.
12. Sutherland Brown, *Silently into the Midst of Things*.
13. Major-General Chenault was the air advisor to Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek, the leader of Nationalist China. He commanded the United States - China Air Task Force which included the American Volunteer Group - 116 mercenary pilots initially - the survivors of which were incorporated into the USAAF after the United States entered the war. They flew Curtiss P-36 Tomahawk fighters.

Atholl Sutherland Brown, DFC, PhD, served with 177 Squadron, RAF, in Burma during Second World War and was formerly Chief Geologist for the Province of British Columbia.

William Rodney, DFC and Bar, MA, PhD, served with 78 Squadron, RAF, and was formerly Dean of Arts, Royal Roads Military College.