

EAGLES OVER DARWIN



Carrier-launched Zeros swoop onto a P-40E from Lieutenant Oestreicher's B Flight at the start of the huge raid against Darwin on 19 February 1942. (Michael Claringbould)

Oestreicher dived away from his B Flight formation yelling “Zeros, Zeros, Zeros” into his radio-microphone. Discharging his drop tank and diving away at high speed, he flew south, at low level and away from Darwin and was not seen again for over an hour (Oestreicher’s subsequent claims in respect to the events of 19 February remain a subject of some controversy and are discussed in more detail in Appendix 1).

Meanwhile the other four pilots were set upon by Zeros, and in no position for an even fight. Lieutenant Bill Walker looked up to see nine Zeros peeling off from about 2,000 feet above, and diving on him and his element leader, Lieutenant Max Wiecks. The latter was preoccupied with getting his radio to function and was hunched over in his cockpit. The Japanese were in a near perfect position with surprise almost complete and attacking from above.

The subsequent combat is somewhat confused, but the outcomes are known. In a hopeless position, the American pilots bravely tried to turn into the Zeros and fight them. For the elite Japanese pilots, the dogfight was easy work. The P-40s could not outfly them, but they were well-built, with armour plate and self-sealing fuel tanks, unlike the Zeros. This saved the life of a couple of their pilots. After Wiecks’ plane was hit, he found himself diving out to sea with dead controls. At 4,000 feet he struggled to bail out, just managing to do so in time. As his parachute opened fully, he heard his plane splash into the water below him, some ten miles off the coast.

Wiecks’ wingman, Walker, had also tried to dogfight the attackers but almost immediately his P-40 took hits in the cockpit. Walker was wounded in the shoulder and was unable to detach