

Introduction

Over a two year period from January 1942 to February 1944, land-based Zeros in the South Pacific (referred to as the “South Seas” theatre by the Japanese) waged a series of massive aerial battles both offensive and defensive in nature. Ultimately it was overpowering Allied resources which expelled Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) air units from the Solomons and then Rabaul. Thousands of airmen had perished by the time a decision was made in Tokyo to relocate Rabaul’s remaining air units to Truk in February 1944. By this stage a giant combined onslaught of USAAF, USN, RAAF, USMC and RNZAF units was pummelling Rabaul daily.

Many units staged throughout the theatre, and in November 1942 there was a restructure of IJN air power. This was mainly administrative in nature, however some units such as the Tainan *Ku* were recalled to Japan for reformation. Rabaul remained a hub for operations, and most Zero pilots served there at some stage in their careers. Given this background, the world of Zero markings in the South Seas area is predictably both complex and diverse. The research undertaken for this volume addresses many previous knowledge gaps, however the more discerning Zero aficionado will quickly ascertain that gaps still exist, particularly the issues raised in Chapter 13 pertaining to the *Rabauru Kokubuntai*.

The operational doctrine of the IJN stated that the rank of officer pilots should be indicated on their fighters. The policy arose as it was deemed critical that flight leaders be quickly identified during combat, however this ambitious requirement was enforced more by some units than others. The interpretation, structure and application of unit markings was decided in the field, and authorised at commander level. Unit colours were decided at *chutai* level, and each *chutaicho* usually took their colours with them as they transferred between units. If there were a conflict of colours, seniority held sway in deciding matters. Thus some *chutai* changed colours during their deployments, for example within the Tainan *Ku* when it transited from the Netherlands East Indies to New Guinea. Markings were applied according to the rules of the new unit into which they were assigned. In addition, some units were allocated to different parent *Koku Sentai* resulting in further markings changes.

All IJN aerial units based their operations and procedures around nautical concepts and procedures, and some heraldry flows from these. IJN rank structure was steadfast and strictly observed. Rank-consciousness is routinely borne out even in group photos: characteristically the most senior officer is usually seated in the wicker chair, surrounded by his favourite acolytes. Not all lieutenants (or other ranks) were equal. Seniority based on the graduation year from Eta Jima Naval Academy was also a key component of rank. So, two lieutenants in the same unit held differing seniority depending on when they graduated. Understanding these dynamics sometimes explains subtle markings vagaries, once again particularly in the case of the Tainan *Ku*.

Tail codes and other markings were often dictated by the units’ *Koku Sentai* association. However, it is essential to understand the difference between *Koku Sentai* (Air Flotilla) and *Kushu Butai* translated as Attack Force. The former were commands based on administrative structure, whereas the latter were tactical operational formations.