

## Appendix 9.

### Myth: The Heroic Robert Oestreicher

One of the enduring Darwin stories is that of the American fighter pilot Robert Oestreicher. Of ten American fighters aloft that day, only Oestreicher's P-40 survived. He was uninjured and landed his machine, virtually undamaged, almost two hours after the raid. He claimed to have downed two of the attacking divebombers. On a day of overwhelming Japanese superiority, here is a positive David versus Goliath story, one that authors have found irresistible to include and embellish. Most recently, Oestreicher has been described as being "alone to face 36 Zeroes, 71 Vals and 81 Kates"<sup>1</sup> and is elevated to the status of a "savvy veteran."<sup>2</sup>

The truth is somewhat different. Oestreicher was a novice fighter pilot – he had just 14 hours on P-40s before leaving the USA for Australia.<sup>3</sup> When he saw Japanese aircraft for the first time he dived away to save himself and hid in clouds to the south of Darwin for the duration of the raid. His aerial claims were invented – they never happened. Further scrutiny of his service records show that many of his so-called combat missions were contrived – instead they were routine flights far from the enemy. In 1982 he returned to Darwin and lied about or exaggerated his wartime service.

Military history portrays many heroes. The case of Oestreicher is interesting because the story is quite the opposite – of the type that is rarely told. He was not up to the job of being a fighter pilot, but was seemingly unable to admit it. While youth and inexperience may excuse his behaviour in 1942, he continued to revel in his hero status decades later in mature age.

#### OESTREICHER'S CLAIMS

After seeing Zeroes shortly before 1000 on 19 February, Oestreicher dived away from his B Flight formation yelling "Zeroes, Zeroes, Zeroes" into his radio-microphone and discharging his drop tank. As Oestreicher dived away at high speed, he was last seen flying south, at low level and away from Darwin. Meanwhile the other pilots were set upon by Zeroes, in no position for an even fight.

Almost two hours later, at 1145, Oestreicher landed at the RAAF Base, which now resembled a smoking ruin – very different from the functioning base he had taken off from earlier that morning. His aircraft was undamaged except for a burst tyre. He would have been shocked at what he quickly learned about his comrades. His commanding officer was dead as were three of his fellow pilots. Others were missing at this time. The whole squadron had been decimated. Probably he made up the story about downing two Vals as a way of validating his actions. It was not for another four months (21 July) that Oestreicher wrote a report regarding the events of 19 February.