








**H**igh above Japan at 03:40hrs on August 15, 1945, 134 Boeing B-29s aircraft from the 315th Bomb Wing were making their way home. Their target had been the Nippon Oil Company Refinery at Tsuchizaki. Below them lay Hiroshima and Nagasaki, devastated by the world's first two atomic bomb attacks. Other cities had fared no better. Incendiary weapons had ravaged 40% of the urban areas in 66 cities, resulting in the destruction of nearly one

third of all Japanese dwellings. The war was effectively over, but for the Japanese high command there was no other option but to fight on. Bent upon extinction rather than surrender, the Japanese offered the Allies precious little middle ground; the cultural divide between Japan and the West was a vast chasm of disbelief and unconscionable moral logic. While the world waited and prayed, powerful US and British carrier task forces prepared for the last air strikes of the war. The

question is why? There were no military targets of any consequence left, and Japanese resistance in the air was virtually non-existent. The night before, pilots aboard the carrier USS *Shangri-La* had heard rumours and reports all day. Vought F4U Corsair pilot Richard DeMott recalled: "Japan has broadcast and has accepted our peace treaty... I wish to hell we could find out if the Japs are surrendering before we go needlessly groping over [there] again and lose more pilots." 

**Below**  
The Mitsubishi J2M3 Raiden 'Jack' was to be one of the Zero-sen's wartime replacements. It did not enter combat until December 1943. These Raidens belong to the 1st Hikotai of the 302nd Kokutai at Atsugi in 1945.  
ALL AUTHOR UNLESS STATED



# 1945 LAST DOG FIGHTS

DONALD NIJBOER EXAMINES THE VERY FINAL AIR ENGAGEMENTS OF WORLD WAR TWO







**Above**  
HMS 'Indefatigable' passing through the Suez Canal on its way to the Pacific in late 1944.

**Right**  
A Nakajima Ki-84-la 'Frank' of the 111th Sentai. Organised in July 1945, the unit was one of the last Japanese Army Air Force entities formed during the war. NARA

### BRITS OR YANKS?

It was the final desperate 24 hours in a long and barbaric war. It would also be the last time allied and Japanese fighters would tangle in aerial combat. Who would make claim to the last dogfight of World War Two? American history says it belongs to the US Navy Grumman Hellcats of VF-88, but British author Mark Huggins, in June 2001's *Aeroplane Monthly*, claims the iconic Seafires of the Fleet Air Arm's (FAA's) 24 Naval Fighter Wing may have fired the final shots (the wing comprised 887 and 894 Naval Air Squadrons). To assess who participated in the war's last dogfight we should return to the morning of August 15, 1945.

and Grumman Avengers, besides the 24 Wing Seafires. The Allies had planned two strikes for Tokyo for that day with Strike Force Able being launched first at 04:15hrs.

Sunrise over Japan came at 04:35hrs on August 15, and the sky was a patchwork quilt of clouds and scattered showers. Task Force 38 carriers began launching combat air patrols and assembling two strike missions. Aboard HMS *Indefatigable*, at 04:00hrs, four rocket-armed Fireflies were



Several fighter units including US Navy squadrons VF-6, VF-31, VF-49 and VF-88 flew missions in and around Tokyo on that fateful day. The British were also involved through sorties by Fairey Fireflies

launched, followed by six Avengers with an escort of eight Seafires led by S Lt Fred Hockley. Their target was Kisarazu airfield near Tokyo. At 04:15hrs, 12 Hellcats from VF-88 roared off the deck of the USS





*Yorktown*. The US Navy's VF-88 was battle-trained but untested, its pilots eager to enter the fight. They rendezvoused with 24 Corsairs from the carriers USS *Shangri-La* and USS *Wasp*. Their mission was a sweep of airfields, including Atsugi, northwest of Tokyo. Hellcats from VF-6, VF-31 and VF-49, as part of Strike Force Able, were also launched.

Despite their hopeless situation, the Imperial Japanese Naval Air Force and its army equivalent were still mounting air-defence sorties. One of the units involved was the naval 302nd Kokutai. There were very few veterans left in its ranks by the final weeks of the conflict, however, and most of its pilots had been transferred in from other units flying seaplanes, flying boats and carrier bombers. By May 1945 the 302nd was down to just ten operational aircraft, a mix of late-model Zeros and J2M3 Raidens. The 252nd Kokutai, based at Mobara airfield, east of Tokyo Bay, was also assigned the task of air defence. Like the 302nd, it too was equipped with a limited number of late Zeros.

#### **'DARK BLUE' GRIT**

As the 14 FAA aircraft (six Avengers, eight Seafires) climbed through low cloud, they finally broke into better weather at 6,000-8,000ft. The Seafire pilots were greeted by the



**Left**  
A wrecked Mitsubishi A6M5 Zero-sen on Kwajalein Atoll, Marshall Islands, in 1945.

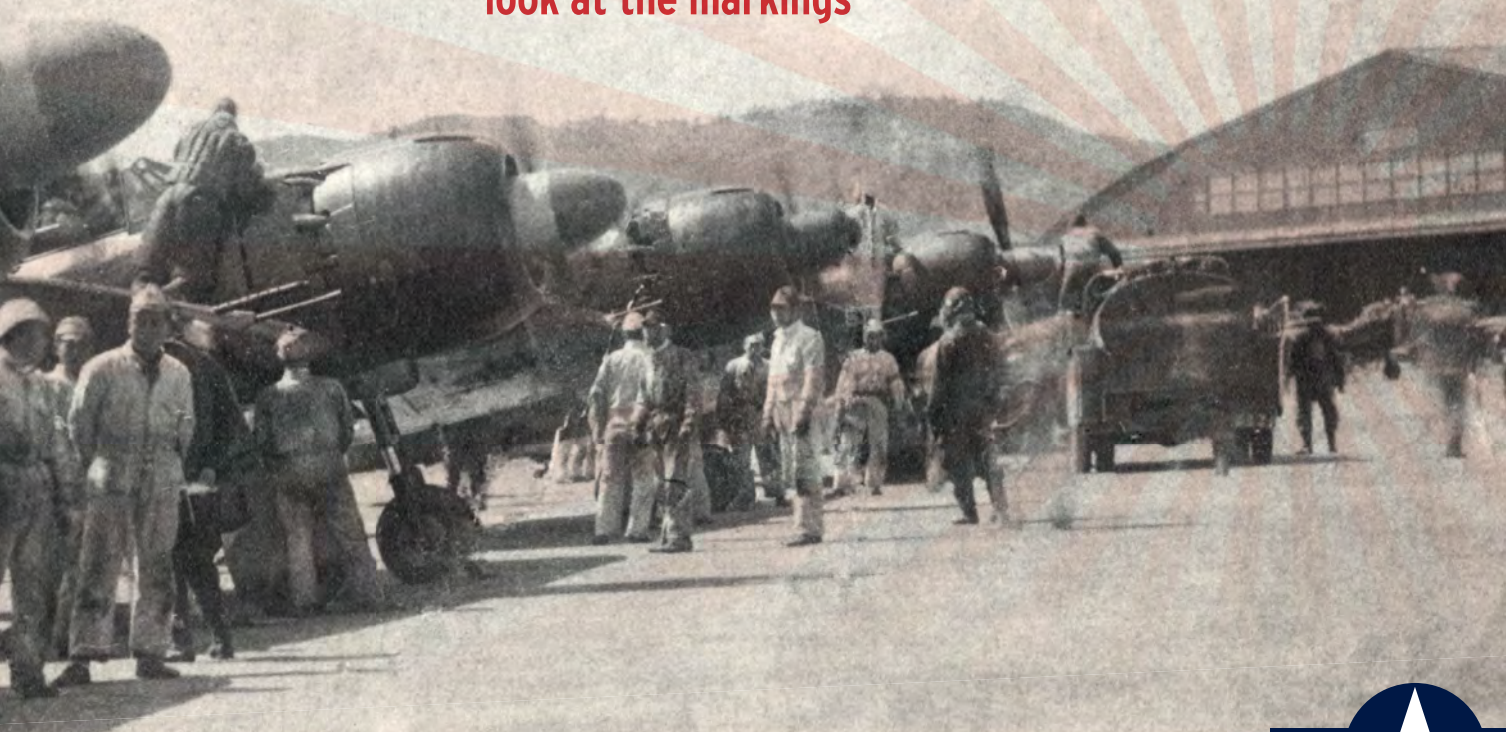
new day's summer sun and all was quiet except for the steady throb of their trusty Merlin engines. As the tiny strike force crossed Tokyo Bay, a pair of A6M5 Zeros was sighted well below the Avengers. This was a common decoy tactic used by the Japanese, but the Seafire pilots didn't bite when a dozen A6M5s came bearing down from the 3 o'clock-high position at 05:45hrs. The diving Zeros passed the top cover headed for the Avengers and the close-escort Seafires below. Sufficient warning was given for the pilots to counter the 'bounce', but not all were able to jettison their drop tanks. Radio failure doomed S Lt Hockley, though, and he was shot down in the first pass. He was

the last Royal Navy casualty of the war. After having baled out and parachuted, he was captured and executed by the Japanese.

As the first Zeros passed out of range, S Lt Vic Lowden turned his flight and met the second Japanese element in line abreast formation. Opening fire at the extreme range of 800 yards (731m), Lowden shot at a Zero and saw it "flaming nicely, going down". His number 3, S Lt Williams, also contributed, hitting the same aircraft with cannon shells. Lowden soon encountered another Zero and, after opening fire from about 200 yards, he saw pieces fly off as it fell away. He later wrote: "I then found one of the original attacking 'Zekes' climbing at

**Below**  
Mitsubishi A6M2c Type 52c aircraft of the 252nd Kokutai warming up prior to another home defence mission. In the hands of a highly skilled pilot the Zero-sen was a formidable opponent.

**"I closed to 100 yards at 11,000ft, kicking on the rudder to have a look at the markings"**







**Above**  
The A6M5c, shown here, was the main opponent of the Seafire in the final months of the Pacific war.

**Right**  
These FAA pilots were involved in the Royal Navy's last air combat of the war. They are, left to right, S Lts Don Duncan, Randy Kay, 'Spud' Murphy, Vic Lowden, Ted Gavin and 'Taffy' Williams, all from 24 Naval Fighter Wing. AUTHOR VIA ANDREW THOMAS

**Below**  
A Supermarine Seafire Mk.III seen at Clark Field, Philippines in 1945.

8,000ft, about 1,000 yards from me. I closed to 100 yards at 11,000ft, kicking on the rudder to have a look at the markings, and then went back astern and fired two two-second bursts of machine gun fire... the cannon ammunition had already been exhausted. Following strikes all over the aircraft, the pilot baled out. His fighter dived past him, smoking somewhat." Lowden would be credited with two aircraft destroyed, a third shared and two damaged. In his memoirs, Lt Saburo Abe of the Japanese 252nd Kokutai claims to have shot down a Seafire on August 15, but his description does not match what happened to S Lt Hockley.

Abe: "Immediately, it turned into a chaotic battle. Both the enemy fighters and ours were coming and going from all directions. I did not know how to determine my target. Suddenly, an enemy plane appeared from my right and flew down to the left. At

that moment, I remembered what Lt Tetsuzō Iwamoto taught me before. Quickly, I banked to the left with full-throttle and chased the enemy fighter. "On the ground, I was pretty good at shooting. However, it was not the same when I had to shoot while flying the fighter plane. I always missed my targets. So, I had decided that I would not pull the trigger

until I was close enough to see an expression on the enemy's face. On that day, I did the same. The enemy pilot probably felt my presence, and he looked back. Our eyes met for a moment. I saw his despairing look, and I opened fire at the same time. I did not need to use a gunsight. If I remember well, the distance between us was less than 20m. I pulled the



**"Kay then concentrated on another Zero and with high deflection, shot off its tail with his first burst"**



trigger lever, and the next moment, I witnessed that half of the pilot's head was blown off. The windscreen of his airplane became all red being covered with blood. His plane was tossed upward into the air as if it was bending its back. I flew under him and just managed to avoid a crash."

Lt Abe also claims to have been shot at by Seafires, causing a forced landing of his fighter: "I heard a loud noise and felt pain in my right leg as if someone hit [it] with an iron bar. I felt like I was awakened from my trance or something. Still, I was thinking, idiot! Who are those stupid ones that cannot tell their friends from the enemy? I'm going to punch them when they get out

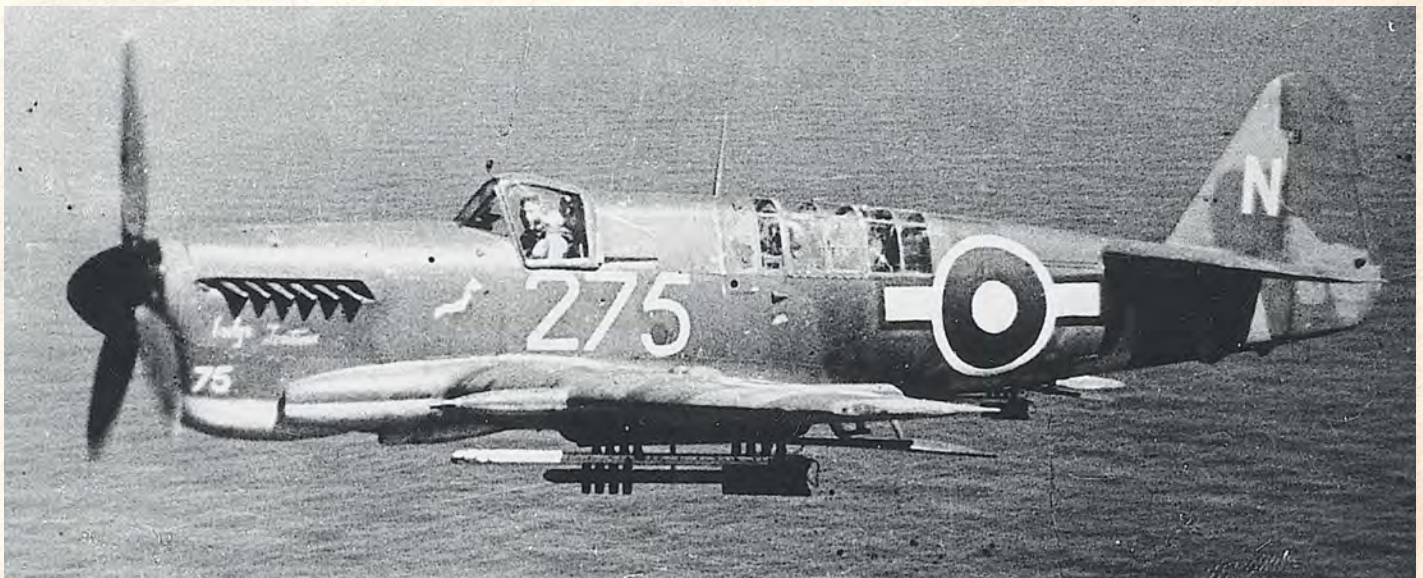
two Zeros, with a third shared and two others damaged. Then it was S Lt Murphy's turn, as he reported: "The enemy approached our Avengers in fairly close starboard echelon, but with flights in line astern. They peeled off smartly in fours from down sun and headed for the Avengers. One section of four appeared to be coming head-on for us, but I didn't observe their guns firing. Their original attack was well coordinated, but they seemed to lose each other after that, and could not have kept a good lookout astern.

"I opened fire with my flight leader from the enemy's port quarter. Saw strikes on the fuselage of the enemy, which was finished off by flight

port wing-root area. Switching targets, Kay then concentrated on another Zero and with high deflection, shot off its tail with his first burst. Searching for a third target, he found and damaged another A6M5.

All six Avengers delivered their bombs on target. Just one was badly damaged by the attack, but the pilot brought back the crippled aircraft to the fleet and ditched alongside one of the radar picket destroyers.

En route to the coast, VF-88 and the Corsairs encountered low cloud cover, forcing the squadrons to separate as they climbed through the overcast. The cloud extended to 18,000ft and when the group emerged, just eight of the original 12



of their planes," still thinking they were Japanese fighters. "I looked up and the two planes passed above me and to the left. There was no 'rising sun' painted on the bodies, I said to myself. They were not the American fighters. Their marking was different. Who is that? That's British. What are they doing here?"

## ZERO HOUR

The remaining Seafires turned toward the enemy. With the first Japanese element now out of range, S Lt Lowden moved his flight into line abreast and engaged the second group of fighters. The close escort, tied as they were to the Avengers, still managed an impressive score. The first Zero was shot down at long range by Lowden, who continued to score, hitting another Zero at 250 yards. It exploded after three short bursts. The opening moves had proved decisive for the Seafire pilots. Lowden shot down

leader or no 3. Disengaged from above to attack another 'Zeke' to port and 500ft below. Closed from above and astern, obtaining hits on belly and engine, but I was closing too fast and overshot. Pulled up nose to re-attack No 2 and saw a lone 'Zeke' at same level doing a shallow turn to starboard. He evidently didn't see me, and I held fire till some 100 yards away. Observed immediate strikes on cockpit and engine, which burst into flames. Enemy rolled on back, plummeting in flames into cloud."

S Lt Don Duncan, Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve, chose to retain his slipper tank and, maintaining his speed as recommended in his official tactics notes, engaged three of the Zeros, coming away with two probable 'kills'. The last Seafire to leave the combat area was Duncan's section leader, S Lt Randy Kay. As a Zero closed on the Avengers he made a quarter attack, setting it on fire in the

Hellcats were together, the Corsairs nowhere to be seen. Lt Howard M Harrison of VF-88 ordered two of his Hellcats to remain near the coast and provide a communication link with the fleet, in the event of a recall message being issued. Six Hellcats remained, piloted by Harrison, Lts Maurice 'Maury' Proctor, Joseph Sahloff and Theodore Hansen, and Ensigns Wright Hobbs and Eugene Mandeborg. They pressed on toward their target at Atsugi airfield, home base for the 302nd Kokutai.

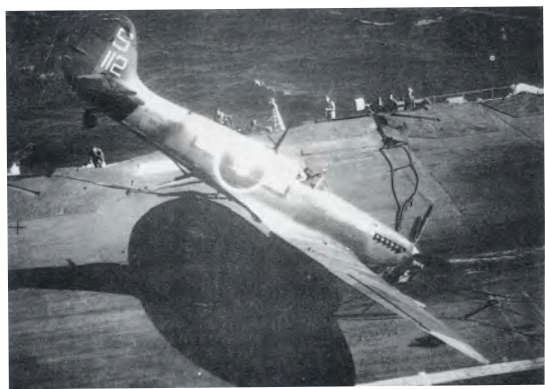
## EMPIRE'S RESPONSE

On the morning of August 15, allied carrier aircraft were reported inbound towards Tokyo. The 302nd commander, Capt Yasuna Kozono, ordered all serviceable fighters airborne. Led by Lt Yutaka Moriaka, four J2M3 Raidens and eight A6M5c/A6M7 Zeros took to the air. The 252nd Kokutai also launched fighters, and Lt

**Above**  
A rocket-armed Firefly Mk.I from 1771 NAS, at the time embarked on HMS 'Implacable', heads for a target in Japan in July 1945.  
AUTHOR VIA ANDREW THOMAS







**Above**  
Seafire Mk.III NN212/  
S112 of 887 NAS  
was flown by Sub Lt  
'Spud' Murphy on  
August 15, 1945. He  
was credited with  
two A6M Zeros  
over Odaki Bay  
near Tokyo.

**Above right**  
Lt Yutaka Moriaka. In  
April 1944 he joined  
the Atsugi-based  
302nd Kokutai,  
assigned to the air  
defence of Tokyo.



**“When it was all over, VF-88 would claim eight Japanese aircraft shot down but would pay a heavy price...”**

Cdr Moriyasu Hidaka led a group of eight or nine Zeros towards a large formation of enemy aircraft. The airspace over Tokyo Bay and surrounding area became extremely crowded. Along with aircraft from HMS *Indefatigable* there were the Hellcats from VF-6, VF-31, VF-49 and VF-88, and Corsairs from VBF-8. Mark Huggins has claimed that the Japanese fighters encountered by the FAA that morning “were almost certainly the 302nd AG led by Lt Moriaka”, but this doesn’t mesh with Moriaka’s own claim of a single Hellcat shot down that day. His original orders were to head to Kisarazu airfield, where he found a hangar on fire, smoking violently. Could the earlier Firefly ‘Ramrod’ mission launched ahead of the Avengers and Seafires have reached Kisarazu before the weather closed in and attacked the facility? According to Moriaka, his flight was then ordered back to Atsugi while “now under attack by Grummans”. There he spotted six F6F Hellcats and shot down one. Moriaka described the base as being attacked by rocket-firing F6Fs

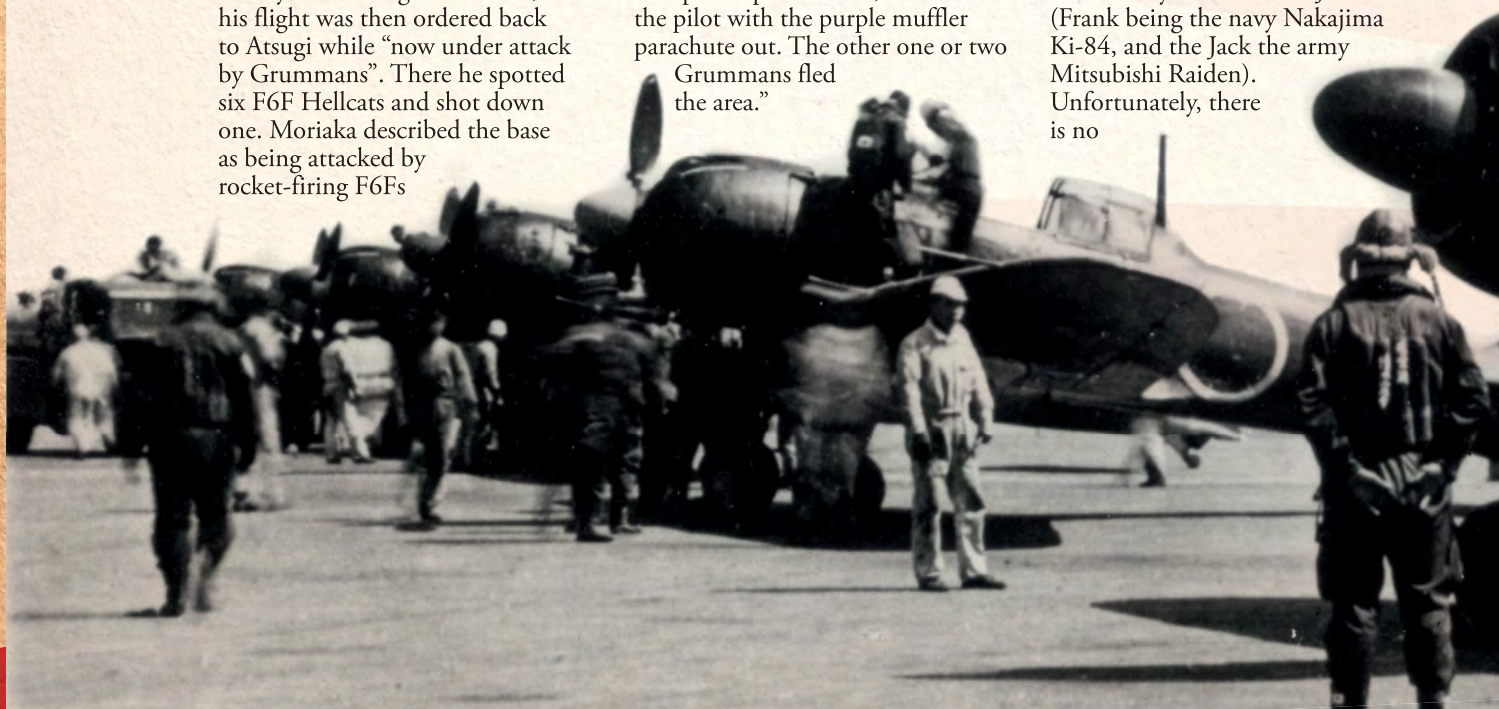
(the Hellcats of VF-88 were armed with four HVAR rockets). Moriaka recalled: “This is it. I ordered my flight to spread out into combat formation. The Grummans were at 3,000m, rocket-bombing Atsugi. There were six Grummans right in front of me, flying in two groups of three planes. We were in an advantageous position, like a cat getting ready to pounce on some unsuspecting mice.

“Then I suddenly saw one plane circling around... OK, there it comes. I placed this plane squarely in my gunsight. There were three planes below me and they could climb up to get me. That could be dangerous. I pulled up, circled, and dived down. I could see the pilot wearing a purple muffler. I opened up with my 20mm cannons and could see red-coloured projectiles striking the Grumman’s engine. The plane spun around, and I saw the pilot with the purple muffler parachute out. The other one or two Grummans fled the area.”

Maury Proctor, one of the two Hellcat pilots who survived that day, describes a different scenario: “At 06:45 we were within seconds of starting into our dive on Atsugi airfield when Hardesty relayed the news that the fleet commanders had broadcast: ‘All Bronco planes cease hostilities and return to base, the war is over’. “Needless to say, everyone went ape over the news and flew in all directions, doing aerobatics to vent the enthusiasm we felt. By the time we could get organised and rendezvous the flight, several precious minutes had lapsed.” Shortly after, Proctor and his five remaining Hellcat pilots were attacked by “approximately 20” enemy fighters.

**AERIAL JOUSTING**

The six relatively inexperienced F6F Hellcat pilots claimed they were bounced by ‘Franks’ and ‘Jacks’ (Frank being the navy Nakajima Ki-84, and the Jack the army Mitsubishi Raiden). Unfortunately, there is no





record of army fighter units being active on August 15, 1945, but one can only assume that if the Japanese Navy fighters were active, army air units would be too.

The six Hellcats turned and met the Japanese fighters head on, and four of the enemy went down in that first pass. Proctor describes the first of his two kills: "One fighter, which by my shaky identification looked to be a Frank, turned away a little too early and give an excellent target opportunity with a minimum deflection shot at close range. I fired a relatively short burst and half of his wing came off; down he went." With both formations shredded by the head-on lunge, Proctor soon found himself on the receiving end: "No sooner had I released the mike button than whamo!... tracers were everywhere, some of them hitting my plane. I pulled hard right toward my wingman and Hanson shot the Frank off my tail. Seven planes were heading towards Joe's smoking aircraft, which seemed to be flying in a rather straight and level pattern as if [he] was in trouble. I pulled into them and fired, hoping to make them abort their run. Six pulled up and one turned in a direction that gave me a favourable firing position. He was in a slight left turn when I started to connect. He wiggled and turned and was taking a lot of hits. Finally, a large flame came out of his engine compartment and he turned straight down."

When it was all over, VF-88 would claim eight Japanese aircraft shot down but would pay a heavy price

with the loss of four of its own. Just two of the original six Hellcat pilots survived this attack, Proctor and Hanson.

As for the other Hellcat units flying that day, they would find themselves fighting for their lives just before the radio message of surrender was sent out. Navy unit VF-6 had been bounced by seven enemy fighters over Sagami Bay, claiming one Zeke and two Jacks without a loss. In parallel, VF-31 tangled with Zekes offshore, claiming six, while VF-49 claimed seven A6M5s west of Mito.

The interceptors of the 302nd AG engaged an enemy carrier aircraft in the Tokyo area, with the result being a single kill, two probables and the loss of four fighters during the combat, which closely matches British records. The FAA's 24th Wing engaged 12 Zeros and its pilots were credited with seven fighters destroyed, three probables and four damaged. The 252nd claimed nine enemy aircraft shot down and four damaged that day. Pilots of VF-88 claimed eight enemy aircraft shot down for a loss of four of their own. The stress and confusion of aerial combat caused inflated and over optimistic reports to be made on both sides and the day's events were most certainly clouded by the 'fog of war'. The British and

Americans would, however, have the advantage of gun camera film for confirmation.

## DECODING THE MELEE

Exactly which Japanese units found and attacked the US Navy Hellcats and FAA Avengers and Seafires remains a mystery. It is quite possible that elements from both the 302nd and 252nd were involved. And were there any Japanese Army Air Force aircraft involved as reported by the pilots of VF-88? Regardless, these were the last dogfights of World War Two.

Many questions remain unanswered, but what is clear is the time of combat. The British Seafire pilots reported their action commencing at 05:45hrs and the surrender message and recall of aircraft being issued at 07:00hrs. The pilots of VF-88 report hearing the surrender message at 06:45hrs, with combat shortly after. As for VF-6, VF-31 and VF-49, their skirmishes took place just before the surrender announcement was broadcast. For the British, their last dogfight was a triumph; for the loss of one Seafire and one Avenger damaged, they claimed seven Zeros shot down and four damaged. But the Americans' experience in their last dogfight was a disaster. For the loss of four Hellcats out of six, they claimed eight enemy aircraft destroyed. How many they actually shot down is hard to determine, as is made clear in the Combat Mission Report dated August 15: '3 Jacks and 1 Frank were exploded by VF-88 pilots, but identification is impossible as the pilots are missing.' ●

Below

The A6M5c Type 52 was the most heavily armed and armoured Zero variant, equipped with two 20mm cannon and three 13mm machine guns.

