

Warrior

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Imperial Japanese Naval Aviator 1937–45



Osamu Tagaya • Illustrated by John White

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CONTENTS

HISTORY	4
CHRONOLOGY	10
RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING	10
FLIGHT TRAINING	18
CARRIER QUALIFICATION	21
BELIEF AND BELONGING	22
SPIRIT OF THE IMPERIAL JAPANESE NAVAL AIRMAN	25
DRESS AND APPEARANCE	26
WEAPONS AND EQUIPMENT	27
<small>Armament • Bombs and torpedoes • Wireless equipment</small>	
DAILY LIFE AND FRONT-LINE DUTY	31
TACTICS	45
<small>Fighters • Horizontal bombers • Torpedo bombers • Dive bombers</small>	
THE IMPERIAL JAPANESE NAVAL AIRMAN IN COMBAT	50
GLOSSARY	58
BIBLIOGRAPHY	59
COLOR PLATE COMMENTARY	60
INDEX	64

IMPERIAL JAPANESE NAVAL AVIATOR 1937-45

HISTORY

In the beginning, pilot training in the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) was open only to commissioned officers. As a new and largely unproven field, however, aviation provided little opportunity for career advancement to graduates of the naval academy. With the realization that other sources of recruitment would be needed to expand the ranks of naval aviation quickly, pilot training was made available to non-commissioned officers on a trial basis for the first time in March 1914. With the success of this program, recruitment of aviators from the navy's non-commissioned and enlisted ranks was permanently established in May 1920. Within a few years the number of non-commissioned officers and enlisted airmen came to outnumber commissioned officer pilots significantly. Ultimately, unlike the air forces of the West, in which the number of commissioned officer pilots remained predominant, the Japanese air forces, and that of the IJN in particular, came to rely primarily on non-commissioned and enlisted ranks to fill the sky. Typically only a handful of commissioned officers would be assigned to active flight duty in any unit, normally leading formations down to *chutai* (nine planes) and sometimes *shotai* (three planes) size. All remaining positions were usually held by warrant officers, petty officers and enlisted airmen. As attrition took its toll in China and the Pacific, and as the expansion of training programs proved far too slow, non-commissioned ranks, by necessity, came to assume ever higher levels of tactical command, routinely leading formations of *chutai* size and sometimes larger by the mid-war years. In the Imperial Japanese Navy it was the non-commissioned ranks that produced the largest number of fighter aces and those with the highest scores. It was they who flew the most number of bombing missions. It was they who did most of the flying, the fighting, and the dying.

While the substance of commissioned officer pilot training differed little from that of other ranks, the privileges and responsibilities of commissioned status clearly set those men apart in a service imbued with elitist attitudes. This book endeavors to describe the experiences of a

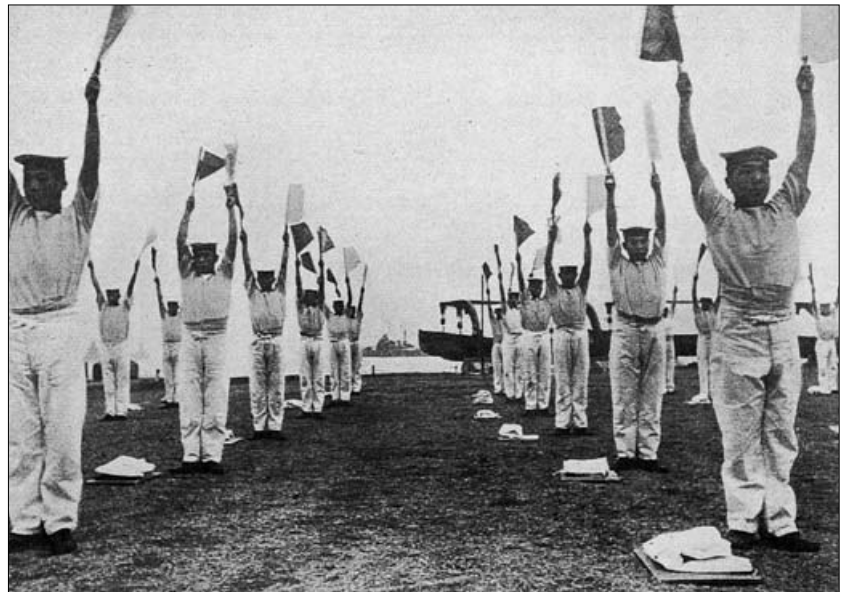
Three trainee pilots in full flight gear watch intently through binoculars as one of their colleagues takes a turn in the air.





Pilot briefing before the mission. The men synchronize their watches on a signal from the mission leader. Both pre-mission and post-mission briefings typically took place outdoors in the IJN Air Service throughout the China War and Pacific War. This photograph, taken during the early stages of the China War, shows the pilots wearing early-style flight goggles with flat lenses and straight upper rims.

Yokaren cadets undergoing semaphore training. The Flight Reserve Trainee Program emphasized all aspects of navy life before proceeding to flight instruction. (via Edward M. Young)



typical IJN airman and will therefore concentrate on the non-commissioned and enlisted ranks to the exclusion of their more privileged commissioned superiors.

In June 1930 the non-commissioned and enlisted pilots' program, previously known by the cumbersome name of *Hiko Jutsu Renshu Sei* (Flying Technique Trainee Program), was formally renamed. Products of this program were thereafter known as *Soh-ju Renshu Sei* (Pilot Trainee) or *Sohren* for short. Shortly before this, in 1928, a new avenue of non-commissioned pilot recruitment had been opened that drew directly from the civilian population. This was the *Hiko Yoka Renshu Sei* (Flight Reserve Trainee Program) or *Yokaren* (the prefix *Hiko* was added in 1936), and the first class under this program began their training in June 1930.

Throughout the 1930s the *Sohren* and *Yokaren* were the two main gateways of enlisted airmen recruitment in the IJN. The *Sohren* program was open, through competitive written examination, to any non-commissioned officer or enlisted seaman already in the navy's ranks. The *Yokaren*, however, drew directly from civilian boys aged 15 to 17 who had completed higher primary school, or the equivalent of second-year middle school, under the prewar education system. It also required a competitive entrance examination. Successful candidates were placed in

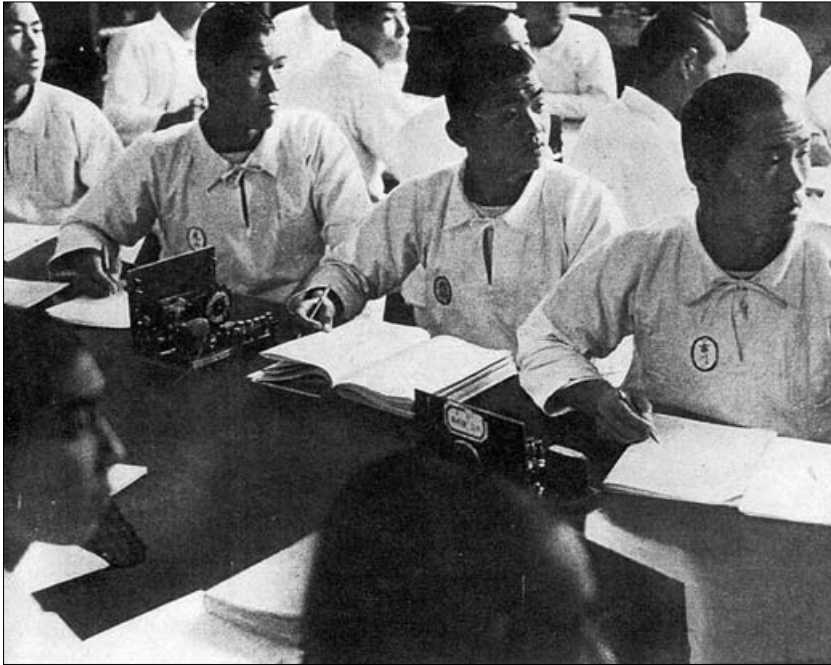
a training program originally lasting three years (shortened to two and a half years following the outbreak of the China War and eventually to under two years following the start of the Pacific War) which concentrated on basic education and training in the ways of the navy. The *Sohren* program, on the other hand, moved quickly on to actual flight training and lasted approximately a year in total as the men under this program had already received basic training in other branches of the navy before becoming pilot trainees.

Up to the end of World War II the Japanese education system was modelled on the German *gymnasium* system and consisted of the following levels: primary school: six years (students who did not go on to middle school could elect, instead, to attend higher primary school, which required two years beyond the six years of primary school); middle school: five years; high school: three years; university: three years.

Following the end of the World War II, the Japanese education system was thoroughly reorganized and remodeled on the American system as follows: primary school: six years; middle school: three years; high school: three years; university: four years (i.e. undergraduate college. Education beyond this level involved graduate-level university degrees.)

As the demand for pilots grew during the course of the decade, new avenues of recruitment were established. An effort to create a pool of reserve officer pilots with university education began in November 1934 with the *Koku Yobi Gakusei* (Air Reserve Student) Program, which drew young men who had graduated from universities and professional schools (under age 26 in the case of universities; under 24 in the case of professional schools). The program was limited initially to members of the navy-sponsored marine division of the Nippon Student Aviation League, a sports flying association with chapters in graduate-level schools throughout the country. Resistance by the naval academy elite to opening the floodgate of commissions to reservists ensured that the program remained very restricted in the years before the outbreak of the Pacific War. The first class admitted only five students, Class No. 8 of April 1941 counted only 43 in its ranks, and Class No. 11 of September 1942 still only had 85. It was not until 1943 that the program was greatly expanded and new programs instituted to cover students attending high school (roughly equivalent to undergraduate college in the postwar education system). This was in sharp contrast to the United States, which by 1940 had established a major program to train men of college age as aviators, thus creating an army of citizen soldier pilots who brought ultimate victory in the air to their nation during World War II.

Despite the narrow-minded views of traditionalists in the IJN, there was no denying the urgency of expanding pilot training as the world drifted towards war in the latter half of the 1930s. May 1937 saw the establishment of a new program drawing on civilian men between the ages of 16 and 19 who had completed three and a half years of their middle school education (equivalent to the middle of first-year high school in the American-based postwar education system.) The first class of this program reported for duty in September 1937, shortly after the outbreak of the undeclared war with China. These men were designated



The cadets listen intently to a classroom lecture. Note the small oval name tags on their work uniforms. (via Edward M. Young)

Ko-shu Hiko Yoka Renshu Sei (A-class Flight Reserve Trainee) and they came to constitute by far the largest category of air cadets. Simultaneously the original *Yokaren* were redesignated *Otsu-shu Hiko Yoka Renshu Sei* (B-class Flight Reserve Trainee). In October 1940 the old *Sohren* system, which drew directly from men already in the navy, was phased out and replaced by *Hei-shu Hiko Yoka Renshu Sei* (C-class Flight Reserve Trainee).

Reflecting the higher level of education with which they entered the navy, *Ko Yokaren* spent only a year and a half (later shortened to a year or less in the latter half of the Pacific War) in basic education and training before moving on to flight training. *Hei Yokaren*, already products of naval training in other branches of the navy, required only a couple of months of basic education before progressing to flight training.

Flight training itself was now standardized for all three classes of *Yokaren* and was known as the *Hiko Renshu Sei* (Flight Trainee) or *Hiren* program. In contrast, flight trainees who were graduates of the naval academy were known as *Hiko Gakusei* (Flight Student).

Sohren training was based at *Kasumigaura Kokutai* near Japan's second largest lake of the same name northeast of Tokyo in Ibaraki Prefecture. The program was later expanded to other bases including *Tsukuba Kokutai* in 1938 and *Yatabe Kokutai* in 1939.

Yokaren were originally based at Yokosuka, but with this oldest of IJN air bases becoming increasingly crowded, they moved to new facilities on the shores of Lake Kasumigaura, just north of the old Kasumigaura air base in March 1939, becoming known as the *Yokaren* Division of *Kasumigaura Kokutai*. When the *Hei Yokaren*, heirs to the old *Sohren* program, started in October 1940, they also moved here from the old Kasumigaura. Then, with the completion of headquarters facilities on the shores of the lake, the *Yokaren* Division became an independent