

## Item of the Week

# SHOICHI SUGITA, JAPANESE ACE

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**KEY WORDS:** Shoichi Sugita Doc Weatherup Shiden-Kai George

*Japanese naval fighter pilots trained during the pre-War period through the Battle of Midway were among the best of any air force at the time. Their training was extremely intensive, resulting in the very skillful pilots, but in grossly-inadequate numbers for the attrition rates that appeared at Midway and after. Saburo Sakai was one of the very few to survive the War, along with Yohei Hinoki (more [here](#)). Most were KIA, including Hiroyoshi Nishizawa. One of them is worthy of note, Shoichi Sugita, shot down on April 15, 1945, **eighty years ago** this week. He was only 20 years old. This is his story.*

## EARLY YEARS

Shoichi Sugita was born on July 21, 1924, in western Honshu's Niigata Prefecture. His family were dirt farmers, very poor. Like many young people trapped in a desperate situation, he sought the security of a military career, enlisting in the Japanese Navy in 1940. He opted for naval aviation, which had a most rigorous and thorough training program. Most pilot candidates washed out in those days, but young Sugita persevered and earned his wings in March, 1942. His initial assignment was to the 6<sup>th</sup> Kokutai (akin to an USAAF "Air Group"), scheduled to attack Midway, but his appointment was too late for him to fight there. The 6<sup>th</sup> was decimated at the great loss of carriers in that battle, losing of its aircraft and almost all of its pilots. Sugita and the few survivors were returned to Japan, incorporated into the 204<sup>th</sup> Kokutai, and shipped out to Rabaul via the carrier *Zuiho* in October, 1942, to fight in the Solomon Islands.

## FIGHTER PILOTS' FAILURE

Sugita quickly earned the reputation of being a very skilled pilot. His first confirmed aerial victory was on December 1, over the Buin air base on Bougainville, near Rabaul. He shot into and damaged an attacking B-17, then intentionally collided with it to make sure it went down, losing part of his own wing in the process. His reputation for aggressiveness only grew from there. Due to it, he drew a plum assignment, supporting Admiral Yamamoto's inspection flight to Buin in April. Sugita would fly one of six "Zero" fighters escorting Yamamoto's party, who were in two lightly-armed "Betty" bombers.

American codebreakers had decrypted Japanese messages that revealed Yamamoto's schedule. Buin was within reach (barely) of fighter planes based at newly-captured Guadalcanal. Navy

brass recognized that shooting down Admiral Yamamoto would be a grievous blow to the Japanese Navy and Japanese national pride/morale. The potential downside was that any successful interception by the Navy could tip the Japanese to the fact we had broken their code.

Captain John Mitchell was given the opportunity to plan and conduct the attack. A group of 16 P-38s would take a roundabout route to the Rabaul area in order to avoid being seen by any Japanese coast watchers, flying a wavetop height to avoid detection by any Japanese radars. At Bougainville, the flight would divide, with a group of four attacking the Betty and the other 12 providing cover. The flight, fight, and successful result is described in an earlier Item of the Week, see [here](#). The mission took place on April 18, 1943 ***one year to the day after the famous Doolittle bombing raid on Tokyo.***

The attacking quartet of P-38s found two Betty bombers; they had expected only one. The six Zero escorts were somewhat out of position, above the bombers, but behind them. They roared down to attack the climbing Americans as the Bettys dove for the deck, hampered by their lack of radios which prevented them from coordinating a defense. Thomas Lanphier turned into the Zeros, breaking up their attack, allowing Rex Barber to approach and attack Yamamoto's bomber and shoot it down, and giving element leader Besby Holmes a chance to free his stuck drop tank, protected by his wingman Ray Hine. The tank came free after Rex had taken a few hits from an attacking Zero; then Rex and Ray dove after the other Betty, which contained Admiral Matomi Ugaki, Yamamoto's Chief of Staff.

Sugita saw the first Betty go down and the second about to come under attack, and headed off in hot pursuit. Sugita saw that Holmes under attack by another Zero, so focused his attention on Holmes' wingman, Ray Hine, scoring damage. Nobody saw Hine fall, but he was the only American not to return, and it is most probable that Sugita was the victor (although both sides in this fracas over-claimed significantly).

All six Zero escort pilots survived, but they failed to protect Admiral Yamamoto, who was killed with all aboard his plane. Admiral Ugaki and two others survived from their crash-landing in the ocean after their encounter with Holmes. The six were utterly disgraced. They would seek some small level of atonement by fighting with suicidal intensity for their remainder of service. Only one of the six would survive the War; Shoichi Sugita was not one of them.

The first to go was killed in action over the Russell Islands on June 7, 1943. Second escort pilot Kenji Yanagiya was WIA over Guadalcanal in that same aerial battle, suffering injuries that would cost him his arm, but allowed him to survive the War as a flight instructor. The third escort was KIA was over Guadalcanal on June 16, the fourth escort pilot died over Rendova on July 1, and the fifth to die fell on July 12.

Meanwhile, Sugita continued to enjoy aerial successes during that period, up until August 16, when he was WIA over the Rabaul-area airfield on Ballale Island in a fight with a group of American Corsairs. He bailed out successfully, but was badly burned in the process, requiring hospitalization and recuperation back in Japan.

## INTO THE FRAY AGAIN

Sugita recovered sufficiently to return to combat by March, 1944. He was assigned to the 263<sup>rd</sup> Kokutai, based first on Truk and then in the Marianas as the American noose tightened around the central Pacific. He continued to fly most boldly. On July 8, he was one of six Zeros flying *en route* to the Palau Islands; his air group leader was in command of the flight. Near Yap Island, the six were ambushed by a group of Hellcat fighters from VF-31. Sugita fought fiercely, and was the only survivor of the six. He saw action next in the Philippines in the 201<sup>st</sup> Kokutai, continuing to build up his score and his reputation. He would rotate back to Japan (a rare event for Japanese Navy pilots!) in January, 1945.

By this time, Japanese backs were against the wall. The American aircraft had been steadily improving since the War began, but the Japanese had been flying the same Zeros they had at the time of Pearl Harbor, with few improvements. However, by the end of 1944, a later model of naval fighter plane, the Shiden-Kai (code-named “George” by the Americans) began to enter service. It was a big improvement over the Zero in almost all respects. But there were few good pilots left to fly them. In desperation, the Japanese turned to kamikaze attacks in order to hold off advancing American naval forces, striving for outright victory or at least to make American losses too high to sustain. They also devised a plan to form a new unit, assembling the very best pilots still able to fly and giving them some of the pitifully-few Georges becoming available.

Captain Minoru Genda, the strategist at the loss at Midway, was tasked with forming the “all-star” team, the 301<sup>st</sup> Squadron, equipped with Georges in December, 1944. Genda personally selected Sugita for the unit, based on past experience since the Yamamoto debacle. Sugita proved himself worthy when he and his wingmen shot down three Hellcats over Kure Harbor on March 19, a feat that earned him a very-rare verbal commendation from IJN High Command.

Iwo Jima had been captured by the Americans in February and it was clear to all that Okinawa was going to be attacked soon. The use of kamikazes increased, basing out of airfields in the Home Islands, Kyushu in particular. The Americans moved to attack the Kyushu airfields to interdict further kamikaze attacks. And Sugita and the 301<sup>st</sup> moved to defend the bases.

## THE END’S BEGINNING

The American Navy was very large by the start of 1945. Among other assets, the Navy had created the massive Task Group 58 in early 1944, building sub-groups around four fleet carriers apiece, screened by battleships and cruisers, with at least a dozen destroyers arranged around each sub-group. TF 58 supported the Iwo Jima invasion fleet in February with both pre-landing bombardments from their capital ships and aerial attacks on air bases in the Home Islands. Kamikazes severely damaged the fleet carrier *Saratoga* and sank the escort carrier *Bismarck Sea* in return. Iwo Jima was a big loss for Japan, as it could serve as both a base for fighter escorts on bombing missions anywhere in Japan, and as an emergency landing field for battle-damaged B-29 bombers.

The B-29s were a real problem for the Japanese. Not so much at first, because jet stream winds aloft scattered bombs dropped from high altitudes. But when General LeMay switched to low-altitude night firebomb missions, great damage was done to the cities and factories of Japan. The attack on Tokyo on the night of March 9/10 killed more Japanese than either of the later atomic bombs.

All that separated Japan from total defeat were the kamikazes. And Task Force 58 knew where they flew from.

## ENTER “DOC” WEATHERUP

Robert Weatherup was the XO of V-46, a fighter squadron assigned to the aircraft carrier *Independence*. He was the best shot in V-46, too. The *Independence* was one of the core carriers in the TF 58.2 subset of TF 58. TF 58.2 and two other subgroups of TF 58 would each target one of the three airfields in the south part of Kyushu to eliminate kamikazes on the ground.

On April 15, 1945, LtCdr Weatherup led a group of 8 VF-46 Hellcats mixed with 20 more from fellow carrier *USS Randolph's* VF-12. The carriers began launching a fighter sweep early in the afternoon when they got three hundred miles from the target airfields. They got pretty close to the target airfields before being spotted. The warning went out to the defending fighters and the pilots prepared to man planes.

Weatherup had considered bringing in his planes at high altitude, a good tactic for attacking high-flying defenders. But he also hoped to be able to shoot up aircraft on the ground. Diving in from 30,000 feet was safe against defending airplanes, but being at such height would make it more difficult to make a surprise low-level attack. He came in at 15,000 feet. The defenders saw him at the same time he saw airplanes moving on his secondary airfield target, Kanoya, where Shoichi Sugita and his fellow top guns awaited on standby, including their training leader, the famed ace Saburo Sakai.

Sugita was to first to sight Weatherup and his VF-46 team, and he and his compatriots began their take-offs. Sakai realized that the planes would not have time to really get airborne before the staffing Hellcats arrived, and called for them to leave their Georges and take cover. Some heard and complied. Aggressive to the end, Sugita and his wingman, Toyomi Miyazawa, did not comply, and managed to get off the ground. Barely.

LtCdr Weatherup had rockets and machine guns at his disposal. He fired the former at an aircraft he saw in a revetment on the way in, then shifted targets to two aircraft he saw taking off. A long burst from his .50 caliber wing guns knocked down Sugita, who was probably dead from the bullets before his George exploded upon impact near the runway. Doc followed with an attack on the trailing George with identical results.

The victories over Sugita and Miyazawa were LtCdr Weatherup's only two of the War. He retired from the Navy in 1961 and worked for McDonell Aircraft until retirement in 1982.

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