
The Zero Pilot

Clive James

On the *Hiryu*, Hajime Toyoshima
Starred in the group photos like Andy Hardy,
He was so small and cute.
His face, as friendly as his first name
(In Japanese you say *hajime* at first meeting),
Could have been chirping: 'Hey, why don't we
Put the show on right here in the barn?'
After Pearl Harbor he was one of the great ship's heroes
And the attack on Darwin promised him yet more glory,
But his engine conked out over Melville Island
From one lousy rifle bullet in the oil system.
Caught by natives, he should have done it then,
If not beforehand when the prop stopped turning.
Instead of hitting the silk
He could have nosed over and dived into the ground
But he didn't. When the natives closed in
He could have shot himself with his .32
But he didn't do that either.
Under interrogation he was offered chocolate
Which he ate instead of turning down.
What was he thinking?
He didn't get it done
Until a full two and a half years later —
After the Cowra breakout, which he helped
To lead, madly blowing a stolen bugle,
Psyched up to guide his party of frantic runners
All the way to Japan. Upon recapture
He finally did it with a carving knife,
Sawing at his own throat as if to cancel
That sweet, rich taste of surrender,
The swallowed chocolate. His ruined Zero
Is on display in Darwin. The empty bulkhead
Is torn like silver paper where the engine raged
That once propelled him through the startled sky
At a rate of roll unknown to Kittyhawks.
Paint, cables, webbing, instruments and guns:
Much else is also missing,
But the real absence is his,
And always was.
Hajime is short for
'Our acquaintanceship begins:
Until now, we did not know each other.
From this day forth, we will.'
Well, could be,
Though it mightn't be quite that easy.
Buried at Cowra,
He probably never knew
That the *Hiryu* went down at Midway,
Where the last of his friends died fighting —
Still missing the cheery voice
Of their mascot, named always to say hello,
Who never said goodbye.