



Zero or all for Naught?

With just over a year passing, since the start of the war in Europe, decisions were being made concerning the equipment purchases for the expanding RAAF

On the 29th October 1940, the Advisory War Council Meeting was held in Melbourne with several topics discussed. One of those present was Sir John Latham.

Having served a distinguished political career including as the Leader of the Federal opposition (United Australia Party) in the late twenties and early thirties, he was appointed Chief Justice of the High Court in 1934.

His electorate then elected a new member, who would later become Prime Minister in 1939 and then again in 1949.

At the commencement of hostilities, Sir John returned to politics it seems and was appointed as Australian Minister to Japan. This appears as an Ambassador role.

Older Australians would remember some of the nicknames that were given to Sir Robert, one being in particular, *Pig Iron Bob*. This was derived by the fact that substantial amounts of pig iron were traded to Japan, prior to the outbreak of the Pacific War.

An interesting topic brought up by Sir John Latham, who it seems, may have been approached by Japan to supply aircraft to Australia.

The discussion was centred on maintaining good relations with Japan by placing an order for aircraft to the value of 500,000 Australian Pounds.

This was perhaps view that such an order would put Japanese interests opposite to Germany. All agreed at the meeting of the proposal and a recommendation was forwarded to the Prime Minister, Sir Robert G Menzies KC. MP on the 31st October 1940.

Sir Robert replied in the positive and stated that immediate steps would be taken to examine the proposal in his reply of the 4th November 1940.

On the 14th November 1940, the Minister for Air, Mr J “Blackjack” McEwen sent an advisement, stating *finally* that since June 1940, Mitsubishi Shoji Kaishi Ltd had indeed approached the Aircraft Production Commission in providing service and training types for the RAAF.

He stated that for obvious reasons that the Department felt that it could not rely on Japan for war materials, but continued to negotiate on training types to fulfil the needs of the EATS for 1940 and 1941. The approved type would fill the need in the same way as the Avro Anson.

Negotiations progressed to the point whereby the company submitted a proposal on the 12th September 1940 to supply 250 of such a twin-engine type as follows:

- Shipment to commence in ten months and completed in 20months thereafter.
- Price per plane complete to be approx. twelve thousand, five hundred Australian pounds, free on board ex Main Port Japan.

- Payment to be made by counter-pay to Japan, not in cash, but by product (platinum, pig iron, scrap iron, molybdenum, nickel, aluminium and lead, to name but a few items that would seemingly come flying back in 1942)

The Chief of Air Staff threw his opinion in by stating that all deliveries should be made “immediate delivery”, given the needs of the EATS.

On the 2nd December 1940, the Advisory War Commission minutes (Minute #50) carried an extension of the decision and I quote:

“ It was recommended that further enquiries should be made as to the possibility of obtaining immediate delivery of fighter types of aircraft, and the importance of the continuance of the negotiations was emphasised”



Perhaps we may have had been delivered 75 x Aus 6 Model 4 Naughts by September 1941. With mixed Japanese colours with standard RAAF Malaysian markings? What a thought! GRB

Minister for Air, Mr J McEwen in his letter of the 12th December 1940 to the Prime Minister on behalf of the Chief of Air Staff, stated:

“By making inquiries for operational types, we will reveal to Japan not only that we are short of this class of aircraft at the moment, but that our prospects of obtaining them from British or American sources are not clear.

We cannot expect the best performance fighters from Japan in view of the relations existing between that country and Great Britain at the present time

Japan is a potential enemy and one with which hostilities cannot be ruled out, and to obtain operational aircraft from such a source would deprive us of any possibility of tactical surprise in the event of war since the Japanese would be thoroughly familiar with the capabilities and limitations of their aircraft

*Difficulties of inspection both during the manufacture in Japan and on delivery would be very great and incapable of solutions under present conditions. **In this connection, sabotage by means of delay action explosives is a real possibility”***

The last comment or perhaps selling pig iron and being called *Pig Iron Bob*, let alone being probably being called *Zero Bob*, swayed the mind of the Prime Minister.

Suffice to say, the chances of a Mitsubishi Zero flying in RAAF Colours in 1941 *flew out the window* after that statement in December 1940!

The main reason could have been that the Japanese Imperial Government joined Germany and Italy in September 1940 in an alliance for world domination called the Tripartite Pact.

Special thanks to the National Archives of Australia for their ongoing support and timeless effort in making one of the greatest repositories of documents in Australia.

Gordon R Birkett @2006