

Janis Kozlowski: What do you remember about that day that Dutch Harbor was bombed?

John Pletcher: Well, I was at Cold Bay and part of our squadron, I think, part of our squadron, was at Umnak. Part of our squadron was at Cold Bay and part of it was at Umnak and they had a fighter squadron of P-40s, the fighter squadron was at Umnak. And those were the fighters that intercepted the Japanese fighters, the Zeros and other airplanes that had bombed Dutch Harbor.

In fact, a P-40 apparently shot down one of them, they recovered an intact Zero up here. The pilot apparently thought he had an engine problem, because the line going to his fuel pressure gauge that it hit, apparently in the raid on Dutch Harbor, and he wasn't getting any indication on his fuel gauge. He thought he was about to lose his engine so he elected to make a forced landing. He was over tundra, which from the air looked to him like nice grass, which it was, but it was deep and soggy and wet [*laughing*], and humpy so he put his wheels down. It took him over on his back and killed him - killed the pilot but it didn't damage the airplane too bad.

The Navy discovered the airplane, one of their PBYS discovered the airplane, so they sent a crew in and salvaged the airplane – the Zero – and shipped it back to the States to an air depot where it was rebuilt and put it in flyable condition. Test pilots down there flew it to find out what its' performance abilities were and how best the American fighters could fight against it, what tactics worked the best.

Because, the Zero was quite a surprise to the Americans, in the fact that it was a light, fast and short turning airplane. It could turn shorter than our airplanes and it could make shorter turns and it could land faster than most of our fighters that it came in contact with. So the fighter pilots had to learn that you don't get into a tussle with them where you're fighting a normal dogfight. You have to come in with excess speed and altitude where you got the excess speed to do battle with the Zero. The airplane was a fairly, by our standards, was quite a flimsy airplane, but it was strong enough to do the job for the Japanese. But it was quite a surprise when the Americans first started running into the Japanese Zero to find out what a fighter it was.