

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

#373

ZENJI ABE

JAPANESE PILOT

INTERVIEWED ON

DECEMBER 1, 2001

BY ROBERT "BOB" P. CHENOWETH

TRANSCRIBED BY:

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**USS *ARIZONA* MEMORIAL
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

Robert “Bob” P. Chenoweth (BC): ...so I’ll go ahead and do that and then I’ll ask the questions I had talked to you about just a minute ago. The following oral history interview was conducted by [*Robert P.*] “Bob” Chenoweth for the National Park Service, USS *Arizona* Memorial, at the Hilton Hawaiian Village, Tapa Room 329 on December 1, 2001 around 1200. The person being interviewed is Zenji Abe, who was a dive-bomber pilot on December 7, 1941, flying from the aircraft carrier *Akagi*. For the record, please state your full name, place of birth and birth date.

Zenji Abe (ZA): Zenji Abe, born 1916, August 18.

BC: And where were you born? The place.

ZA: Oh, Yamaguchi prefecture.

BC: What do you consider to be your hometown in 1941?

ZA: [*I was out of my hometown since 1933. I don’t understand what is your question?*]

Naomi Shin (Interpreter, NS): (Speaking in Japanese)

BC: What were your parents’ names?

ZA: [*My father’s name was Kumakichi Abe, and mother’s was Masa Abe.*]

NS: I was born in the countryside, mountainside in Yamaguchi prefecture, Japan.

BC: How many brothers or sisters did you have?

ZA: Two elder brother[‘s], one elder sister, [*and*] one younger brother.

BC: Could you tell me about your education, formal education?

ZA: I spent six years in primary school, Kanno town in Yamaguchi prefecture. And then went [*entered*] Yamaguchi Middle School, four years. And then naval academy.

BC: When did you enlist into the naval service and where, from where?

ZA: *[I think I enlisted into the naval service when I entered the naval academy, Etajima, April 1933 from Yamaguchi Middle School.]*

BC: When you completed your academy service, did you then go into flying training to become a pilot?

ZA: *[I graduated at the naval academy, March 1937. At that time was promoted to the rank of midshipman. And then we joined the training cruise to the Mediterranean Sea. Some training in (Navigation, gunnery, communication, damage control etc.) were necessary prior to becoming an aviator.]* Do you understand that?

BC: Yes, you were midshipman.

ZA: Right.

BC: And when you finished the naval academy, did you then, did you become an ensign?

ZA: *[I finished the naval academy March 1937, and became a Midshipman.]*
[After] one year [we were] promoted [to] ensign, March next year, [1938.]

BC: I see. Okay, after you were promoted, what did you do then for your military service?

ZA: *[Right after return from the training voyage, October 1937.]* *[All] 160 classmates [Midshipman] [entered the] air training school [for a month.]*

NS: And they got a kind of test, who would be able to be pilot or...

BC: Crew?

NS: Yes, yes. *[Pilot or navigator, aviator.]*

BC: And where was your training? Where was your flying training?

ZA: *[I was transferred to the cruiser Kumano as anti-aircraft gunnery officer. In April 1938, I transferred to the destroyer _____ as assistant navigator. While in August same year I was ordered to enter Kasumigaura air training school for flying training.]*

BC: Did you, when you were going through your training, did you train to fly specific types of aircraft? Did you fly, for example, float planes or attack planes? Was the training selective at that time?

ZA: *[I went through training through March 1939. Yes we trained to fly only by basic training plane, not by specific type of aircraft. When we graduated, the school selected us for specific type of aircraft.]*

BC: So you were not flying when...

ZA: Then...

BC: ...you were on the destroyer?

ZA: *[In] August of [1938], I [was] picked [to go to] air training school. And then trained, six, seven months in Kasumigaura, very basic training [by training airplane.]*

NS: As a pilot.

ZA: *[Oh as an aviator.]*

NS: As a pilot?

ZA: Yes. *[As a airman, pilot as well as a navigator.]*

NS: As a pilot.

BC: When did you finish that training?

ZA: April of next year, [1939.]

?: Next year.

ZA: From Kasumigaura.

(Speaking in Japanese)

BC: So, April of...

ZA: April of next year, [1939.]

NS: Thirty-[*nine*].

ZA: At the time, we were [*selected*] ten, for fighter pilot. Ten [*as the*] pilot[s] of three-seated attacker. And ten for navigator. And only four [*including*] me were pilot of the dive-bomber, only four.

NS: Only four of them including him became, yes, were chosen as pilot of dive-bomber.

ZA: It was [*specialist selection*]...(speaking in Japanese)

NS: Professional?

ZA: [*We four*] went through the [*Ohmura Air Base, Kyushu*] for training [*as*] dive-bomber [*pilot*] and ten other pilots went to Oita Air Base for] fighter pilot training, [*10 three-seated attack pilots to Tateyama, and ten air navigators to Yokosuka.*]

BC: Train squadrons, yeah.

ZA: [*Yes, training squadron of each air base.*
]

BC: Okay.

BC: Can you tell me a little bit about your training as a dive-bomber pilot?

ZA: Training [*for dive-bomber aviators comprised, taking off and landing on the flight deck of the carrier, dive bombing toward the moving target. Dog-*

fighting, navigation, reconnaissance and escort of the fleet against hostile submarines etc.]

BC: Yeah.

ZA: [*Diving angle*] was about fifty-five degrees [*at top*] speed, [*aiming at a*] target on the ocean. That [*was*] the main mission of dive-bomber.

BC: Okay. When did you finish this training as a dive-bomber pilot?

(Speaking in Japanese)

ZA: [*IO did finish that training in August 1939.*]

NS: July 1939 promoted to lieutenant.
Nineteen thirty-nine promotion.

ZA: This time, '39, promoted to...

NS: Lieutenant junior.

ZA: Lieutenant junior. And then transferred to the aircraft carrier *Soryu* as a platoon leader [*of dive- bomber, a*] platoon, that [*consisted of*] three aircraft, three bomber[*'s.*]

BC: Three bombers.

ZA: One platoon.

BC: How many aircraft were in the dive-bomber squadron?

ZA: [*A squadron consisted of*] three platoon[*s*], [*therefore*] nine [*aircraft were in the dive-bomber*] squadron.

BC: And how long did you stay on *Soryu*?

ZA: [*I stayed six months on Soryu, from November 1940 until April 1941.*]

BC: Did you fly combat from *Soryu*? Did you fly combat in China?

ZA: No, just training, [*no combat flight in China.*]

BC: Just training.

ZA: Just training.

BC: And when did you begin your training for the Pearl Harbor attack?

ZA: [*I think we began our training June or July 1941, but I did not know that the training was for the*] Pearl Harbor attack.

BC: So the groups did not train together? The different attack groups did not train together?

ZA: [*Same kind airplanes for,*] four aircraft carrier [*were assembled at each air bases in Kyushu.*]

BC: So all the dive-bombers together?

ZA: That's right.

BC: All the attackers together.

ZA: That's right. That's right.

BC: I see.

ZA: That's right.

BC: I see. So did you have an idea something big was going to happen?

ZA: [*No,*] at that time, I didn't feel that.

BC: You didn't have that feeling.

ZA: No. I thought something [*changed*], the training method. You know that? But we didn't know at all.

BC: But was that a normal way to train? To take all the dive-bombers from four aircraft carriers, all the torpedo planes from four and put them together to train? Was that the normal way?

ZA: The training type changed June, July, since June, July.

BC: Uh-huh.

ZA: For example, torpedo attacker, [*its release altitude became down to 20 meters from 200 meters.*]

NS: Shallow sea.

BC: Yeah.

ZA: You know that? Yeah?

BC: They should be in the deep ocean. Yes.

ZA: [*In former times,*] torpedo attacker [*used to shoot at one*] hundred meter [*high*] towards the target. At [*that time*], torpedo sank maybe, forty meter or fifty meter underneath of surface.

BC: Yes.

ZA: Then [*repeat up and down*] this way. [*Thus, the torpedo runs about 600 meters in the water.*]

BC: Yeah.

ZA: After [*running*] 600 meter, [*torpedo depth is*] set underneath, three meter, four meter. Just [*toward*] the body of the target.

BC: Uh-huh.

ZA: But Pearl Harbor, so [*narrow*] and so shallow, so.

BC: So your training was beginning to be different.

ZA: Yeah, yeah. For example, dive-bomber, before that [*time*]. We dropped [*at an altitude of*] 800 meter[s]. But we didn't match a hit. So then down to 600 meter, release button. A little bit much hit. But it [*was*] not enough.

BC: You were not hitting at 800 meters, so you released at 600 meters.

ZA: Then, [*finally, release altitude became*] 400 meters.

BC: Ah.

ZA: [*When we dash in a steep dive we use the*] air brake underneath of the wings, [*and release at an altitude of 400 meters. If we not use air brake*] [*Aichi D3A1*], 99 type dive-bomber will go over the top speed and crash.] Altimeter [*calls thru the voice tube from navigator in back seat,*] 600 meter...

BC: He calls it?

ZA: "Ready, [*shoot*" at 400 meters.] [*I release the bomb aiming*] target in [*my*] scope.

BC: Yes.

ZA: Then [*put back*] air brake, five, six [*times the force of*] gravity [*hits me*]. And [*I lose sight a moment, my*] aircraft [*goes*] down to [*about,*] thirty meters [*in altitude above*] the water. The training style changed like that.

BC: So how did you feel when this training began to change? Did you still not think something big was going to happen?

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

(Speaking in Japanese with interpreter)

NS: Well, ten years before from that time, Japanese [*army*] sent force to [*China*] and everybody knew in the navy, so he was thinking something going to happen.

BC: Okay.

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: And daily necessities are getting short, short. And the atmosphere in Japan were very...

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)
[*Gloomy.*]

NS: He was suspicious that something would be happening.

BC: So when did you begin to prepare exactly for going to Hawaii?

(Interpreter speaking in Japanese)

BC: Coming back to your ship, everyone going up north and getting ready to sail to Hawaii.

ZA: [*No, most officers and men did not know that, only*] the main officer['s *about*] thirty or forty were [*notified*] about Pearl Harbor attack.

BC: Oh.

ZA: I remember...[*I knew that in the meeting at an air base in Kyushu.*]

NS: October 1941?

ZA: Middle of October 1941. But that was secret of secret.

BC: So did you come back to the *Akagi* in October of 1941 and then stayed on the ship or when exactly did you return to *Akagi* to get ready?

NS: (Speaking in Japanese) After the meeting held, gathering thirty - forty persons at Kasanohara Airbase, he went back to *Akagi* and...(speaking in Japanese).

ZA: No, no. (Speaking in Japanese)
[*We came back to each air base, and continued training about a month.*]

(Speaking in Japanese)

NS: He doesn't remember where he was stationed, whether...

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)
[*I think I stayed at Tomitaka.*]

NS: ...either in Tomitaka or Kasanohara.

ZA: Yeah, not back to *Akagi*. That's the training in Kyushu.

NS: So he went back to Kyushu.

BC: So I guess what I want to know is when did they report back to the ship?
When did they fly back to the ship and then prepare to go up north?

ZA: I think sixteenth or seventeenth of November 1941, aircraft, return to *Akagi*.
I think so. So we had one-month training period since I knew the Pearl Harbor attack and then go out toward Hitokappu Bay.

BC: So on the way from Hitokappu to Hawaii, can you talk about the preparation, the activity on board the ship?

ZA: Yeah. The way from Hitokappu to Pearl Harbor? Oh. (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: Aircraft were in hangar, yes.

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: Once a day...

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: ...they went down to the...

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: ...they went to the cockpit of the aircraft which were stored in the hangar.

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: They used to sit so that they would remember (speaking in Japanese)...

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: ...so that their bodies will be accustomed with the aircraft.

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: Or they had training to, pointing out each U.S. aircraft carriers. For example, that is *Maryland*, that is (speaking in Japanese)...

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: ...in a room...

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: ...to identify each U.S. aircraft carrier.

BC: Did you know the target that you were going to attack at that time?

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)
[*Yes, I knew that our target was a U.S. aircraft carrier.*]

(Conversation off-mike)

BC: Yeah, we need to stop.

END OF TAPE #1

TAPE #2

(Conversation off-mike)

BC: Okay, I was asking if you knew at this time when you were practicing in the cockpit every day, did you know the target that you were going to attack?

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)
[*Yes, I knew what was my target.*]

NS: He was in the second wave group, dive-bomber of the second wave.

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: His mission was to attack U.S. aircraft carriers.

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: But he understood at that time, they were informed that no U.S. aircraft carriers were in anchor in Pearl—there was no U.S. aircraft carriers in anchor in Pearl Harbor.

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: And from the first wave, level bombers, torpedo bombers, were ordered to attack main ships.

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: And including him, they took off from the aircraft carrier so the dive-bombers from the second wave were ordered to attack U.S. aircraft carriers that were attacked by the first wave again, to attack those aircraft carriers again.

BC: But there were no aircraft carriers.

NS: No.

BC: So they got the...

NS: Sorry, I made a mistake.

BC: ...aircraft carrier?

NS: So the dive-bombers from the second wave were ordered to attack the main ships...

BC: Main ships.

NS: ...yes, that were attacked by the first wave.

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

[As there was no aircraft carrier in the harbor, our target was changed to the main ships.]

NS: So he would like to say that as the first wave has attacked main ship, U.S. main ships already, and most of them were sunk into the bottom of the sea, so the attack made by second wave were not so...were not necessary.

BC: So actually when you came to make your attack, where did you drop your bomb?

ZA: *[I knew later that my target was Arizona. It was a big one, anchored north east side along Ford Island, no smoke, no fire. I could not distinguish that was already sunk, when I dashed into hell diving.]*

BC: *At Arizona?* The battleship *Arizona*. How do you think was the result of that? Did your bomb hit the ship?

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

[Yes, my bomb hit Arizona, but I knew later that my bomb was wasteful.]

NS: Okay. They hit *Arizona*, but he heard later that the first wave has already attacked the *Arizona* and it has sunk into some meters down of the surface.

BC: But did you drop your bomb at *Arizona*?

ZA: Yeah, big one. But (speaking in Japanese).

NS: So before shooting the bomb, he didn't know, he did not know that the *Arizona* was sunk already, [*be*]cause by dive-bombing fifty-five degree [*angle*] and there was [*no*] smoke. They were [*no*] smoke and [*no*] fire. So he didn't know that the *Arizona* has been sunk already.

BC: Do you remember the time of your attack?

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: He thinks 8:40 or 8:50 Hawaii time, local time.

BC: After your attack, could you explain your return to the *Akagi*? How did you go back? What way?

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: They gathered at the rendezvous point after the attack.

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: He waited at the rendezvous point for about a half-hour, but his second aircraft didn't come back.

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: Other seven aircraft came later.

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: Okay and then together with those seven aircraft, they waited [*20 miles west of Kaena Point at an altitude of 1000 meters,*] flying around and waited [*for*] the rest of the aircraft there.

BC: So only eight planes returned?

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)
[*Yes, .that's right, my squadron.*]

NS: So those aircraft had shot and they had holes in their bodies.

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: Therefore...

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: ...he thought his second aircraft had been shot by U.S. and crashed down, he thought.

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: And he gave up waiting on his second aircraft and...

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: ...and fly back to *Akagi*.

BC: Where was your rendezvous place?

ZA: Just twenty miles west of Kaena Point [*and*] the altitude, 1000 meter[s.]

BC: One thousand meters altitude?

ZA: One thousand meters height, twenty miles west of Kaena Point. That was the rendezvous point.

BC: And when you returned to your aircraft carrier, when you flew out, did you see any American fighter planes? Any American aircraft?

ZA: [*I think I returned to Akagi 1130 Hawaii time.*] I did not see anyone on the [*Oahu*] island. Because I was [*rear*] squadron so (speaking in Japanese) all airplanes, [*gone*] out. I didn't. But later, I knew that [*Second*] Lieutenant Kenneth [*M.*] Taylor, [*Second*] Lieutenant [*George S.*] Welch and other P-40 took off from Haleiwa and counterattacked towards our second wave. I know that story. Maybe my second plane was shot down by [*Second*] Lieutenant Welch.

BC: So when you landed back on the *Akagi*, was your airplane damaged?

ZA: [Yes, all planes of my squadron had some bullet holes. *I landed back on Akagi before noon.*] I knew the three dive-bomber of the third platoon of the first squadron [*were shot down.*]

(Speaking in Japanese)

ZA: Yeah, yeah. *Hai.* (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: Yeah, there was three or four shot.

BC: Damaged?

NS: Yeah, damaged.

BC: Were you aware that Commander Fuchida was discussing making another attack? Did you know about that?

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: He was not in the position to discuss about the later plans, so he didn't know.

BC: Didn't know.

NS: No, he didn't know at that time.

BC: How did you feel about making another attack? Did you think that it would have been a good idea to attack again?

ZA: *[I think another attack was unnecessary, and I think that our second wave should attack other targets, oil tanks, dockyard etc., not main ships.]*

(Speaking in Japanese)

NS: He thought it was *[right]* to abandon the second attack as *[only]* one dive-bomber from the first wave was damaged *[but fourteen]* dive-bomber[s] *[of]* the second wave were *[lost]*. Total twenty*[nine, including Kate and Zero aircraft]*. And there was so much damage for Japan *[in]* the first attack, second wave attack was not necessary as a result. So purpose, original purpose has been achieved so second attack was not necessary, he thinks.

BC: After you returned to the carrier, can you talk about your return to Japan and also what other battle after Pearl Harbor, what other battle did you participate in?

ZA: *[We returned to Japan late in December. And in early January we left Japan heading south.]*

(Speaking in Japanese)

NS: From January to April 1942, he participated Southeast Pacific theater. So he was in the war. He went to Java, north of Australia, and Port Darwin.

ZA: Then toward Bengal Bay, Indian Ocean. *[We sank the British heavy cruiser Dorsetshire and Cornwall, 5th April; and the British aircraft carrier Hermes, 9th April south of the Island of Ceylon.]*

NS: Would you like to have the specific year of those?

BC: I know it was in early 1942. So he stayed aboard *Akagi* through—were you at the Midway battle?

ZA: No. *[I was not at the Midway battle.]*

BC: No.

ZA: No. After came back from Indian Ocean, I transferred [*to*] another new aircraft carrier from *Akagi*.

BC: Which aircraft carrier did you change to?

ZA: *Junyo*. [*Converted*] from the transport ship to [*an*] aircraft carrier. Then...

BC: Did you participate with *Junyo* in the Aleutian battle?

ZA: That's right. Yes. [*Akagi and the others were going to*] the Midway operation. We went up to the [*Aleutian*.]

NS: He was...

BC: So how long did you stay on *Junyo*?

ZA: [*I stayed two months on Junyo*.]

NS: Okay from May 1942, he posted to *Junyo* and then he posted to *Hiyo*, H-I-Y-O, in July 1942.

ZA: *Hiyo* was sister...[*ship of Junyo*.]

BC: Sister to...

ZA: ...*Junyo*.

BC: So from *Junyo*, did you stay on *Junyo* for the remainder of the war or another ship later?

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese) [*No, early October, My aircraft carrier Hiyo left Japan with Junyo heading south*.]

NS: Okay, he went to Aleutian battle and then he came back to Ominato and then he was transferred to *Hiyo*.

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: And on *Hiyo*, he went down to southeast.

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: In Japan, we say “South Pacific war,” but he heard your people say, “Santa Cruz?”

ZA: [*Sea battle off Santa Cruz.*]

NS: Battleship.

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: A few days before that, this war...

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: ...*Hiyo* had engine trouble...

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: ...so dive-bombers and fighters from *Hiyo* went down to...

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: ... Bougainville Island.

ZA: From there we attacked Guadalcanal. (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: And its sister ship, *Junyo*, was (speaking in Japanese)—was hit?

ZA: (*Speaking in Japanese*) *Junyo* lost [*almost. All attacks in sea battle off Santa Cruz.*]

NS: Was [*lost*] at Santa Cruz, *Junyo* _____.

ZA: Then attacker of the *Hiyo* transferred to *Junyo*, _____.

NS: So attackers from the...*Hiyo*, transferred to *Junyo*, were transferred to *Junyo*.

BC: Where were you at the end of the war, when war came to an end? Were you on board ship or in Japan?

ZA: I was on Rota Island, located between Saipan and Guam. There's a small island, Rota. It was 19 June, 1944. [A forced landing after the Mariana sea battle.]

BC: So you came there in June of 1944, to Rota?

ZA: Rota. [I attacked USS *Bunker Hill*, one way] attack. And following months August Guam Japanese garrison [was defeated]. So all air [space], sea [lanes were] occupied [by] America. Japanese [navy], could not rescue me. So I stayed until war over, isolated in Rota until August of next year, 1945. So spent fourteen months [on] Rota Island, in the cave. Really every day, American attack, machine-gunning, bombing, as if Rota was a training field of American aircraft. No means we had, we had no ammunition, no guns.

BC: Just waiting.

ZA: Yes.

--: Yes, I would like to ask, when the second wave dive-bombers reached Battleship Row, the battleship *Nevada* was trying to get out of Pearl Harbor. Did you see the *Nevada* as you were attacking the *Arizona*? And if you did, what did you think about its trying to leave Pearl Harbor?

(Speaking in Japanese)

NS: He didn't see *Nevada*. There weren't *Nevada* when he attacked.

ZA: Already.

NS: Gone.

--: It had already gone?

ZA: Yeah.

--: It had already left?

ZA: That's right.

BC: I don't have any more questions. Thank you very much.

ZA: Welcome. I appreciate. (Speaking in Japanese)

(Speaking in Japanese)

NS: If he could add in addition to what he says, most of the historians says Japan, purpose of this Pearl Harbor attack was to make time, four month in order [*to succeed Japanese southern operation.*] But Isoroku Yamamoto [*was thinking another way. He believed that he could crush American's fighting spirit by sinking U. S. main ships.*]

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: In the pamphlet that *Arizona Memorial* has published, it says second wave attack was very... [*severe to, most ships and airplanes on the field were damaged enough by the first wave attack. Then the second wave attack did not produce additional effect.*]

ZA: Severe.

NS: ...severe, heavy.

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: However...

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: ...as U.S. main ships were damaged severely already by first wave...

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: ...there was no use. It was not necessary to attack again by the second wave.

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: So it did...

ZA: (Speaking in Japanese)

NS: So why Isoroku Yamamoto not let second wave to attack, gasoline tanks and ammunition and other important facilities. He wonders.

BC: That's an important question that people have asked. I think it was just very difficult for the pilots to communicate with each other and to communicate back with the ship to make those decisions.

END OF INTERVIEW