Japanese Aircraft over Melbourne 1942

Around noon on Wednesday the 18th of February the I-25 a Japanese submarine was nearly 400 miles southeast of Sydney heading south. Orders were to send a floatplane (Yokosuka E14Y ‘Glen’) over Melbourne’s Port Phillip Bay in order to ascertain the number of Allied warships sheltered there.

Bass Strait is deep enough for a submarine to run submerged. To play it safe the Japanese decided to launch the floatplane from Cape Wickham at the northern tip of King Island which lies at the western end of the Strait about halfway between the mainland and Tasmania.

Before launching the reconnaissance aircraft, the submarine made a submerged daylight run across Bass Strait to Cape Otway. The aim was to observe shipping movements in the Strait. The submarine came to within ten miles of the Victorian coast and began observations with the periscope.

Two hours before dawn on the 26th of February Nobuo Fujita and Shoji Okuda were ready for their mission over Melbourne. The I-25 was ten miles north of Cape Wickham. For an hour the submarine had been on the surface at a reduced speed, while the assembly crew readied the plane for flight. The conditions were calm and cloudy with very little wind. With her two diesels engines engaged I-25 began a high speed run on the surface to generate the necessary wind for launching.

The plan was to fly north across Bass Strait, making for Cape Otway. From there the plane would bank to the northeast and follow the coast to the Point Lonsdale lighthouse as it stood at the narrow entrance to Port Phillip Bay. This leg of the flight would take 90 minutes, from Point Lonsdale the pilot Fujita would swing north to continue to Melbourne.

To start with the Japanese pilot found himself flying through heavy banks of cloud. After a while he emerged into air that was clear. Fujita was at 1500 meters. The navigation lights were off. Soon the plane was in cloud again, Fujita was dependant on his instruments. It was not possible to make more than a rough guess of the planes position. When he judged he was over Cape Otway he brought the nose around to the northeast. Fujita crossed the coast to the west of the lighthouse, where concrete gun emplacements had been recently built among the sand dunes and tea trees. The heavy cloud hid the plane from view and the surf drowned out the sound of the engines so that the chances of detection were small.

Fujita flew across the Bellerine Peninsula and heading north-northeast the ‘Glen’ floatplane passed over Portarlington and began the 24 kilometre run across the western reaches of the bay. Dawn was seeping into the eastern sky. There was no uplet in the cloud. Fujita eventually saw what looked like a valley in the clouds and descended. He pushed the nose down keeping an eye on the altimeter as the plane descended in the cold grey air. At 300 metres the floatplane went through the base of the clouds.
The Japanese plane had come down right over the Royal Australian Air Force base at Laverton. RAAF Laverton was the home base for 12 Squadron with its Wirraway Fighter/Trainers as well Hudson and Avro Anson Bombers. Nine RAAF personnel sighted the aircraft at 6.45am. They reported it was a "twin float single engined monoplane dark in colour". Two searches were flown seaward as a result of the sighting. Three Wirraways were ordered to Bairnsdale as a striking force.

Regaining the safety of the clouds, Fujita continued on his instruments towards Melbourne passing over Altona, making occasional descents to check his progress. Fujita was making for Williamstown where four heavy anti-aircraft guns were set up alongside the rifle range. The crews were carrying out routine examinations on the guns. Fujita flew over Melbourne at 300 metres noting the Yarra River, the commercial business district, the docks at the mouth of the river.

Melbourne had participated in a national brownout fifteen nights earlier. Even on that occasion some lights could be seen, few people took the danger of attack seriously. Streetlights had been burning in all suburbs as Fujita approached Melbourne.

Okuda (the Observer) had the canopy back and his binoculars out, through breaks in the clouds he counted 18 vessels at anchor. He noted 6 warships proceeding in line astern towards the Port Melbourne docks. Fujita checking through his own binoculars concluded that the leading ship was a light cruiser. The others were what appeared to be destroyers.

Fujita flew back over land near Dromana and continued towards Cape Schank it was an easy 175 kilometre run back to Cape Wickham light Fujita had no difficulty making his way back to the submarine. Fujita was surprised and concerned to find the submarine so close to the lighthouse. The landing position had been fixed at a point 10 nautical miles east of King Island 1-25 had drifted west on the current. It was only six nautical miles east of the lighthouse. The crew were concerned the submarine would be seen from shore so the aircraft was recovered and I-25 was underway before it was fully stowed.

The 2 seat Yokosuka E14Y 'Glen' reconnaissance floatplane. It was used for many reconnaissance flights over Australia during World War 2. It was stowed in a cylindrical water tight hangar at the front of Japanese "I" type submarines. The "Glen" was able to be broken down into 12 components for storage in the hangar.

The "Glen", once assembled on the deck of the submarine, was launched from a 20 metre inclined steel tracked catapult on the forward deck. Being very slow it was an easy target for Allied aircraft if spotted. Their recce flights (normally around 5 hours duration) were usually carried out under the cover of darkness to avoid such an occurrence.

The "Glen" was armed with a 7.7 mm machine gun mounted in the rear cockpit.