

ANOTHER Australian aircraft recently put on display at the War Memorial also has a colourful, but shorter history than the Deperdussin.

It is a World War 2 Wirraway that shot down a Jananese Zero.

An oil painting of the incident has been hanging in the War Memorial for many years, but this is the first time that the actual aircraft has been displayed.

Official war history records the action this way:

On December 26, 1942, Flying Officer J. S. Archer, pilot, and Sergeant J. L. Coulston, observer, were on tactical reconnaissance over a Jananese ship, wrecked off Gona when Archer sighted a Zero about 1000 feet below.

Without hesitation he took the advantage offered by his position, put the nose of his aircraft down and fired a five-seconds burst with his Browning .303 gun.

The Zero plunged into the sea.

Not long afterwards Charlton at squadron headquarters received an understandably elated signal from Dobodura which read, "Archer has shot down one Zeke, repeat one Zeke. Send six bottles beer."

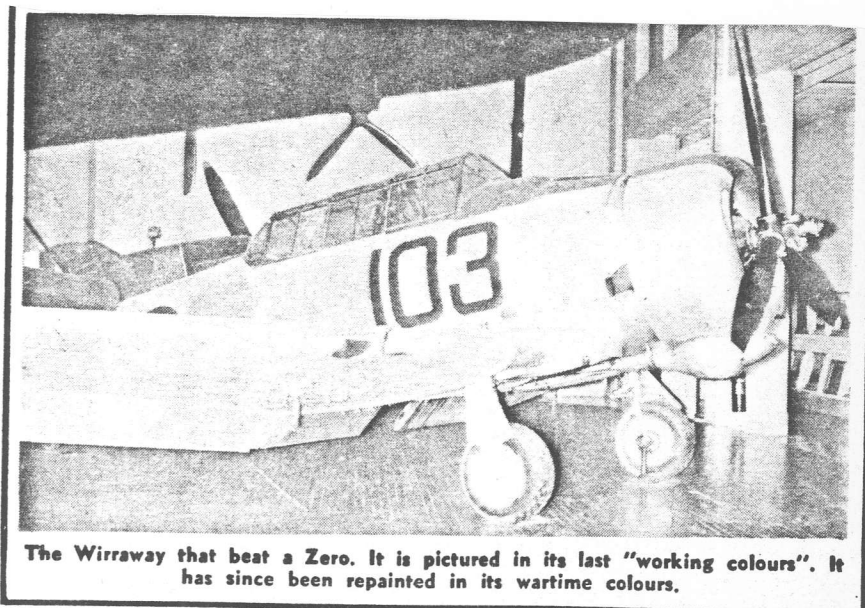
The victory was unique; the beer — a precious commodity — was sent. (Ends war history.)

On the official aircraft recognition charts supplied by the RAAF during World War 2, is made the notation of the Wirraway:

"Possible confusion is Japanese Zero Mark I (Zeke), or Mitsubishi 01 (Oscar), but from underneath the different wing plans show the difference."

The Wirraway on display was offered to the Australian War Memorial in August, 1958, by the Department of Air. It was then at No. 1 Aircraft Depot, Detachment B, RAAF Tocumwal, N.S.W.

It was sent by road to the War Memorial in March, 1959.



The Wirraway that beat a Zero. It is pictured in its last "working colours". It has since been repainted in its wartime colours.

Zero-slaying

Wirraway awaits facelift

CANBERRA TIMES

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War Memorial plans \$20,000

appeal to complete project

By **NORMAN ABJORENSEN**

The modest little Wirraway — the first military aircraft to be mass-produced in Australia — was in essence a trainer, but the exigencies of war saw it operating as a front-line fighter as the Japanese thrust into New Guinea.

For a complex variety of reasons, not the least of which was Britain's desire to protect its aircraft markets by discouraging overseas manufacture, Australia was forced to turn to the United States for a suitable aircraft, choosing the NA-33, made by the North American Aircraft Corporation in California.

This particular model was powered by a Pratt and Whitney single-row Wasp radial engine, and recommended itself on the grounds that both the airframe and the engine were relatively simple and presented no great construction problems for an industry not yet on its feet. With modifications for Australian service, it was dubbed the Wirraway — an Aboriginal word, quite appropriately, meaning "challenge".

With war looming, the Government of the day was bogged in a mire of controversy over military matters and it was widely feared that Australian air capabilities were not up to scratch to fight a modern war. In such a climate was an opinion sought from Sir Edward Ellington, Marshal of the Royal Air Force.

Sir Edward was a believer in the imperial might of Britannia, and when he arrived in Australia, he made the point that, first, Australia's first line of defence lay in England — Japan could never attack Australia without first overcoming British power; and, second, that Australia was safe from airborne attack.

In a wide-ranging report that examined, among other things the accident record of the RAAF, he personally inspected the Wirraway.

"I understand that it is intended to use it in replacement of the [Hawker] Demon as a fighter bomber," he said. "I consider that the Wirraway should be regarded as a temporary expedient ... it can only be regarded as an advanced training aircraft." It was hardly a glowing endorsement, but the Government had already placed an order for 40 of them at a favourable price, with the option of more to come.

By 1941, with war already in

the Wirraway would be able to put up "quite a good show". It was, he conceded, an obsolete type but it did have some fighting value.

Doubts notwithstanding, the Wirraway was produced in large numbers — 755 in all at the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation's plant at Fishermen's Bend in Melbourne, and the last one of the type remained in service until 1959 as a trainer.

For all its faults, the Wirraway has a special place in the hearts of the men who flew and maintained them, especially those redoubtable fliers of No 4 Squadron who last week held their reunion in Canberra.

There is a very special glory attached to No 4 Squadron and the Wirraway because on Boxing Day 1942, air force history was made in New Guinea when a Wirraway brought down a Zero. Flying Officer Johnny Archer, who now lives in Sydney, and his observer, the late Flight Sergeant Les Coulston, were carrying out reconnaissance over a Japanese ship which had been bombed off Gona, but was thought to be still in use.

The Wirra was cruising at around 1000 feet when Archer spotted a Zero below him. As the No 4 Squadron history records: "There was not time for indecision, so, without hesitation, Johnny put the nose of the Wirra down. He fired a five-second burst with the Wirraway's twin 303s, firing through the prop — and thank God his aim was spot on! The Zero took a nose dive

‘... an obsolete type but it did have some fighting value’

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straight into the sea."

History compiler Cec Graham wrote: "I believe John Archer said he knew if he didn't get the Jap, first shot, the Jap would get him. Even if these were not his words, one could imagine would be the thoughts racing through his mind immediately he saw the Zero.

"Immediately John and Les got back to base and reported what had happened, a signal was

John White, "but it simply can't be done in a day and a night."

Mr White agrees on the historical significance of the plane, commenting that it "is probably the most original and historically significant example of the type to survive."

"The Wirraway was simply never envisaged as the type of aircraft to take on the Zero — lighter, faster and better armed. That particular Zero had to be the unluckiest Zero in the war."

After its action in New Guinea, the Wirra was flown back to Australia for use on convoy patrols and later was used as a trainer, being retired in 1957. It was fortunate that it has spent most of its non-flying days under cover and has not been unduly affected by the weather and corrosion.

"After half a century, A20-103 is in remarkably sound condition; it is fairly complete and has little corrosion damage," Mr White says.

The War Memorial is working to a long-term plan to restore the Wirraway to its authentic war-time state which involves dismantling and cleaning it, fitting out the interior, repairing damage, and re-assembling and painting the exterior in an authentic 1942 scheme.

"The memorial will not rebuild the machine to flying condition: the purpose of the work will be to preserve the Wirraway and as many of its original features as possible. This work must be carried out to very high standards," Mr White says.

It is an arduous and painstaking task, further complicated by the fact that the aircraft were continually modified and the log books have been checked closely to ensure historical accuracy.

Before starting it was necessary to find original technical information — service orders, manuals, parts lists, photographs and many rare parts.

"The history of the Wirraway has been carefully researched so that its story can be told fully for the first time," Mr White says.

He explains that parts cannot easily be found, and it has taken years of work to track down the required items including radios, armaments, bombs, instruments and vital nuts and bolts. Pieces have come from Papua New Guinea, New Zealand and the US.

In Australia, bits have been found in disposal stores, junk

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By 1941, with war already in Europe and the prospect of Japan entering the conflict, the Australian War Cabinet looked at what an enemy Japan might use in the Australian operational area. Main interest centred on a new naval air service single-seater fighter which entered production in 1940, equipped with two 20mm cannon and two 7.7mm machine-guns, and a top speed of 300mp/h — the plane that came to be known as the Zero.

At a subsequent meeting of the War Cabinet, the Army Minister, Percy Spender, referred to the impression that the Wirraway would "generally be able to counter Japanese seaborne aircraft", when in fact, on what was known, the Wirraway would not be able to compete.

Sir Charles Burnet, Chief of the Air Staff, was at the meeting and he did not share the minister's assessment. He thought the high-powered Japanese aircraft referred to would be relatively few in number, and having regard to the type of Japanese air-

craft, faster and better armed.

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"Immediately John and Les got back to base and reported what had happened, a signal was sent to HQ at Moresby which read — 'Archer shot down one Zeke — Send six bottles of beer'.

"Some reports state that the beer was sent immediately, but I've been told by a pilot who was there at the time that it was never sent — because there was none to send!

"Flying Officer Archer was awarded the American Silver Star. Flight Sergeant Les Coulston was awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal.

"The Wirraway in which this amazing feat was performed was A20-103, so that [it], and the crew, have a special place in the memories of all 4 Squadron personnel."

It just so happens that this self-same Wirraway is now owned by the Australian War Memorial and is undergoing a meticulous restoration — but not fast enough for the members of 4 Squadron who believe that it should be promoted to pride of place at the memorial.

"I can understand that feeling

lighter, faster and better armed. That particular Zero had to be the unluckiest Zero in the war."

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In Australia, bits have been found in disposal stores, junkyards, abandoned airfields and in the hands of retired servicemen and enthusiasts. Some parts have had to be made, often at considerable cost — a gun sighting ring, for example, not much bigger than a fist, cost \$2000 to be made with precision engineering.

Despite the fears of 4 Squadron that their pride and joy has been forgotten, the War Memorial is preparing to launch a public appeal for about \$20,000 to complete the work.

The old battle-scarred Wirraway is not the only survivor of the class. A group of Cathay Pacific pilots have restored a Wirraway in Queensland to flying condition, a feat that has excited the veterans of 4 Squadron.

"I know it is exciting to have an old plane in the air, but restoring for display and historical accuracy and restoring for flying are two totally different things," says Mr White, quickly adding for reassurance that his Wirraway remains in the best of care, stored in carefully controlled