



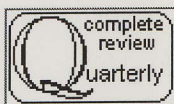
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Zero Over Berlin

by
Sasaki Joh

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Title: *Zero Over Berlin*
Author: Sasaki Joh
Genre: Novel
Written: 1988 (Eng. 2004)
Length: 346 pages
Original in: Japanese
Availability: [Zero Over Berlin - US](#)
[Zero Over Berlin - UK](#)
[Zero Over Berlin - Canada](#)

- Japanese title: *Berurin hiko shirei*
- Translated by Hiroko Yoda with Matt Alt

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Our Assessment:

B : workmanlike World War II adventure-story

See [our review](#) for fuller assessment.



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The complete review's Review:

Zero Over Berlin begins decades after World War II, the author explaining how he came to hear of this story and how the first few pieces of it -- old memories, out of place sightings -- fell into place. The claim seems a fantastic one: that a Japanese pilot flew a so-called Zero fighter to Germany all the way from Japan in 1940 -- an unlikely feat, given the enormous distance, much of it across already hostile territory. *Zero Over Berlin* is the pseudo-historical story of this incredible journey.

The reason for the journey is that the Germans are dissatisfied with their own fighters -- especially their lack of range, which severely limits their ability to bomb England. They hear about the Japanese Zero fighter, which has a much longer range than any German plane, and think it might be the answer to their problems. Negotiations lead to the Japanese -- new German allies -- promising to deliver two Zeros to Berlin, so that the Germans can test them for themselves and, if they're suitable, license them so they can produce their own version.

Delivery isn't easy in wartime. The two main problems are finding pilots able and willing to risk the trip, and finding a route the planes can take -- along with stops every 2000 miles or so, for rest, refuelling, and maintenance.

Flying over the Soviet Union is out of the question: the Germans haven't attacked it yet, but this is a secret they want to keep from their Soviet allies. That leaves a southern route, which means flying over British territory -- India, especially, but Iraq as well -- and while there is no state of war yet, the British would hardly consent to a Japanese fighter making its way to Europe this way. A good chunk of the novel follows the diplomatic and personal efforts of the Japanese to secure landing strips in this hostile territory. As it turns out, in each of the spots -- two in India (Bengal and Rajasthan), then Iran and Iraq -- there are local possibilities to work with. Especially in India and Iraq the English have quite a few enemies. But those enlisted to help also have their own agendas, which might complicate the trip. In addition, secrecy about something on this scale is very difficult to maintain.

Finding pilots also isn't that easy. But those in charge of the project do

find their men -- two grounded troublemakers with an extraordinary record of success. Ando is the central figure, a lone wolf type who lives by his own code, which has gotten him into a good deal of trouble. But he's also possibly the best pilot the Japanese have, with a record number of kills -- and the skill to perform even an Immelmann (the ultimate fighter-pilot manoeuvre). (Unfortunately, the manoeuvre is misspelled -- as a single-'n'd *Immelman* -- in the book.) The other pilot is his devoted wingman, Inui.

Much of the book builds up to the journey. There's considerable space devoted to the negotiations with the various parties whose help must be enlisted along the way -- offering a decent bit of insight into local issues of that era, from Indian and Iraqi struggles for independence to the somewhat uneasy new German-Japanese alliance. Wartime Japan (long-active in China by then) is also well-described, especially Ando's independent attitude in contrast to the ever-more rigid society of that time.

The book doesn't bog down in airplane-detail -- the weeks of training barely mention any actual flying -- and it's a surprisingly broad canvas. From a touch of romance to many aspects of Japanese culture and then local colour en route, it covers a lot of ground. The presentation is a bit plodding, the writing a bit stilted, but there's enough variety -- and entertaining fighter-pilot tales -- for it to be fairly consistently engaging.

The account of the trip also proceeds briskly. There's adventure on the way, of course: information may have leaked out, and those who are supposed to help sometimes have more pressing business. It's fairly well-done: gripping enough throughout, a good adventure romp.

The foregone conclusion -- one plane did make it, but Germany did not, after all, license or build its own Zero fighters -- renders all this a bit anticlimactic, but it's still a decent ride for as far as it goes. Ando, especially, an un-Japanese independent spirit (who nevertheless commands the loyalty of his crew and fellow pilots) is an interesting figure and admirable hero.

Much more than just a plane-ride story, *Zero Over Berlin* offers a broad canvas of a world uneasily slipping into a world war. It's not artfully done, but it's interesting and makes for decent entertainment.

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Zero Fighter:

- [Mitsubishi A6M Reisen \(Zero Fighter\)](#) at WWII Imperial Japanese Naval Aviation Page

Sasaki Joh:

- [Official site](#)

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About the Author:

Sasaki Joh is a popular Japanese author.

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