



第十義勇

From Tokyo to Rome, 1931
Young Japan

Japanese aviation historian **KŌJI YANAGISAWA** uses the personal diary entries of one of a pair of intrepid Japanese aviators who made a remarkable long-distance flight from Tokyo to Rome in a two-seat biplane in 1931 to chart the course of what would become a forgotten symbol of Japanese aviation's pioneering years. Translation by **PAUL THOMPSON**

IN NOVEMBER 1930 Hōsei University in Tokyo announced that it had decided to sponsor a flight to Europe on behalf of the newly formed Japan Students' Aviation League (JSAL). The endeavour was backed by newspaper company *Asahi Shimbun* and supported by a society specifically formed for the purpose within Hōsei University. Hyakken Uchida [for this feature we have used the western custom of putting family name last — Ed], a professor of German at the university, who also happened to lead its Aviation Research Group, suggested the planning for this venture. Initially, the goal was to fly to Berlin, but it was reportedly changed to Rome because, according to the popular proverb, "all roads lead to Rome".

EASTBOUND PIONEERS

Why did Uchida hit upon the idea of a flight to Europe? Probably because of a series of long-distance flights undertaken by Japanese pilots in the reverse direction, from Europe. The first was that of 25-year-old Seiji Yoshihara, who had landed at Tachikawa airfield in Tokyo on August 30, 1930. Flying a Junkers-A 50 Junior monoplane, he had covered the 7,086 miles (11,404km) from Berlin in 79hr 58min flying time.

The following day Zensaku Azuma (aged 37) landed his Travel Air 4000 biplane (named *Tokyo*) at Tachikawa to complete a round-the-world flight. After departing Los Angeles, California, on June 22, 1930, *Tokyo* had flown east across the USA, Azuma becoming the first Japanese pilot to traverse the American mainland. Having crossed the Atlantic Ocean, he followed a route from London via stops in Berlin and Moscow before crossing Siberia and touching down at Tachikawa. Azuma had planned to land at Tachikawa first, but he apparently offered the chance to Yoshihara to complete his flight first.

As a Japanese, Hyakken Uchida became excited at the prospect of further long-range flights. Providing him with added encouragement was The Hon Mrs Victor Bruce (*née* Mildred Petre), an Englishwoman who had flown solo in Blackburn Bluebird IV biplane G-ABDS, an aircraft in the same class as Azuma's *Tokyo*, eastabout around the world with ocean crossings completed by steamer. Departing from London on September 25, 1930, she flew via South-east Asia and arrived at Tachikawa on November 24.

Seeing that a woman pilot flying a biplane could take up the challenge, Uchida thought that if a student had the piloting skills and painstaking preparations were made, it would be possible for



TAH ARCHIVE

ABOVE Described by the international press as "The Lindbergh of Japan", Seiji Yoshihara stands beside the Junkers Junior in which he flew from Berlin to Tokyo via Koenigsberg, Smolensk, Sverdlovsk, Omsk, Krasnoyarsk, Chita, Harbin and Osaka in 1930. He made a failed attempt at a transpacific flight in 1931.

one of them to fly to Europe during the summer break. Although not a record-setting flight, it would be a fine opportunity for a goodwill exchange between Japanese and foreign students. A plan was set to select a student as first pilot accompanied by a veteran pilot instructor, the flight to Europe serving as part of the tuition.

AND THE WINNER IS . . .

Japanese pilots had already succeeded in flying a pair of French-built Breguet 19s, named *Hatsukaze* (First Wind) and *Kochikaze* (East Wind), owned by *Asahi Shimbun*, to Paris via Siberia in 1925. Uchida was determined that, come what may, the JSAL flight would be undertaken in an indigenous Japanese aircraft. At the time the flight was announced, Hōsei University's Aviation Research Group was made up of six members, of whom only two were qualified to fly solo. Training commenced to select a pilot for the flight to Europe from among these six members.

On March 18, 1931, the selection of first-year economics student Moritaka Kurimura (23) was

OPPOSITE PAGE Ryotaro Kumakawa (left) and Moritaka Kurimura stand beside Ishikawajima R-3 J-BEPB, named Seinen Nippon (*Young Japan*) at the aircraft manufacturer's factory at Tachikawa airfield in Tokyo in April 1931, shortly before undertaking their epic 92-day flight to Rome. ALL PHOTOGRAPHS VIA AUTHOR UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED