

A6M5 (ZEKE) - Zero Fighter

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The Mitsubishi A6M Zero is to WWII Japan as the Bf 109 is to Germany, as the Spitfire is to the U.K., and the P-51 is to the U.S.A.

Designed to requirements set in 1937, the year of Japan's aggression at the Marco Polo Bridge in China, Jiro Horikoshi's Mitsubishi team accomplished the impossible. The light, nimble, lethally armed fighter provided maximum visibility and the extraordinary range the above-mentioned fighters initially lacked but was essential in the vast distances it would fight throughout China and the Pacific. In fact, the day after Pearl Harbor where they were carrier-launched, other Zeros escorted bombers to destroy the US air forces in the Philippines from land bases in Formosa, some 1,125 statute miles roundtrip. The Zero's remarkable performance came from the unremarkable 950hp Sakae engine (when other aircraft already had up to 2,000hp), at the sacrifice of



armor plating for the pilot and self-sealing fuel tanks and other protection.

Like the aforementioned aircraft, the Zero fought from the wars first to last days as different marks (all Zeros were A6Ms). The mark was indicated after the A6M, for example A6M5. Even so, the Imperial Japanese Navy never gave Mitsubishi the high performance engines they requested.

The A6M5 was deployed in the fall of 1943 mounting the same 1,130hp Nakajima Sakae engine seen in the earlier model 22 Zero. The newly designed, multiple exhaust pipe propulsion system increased top speed to 565 km/h.

Armed with two 7.7mm machine guns in the cowling and 20mm belt-fed cannons in the wings, the A6M5, in the right hands, could be a formidable foe.

The Zero was built in larger numbers than any other Japanese aircraft but was never replaced by far superior aircraft that Japan produced too few and too late in the war. It wasn't until later sub-variants of the A6M5 that the Zero put on weight to protect the pilot and fuel tanks.

Though the capture of a Zero in the Aleutians is legend, less known is the fact that after Japan's Marianas debacle and loss of Saipan, America obtained over a dozen of the new A6M5 Zeros and promptly tested them

against our fighters to learn its strength and weaknesses. This, and the irreplaceable loss of most of Japan's best pilots and carriers, made Japan's fate inevitable.

A U.S. Navy Technical Air Intelligence crew of two sailors led by an Ensign landed under fire on Saipan, and with the help of Seabees, dug in on one end of disputed Aslito airfield (later to be renamed Isley Field) while the Japanese continued fighting at the other end of the airfield. As the Marianas Turkey Shoot progressed overhead, a Zero with burning port wing crash-landed on the field and strafed the Navy position. Three counterattacks were repulsed that night.

After dawn the T.A.I. obtained a Japanese gasoline truck that needed a generator along with a donor truck for the generator and made the switch under continuous sniper and mortar fire. The aircraft they targeted for salvage to the States were in revetments and on taxiways at the upper end of the field in areas still partially held by the Japanese. Under covering fire from the 4th Marines and the US Army's 27th Infantry Division, the T.A.I. made fast runs with two sailors and two Seabees to an outlying revetment, pushed an aircraft out by hand, lifted the tail, tied it to the truck and

drove away at speed as a caisson is drawn to a safe hangar – during which they were under rifle, machine gun, and mortar fire.

In two weeks they had 24 Japanese planes, including the newest A6M5 Zero, 30 spare engines, and some 300 boxes of parts to haul back to Wright Field for immediate evaluation.

Before I dive into this model in detail, let me first state that these 62 grey plastic parts, four clear parts (three if you close the canopy), two poly caps, and decals for three options will produce the very best 1/72nd A6M Zero model today's money can buy, and is possibly today's very best 1/72nd WWII fighter kit!

Tamiya's 1/72nd A6M5 Zero represents the last major, mass produced, version which entered service in 1943. Previously, Tamiya released the very best 1/32nd scale Zero kits and others just as fantastic in 1/48th scale. This is Tamiya's first-ever 1/72nd Zero release and their first 1/72nd aircraft release in five years. I hope they have IPMS Seattle Chapter Newsletter Page 11 other 1/72nd aircraft models waiting to be released of earlier Zero variants, as well as other popular WWI thru Vietnam aircraft. Included in this kit is a supplemental history of the A6M Zero which illustrates as well as tells a

brief history of the birth and growth of one of the best fighter aircraft of its time. It covers the main variants and differences between them and compares its performance against their main adversaries. The illustrations include wingtip fold detail, wired engine, and side view of two unidentified Zeros, "AI-I02" (an A6M2) that would have served on the Akagi (AI) in 1941-42, and "3D-126" with 6 kills, which my other references reveal to be a late war A6M5 of the 302nd Air Group flown by ace Ensign Sadaaki Akamatsu. Mitsubishi won the original design contract but Nakajima made more than half of the over 10,000 Zeros built! In fact, Nakajima refused to bid, stating that the requirements were unrealistic!

This kit is not one of Tamiya's larger scale Zeros shrunk down, but has been designed to give that impression. But it's not perfect (what kit is?), which I'll explain, hoping Tamiya and other manufacturers will take note and perhaps make today's best kits even better and worth digging deep to gladly purchase one! I'll even make note of other contemporary 1/72nd Zero kits that are available, including one worthy of second place.

Tamiya's sturdy box is topped with an excellent but modest painting of an A6M5 from the Carrier Junyo in the 1944 Marianas skies. The touch of class continues with the box itself, protecting and containing the kit while you build it. The packaging seals each parts tree in a poly bag – one for the clear parts tree, another for the light grey parts tree, another for the propeller poly caps and finally the decals, each in a separate poly bag so they arrive intact and in perfect condition. You get a choice of a two-piece closed or three-piece open canopy, which is a must when you have any interior detail to show off at all – and this kit has plenty! Tamiya provides a one-piece clear gun sight with clear flat panels pre-posed. It would be near impossible to assemble a two or three part gun sight with hard-to-see, much less handle, tiny fiddly parts. Simply paint the body black and the padded end that sticks into the cockpit a leather brown. Don't glue in the gun sight until very near the end of your build.

Tamiya references Tamiya brand paints that basically agree with most of my references. IJN interiors were painted a color similar to the U.S. zinc chromate, including some instrument panels. Instrument faces were usually black and control boxes were a darker green. Tamiya provides some instrument panel and

side panel decals, but not all. Very good, fine raised detail is molded on the instrument panel and inside fuselage walls and includes a few separate parts like the throttle, identified only as "cockpit parts." I painted, washed, and dry brushed to good effect. I recommend that you paint the instrument panel an even lighter zinc chromate for greater contrast with the dark instrument decals. The 7.7mm machine guns properly butt thru the firewall, but they presented the only exposed ejection marks to be seen. Therefore, I would assume with a model this good that Tamiya intended them to be there because they are not ejection marks or they figured they won't be seen once in place and seen thru the canopy. The cocking mechanism is molded on but the truly ambitious modeler would replace them with photo etch.

There is a most excellent, detailed, floor. Glue the control stick before you install the seat and even the lever to raise/lower the seat! The rear cockpit bulkhead has different sized lightening holes drilled thru, but there are only indentations and no actual lightening holes in the thin seat. You can drill out the lightening holes but I was happy with painting the seat, filling the 'holes' with a wash and then dry brushing it. Strategically position the excellent decal seatbelt so it

doesn't cover too many holes and you're done with this sub-assembly. The bottom of the seat is correctly a simple bucket shape in which the pilot sits on top of his parachute. Once tucked into the cockpit, I don't know if you'll appreciate the difference between drilled and simulated holes. I brought the seat rest, part A28, thru the back of the bulkhead A41, lined up the bar into its clips, and cemented it from the back. Adjust the height, then add the seat from the front of the bulkhead. The seat does not attach flush to the rear bulkhead – it stands proud of it. Make sure the seat is no higher than the fuselage sides, and looks squared away from the front and top view. Some Zero photos show that the pilot has the seat raised high during takeoff so he could see better. I imagine pilots like Saburo Sakai had occasion to lower the seat as low as possible to become as hidden a target as possible! Finally, make sure the cockpit parts assemble into a squared up, amazing drop-in unit (it fits in from underneath the closed fuselage), much like you'd find in large scale models! Make sure it's painted before doing so. Hidden interiors were often painted what appeared to be clear or a metallic blue, including the wheel wells, landing gear legs (except for chrome pneumatic parts), and deep inside the fuselage and wing. Watch the instruction sheet for

instructions to cut off stubs or open holes and make sure it is appropriate for the version you are building.

The seat itself is the design fitted in most Zeros. The Squadron Signal book shows a better armored seat that was fitted into A6M5 and later versions but doesn't indicate exactly when the change took place. You would need to look inside the real airplane you're building to determine which style seat belongs there or just use the seat Tamiya provided. If you judge one of these Zeros in a contest, don't be surprised if a modeler uses the later style seat. Similarly, Tamiya gives you the option of installing the tail hook or replacing it with a panel (part no. A14). IJN Zeros by necessity flew off land bases as the war progressed and their aircraft carriers were sunk. They saved a lot of weight and improved performance if they left off the tail hook and faired over the open space.

The wings are one long bottom piece with an upper right and left top wing. The holes for the cannons and pitot tube are notched out on the bottom wing, but Tamiya advises you to cut out the hole in the upper wings too. Rather than risk botching aligning the holes, I assembled the wings, then cut my notch in each upper wing. The wings don't quite fit perfectly and require some nominal sanding. You'll be

amazed at how thin the trailing edge is! The fuselage halves are an almost perfect fit. The wing assembly fits into the fuselage, again, in an almost perfect fit. I left the tiny cannons, pitot tube, aileron mass balances, and clear parts off until the end, to minimize time on my knees searching for lost parts. Still, I managed to lose the cannons and pitot tube into my magic carpet and replaced them with stretched hollow sprue. No head-on view is provided to show you the proper wing dihedral, landing gear leg angle, and stabilizer angle, but my references came through for me. Wheel well detail is all minutely molded on, including tire tread. The retraction mechanisms for the small undercarriage doors are separate parts.

The one-piece cowling, with one-piece separated cowl flaps, is designed to look scale thin and to ease construction. The exhaust pipes are molded as one left and one right side, so you don't go crazy fiddling with impossibly tiny individual parts. The three-part engine traps a fourth part, a poly cap that allows you to add the finished propeller in one of your last steps. I shortened the prop's stub, as it was a very snug fit thru the poly cap. The engine is one of the best I've seen. There are notches (keys?) and cutouts that align the engine parts and their fit into the cowling, and the cowling onto

the fuselage. Dry fit and be patient, as they don't all lock together like Lego blocks! I had to trim away some of the cooling air intake part C10 to make it fit, because I didn't align everything perfectly. Depending upon the specific aircraft you're modeling, the prop and spinner are painted a medium brown both sides along with decal markings provided.

Tamiya has the finest engraved panel lines, but that means you can't lay the paint or clear coats on too heavy! Similarly, a "very good" to-scale radar loop and aileron balance weights are provided. There are no bombs, but a centerline drop tank is included. Note that Hasegawa kits feature very fine engraved panel lines while Academy's are more prominent, which would be most beneficial if you add a wash.

The upper wing "Do Not Walk" thin red lines and stenciling decals lack the outboard line to close the rectangle. This is correct for the aircraft Tamiya depicts according to Tamiya's instructions, but looked odd to me. I opted to model an aircraft confirmed 27 kill ace Sadaaki Akamatsu flew from Atsugi airfield near Tokyo, February 1945. I borrowed the red warning rectangles from an Academy A6M5 kit, along with their two part Hinomaru decals. The under wing Hinomarus are from the Tamiya kit. The yellow Cherry Blossom kill markings

are from aged Authenticals Decals that may be older than you! I clear coated them with Future floor wax and Super Scale International decal Super Film. Blossoms with the vanes represent confirmed victories while those without vanes meant a probable or shared victory. These small, old decals still needed to be soaked thru and handled with care.

On the plus side, Tamiya provides decals for the yellow leading edge wing markings, making it easier for any of us to build an accurate and attractive model without serious masking. Fine stencils are also provided.

I use the "Future floor wax decal system" with great success. I apply Future wet by cotton swab where the decal will go, then position the decal in place and finally, "sandwich" the decal with another coat over the decal. When thoroughly dry I spray a coat of Dull Kote or other flat finish. The clear carrier film disappears and the final coat of Future sucks the decal down, even into Tamiya's fine engraved panel lines.

Some of Tamiya's decals for black-outlining-the-red Hinomarus are not perfectly aligned and appear odd. Usually, the national marking, the Hinomaru, had a white or yellow outline, if any. Late in the war the outlines were

sometimes overpainted with black or IJN Dark Green so the aircraft would not stand out as much. That the "outline" would appear off center too is intentional, according to Tamiya and other references, especially for late in the war when it was painted in the field by the crew. Tamiya's kit markings are provided for three "pilot unknown" IJN green-over-gray schemes:

1. Nakajima made "652nd Air Group" Carrier Junyo flagship Carrier Div. 2 Mariana Sea June 1944
2. Nakajima made "653rd Air Group" Oita Prefecture, 1944
3. Mitsubishi made Rabaul Air Group, Rabaul, New Britain Island, 1943-4

All have a blue-black cowling (black for all intents and purposes). During the last years of the war there were some interesting looking Zeros, as well as some historically famous ones flown by the last surviving Naval aces, Group, and Squadron leaders. I would have preferred more colorful or historical markings choices. Tamiya's three Zeros share similar paint schemes and decals, and are not identified by pilot. In fact, few Japanese pilots had their own airplane and the opportunity to have personal markings. Not many Japanese aircraft bore kill markings and, when they did, they often

indicated kills attributed to that airplane, not the pilot! Some leaders tallied their unit's combined kills on their mount.

At a glance, Tamiya's is certainly the best Zero kit by some criteria, especially with their killer cockpit. The only real complaints are the unexplained, surprising choice of intentionally off-center Hinomarus and the choice of unknown pilots' markings when I would have preferred (and chose) markings for specific aces' planes. I think Tamiya should have noted on its instructions that their markings are correct even though unusual. And the \$28 MSRP! Academy's beautiful A6M5 model can be found for \$10 or less, is very nicely detailed, though the cockpit isn't up to Tamiya's standards, and has the bonus of accurate bombs, an ace's markings (CPO Takeo Tanimizu's yellow 03-09), and dead-on decal color registration. Hasegawa's A6M2 and A6M3 are 20 yrs old and suffer from the one-piece closed canopy, basic cockpit, and generally retails near \$20. [Ed: Hasegawa also makes an A6M5, which was released in 1994 and has periodically been resued.] Airfix's brand new A6M2b costs even less and is certainly the best value for your money, except it is an A6M2b – an earlier mark Zero than Tamiya's late A6M5 and, though it makes into a very fine model with basic cockpit

and closed canopy, it is not so very fine as Tamiya!

Tamiya shoots for the very best and charges for it. I think they could be the absolute best. How could the best get better? The Zero canopy begs for a masking set and/or a pre-painted canopy that could be included. It has to be able to be posed open. Dragon has lead the way with slide molding – Tamiya can use their version to open up the cannon barrels, the pilot's seat lightening holes, and the exhaust pipe ends. A sitting and standing pilot and a ground crewman would add extra value in 1/72nd, just as Tamiya has already appreciated in the larger scales. Positionable flying surfaces, including detailed landing flaps that can be posed dropped, would be welcome and not over- complicate the build. An extensive decal sheet of notable pilots/aircraft would boost Tamiya over the top. Throw in a display base plate and/or a stand, too, if you will. But "plane Janes" (or should I say Zekes?) with unexplained off-register markings, indentations rather than holes, and high prices could make the modeler take a closer look at Academy's offering. I can highly recommend the Tamiya kit to modelers at every skill level with just a caution about the smallest parts – and if their budget can handle the biggest price. I greatly appreciate the review sample provided by

Tamiya USA and an enjoyable build that allowed me to see just how high 1/72nd scale's state of the art has risen.

The only real A6M5 in 1/72nd to compare it to is the Academy kit which is, perhaps, a third of the price! Academy's seat can be improved or replaced. Academy provides bombs, underwing attachments, and better Hinomaru decals.

Out of the box? Tamiya sets the standard! Tamiya's cockpit is incomparable. Yet it can be better.

Following are brief mentions of other 'contemporary' 1/72nd Zero models, courtesy of my model budget:

Hasegawa A6M3 Type 22 and 32 ca. 1993 for comparison to their A6M5 Type 52. They come with a closed one-piece canopy, no perforations or indentations in the rear bulkhead, no lightening hole perforations or indents in the seat, no fuselage wall detail – but, instead, there is a detailed floor with instrument column and molded-on rudder pedals, a flat instrument panel with a very good decal, single-piece cowling with a choice of propeller blades and spinners, very fine engraved panel lines, good wheel well detail, red "Do Not Walk" decal and some stenciling, decals for Naval Air Pilot 1/C Hiroyoshi Nishizawa IJN green over gray, "202nd

Flying Group" overall IJN Gray, and carrier Zuikaku fighter group IJN green over gray – all with a Blue-Black cowling.

Academy A6M5c Type 52c ca. 1998. Three-piece canopy can be displayed open, clear gun sight, large holes in bulkhead, no perforations or indentations in the thick seat that begs to be fixed or replaced with an aftermarket seat, fine fuselage wall detail, excellent raised instrument panel detail without decal, excellent detailed floor, three-piece cowling with separated cowl flaps, very good but not too finely engraved panel lines, very good wheel well detail, very good radar loop and balance weights, bonus bombs, red "Do Not Walk" decal and some stenciling, decal for Hinomarus with separate red over white or optional dark green painted out white surrounds, propeller decals, optional markings for two aircraft each with a Blue-Black cowling and IJN Green over light gray schemes: Naval Air Pilot 1/C Takeo Tanimizu 203rd FG, Kagoshima, June '45 w/ kills (one of the most popular A6M5 choices with its display of kills) and "302nd Flying Group" Atsugi, July '45.

Airfix A6M2b ca. 2012. Airfix has replaced one of its oldest 1/72nd kits with their new state of the art that kids can afford with an MSRP under \$10, and elders with a fixed income can enjoy as well. It comes

with a one-piece canopy in its own poly bag. The cockpit has excellent side wall detail molded in; there's a detailed floor with console and rudder pedals, but ejection marks behind them might need to be filled. The seat has some holes molded in but not drilled thru. The rear bulkhead has no detail. The instrument panel is flat but has a full decal. The A6M2 had folding wingtips and Airfix gives you separate wingtips if you want to display this option. If so, you have to make some cuts into the

straight wings, then detail the exposed wingfold area. The rudder is a separate piece that can be glued on off-center. There's an excellent head-on drawing that shows you the proper wing and elevator dihedral. A closed landing door option is provided. Airfix includes the landing gear retraction parts that Tamiya provides, only they are molded to the smaller landing gear door. A centerline drop tank is provided, as is a seated pilot figure. Markings are provided for one Blue-Black cowling, IJN

Green over IJN Grey scheme of the 201st Kokuta, Papua, New Guinea. It has more stencils than any of the other kits, plus the yellow wing leading edge stripes, propeller and landing gear door stripes, "Do Not Walk" lines and fuselage white outline Hinomarus in perfect register. Fine engraved panels are nicely done. If money was truly a major consideration, then I would definitely urge you to stock up on Airfix A6M2bs. Regardless, it is probably the best 1/72nd A6M2 available at any price. But it's not an A6M5!
