

## **Fujioka Historical Museum**

### **Horikoshi Jiro (1903–1982)**

Horikoshi Jiro (1903–1982) was born in Fujioka and became one of Japan's best-known aeronautical engineers. He is particularly known for his work on the Zero fighter plane that played a major role during World War II.

As a schoolboy, Horikoshi showed an aptitude for engineering and was encouraged by his teachers to study hard. By all accounts, he was a diligent student, even reading books written in English while walking to school. He is also said to have been kind, often helping his younger sister with her studies.

#### *Aeronautical Training*

In 1924, Horikoshi entered the newly formed Aeronautical Engineering Department of Tokyo Imperial University (now the University of Tokyo). After graduating in 1927, he joined the company that later became Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, a major producer of airplanes for the Japanese military up to the end of World War II. His employer sent him to England, Germany, and the United States in 1929–1930 to learn more about seaplane engineering. At the time, Japanese aeronautics were widely thought to be about 30 years behind that of the United States and Europe. Horikoshi used what he learned while abroad to help Japan catch up.

Within five years of his return to Japan Horikoshi was appointed chief engineer of a Mitsubishi development team in Nagoya, designing a single-seat low-wing fighter. After a couple of failed attempts, the team successfully produced the Mitsubishi A5M (better known in Japan as the Mitsubishi Navy Type 96 Carrier-based Fighter), which went into mass production in 1936.

By 1940, Horikoshi and his team had finalized the design of the A6M Zero, the Zero fighter, popularly known in Japan as *Rei (zero) sen*, that soon gained notoriety as the best performing carrier-based fighter plane in the world. His design was not only functional, producing highly maneuverable craft, it was also attractive. It was often noted that the low, cantilevered wings made it resemble a bird in flight. Horikoshi himself said that “functionally superior things are beautiful.”

As the war continued, his work on next-generation planes was disrupted by the extensive bombing of Nagoya and his own ill health.

#### *Postwar Career*

During the Allied Occupation of postwar Japan, Mitsubishi was barred from producing aircraft and Horikoshi was assigned to a subsidiary company that manufactured household items. In 1955 he joined the University of Tokyo, where he taught aircraft design. He also helped produce the basic design of the YS-11, a passenger plane completely designed and built in Japan in the twentieth century. He later taught at the National Defense Academy of Japan and Nihon University.

Horikoshi was awarded the Imperial Order of the Rising Sun, Third Class, in 1973 for his achievements in aeronautical engineering. An English translation of his 1970 memoir describing the development of the Zero fighter was published as *Eagles of Mitsubishi: The Story of the Zero Fighter* in 1981. He also collaborated on a 1956 book published in English as *Zero: The Story of Japan's Air War in the Pacific – As Seen by the Enemy*. A fictionalized version of his life is told in the 2013 Miyazaki Hayao

animated film *The Wind Rises*.