

Approach to objective.

13. H.M.S. INDOMITABLE joined Flag on 3rd May and contact was made between Convoys Y and Z, the latter slowing down and increasing zig-zag so as to remain in rear.

14. Approval having been received from S.O.F., the object of the expedition was announced to all officers and men, maps were issued and Assault Commanders gave lectures outlining the intended plan.

All officers of landing craft received special instruction to enable them to recognise their respective beaches. This included the study of maps, models, panorama sketches and photographs which had been prepared for the purpose.

15. Convoys Y and Z formed into groups p.m. 4th May and the approach was made in accordance with the pre-arranged orders.

16. The strong Westerly set which had been expected between positions AA and ZB did not materialise. Visibility was good and contact was made with H.M.S. LIGHTNING, anchored off Nosi Fati, as expected. The final approach was carried out as ordered, groups anchoring approximately 10 minutes earlier than planned.

17. Slight inconvenience was caused by the fact that the first dan had been laid too close to Nosi Fati. Warning of this however was received from LAFOREY and ships left this dan on their starboard hand. Remaining dans were laid accurately and were easy to pick up; the successful danning of this channel was a first-class bit of work and largely contributed to the result.

18. The successful execution of this approach, which resulted from long and careful planning tends to obscure the great difficulties which were overcome. An extract from a Memoire Militaire captured from Windsor Castle battery reads: "Tir de nuit n'est pas envisagé, l'accès de la Baie étant considéré comme impossible de nuit."

The Assault.

19. The assault proceeded according to plan, zero being at 0430 on Tuesday, 5th May (D.1). WINCHESTER CASTLE's (Captain Sebastian Francis Newdigate, Master) (No. 5 Commando and 2 East Lancs. Regt.), KEREN's (1st R.S.F.) and KARANJA's (2 R.W.F.) flotillas left their ships at 0230, 0227 and 0319 for Red, Green and White Beaches respectively. Complete surprise was effected in spite of the explosion of at least one mine, and No. 7 battery (Red Beach), White and Green landings were carried out without loss. Landing craft navigation was as good as that of their parent ships and all made accurate beachings.

In accordance with the tactical plan, Blue Beach was then assaulted and encountered machine-gun fire, but was carried.

20. On receipt of the success signal from No. 5 Commando, KEREN, KARANJA, WINCHESTER CASTLE, SOBIESKI and BACHAQUERO were ordered to anchor in the main anchorage off Ambararata Bay. WINCHESTER CASTLE and BACHAQUERO led whilst remainder loaded their second flight.

A signal reporting mines near position HH at the end of the main anchorage had not been received in KEREN, but DEVONSHIRE,

who had got it and who was then anchored East of Nosi Hara, promptly and properly ordered both ships to stop. The departure of the remaining ships was therefore delayed by me, until further minesweeping had been carried out.

21. Up to this time surprise had been achieved and by 0620 about 2,300 of our troops were ashore. On the other hand, the turn round for landing craft was very long, and as LAFOREY, LIGHTNING and ROYAL ULSTERMAN were anchored in or near a minefield, I ordered them to remain at anchor.

My joint Assault Commander, Brigadier F. W. Festing and his Command Post landed at 0710 at White Beach.

22. Reports of successful advance and taking of prisoners began to come in. At 0750 KEREN led Group IV to the main anchorage where minesweeping had just been completed, followed by the remainder of the assault force. About this time, the S.E. wind had increased to about force 8* and raised a sea of such size that in any other circumstances I would have ordered boats to be hoisted. Ships dropped second anchors.

The handling and loading of craft under these circumstances was exemplary. None were put out of action, and disembarkation continued at full speed.

23. Sweeping continued and at 1138 I regret to report that H.M.S. AURICULA struck a mine close to position HH (without loss of life), and remained anchored by her sweep. No action could be taken without prejudice to the operation and risk to the other ships and sweepers, and as she had ceased to sink she was left where she was, her back being broken.

By this time, minesweepers were 50 per cent. out of action, 35 mines had been swept and sweepers had done splendidly.

24. White Beach, opposite main anchorage, then became unsuitable after half tide so Blue was developed. This involved a 2 mile further turn round for landing craft, but with the risk of yet more sweeper casualties I ordered sweeping to cease and accepted the longer turn round in order to preserve the minesweepers for sweeping the Fleet into Diego Suarez harbour.

25. The landing continued at full pressure, two or three machine-gun attacks being made on the beaches during the day by enemy fighter aircraft. Fleet Air Arm fighter patrols however provided effective protection and with the initial air blow on the aerodrome, no attacks were made on the transports. Landing operations were suspended during the period from sunset to moonrise, to avoid damage to craft.

26. About 1354 an enemy post on Windsor Castle became a nuisance and a little later was engaged by LAFOREY. Shortly after, signals of surrender and a white flag were observed and fire was ceased. The following morning LAFOREY and LIGHTNING engaged this post which was found to be empty on our troops taking possession.

27. The Hospital Ship ATLANTIS arrived in the afternoon, being led by a corvette through the swept channel to her anchorage close West of the main anchorage.

Admiralty footnote —

* Wind force 8—fresh gale, 34–40 knots.