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**THE CARRIER-BORNE AIRCRAFT ATTACKS ON OIL REFINERIES
 IN THE PALEMBANG (SUMATRA) AREA IN JANUARY, 1945**

Admiralty foreword :—

One of the objects of the activities of the East Indies Fleet, as defined by the Commander-in-Chief, East Indies in January, 1945, was the destruction of enemy war potential, especially oil. The refineries in Sumatra, particularly those at Pangkalan Brandan and Palembang, produced at least half the oil used by Japan, including about three-quarters of the aviation spirit. Further, their employment eliminated the wasteful transport of crude oil to Japan for refining.

This despatch by the Commander-in-Chief, East Indies deals with two attacks by carrier-borne aircraft of the Royal Navy on the oil refineries at Pladjoe and Sonjei Gerong in the Palembang area. The Pladjoe refinery was the largest and most important in the Far East. Information later obtained from Japanese sources revealed that by the end of May, 1945, four months after the attack, this refinery was only up to half production.

The following Despatch was submitted to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on the 14th March, 1945, by Admiral Sir Arthur J. Power, K.C.B., C.V.O., Commander-in-Chief, East Indies Station.

East Indies Station.

14th March, 1945.

OPERATION "MERIDIAN"

Be pleased to lay before Their Lordships the accompanying report received from the Flag Officer Commanding Aircraft Carriers, British Pacific Fleet covering Operation "Meridian", which was planned for the destruction of the two oil refineries at Sonjei

Gerong and Pladjoe in Sumatra. I am in general agreement with the report.

2. From the evidence now available, I consider "Meridian" achieved its object and dealt the Japanese oil industry in Sumatra a severe blow from which only a very partial recovery will be possible. In addition to the destruction of these oil plants, the Japanese were defeated decisively in the air fighting.

3. While in Ceylon before leaving for this operation, every opportunity of equipping and training the air squadrons was taken. Two small scale operations were carried out against oil targets in the north of Sumatra in December and January, whilst a full scale rehearsal for "Meridian" was carried out at sea off Ceylon in January. The passage to the scene of operations provided opportunities for exercising the fleet.

4. The results of the training before the force left Ceylon showed that it had reached a standard just acceptable for an operation of this magnitude.

5. Meteorological conditions in the operational area were as forecast and the inter-tropical front then moving south with the sun presented serious difficulties to flying. The scale of defence in the vicinity of the target was formidable.

6. Throughout the operation all difficulties were overcome and a notable success was achieved by very careful planning, the courageous conduct of our aircrews, and the distinguished leadership of Rear-Admiral Sir Philip L. Vian, K.C.B., K.B.E., D.S.O.

(Signed) ARTHUR J. POWER,
Admiral,
Commander-in-Chief.

*Office of Flag Officer Commanding
Aircraft Carriers,
British Pacific Fleet.*

10th February, 1945.

OPERATION "MERIDIAN"

The Report of the Proceedings of Force 63 in Operation "Meridian" is forwarded herewith.

2. I am not able to report that the object set, "To put refineries at Palembang out of action", was achieved. Of the two refineries, Songei Gerong, the smaller, is assessed as out of action on photographic analysis, but Pladjoe, which covers an extensive area and in which the essential plants are widely separated and generally duplicated, needs probably another raid if all work is to stop.

3. The stage was set for such a final raid—fighter opposition largely overcome, enemy special army attack corps shot down, weather possible, position of the Fleet not known—but there was not enough oil.

4. The speeds—13 to 17 knots cruising, 22 knots off the Sumatran coast—were lower than I have been accustomed to use in similar situations, or would choose to use: even then the oil available proved short by 24 hours' consumption of what was needed.

5. The inter-tropical front, which lay obstinately against the Sumatran coast until the 23rd January, whilst it provided a convenient screen in which to operate, detracted on the whole from success because spray and the torrential rains affected the serviceability of the large number of aircraft necessarily parked on deck.

6. Whilst the weather was bad at 0400, it cleared for flying off at 0600 on the 24th. On the 29th proceedings were hampered by low cloud and rain storms, and the fact that so considerable an air group formed up successfully in such conditions offers a fair measure of the good drill of the squadrons.

7. The squadrons put the maximum of human endeavour into the execution of the plan; that they achieved so great a measure of success against a not easily accessible and heavily defended target justifies an outlook of high promise for the future, besides being ever most creditable to the officers and men concerned.

I wish in this connection to mention to you in this despatch the name of Major R. C. Hay, D.S.C., Royal Marines, who, as Air Co-ordinator, controlled the approach and withdrawal of the Striking Forces in a very able manner, obtained a series of valuable photographs, and found time also to shoot down three enemy aircraft with his own guns.

8. The overall cost of the operation in aircraft lost from whatever cause was 41; aircrews 17. Of the 12 aircraft known to have waterlanded the crews of 10 were recovered; the position of the eleventh was never fixed; the last landed within 25 miles of the rescue submarine in the Malacca Straits and was not apparently saved.

9. The relatively high proportion of aircraft waterlanded is a natural reflection of the resolve of aircrews to avoid becoming captive to the Japanese: the resultant rescue problems are sometimes difficult to solve.

10. It seems from their behaviour and subsequent Japanese broadcasts that the Sally* bombers which attacked the Fleet on the 29th January were manned by suicide crews. The aircraft used proved unsuitable for this form of attack. The crews were determined, achieved co-ordination and, flying low, penetrated the inner, carrier, ring; but a plan of attack appeared to be lacking and the aircraft offered easier targets than ever I have seen.

The attack was broken in the main by Sea-fires whose orders were to break off at Bofors range. With total disregard for safety they very courageously followed their targets into point blank pom-pom range of the ships, and in most cases shot down or crippled them. One at least was shot down by a Hellcat which was flown off in the middle of the engagement, and certainly one by ships' gunfire. Generally the fire, and fire discipline, of the Fleet was of a low standard.

11. Whilst not seriously tested, the steaming quality of the Fleet proved adequate for requirements; but the figures for oil consumption were higher generally than those published.

12. Next to admiration for the work of the Air Squadrons, my most particular impression from this operation is that Sea-fire aircraft are unsuitable for sustained ocean warfare.

(Signed) PHILIP VIAN,
Rear-Admiral.

REPORT ON OPERATION "MERIDIAN"
NARRATIVE

Passage to First Oiling Rendezvous

1. (i) Force 69, consisting of H.M.S. URCHIN (Senior Officer) and R.F.As.† ECHODALE, WAVE KING and EMPIRE SALVAGE, left Trincomalee at 1530 on Saturday, 13th January, 1945, and proceeded to the first oiling rendezvous.

(ii) Force 63, consisting of H. M. Ships INDOMITABLE (Flag of Flag Officer Commanding Aircraft Carriers, British Pacific Fleet), VICTORIOUS, ILLUSTRIOUS, INDEFATIGABLE, KING GEORGE V, ARGONAUT, BLACK PRINCE, EURYALUS, CEYLON, GRENVILLE (Captain (D), 25th Destroyer Flotilla), UNDINE, URSA, UNDAUNTED, KEMPENFELT (Captain (D), 27th Destroyer Flotilla), WAKEFUL, WHIRLWIND, WAGER, WESSEX and WHELP, sailed from Trincomalee at 1430 on Tuesday, 16th January, less CEYLON and WESSEX, who stayed to embark mail and radar spares respectively. CEYLON sailed to overtake at 1700.

(iii) R.F.A. ARNDALE sailed from Fremantle on 15th January to join Force 69.

2. During the first three days, night encounter, aircraft shadowing, interception, destroyer torpedo attack and various gunnery exercises were carried out.

3. (i) WESSEX joined Force 63 at 1930 on 19th January. Force 69 was not in sight on arrival at the rendezvous on 20th January, but was located at 0822 by aircraft. KING GEORGE V, cruisers and destroyers oiled between 0900 and 1850.

Admiralty foot notes :—

* Sally—Allied code name for a type of Japanese army bomber.

† R.F.A.—Royal Fleet Auxiliary.

(ii) The oilers reported much gear damaged by destroyers. Weather conditions at the time were not good, there being frequent rain squalls, with a moderate southerly swell and wind force 3-5*.

(iii) Force 63 then proceeded, leaving CEYLON and URCHIN with the oilers.

First Approach to Flying Off Position

4. During the night of 21st-22nd January and again on the night of 22nd-23rd January, Force 63 approached the flying off position. On both nights it was decided to turn back to the westward, owing to bad weather and unfavourable weather forecasts.

5. The final approach of the first operational period was made on the night of 23rd-24th January in better conditions. At dawn the weather was fine with no low cloud: the mountain range to be crossed by the strike was clearly visible.

Order of Battle

6. (i) The order of battle of the aircraft on the strike and sweep was:—

Pladjoe Striking Force

INDOMITABLE, 12 Avengers, 16 Hellcats.

ILLUSTRIOUS, 12 Avengers, 16 Corsairs.

VICTORIOUS, 12 Avengers, 16 Corsairs.

INDEFATIGABLE, 12 Avengers, 12 Fireflies.

Mana Strike

INDOMITABLE, 4 Avengers, 4 Hellcats.

Fighter Ramrod Sweep over Enemy Airfields

VICTORIOUS, 12 Corsairs.

ILLUSTRIOUS, 12 Corsairs.

(ii) The number of bombers was related to:

(a) The number of fighters available for escort.

(b) Estimate of enemy fighter strength.

(c) Ranging capacity of carriers.

First Strike—Fly Off

7. At 0615 on 24th January the combined striking force of Avengers, with their fighter escort, started to fly off from a position seventy miles east of Engano Island. This force took departure at 0710. Its target was the key buildings of the Pladjoe refinery.

8. The second range of aircraft consisted of the Fireflies of the main strike, the twenty-four Corsairs of the fighter sweep, and the small strike on the nearby Mana airfield.

9. Ships were slow in preparing the second range, and were hampered by aircraft of the first range returning for emergency landings. Flying off the second range was not completed until about 0720. Partly as a result of this the Fireflies did not join up with the striking force until that force was approaching the deployment point.

10. The wind was variable, at one time veering to the north-east. So long however as the force manœuvred to seaward of Position TA†

Admiralty footnotes:—

* Wind force 3—gentle breeze (7-10 knots); force 5—fresh breeze (16-20 knots).

† Position TA—the flying off position, in latitude 05° 41' S., longitude 103° 32' E.

the wind was sufficiently steady from the north-west to keep the force fairly near the flying off position.

First Sweep and Strike—Narrative

11. (i) The fighter sweep passed the main strike on its outward journey and surprised the enemy on Lembak airfield. By the time this sweep had arrived at the Palembang and Talangbetoetoe airfields the enemy was more on the alert and flak at the latter airfields was much more intense and accurate.

(ii) The Ramrod sweep achieved its object and, by destroying 34 aircraft on the ground and damaging numerous others, effectively crippled the enemy's fighter defences.

12. (i) The enemy's air raid warning appears to have been given at about the time the main strike crossed the coast.

(ii) The striking force was not intercepted by enemy fighters until it was within fifteen miles of the target. A number of enemy fighters, probably about twenty, attempted to attack the force from this time onwards. They were driven off by the fighter escort.

13. (i) The Avengers and Fireflies in their attacks had to fly through anti-aircraft fire and a balloon barrage.

(ii) The anti-aircraft fire was encountered from both heavy and light batteries. It was intense throughout, inaccurate at first, but increasing in accuracy as the attack progressed.

(iii) The balloons were flying at about 2,000 feet when the striking force approached the target, and were raised to heights varying between 4,000 feet and 6,000 feet as the attack developed. A number of Avengers dived through the balloon barrage to press home their bombing attacks.

(iv) The withdrawal route passed over flak batteries near Palembang town. The rendezvous position was half covered with cloud and some pilots had difficulty in recognising it. The form up was satisfactorily carried out, however.

14. (i) A first interpretation of the photographs of the target during and after the attack showed probable hits on one power house, three crude distilleries, two other distillation units, a cracking plant and a reforming unit.

(ii) The wireless station three miles north-west of the town was also left in flames.

15. The fighter escort reported fairly stiff enemy opposition and claimed 13 single and twin engined fighters destroyed, with six probables. Japanese broadcasts later admitted the loss of 14 fighters.

16. Six Corsairs, one Hellcat and two Avengers failed to return. It is known that at least two members of the crews made safe landings and may have been taken prisoner. In addition, one Corsair pilot and one Seafire pilot had to bale out over the fleet. Both were picked up uninjured.

17. The small striking force sent to Mana reported little activity there. (One aircraft was destroyed on the ground and bombs were dropped on the runway. One Hellcat pilot was slightly wounded by A.A. fire.

18. (i) At 0940 the strike started to land on. (This was completed by 1025. An aircraft followed the returning striking force and was recognised on the plot as hostile too late for a successful interception.

(ii) The Force retired to the south-west at 22 knots.

Withdrawal and Second Oiling

19. At 1415 a group of "four plus" enemy aircraft was detected by radar, the fleet then being 42 miles south of Engano Island. This group circled the island and finally faded to the north-west at 1430. The high Combat Air Patrol, which had been sent out to intercept, was recalled. It is thought that no further attempt was made to locate the fleet.

20. URSA was topped up with oil from KING GEORGE V during 25th January and was detached in the evening to proceed to Cocos Island with signals for despatch. She rejoined while the fleet was fuelling.

21. Force 63, including the aircraft carriers, oiled in two bodies on 26th and 27th January. ILLUSTRIOUS and VICTORIOUS also topped up with aviation spirit. Oiling was slow owing to buoyant hoses parting at the joints.

22. At this stage it had become clear that the fuel situation would allow no more than one further strike at Palembang.

Second Strike Plan

23. (i) As a result of experience gained in the first operation the orders for the second strike were modified in two respects.

(ii) First, the fighter sweep was flown in two parts, the timing of the flight plans being such that the two independent squadrons should arrive simultaneously at the two main enemy fighter airfields. The squadrons were ordered to establish patrols over the enemy's airfields on completion of the sweeps.

(iii) Secondly, the bombers were instructed to turn right handed after bombing and proceed to the rendezvous passing south of the target. This lengthened the withdrawal route, but the alteration was made at the request of the two Avenger Wing Leaders, in order to avoid the heavy A.A. fire encountered round Palembang town.

24. Plans were also made to fly off from an alternative position north of Engano Island. This northern position was not used, as it seemed very unlikely that the enemy would be able to move U-boats to the West Sumatran coast in time to interfere with the operations.

Defence of the Fleet

25. It was appreciated that the enemy would know that we intended to strike a second time. They had probably captured prisoners who knew that more than one strike was intended. We had attacked only one of the two main refineries in the first strike, and might reasonably be expected to return to deal with the other.

26. It was therefore decided to reduce the escort of the main strike, make this up to some extent by using the Fireflies throughout as close escort fighters, and retain at least four

fighters in each of VICTORIOUS, ILLUSTRIOUS and INDOMITABLE ready to back up the standing air patrol from INDEFATIGABLE.

27. It was not expected that the enemy would be able to reinforce materially his defensive fighters, but it was expected that he would make a real effort to attack the carriers, possibly with one of his special attack squadrons.

Order of Battle

28. The order of battle of the aircraft on the second strike and sweeps was:—

Songei Gerong Strike

INDOMITABLE, 12 Avengers, 16 Hellcats.

ILLUSTRIOUS, 12 Avengers, 12 Corsairs.

VICTORIOUS, 12 Avengers, 12 Corsairs.

INDEFATIGABLE, 12 Avengers, 10 Fireflies.

Fighter Ramrod Sweeps

Lembak Airfield

ILLUSTRIOUS, 12 Corsairs.

Talangbetoetoe Airfield

VICTORIOUS, 12 Corsairs.

Armed Reconnaissance—Mana Airfield

INDEFATIGABLE, 2 Fireflies.

Second Strike—Flying off

29. Force 63 arrived at Position TA at 0600 on 29th January to find heavy rainstorms in a belt 30 miles off the coast, but the Sumatran mountains apparently clear of cloud. H Hour was postponed from 0615 until 0640. At this time the carriers were in a clear patch between two rainstorms, but others soon arrived.

30. The striking force formed up well in spite of poor conditions and took departure at 0732, two minutes after the planned time. Their target was the Songei Gerong distillery.

31. The second ranges of aircraft were prepared much more quickly than on 24th January. As a result the Fireflies joined up with the main body before it crossed the coast, and the Ramrod sweeps kept their appointments punctually at the enemy airfields.

32. The weather conditions round the flying off position improved quickly after 0730 and there was a steady north-westerly wind throughout the operation.

Second Strike and Sweep—Narrative

33. The enemy was more alert than he had been on 24th January, and was apparently keeping a standing fighter patrol airborne. The Ramrod sweeps found little on their airfields, but their presence on patrol over the airfields may have prevented the enemy reinforcing his existing patrols. The total claim of these two squadrons was four aircraft destroyed and two damaged.

34. The main strike met no opposition from enemy fighters until after they deployed. The step-aside deployment plan used for this target gave our escorting fighters a more difficult task than the circular deployment used at Pladjoe.

The second squadron of the first wing (No. 849 Squadron) reported being attacked on the run in to the target, when they were without close escort of fighters.

35. The enemy's A.A. defences had been improved both in quantity and quality since the first strike. The first squadron to go in (No. 857 Squadron) bore the brunt of the A.A. fire and was lucky not to suffer heavier losses.

36. The balloon barrage was reported to be less severe than at Pladjoe and again many Avengers dived through the balloons to drop their bombs at low altitude. Two aircraft of No. 854 Squadron were lost through colliding with balloon cables.

37. The bombing results were excellent and bombs were concentrated in each of the target areas: important plants which were specific targets received direct hits. Photographs taken during and after the attack show a sea of flames in both the distillery and the power house areas.

38. The withdrawal round to the southwards gave the Avengers a long passage back to the rendezvous.

No. 854 Squadron in particular received little support from our escorting fighters during this period and all the aircraft of the squadron were attacked by hostile fighters. The standard of Japanese air gunnery was reported as poor: though all the Avengers suffered some damage none were shot down. Lieutenant (A) G. J. Conolly, R.N.V.R., distinguished himself by shooting down a Tojo* with an Avenger's front guns.

39. The form up at the rendezvous was carried out expeditiously, and the striking force returned to the fleet without being further attacked. The total losses over the target were four Avengers, one Firefly and one Corsair.

40. In the course of air combats the fighter escort claimed seven enemy fighters destroyed and three probably destroyed.

41. As a result of damage from enemy fighters and A.A. fire, nine aircraft of the strike had to ditch; the crews of eight were recovered.

42. An armed reconnaissance of Mana airfield by Fireflies found that the only form of activity was a football match.

43. The strike started to land on at 1010, landing on being completed at 1100.

Own and Enemy Aircraft Losses

44. Our own losses of aircraft from all causes in both strikes totalled 41: 16 by enemy action, 11 by ditching, and 14 in deck crashes, etc. 38 enemy aircraft were claimed destroyed on the ground, with 30 certainly and 7 probably destroyed in the air.

Enemy Air Activity Round Fleet—29th January

45. There was no radar indication of any enemy aircraft in the vicinity of the fleet until 0900. This bogey† was sighted by Seafires at 0917: it was a fast single engined aircraft which escaped by diving into clouds.

46. At 0939 a few enemy aircraft approached from the north. They probably did not sight

the fleet, which was then under low cloud. Seafires were sent to intercept and shot down one Dinah* twenty-eight miles west of the fleet.

47. At 1026 a group of twelve plus enemy aircraft were reported approaching from the north. Corsairs and Seafires of the fighter patrols were vectored out. The Corsairs reported sighting two single engined enemy aircraft carrying bombs which were chased far to the eastward. One Corsair from VICTORIOUS failed to return.

48. At 1028 a few enemy planes were detected passing the fleet on a southerly track some 40 miles to seaward. No fighters were sent to intercept as the enemy seemed to have no knowledge of the fleet's position.

49. At 1152 a raid was detected approaching low from the southward and seven Seafires of the low patrol were sent to intercept. This Seafire patrol was flying wide of the fleet to the northward when given their first vector. They intercepted the raid as it was sighted from the fleet. The enemy formation, which was originally reported by radar as "one large", consisted of one Helen† and six Sallies.

50. The Combat Air Patrol was due to be changed at this time and three Hellcats took off from INDOMITABLE as the ship opened fire.

51. The standard of fire discipline and fire control in the fleet was low. The enemy attack was broken up by our fighters, which dived in a most determined manner through our own anti-aircraft fire and pressed in to close range of the enemy bombers.

52. The enemy formation attacked from the port quarter of the fleet upwind, height about 50 feet. They broke up when the Seafires intercepted and appeared to try to carry out low-level bombing attacks on ILLUSTRIOUS and INDEFATIGABLE. From the form of the attack when it first developed it was thought that the enemy aircraft were carrying torpedoes and the fleet was accordingly manoeuvred so as to present a difficult torpedo target.

53. Most of the attackers succeeded in reaching the main body and were shot down close to the ships. Of the seven aircraft which attacked, certainly six and probably all seven were destroyed. It is believed that the enemy losses were accounted for by

Seafires—two or three
Seafires and Corsairs—one
Seafires and Hellcats—one
Hellcats—one
gunfire—one.

54. During the attack ILLUSTRIOUS was struck by two shells fired by our own forces and suffered 12 fatal casualties and 21 wounded.

55. From 1212 to 1430 the fleet was apparently shadowed by an aircraft which remained 45 to 60 miles to the eastward. It is possible that this aircraft may have been keeping track of us by receiving either our radar or our beacon transmissions.

56. At 1818, a quarter of an hour before sunset, a single aircraft approached from the north-eastward at 15,000 feet. VICTORIOUS'

Admiralty footnotes:—

* Tojo—Japanese army fighter.

† Bogey—unidentified aircraft.

Admiralty footnotes:—

* Dinah—Japanese army reconnaissance aircraft.

† Helen—Japanese army bomber.

Corsairs were vectored out to intercept and got within three miles of the bogey. These aircraft had however been brought down to 6,000 feet as it was thought the enemy was diving. After this failure the fighters were recalled in order to land them on before darkness fell. The two last Corsairs landed on about 20 minutes after sunset with clouds reducing the rapidly failing light.

57. The enemy aircraft remained in the vicinity until about 1910. It is doubtful if the fleet was sighted but the enemy appeared to be aware of our approximate position.

58. The fleet was steering a course towards Ceylon while this aircraft was in contact.

Third Oiling and Passage to Fremantle

59. Force 63 proceeded westward at 23 knots throughout the night of 29th-30th January in order to join the oilers sufficiently early on 30th January to complete fuelling on that day. Fuelling was started at 1315 and was finished by 2200, all ships with the exception of VICTORIOUS and ILLUSTRIOUS either filling up or topping up for the passage to Fremantle.

60. URSA, after oiling, was detached to take messages to Cocos Island for transmission and to proceed independently.

61. Force 63 arrived at Fremantle at 0600 local time 4th February.

APPENDIX TO NARRATIVE

Statement of Results

Bomb Damage to specific buildings confirmed by photographs

(Photography ceased on account of smoke before raid was completed.)

(a) *Pladjoe*

<i>Target</i>	<i>Assessment</i>
Crude distilleries and run down tanks ...	Hits.
Reforming unit	} Hits in area—probably about 30 per cent. destroyed.
Redistillation unit	
Cracking unit	
Distillation units	
Main boiler and electric power house ...	

(b) *Songei Gerong*

Boiler and electric power houses	Direct hits claimed, but not shown by photographs; photography ceased about half time.
1,000 lb. cracking plant	} All hit.
Fractionating columns	
Coke stills	
Pipe stills and re-run stills	
Depropaniser	
750 lb. cracking plant	Probably hit.

H.M.S. VICTORIOUS.

25th January, 1945.

REPORT OF AIR CO-ORDINATOR ON FIRST STRIKE

I have the honour to submit the following report on the conduct of the air strike against Palembang, Sumatra, on the morning of Wednesday, 24th January, 1945:—

2. Form Up

VICTORIOUS group was flown off and formed up in 25 minutes. At this time (0645), all the groups appeared ready and the Strike Leader (INDOMITABLE) should have commenced his circuit of the force, since time for departure was 0655. He was so long in coming that I flew over to INDOMITABLE's sector to see if there was any trouble. But their squadrons were all formed up and the additional circuit made was unnecessary and delayed departure at least five minutes. On future occasions I will break R/T* silence if necessary, to prevent similar delays.

Circuit of the force was commenced at 0650 and departure taken at 0704. The strike was thus nine minutes late, but it was just as well, since if they had been on time, the Fireflies (INDEFATIGABLE) would not have joined up before the strike reached the target.

Admiralty footnote:—

* R/T—radio-telephone.

3. Base to Coast

All went according to plan here except that the escort, instead of remaining at the same height as the bombers, as had been previously arranged took up their correct escort intervals.

An accurate landfall was made at 0718 at 4,500 feet.

4. Coast to Target

The climb was continued to 7,000 feet in order to clear the mountains. This height was not lost again, as had been arranged, and I am not clear why the Strike Leader had to alter this part of the plan. The weather was excellent for the strike. Thin 10/10th at about 20,000 feet which enabled pilots to look into the sun with ease; and very low 10/10th stratus covering large areas. Visibility was about 60 miles and the wind from the south-east.

The formation of both the strike and escort was exceptionally good. For reasons unknown, one Avenger from INDEFATIGABLE's squadron started to straggle. I have a photograph of this and have sent it to the squadron in the hope that it will teach them what not to do.

At 0738 we passed over Matapoera at 7,500 feet and observed three landing strips. Details of these have been reported separately. At 0803 the strike reached 12,000 feet. This was only 12 minutes before the attack and I do not consider soon enough. From the escort point of view, we want the strike at its top

height a minimum of 50 miles from the target. This distance, allowing an average speed of 160 knots and a descent from 12,000 to 8,000 feet, would only take 19 minutes.

5. Approach to Target

About 20 miles from the target the Strike Leader requested the Fireflies (INDEFATIGABLE) to go ahead and strafe the balloons which could be seen flying in the target area at about 3,000 feet. Unfortunately, owing to delays in the carrier, the aircraft still had not joined the main strike. I judged their time of joining to be 0806 and almost immediately afterwards they went ahead to strafe their special target. I do not think they heard the request for the balloons to be strafed.

At about 0808 the enemy A.A. defences opened fire whilst the strike was still out of range, indicating that they had had warning of our approach.

Almost immediately afterwards the escort was engaged by an estimated 25 Tojo fighters, although I myself only counted about 12 at the time. Their initial height was 13,000-15,000 feet.

6. The Attack

There seemed to be a rather long delay after the enemy had opened fire until the first bombs fell (about six minutes). When surprise has obviously not been achieved, as in this case, the time interval must be cut down to a minimum and the bombing become more concentrated.

I did not see the Fireflies attack, but the first group of bombs to fall struck several oil tanks with the inevitable result; it seemed that all subsequent attacks had the same effect. The target of No. 1 Wing (INDOMITABLE and VICTORIOUS) appeared well hit. No. 2 Wing (ILLUSTRIOUS and INDEFATIGABLE) appeared to have destroyed only half of theirs. During this period, when not engaged with enemy fighters or occupied in avoiding predicted flak, I was able to secure a series of oblique photographs of the bombing. When I finally left the target area (about 0823), the Avengers were just about to leave the rendezvous and I did not see them again.

Throughout the attack the enemy had just sufficient fighters to saturate the escort. Enemy pilots showed as much contempt for Japanese heavy A.A. as we did and fights were raging all over the target area. It was almost funny to see the aircraft scrapping and all the while the A.A. bursting at all heights up to 15,000 feet. As far as I know no one was lost by this fire and very few damaged.

The presence of 3 or 4 twin-engined aircraft seemed to indicate some air-ground control of A.A. or fighters. No noticeable difference was observed after three of these twin-engined aircraft had been shot down.

R/T discipline during this air battle was good. No report was received from Force X-Ray. An immense column of black smoke to the north-west of the target indicated their passage, but when I left they still had not arrived at Talangbetotoe. Thus, although they achieved very excellent results, they were too late to be of any material help to the strike.

7. Withdrawal

Once again the withdrawal was insufficiently protected by the escort. The Fireflies appeared to be the only aircraft there and they were unable to prevent several attacks by fighters taking place. There is no doubt more of the escort could have got there and discipline on this point must be tightened. At 0825 the enemy fighters appear to have been ordered off, as no further attacks developed after this time and the escort quickly formed up on the strike. In my attempt to rejoin the formation, my flight became engaged with four Tojos of which I shot down two and the remaining two in my flight damaged one each.

8. Return to Base

Return was without incident. The top cover (VICTORIOUS) dispersed two Tojos which were attempting to shadow the formation. The fleet was several miles to the north of her advertised position. Attempts to home by beacon, as usual, failed. The reason for this continued failure of the beacon is not clearly understood. A very large number of aviators report failure each time with a lucky one or two reporting success. At any rate this matter needs most careful attention. At 0928 the group broke up for landing which was carried out speedily and with skill.

9. General

I think this has been one of the better strikes the Fleet Air Arm has ever accomplished.

There was some initial confusion in the operation orders since most places in South Sumatra appear to have more than one name.

Maps were good and briefing excellent. Despite the unwelcome appearance of enemy fighters, balloons and intense A.A., the Avengers wrote off a good 60 per cent. of their targets and, now we know the form, succeeding strikes should be better still.

(Signed) R. C. HAY,

Major, R.M.

REPORT OF AIR CO-ORDINATOR ON SECOND STRIKE

I have the honour to submit the following report on the strike against the oil refineries at Songei Gerong, Palembang on the morning of Monday, 29th January, 1945.

2. Form Up

In rather doubtful weather, carriers commenced flying off at 0640; about 0710 visibility improved sufficiently for all groups to be observed at the same time.

At 0718 the Strike Leader commenced his left hand circuit of the fleet. All units were ready for him, and joined up promptly. At 0729 the complete strike was all formed up and on the east side of the fleet, ready to take departure. Alas, the Strike Leader once again, for no known reason, made a 360 degree orbit. I decided against breaking R/T silence, which was my error. Anyway, the Flagship came up and ordered departure to be taken but it was too late. The result of

this extra, unnecessary, circuit was:—

(a) The strike departed at 0734 (four minutes late).

(b) Three Avenger Squadrons were hopelessly out of position.

(c) The fighter escort was all jumbled up, which, with the poor weather conditions obtaining, made aviation in the area extremely hazardous.

I think the time allowed, *i.e.*, 40 minutes before collection and 50 minutes before departure, could be reduced. The Strike Leader should collect 30 minutes after take off and depart 10 minutes later. At 0733, I observed an air crew being picked up by a destroyer: it seemed a little early in the day to start losing aircraft.

3. Base to Coast

At 0740, the strike commenced climbing and the escort took up position. An accurate landfall was made at 0752 at 5,500 feet. Formations had by now all closed up and the escort was very tidily in position. I lost sight of the fleet at about 10 miles owing to masses of low cumulus. But over the land, conditions were much improved. There was thin 10/10th at about 14,000 feet and over the eastern plain of Sumatra 10/10th cloud, 500 feet thick, covering large areas. In fact, the weather could not have been more ideal.

4. Coast to Target

On passing over Lake Ranau, one Avenger commenced straggling and soon after turned for base. I reported this to INDOMITABLE but got no reply. The climb was continued over the mountains to 7,500 feet. The formation of the strike and escort was very good. The weather, however, got worse and I had some doubts whether we would be able to see the target. As the top cover was being forced down by cloud, requests were passed to the Strike Leader to fly lower. But he continued to climb to 10,000 feet and caused embarrassment to the escort above him.

The journey to the target was otherwise uneventful. At 0830 I shifted to R/T Channel C and heard Forces X-Ray and Yoke at work. They were on their targets about 15 minutes before we struck and by the sound of things they were far too late. Most of their reports were of Bandits* airborne.

At 0835, the vexed question of balloons cropped up and the escort leader, much to the relief of the bombers, decided to use the Fireflies for this work. At 0840, the target could be seen, fortunately quite clear of clouds. The balloons were about 4,000 feet. All fires from the previous raid on Pladjoe were out. Shortly after, the Fireflies reported "Out Lights", the bombers deployed according to plan and I moved ahead to observe the target.

Almost immediately, the heavy A.A. opened up on the Fireflies. Several groups of about 10 rounds were observed extremely accurate for height and range but, fortunately, out for bearing. My flight also attracted the attentions of the gunners but they were completely unable to cope with gentle evasion. All this

drew quite a bit of the A.A. away from the bombers. But just after the deployment, several enemy fighters were seen diving down on them. I observed no reaction by the top or middle cover. The plan for guarding individual squadrons by sections of the escort appeared in most cases to be a failure. Both squadrons of No. 1 Wing received the unwelcome attentions of Jap fighters which did not cease until they commenced to bomb. During this period no protection was afforded by our own fighters. I believe No. 2 Wing were more fortunate. About three balloons were destroyed but I don't think they were worth the attention the Fireflies gave them.

5. Attack

I commenced photographing at 0850 as the first bombs fell. From visual observation, some targets were severely hit and the photographs have confirmed this. Bombing by No. 1 Wing was truly impressive. By the time No. 2 Wing commenced bombing, it was getting a bit difficult to see. The first squadron of that wing (ILLUSTRIOUS) set off some oil tanks in the vicinity and certainly were very close to their target. Some of the last aircraft to bomb obviously could not observe their correct target and so, quite rightly, chose another. One stick was seen to burst along the wharves. It seemed a pity that so many aircraft were put on to one small target whilst Pladjoe was completely clear and could have been bombed accurately.

6. Withdrawal to Rendezvous

About three minutes after the last aircraft bombed I finished photographing. I then climbed from 6,000 feet to 10,000 in order to take vertical line overlap photographs as the flak had died down. I soon had to change my mind as a Tojo was coming for us. In shooting this one down, we descended to 0 feet and, attracted by the gunfire, an Oscar* came along, and by 0905 he, too, was dead.

During this time the radio was giving me an interesting picture of a long stream of Avengers dribbling out of the target area to the rendezvous, 30 miles away. It was evident some of them could not find it. Nor could I from 7,000 feet even though I searched for some time. During this period there was quite a vicious air battle of which I can give no detail.

7. Rendezvous to Base

The return was without opposition of any kind. There seemed to be a little confusion as to who was going to escort the stragglers. Formation on the return was good and the escort in position. I climbed to 10,000 feet and swept the area astern of the formation but no enemy aircraft attempted to shadow. After the strike had crossed the coast I examined Lake Ranau for any survivors but saw none. I then proceeded to the submarine rendezvous for the aircrews forced down and took oblique photographs of all the river mouths in the bay in question.

R/T discipline up till now had been 100 per cent. improved. But crossing the coast seemed to be the signal for complete radio chaos. Primarily the Avengers giving their damaged

Admiralty footnote:—

* Bandits—enemy aircraft.

Admiralty footnote:—

* Oscar—Japanese army fighter.

friends extracts from pilot's handling notes. It is about time everybody knew their emergency drill without having to talk about it.

I found it extremely difficult to get a word in edgeways in order to report my return which was independent of the main strike and might have been mistaken for a raid. I could get no reply from INDOMITABLE and eventually had to pass the message on Channel C to VICTORIOUS.

Break up and landing requires no comments from me.

8. *Conclusion*

"Meridian" One and Two have been the most interesting and successful operations I know of. In both cases we succeeded in our object and I would like to praise the determination of the Avenger pilots who bombed so accurately in the face of maximum discouragement.

The fighter escort proved itself against the most serious air opposition it has so far met.

(Signed) R. C. HAY,
Major, R.M.

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