

(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.