

the enemy. One paratroop party had, however, reached the road leading to Palembang and ambushed part of the withdrawing parties, subsequently making a road block with overturned vehicles.

460. Two subsequent attempts from Palembang Town to reinforce the aerodrome were driven back at the road block after close quarters fighting. The first, at about 1100 hours, was by an R.A.F. party under F.L. Jackson and P.O. Umphelby who pressed their attack with determination: some of the party succeeded in reaching the aerodrome through the scrub and assisted in evacuating some wounded and unarmed personnel. The second, at 16.30 hours, was by a Dutch contingent which also was able to get some small assistance and information to the aerodrome.

461. Wing Commander Maguire's party, by now much reduced, was running out of ammunition, and had no water or food. Thus, this handful of men was in no position to continue their gallant denial of the aerodrome to the enemy in face of an attack in force which was certain to come at night. He therefore destroyed all material, including some unserviceable aircraft, and withdrew. Being cut off from Palembang Town the party made its way to the West Coast of Sumatra after an arduous trek of seven days, during which they destroyed a number of stocks of petrol and some rubber factories. They there rejoined their units in Java.

462. Our aircraft at P.II meanwhile were too busy dealing with far greater a threat to be in a position to help recover P.I aerodrome, as will now be related.

EVENTS FROM 14TH FEBRUARY (P.M.)— 18TH FEBRUARY.

Attacks on Japanese Convoy off Palembang, 15th February.

463. By 14th February (p.m.) therefore, the total Air Forces located in Sumatra were at P.II aerodrome. The strength consisted of:—

22 Hurricanes.

35 Blenheim I's and IV's—many of which were unserviceable.

3 Hudsons (the remainder of the Hudson force was flown to Java for repairs on the 14th February).

The whole was placed under the command of the Station Commander P.II, Group Captain McCauley, who was instructed by the A.O.C. No. 225 (B) Group to continue attacks on the Japanese convoy entering the Palembang River from first light on the 15th (paras. 452-4).

464. Reconnaissance on the 15th pin-pointed the position of transports and barges, and revealed approximately 20 naval vessels and transports steaming through the Banka Straits, whilst other transports and landing craft were in the river mouth.

465. The first attack, off at 0630 hours, was made by 6 Blenheims escorted by Hurricanes. It met strong fighter opposition but pressed home the attack. From then onwards until 1530 hours a constant stream of our aircraft proceeded to attack the convoy, and, as all enemy fighter opposition had ceased, Hurricanes were employed in shooting up barges whilst bombers similarly expended their ammunition after dropping their bombs. The

limiting factor in the number of attacks was the speed with which re-armament and refuelling could be carried out. The Japanese in barges and transports fought back for a time with A.A. and small arms fire but by 1100 hours this opposition ceased. By 1530 hours all movement on the river was stopped and surviving barges and landing craft had pulled in to the thick undergrowth. Troops had dispersed on to the river bank, and against them attacks continued.

466. It is difficult to assess the damage done. All pilots reported upon its extent. Thousands of troops in barges were caught in the open by machine gun fire, particularly by the Hurricanes, and very heavy casualties were inflicted upon them. Bombing accounted for many more, whilst in addition, 3 transports were sunk, a number of others were hit and an unknown number of landing craft were also sunk.

467. As a fitting finale to the day, a number of Navy 'O' fighters were located on a strip on the beach on Banka Island and were destroyed by Hurricanes. It is probable that these fighters were those which had been encountered during the initial sorties of this day.

468. Air action thus brought the landing to a standstill. The Japanese were punished heavily for their failure to locate P.II aerodrome. Unfortunately, there were no troops or naval light craft available in the area to take advantage of the situation.

Withdrawal from Sumatra.

469. On the evening of the 14th February, A.O.C. 226 Group returned to Palembang from P.II. Both he and A.O.C. 225 Group were informed by the local Dutch Territorial Commander that the situation was well under control and that he had every hope of eliminating the paratroops. He gave the impression that a drive was to take place that night to clear the area. Contrary orders evidently were received later by him, because a start was made during the night in burning oil and rubber stocks in the town, and in the destruction of the oil refinery area.

470. When A.O.C.'s Nos. 225 and 226 Groups saw the Dutch Territorial Commander early on the morning of the 15th, they found that the Dutch H.Q. had closed and that the Territorial Commander himself considered it too late to restore the situation. He was himself about to leave for Lahat in the South.

471. The Dutch Territorial Commander also stated that the ferries across the river and the railhead facilities would be blown in one hour's time, with the object of embarrassing the Japanese advance towards the South. In consequence, A.O.C. No. 225 Group ordered the immediate evacuation of the town by all remaining R.A.F. personnel. This was effected by road and rail to Oesthaven.

472. A further paratroop landing took place at P.I. later during the morning of the 15th, and the Japanese established themselves in the vicinity of Palembang town. There was thus a distinct possibility that P.II aerodrome might be over-run during the night 15th/16th February. Also by 15th February (p.m.) stocks of bombs and ammunition at P.II were almost expended, whilst food supplies were cut off.

473. In view of these factors and the lack of any supporting troops, Abdair approved the