

*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 Seafire 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. ARNDALÉ 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 footnotes:—

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

† R.F.A.—Royal Fleet Auxiliary.