

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.