

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 Talangbetoetoe. 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 Sonnei 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