

signals organisation. Firstly because its numbers were reduced at a time when signals traffic was on the increase consequent upon the splitting up of the Command between Singapore and Sumatra. Secondly because it was just at this time that the trained and experienced lady cypher staff had to be evacuated. The result was acute congestion of, and increasing delays in, signals traffic. This had reached such a pitch on 6th February as to constitute a breakdown between Palembang and A.H.Q. in Singapore. Abdair therefore assumed operational control of all R.A.F. units in Sumatra with effect from 7th February.

Formation of Westgroup H.Qs in the N.E.I.

449 Air Vice-Marshal P. C. Maltby and Air Commodore W. E. Staton arrived in Palembang on the 10th February, and on the following day the former became A.O.C. and the latter S.A.S.O. of Westgroup, which comprised all R.A.F. and R.A.A.F. Units of the Far East Command now located in Sumatra and Java. Whilst in Palembang they picked up a nucleus staff and moved with it on 12th February to Java, having first reconnoitred South Sumatra and ascertained that no suitable site for a H.Q. existed in that area. It was arranged that, pending the establishment of H.Q. Westgroup in Java, Abdair would continue in direct control of all operations carried out by Westgroup Units.

**FURTHER OPERATIONS BY 225 (B) GROUP—
12TH TO 14TH FEBRUARY.**

450. From the 7th February onwards, all reconnaissance by No. 225 (B) Group had been discontinued under orders from Abdair, who wished to economise air effort by centralising all reconnaissance under the Reconnaissance Group in Java and thereby increasing the size of the striking force available in Sumatra.

451. On the 13th February, however, the shipping situation as known at H.Q. 225 (B) Group appeared most confused. Reconnaissance reports made by Reconnaissance Group and received through Abdair showed that Japanese naval forces were in strength south of Singapore. These reports were 5-7 hours old by the time they reached 225 (B) Group owing to bad communications, locations of convoys had by then completely changed. To confuse matters still further, a stream of shipping of all kinds was at the same time passing south from Singapore to Java despite the presence of Japanese forces; friend was difficult to distinguish from foe.

452. By the 13th February (p.m.) it was felt at H.Q. 225 (B) Group that, despite orders to the contrary, a reconnaissance must be carried out to clear the situation and ascertain whether or not there was an immediate threat to Sumatra. One Hudson of No. 1 (GR) Squadron, R.A.A.F., was sent in the afternoon and reported a concentration of Japanese shipping north of Banka Island, which confirmed impressions that a landing at Palembang was imminent. All available Blenheims were immediately despatched to attack the enemy force, but results were difficult to assess owing to darkness and rainstorms.

453. On the 14th February an offensive reconnaissance of 5 Hudsons was despatched so as to be over the area at first light. This

located and attacked a convoy consisting of 25-30 transports, heavily escorted by naval vessels, at the northern entrance of the Banka Straits, heading towards the Palembang river. The convoy was protected by fighters believed to be from one or two aircraft carriers which were not, however, located. This was followed up by attacks by all available Hudsons and Blenheims, during which at least 6 transports were sunk or badly damaged. All of these attacks, except the first, were unescorted and carried out in the face of heavy A.A. fire and strong fighter defence. Six to eight of our aircraft were shot down or destroyed on landing in a damaged condition, whilst the majority were hit to a varying degree. Nevertheless, the successes already achieved more than balanced those losses and during the night of the 14th everything possible was done to prepare for further attacks the following morning.

454. The reason why no fighter escort had been available except for the first attack was because the Japanese had, in co-ordination with the approach of their convoy, staged a parachute attack on P.I. aerodrome, on which our fighters were based. It was the only occupied aerodrome which they had located in Sumatra. Presumably by attacking it they hoped to neutralize all air resistance to the convoy. As events will show, their failure to locate P.II and neutralize it as well was to prove costly. However, before proceeding further it is now necessary to turn to describe events at P.I.

**Parachute attack on Palembang I Aerodrome—
14th February.**

455. On 14th February all serviceable Hurricanes were airborne, escorting 225 Group's bombers which were attacking enemy shipping in Banka Straits. At about 0800 hours the approach of a large hostile formation was reported by the Observer Corps. Attempts to divert our Hurricanes to intercept it failed because they were beyond R/T range.

456. Shortly afterwards P.I. was attacked, first by bombers with light bombs, then it was well shot up by the large escort of fighters, and finally troop carriers dropped 2 groups of parachutists, each 150-200 strong, at two points 400-800 yards to the S. and W. in the scrub jungle which surrounds the aerodrome. Simultaneously 300 more were dropped on the oil refinery a few miles away near Pladjoe.

457. The aerodrome defences (8 heavy and 8 Bofors British A.A. guns, 150 Dutch infantry with 2 old armoured cars and about 60 R.A.F. ground defence gunners of 258 and 605 (F) Squadrons) warded off an attempt to rush the aerodrome, a number of casualties occurring on both sides.

458. Our absent fighters, now with empty tanks and guns, were diverted to P.II. and were subsequently employed against the main enemy attack in the Palembang river. Some landed at P.I, not having received the diversion order, were refuelled and sent on to P.II.

459. Shortly afterwards the A.A. guns, having by then almost exhausted their small stock of ammunition, were withdrawn to Palembang Town. Wing Commander Maguire organised the withdrawal of unarmed R.A.F. personnel at the same time. He remained himself with about 60 R.A.F. personnel and some Dutch native infantry to deny the aerodrome to