

4 The question of fighter protection and reconnaissance was discussed with Royal Air Force Headquarters before the Force sailed. The Air Officer Commanding, Royal Air Force, Far East, stated that he hoped to be able to provide air reconnaissance, but was doubtful about fighter protection off Singgora at daylight on the 10th December. After full investigation, he confirmed later to the Chief of Staff, Eastern Fleet, that such protection could not be provided.*

Composition of Force Z.

5. Force Z consisted of H.M. Ships PRINCE OF WALES (Captain J. C. Leach, M.V.O., D.S.O., R.N.) flying the flag of Admiral Sir Tom S. V. Phillips, K.C.B., REPULSE (Captain W. G. Tennant, C.B., M.V.O., R.N.), ELECTRA (Commander C. W. May, R.N.), EXPRESS (Lieutenant Commander F. J. Cartwright, R.N.), H.M.A.S. VAMPIRE (Commander W. T. A. Moran, R.A.N.), and H.M.S. TENEDOS (Lieutenant R. Dyer, R.N.).

JUPITER and ENCOUNTER were under repair and STRONGHOLD had to be used for meeting a division of U.S. destroyers expected at Singapore p.m. 9th December.

DURBAN was available but the Commander-in-Chief decided not to take her.

Movements of the Fleet up to the time of Air Attacks.

6. Force Z sailed at 1735 on 8th December and proceeded at 17½ knots to pass to eastward of Anamba Islands thence to the northward. The Commander-in-Chief informed the Force that the enemy Battle cruiser KONGO together with Cruisers and Destroyers were supporting the transports he intended to attack off Singgora and Pattani and that the landing was probably supported by submarines and mining.

7. In signal 2253GH/8 Chief of Staff informed Commander-in-Chief that fighter protection on 10th would not be possible.

8. Weather conditions during most of Tuesday, 9th December were favourable for evasion, with frequent rainstorms and low cloud. There was an unconfirmed report of sighting an enemy aircraft at 0620 on 9th December by VAMPIRE, the machine being seen for one minute by one lookout only. This was disregarded.

Between 1700 and 1830 the weather cleared and three Japanese naval reconnaissance aircraft in swift succession were sighted from the PRINCE OF WALES.

Admiralty footnote —

* Before sailing, the Commander-in-Chief, Eastern Fleet asked the Air Officer Commanding, Royal Air Force, Far East for

- (a) reconnaissance 100 miles to north of Force daylight 9th December
- (b) reconnaissance 100 miles mid point Singgora 10 miles from coast starting first light 10th December
- (c) fighter protection off Singgora at daylight 10th December

The Air Officer Commanding subsequently informed the Chief of Staff, Eastern Fleet, who remained ashore, that he could provide (a), hoped to be able to provide (b), but could not provide (c). The Chief of Staff, Eastern Fleet signalled accordingly to the Commander-in-Chief, Eastern Fleet, then at sea (see signals attached as Appendix III)

Chief of Staff was Rear-Admiral A. F. E. Palliser, D.S.C., who remained ashore in charge of the Commander-in-Chief's office at Singapore.

9 TENEDOS was ordered to return to Singapore at 1834 on the 9th December on account of her low endurance.

10. Before these sightings, the Commander-in-Chief had intended to detach the remaining destroyers at 2200 on 9th December and make a high speed descent on Singgora with the heavy ships only. He considered the destroyers would be very vulnerable to air attack and their low endurance was an anxiety. The Admiral intended to rely on the speed and surprise of the heavy ships' attack to avoid damage to these ships sufficient to slow them down, believing that Japanese aircraft encountered would not be carrying anti-ship bombs or torpedoes and that the Force on retirement would only have to deal with hastily organized long range bombers from bases in Indo-China.

11. On knowing that the Force had been sighted the Commander-in-Chief decided that the risk of attacking Singgora was no longer justified, as the ships would be expected, their targets might well have been withdrawn and a very large scale of air attack must be faced.

12. As soon as the reconnaissance aircraft had been shaken off after dusk, Force Z therefore turned to southward with the intention of returning to Singapore.

13. The situation was however altered by the receipt of Chief of Staff, Eastern Fleet's message timed 1505Z/9 at about midnight, which stated "Enemy reported landing at Kuantan." It seemed improbable that the enemy would expect Force Z, last located steering to the northward in the latitude of Singgora to be as far south as Kuantan by daylight. Kuantan was not far off the return track to Singapore, was 400 miles from Japanese aerodromes in Indo-China and was considered a key military position which every effort must be made to defend.

At 0052 on the 10th December, therefore, the Force turned for Kuantan and increased speed to 25 knots.

14. Between 0630 and 0730 enemy reconnaissance aircraft were sighted. PRINCE OF WALES and REPULSE flew off aircraft for reconnaissance and A/S patrol.*

15. Force Z arrived off Kuantan at 0800 on 10th December. No enemy forces were sighted and EXPRESS, who was sent to investigate the harbour, reported "complete peace."

16. One hour before reaching Kuantan, Force Z had passed at extreme range what appeared to be one small ship with a number of barges or junks. On finding Kuantan all quiet, the Commander-in-Chief decided to go back and investigate these barges before returning to Singapore. It was while steaming to the eastward to do this that Force Z was attacked by enemy aircraft.

17. The only signal from the Commander-in-Chief addressed to his base at Singapore was his 1455GH/9 which he directed TENEDOS to transmit at 0800 on 10th December. This stated that 0630 on the 11th December was the earliest time Force Z was likely to pass through position 3° 25' N. 106° 40' E. on return and asked that all available destroyers should be sent out to meet him.

Admiralty footnote —

* A/S patrol—anti-submarine patrol.