

203. However, with the destruction of aircraft on the ground in N.W. Malaya in mind, it became evident to A.H.Q. that a dangerous congestion of aircraft existed at Kuantan, particularly vulnerable because there was no A.A. protection there at all. Orders were issued to O.C. Kuantan, early on the 9th, to retain 12 Vildebeestes and the 13 Hudsons of Nos. 1 and 8 (GR) Squadrons, R.A.A.F., and to despatch the remainder to Singapore.

204. At noon the expected attack took place, and Kuantan was subjected to its first experience of high bombing, followed up by the bombers flying low and shooting up at will. A.H.Q. thereupon decided to evacuate Kuantan, the surviving 10 Hudsons and 8 Vildebeestes returning to Singapore. The withdrawal of the ground party from Kuantan might have been better controlled. From then on Kuantan was available as an A.L.G. for refuelling only.

*Reports of a landing at Kuantan—9-10th December, 1941.*

205. During the night 9-10th, reports were received of a landing north of Kuantan. Six Vildebeestes and 3 Hudsons were ordered to attack. The Vildebeestes found 3 small ships and bombed them with doubtful results, but the Hudsons which arrived later found no target although they prolonged their search of the area past daylight. There is reason to believe that the beaches at Kuantan had been fired on during the night, but that the enemy force was only a light reconnaissance to test the defences, and its size had been magnified in the telling.

206. Further bombing of Kuantan aerodrome on the morning of the 10th added to the uncertainty of the situation and all available bombers in Singapore were put at short notice to await developments. Sharks from the target-towing flight carried out reconnaissance of the approaches to Singapore, whilst Blenheim IV's from No. 34 (B) Squadron, using Kuantan for refuelling purposes, continued reconnaissance of the east coast up to 50 miles north of Singora, confirming once more the large concentration of shipping off the Siamese coast.

207. The false report of a landing at Kuantan proved to have a vital bearing on the movements of H.M.S. "Prince of Wales" and H.M.S. "Repulse", and it is now necessary to turn to the events leading up to the sinking of these two vessels.

*Sinking of H.M.S. "Prince of Wales" and "Repulse"—10th December, 1941.*

208. The C.-in-C. Eastern Fleet, Admiral Sir Tom Phillips, decided to sail on the 8th December, 1941, with H.M.S. "Prince of Wales" and H.M.S. "Repulse" accompanied by four destroyers, with the object of attacking the concentration of Japanese transports reported between Singora and Patani. He intended to arrive in the target area at dawn on the 10th December.

209. Before leaving on the 8th December (p.m.) the C.-in-C. asked for the following:—

(a) Reconnaissance 100 miles to north of the force from daylight, Tuesday, the 9th December:

(b) Reconnaissance to Singora and beyond, ten miles from the coast, starting at first light on the 10th December:

(c) Fighter protection off Singora at daylight on the 10th December.

The A.O.C. gave tentative replies that he could provide (a), hoped to be able to provide (b), but could not provide (c). It was decided that he should go thoroughly into the problems involved and give definite replies to the Chief of Staff, Eastern Fleet (Rear Admiral Palliser), who remained at the Naval Base in close liaison with G.H.Q.

210. The doubt about the reconnaissance required in (b) above was due to the fact that the reconnaissance would have had to be provided by Blenheim IV's based on Kuantan, and it was uncertain whether this aerodrome would be out of action or not.

211. The reason why the fighter protection asked for in (c) could not be provided was mainly that the northern aerodromes were either untenable or else had been badly damaged by bombers; this meant that the fighters would have to operate from aerodromes at considerable distance from Singora, and, owing to the short endurance of the Buffalo, would have been able to remain only a very short time over the Singora area before having to return to refuel. These factors meant that a short patrol might possibly have been provided at intervals at Singora, but that it was impossible to guarantee appreciable fighter protection.

212. On the evening of the 8th December the A.O.C. confirmed his tentative replies to the Chief of Staff, Eastern Fleet, and this information was passed by the latter to the C.-in-C. The signal as received on board "Prince of Wales" expressly stated that no fighter protection could be provided on 10th December, 1941. The words "off Singora" did not appear in the text of the signal, but were implied in the light of Admiral Phillips' request (para. 209 (c)).

213. The agreed air reconnaissances were carried out on both the 9th and 10th December.

214. In the early hours of 10th December a signal was received at Singapore indicating that the Fleet might return sooner than was originally planned. Apart from this no communication was received from the C.-in-C. and his position was unknown.

215. Suddenly, shortly after 1200 hours on the 10th December, a signal, originating from H.M.S. "Repulse", was received in the Operations Room at A.H.Q. of enemy air attacks on H.M.S. "Prince of Wales" and "Repulse" in a position some 60 miles Eastwards of Kuantan. No. 453 (F) Squadron (11 aircraft), which was standing by specifically to provide protection for these ships in case of their return to Singapore, left six minutes later, only to arrive in the area, 165 miles away, to find destroyers picking up survivors from these two great vessels. For the rest of the day a number of sorties by flying boats and fighters was carried out in connection with the return of these destroyers to Singapore.

216. It subsequently transpired that the Fleet had been located by Japanese reconnaissance p.m. 9th December, and that later the