

*Attempts to maintain contact with Enemy.*

157. On the afternoon of the 6th December, Hudsons despatched at 1620 hours from Kota Bahru to shadow were unable to contact the convoys, and bad weather prohibited relief aircraft being sent. The first Catalina of No. 205 (FB) Squadron left Seletar at 18.30 hours according to programmes to shadow the convoy during the night.

158. During the late evening of the 6th, scrutiny of reports and records revealed that the Japanese convoys were probably one hour ahead of the positions reported. It was assumed, therefore, that the convoys on rounding Indo-China had turned to the N.W. into the Gulf of Siam, thus passing out of the reconnaissance area (vide para. 152). This, perhaps, appeared at the time to explain why Hudsons despatched to shadow had not contacted the enemy; visibility conditions, however, had been poor.

159. No reports having been received from the first Catalina despatched to shadow the convoys, orders were issued to a second Catalina, before it took off to relieve the first, that if no contact was established, a search was to be made off the West Coast of Cambodia.

This was done because G.H.Q. considered the convoy had probably anchored at Ko Kong, for which it might be making as the next step towards Siam. The second Catalina left Seletar at 0200 hours on 7th December. After it was airborne it was ordered to keep 10 miles away from the coast of Siam. No report was ever received from this second Catalina, which was afterwards confirmed as having been shot down by the Japanese.

*Reconnaissance Plan for 7th December, 1941.*

160. For the 7th December, 1941 the Dutch flying boat "Group" and No. 205 (FB) Squadron at Seletar, and No. 8 (GR) Squadron, R.A.A.F., at Kuantan were instructed to continue the set reconnaissance plan covering the more direct line of approach to Singapore in case a further invasion convoy should attack from that direction. Such an attack would have been most dangerous, particularly if it were directed against the beaches in the Mersing/Endau area, where a successful landing would have gravely jeopardised the field army in Northern Malaya and might even have threatened Singapore itself before the same field army could come to its defence.

But the G.R. Squadron at Kota Bahru was detailed to carry out a special reconnaissance sweep into the Gulf of Siam with the object of re-establishing contact with the Japanese convoys known to be in it.

Vildebeestes were despatched to maintain an anti-submarine patrol ahead of H.M.S. Repulse which had been recalled from Australia.

*Events on the 7th December, 1941.*

161. Owing to bad weather, it was not until 0645 hours on the 7th that the reconnaissance aircraft from Kota Bahru, of which there were three, were able to take off for a sweep into the Gulf of Siam. Shortly afterwards, owing to rain, low clouds and bad visibility, two of them returned; the third proceeded alone.

162. At 1025 hours the C.-in-C., Far East, visited the Combined Army/Air Operations Room and stated that he:—

(a) Wished B.O.A.C. to continue using Bangkok until the last possible moment, and

confirmed that flights on the 8th December were to go through Bangkok.

(b) Was considering allowing our aircraft to fire at aircraft not established as friendly.

(c) Would issue orders shortly for the reconnaissance of Ko Kong anchorage, which he wished the P.R. Beaufort, now at Kota Bahru, to carry out.

163. Shortly afterwards, G.H.Q. issued their orders for the reconnaissance of Ko Kong. The aircraft left Kota Bahru at 1220 hours, but returned at 1445 hours owing to bad weather. During the morning, the Catalina with Admiral Sir Tom Phillips on board returned from Manila.

164. Meanwhile at 1345 hours on the 7th December, A.H.Q. was informed that air reconnaissance from Kota Bahru had sighted a 6,000-8,000 ton cargo vessel in the Gulf of Siam steaming west, and this was followed by a further sighting at 1545 hours, by a Hudson of No. 8 (R.A.A.F.) Squadron, of one other Japanese merchant vessel steering south. This latter vessel was stated to have a large number of men on deck in khaki.

165. Two Hudsons from Kota Bahru were immediately directed on a diverging search north of that place and 10 miles off the Siamese coast. At 1750 hours one merchant vessel and one cruiser steaming 270° were sighted about 112 miles north of Kota Bahru. The cruiser opened fire on the aircraft. At 1848 hours, under conditions of very bad visibility, four Japanese naval vessels, perhaps destroyers, were seen 60 miles north of Patani steaming south.

166. Owing to subsequent destruction of records, the exact positions of some of the ship sightings mentioned above cannot now be given with any certainty.

*Resulting Action.*

167. In consequence of these reports, G.H.Q. decided, late on 7th December, not to put "Operation Matador" into effect that night, and issued orders for B.O.A.C. aircraft to avoid Bangkok and to use the West coast route.

168. Conditions at midnight 7th-8th December, 1941 were therefore:—

(a) Contact with the main Japanese convoys located on the 6th had not been re-established.

(b) Conditions for air reconnaissance in the Gulf of Siam had been bad, but in the late evening four ships had been sighted off Singora steaming south.

(c) "Norgroup," with Nos 21 (F) R.A.A.F., and 27 (NF) Squadrons at Sungei Patani, was standing by in support of IIIrd Corps, but Operation Matador had not been ordered.

(d) The following aircraft under the command of the Officer Commanding Kota Bahru were fully armed and ready to take the offensive:—

(i) No. 1 (GR) Squadron R.A.A.F., and one Section (2) Buffaloes of No. 243 (F) Squadron at Kota Bahru.

(ii) Seven Vildebeestes (No. 36 (TB) Squadron), with torpedoes, at Gong Kedah, to which they had been transferred owing to congestion at Kota Bahru.