

this extra, unnecessary, circuit was:—

(a) The strike departed at 0734 (four minutes late).

(b) Three Avenger Squadrons were hopelessly out of position.

(c) The fighter escort was all jumbled up, which, with the poor weather conditions obtaining, made aviation in the area extremely hazardous.

I think the time allowed, *i.e.*, 40 minutes before collection and 50 minutes before departure, could be reduced. The Strike Leader should collect 30 minutes after take off and depart 10 minutes later. At 0733, I observed an air crew being picked up by a destroyer: it seemed a little early in the day to start losing aircraft.

3. Base to Coast

At 0740, the strike commenced climbing and the escort took up position. An accurate landfall was made at 0752 at 5,500 feet. Formations had by now all closed up and the escort was very tidily in position. I lost sight of the fleet at about 10 miles owing to masses of low cumulus. But over the land, conditions were much improved. There was thin 10/10th at about 14,000 feet and over the eastern plain of Sumatra 10/10th cloud, 500 feet thick, covering large areas. In fact, the weather could not have been more ideal.

4. Coast to Target

On passing over Lake Ranau, one Avenger commenced straggling and soon after turned for base. I reported this to INDOMITABLE but got no reply. The climb was continued over the mountains to 7,500 feet. The formation of the strike and escort was very good. The weather, however, got worse and I had some doubts whether we would be able to see the target. As the top cover was being forced down by cloud, requests were passed to the Strike Leader to fly lower. But he continued to climb to 10,000 feet and caused embarrassment to the escort above him.

The journey to the target was otherwise uneventful. At 0830 I shifted to R/T Channel C and heard Forces X-Ray and Yoke at work. They were on their targets about 15 minutes before we struck and by the sound of things they were far too late. Most of their reports were of Bandits* airborne.

At 0835, the vexed question of balloons cropped up and the escort leader, much to the relief of the bombers, decided to use the Fireflies for this work. At 0840, the target could be seen, fortunately quite clear of clouds. The balloons were about 4,000 feet. All fires from the previous raid on Pladjoe were out. Shortly after, the Fireflies reported "Out Lights", the bombers deployed according to plan and I moved ahead to observe the target.

Almost immediately, the heavy A.A. opened up on the Fireflies. Several groups of about 10 rounds were observed extremely accurate for height and range but, fortunately, out for bearing. My flight also attracted the attentions of the gunners but they were completely unable to cope with gentle evasion. All this

drew quite a bit of the A.A. away from the bombers. But just after the deployment, several enemy fighters were seen diving down on them. I observed no reaction by the top or middle cover. The plan for guarding individual squadrons by sections of the escort appeared in most cases to be a failure. Both squadrons of No. 1 Wing received the unwelcome attentions of Jap fighters which did not cease until they commenced to bomb. During this period no protection was afforded by our own fighters. I believe No. 2 Wing were more fortunate. About three balloons were destroyed but I don't think they were worth the attention the Fireflies gave them.

5. Attack

I commenced photographing at 0850 as the first bombs fell. From visual observation, some targets were severely hit and the photographs have confirmed this. Bombing by No. 1 Wing was truly impressive. By the time No. 2 Wing commenced bombing, it was getting a bit difficult to see. The first squadron of that wing (ILLUSTRIOUS) set off some oil tanks in the vicinity and certainly were very close to their target. Some of the last aircraft to bomb obviously could not observe their correct target and so, quite rightly, chose another. One stick was seen to burst along the wharves. It seemed a pity that so many aircraft were put on to one small target whilst Pladjoe was completely clear and could have been bombed accurately.

6. Withdrawal to Rendezvous

About three minutes after the last aircraft bombed I finished photographing. I then climbed from 6,000 feet to 10,000 in order to take vertical line overlap photographs as the flak had died down. I soon had to change my mind as a Tojo was coming for us. In shooting this one down, we descended to 0 feet and, attracted by the gunfire, an Oscar* came along, and by 0905 he, too, was dead.

During this time the radio was giving me an interesting picture of a long stream of Avengers dribbling out of the target area to the rendezvous, 30 miles away. It was evident some of them could not find it. Nor could I from 7,000 feet even though I searched for some time. During this period there was quite a vicious air battle of which I can give no detail.

7. Rendezvous to Base

The return was without opposition of any kind. There seemed to be a little confusion as to who was going to escort the stragglers. Formation on the return was good and the escort in position. I climbed to 10,000 feet and swept the area astern of the formation but no enemy aircraft attempted to shadow. After the strike had crossed the coast I examined Lake Ranau for any survivors but saw none. I then proceeded to the submarine rendezvous for the aircrews forced down and took oblique photographs of all the river mouths in the bay in question.

R/T discipline up till now had been 100 per cent. improved. But crossing the coast seemed to be the signal for complete radio chaos. Primarily the Avengers giving their damaged

Admiralty footnote:—

* Bandits—enemy aircraft.

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* Oscar—Japanese army fighter.