

18. (i) At 0940 the strike started to land on. (This was completed by 1025. An aircraft followed the returning striking force and was recognised on the plot as hostile too late for a successful interception.

(ii) The Force retired to the south-west at 22 knots.

Withdrawal and Second Oiling

19. At 1415 a group of "four plus" enemy aircraft was detected by radar, the fleet then being 42 miles south of Engano Island. This group circled the island and finally faded to the north-west at 1430. The high Combat Air Patrol, which had been sent out to intercept, was recalled. It is thought that no further attempt was made to locate the fleet.

20. URSA was topped up with oil from KING GEORGE V during 25th January and was detached in the evening to proceed to Cocos Island with signals for despatch. She rejoined while the fleet was fuelling.

21. Force 63, including the aircraft carriers, oiled in two bodies on 26th and 27th January. ILLUSTRIOUS and VICTORIOUS also topped up with aviation spirit. Oiling was slow owing to buoyant hoses parting at the joints.

22. At this stage it had become clear that the fuel situation would allow no more than one further strike at Palembang.

Second Strike Plan

23. (i) As a result of experience gained in the first operation the orders for the second strike were modified in two respects.

(ii) First, the fighter sweep was flown in two parts, the timing of the flight plans being such that the two independent squadrons should arrive simultaneously at the two main enemy fighter airfields. The squadrons were ordered to establish patrols over the enemy's airfields on completion of the sweeps.

(iii) Secondly, the bombers were instructed to turn right handed after bombing and proceed to the rendezvous passing south of the target. This lengthened the withdrawal route, but the alteration was made at the request of the two Avenger Wing Leaders, in order to avoid the heavy A.A. fire encountered round Palembang town.

24. Plans were also made to fly off from an alternative position north of Engano Island. This northern position was not used, as it seemed very unlikely that the enemy would be able to move U-boats to the West Sumatran coast in time to interfere with the operations.

Defence of the Fleet

25. It was appreciated that the enemy would know that we intended to strike a second time. They had probably captured prisoners who knew that more than one strike was intended. We had attacked only one of the two main refineries in the first strike, and might reasonably be expected to return to deal with the other.

26. It was therefore decided to reduce the escort of the main strike, make this up to some extent by using the Fireflies throughout as close escort fighters, and retain at least four

fighters in each of VICTORIOUS, ILLUSTRIOUS and INDEFATIGABLE ready to back up the standing air patrol from INDEFATIGABLE.

27. It was not expected that the enemy would be able to reinforce materially his defensive fighters, but it was expected that he would make a real effort to attack the carriers, possibly with one of his special attack squadrons.

Order of Battle

28. The order of battle of the aircraft on the second strike and sweeps was:—

Songei Gerong Strike

INDEFATIGABLE, 12 Avengers, 16 Hellcats.

ILLUSTRIOUS, 12 Avengers, 12 Corsairs.

VICTORIOUS, 12 Avengers, 12 Corsairs.

INDEFATIGABLE, 12 Avengers, 10 Fireflies.

Fighter Ramrod Sweeps

Lembak Airfield

ILLUSTRIOUS, 12 Corsairs.

Talangbetoetoe Airfield

VICTORIOUS, 12 Corsairs.

Armed Reconnaissance—Mana Airfield

INDEFATIGABLE, 2 Fireflies.

Second Strike—Flying off

29. Force 63 arrived at Position TA at 0600 on 29th January to find heavy rainstorms in a belt 30 miles off the coast, but the Sumatran mountains apparently clear of cloud. H Hour was postponed from 0615 until 0640. At this time the carriers were in a clear patch between two rainstorms, but others soon arrived.

30. The striking force formed up well in spite of poor conditions and took departure at 0732, two minutes after the planned time. Their target was the Songei Gerong distillery.

31. The second ranges of aircraft were prepared much more quickly than on 24th January. As a result the Fireflies joined up with the main body before it crossed the coast, and the Ramrod sweeps kept their appointments punctually at the enemy airfields.

32. The weather conditions round the flying off position improved quickly after 0730 and there was a steady north-westerly wind throughout the operation.

Second Strike and Sweep—Narrative

33. The enemy was more alert than he had been on 24th January, and was apparently keeping a standing fighter patrol airborne. The Ramrod sweeps found little on their airfields, but their presence on patrol over the airfields may have prevented the enemy reinforcing his existing patrols. The total claim of these two squadrons was four aircraft destroyed and two damaged.

34. The main strike met no opposition from enemy fighters until after they deployed. The step-aside deployment plan used for this target gave our escorting fighters a more difficult task than the circular deployment used at Pladjoe.