

Arrangements were made for the Gun Operations Room to be in the same building. It was also connected with the Dutch Civil Observer System, which was in course of being improved (paras. 406 and 407).

433. The role of the Group was:—

(a) Defence of the Palembang area

(b) Protection of shipping in the Banka Straits, by means of escort patrols and offensive sweeps:

(c) Up till the 9th February 1942 maintenance of a token force of fighters in Singapore.

434. V.H.F. was not available, nor was D/F for assisting homing aircraft. The absence of the latter was a serious handicap because intense thunderstorms were frequent and fighter pilots were apt to lose their bearings when negotiating them.

All aircraft of the Fighter Group were based on P.I. aerodrome, the administrative shortcomings of which have already been related. It had a telephone from the Operations Room in Palembang but no instruments were available for dispersal points round the aerodrome, which slowed down the speed with which fighters could get away to intercept an enemy raid.

Strength of Fighter Squadrons.

435. About 50 Hurricanes were available when the Group formed, the majority direct from H.M.S. "Indomitable." The remainder were part of the original consignment which had arrived in crates in Singapore on the 13th January.

436. Forty-eight flew off H.M.S. "Indomitable" on 26th January. All flew off with their guns protected with anti-corrosion grease with which they had been provided for the journey. Fifteen flew via Batavia and P.I. to Singapore, arriving on the 29th January. Their guns were cleaned at Seletar. The remainder remained at P.II to have their guns cleaned before transfer to P.I. Cleaning of these guns was a slow operation owing to lack of all the usual facilities, and considerable delay occurred before squadrons were able to go into action.

437. Pilots were drawn from Nos 232, 242, 258 and 605 (F) Squadrons and operated as two composite squadrons—Nos. 232 and 258. Most pilots, with the exception of the Commanding Officers and Flight Commanders, were straight from O.T.U's., and deserve credit for the spirit with which they went straight into action. They had experienced a long sea voyage, but once again no time could be spared for acclimatization or training.

438. When they first arrived their aircraft were serviced by personnel from Buffalo squadrons. From the 6th February onwards however, ground personnel of No. 266 (F) Wing began to arrive via Oesthaven, including advanced parties and stores with an Air Stores Park and an R.S.U. There was a deficiency of Hurricane tool kits, few battery starters for aircraft, and no battery-charging facilities were available at the aerodrome: factors which contributed to a low standard of serviceability.

439. To improve the climb and manoeuvrability of the Hurricane the four outside guns were removed, as it was considered that eight guns were ample against the unarmoured Japanese aircraft.

OPERATIONS CARRIED OUT BY NO. 226 (F) GROUP.

440. From the 2nd-5th February many sorties were carried out escorting shipping proceeding north and south through the Banka Straits. On the 3rd February, nine aircraft of No. 258 Squadron left for Singapore to co-operate with a bomber force in a combined attack on Kluang aerodrome, returning the following day. They landed at Tengah, but owing to an error on the part of that Station, the squadron was not ready to take off at the appointed time, and the attack was a failure.

441. Meanwhile, Japanese reconnaissance was maintained daily over Palembang, and was quick to note our activity. Air attacks on P.I. aerodrome took place on 6th, 7th and 8th February by formations of bombers escorted by fighters.

442. On the 6th February warning was short, and the Hurricanes, caught at a tactical disadvantage, lost four and claimed one Navy "O". No. 232 Squadron were away at Singapore on this day conducting operations from the Island.

443. On the 7th February warning was even shorter, and results were serious. The Japanese combined a high bombing attack with a low attack by fighters. Three Hurricanes were destroyed and 11 others damaged on the ground, whilst three were shot down in the air. In addition four unserviceable Blenheims on the ground, and one Hudson, which arrived as the attack was in progress, were destroyed. Only one Navy "O" fighter could be claimed.

444. On the 8th and 13th February fresh attacks on the aerodromes took place, but more warning was received: on the 8th an inconclusive interception took place, but on the 13th, three Navy "O" fighters and two Army 97 bombers were shot down for the loss of one Hurricane.

445. On the 12th February the Group was reinforced by Wing Commander Maguire and eight aircraft. These were part of a reinforcing Wing, No. 226 (F) Wing which included 39 Hurricanes, a pool of 15 pilots, and the ground crews of Nos. 232, 258 and 605 Squadrons: it had arrived at Batavia by sea on the 4th February.

446. On the 13th February a further nine aircraft from Batavia arrived at P.I. Unfortunately they did so while the attack on the aerodrome was in progress. They were short of petrol, and in ensuing engagements six were either shot down or crashed.

447. It was quite evident that the Japanese already realised that we were endeavouring to establish our squadrons on P.I. and that they were devoting a very considerable effort, particularly with strong forces of fighters, to prevent it.

It is opportune at this juncture to digress for a moment.

Control of operations in Sumatra assumed by Abdair.

448. It will be realised that A.H.Q. in Singapore had, by the end of January, much depleted its staff in forming the staffs of the two new Groups, Nos. 225 and 226, in Sumatra, which were themselves much under requirements. This depletion particularly affected the