

“a raid of the Pearl Harbour type”: The Japanese Attack on Colombo

Introduction

On 5 April 1942, Colombo, the capital and principal port of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), was attacked by 127 aircraft from the five aircraft carriers of Kidō Butai (KdB), the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) carrier task force which had attacked Pearl Harbor. This was no bolt from the blue, however. The defenders had been preparing for weeks for just such an eventuality - “a raid of the ‘Pearl Harbour’ type”, as one of their assessments put it in mid-February (misspelling Pearl Harbor, a proper noun). Codebreaking gave some warning of the attack in late March, reconnaissance aircraft detected KdB’s approach on 4 April and tracked it during the night, and the defending aircraft and anti-aircraft guns, supported by an operational radar station, came to full readiness before first light. The defending fighters were nevertheless still on the ground when the Japanese aircraft arrived and were not scrambled until the pilots themselves saw the attackers overhead. As a result, the defenders lost 20 of the 41 fighters which then took off and the Japanese lost only seven aircraft.

This article provides a detailed analysis of the attack on Colombo, aiming in particular to explain how the attackers achieved tactical surprise when the defenders had ample warning of the impending attack.

Note:

This is a revised and much expanded edition of an article by the same author, “Air Raid Colombo, 5 April 1942: The Fully Expected Surprise Attack”, which was published in the fall 2014 issue of The Royal Canadian Air Force Journal. (It can be accessed at http://www.rcaf-arc.forces.gc.ca/assets/AIRFORCE_Internet/docs/en/cf-aerospace-warfare-centre/elibrary/journal/2014-vol3-iss4-06-air-raid-colombo-5-april-1942.pdf.)

Local time (Zone F, GMT+6) is used throughout this article and “miles” refers to nautical miles.

The Threat is Recognized

The attack on Colombo was the opening act of Operation C, the IJN’s April 1942 campaign in the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal. (See Map 1.) Operation C did not achieve strategic surprise. The IJN’s switch on 4 December 1941 to a new additive table for JN-25B, its main operational code, temporarily cut off Allies’ best potential source of intelligence on Japanese intentions. But the authorities in London still knew how to read a map and did their best to foresee Japan’s strategic options. On 16 February, the day after the fall of Singapore, the War Cabinet Joint Planning Staff submitted an assessment entitled “Far East Policy” which commented that:

9. By the seizure of Ceylon and raids on the Indian coast Japan could raise overwhelming internal security troubles in India, induce instability in Indian forces and threaten our communications to Middle East, Burma and Australia. Our fleet would be denied the use of Trincomalee and Colombo.

[...]

11. In the near future we may expect to see ... Attack on Ceylon by a raid of the “Pearl Harbour” type or by general assault.

[...]

13. The basis of our general strategy lies in the safety of our sea communications, for which secure naval and air bases are essential. We must therefore make certain of our main bases, i.e. Burma, India, Ceylon and Australia, before we think of reinforcing the Malayan barrier.

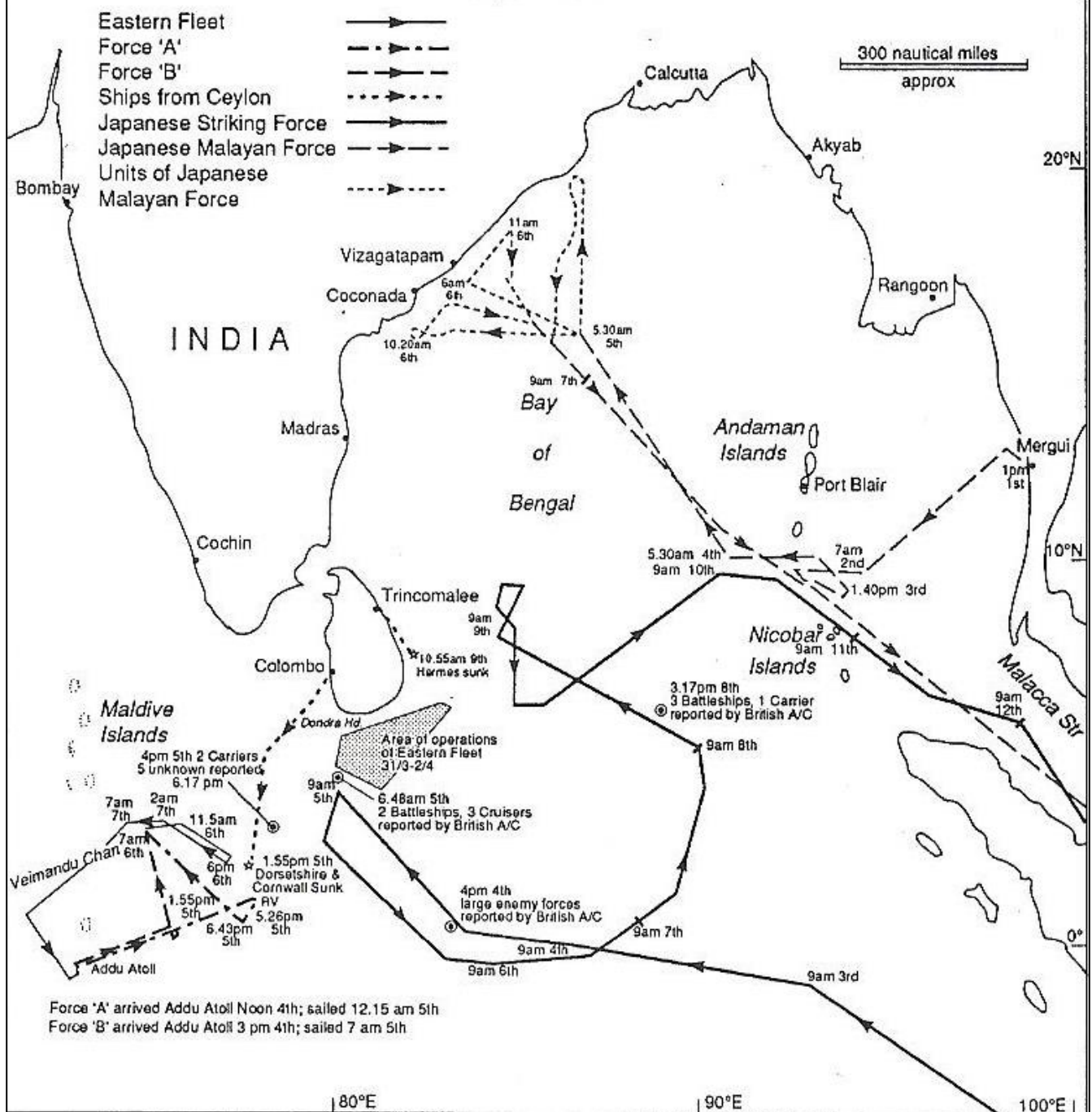
The assessment concluded that the top two priorities for reinforcement were now Burma, whose retention was “vital to prolongation of Chinese effort”, and Ceylon, whose loss “would imperil whole British war effort in Middle East and Far East.”¹

Agreeing with this assessment, the Chiefs of Staff advised the War Cabinet five days later that:

*... The loss of Ceylon would imperil the whole British war effort in the Middle and Far East, owing to its position in relation to our sea communications. Immediate measures are being taken to provide the island with adequate defences, particularly air forces, anti-aircraft guns and increased R.D.F. [Radio Direction Finding, i.e., radar].*²

The theatre commanders also anticipated the threat to Ceylon. On 7 February Vice Admiral Sir Geoffrey Layton, the acting commander of the Eastern Fleet at the time, warned London of the defencelessness of Colombo and Trincomalee to a Pearl Harbor style Japanese air attack.³ On 27 February General Sir Archibald Wavell, Commander-in-Chief India, suggested that the “Immediate danger to Ceylon seems to lie in a raid of Pearl Harbour or Port Darwin type, from carriers to destroy warships, merchant ships, aircraft base, installations [and] oil tanks at Trincomalee and Colombo.”⁴ (Darwin was attacked by KdB on 19 February.) Altogether, the British explicitly acknowledged the possibility of a Pearl Harbor-type attack on Ceylon on at least seven occasions.

April 1942



Map 1 – An Overview of Operation C.^{5*}

Reinforcements, Part 1 – Planes and Pilots

On 7 December 1941 the air defences of Ceylon had consisted of four obsolescent 3-inch AA guns at Trincomalee. The only RAF unit was 273 Squadron at China Bay, near Trincomalee, with four Vildebeests and four Seals, both of which were obsolete biplane torpedo aircraft. There were no fighters and no radar stations.

During the next two months, British reinforcements were sent mainly to Singapore and Burma, and the only additional aircraft obtained by the RAF in Ceylon during this period was a single Catalina flying boat. This was one of four Catalinas of 202 Squadron which staged through Ceylon on their way to Singapore from Gibraltar in December 1941. This aircraft was serial numbered W8406 with unit code AX-D, and was captained by Flight Lieutenant DHT (Toby) Hildyard. 222 Group, the headquarters controlling all RAF aircraft and stations on Ceylon, retained AX-D in Ceylon when the other three Catalinas resumed their transit to Singapore.

No further Catalinas reached Ceylon until 18 February, when Flight Lieutenant JR Graham arrived with Z2144 / FV-R, the sole surviving aircraft of 205 Squadron, which had been based at Singapore before 7 December. None of the three 202 Squadron aircraft which had passed through Ceylon in December survived the unsuccessful defence of Malaya and the Netherlands East Indies (now Indonesia).

* Like virtually all Operation C maps, Map 1's depiction of KdB's track on 5 April is not entirely accurate. It shows KdB changing course to 200 degrees by mid-morning, maintaining this course for about 100 miles and then turning southeast to retire. In fact, KdB maintained its mean approach course of 315 only until 0830, when it changed course to 230, rather than 200. It changed course to 135 to retire to the southeast at probably 1530. (For further information, see Boyd, pp. 371-376.) Map 3 (see below) accurately depicts KdB's movements immediately preceding and following the launch of the Colombo strike.



Catalina Mark 1 W8406 / AXD undergoing maintenance at Koggala lagoon later in the war⁶



FV-R (at left) and another Catalina from 205 Squadron off the coast of Malaya, presumably before 7 December 1941⁷

Another eight Catalinas arrived in Ceylon during the first half of March. Four of them were 240 Squadron aircraft from Lough Erne in Northern Ireland. The other quartet were Dutch Naval Air Force (Marine Luchtvaart Dienst, or MLD) refugees which had fled the Netherlands East Indies when it fell to the Japanese.⁸

The last two Catalinas to arrive before 5 April were from the RCAF's 413 Squadron, stationed since October 1941 at Sullom Voe in the Shetlands. The unit received orders on 27 February to move to Ceylon and four of its aircraft soon began the long journey to their new station, via Pembroke Dock (in southwestern Wales), Gibraltar, Cairo, Aboukir (where they paused for unspecified maintenance work), Basra and Karachi.

The first 413 Squadron aircraft to arrive was W8421 / QL-Y, captained by Flight Lieutenant Rae Thomas, a South African in the RAF, which reached Ceylon on 28 March. The second was AJ155 / QL-A, captained by Squadron Leader Leonard Birchall, a career RCAF officer, which arrived at 0945 on 2 April. The unit's other Catalinas arrived after the attack on Colombo. We may note in passing that, the two infantry battalions at Hong Kong having been captured, 413 Squadron remained the only unit from any of the three Canadian services stationed anywhere in the Pacific or Indian Ocean areas (apart from those in British Columbia and Alaska) until October 1944, when two RCAF transport squadrons were formed in India and subsequently employed in support of the Burma campaign.⁹

The Catalinas all operated from Koggala lagoon, which was essentially a salt water lake a short distance inland from the south coast and about 30 kilometres west of Dondra Head, Ceylon's southernmost point. The Japanese were not aware that Koggala was in use as a seaplane base and did not attack it on 5 April.

Unfortunately, on 4 April three of the Dutch and two of the British Catalinas were apparently unserviceable, with some or all of them probably being overhauled by Hindustan Aircraft Limited (HAL) at Bangalore in India. As well, at midday on 4 April the fourth Dutch Catalina, Y-56, was sent to Addu Atoll on what was described only as an "important mission in connection with Naval Forces" and did not return until 9 April. This left just six serviceable Catalinas at Koggala – four RAF machines and the two newly arrived RCAF planes.¹⁰

Ceylon remained bereft of fighters until 23 February, when eight Hurricanes IIBs arrived at Ratmalana, the civil airfield 15 kilometres (8 nm) south of Colombo which was taken over by the RAF on 1 March. They were part of a shipment of thirty disassembled Hurricanes which had arrived at Karachi on 3 February on the merchant vessel Cefn-Y-Bryn. The eight Hurricanes were assembled at Karachi, flown to Ratmalana, and issued to what was at first known as 'K' Squadron. Most of its first pilots arrived at Colombo from Java on the Dutch ship Kota Gede on 6 March. They had been among the 258 Squadron pilots ferried to Java by HMS Indomitable in January (see below). Consequently, the new unit was officially redesignated 258 Squadron on 30 March.¹¹



A shot of Ratmalana looking to the northeast showing the runway and station buildings. It was probably taken between March and November 1942. The biplane at centre right is likely a Vildebeest of the station flight.¹²



This overhead shot of Ratmalana is undated but it was likely taken after the image at the top of the page¹³

A much larger number of Hurricanes arrived in March aboard Indomitable. In January the carrier had ferried 48 (some sources say 50) partially disassembled Hurricanes IIBs of 232 and 258 Squadrons from Port Sudan to Java, this mission being known as Operation Opponent. Indomitable left Port Sudan, on the western shore of the Red Sea, on 15 January and arrived south of Java on 27 January. Although two of Indomitable's four squadrons had been left at Aden, the lack of elbow room in the hangars limited the number of Hurricanes which could be assembled and each one had to be brought up to the flight deck as soon as it was ready, to make room for another to be put together. Consequently, it took two days to assemble and launch the Hurricanes. Two batches were launched on 27 January and a final batch was launched the next morning. One of the RAF aircraft, Hurricane IIB BD771, suffered an engine failure and was retained on board. It was converted to a Sea Hurricane and flown from Indomitable during Operation Pedestal, the famous August 1942 Malta convoy battle.

On 25 February Indomitable was back at Port Sudan for a second ferry run, Operation Bellows, and loaded more partially disassembled Hurricanes – probably 50 Mark IIBs and 10 Mark Is. The pilots and advance parties from 30 and 261 Squadrons were also embarked. The rest of the two squadrons' ground staff and their vehicles embarked on the troop ship Talma, which also carried the ground staff and vehicles of 11 Squadron and those of the radar units AMES 254 and AMES 272. (AMES 272 was destined for Trincomalee. For further information on 11 Squadron and AMES 254 see below.)

When Indomitable sailed from Port Sudan on 27 February, its destination had not been finalized. Bellows was originally to have been a repeat Opponent, with the fighters again being ferried to Java, but by mid-February the further reinforcement of Java was looking increasingly futile and the question of Indomitable's destination was under urgent discussion by the Chiefs of Staff in London. The Allied navies' defeat in the Battle of the Java Sea on 27 February and the Japanese landings on the north coast of Java the next day no doubt put the kibosh on reinforcing Java once and for all, but it was not until 3 March that the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, advised all concerned that Indomitable was to proceed to Ceylon and unload all its Hurricanes there.¹⁴

Various authors have asserted that Layton diverted Indomitable to Ceylon while it was on route to Java, in defiance of the Chiefs of Staff. This is a completely unfounded myth. As noted above, the Chiefs of Staff ordered the Hurricanes diverted to Ceylon on 3 March. Two days later the RAF headquarters in India, to which 222 Group in Ceylon was subordinate, proposed to London that 24 of the 60 Hurricanes aboard the carrier should be sent from Ceylon to Burma, but the Chiefs of Staff were adamant that all 60 were to be employed to defend Ceylon. Their position was that "All repeat all Hurricanes ex INDOMITABLE are to remain in Ceylon" and that "Forces in Ceylon or in route to it are not to be diverted without reference to the COS."¹⁵



Indomitable in July 1942¹⁶



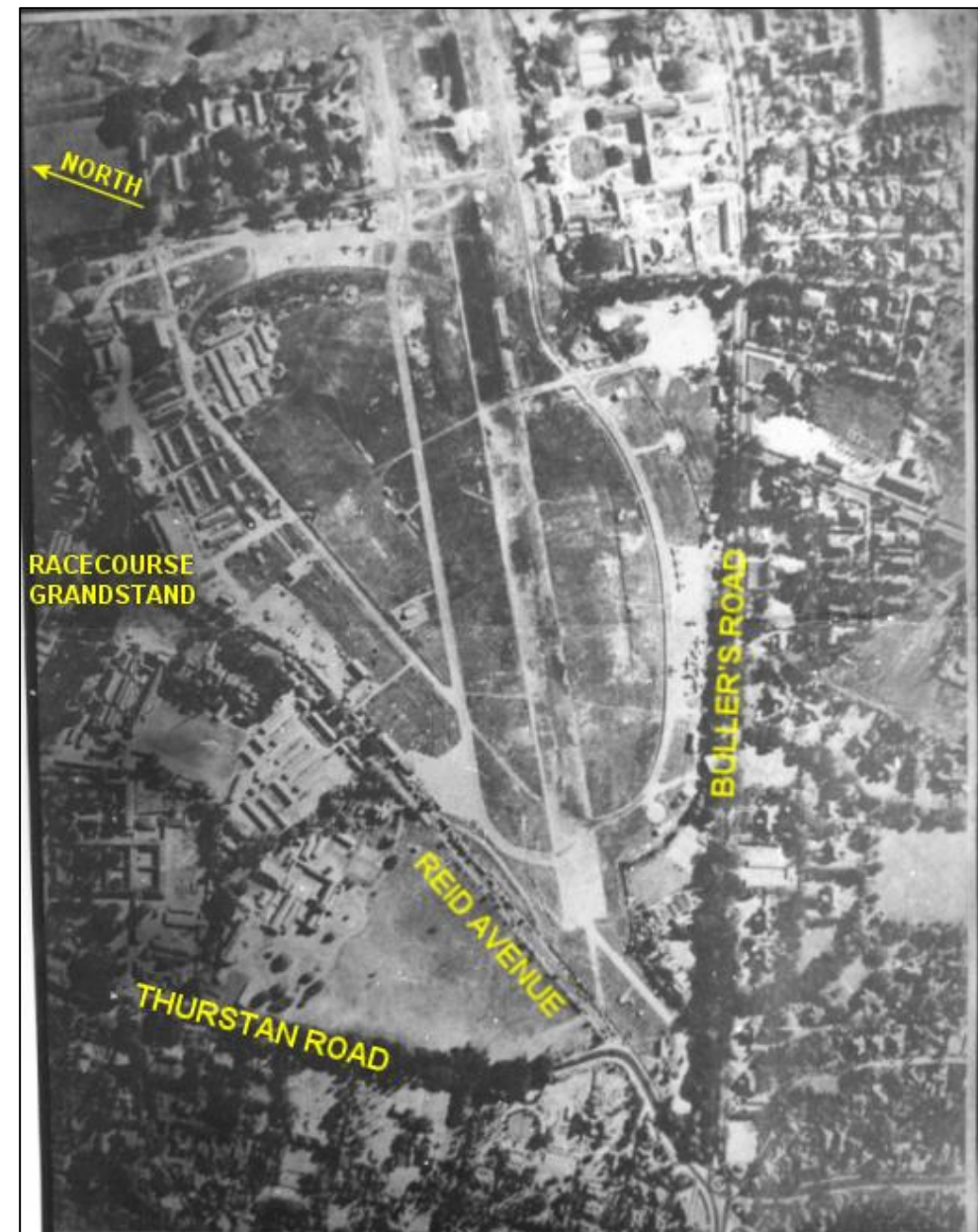
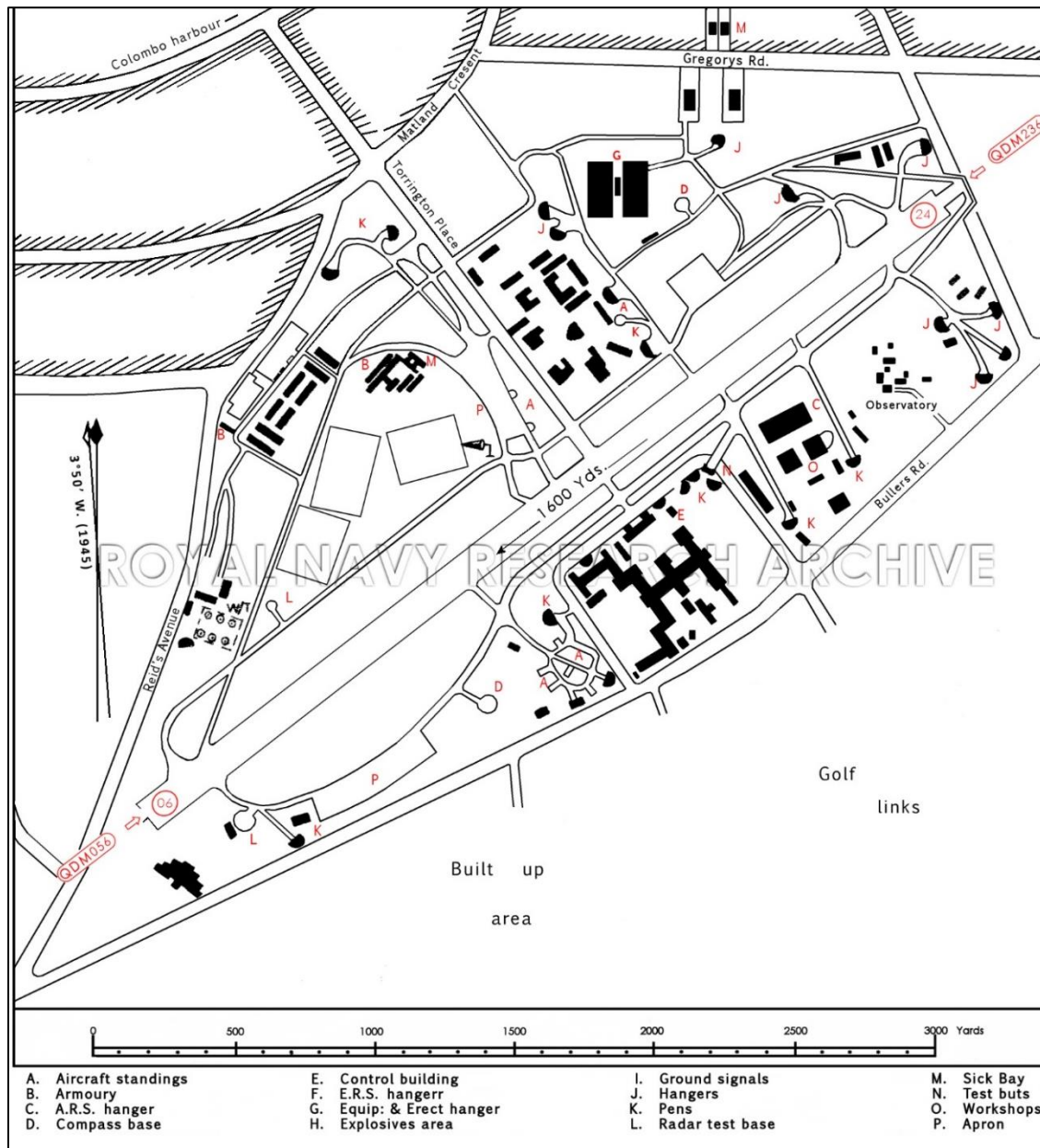
Sea Hurricane 1b AF974 (built in Canada as a Hurricane Mk I) being moved on to Indomitable's forward lift, the only lift on any Illustrious class carrier able to accommodate Sea Hurricanes and Hurricanes. Not having folding wings, they had to be turned sideways to fit. The aircraft on the left at the ship's bow is thought to be BD771, in which case the image was taken after 28 January 1942.¹⁷

Indomitable arrived off Ceylon on 6 March and in the morning launched 20 Hurricanes. One 30 Squadron Hurricane, BG887, flown by Sgt F. Whittaker, RNZAF, returned to Indomitable with a glycol leak and landed back on the carrier, despite not having any arrestor hook. It was repaired in time for Whittaker to depart again at 1600, with the second batch. The final batch of Hurricanes flew off the next morning.¹⁸

For some of the pilots this was not the first time they had flown a Hurricane off a carrier. Whittaker and such other 30 Squadron pilots as F/O RC Graves had flown Hurricanes to Malta in 1941 from Ark Royal's deck, while F/L SR Peacock-Edwards had flown one to Takoradi off Furious.

All of the Hurricanes landed at Ratmalana. 261 Squadron soon departed for China Bay, the RAF station at Trincomalee, but 30 Squadron remained at Ratmalana and was still based there on 5 April.

On 23 March, 258 Squadron moved to a new airstrip at Colombo's racecourse. The Ceylonese ministers had approved its construction on or shortly before 12 February, this entailing the sacrifice of the racecourse, a golf course and three government houses. The strip was nearly 2,000 feet in length, running northeast-southwest, and located only five km south of the harbour (see Map 4). On 2 April the 14 Blenheim IV bombers of 11 Squadron, whose aircraft had started to arrive from the Middle East on 28 February, also moved from Ratmalana to the racecourse airstrip. The Japanese were unaware of the airstrip's existence.¹⁹

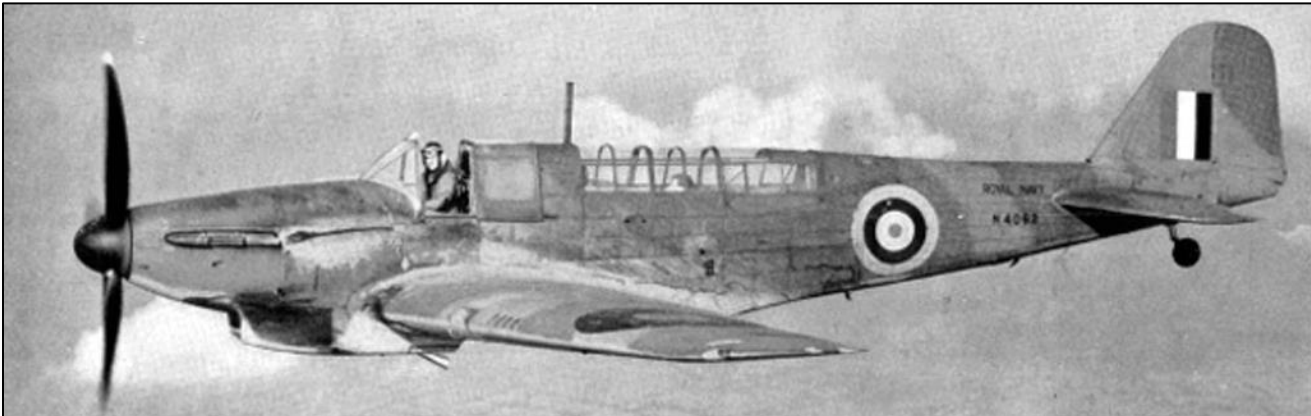


The sketch at left, which is probably from 1943-45, shows the layout of the Racecourse Airstrip. The photo at right is undated but was likely taken well after April 1942 given the state of development it depicts.²⁰



The Hurricane IIB flown on 5 April by P/O Jimmy Whalen, RCAF. The air intake has been fitted with a tropical filter.²¹

The RAF reinforcements were followed by two Fleet Air Arm (FAA) units with 12 Fulmar II two-seat fighters apiece. 803 Naval Air Squadron (NAS) landed at Ratmalana on 24 March and 806 NAS arrived on 27 March. Both had been flying the Fulmar I from HMS Formidable until it was damaged off Crete in May 1941. They then flew Hurricanes from airfields in the Middle East until given Fulmar IIs and sent to Ceylon.²²



A Fulmar II. Lt Cyril Pountney is the pilot, according to his memoirs. He was shot down on 5 April flying a Swordfish.²³

The Fulmar was not a great success as a fighter, despite having the same engine as the Hurricane and Spitfire. Its great handicap was that it was designed in accordance with the Royal Navy requirement that all shipborne aircraft carry an observer (i.e., a navigator), so it had to carry a second crewman. As Table 1 illustrates, the Fulmar II was outclassed by the Zero in every category, and particularly in rate of climb. The Hurricane was a better bet, especially the Mark II, provided that the pilot had an altitude advantage and employed dive and zoom tactics rather than attempting to dogfight a Zero. Nevertheless, the Fulmar certainly had the firepower to destroy a Japanese bomber, if given the chance. On 9 April a total of 14 Fulmars IIs were to attack a group of 17 unescorted Vals from Soryu off Ceylon’s east coast, destroying four of them and damaging another four.

	Fulmar II	Hurricane IA	Hurricane IIB	A6M2 Zero
Span	14.14 m	12.2 m	12.19 m	12.00 m
Length	12.24 m	9.59 m	9.582 m	9.06 m
Empty Weight	3,182 kg	2,118 kg	2,495 kg	1,680 kg
Maximum Speed	236 kt at 2,200 m	275 kt at 6,096 m	287 kt at 7,620 m	288 kt at 4,550 m
Climbing Speed	4,572 m in 12 mins	4,572 m in 5.85 mins	4,572 m in 5.9 mins	6,000 m in 7.45 mins
Range	661 nm	521 nm	417 nm	1,010 nm
Armament	8 x .303in	8 x .303in	12 x .303in	2 x 20mm, 2 x 7.7mm

Table 1 – Fighter Performance Data²⁴

At dawn on 5 April there were 46 fighters at Ratmalana - 22 Hurricane IIBs of 30 Squadron, all of them operational, and 24 Fulmars IIs of 803 and 806 NAS. Twelve of the of the Fulmars got airborne during the morning, but it is not known how many of the remaining 12 were operational. At Racecourse, 258 Squadron had 14 operational Hurricanes - nine Mark IIBs and five Mark Is. In all, then, there were up to 60 operational fighters to defend Colombo from an attacking force which had 36 fighters, of which the nine from Zuikaku never engaged the defending fighters.²⁵

Two of the 35 Hurricane pilots who engaged the Japanese, both of them from 30 Squadron, have not been identified. Of the 33 identified pilots, only 12 were from the UK. Eight were Canadian, one was from Newfoundland (which became Canada’s tenth province in 1949), four were Australian and four were New Zealanders. There was also a South African, a Rhodesian, a Kenyan and an American, all serving in the RAF.

The 33 identified Hurricane pilots included seven veterans of the Battle of Britain, two of whom also fought the Japanese over Singapore and the Dutch East Indies, as did four others. (The six pilots with experience fighting the Japanese were all serving with 258 Squadron. See Table 10.) At least ten more had fought the Luftwaffe and/or the Regia Aeronautica over Europe, Malta or the Middle East. Thus at least 21 of the 33 identified Hurricane pilots had previous combat experience, often a great deal of it. Flt Sgt Anthony (Tony) Owens, for example, flew “over 100 sorties” prior to 5 April, according to the citation for his DFM. Four of the 33 pilots had

already claimed between two and four enemy aircraft, and a few others had claimed one victory each.

Six Fulmar pilots of 803 and 806 NAS also engaged the Japanese over Colombo, and at least two of them had previously seen combat. Sub-Lt John Sykes briefly flew during the Battle of Britain and then fought in the Mediterranean area. He was serving aboard Formidable when it was damaged in May 1941, and from then until March 1942 he flew from shore bases in Egypt. Sub-Lt A.S. Diggins also fought over Egypt for a number of months, claiming an Italian G-50 fighter on 1 December 1941. Lt Mike Hordern likewise served with FAA units in Egypt, from November 1941 to February 1942, but it is not known if he saw any combat during that period.

The remaining three Fulmar pilots were Sub-Lieutenants W.H. Anderson, I.K. White-Smith and K.J.M. Pettitt. No information on their flying careers prior to their arrival in Ceylon has been found.

These figures show that at least 23 of the 39 identified Allied pilots had previous combat experience. Among those without previous combat experience was one key leader, namely the CO of 258 Squadron, Squadron Leader Peter Fletcher.²⁶

It is often stated that many of the pilots serving with the IJN when the Pacific war started had gained valuable experience fighting the Chinese from 1937 onwards, but, as shown in Table 2, only three of the 27 Zero pilots who fought over Colombo are known to have had such experience, and only one of them, Flight Petty Officer 1st Class (FPO 1/c) Oda, was involved in air-to-air combat. Table 2 also indicates that as few as six of these 27 pilots had seen any air-to-air combat between December 1941 and March 1942.

In all, at least 22 of the 27 Zero pilots who fought over Colombo had prior combat experience, although it was often limited to one or two escort/strafing missions. This is a higher proportion than for the defending pilots, but many of the latter had been in combat for much longer periods, against more formidable opposition than the Japanese faced over China, Wake or Darwin. All in all, it would probably be fair to say that on 5 April it was the defending fighter pilots who had the advantage in terms of pervious combat experience. This should not be very surprising, given that their countries had already been at war for 31 months.

Pilot	Previous Combat Experience
Akagi	
Lt-Cdr Itaya Shigeru	Led first wave fighters during Pearl Harbor raid, strafed Hickam, engaged a B-17. Led fighters during Darwin raid.
Lt Ibusuki Masanobu	Strafed Hickam and engaged a B-17 during Pearl Harbor raid
FPO 1/c Iwaki Yoshio	Strafed Hickam and engaged a B-17 during Pearl Harbor raid. Shared in the destruction of Birchall's Catalina on 4 April.
FPO 1/c Tanaka Katsumi	Strafed Hickam and Ewa during Pearl Harbor raid
FPO 3/c Mori Sakae	
F1/c Sano Shinpei	
FPO 1/c Kikuchi Tetsuo	Flew in China 1937-38, but not involved in air-to-air combat Flew CAP over KdB during Pearl Harbor raid.
FPO 2/c Kawada Yozo	Did not fly with first or second waves during Pearl Harbor raid. Combat experience (or lack thereof) otherwise unknown.
FPO 2/c Ohara Hiroshi	
Soryo	
Lt (jg) Fujita Iyozo	Strafed Kaneohe and engaged P-36s during Pearl Harbor raid. Led Soryu's fighters during raid on Darwin.
FPO 1/c Oda Ki-ichi	Claimed three Chinese fighters in 1937. Strafed Kaneohe and engaged P-36s during Pearl Harbor raid.
FPO 1c Tanaka Jiro	Strafed Kaneohe and engaged P-36s during Pearl Harbor raid.
FPO 2/c Takashima Takeo	
FPO 1c Takahashi Sozaburo	
FPO 1C Harada Kaname	Flew in China, October 1937 to January 1938, but not involved in air-to-air combat. Flew CAP over KdB during Pearl Harbor raid.
FPO 3/c Nagasawa Genzo	Did not fly with first or second waves during Pearl Harbor raid. Combat experience (or lack thereof) otherwise unknown.
F1/c Higashi Yukio	
F1/c Kubota Wataru	
Hiryu	
Lt Nono Sumio	Strafed Kaneohe, Wheeler and Bellows during Pearl Harbor raid. Participated in attacks on Wake. Led Hiryu's fighters during raid on Darwin.
WO Kodama Yoshima	Strafed Kaneohe during raid on Pearl Harbor, as member of Zuikaku's fighter unit.
FPO 1C Matsuyama Tsuguo	Strafed Kaneohe, Wheeler and Bellows during Pearl Harbor raid. Claimed two P-40s.
FPO 2/c Nitta Haruo	Strafed Kaneohe, Wheeler and Bellows during Pearl Harbor raid. Participated in attacks on Wake and Darwin.
FPO 2/c Todaka Noboru	Strafed Kaneohe, Wheeler and Bellows during Pearl Harbor raid. Participated in attacks on Wake. Flew CAP over KdB during Darwin raid.
FPO 1C Hino Masato	Flew CAP over KdB during Pearl Harbor and Darwin raids. Participated in attacks on Wake.
FPO 1C Sasaki Tadashi	
F1/c Kotani Kenji	
FPO 3/c Chiyoshima Yutaka	Scheduled to fly in Pearl Harbor raid but had to abort. Participated in attacks on Wake.

Table 2 – Prior Combat Experience of Zero Pilots Involved in Air-to-Air Combat Over Colombo²⁷

Reinforcements, Part 2 – Anti-Aircraft Guns

Five anti-aircraft units arrived prior to the Japanese attack. The first to arrive, on 1 February, were Royal Marines units from the Middle East – 1 Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment RM, with 24 mobile 3.7-inch (94 mm) guns, and 22 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery RM, with 16 Bofors 40mm guns. Arriving on 4 March from the UK were three units of the Royal Artillery, namely 65 Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment, with 24 (possibly 28) of the static model of the 3.7-inch gun, and 43 and 55 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiments, each with 36 Bofors 40 mm guns. (Autolycus, one of the two ships which carried 65 HAA Regiment to Colombo, was sunk on 6 April by three Malaya Force ships – the heavy cruisers Kumano and Suzuya, and the destroyer Shirakumo.)

In addition, a Royal Marines headquarters known as 1 Anti-Aircraft Brigade arrived on 1 February. In its Operation Order Number 10, dated 31 January, it advised the anti-aircraft units that the “local population is of doubtful loyalty and the general morale of the native population is not expected to stand up to Enemy air attack”, and that “Enemy agents are expected to exist”. This order also identified two vulnerable points in Colombo which were to be defended on a priority basis: “(1) Harbour and Harbour defences with particular reference to Graving Dock [and] (2) Petrol and Power Installations at Kolonnawa”.²⁸ Kolonnawa is about 4 km southeast of the harbour.



A good shot of a 3.7-inch heavy anti-aircraft gun during firing trials, albeit in a decidedly un-Ceylonese climate (winter in Quebec)²⁹



Sir Andrew Caldecott, Governor of Ceylon, inspects a 40mm gun of 22 LAA Battery after a parade at which an officer was given the OBE, hence his formal attire³⁰

About half of the newly arrived guns were kept in the Colombo area. Most of the rest went to Trincomalee, but one AA unit was sent in the opposite direction. This was 14 Anti-Aircraft Battery, with the four old 3-inch guns which had constituted Ceylon’s only air defence assets before 7 December 1941. It moved from Trincomalee to Colombo in February and by 5 April was deployed to defend Kolonnawa’s petrol and power facilities.

Evidently problems were encountered installing 65 HAA Regiment’s static 3.7-inch guns, as by 5 April only 12 (possibly only 11) of the 16 (possibly 20) guns it retained in the Colombo area were ready for action.

Like all British colonies, Ceylon raised a number of local defence units and by April 1942 the Ceylon Garrison Artillery had three anti-aircraft batteries. They were still under training, however, and on 5 April the CGA was able to put into action against the Japanese raiders only two 40mm guns.

The Royal Navy also made a contribution to the anti-aircraft defences, manning three naval 12-pounders mounted ashore. The 12-pounder was of 3-inch calibre but not at all the same as the army’s 3-inch guns.

On 5 April there was probably a total of 62 land-based anti-aircraft guns ready for action in the Colombo area. They are believed to have been deployed as shown in Table 3.³¹

	3.7-inch	3-inch	12-pounder	40 mm	Total
Ratmalana and railway workshops	4			12	16
Racecourse				8	8
Harbour area	4		3	4	11
Kolonnawa		4		8	12
In Colombo area but location unknown	12			3	15
Total	20	4	3	35	62

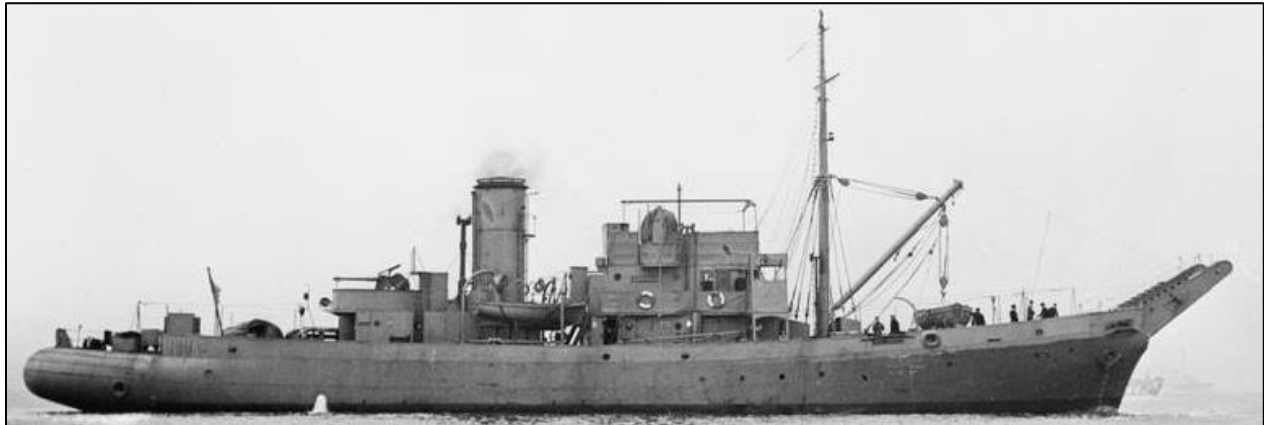
Table 3 – Colombo’s Operational Land-based Anti-Aircraft Guns, 5 April 1942

It is unlikely that any of the ships had much in the way of anti-aircraft firepower. The armed merchant cruiser Hector, the largest ship destined to be sunk, had just two 3-inch AA guns (of which only one could be fired on 5 April) and two .303-inch Lewis light machine guns, while the old destroyer Tenedos had only one 2-pounder Mark II pom-pom, two Oerlikon 20mm guns, and a few machine guns. (The 2-pounder was of 40mm calibre.)

The tanker British Sergeant had just one 12-pounder and a few .303-inch machine guns. At least four naval auxiliaries and patrol vessels had a 12-pounder, and perhaps a few more of the merchantmen did as well, but many vessels present probably had only 2-pounders or machine guns. Overall, effective shipborne anti-aircraft weapons must have been few in number, and none are likely to have had adequate fire control systems.³²



A 2-pounder Mark II “pom pom” light anti-aircraft gun is shown above at left. Tenedos had one of these weapons. A 12-pounder Mark V dual purpose gun is shown above at right. It was carried on some merchant vessels and on such naval auxiliaries as the 730-ton Bar class boom defence vessel shown below, where it can be seen on the bandstand abaft the funnel. Several BDVs were based at Colombo, including HM Ships Barlane, Barrier, Barricade and Barnett.³³



Reinforcements, Part 3 – Radar (and Balloons)

Having won the Battle of Britain due in large measure to its radar chains and its fighter direction system, the RAF was fully alive to the need to provide Ceylon with adequate radar coverage. A number of radar units were hurriedly dispatched and one was operational in the Colombo area by 5 April. This was AMES 254, which was equipped with one Mobile Radio Unit (MRU) radar. (“AMES” stood for Air Ministry Experimental Station, a cover name for a radar unit.) The unit was dispatched from the Middle East on 3 March aboard the transport Talma, which also carried 30 Squadron’s rear party and 11 Squadron’s ground staff.



A deployed MRU radar unit.³⁴ The mast at left carries the transmitter antenna while the other has the receiving antenna. An interior view of a receiver van similar to the one parked by the righthand mast is on the next page.

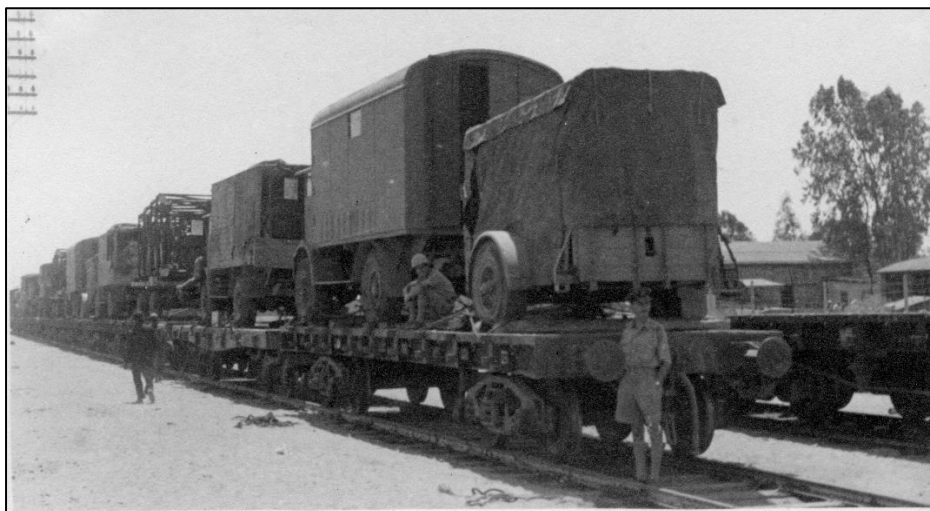
AMES 254's personnel arrived on 18 March. After its equipment arrived on 22 March it moved to the Royal Colombo Golf Course at Ridgeway, one mile east of Racecourse, and worked around the clock to get everything up and working. The unit became operational on 25 March and on 28 March was connected by telephone to No. 20 Operations Room, which was responsible for fighter direction. Practice interceptions of 11 Squadron Blenheims by 30 Squadron Hurricanes were conducted on 21 and 23 March but none was held after AMES 254 became operational. The complete fighter control system was thus not tested before 5 April.³⁵

Three images from the wartime album of one of AMES 254's sister MRU units are shown below.³⁶

Given the bulkiness of the equipment and the need for the unit to be self sufficient no matter where it might be deployed, making a Mobile Radio Unit mobile required numerous vehicles. In the image at upper right, a portion of the vehicles of a MRU-equipped radar unit have been entrained and are about to depart for a new location in Egypt's Western Desert in 1941. A trailer carrying a disassembled mast is visible just ahead of the second vehicle from the rear.

In the second image the mast for the transmitter antenna has been reassembled and, with the antenna already attached, is about to be erected. This must have been a demanding and delicate job.

The last image shows the interior of the receiver van. The airman closest to the camera plots the contacts reported by the operators behind him and "tells" (reports) the plots to a distant operations room using the hands-free telephone set he is wearing.



The final RAF reinforcement of note was 990 Balloon Squadron, which arrived in mid-March. However, this unit was soon sent to Trincomalee and on 5 April there were no barrage balloons floating over Colombo.³⁷

Nagumo Sails

Operation C began on 26 March at 0800 Japan Standard Time (GMT + 9), when KdB left Staring Bay on the east coast of Celebes (now Sulawesi). Kidō Butai means “Mobile Force” but is usually rendered as “Striking Force”. KdB was the larger of two forces committed to Operation C. The second, Malaya Force, sortied from Mergui in southern Burma on 1 April and sank 20 ships in the Bay of Bengal on 5 and 6 April. The approximate movements of the Japanese and British naval forces during Operation C are shown on Map 1.

KdB was commanded by Vice Admiral Chūichi Nagumo. During Operation C it would consist of:

- carriers Akagi, Soryu, Hiryu, Shokaku and Zuikaku
- battleships Kongo, Hiei, Haruna and Kirishima
- heavy cruisers Tone and Chikuma
- light cruiser Abukuma
- eight destroyers
- a supply unit with a varying number of oilers and an escort of up to three destroyers

Carrier Division 1 (CarDiv1) normally consisted of Akagi and Kaga, but the latter was in Japan for maintenance. Nagumo commanded CarDiv1 as well as the whole force. Soryu and Hiryu constituted CarDiv2, under Rear Admiral Yamaguchi, while Shokaku and Zuikaku made up CarDiv5, under Rear Admiral Hara. The battleships constituted BatDiv3, under Rear Admiral Mikawa, the heavy cruisers formed CruDiv8, under Rear Admiral Abe, and Abukuma and the destroyers constituted Destroyer Squadron 1 (DesRon1), under Rear Admiral Omori.³⁸

Nagumo had the following carrier-borne aircraft:

	A6M2 “Zero” Fighters	D3A1 “Val” Dive Bombers	B5N2 “Kate” Torpedo Bombers	Total
Akagi	19	17	18	54
Soryu	20	18	18	56
Hiryu	18	18	18	54
Shokaku	18	19	19	56
Zuikaku	18	19	18	55
	93	91	91	275

Table 4 – KdB’s Carrier-borne Aircraft, as of 4 April 1942³⁹



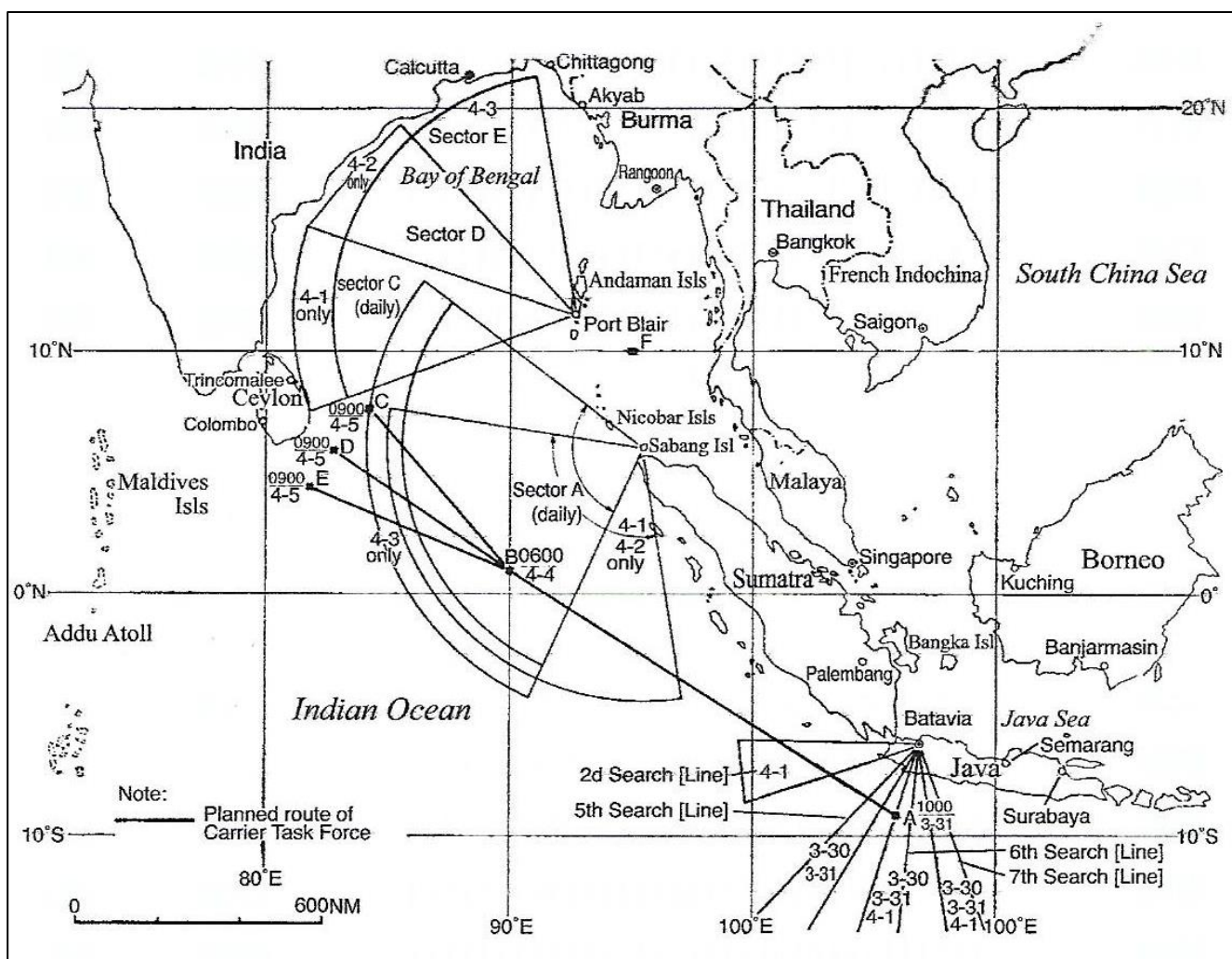
A shot of Nagumo taken at some point after his promotion to vice admiral on 15 November 1939⁴⁰



Nagumo on Akagi’s bridge. This shot was reportedly taken while KdB was in route to Pearl Harbor.⁴¹

After departing Staring Bay, KdB steered southward and the next day passed through the Ombai Strait, which separates Timor from the islands to its north. It then shaped course to the west, passing south of Java. One oiler accompanied it from Staring Bay and on 31 March three others arrived at a rendezvous north of Christmas Island (Point A on Map 2). Refueling began that day. It was completed on 2 April, and the four oilers and probably three of the eleven destroyers were then detached. Now consisting of 20 warships, KdB continued toward Ceylon as depicted in Map 1.

KdB’s mission during Operation C was “To conduct a surprise attack on the enemy fleet in the Ceylon area and destroy it”.⁴² The Eastern Fleet was “the enemy fleet in the Ceylon area”.



Map 2 – KdB's Planned Route, 31 March-5 April 1942, and the Search Sectors for the Supporting Land-based Air Units⁴³

Three Admirals and an Airman

The Eastern Fleet came into being in early December 1941, with the arrival at Singapore of the battleship Prince of Wales and the battlecruiser Repulse. Its first commander was Admiral Sir Tom Phillips, who had sailed from the UK aboard Prince of Wales. Phillips concurrently became the commander-in-chief of the China Station, the Royal Navy area command centred on Singapore, displacing Layton, who had commanded the China Station since September 1940.

When Phillips died on 10 December with the sinking of Prince of Wales and Repulse, Layton was already aboard a ship about to sail for the UK, but he hastily disembarked and took over the Eastern Fleet as its acting commander, concurrently resuming command of the China Station. On 5 January he left Singapore for Batavia, but soon re-located to Colombo, arriving there on 21 January.

After Singapore fell on 15 February, it was felt in London that its loss was due in no small part to the fact that no single person had been empowered to coordinate all aspects of its defence, civil as well as military. Determined not to see that happen again, Layton was appointed to the new post of "Commander-in-Chief, Ceylon", on 5 March. He was placed over all other military and civil authorities, including the governor, Sir Andrew Caldecott.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, on 2 January, Vice Admiral Sir James Somerville, then in command of Force H, was ordered to take over the Eastern Fleet. Wasting no time, Somerville left Gibraltar for the UK the very next day, taking passage aboard the light cruiser Hermione. After a month in the UK which included discussions at the Admiralty and a 70-minute meeting with Churchill during which the latter expressed his "complete confidence" in him, Somerville sailed for Ceylon on 17 February aboard the carrier Formidable. Arriving at Colombo on 24 March, he assumed command of the Eastern Fleet from Layton at 0800 on 26 March - three hours after KdB sortied from Staring Bay.⁴⁵

The Eastern Fleet was not the only British naval command in the Indian Ocean, however. There was also an area commander, the Commander-in-Chief, East Indies, Vice Admiral Geoffrey Arbuthnot. Somerville commanded the striking forces, that is, the battleships, aircraft carriers, cruisers, minelayers, destroyers and submarines, while Arbuthnot was responsible for all other naval vessels and auxiliaries, for the naval bases in the area, and for protecting and controlling the movement of merchant shipping.⁴⁶

The fourth key commander involved in the defence of Colombo was Air Vice Marshall John D'Albiac, Air Officer Commanding 222 Group, the RAF headquarters on Ceylon. He commanded all RAF units and bases on the island, and exercise operational control of the two Royal Navy fighter squadrons located at Ratmalana. D'Albiac and Arbuthnot had a joint operations centre at Colombo and were "the men on the spot" when warning was received of the approach of KdB.



Layton in 1945⁴⁷



Somerville in 1941⁴⁸



Arbuthnot in 1938⁴⁹



D'Albiac in 1943-1944⁵⁰

Colombo or Trincomalee?

When the Japanese were planning the 7 December 1941 attack on the US Pacific Fleet, they had to provide for the possibility that some of its ships might be at the Lahaina anchorage some 70 miles southeast of Pearl Harbor, as it had been used by the fleet in 1940. However, by the evening of 6 December submarines sent to scout Lahaina had reported that it was empty, and an intelligence officer working at the Japanese consulate in Honolulu had confirmed that the bulk of the American fleet was at Pearl Harbor. Nevertheless, to secure last-minute confirmation of this information, heavy cruisers Tone and Chikuma each launched one E13A floatplane about 30 minutes before the strike aircraft started taking off, to reconnoitre Pearl Harbor and the Lahaina anchorage. They reported that, as expected, the former was full of ships and the latter empty.⁵¹

For Operation C, the Japanese likewise needed to know if the Eastern Fleet could be found at Colombo or at Trincomalee, or divided between the two. If the British fleet was at Colombo, KdB was to launch all of its strike aircraft against Colombo from Point E (see Map 2), if it was at Trincomalee then all the strike aircraft would attack that port from Point C, and if it fleet was divided between the two ports then KdB would launch half of its strike aircraft against each of them, from Point D. KdB was to shape course toward one of the three potential launch points on 4 April, from Point B. Lacking spies on the ground in Ceylon and unable to decrypt British radio traffic which might have provided this information, the Japanese attempted to obtain it by submarine and aerial reconnaissance.

Six Japanese submarines from Submarine Squadron Two participated in Operation C. Three of them, I-2, I-3 and I-7, all based at Penang, were tasked with reconnoitering Trincomalee and Colombo while KdB was *en route*.

I-2 arrived off Trincomalee on 31 March and sent the following report at 1830 on 3 April:

1. Although we reached a point ten nautical miles outside the port of Trincomalee at 1100 [0800 local] on 3 April, we were not able to approach [the port], being blocked by patrolling enemy vessels. No enemy was spotted around the mouth of the port other than the patrolling vessels.

2. During the period we have watched this area from 31 March onwards, we have spotted no enemy aircraft around sunrise [or sunset] or at night (we remained submerged during daytime).

*3. General weather conditions in this area: fair until 1 April; overcast with thin clouds on 2 and 3 April and there was a light rain on the evening of the 3d. However, the weather is generally fine in the morning, and the sea is very calm every day.*⁵²

The battleship Warspite and two destroyers left Trincomalee for Colombo on 28 March, and the carrier Hermes, the light cruiser Emerald and two destroyers left on 30 March to join Somerville south of Ceylon, but I-2 arrived too late to witness their departures. I-2 apparently also missed the 4 April return to Trincomalee of Hermes and its escorting destroyer, HMAS Vampire.

I-3 and I-7 both set sail from Penang on 28 March. I-3's destination was Colombo. At 1300 on 31 March it was still about 120 miles southeast of Dondra Head and apparently did not arrive off Colombo until 2 April, far too late to observe the departure from Colombo at 1400 on 30 March of Warspite (Somerville's flagship), Formidable, the heavy cruiser Cornwall, the light cruisers Enterprise, Caledon and Dragon, and five destroyers, nor the departure later that day of the heavy cruiser Dorsetshire. It also failed to spot and report the return of Cornwall and Dorsetshire at 1000 on 4 April, their departure again at 2300 that night, or the hasty departure the same day, described below, of 25 merchantmen.

I-3 apparently sent only the following reports:

1900 on 3 April: A number of enemy patrol vessels were outside the port of Colombo. Since his guard was very strict, we were not yet able to reconnoiter the inside of the port. [Enemy] ships considered to have departed [from Colombo] were one merchantman, who was sailing south alone at a point seventy nautical miles 220° [southwest] of Colombo at 0725 [0425 local] on the 2d, and another, who was sailing westward alone at a point seventy nautical miles 235° of Colombo at 0130 on the 3d [2230 on the 2nd]. However, other than them, we have not encountered any naval vessels entering or leaving the port. As for [enemy] aircraft, although one land-based aircraft was spotted at a point 195 nautical miles 135° [southeast] of Colombo at 1600 [1300] on the 31st, the situation of the [enemy] air patrols is unclear because we remained submerged during the day since then.

2300 on 4 April: The weather is fine around [here]; the cloud cover is five and its height 1,000 [meters]. A southern wind with a velocity of five meters [per second]. Visibility is good. More clouds are seen near the horizon and lightening is seen sometimes. Almost no changes in the weather in the past two days other than some increase in wind velocity. Our position is fifty nautical miles 240° [WSW] of Colombo.

0100 on 5 April: Weather and atmospheric conditions were as sent in our Classified Telegram No. 30 (I-3's previous telegram). The sea is calm. Our position is thirty-six nautical miles 240° of Colombo.⁵³

I-3's movements after 0100 on 5 April are somewhat unclear but she reported sighting a few merchantmen 150 miles south-west-west of Colombo early in the morning on 6 April, which suggests she may have withdrawn from the Colombo area before KdB's attack. She seems to have followed one of these vessels, the UK merchant ship Elmdale, which she attacked and damaged at about 0300 on 7 April some 60 miles west of Colombo.⁵⁴

I-7 was one of several large Japanese submarines which carried a small floatplane for reconnaissance purposes. The dismantled aircraft was carried in two small watertight hangars aft of the conning tower. Sending it on a reconnaissance flight entailed surfacing, assembling it and using the aft-facing catapult to launch it. On completion of the mission the aircraft would alight near the submarine and could be lifted aboard by a crane, disassembled and stowed away again.

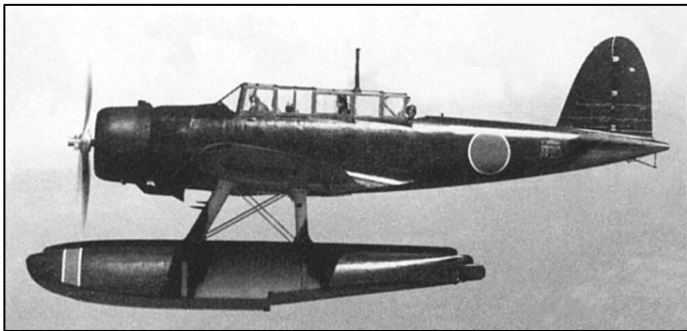
I-7 successfully completed its first aerial reconnaissance mission on 16 December 1941 - at Pearl Harbor. Its E9W1 floatplane was launched before dawn, overflew Pearl Harbor in the early daylight, noted the number and type of ships present, and returned to I-7, alighting beside it. To permit the submarine to submerge and depart as soon as possible, the pilot and observer abandoned their aircraft, which was scuttled, and swam to I-7.

For Operation C, I-7 was tasked with conducting reconnaissance flights over Colombo and Trincomalee two days prior to the air attacks. The flight over Colombo would therefore have been on 3 April. One can only assume that the plan would have been to launch the aircraft in darkness and have it fly over the harbour soon after dawn, as was done on 16 December, but the flight never took place.

I-7 was attacked by a Catalina at 0517 on 1 April, about 180 miles southeast of Ceylon, according to a report it radioed at 2030 that evening. I-7 was near-missed but escaped damaged because the bomb or bombs were duds. The report also noted that "Four hours after the bombing, an [enemy] patrol aircraft came to our position", and, apparently in reference to enemy activity during the previous night, added that "When the communication [signals] from the [enemy] aircraft at night and the reports from the 5th Submarine Squadron are taken into consideration together, we presume that the enemy is trying to clear the sea of submarines at night with his aircraft, taking advantage of current [bright] moonlight. It is necessary to keep a strict watch."

The identity of the Catalina which attacked I-7 is uncertain. One secondary source describes an incident, supposedly on 31 March, when Flt Lt Graham attacked a Japanese submarine south-east of Ceylon but "To his chagrin there were no explosions and it was found that the fusing links by which, at the moment of separation from the aircraft the depth-charges become fused, had fallen with the depth-charges thus leaving them 'safe' and unfused". However, Graham's FV-R flew no mission on 31 March or 1 April. The only Catalina to fly a mission on 1 April was 413 Squadron's QL-Y, flown by Flt Lt Thomas, and there is no known record of any

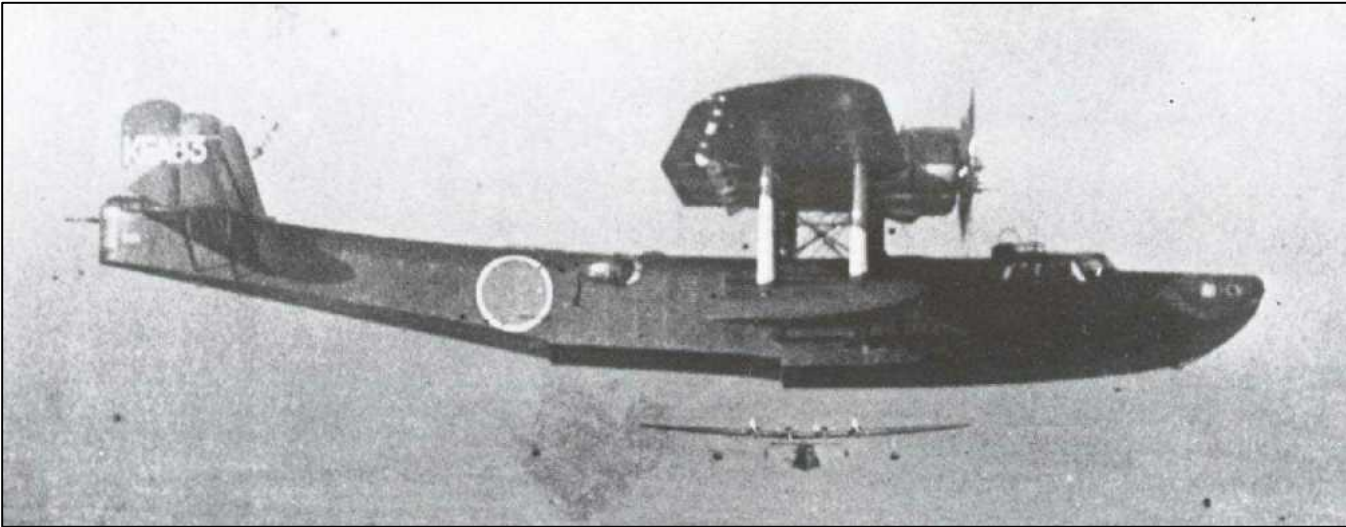
encounter with a submarine during this flight. Graham did fly a mission on 2 April, his last before he was killed on 4 April (see below), but it seems unlikely that I-7 would have wrongly recorded the date of the attack. It is possible that the patrol aircraft sighted by I-7 four hours after the Catalina attacked was a shipborne aircraft from the Eastern Fleet, which was loitering south of Ceylon, but if so then it seems that the aircraft did not sight the submarine.



At top is a 1939 shot of I-8, I-7's sister ship. The ramp aft of the bridge is the catapult for the E9W1 floatplane, shown above left, which was stored in a disassembled state in two watertight hangars immediately aft of the bridge. To the right is an E13A, of which Tone and Chikuma carried one each for the Pearl Harbor operation and during Operation C.⁵⁵

At 2100 the next day, 2 April, I-7 radioed that "The guard within a radius of seventy to eighty nautical miles from the shore southwest of Ceylon is very strict around the clock. Since there will be almost no chance for a launch of the flight operations, I-7 shall cancel the air reconnaissance over Colombo and take up her designated position." About six hours later I-7 sank the 9,415 ton British ship Glenshiel some 450 miles south of Ceylon.⁵⁶

While the effort to reconnoiter Colombo and Trincomalee by submarine and submarine-launched aircraft thus proved to be a complete bust, the Japanese had one other reconnaissance card up their sleeves. The Andaman Islands, located on the eastern side of the Bay of Bengal, were occupied on 23 March, and within two days a detachment of eight H6K "Mavis" large flying boats from the Tōkō Air Group began flying daily patrols up to 600 miles from Port Blair, covering the area northeast of Ceylon which was designated Sector C, as well as occasional patrols of Sectors D and E. (See Map 2.)



A side view of a H6K four-engine flying boat. Below it another H6K is visible facing the camera.⁵⁷

In addition to the daily patrols of Sector C, on 1 and 4 April aircraft were dispatched to scout Ceylon's northwest and northeast coasts. The three H6Ks which flew the 1 April mission reported as follows:

- 1. At 1030 a.m. [0730 local], no enemy vessels or aircraft were spotted other than two merchantmen of 4,000-ton class at anchor in Palk Bay.*
- 2. At 1005 a.m. [0705], three 10,000-ton-class merchantmen and one minesweeper escorting them [were spotted] sailing northward off the northeastern end of Ceylon at eight knots.*
- 3. No enemy aircraft was spotted on the airfield or at the seaplane base near Trincomalee. No patrol aircraft was spotted, [either]. No antiaircraft fire. Eight destroyers or larger vessels [were spotted] inside the port and one destroyer was [spotted] escorting [a] large merchantman outside the bay.*

It seems that the H6K which approached Trincomalee did not sight the six Hurricanes of 261 Squadron's dawn patrol, which reported that they "sighted an unidentified aircraft but [were] unable to intercept as the 'Bogie' turned into the sun and disappeared."

A single H6K was sent on 4 April to take a final look at Trincomalee. It reported seeing "eight mid-sized or larger merchantmen (one of which was a hospital ship), one large destroyer inside the port and patrol boat[s] outside". This was probably an accurate report, except that no destroyers were present, given that Hermes and Vampire had evidently not yet arrived. (They were present by 1600.) The vessel mistaken for a destroyer was presumably either the Dutch light cruiser Sumatra or the British monitor Erebus, both displacing some 8,000 tons.⁵⁸ For Nagumo the important point would have been that the Eastern Fleet was not at Trincomalee.

No reconnaissance of Colombo was flown by the H6Ks. The aircraft probably had the range to fly such a mission, but it was presumably deemed to be too risky an operation.

The plan for Operation C stipulated that if no information about the location of the Eastern Fleet was obtained by the time KdB reached Point B, it was to postpone the air raid for one day, i.e., until 6 April, and have the Tone and Chikuma speed ahead to conduct a covert reconnaissance of Trincomalee and Colombo on 5 April with their floatplanes from at least 400 miles offshore. However, at 0815 on 3 April Nagumo cancelled this planned covert reconnaissance and, apparently at about the same time or soon thereafter, ordered Colombo to be attacked on 5 April followed by Trincomalee on the 6th or 7th.⁵⁹ It is not clear why he made this decision, but we can perhaps infer that it was because the 1 April H6K reconnaissance of Trincomalee had reported so few warships in the harbour. If so then the results of the 4 April flight to Trincomalee would have confirmed him in his decision.

Sigint Gives Warning

The Allies' Sigint (Signals Intelligence) units spared no effort to break back into JN-25B, and on 3 March the Far East Combined Bureau (FECB), the Sigint centre at Colombo, read its first JN-25B message since 4 December. This message revealed that five Japanese submarines were to be based at Penang, on the northwest coast of Malaya, which clearly indicated that submarines would be operating in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. By mid-March, Allied Sigint was also aware that CarDiv1 and CarDiv2 were at Staring Bay, and that CarDiv5 was on its way to join them. In fact, five US submarines patrolling within reach of CarDiv5's route to Staring Bay were alerted by the submarine command at Pearl Harbor but none was able to intercept it. A sixth submarine, USS Sculpin (SS-191), was sent to patrol off Staring Bay.⁶⁰

During the latter part of March, firmer indications of what KdB's next operation might be were seen. FECB later recorded that "about 20 March 1942 certain JN.25 messages concerned an operation by a Japanese carrier force, accompanied by another force (thought to be heavy cruisers), in the D area, including an air raid on DG on 2nd April." The identity of "DG" was deduced on 28 March from additional decrypts and FECB then "estimated that D was the Ceylon area and DG a town in Ceylon—probably Colombo." Somerville summoned the head of FECB's cryptanalysis branch to discuss the reliability of this intelligence and was persuaded that it was correct.⁶¹

On 29 March Somerville advised London that "According to a Combined Fleet telegram orders were issued that an A/c [aircraft] carrier unit, which would normally be expected to consist of 2 carriers 4 cruisers and 12 destroyers, should leave Staring Bay on about 21st March for the attack on "D.G" on or about first April." He then noted that the Japanese carrier Kaga "had instructions some time ago to proceed [to] Japan, fill aeroplanes and subsequently take part in an attack on "D.G" [...] It is therefore deduced area in which A/c Carrier KAGA force is to attack is Ceylon. It should be noted word "attack" rather than "invaded" or "advance" is used. Timing of operation appears for about 1st April."⁶²

As we now know, FECB was wrong about the composition of the attacking force—it had five carriers rather than two, and Kaga was in Japan undergoing repairs. FECB also got the date wrong. The original Japanese schedule did indeed call for KdB to sail on 21 March and attack Ceylon on 1 or 2 April, but the schedule was pushed back because the arrival of CarDiv5 at Staring Bay was delayed until 24 March, and no indications of the postponement were picked up by Allied Sigint. Had aerial reconnaissance discovered KdB still at Staring Bay after 21 March it would have been realized that "DG" could not have been attacked until after 1 April, but Staring Bay was some 700 miles (800 statute miles) from the nearest Allied air base and no aircraft with the requisite range were available to keep it under observation. Sculpin arrived off Staring Bay on 25 March but had to submerge before dawn the next day and did not detect KdB's departure.⁶³

The British reacted energetically to FECB's warning. Somerville took the Eastern Fleet to sea and cruised back and forth south of Ceylon with the intention of ambushing KdB, the small Catalina force intensified its patrolling, focussing on the southeastern approaches, and the fighter and anti-aircraft units were put on alert. In addition, Arbuthnot cleared Colombo and Trincomalee of as much shipping as possible. At Colombo all seaworthy merchant ships not being loaded or unloaded were ordered to disperse. A total of 36 ships were sailed in small groups to two anchorages off Ceylon's west coast, north of Dutch Bay and southwest of Manaar, and to six anchorages either side of the southern tip of India - Aleppi (aka Alleppey or Alappuzha), Quilon

(Kollam), Trivandrum, Kolachel (Colachel), Tuticorin (Thoothukudi) - and just east of Cape Comorin. Another 23 particularly important merchant ships were sent to Cochin (Kochi) and certain ships at sea approaching Colombo were diverted there. The seven Dutch warships at Colombo also put to sea. The submarine O-19 departed for an anti-submarine patrol in the Eight Degree Channel while the other six proceeded to the Gulf of Mannar and anchored near Adam's Bridge. They were the submarines K-XI, K-XIV and K-XV, the submarine depot ship Colombia, the minelayer Willem Van Der Zaan and the supply ship Zuiderkruis.⁶⁴

And then nothing happened. 1 April and then 2 April came and went, and the enemy did not appear.

Having swept back and forth south of Ceylon for two and a half days without seeing any sign of KdB, Somerville packed it in at 2100 on 2 April and led the bulk of the Eastern Fleet to Addu Atoll, some 600 miles to the southwest of Ceylon, thinking that perhaps the Japanese were not coming after all. Dorsetshire and Cornwall were however detached and sent to Colombo. Dorsetshire had some engine defects it needed to deal with and Cornwall was needed to escort an incoming troop convoy which was soon to arrive. As well, by 4 April at least six of the merchant ships sent away by Arbuthnot had returned to Colombo, either for working cargoes or because their fuel or water was running short. The Catalinas continued their patrolling but the other air units reverted to a lower alert level and resumed their training activities.⁶⁵

Catalinas Give Warning

And then KdB showed up. It was spotted at about 1600 hours on 4 April, 360 miles southeast of Ceylon, by Catalina QL-A from 413 Squadron. QL-A was shot down, but only after it got off a sighting report giving KdB's position and course, although not its composition. The pilot of QL-A, S/L Birchall, was one of the six survivors from the crew of nine picked up by the destroyer Isokaze.⁶⁶

The crew of QL-A gave the defenders a very timely warning of what was coming, 15 hours before the Japanese aircraft arrived over Colombo. And that was not the last contribution of the Catalina force. At 1745 on 4 April F/L Graham took off in FV-R to take over the shadowing of the enemy force. At 2237 Graham reported one destroyer in position 01.59N, 82.20E, course 315 degrees, speed 20 knots, at 0045 on 5 April he reported six destroyers in position 02.54N, 82.10E, course 325 degrees, speed 21 knots, and at 0615 one battleship, one cruiser "and at least four other ships" 110 miles and 195 degrees from Dondra Head, the southernmost tip of Ceylon. (These sightings have been plotted in Plan 4 in "Battle Summary No. 15", which is accessible at https://www.navy.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/Battle_Summary_No_15_and_16.pdf.) FV-R was shot down at 0746 by Zeros from Hiryu, two of which were damaged by the Catalina's return fire. There were no survivors.⁶⁷



Birchall at Pembroke Docks on 17 March 1942⁶⁸



Graham, as a pilot officer⁶⁹

The sighting reports from the Catalinas permitted the British to follow KdB's progress and work out roughly where it would be at dawn. D'Albiac called his unit commanders to his headquarters within an hour of Birchall's signal being received and briefed them on the "anticipated Japanese air attack sometime after dawn".⁷⁰ At some point before midnight 222 Group issued Operation Order No. 43, which included the observation that "Should the enemy force maintain present reported course at a speed of 25 knots it will arrive in position approximately 150 miles from Colombo at 2100 hours G.M.T. [0300 local time]".⁷¹ The fact that KdB's anticipated position at 0300 was given suggests that Albiac also saw an attack at or before dawn as a possibility, and "Standby" was assumed at 0400 at all his airfields, with the pilots at immediate readiness. Sgt George Bate, RCAF, a Hurricane pilot with 30 Squadron, recalled his recall to Ratmalana some years later:

An inter-service dance was held on the Saturday evening, 4 April 1942, in Colombo. During this function all personnel were ordered to return to their units immediately. Upon return to the station the pilots were briefed that a Jap carrier force had been sighted by 413 Squadron at Kogalla [Koggala] and '30' was to go to full readiness prior to first light.⁷²

Arbuthnot Reacts to Birchall’s Sighting Report

Arbuthnot likewise reacted quickly to Birchall’s sighting report. One of his first actions was to order Dorsetshire and Cornwall to depart and rejoin Somerville. Unfortunately, they could not sail until 2200 and were sunk by dive bombers from Akagi, Soryu and Hiryu the next afternoon.⁷³

According to reports submitted by Arbuthnot during the following weeks, 46 merchant ships lay at Colombo when Birchall’s report was received, and within hours he sent 25 of them and three anti-submarine escorts out of harm’s way well to the west. They were ordered not to return until after 1400 on 5 April, which suggests that Arbuthnot anticipated that the Japanese would launch a single strike against Colombo in the morning and then withdraw.

In the same reports Arbuthnot advised London that when the Japanese aircraft arrived over Colombo there remained in the harbour 21 merchant ships, eight small naval auxiliaries, and five warships, the latter being the armed merchant cruiser Hector, the submarine depot ship Lucia, the submarine Trusty, which was loading torpedoes from Lucia, and the destroyers Tenedos and Decoy, which were unfit for sea owing to defects.⁷⁴

Seventeen years of research by the author indicates that up to 26 warships and naval auxiliaries were present during the attack, rather than Arbuthnot’s total of 13. Nor were the naval auxiliaries all small, as he claimed. The boom carrier HMS Laomedon displaced 6693 tons, for instance, while the Victualing Stores Issuing Ship (VSIS) Demodocus displaced 6689. Neither did he refer to the 9748 ton infantry assault ship HMS Glenearn, which could not be described as a naval auxiliary, let alone a small one, by any stretch of the imagination.

The 26 naval units believed present at Colombo are listed in Table 5. The Royal Air Force Auxiliary (RAFA) Shenking, which was employed transporting RAF personnel and materiel to isolated air bases, was not a *naval* auxiliary per se but is included in the table for the sake of completeness.

Ship	Type	Tons	Particulars	Sunk or Damaged?
HMS Hector	Armed Merchant Cruiser	11,198	Confirmed present. Under conversion back to merchant vessel	Sunk
HMS Tenedos	Destroyer	905	Confirmed present. Repairing unspecified defects	Sunk
HMS Decoy	Destroyer	1375	Confirmed present. Repairing main feed pump	Undamaged
HMS Lucia	Submarine Depot Ship	5805	Confirmed present	Damaged
HMS Trusty	Submarine	1095	Confirmed present. Preparing for patrol	Undamaged
HMS Glenearn	Infantry Assault Ship	9748	Confirmed present. Under repair since December 1941	Undamaged
HMS Kelantan	Auxiliary Patrol Vessel	1106	Confirmed present. Moored next to Hector	Slightly Damaged
HMS Laomedon	Boom carrier	6693	Confirmed present. Torpedoed by I-65 on 9 February and awaiting/under repair	Undamaged
HMS Barlane	Boom Defence Vessel	730	Confirmed present	Undamaged
HMS Barrier	Boom Defence Vessel	730	Probably present	Undamaged
HMS Barricade	Boom Defence Vessel	730		Undamaged
HMS Tarantula	Gunboat	625		Undamaged
HMS Overdale Wyke	Minesweeping trawler	338	Probably present. Manned by Ceylon Naval Volunteer Force (CNVF)	Undamaged
HMS Fara	Isles class trawler	545	On local anti-submarine patrol	Undamaged
HMS Okapi	Patrol craft (ex-whalers)	?	On local anti-submarine patrol. Manned by CNVF	Undamaged
HMS Sambhur		223	Probably present. Manned by CNVF	Undamaged
Snowdrift	Whalers being converted to minesweeping trawlers equipped to sweep magnetic mines	279	Probably present	Undamaged
Semla		217		Undamaged
Silhoutte		254		Undamaged
Sahra		355		Undamaged
Santa		355		Undamaged
Rainstorm		266		Undamaged
Demodocus		6689		Undamaged
Changte	Victualing Stores Issuing Ships (VSIS)	324		Undamaged
Springtide	Deperming vessel	1579		Undamaged
RAFA Shenking	Royal Air Force Auxiliary	3000		Undamaged

Table 5 – Warships and Naval Auxiliaries Confirmed or Probably in Port or Vicinity During Raid⁷⁵

Many of the naval and merchant vessels which found themselves at Colombo on 5 April were present only due to the fortunes of war, or more accurately the misfortunes of war, and none had suffered more misfortune than HMS Glenearn. Completed in 1938 as a refrigerated cargo liner, Glenearn was taken over by the Royal Navy in October 1939 and converted in 1940 to an infantry assault ship – a type of ship later known as a Landing Ship, Infantry (LSI). In April 1941, Glenearn was involved in the evacuation of Allied troops from Greece. It was damaged by Luftwaffe bombs on 24 April and disabled two days later by near misses just off the

southern Greek coast. Glenearn was towed in stages first to Suda Bay on the north coast of Crete, then to Alexandria, and then through the Suez Canal. In July an air raid on shipping in Suez Bay hit and set ablaze the transport Georgic, which subsequently collided with the moored and still disabled Glenearn, inflicting further damage on the latter. Glenearn was then towed to Aden whence it left for permanent repair at Colombo on 22 November, under tow by the merchantman Afghanistan – which lost a propeller blade two days later. Afghanistan and Glenearn left Aden again on 11 December, arriving at Colombo on 28 December. But Murphy's Law had not yet finished with Glenearn, for a serious fire broke out aboard her soon after her arrival. On 5 April she was moored in the harbour, immobile and with all of her armament removed, and still six months shy of being seaworthy again.⁷⁶†

Identifying the naval vessels present at Colombo has been difficult, but it has been even more challenging to identify the merchant ships. Only 12 definitely present on 5 April have been identified. They are listed in the first section of Table 6 (see next page), along with two ships which were strafed in the approaches to the port. These 12 ships were presumably among the total of 21 merchantmen which Arbuthnot claimed were present, although he may not have counted the Norwegian tanker Soli. It was sunk during the raid but Arbuthnot never mentioned its loss in his post-raid reports to London, and in fact he stated that the only merchant ship hit was the Benledi. This may have been due to the fact that Soli, 27 years old, had been declared “no longer fit for service any waters any purpose” by Lloyd's surveyors in November 1941, or perhaps because it was not British.⁷⁷ Arbuthnot likewise failed to mention in his reports on the events of 9 April that the Norwegian ship Norviken was sunk by Vals off Ceylon's east coast. He named only the five Commonwealth ships lost - Hermes, Vampire, Hollyhock, Athelstane and British Sergeant.

Three of the first 12 merchantmen listed in Table 6 were unable to sail on the evening of 4 April due to damage inflicted by the enemy, namely the UK tankers Longwood, San Cirilo and British Judge, all of which had been torpedoed by Japanese submarines. Another two ships were unable to flee due to defects. One of these was the Norwegian tanker Storanger, which was under refit for engine defects. It was towed out of the harbour to the examination anchorage on 4 April, presumably because it would be better to have it sink there than in the harbour if it were hit. Already present in the examination anchorage was the British tanker Trocas whose engines were also under repair.⁷⁸ Another ship confirmed present, Cornish City, had arrived from the Middle East with Australian troops, guns and vehicles, and was kept in the harbour so that its unloading could continue.⁷⁹

Table 6 also lists 36 ships believed to have been at Colombo on 4 April, the day before the raid, and two which could possibly have been present. This information has been compiled from several sources but by far the most important has been the “movement cards” maintained during the war by the Registry of Shipping and Seamen and now held by the UK National Archives in the BT 389/nn/nnn series. They detail the wartime voyages of virtually every British and British-controlled merchant ship, and from these it has been possible to confirm the dates on which a given ship arrived at and sailed from Colombo. Movement cards for all but one of the 38 ships, the US-flagged Alabaman being the exception, have been found, but not one of them notes any 4 April departure from Colombo followed by a return to Colombo on 5 April. It seems likely that leaving harbour to avoid an enemy attack and returning to the same harbour in 24 hours or less was not considered a voyage and was therefore not recorded in the movement cards, or that the officials in London who maintained the movement cards did not even know of these brief sorties from the harbour.

Interestingly, a ship from a neutral country was likely also present on 4 April, namely the Soviet ship Igarka (2,920 tons, completed 1936). The USSR was at war with the other Axis powers but still at peace with Japan. After Hitler's invasion in June 1941, ships of the Vladivostok-based Far East State Sea Shipping Company were employed obtaining vital materials, with some of them being dispatched to the South Pacific and Indian oceans to collect emergency supplies of tin, rubber, and food. Igarka was one of these ships.⁸⁰ Ceylon was a significant producer of rubber, so it seems possible that Igarka was at Colombo to pick up a consignment of this vital raw material.

Only two merchantmen are known to have left Colombo on 4 April. The 5,843 ton Begum, which had arrived on 26 March, left Colombo at an unknown time on 4 April, arrived at Cochin (now known as Kochi) on 5 April and remained there until 8 April. The 4,856 ton Jalaputra, which arrived at Colombo on 4 April, apparently sailed just a few hours after arriving. It reached Trincomalee on 6 April and sailed the next day.⁸¹ Given that they did not return to Colombo on 5 April, they may not have been among the 25 ships ordered to sea in response to Birchall's sighting report and for this reason they have not been included in Table 6.

It has thus not been possible to identify the 25 merchantmen cleared from the harbour on 4 April in response to news of the approach of KdB. Consequently, it is not known which of the 38 ships in the middle and bottom sections of Table 6 were still at Colombo when it was attacked. However, if 25 of them were indeed the 25 ships cleared from the harbour on 4 April after Birchall's sighting report was received, then adding the remaining 11-13 ships to the 12 known to have been present during the raid gives us a total of 23-25. Allowing for possible errors in Table 6, this suggests that Arbuthnot's claim that 21 merchantmen were present when Colombo was attacked may be accurate, or only a slight under count.

† A photo of Glenearn appears on page 61 of this article.

Ship	Type	Tons	Flag	Particulars
14 Ships Present in Harbour/Examination Anchorage or Nearby on 5 April. No Damage Sustained Except as Noted				
Soli	Tanker	5834	Nor	Arrived October 1941. Declared “no longer fit for service any waters any purpose” in November. Sunk during raid.
Benledi	Passenger/cargo	5943	UK	Arrived 25 March carrying RAF radar units. Sailed 30 March, returned 31 March. Damaged during raid.
San Cirilo	Tanker	8012	UK	Torpedoed by I-62 on 21 March. Damaged during raid.
Reynella	Cargo Liner	9787	Aust	Arrived 2 April. Slightly damaged during raid.
Clan Murdoch	General Cargo	5950	UK	Arrived on 3 April. Near missed during raid.
Longwood	Tanker	9463	UK	Torpedoed by I-62 on 31 January
Storanger	Tanker	9223	Nor	Arrived 13 March. Under refit for engine defects. Towed out to the Examination Anchorage on 4 April
Trocas	Tanker	7406	UK	Engines under repair. Anchored in examination anchorage.
Tjibadak	Passenger/cargo	7083	Neth	Serving as temporary accommodation ship
British Judge	Tanker	6735	UK	Torpedoed by I-58 on 28 February.
British Sergeant	Tanker	5868	UK	Arrived 3 April from Trincomalee with fuel for Colombo.
Cornish City	Cargo	4952	UK	Arrived 25 March, still unloading vehicles and guns of Australian 16 th Brigade. Sailed on 5 April after raid.
Vardaas	Tanker	8176	Nor	Strafed approaching port. Extent of damage unknown.
Seawall	Cargo	3077	Pan	Strafed 30 miles from entrance buoy and slightly damaged. Three crew members wounded.
36 ships believed present on 4 April. The 25 unidentified ships sent to westward after KdB was sighted are probably on this list. The remainder were presumably in the harbour or nearby during the raid.				
Alabaman	General cargo	7004	US	Arrived 3 April. Sailed 5 April but time of departure unknown.
Waiwera	Passenger/cargo	12,435	UK	Arrived 24 March from Middle East
Danmark	General cargo	8391	Den	Arrived 30 March, sailed 7 April. (Possibly absent 1-? April.)
Valldemosa	Tanker	7222	UK	Arrived 28 March from Abadan, Sailed 21 April for Abadan.
Benrinnes	General cargo	5415	UK	Arrived 29 March, carrying Australian troops and vehicles
Uffington Court	General cargo	4976	UK	from Middle East
British Colonel	Tanker	6999	UK	Arrived 27 March from Abadan
Nellore	Passenger/cargo	6942	UK	Arrived 29 March, sailed 15 April
Sinnington Court	General cargo	6910	UK	Arrived 28 March with troops and vehicles from Middle East
Stanmore	General cargo	6910	UK	Arrived 3 April, sailed 15 April
Clan MacGillivray	Cargo	6464	UK	Arrived 27 Feb with cargo for Singapore
Kanbe	Passenger/cargo	6244	UK	Arrived 15 February, sailed 11 April
Yenangyaung	Tanker	5447	UK	Arrived 4 April from Abadan
Nawab	?	5430	UK	Arrived 4 April, sailed 12 April
Nurjehan	Cargo	5424	UK	Arrived 1 April, sailed 15 April
Clan MacTavish	Cargo	7631	UK	Arrived 27 March, carrying Australian troops and vehicles from Middle East
Gogra	General cargo	5415	UK	
Pardo	General cargo	5400	UK	Sailed 30 March, returned 3 April, sailed 12 April
Dornoch	General cargo	5186	UK	Arrived 24 March, sailed 11 April
Forthbank	Cargo	5057	UK	Arrived 3 April, sailed 11 April
Jalaganga	General cargo	4981	India	Arrived 28 March, sailed 10 April
Sønnavind	Cargo	4965	Nor	Arrived 3 April, sailed 10 April
Marionga D. Thermiotis	Cargo	4784	Greek	Arrived 3 April, sailed 7 April
Michael Livanos	General cargo	4774	Greek	Arrived 27 March, carrying troops, vehicles and ammunition of British 16 th Brigade from Middle East
Irene S. Embiricos	General cargo	4164	Greek	Arrived 28 March, sailed 10 April
Jalabala	General cargo	3610	India	Arrived 4 April, sailed 24 April
Drava	?	3509	Yugo	Arrived 31 March, sailed 9 May
Igarka	General cargo	2920	USSR	Arrived 14 March, sailed 16 April.
Ashridge	General cargo	2884	UK	Arrived 11 March with evacuees from Java, sailed 24 April
Winifred Moller	General cargo	2484	UK	Arrived 3 April from Calcutta
Taiposhan	General cargo	2143	UK	Arrived 2 April, sailed 8 April
Halvdan	Cargo	1350	Nor	Arrived 19 March, sailed 11 April
Angby	General cargo	786	UK	Arrived 4 March from Java, sailed 19 May
Ho Kwang	?	684	UK	Arrived 7 March, sailed 2 May
Ah Kwang	Cargo	612	UK?	Arrived 7 March, sailed 14 May
Indragiri	?	592	Neth	Arrived 6 March from Java, sailed 20 April
2 Additional Ships Possibly Present on 4 April				
Mariso	Cargo	7659	Neth	Arrived 28 March, sailed on unknown date, returned on 19 April
Merak	Passenger/Cargo	1848	Neth	Arrived 29 March, sailed on unknown date

Table 6 – Merchant Ships Confirmed, Probably or Possibly Present During Raid⁸²

In addition to the ships listed in Table 6, all of which arrived prior to 5 April, another five are known to have arrived on 5 April itself. They are listed in Table 7. The time of their arrival at Colombo is not known, but it is reasonable to assume that they would not have been allowed to enter the harbour or the examination anchorage until well after the raid. One can speculate, however, that one or more of them may perhaps have

been in the approaches to the port at the time of the raid and may thus have been strafed, as Vardaas and Seawall were, given that Somerville stated in his report of proceedings that “several” merchant ships southwest of Ceylon were strafed as the Japanese aircraft withdraw.⁸³

Ship	Type	Tons	Flag	Particulars
Bering	Cargo	7650	US	Arrived on 5 April from Capetown, left on 15 April
Masimpur	Tanker	5586	UK	Arrived on 5 April from Abadan, left on 11 April for Cocanada and Bombay
Koumoundouros	Cargo	3598	Greek	Arrived 5 April from Suez, left on 22 April
Kwai Sang	ASIS	2320	UK	Sailed from Colombo 31 March, returned 5 April, left on 21 April in convoy C.0
Colon	ASIS	1803	UK	Arrived on 5 April from Trincomalee, left 13 April

Table 7 – Ships Which Arrived on 5 April, Probably After the Raid⁸⁴

Nagumo Reacts to Birchall’s Sighting Report

As already noted, Nagumo decided on 3 April that the 5 April attack would target Colombo, rather than Trincomalee or both Colombo and Trincomalee. At 1521 that day, he issued his Message Order No. 72, which specified that Colombo would be attacked by all of KdB’s Kates and Vals, with none held in reserve aboard the carriers. This would have been no surprise to his airmen, since on 19 March, while KdB was still at Staring Bay, Nagumo had issued his Classified Operation Order No. 31, which *inter alia* stipulated that if only Colombo or only Trincomalee were attacked, the following would apply:

- Each carrier was to provide nine Zeros to escort the strike aircraft.
- The priority targets for the Kates would be enemy aircraft carriers, battleships and cruisers, in that order. They were each to be armed with one 800 kg “ordinary” (Semi-Armour Piercing (SAP)) bomb fitted with a ‘C’ fuze. This was a delay fuze designed to detonate the bomb 0.02 seconds after it hit the target ship, thus allowing the bomb to penetrate the deck before detonating. (Always referred to as an 800 kg bomb, it actually weighed 807.5 kg.)
- The priority targets for the Vals would be aircraft carriers, cruisers, battleships and small vessels, in that order, however the Vals from one of the carriers were to attack the local airfield. The latter were each to be armed with one 242 kg “land” (High Explosive (HE)) bomb with a ‘B’ (0.01 second delay) fuze. The Vals assigned to attack enemy ships were each to carry one 250 kg SAP bomb with a ‘C’ fuze.
- If the number of enemy warships was markedly less than expected, some of the aircraft were to attack transport ships or military facilities on the ground.
- The Kates and Zeros were to be launched at 0600, followed 30 minutes later by the Vals. Since the Vals had a higher cruising speed than the Kates, these launch timings would permit the former to catch up with the latter and proceed to the target together.

The intent of these orders was to have Colombo attacked by a single wave of 227 aircraft – 91 level bombers, 91 dive bombers and 45 fighters. This would have been only the second time that KdB launched a full-strength single-wave attack on any target, the previous such occasion being on 19 February, when 188 aircraft were dispatched to attack Darwin from the four carriers involved in that operation.

Nagumo’s 3 April order also stated that if enemy battleships were at anchor at the time of the first attack, a second attack would be made on the same afternoon (5 April) or at early dawn the following day (6 April). During this second attack the Kates were to be armed with 800 kg AP bombs. This would have marked only the second use of these bombs, following their use against the US battleships at Pearl Harbor.⁸⁵

Alas, no plan survives contact with the enemy, as Moltke the Elder is reputed to have said, and Nagumo had to throw this plan out the window when Birchall found and reported KdB. Nagumo knew that QL-A had sent a sighting report before being shot down because KdB intercepted it, when QL-A sent it and when it was rebroadcast by the British naval radio stations at Colombo, Bombay and Aden.⁸⁶ It must have been immediately clear to the Japanese that the sighting of KdB some 15 hours before its aircraft could arrive over Colombo would allow many of the ships in the harbour to sortie in good time. Indeed, at 1905 Rear Admiral Yamaguchi made the following recommendation to Nagumo:

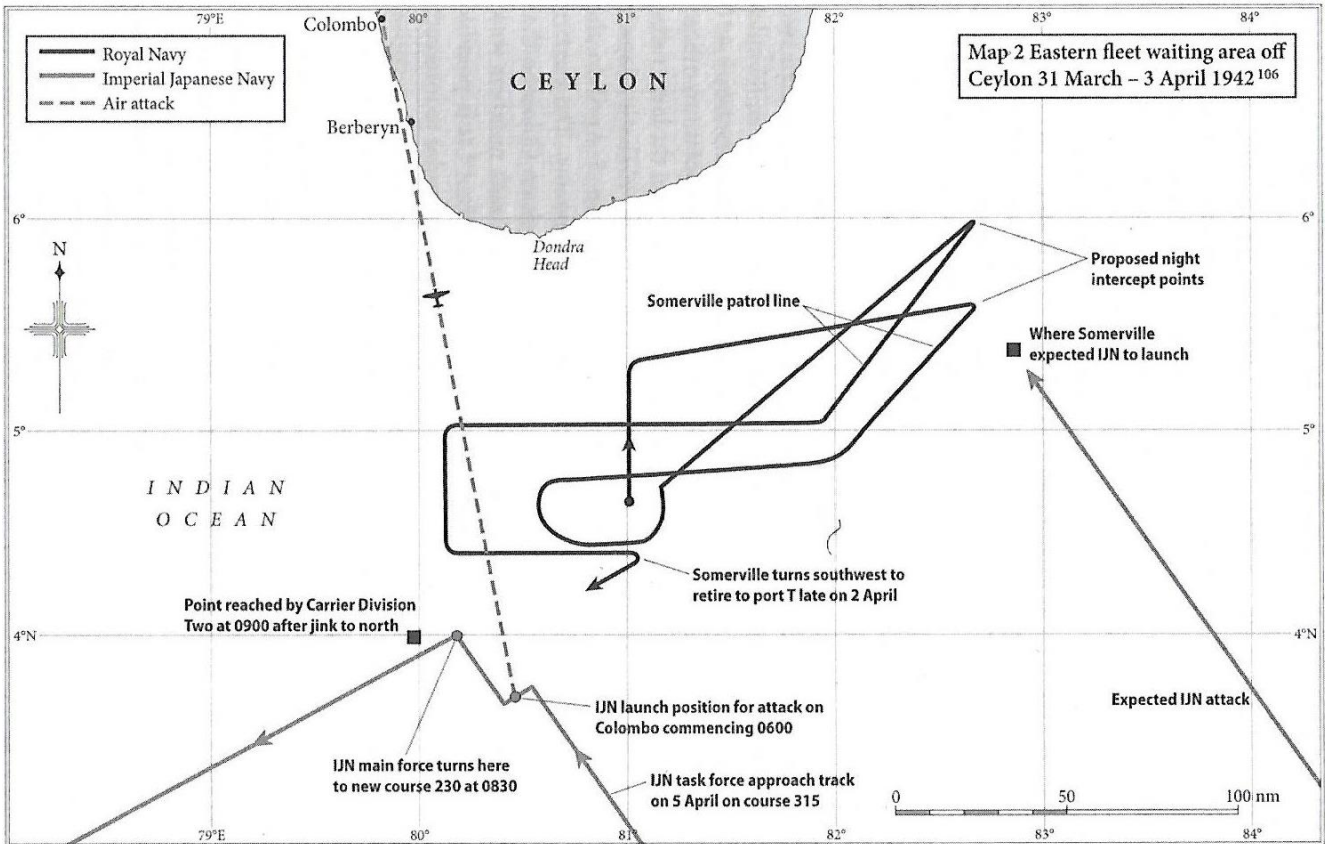
In view of today’s development, it is felt necessary to advance the time of take-off as much as possible in tomorrow’s attack on Colombo and the enemy air force, and at the same time to expand the area of search and patrol and keep on the alert planes ready to attack enemy surface vessels.⁸⁷

During the next 90 minutes, Nagumo issued two new orders. The first, Message Order No. 74, ordered a strengthening of the air search to be launched at dawn on 5 April. Message Order No. 75, issued by 2045, ordered that:

- The strike force for the attack on Colombo would now consist of the Kates from Akagi, Soryu and Hiryu, and the Vals from Shokaku and Zuikaku. The latter ship’s Vals were to attack Ratmalana airfield.
- Akagi, Soryu, Hiryu and Zuikaku were each to provide nine Zeros to act as escorts.
- After the above planes took off, the remaining strike aircraft were to be on the ready in their hangars, with the Kates armed with torpedoes, in the hope that important enemy ships would be found at sea. Nine of Shokaku’s Zeros were to stand by in their hangar, ready to escort these strike aircraft.

These orders reduced the planned size of the attack force from 227 aircraft to 128 – 54 level bombers, 38 dive bombers and 36 fighters. In the event only 127 were actually sent against Colombo, as the launch of one aircraft, apparently a Kate from Akagi, was aborted for unspecified reasons.⁸⁸

KdB Launches the Colombo Strike



Map 3 – This map shows the 31 March to 2 April manoeuvres of the Eastern Fleet during Somerville’s abortive effort to ambush KdB, the position from which Somerville expected the Japanese carriers to simultaneously attack Colombo and Trincomalee, and the position from which the attack on Colombo was actually launched.⁸⁹

During the night of 4-5 April, Nagumo continued on his northwesterly approach course, as shown in Map 3. At 0600, having altered course to the southwest to steam into the wind, he began launching his strike force and the five floatplanes of the morning search. The composition of the strike force is given in Table 8.

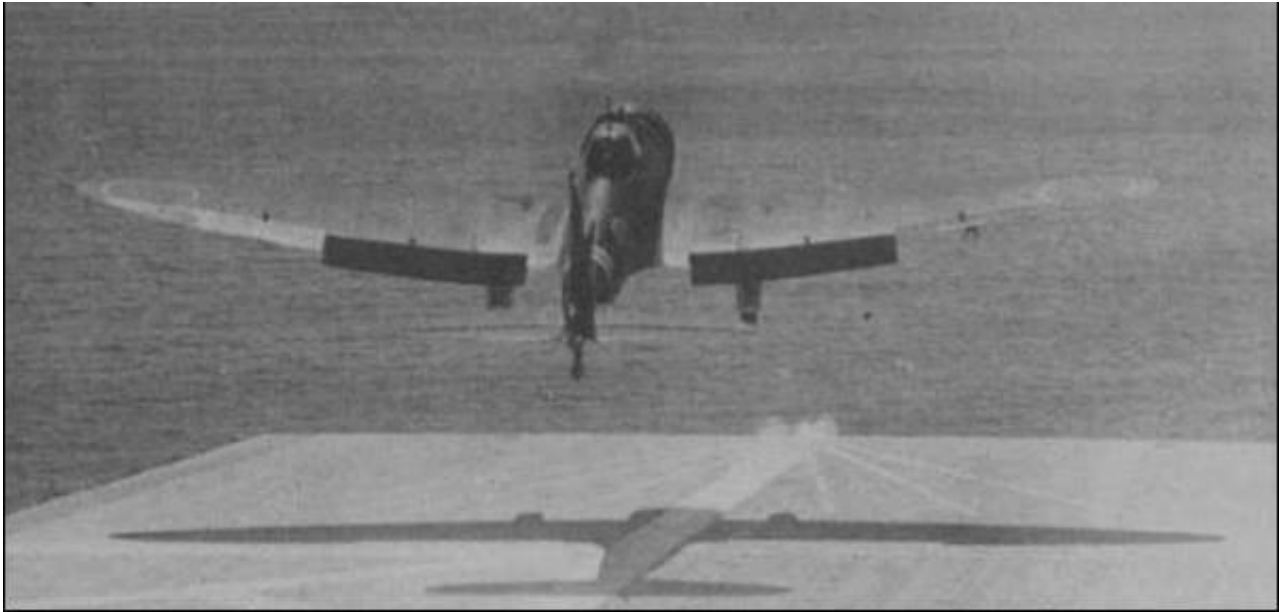
	A6M2 “Zero” Fighters	D3A1 “Val” Dive Bombers	B5N2 “Kate” Torpedo Bombers	Total
Akagi	9		17	26
Soryu	9		18	27
Hiryu	9		18	27
Shokaku		19		19
Zuikaku	9	19		28
	36	38	53	127

Table 8 – The Colombo Strike Group

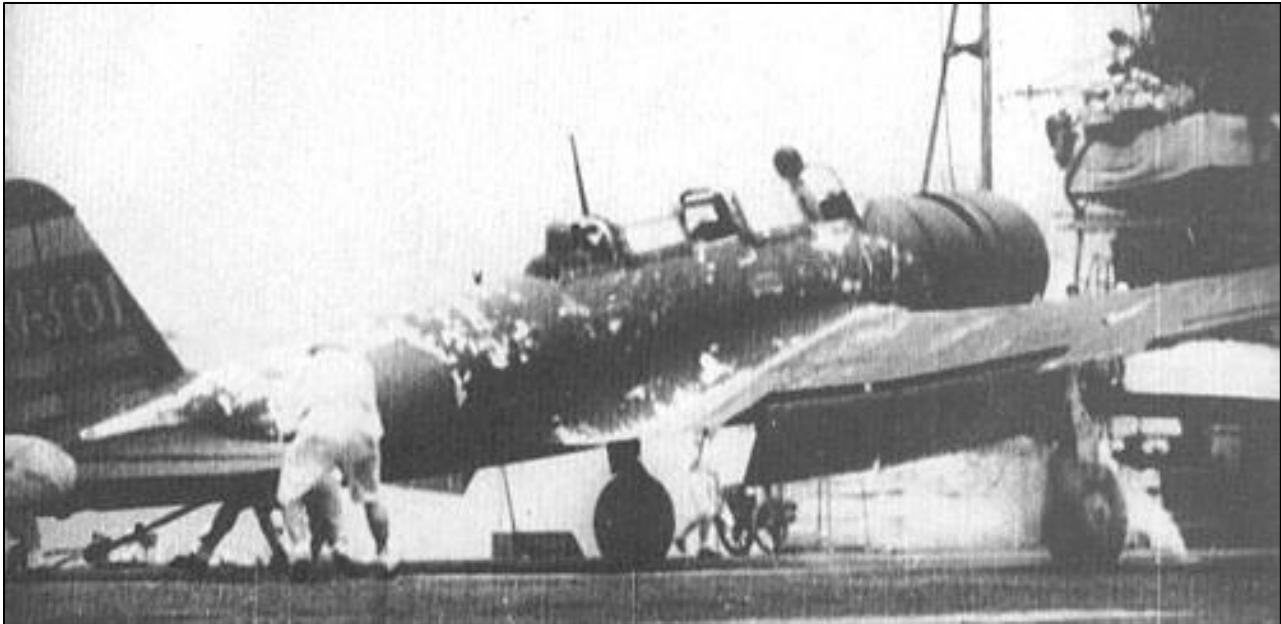
The Zero’s from Hiryu and Akagi were to sweep ahead of the other aircraft and clear away enemy fighters.

The Vals were to arrive next. Shokaku’s Vals, carrying 250 kg SAP bombs and escorted by Soryu’s Zeros, were to attack the enemy ships. Their counterparts from Zuikaku, who were assigned no direct escort, were to attack Ratmalana, but only 14 of them were armed with 242 kg HE bombs. The other five carried 250 kg SAP bombs, and three of these five Vals attacked the harbour.

The Kates were to arrive last. Armed exclusively with 800 kg SAP bombs, they were assigned to attack ships in the harbour. Zuikaku’s Zeros were tasked to escort them. Commander Mitsuo Fuchida, aboard a Kate from Akagi, was in command of the attacking force.⁹⁰

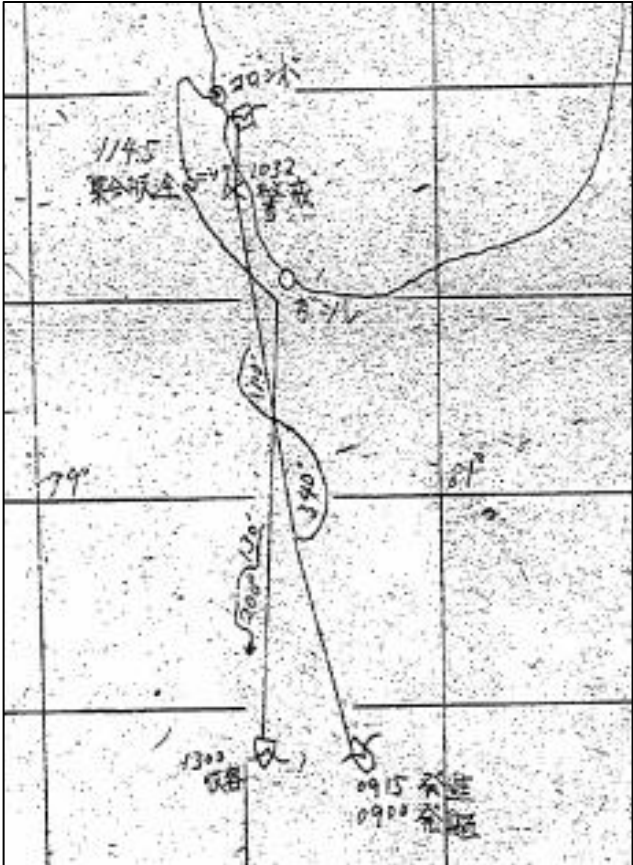


A D3A1 taking off from Zuikaku on 5 April to attack Colombo⁹¹

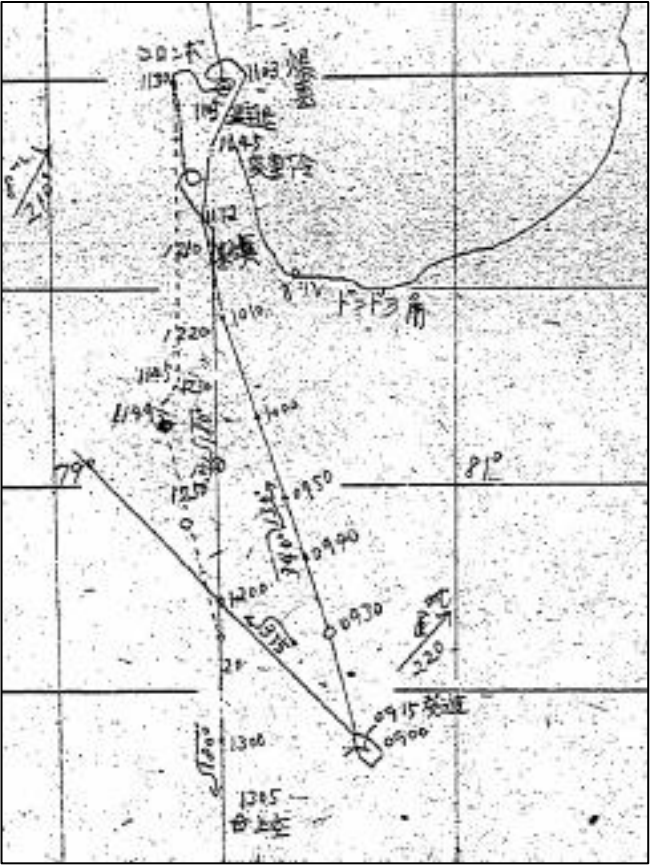


Fuchida's B5N2, AI-301, lands on Akagi on either 5 April or 9 April⁹²

Map 3 shows the nominal track flown to Colombo by the attacking aircraft. The sketches attached below show in more detail the tracks flown by Hiryu's aircraft. Similar track charts for the other carriers are not available.



Track chart for Hiryu's Zeros. According to Hiryu's kodochosho, they sighted "Colombo airfield" (probably the Racecourse airstrip) at 0732 (1032 JST)



Track chart for Hiryu's Kates, which turned to cross the coast at 0745 (1045 JST), circled around Colombo, and then attacked the harbour from the northwest⁹³

The Four Dogs Which Didn't Bark

Dawn on 5 April found Colombo's defenders forewarned and forearmed. They had been reinforced in good time, they were shadowing the enemy carrier force, they expected to be attacked and they were on full alert. All that was required to get the Hurricanes and Fulmars in the air was word of the approaching raid and the order to scramble. Unfortunately, the word never came. A mystery novel may hinge on the dog which never barks, but in this case four dogs failed to bark.

The First Dog: BN-L

At 0534 another Catalina took off to shadow KdB. This was 240 Squadron's BN-L, piloted by Flight Lieutenant Bradshaw. At about 0640, Bradshaw's crew sighted six aircraft resembling Fulmars flying at about 5,000 feet in light clouds, heading north in a V formation, 100 miles south of Ceylon. Two minutes later four aircraft resembling Sea Hurricanes were seen heading in the same direction. Believing these aircraft to be British, Bradshaw did not break radio silence to report them.⁹⁴ However, we know that they were Japanese, because an aircraft from Hiryu sent a message at 0645 reporting that at 0638 they had "Sighted enemy plane. One flying boat at 346 degrees, 43 nautical miles from launch point."⁹⁵ The Hiryu plane which sent this message was almost certainly a Kate, which suggests that the six aircraft resembling Fulmars were a six-plane chūtai of Kates from that carrier. The "Sea Hurricanes" were most likely Zeros, presumably from Zuikaku.

On 4 June 1942 a Midway-based Catalina which sighted inbound aircraft famously broadcast the message "Many planes heading Midway ...". That Bradshaw did not send a "Many planes heading Colombo" message on 5 April robbed the defenders of about 50 minutes warning of the raiders' approach, which should have been enough to get Colombo's fighters airborne and climbing to altitude.

The Second Dog: The coast watchers

Anyone familiar with the Battle of Britain will recall that once an inbound Luftwaffe formation crossed the English coast it was efficiently tracked by the Observer Corps. Ceylon had a counterpart organization in 1942, which was described as follows in a contemporary document:

1. *A Civil Coast Watching System operates in all coastal areas of CEYLON. [...]*
2. *Duties of C.W. Posts are [...] to report on:*
 - (a) *Unidentified ships*
 - (b) *Aircraft*
 - (c) *Gunfire at sea*
 - (d) *Preparations for enemy landings*
3. *Reports are written on special pro-formas, taken by cycle to C.W. Station, verified by Inspector on duty and forwarded to FIRE CHIEF. Majority of stations have no telephone, and reports have to be made from nearest Police Station. Consequently there is considerable delay in communicating information. [...]*
4. *Coast Watching Personnel are drawn from CEYLON EXCISE & EDUCATION DEPTS. They are stated to be reliable, but they lack training and equipment.*⁹⁶

It would not have been surprising if this ill-prepared organization had failed to detect enemy aircraft crossing the south coast and heading north, but in fact it never got the chance to show what it could or could not do. The Japanese aircraft kept well out from the west coast before swinging in to cross the coast just south of Colombo and heading for their targets. (See Hiryu track charts on preceding page.) Neither the coast watchers nor any other ground observers had an opportunity to sound the alarm.

The Third Dog: The Fulmar Patrol

One of the actions ordered in 222 Group's Operation Order No. 43 was for Fulmars from Ratmalana to carry out a line patrol from dawn onwards between Bentota, 60 km south of Colombo on the west coast, and Pottuvri (now Pottuvil), 210 km away on the east coast. Six Fulmars of 803 NAS duly took off early on 5 April to patrol this line, but as each pass along this line took about 35 minutes at cruising speed, and as the Japanese aircraft stayed well off the coast in any case, the Fulmars did not encounter them and had no opportunity to sound the alarm or undertake any attack.

While heading back to Ratmalana the Fulmars saw a number of aircraft heading out to sea but one crew member later recalled that "Japanese aircraft were farthest from our minds on the return flight that morning, and we dismissed the aircraft seen by thinking they were another unscheduled FAA [Fleet Air Arm] flight". (One wonders what kind of pre-flight briefing they had been given!) They were not aware of the raid until they landed and saw the damage.⁹⁷

A fair amount of misinformation has been printed to the effect that the radar station at Colombo was unmanned, down for maintenance or not yet operational on 5 April. None of this is true. As noted above, AMES 254 became operational on 25 March and its Operations Record Book (ORB) records “Normal Operations throughout month” during April, indicating that it was neither down for maintenance nor unmanned at any point.⁹⁸

That said, it is true that AMES 254 did not provide adequate warning of the approaching raid. The ORB of 20 Operation Room notes that “the early warning system failed to provide information on the Japanese aircraft until they were very close to Colombo.”⁹⁹ A 222 Group post mortem produced in June 1942 says only that “The early warning system failed and the fighters were on the ground when the attack commenced.”¹⁰⁰ AMES 254’s own ORB gives no indication that it detected the approaching aircraft, noting only that its Lewis machine guns were in action during the raid!¹⁰¹

Sufficient information is available for some informed speculation as to why AMES 254 provided no timely warning of the approaching raid.

In the first place, the minutes of a 222 Group meeting held on 31 March record that D’Albiac commented that up to then, i.e., during its first six days in operation, AMES 254 had not been able to detect single aircraft, as opposed to formations of multiple aircraft, at a range of more than 30 to 40 miles. We also know that in a post-raid cable Layton advised Churchill that the station “experienced interference from hills” and had a range of only about 60 miles.¹⁰² Sixty miles was not the best that this type of radar could do. With similar hardware, AMES 272 picked up the Japanese aircraft approaching Trincomalee on the morning of 9 April at a range of 91 miles, for example. (The sources cited in this paragraph were presumably referring to statute miles. Statute miles are also used on the rest of this page.)

As already noted, AMES 254 was located at Ridgeway. Ridgeway is about six miles north of Ratmalana, where three of Colombo’s four fighter squadrons were based, and one mile east of the improvised airstrip at Colombo’s racecourse, where the fourth fighter squadron was based. The leading Japanese aircraft, which approached from the south and over the sea, were the nine Zero fighters from Hiryu. The Zero cruised at just over 200 mph, so they could cover the roughly 54 miles between the nominal edge of AMES 254’s 60 mile coverage and Ratmalana in about 17 minutes. As noted below, it took about five minutes for Colombo’s Hurricane squadrons to get airborne that morning. Since it took about six minutes for a Hurricane to reach 15,000 feet, and the same amount of time for a Fulmar to reach 10,000 feet, the order to scramble needed to be given at least 11 minutes before the arrival of the enemy aircraft. There was thus a window of only six minutes for AMES 254 to detect the raid, plot it, identify it as hostile, and report it to No. 20 Operations Room, and for the fighter controllers to get their orders to the squadrons, if the defending fighters were to get to altitude before the raiders arrived.

After the war the Air Historical Branch in London produced a number of “staff narratives” on the RAF’s wartime operations, and *Signals Volume V: Fighter Control and Interception* makes two relevant comments. The first is that “The failure to detect the raid on 5 April was attributable in part to the very troublesome permanent echoes and to gaps subsequently discovered in the vertical polar diagram of the station”.¹⁰³

To deal with permanent echoes the operator needed to be skilled at the operation of the set and to have experienced the return from local aircraft to be able to recognise the characteristics of false echoes and discount them. AMES 254 had gained operational experience in Egypt and presumably had adequately trained operators, but, having been in operation at Colombo for less than two weeks, it seems unlikely that all its operators were already familiar with local conditions. It is pure speculation to say so, but it is perhaps possible that the operators on duty on 5 April may initially have taken the real echoes from the enemy aircraft as being false echoes. (It is even more speculative to wonder if the echoes from the first Japanese aircraft were perhaps taken as coming from the Fulmars patrolling their beat south of Colombo.)

The reference to “gaps ... in the vertical polar diagram of the station” requires explanation. AMES 254’s transmitting antenna array consisted of parallel dipole elements. In the image on page 10 of this article of a deployed radar unit of the same type as AMES 254, the transmitting mast is on the left and it can just be made out that there are three parallel dipoles pointing toward the camera and another three dipoles perpendicular to them. (See also the middle picture on page 11.) Each of the six dipoles radiated its own lobe. The lobes overlapped but there could also be gaps between them.

In the height/range diagram at lower right in Figure 1, a small gap can be seen between lobes ‘A’ and ‘B’, meaning that aircraft flying at the relevant altitude would be detected at a shorter range than aircraft approaching at a lower or a higher height. For AMES 254 the height at which these gaps occurred on 5 April is unknown, and consequently it is not known whether or not the leading Japanese aircraft fortuitously flew in at an altitude at which they would be detected at something less than 60 miles out. However, the quote from *Signals Volume V* seems to imply that this was suspected to be the case.

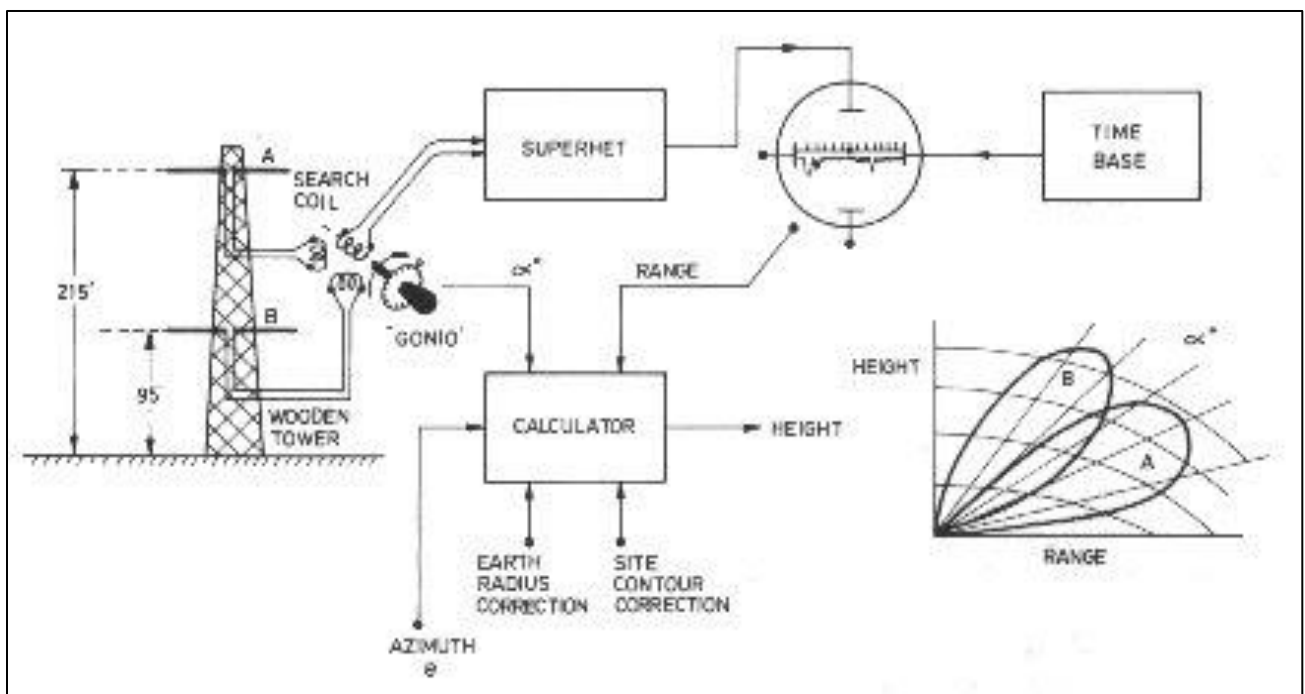


Figure 1 - A schematic showing how the altitude of target aircraft was determined in Chain Home radar systems. The height/range diagram referred to in the text is in the lower right corner.¹⁰⁴

The second relevant comment in *Signals Volume V* is that “Another contributory cause of the failure was an unequally divided watch-keeping roster resulting in operators continuing on watch with diminished alertness.” This clearly implies that the operators on duty when the Japanese came within range had been at their consoles too long. RCAF radar mechanic Gordon MacPhail has recorded that he was on radar duty at Ridgeway [i.e., with AMES 254] from 2300 on 4 April to 0800 the next morning. If the radar operators were likewise on duty from 2300 to 0800, then we can say that the Japanese aircraft came into range only during the last approximately 50 minutes of their nine-hour shift, during which they may well have suffered from “diminished alertness”, particularly, to again indulge in speculation, if they had perhaps been told that a raid at dawn was expected.¹⁰⁵

It is also worth noting that the operators did not have before them a PPI (Plan Position Indicator) display, the radar ‘scope familiar to everyone today, which displays both range and bearing. At Colombo the operators had “A scopes”, which gave only range.¹⁰⁶ Working out the bearing, height and strength of an approaching formation entailed a number of steps which needed to be completed in sequence, and fatigue would no doubt slow things down and tend to result in errors.¹⁰⁷

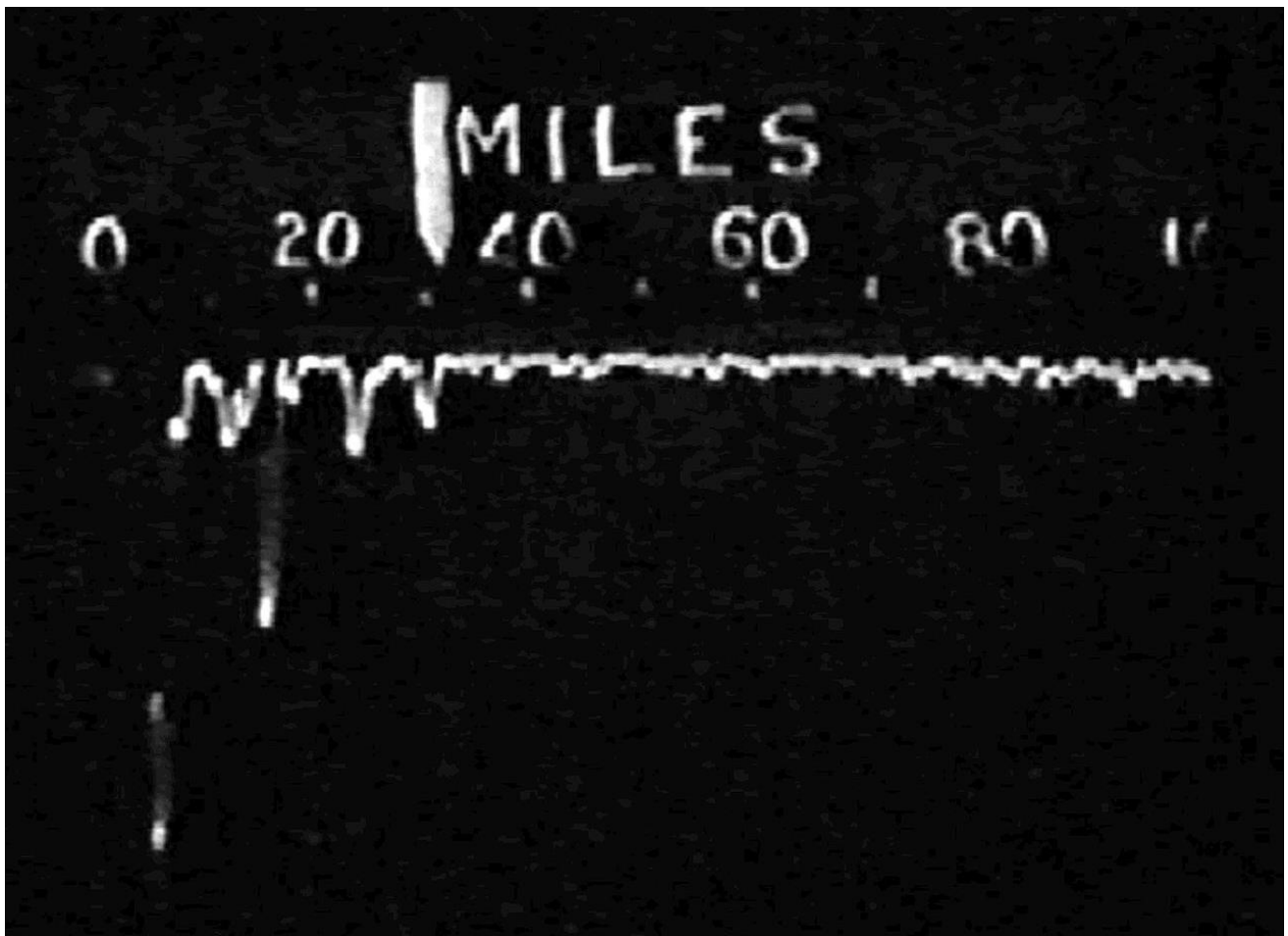


Figure 2 - The “A Scope” of a RAF Chain Home radar. The large spike at far left is the return caused by leftover signal from the transmitter. Returns from targets closer than this distance, about 5 miles, were invisible. Three “blips” are visible to the right of this, one large one at about 18 miles, another at about 25 miles, and a third at about 30 miles.¹⁰⁸

The Japanese Aircraft Arrive

None of the four dogs having barked, the first indication anyone at Colombo had that the raid was happening was the arrival over Racecourse at about 0730 of the nine Zeros from Hiryu, sweeping ahead of the main force. They were seen from the ground and S/L Peter Fletcher, CO of 258 Squadron, miscounting by two, advised Fighter Operations (i.e., No. 20 Operations Room) that 11 enemy aircraft were overhead and his pilots were running to their planes. The unit's 14 operational Hurricanes got off in good order and were airborne by 0735, with nine Mark IIBs led by Fletcher in one flight and five Mark Is led by F/L DJT Sharp in the other.¹⁰⁹

Hiryu's Zeros apparently spotted Racecourse, as CarDiv5's after action report recorded that "More than ten twin-engine large bombers [11 Squadron's Blenheims] and about twenty fighter planes were on the airfield", but by time 258 Squadron got airborne they had flown off toward the harbour. They soon caught six Swordfish Mark I torpedo bombers north of Colombo, probably at 0740. All six Swordfish were quickly shot down, probably by about 0745.

The Swordfish, from 788 Naval Air Squadron, had taken off from Trincomalee's China Bay airfield and were being transferred to Ratmalana (some sources say they were being transferred to Racecourse), with a view to attacking the Japanese task force if it came within range. 222 Group's June 1942 report comments that "Unfortunately, they were late in [taking off] and ran into enemy fighters" while approaching Colombo. The post-war memoir of one of the surviving Swordfish pilots, quoted on the next page, makes the same remark.

Local orders required friendly aircraft approaching Colombo to fly down a specified corridor north of the city, in single file and at a low altitude. The six Swordfish, having received no warning that enemy aircraft might be encountered, were duly flying down this corridor in the required fashion when attacked by Hiryu's Zeros. The Swordfish crews assumed the fighters were Hurricanes and the lead aircraft, flown by Lt Stephen Longsdon, flashed the letter of the day, while the Swordfish flown by Sub-Lt P.A. Meakin fired the recognition signal.¹¹⁰



The image above shows a Swordfish Mark I of a training unit. The torpedo may be an ordinary Mark XII with a non-explosive head rather than a live warhead. The image below shows the crew of a Swordfish, from left to right the Telegraphist/Air Gunner (TAG), the observer and the pilot. The TAG's weapon is a .303-inch Vickers K machine gun.¹¹¹



Sub-flight	Aircraft	Pilot	Observer	TAG
1st	V4413	Lt S. M. de L. Longsdon W/I	Sub-Lt N.A. McKay W/I	PO W.J. Heath W/I
2nd	V4412?	Lt C.G. Pountney W/I	Lt G.H. Creese W/I	PO J.R. Hall KIA
?	V4371	Sub-Lt A.W.D. Beale DSC KIA	None	L/Air F.H. Edwards KIA
?	V4423?	Sub-Lt P.A. Meakin W/I	None	AM1c G.E.H. Skingley KIA
?	V4398?	Sub-Lt C.T. Shaw KIA	None	L/Air G.H. Cope W/I
?	V4379?	Lt D.R. Carter W/I	None	L/Air D.A. Bolton KIA

Table 9 – The Six Swordfish and Their Crews¹¹² (KIA = Killed In Action; W/I = wounded or injured)

The 14 men aboard the six Swordfish soon learned in the most direct way possible that the fighters approaching them were not friendly.

Two of the four surviving Swordfish pilots have recorded personal accounts of their very one-sided battle with the Japanese fighters. Lt Cyril Pountney, leading the second sub-flight, wrote as follows in his 1986 memoirs:

Before dawn we were awakened, as things had changed and the Japs were more likely to approach the west side of the island of Ceylon. So that meant we pop over to the airstrip near Colombo and there prepare for action. Guessing the adversities of these sort of occasions, I envisaged the next night sleeping under the wing of the aircraft, so I packed my suitcase with essentials and a mosquito net. We intended to take off before light, but dawn had just broken when all were ready to rumble off bristling with our armament, just to get to Colombo. For aerial safety the approach of our own aircraft FAA or RAF, into the neighbourhood of the Naval port, had to be made down an imaginary path for the last few miles running north to south over the land along the coast line and with the aircraft in line astern formation. Our two sections of aircraft complied accordingly and were happily cruising along, not much above the height of the palm trees which in many places grew quite close to the shore. It was full sunlight by now and suddenly there was the unmistakable sound of a burst of machine-gun fire, and I caught a glimpse of an RAF Hurricane, which zoomed up alongside me from the port quarter, “What the Hell!” I yelled to myself. But flabbergasted still more I was to see – yes it was a Hurricane only with a large red dot painted on the wings and fuselage. A Jap. No time to think more, I cocked my forward mounted machine gun, thinking if that Jap turns to attack one of the Swordfish over on my port flank I might get a shot at him. My air-gunner apparently had not seen the approach of any enemy aircraft, I don’t blame him. However the Jap did a tight circle and came in to get his sights on me. I throttled right back and started a very tight turn believing the Hurricane would be moving too fast to do the same. No such luck and a burst of his guns and cannon did some things to us, as there was a nasty cloud of smoke produced in the back cockpit (possibly one of the coloured flares we carried had been set off) and I found the throttle lever loose in my left hand. It gave no control to my engine. Not much for me to do but try and save our skins. At the low height we were at, there was little chance of selecting an ideal forced landing spot to aim at. Within the next minute or so I had to take the opportunity. I cut the ignition switch and glided down to the edge of the beach which looked fairly inviting.

It was uncomfortably bumpy and the landing finished up by us falling over the edge more or less upside down in the sea about ten feet below. The Jap pilot let off a few more rounds at us and disappeared from view. To get ourselves out and away from the now ominous torpedo that had broken loose and was slopping about beside us, was urgent. Funny how in such a circumstance I thought I could breathe under water. Not very pleasant and I collected my senses in time. George Creese [the observer] and I managed to hoist the air-gunner [PO J.R. Hall] up onto land but he was in a very poor way. I put a tourniquet handkerchief round his thigh, as the leg had almost been severed by a cannon shell. Too late though, and he died mainly because the wound had been in the water for a bit and too much blood was lost. At this moment it felt jolly painful to walk, my left leg was hurting and George’s arm was in trouble too. In the distance I saw one of our young pilots, running from his crashed aircraft towards the shelter of the palm trees. My heart bled for him, for I saw a Jap plane swoop down firing at the retreating figure and to my dismay he crumpled to the ground.¹¹³

Bloody Shambles volume two states that the Swordfish flown by Sub-Lt Meakin crash-landed on a beach and that he and his TAG, Air Mechanic 1st Class G.E.H. Skingley, were strafed while running clear. Meakin was wounded in the ankle, badly enough that his foot was later amputated, while Skingley was killed. It seems likely Meakin or Skingley was the person Pountney saw.

Another of the four surviving pilots, Lt David Carter, a devout Christian, was one of the two subjects of a 2011 biography. It is one of a few accounts which state that the six Swordfish were in route to Racecourse rather than to Ratmalana. This cannot be confirmed, but is at least plausible, given that the only other striking force able to actually attack KdB, 11 Squadron and its 14 Blenheims, was based there.

Carter saw very little of what happened to the other Swordfish when the Zeros started their attacks, “except for one which, out of the corner of my eye, I saw go straight down in flames”. This was apparently Sub-Lt Tony Beale, who had won a DSC for scoring a torpedo hit amidship on the German battleship Bismarck in May 1941. Beale and his TAG were both killed.

Carter was at 800 feet when he was attacked from above. His instrument panel and one wing were hit, but the aircraft’s handling was largely unimpaired. He eluded a second attack, but lost a great deal of height doing so. Finally, in trying to avoid two Zeros, he failed to see a third, which fired at him. His goggles were shot off his face, his instrument panel smashed, and the tailplane and elevators damaged. Now only about 50 feet above the water, the Swordfish became uncontrollable and smashed into the sea – luckily on a reasonably even keel.

Carter and his badly wounded TAG, L/Air D.A. Bolton, got their lifejackets and dinghy inflated, and were soon out of the rapidly sinking aircraft, trying to free the dinghy, while air escaping from their torpedo was hissing alarmingly.



Lt David Carter RNVR

At last the dinghy was freed. I then noticed that my companion looked terribly bad. The Japs visible were now further away so I got in the dinghy. It took absolutely all my strength to haul David Burns [sic] in too. And then I saw what had happened. A cannon shell must have exploded very near his back and it was obviously a fatal wound. He became unconscious when he had only been in the dinghy a moment or two, but recovered, just for a moment, before he died. ‘It’s all going dark. It’s all going dark.’ Such an extraordinary urge to hold and support him in that moment was gripping me, but my support was human and weak. Perhaps at that moment, though, he knew the support of the Everlasting Arms ...

A few moments later Carter’s dinghy was attacked by another enemy aircraft.

As the spurts of water from the bullets came rushing towards me, I was over the side and into the water. Then I tried to get down, and I had the impression that I got several feet below the surface. Probably, though, having an inflated life-jacket, I had deceived myself. It’s funny, though, that in spite of thinking myself well down, I was certain that this was the end. And with that thought I remember praying ‘God, forgive us for making this war inevitable by our own selfishness, and, God, forgive these men for trying to kill me’.

But I wasn’t hit. Nor, miraculously, was the dinghy. When I surfaced, the plane was climbing away. I was visited by several more and each time I dived over the side, but I don’t think any more opened fire. The gunfire over Colombo also stopped. A pall of black smoke was rising.¹¹⁴

Hiryu’s Zeros claimed to have shot down eight Swordfish during this encounter, as shown below in an annotated copy of the relevant page from Hiryu’s kodochosho - the tabulated operational record for a Japanese air group.

"Colombo" Hiryu 5 April, 1942											
飛行機隊編制調書				所轄 飛龍		(行動番號 17.4.5)		戦闘種別		空襲 偵察	
實施年月日			任務			備考					
昭和 17.4.5 日			コロンボ 攻撃 (制空)			<input type="checkbox"/> 統指揮官 <input type="checkbox"/> 大隊長 <input type="checkbox"/> 中隊長 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 小隊長 <input type="checkbox"/> 機長					
大隊	中隊	小隊	機長	主副操縦	主副偵察	先次電信員	先次搭發員	消耗兵器	被害	効果	記事
編		1	大田	能野澄史							
		2	飛曹	新田泰雄							
		1	飛曹	日野弘人							
		2	飛曹	佐々木育							敵機撃墜数 5745 敵機撃墜 12 (由一機)
		2	飛曹	小笠原治				20機銃弾1875 27 X 3900 被弾X2機			赤城折損同 二機(不確実)
		1	飛曹	荒玉義美							5機撃墜 4機折損 4機折損
		2	飛曹	戸高岸							4機折損 2機撃墜
		1	飛曹	松山次男							合計(空襲(確実) 19 (不確実) 2
		2	飛曹	子成島量							以上計5機撃墜 5745 敵機撃墜 12 (由一機)
											9機撃墜

875 20mm rounds, 3900 7.7mm rounds expended

8 "Swordfish" shot down

Annotated Page from Hiryu’s Kodochosho for 5 April 1942¹¹⁵

Evidently, some of Akagi’s Zeros also attacked the hapless Swordfish, as they claimed to have probably destroyed two of them. This means that the fighter pilots from Hiryu and Akagi collectively claimed to have destroyed or probably destroyed ten of the six Swordfish.¹¹⁶

Thus it was that Ceylon’s small torpedo-bomber force was destroyed before it even took off to attack KdB.



Akagi's Zero pilots at Kagoshima airfield in June 1941.

At centre, in an officer's cap, is Lt-Cdr Itaya, who was in overall command of the 36 Zeros sent to escort the Colombo strike force. Lt Ibusuki, second from the left in the centre row, claimed four enemy fighters destroyed and one probably destroyed on 5 April. FPO 1/c Iwaki, fourth from the left in the back row, claimed one fighter probably shot down.¹¹⁷

258 Squadron's Battle

Compiling a coherent account of the defence of Colombo by its fighters has been complicated by the fact that very few of the combat reports the pilots submitted are available. The UK National Archives have copies of the combat reports submitted by Fighter Command pilots, but fighter units serving overseas were not under Fighter Command, and combat reports submitted by their pilots seem not to have been saved for posterity, except for those appended to unit ORBs. The situation for the two Fulmar squadrons is worse, because the FAA did not require its units to maintain any direct equivalent to the RAF's ORBs.

The information available from the Japanese side is sparser still. The five Japanese carriers' kodochosho are available, but while invaluable they are in some respects not as detailed as one could wish. Furthermore, it was not IJN practice for every individual pilot to submit a written combat report after each mission, so no such reports exist for 5 April, and since comparatively few of the Japanese aircrew who fought on 5 April survived the war, there is also a dearth of postwar personal accounts from them.

The following account of 258 Squadron's battle is based primarily on its ORB and Fletcher's combat report, which was appended to the ORB, on the kodochoshos, and on post-war accounts by some of the participants.

The 14 Hurricane pilots scrambled by 258 Squadron did not have to take off while being attacked, because the existence of the racecourse airfield was unknown to the Japanese before the attack, and no aircraft were assigned to attack it. The account in the squadron's ORB reads as follows:

*Weather – Much cloud with thunder and slight rain. Visibility fair, clearing later. [...]*¹¹⁸

*The 9 Hurricane II's scrambled as a Squadron and the 5 Hurricane I's as an independent Flight. One or two enemy A/c [aircraft] were encountered overhead, but the main body, approximately 75 E/Ac. [enemy aircraft] were then concentrated over the HARBOUR, with approx. 35 NAVY 'O's a few thousand feet above, acting as cover. As 258 Squadron approached the HARBOUR the enemy Bombers were preparing to attack. When the Squadron arrived at the Harbour it was on a level with the enemy Bombers and below the NAVY 'O's. S/LDR FLETCHER attacked the enemy bombers with the Hurricane II's. He continued to attack for as long a period as possible.*¹¹⁹

It is very unlikely that 35 of the 36 Zeros were over the harbour when 258 Squadron arrived. According to Shokaku's kodochosho, its Vals were attacked from 0752 to 0800. The nine Zeros from Soryu would certainly have been present then, as they were escorting Shokaku's Vals. The nine Zeros from Zuikaku may also have been in sight above the Hurricanes, since they were escorting the 53 Kates, the first of which began attacking as early as 0756, according to one source, but as no Zuikaku Zero pilot made any claim it appears that they did not engage the Hurricanes. Perhaps they did not arrive in time to do so, or did not see the Hurricanes, or they decided to stick with the Kates they had been ordered to protect. It also seems clear that Akagi's nine Zeros hurried down to Ratmalana when they spotted enemy aircraft over it at 0745 and were well clear of the harbour when 258 Squadron attacked.

The movements of Hiryu's Zeros after their encounter with 788 Squadron are less clearly detailed, but it seems that at some point they too moved down to Ratmalana. For one thing, a Zero pilot from Hiryu apparently claimed to have shared in the destruction of a Hurricane with a counterpart from Akagi, which suggests that

the former was also at Ratmalana. That said, Hiryu's fighters, or some of them, may have climbed to altitude over the harbour after the engagement with the Swordfish concluded at 0745 and could plausibly have been above the Hurricanes by 0752, given that the Zero could climb to 6,000 m in 7.45 minutes.

It is thus likely that the 18 Zeros from Soryu and Zuikaku, and possibly some or all of the nine from Hiryu, were the fighters seen above 258 Squadron when it arrived at the harbour – a total of 27 fighters, at most. We can also say that 258 Squadron's 14 Hurricanes were engaged by Soryu's nine Zeros and very possibly some or all of Hiryu's as well, whether or not the latter were above the Hurricanes. The Hurricanes were also engaged by Shokaku's Vals, which claimed to have shot down five of them. This claim is not quite as outlandish as it may appear at first glance. The Val was very manoeuvrable once its bombload was dropped, and during an engagement on 9 April off Ceylon's east coast, unescorted Vals from Soryu managed to shoot down two of the 14 Fulmars which attacked them.¹²⁰

Squadron Leader Fletcher's own report, which covers the actions of the Hurricane IIB flight, records that:

*Having received no warning and finding the A/c overhead, we took off and climbed for the HARBOUR as being the most likely point of enemy attack. When we arrived, we found that the Bombers had commenced their attack, and there was a strong force of enemy fighters as top cover, and considerably above our formation. I decided to attack the Bombers in the hope that it would impair the efficiency of the enemy attack. I realized that this would put the enemy fighters in a strong position. We continued to attack the bombers for as long a period as possible, though this resulted in rather heavy losses inflicted by enemy fighters. I should like to stress that the AA fire continued in spite of our presence directly overhead.*¹²¹

Fletcher provided a more detailed account a number of years after the war:

Really clawing for height. There was a lot of "lumpy" cloud about, but quite good visibility in between (visibility not so good at sea level). I had clearly seen the tight formation of Jap bombers, with fighters above them, heading rather inland. I deduced they would turn and attack the harbour from the land side.

We did a climbing turn towards the harbour; I was still hoping against hope to get above them (I thought they were at about 10,000 ft) but if not, a head-on attack against the formation might be possible. Suddenly a couple of Jap bombers dived down through a gap in the clouds, very close to us. Obviously dive attacks had started. We were still much below the bombers so I had a difficult decision to make. I can remember my thought process very clearly. It looked as if we had not been spotted. There was masses of cloud cover about and if we continued climbing we might get the precious height we needed. On the other hand by that time the bombers would have done a lot of damage; we would be seen by the Zeros sooner or later and would be mixing it with them instead of getting at the bombers.

I decided to go after the bombers, shouted "Tally-ho" and turned down into a dive through a cloud between us and the gap through which the Japanese were diving. Some of the formation lost me in the cloud, but two or three (and Teddy Peacock-Edwards was one of them) were still with me when we broke cloud and were in a good position to attack.

From then on it was every man for himself.

I opened up on one aircraft diving towards the harbour: it partially pulled out but continued straight on and as I did a climbing turn I saw it go into the sea, well outside the harbour.

I was now pointing inland and remember my anger when I saw that our ack-ack was still firing. I was positioning myself to open up on a bomber pulling up from an attack, had fired a burst which hit the Jap and knocked a few bits off the aircraft, when I felt and heard a heavy thud just below me. I looked quickly around but there were no Zeros near me. It was a burst from our own guns.

There was more flak, and oil and fumes began to enter the cockpit. I turned towards base and was looking inside to see how serious things were when I felt some cracking bangs into the back of my seat and a twinge of pain in my shoulder.

There were two Zeros behind me.

I went into a steep turn, applying full power, at which point oil gushed into the cockpit – quite a bit of it in my face.

I bailed out with some difficulty, but my troubles were not over. As I was hanging on the end of my parachute two Zeros took it in turns to shoot at me. Halfway down, as I heard their guns, I hung limply with my head on one side, pretending to be dead. I do not know if they were deceived but they just flew

around me until I landed safely on the edge of a coconut plantation and near a small temple.

Fletcher concludes his account by recalling that a Buddhist priest who had been watching the battle drove him to Racecourse and from there he was taken to hospital.¹²²

Fletcher won the DFC for his actions on 5 April. The citation reads as follows:

*Act. Sqn. Ldr P. C. FLETCHER, R.A.F.V.R., No. 258 Sqn. One day in April, 1942, Sqn. Ldr. Fletcher led his squadron against a formation of enemy dive bombers which were attempting to attack shipping in Colombo Harbour. In the ensuing combat, during which at least five of the bombers were destroyed, his own aircraft was hit, and later, when attacked by a hostile fighter, it burst into flames. Sqn. Ldr. Fletcher was compelled to descend by parachute. Throughout this hazardous operation, in which he was wounded, this officer displayed fine courage and leadership and destroyed one of the five enemy aircraft.*¹²³



Fletcher in 1965¹²⁴



Peacock-Edwards with a Hurricane IIC behind him. Photo probably taken between February 1943 and April 1944.¹²⁵

As noted in Fletcher's account, F/L Peacock-Edwards also flew in the Hurricane IIB flight. He recalled the battle as follows some years after the war:

Our formation commenced to climb in the same direction as the enemy, but sweeping round over the harbour, which was of prime importance, and out to sea. At about 4,000 feet, and just out to sea from the harbour, the enemy, who were by this time behind and above us, caught up and passed our formation which was still climbing at maximum boost.

Within a few second, however, the enemy broke up and commenced to dive-bomb the harbour and shipping off the Galle Face Green. They dived right through our formation which makes me doubt whether they had spotted us. We immediately went in to attack and from then on it was one big dog-fight. I managed to shoot down one Navy 99 into the sea just off the Galle Face Green, but by this time it was every man for himself and the escorting fighters had come down, so I cannot say with any accuracy what happened to the other members of the flight. I was set upon by enemy fighters which I managed to shake off by climbing, but I was followed by two of these and when I found myself in a superior position proceeded to attack the one I considered to be in the most vulnerable position. I followed him down but did not finally observe the results of my attack as I was again set upon by half a dozen fighters.

This time the position was such that my tactics developed into a game of hide and seek in and around the palm trees. At this altitude the Hurricane was at a distinct disadvantage as opposed to the Navy Zero. And while four of them held off at a safe height, two continued to carry out head-on and stern attacks on me. I managed to get in some good bursts on the aircraft doing the head-on attacks but the battle was drawing to a close and I observed no definite results. The [enemy] aircraft was damaged and it is quite possible that it never regained its carrier base.

The end finally came when I was forced to crash-land in a paddy field. During the impact I must have been dazed because I woke up sitting in a pile of wreckage with an enemy fighter circling overhead. It

made no effort to attack until I clambered out of the wreckage, in case fire broke out, and made my way to cover near by. Hampered by the heavy mud of the paddy field, but with enough time for the fighter to deliver a half-hearted attack on me – fortunately nowhere near – I gained cover. This was a stream at the edge of the field into which I jumped and then made my way to a small road-bridge which spanned the stream.

Climbing out of the stream, Peacock-Edwards hitched a ride back to the Racecourse across the handlebars of the bicycle of a Ceylon Light Infantry bugler.¹²⁶

Peacock-Edwards was awarded the DFC in December 1942. The citation reads as follows:

*Flt. Lt. S. R. PEACOCK-EDWARDS, NO. 258 Sqn. Since September, 1939, this officer has flown in many operational sorties both in bomber and fighter aircraft. One day in April, 1942, during an air attack on Colombo, he engaged six enemy aircraft, following them down and destroying at least one of them. He has destroyed at least four enemy aircraft.*¹²⁷

P/O Doug Nicholls, another pilot in Fletcher's flight of nine Hurricane IIBs, recalled their attack as follows

By the time we had been 'Scrambled' the harbour was already under attack by the Japanese dive bombers and, to protect the shipping, our C.O. decided to climb straight into the attack.

Climbing up under enemy aircraft, especially those well escorted by fighters, puts the defending formation at a very great disadvantage, but our aim was to divert the Japanese and give other formations (if any) the chance to come to our aid at a greater height. As we climbed into the enemy formation, I was on the inside of the turn and travelling so slowly that I was very near the stall and unable to get in a shot. So, I kicked over the rudder and spun out and down to get speed to climb up for an effective attack.

I built up speed, climbed up north of the harbour and came back for an attack through the top. I passed through the loose gaggle of Japanese fighters and got on the tail of one of the Navy 99 dive-bombers and fired at it.

*It was obviously hit and went off into cloud, but I couldn't follow it as I in turn was being fired at. Once again, I dived out and climbed back over the top but, this time, instead of the sky over the harbour being a milling mass of aircraft, it was absolutely empty. It was amazing how quickly the sky had cleared. Staying up long enough to ensure that the Japanese had all gone, I returned to base and landed, gave my report and waited with the others for the rest of the squadron to return.*¹²⁸



Doug Nicholls in front of a Hurricane¹²⁹

The combat report Nicholls submitted on 5 April reads as follows:

Claim: One Navy 96 Bomber damaged, own machine undamaged.

"I went up on a scramble with 258 Sqn and over Colombo harbour we intercepted several

*formations of Navy 99 bombers. One of these formations attacked shipping in line astern and I followed the Commanding Officer into the attack. Owing to cloud and my position in the formation I was unable to fire so I climbed above cloud where I got on the tail of two Navy 99s. I fired about a three second burst about 200 yards range from quarter astern. One of the two bombers shook violently and slipped off sideways into cloud. Because of AA fire I did not think it advisable to follow it down”.*¹³⁰

The reference in the first line of this report to “One Navy 96 Bomber” was apparently a typing error, since the Vals were correctly described as “Navy 99” (i.e., Type 99) bombers in the rest of it.

The above accounts are all from pilots who were in the Mark IIB flight. No personal accounts or combat reports from any of the other six 258 Squadron pilots who survived the battle have been found, so there is no personal account from the leader of the Mark I flight, F/L Sharp, or either of the other two survivors from his flight.

According to the unit ORB, the surviving pilots reckoned that they had destroyed or probably destroyed five Japanese aircraft and damaged four more – nine enemy aircraft in all. These numbers are consistent with the individual claims of the seven pilots identified in secondary sources as having submitted claims, as shown in the following table.

Pilot	Service	Flight	Claims		
			Destroyed	Probably Destroyed	Damaged
S/L PC Fletcher	RAFVR	Led Mark IIB Flight	1 x D3A		
P/O CC White	RNZAF	Mark IIB Flight	1 x D3A		
F/L SR Peacock-Edwards	RAF	Mark IIB Flight	1 x D3A	1 x A6M	
Sgt RN Thain	RAFVR	Mark IIB Flight			1 x D3A
P/O A Brown	RAFVR	Mark IIB Flight			1 x D3A
P/O D Nicholls	RAFVR	Mark IIB Flight			1 x D3A
F/L DJT Sharp	RAF	Led Mark I Flight	1 x D3A		1 x D3A
Totals			4	1	4

Table 10 – Individual Claims Made by Pilots of 258 Squadron¹³¹

Shokaku’s kodochosho notes that its Vals attacked targets in the harbour area from 0750 to 0753, and that Hurricanes attacked it from 0752 to 0800. It also shows that one of its aircraft was lost and three were damaged. The former was the Val flown by Lt Fujita Hisayoshi (not to be confused with Lt (jg) Fujita Iyozo, one of Soryu’s fighter pilots), and apparently the other Val crews could not say if he was hit by flak or by a Hurricane. The damage to his plane caused a serious fuel leak. He rendezvoused with the other Vals at the reassembly point (off Galle - see below) at 0820 and headed back to KdB with them but before very long he ran out of fuel and plunged into the sea.¹³²

Lt Fujita Hisayoshi, a veteran of the Pearl Harbor operation, during which he led his chutai of nine Vals in an attack on Hickam Field.¹³³



Zuikaku’s kodochosho records that it lost five Vals but it has been established that they were all lost attacking Ratmalana.¹³⁴ It does not indicate if any of its three Vals which attacked the harbour were among its six damaged Vals, but one of these three pilots, FPO 2/c Hori Kenji, recalled his part in the attack on Colombo as follows, many years after the event:

On 5 April 1942 we flew over the warehouses in Colombo Harbor at an altitude of between 2000-3000 meters. Suddenly, our aircraft were attacked by a large group of Hurricane fighters at the altitude of about 2500 metres. This occurred before I commenced my attack dive. Our mission was to bomb the harbor facilities and ships with 250 kilogram bombs. Unfortunately, it was impossible for our heavy Type 99 kanbaku to battle against Hurricane fighters in the air. I dropped my bomb on a warehouse, which exploded. Other people attacked transport ships as well. During this mission I also saw one of our airplanes get shot down.

After this my fuel tank (inside the right wing) started to leak, and it looked like it was about to catch fire. My Type 99 also had thirty-seven bullet holes in the fuel tank, right landing gear, and fuselage. I

*thought I would have to crash my airplane into the sea because I could not return to my carrier. However, I was able to switch on the other fuel tank and return safely.*¹³⁵

FPO 2/c Hori Kenji, pictured here shortly before the attack on Pearl Harbor¹³⁶



It appears, then, that 258 Squadron engaged the three Zuikaku Vals which attacked the harbour as well as Shokaku’s Vals, and that Hori’s aircraft was one of the six damaged Zuikaku Vals. It is possible that one or both of the other two Vals in Hori’s shotai were also damaged, in which case as few as three of the six damaged Zuikaku Vals were damaged attacking Ratmalana, but given that 30 Squadron and 803 NAS shot down five Vals between them and claimed to have destroyed or damaged another 22 aircraft, it seems unlikely that they damaged only three Vals.

Regarding the “probably destroyed” Zero, the only Zero lost on 5 April is believed to have been destroyed by 30 Squadron. (See below.) Three Zeros were damaged, all of them from Hiryu¹³⁷, and as it has already been shown that some or all of Hiryu’s Zeros may well have engaged 258 Squadron, it is possible that the Zero claimed by Peacock-Edwards as a probable was one of these three.

Based on the information from the Japanese side, we can say that, as was so often the case in aerial combat, 258 Squadron was not nearly as successful as its pilots believed. While they claimed four Vals destroyed and another four damaged, as well as a Zero probably destroyed, their actual tally may have been just one Val destroyed and four damaged, if the anti-aircraft guns were not responsible for any of them. Furthermore, it is evident that none of the damaged Vals were damaged very badly, for they all flew again on 9 April.¹³⁸

Whatever 258 Squadron’s score may have been, it did not prevent the Vals it attacked sinking the armed merchant cruiser *Hector* and damaging at least two other ships, and it suffered proportionately higher losses than 30 Squadron - nine Hurricanes shot down and at least two damaged, with five pilots killed and two wounded. (See Table 11.) It is evident that 258 Squadron’s inability to gain an altitude advantage or to engage the Vals before they started to bomb their targets was due to the lack of early warning. This was a fatal handicap when the enemy fighters were Zeros.

We can also say that 258 Squadron pretty much shot its bolt attacking the Vals. None of its Hurricanes seem to have engaged any of the 53 Kates which attacked the harbour area after the Vals.

Mk	Serial	Pilot	Pilot History	Pilot Fate	Aircraft Fate
IIB	BD701	F/L J Lockhart, RAFVR	Battle of Britain veteran	Killed	Destroyed
IIB	Z5665	F/L A McFadden, RAF	Battle of Britain veteran	Killed	
IIB	Z5385	Sgt RN Thain, RAFVR	No previous combat experience	Killed	
IIB	Z5680	S/L PC Fletcher, RAFVR	No previous combat experience	Wounded	
IIB	Z5461	F/L SR Peacock-Edwards, RAF	Battle of Britain veteran	Wounded	
IIB	BG696	Sgt KN Moorhouse, RCAF	No previous combat experience	Safe	
I	Z4227	P/O EMT Tremlett, RAFVR	Fought Japanese over Singapore and Sumatra	Killed	
I	?	P/O RN Neill, RAAF	No previous combat experience	Killed	
I	Z4783	Sgt LP Gavin, RNZAF	No previous combat experience	Safe	Badly damaged
I	Z4372	P/O AH Milnes, RAFVR	Battle of Britain veteran, fought Japanese over Singapore and Sumatra.	Safe	
I	Z4247	F/L DJT Sharp, RAF	In limited combat with Luftwaffe from UK bases March-Oct 1941, fought Japanese over Singapore and Sumatra	Safe	Damaged
IIB	Z5436	P/O CC White, RNZAF	Fought Japanese over Singapore and Sumatra	Safe	Not known if damaged
IIB	Z5587	P/O A Brown, RAFVR	Newfoundlander. Fought Japanese over Singapore and Sumatra	Safe	
IIB	BD881	P/O DBF Nicholls, RAFVR	Battle of Britain veteran, fought Japanese over Singapore and Sumatra	Safe	

Table 11 – Losses Sustained by 258 Squadron¹³⁹



Hurricane IIBs of 258 Squadron over Ceylon¹⁴⁰

Six of the 14 pilots from 258 Squadron who fought over Colombo harbour on 5 April.

The first image at right shows F/L Lockhart in the UK, 1940-41, probably while serving with 213 Squadron. A veteran of the Battle of Britain, he was killed in action over Colombo.¹⁴¹



The image at far right is of F/L Denis Sharp, who led 258 Squadron's flight of five Mark Is on 5 April. A New Zealander, Sharp had seen combat with the Luftwaffe in 1941 and was one of the six 258 Squadron pilots who fought the Japanese over Singapore and Sumatra before arriving in Ceylon.¹⁴²



Shown here at Batavia prior to escaping to Ceylon are four more of the 258 Squadron pilots who saw combat with the Japanese prior to 5 April. From left to right they are Pilot Officers White, Nicholls, Tremlett and Milnes. Tremlett was killed over Colombo but White, Nicholls and Milnes survived, as did P/O Brown, the sixth 258 Squadron pilot with experience fighting the Japanese.¹⁴³

Ratmalana Attacked

As noted above, Hiryu's fighters overflowed Racecourse at about 0730. This was reported to Fighter Operations but word of it did not reach Ratmalana before 0740, when, according to 222 Group's June 1942 report, observers on the ground saw four "vics" of "Navy 99 dive bombers" approach Ratmalana from the southwest, pass over it and turn toward the harbour. These were Shokaku's Vals. They were soon followed by Zuikaku's Vals. The 14 armed with HE bombs and, for unknown reasons, two of the five which were armed with SAP bombs, attacked Ratmalana. The other three Vals headed for the harbour, as we have seen.¹⁴⁴

The attack on Ratmalana probably began at about 0745, just as 30 Squadron's Hurricanes were taking off in ones and twos in a mad scramble which gave them no chance to form up. Four were still taxiing when the first bombs hit. They were able to get airborne but the Hurricane assigned to the CO, S/L GF Chater, was damaged and could not be flown. It was the only one of the unit's 22 operational Hurricanes which did not take off.¹⁴⁵

As noted above, six Fulmars of 803 NAS were already airborne and patrolling well south of Ratmalana. Another six Fulmars, three each from 803 and 806 NAS, scrambled to get airborne once the Japanese aircraft were in sight.¹⁴⁶ The remaining 12 Fulmars at Ratmalana did not take off. We can only speculate as to why this was the case. Perhaps someone in authority, recognizing that Fulmars taking off with Zeros overhead would likely be shot down without accomplishing anything, ordered them to stay on the ground.

The 27 Hurricanes and Fulmars which managed to take off got caught up in defending their own airfield. In this they were successful. Distracted by the defending fighters and hampered by cloud cover, the Vals did little damage to Ratmalana.¹⁴⁷

Numerous accounts of the attack on Ratmalana from the defenders' point of view exist. The following is from the June 1942 overview of the attack on Colombo compiled by 222 Group headquarters:

*At 0745 hours (while the attack on the harbour was in progress) approximately 40 aircraft attacked Ratmalana aerodrome and the railway workshops. This force compressed Navy 'O' fighters and Navy type '99' dive bombers, probably in a ratio 2:1. They approached the target "stepped-up" at heights varying between 3,000 to 5,000 feet, and carried out three forms of attack machine-gunning, dive bombing, and low level bombing. Aircraft came to within 50 feet of the ground when machine gunning, and bombs were released at heights between 500 and 800 feet, during dive bombing. Low level bombing was carried out at 2,000 feet, just below the cloud base. Here again the fighters provided "top cover", except for those taking part in the ground straffing which were also used for close escort. The low flying aircraft lowered their undercarriages and rocked their aircraft laterally when approaching the aerodrome. Full use was made of the excellent cloud cover prevailing.*¹⁴⁸

The statement that the attack on Ratmalana began at 0745 is probably accurate, since Zuikaku's kodochosho has its Vals arriving "over Colombo" at 0740. Some of the other observations in this account are distinctly dubious, however, especially the statement that low flying enemy aircraft lowered their undercarriages when they approached the airfield! One can only assume that the aircraft in question were Vals and it was not realized that they had fixed undercarriages.

The estimate in this account that Ratmalana was attacked by around 40 aircraft of which two-thirds, or about 26, were fighters, was also mistaken. When the attack opened there were just 16 Vals overhead and possibly zero Zeros. Soryu's fighters were escorting Shokaku's Vals and about to engage 258 Squadron, Zuikaku's were sticking like glue to the Kates approaching the harbour, and Akagi's kodochosho seems to indicate that its fighters did not proceed to Ratmalana until after enemy aircraft were seen over it. The movements of Hiryu's fighters after their encounter with the six Swordfish, which took place between probably 0740 and probably 0745, remain opaque, but it seems unlikely that they could have been over Ratmalana by 0745.¹⁴⁹

The account in 30 Squadron's ORB begins as follows:

All personnel of 30 Squadron were at their posts by 04.00. hours pilots at immediate readiness and defence posts manned. Dawn Patrol was carried out in eight tenths storm cloud.

A similar pre-dawn stand-to had been ordered on 1 and 2 April, and dawn patrols had been flown on the 2nd, 3rd and 4th. The dawn patrols were apparently each flown by two to three Hurricanes. The times at which they landed are not noted in the ORB, but on 5 April it was apparently prior to 0730.

The next comment in the ORB is that:

By 07.30. hours small sections of men were released for breakfast when at approximately 07.50. [probably 0740] formations of enemy aircraft totalling some 90 to 100 bombers and fighters were seen approaching Ratmalana aerodrome on a course of 355 degrees at approximately 8,000 ft.

It is not clear why the pilots could not have been fed at 0330 or why food could not have been brought to them

at their planes at 0730. It is also not clear if it was Fighter Operations or S/L Chater who allowed some of the pilots to go to breakfast at 0730, but it can be speculated that the unfortunate decision to do so may have been based on one or more of these factors:

- (1) Somerville's assessment that the enemy aircraft would attack in the pre-dawn darkness or at dawn was shared by the RAF authorities ashore.
- (2) Whoever released the pilots for breakfast may have been unaware that the attack on Pearl Harbor began at 0755. If so, and especially if they *did* know that Darwin was attacked at about 1000, they may have felt that, dawn having come and gone, 0730 was a relatively safe time to briefly reduce the number of pilots at immediate readiness.
- (3) There was probably a high level of confidence in the early warning system. The plot at No. 20 Operations Room, which hosted Fighter Operations, must have shown no incoming raids at 0730 and it was apparently assumed that adequate warning of the approach of enemy aircraft would be provided.

Regarding the statement that the enemy armada approaching Ratmalana had "some 90 to 100 bombers and fighters", this appears to be a considerable overestimate. The ORB notes (see immediately below) that the first of these formations continued north without attacking, which means that it must have consisted of Shokaku's 19 Vals and their nine escorting Zeros from Soryu. Apparently Zuikaku's 19 Vals were following closely enough behind their brethren from Shokaku to be seen from the ground at the same time, but the Zeros from Hiryu and Akagi were already north of Ratmalana and it seems unlikely that the Kates and their escorts could have been in sight, given that the track chart for Hiryu's Kates indicates that they did not swing in and cross the coast until they were level with Colombo harbour. It is therefore likely that only 47 Japanese aircraft could have been visible.

The entry in the ORB continues:

Pilots of both "A" and "B" Flights who were standing by their aircraft took off simultaneously with the firing of a Red Verrey cartridge from the Control Tower. Although it was obvious to everyone on the drome that the approaching formations were hostile, none of the ground defences opened fire. The station sirens sounded, giving the alarm for invasion and the signal to man defence redoubts etc. The enemy aircraft did not make an immediate attack, the first of the formation[s] continuing due north over the drome. Our Fighters by this time were engaging some of the enemy aircraft, one was seen to burst into flames and dive in a south westerly direction crashing near the railway workshops. Five dive bombers (Navy 97 or Severesky aircraft) circled and formed line astern, then dived from the East. As the first bomb was released from about 500 feet, the Bofors Guns opened up. There were still about four Hurricanes taxi-ing from their dispersal, and all these aircraft took-off while the bombs were exploding near the Control Tower. It was at this particular time that the Bofors were firing continuously and appeared responsible for preventing any of the enemy aircraft jumping our planes as they became airborne. Only one aircraft [the CO's] failed to get into the air, that was because it was dispersed near the Control Tower and received damage by blast from one of the bombs exploding not more than seventy yards away. [...]

Events happened too quickly for any one observer to get a composite picture of the incidents going on, all around the perimeter of the drome. However, one thing was obvious to everyone, the Bofors Guns did grand work, only on two occasions were enemy aircraft seen to dive over the runway chasing low flying aircraft, one a Hurricane; he appeared to get away, the other a low flying Fulmar attempting to land was less fortunate and got shot down by a Navy "O" in spite of three Bofors giving him all they had.

[...] Altogether 21 Hurricanes took off, the majority of them whilst the enemy aircraft were attacking the drome. Fortunately low clouds enabled these machines to gain cover very soon after take-off. Few of the ground staff witnessed the combats as cloud obscured their view [but] occasionally, an aircraft would dive out of cloud being chased by another, the rattle of twelve machine guns being easily distinguished from the enemies fire of cannon or dual machine gun effort.

After half an hour planes started returning and the ground crews soon had refuelling and guns reloaded, but the attack was almost finished apart from a few aircraft still seen twisting and turning through gaps in the clouds, to the S.W. some miles away. By 0900 hours most of our aircraft were on the ground, and a check revealed eight Hurricanes were missing – several of these that had landed were badly shot up, but all of the pilots [who landed at Ratmalana] were uninjured.

[...] Sunday night left 30 Squadron with seven serviceable aircraft, and only that number due to the untiring efforts of all the flight and maintenance personnel. The results of the day's combats closed with the information available at that time. Eleven claimed to have been shot down, seven probables and five damaged, - a total of twenty three enemy aircraft which almost certainly failed to reach their aircraft carrier, for a loss of eight Hurricanes.

On 6 April, after wounded pilots were interviewed, the squadron increased its claims to 14 destroyed, six probably destroyed and five damaged – 25 in all.¹⁵⁰ This claim was included in 222 Group’s June 1942 report. It is interesting that 30 Squadron identified the dive-bombers as “Navy 97 or Severesky aircraft”. The IJN had no Type 97 dive-bomber and the Val was not a copy of any aircraft designed by the Seversky Aircraft Company, which had become Republic Aviation Corporation in 1939. It is not known what aircraft recognition manuals may have been in the unit’s possession, but most of the ones available early in the war against Japan were incomplete and/or inaccurate. However, in its June 1942 report 222 Group correctly identified the dive-bombers as Navy 99s. Better information may have been available at that level, or examination of shot down Vals may have confirmed their identity.

Eight of the 27 pilots who took off from Ratmalana were killed. The 19 survivors presumably all submitted combat reports but while none of their combat reports have been found by the author, some information is available on their claims from other sources, including personal accounts some of the pilots made later. (See below.) These claims are listed in Table 12. They amount to 21 aircraft destroyed, four probably destroyed and three damaged, a total of 28. However, some of the claims available through these sources may not have been endorsed by the authorities at the time, so the figure of 25 in the June 1942 report may better represent approved claims.

Aircraft Serial	Pilot	Claims		
		Destroyed	Probable	Damaged
Z5447	Sgt AJ Browne, RAAF	1 x “aircraft” (Horana Zero?)		
BM930	F/S TG Paxton, RAFVR	1 x Zero 1 x “other aircraft”		
?	F/L RTP Davidson, RAF (Canadian)	1 x Zero 1 x Val shared with Hurley		
?	Sgt JB Hurley, RCAF	1 x Val 1 x Val shared with Davidson		
BG827	P/O JH Whalen, RCAF	3 x Val		
?	Sgt GG Bate, RCAF	2 x Val		
?	Sgt CI Nutbrown, RCAF		1 x unidentified	
?	P/O DA McDonald, RCAF	1 x Val (reportedly crashed in sea)		
?	Sgt PM Hamilton, RAFVR			1 x Val
?	P/O AD Wagner, RAFVR	2 x Val		
?	F/O RC Graves, RAFVR	1 x unidentified	1 x unidentified	1 x unidentified
BM910	F/O T.H.C. Allison, RAFVR	2 x “aircraft”		
?	Sgt R.L. Davies, RAAF	1 x “Jap”		
BG795	P/O GE Caswell, RAAF	2 x Val		
BG887	Sgt F Whittaker, RNZAF		2 x unidentified	1 x unidentified
?	Lt M. Hordern, RN	1 x “Navy 96”		
Totals		21	4	3

Table 12 – Individual Claims Made by Ratmalana-based Pilots¹⁵¹

In actual fact the raiders lost only seven aircraft, of which one, Lt Fujita’s Val, was the victim of 258 Squadron’s Hurricanes or flak. This means that 30 Squadron’s pilots and 806 NAS’s Lt Hordern could have shot down only six aircraft, assuming, as is probably true, that none of them were downed by flak.

A total of 17 Japanese aircraft were damaged:

- Three Zeros from Hiryu, one of which may have been damaged by 258 Squadron.
- Three Vals from Shokaku. They were probably all damaged by 258 Squadron and/or flak.
- Six Vals from Zuikaku, of which at least one was damaged by 258 Squadron.
- Five Kates. They were probably all damaged by flak.¹⁵²

These figures suggest that 30 Squadron, 806 NAS (803 NAS made no claims) and the Ratmalana area anti-aircraft guns damaged no more than three Zeros and five Vals between them. If we assume that 30 Squadron was responsible for all of them, which is possible but cannot be confirmed, then at most it may have shot down six aircraft and damaged eight, a total of 14 – definitely not 23 or 25.

As mentioned, Table 12 is compiled from such sources as personal accounts made by the pilots at a later date, but the source for the first claim listed in the table, Sgt Browne’s, is the 30 Squadron ORB. The relevant part of the 5 April entry is as follows:

[...] The last news of any missing pilots supplied that day was when a Captain in the Ceylon Light Infantry arrived with the body of Sgt. O.J. Browne. [Browne’s initials were actually A.J.] This Captain witnessed the combat between our pilot and a Japanese aircraft. Sgt. Browne shot down his quarry but was attacked from astern by a ‘Navy ‘O’. His aircraft dived into a paddy field in flames, [and] but for the quick action of the C.L.I. forces in the vicinity his body would not have been recovered. He was taken from the wreckage but he had been killed on impact.

One secondary source says that Browne's victim crashed at Horana, a town located about 23 km (12 nm) southeast of Ratmalana. The Australian 16th Brigade Group was deployed near Horana and its 2/2 Infantry Battalion had an observation post (OP) on high ground north of the Horana police station. At 0810 on 5 April this OP reported that it had seen an unidentified aircraft being shot down in flames. A patrol from the battalion found the plane and reported that it was being guarded by the local police. The brigade made an attempt the next day to raise the aircraft, which was buried in three feet of mud, but on 7 April it had to request engineering assistance. The brigade's war diary states that the RAF was "anxious to obtain the engine and armament of the plane, which they have identified as a Navy 'O' fighter". This must have been the Zero flown by F1/c Higashi Sachio from Soryu, as his was the only Zero lost.¹⁵³

The claims of the seven Canadian pilots who fought with 30 Squadron are available from a somewhat unusual source. It appears that an unidentified RCAF public affairs officer may have visited Ratmalana after the attack and interviewed them, because on 26 June the Canadian Minister of National Defence for Air, CG Power, issued a statement extolling their exploits. It appeared in the Canadian press under headlines such as "Nine Jap Planes Felled By Seven Canadians".¹⁵⁴ Furthermore, in the Canadian archives and elsewhere there are a number of photos of these seven pilots taken at Ratmalana after the raid which have the look and feel of typical public affairs images. An alternative explanation is that the combat reports from the RCAF pilots reached Ottawa by June and that they were the basis for the ministerial statement.



Seven of 30 Squadron's Canadian pilots are shown above. From left to right they are Sgt Creighton Nutbrown, P/O Don McDonald, Sgt Jack Hurley, P/O Jimmy Whalen, Sgt Grant Bishop, Sgt "Bub" Murray and Sgt George Bate. Missing are F/L RTP Davidson and Flt Sgt JB Lisle. Lisle was killed on 20 April in an accident, so this image may have been taken after that date. Neither Murray nor Lisle is known to have fought on 5 April. This image and the first three on the next page appear to have been taken at the same time.¹⁵⁵

The Hurricane in the above photo is Whalen's. What appears to be a later version of the crest visible aft of the nickname 'Bista' is shown at right. It records his claimed destruction of three Me-109s in 1941 and three Vals on 5 April 1942. It adorns PZ865, the last Hurricane built, which has been rebuilt by the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight. Since 2012 it has worn the colour scheme of Hurricane IIC HW840, Whalen's usual mount in 1943-44. He was shot down and killed in April 1944 over Kohima.¹⁵⁶



The RCAF pilots serving with 30 Squadron who saw combat on 5 April inspect wreckage from a Val. From left to right they are Whalen, Bishop, Nutbrown, Bate, Hurley and McDonald.¹⁵⁷



Whalen and Bate take their turn posing with the same wreckage. They are holding what is believed to be the starboard wingtip, with the upper surface facing the camera.¹⁵⁸



Whalen, in front of his Hurricane IIB. ‘RS’ was the squadron code assigned to 30 Squadron. We are free to speculate that it was no coincidence that he flew squadron aircraft ‘W’.¹⁵⁹



The story states that the seven Canadians destroyed eight bombers and one fighter, “Exactly one-third of the total number of enemy aircraft destroyed”, meaning that the Canadian government’s information was that 27 Japanese aircraft had been shot down. This may have been based on the press releases issued by the British after the attack. The 6 April headline in such papers as the New York Times gives this number.

New York Times.

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NEW YORK, MONDAY, APRIL 6, 1942.

THREE CENTS

LATE CITY EDITION

April 6, 1942.

Temperature Yesterday—Max., 69; Min., 41.

75 JAPANESE PLANES RAID CEYLON; R. A. F. DOWNS 27 AND HITS 30 MORE; FOE MAKES SMALL BATAAN GAINS

**Raid by Commandos
On Narvik Reported**

LUZON FIGHT RAGES

**Wainwright's Men Take
Big Toll of Japanese
Shock Troops**

LANDING UNITS ROUTED

**Armed Barges, Approaching
Bay Shore of Peninsula, Are
Blasted by U. S. Artillery**

By G. BRIDGES FREEMAN

WASHINGTON, April 5.—The situation of General Joseph M. Wainwright's American and Filipino forces on Bataan Peninsula in the Philippines appeared more serious today with the announcement by the War Department that...

BOMBS IN BELFAST

COLOMBO ATTACKED

**First Assault on Base at
Tip of India Causes
Little Damage**

SOME CIVILIANS ARE KILLED

**Raiders Came From Carrier—
Island Long Prepared for
Major Role in War**

FOE'S ATTEMPT AT SURPRISE RAID BACKFIRES



**RAIDERS CAME FROM CARRIER—
Island Long Prepared for
Major Role in War**

**RAIDERS CAME FROM CARRIER—
Island Long Prepared for
Major Role in War**

The Canadian story goes on to highlight the accounts of the six RCAF pilots who fought on 5 April, two of whom alluded to the seventh Canadian, Davidson, who was in the RAF. The minister is quoted as saying that the seven Canadians “avenged the death of Sqdn.-Ldr. L.J. Birchall, of St. Catharines, Ont., who first spotted the enemy fleet and flashed back the dramatic message which warned the island defenders of the impending attack”. (It was not known until 1943 that Birchall had survived and was a prisoner of war.)

- *Pilot Officer Whalen destroyed three Japanese bombers. "I climbed to 15,000 feet above the City of Colombo and saw a formation of seven bombers at 18,000. I climbed above them, dived and shot down two. I broke away, climbed again and got another. Then I was attacked by Jap fighters, but [Acting] Squadron Leader Davidson saw my trouble, attacked the Japs and shot one of them down."*
- *Bate got two Japanese bombers. "I came down from above on them," he said. "There were several kites in a tight 'Vic.' I gave my first a few short bursts and blew off his tail. I shot across another, spraying him with fire, and he went down with flames streaming from his cockpit."*

Comment: It is highly unlikely that Whalen and Bate shot down five Vals between them, since Zuikaku lost only five Vals and 11 other Hurricane and Fulmar pilots are believed to have claimed Vals.

- *Sergeant Hurley destroyed one Japanese bomber and shared another with Davidson. Taking off with Davidson they both spotted a bomber and went after him. The Japanese was soon falling in flames. "I then went into cloud," said Hurley, "and emerged over the harbor where I ran into a Jap bomber formation flying in a 'Vic.' I tackled No. 2 of the formation, and after I put some bursts into him he blew up. I was then attacked by Jap fighters, but none of them hit me."*
- *Sergeant Nutbrown chalked up a "probable." He chased the Japanese machines for more than an hour and returned with many holes in his aircraft to tell of the battles he had waged.*
- *McDonald caught up with seven bombers at 2,000 feet, attacked one and sent it crashing down. As he turned away a Japanese fighter pumped cannon shell into his aircraft and oil sprayed all over him, but a Royal Air Force pilot came to the rescue and shot the attacking enemy plane down. "I passed over the harbor with all the ack-ack fire blazing away," said McDonald, "and managed to make a forced landing in an open space. I clambered out of the machine and made my way to a local hotel for a bath."*
- *Bishop ran into five Japanese fighters, but took them on. After giving one of them a few bursts he found an enemy plane on his tail, and his controls and a chunk of his propeller were shot away.*

A Canadian who joined the RAF in 1937, Bob Davidson was one of the most experienced pilots in 30 Squadron. Dubbed a “triple front ace” after the war, Davidson was credited with destroying two Italian and one German aircraft in the Middle East in 1940-42, a Zero and a Val over Colombo, and a German aircraft over Western Europe in January 1944. He also saw service in Korea with the 335th Fighter Interceptor Squadron, USAF, September-December 1952, flying 51 F-86 Sabre sorties. He had 10 engagements with MiG 15s.¹⁶⁰

The image at right shows Davidson in a Hawker Typhoon in 1943, shortly before he claimed his sixth victory.¹⁶¹



Two of these seven pilots elaborated on their experiences in accounts made after the war. The following account is from Bate, who was standing by his aircraft while other 30 Squadron pilots went to breakfast:

Bate is shown here in front of a Hurricane IIC in July 1943, after he had been commissioned and promoted to flying officer.¹⁶²



At the time of the raid, our aircraft were parked around the perimeter of the field – no blast bays – the ack ack units had arrived just prior to the raid and were not dug in but just sandbagged and located on the field in the open ... The aircraft were scrambled by the firing of a verey cartridge from the control tower.

It was an overcast day with broken clouds with a ceiling of approximately 1,000 feet. As it was starting to drizzle, my 'erk' and I climbed onto the wing of my aircraft to close the cockpit. As we were doing so we heard the sound of aircraft, and looking up through the broken cloud we saw formations of aircraft passing over, heading in the direction of Colombo. My airman said 'Look at the Spits. They must be reinforcements!' I looked and said 'Those are Japs.' I jumped into my aircraft and along with Flight Lieutenant Davidson started up and headed for the end of the strip for take-off. At the same time the lorry carrying the other pilots headed back to the aircraft. We were caught on the ground with no warning. Dave and I started our take-off as the first bombs hit the field, and we became the first airborne. Still no verey light!

As soon as we were airborne we were in cloud and lost each other – I was on my own. When I broke out on top I was jumped, and I headed back into cloud. It seemed to me that every time I came out of cloud the Jap aircraft were waiting. It was impossible to gain any height to get above them. I decided to head out to sea and climb back into the area. I was fortunate to gain some height and came back to attack a number of single-engined aircraft flying in a V formation. I attacked the formation and shot down two aircraft on the starboard side of the formation. From then on it was a real hornets' nest. Thinking back on it I cannot remember seeing any of our aircraft during this time. Everyone had their private go. Because we were caught on the ground any squadron tactics we had were not available to us.

*When I arrived back at the field I did not make a circuit, but flew straight over the trees and onto the ground, maybe even downwind. The ground crews had the bowser out in the open, so I taxied straight up to it. The armourers hit the wings, the refuelling crews began refuelling, all out in the open. As this was going on the Japs again strafed the airfield. I jumped off the wing, heading for a ditch not far away; one of the armourers threw me his rifle and suggested in no uncertain terms that I shoot at the b*****s!*

As I looked out from the ditch, after the strafing attack, [I saw that] not one airman had left his job; all were carrying on refuelling and rearming as if everything was normal. To me the 'erks' were the real hearos of the raid, and to my knowledge have never received any official recognition.¹⁶³

The following account by McDonald was included in an article published by The 30 Squadron Association:

We stood at readiness from about 2am on in bright, brilliant moonlight. About 6am half of us went for breakfast and we had just arrived back in front of the control tower when we heard engines roaring and looked up to see formations of Japs coming over the tops of large cumulus clouds. [...]

Why the Japs did not keep us on the ground I will never know. We took off in sections of two and never did have an opportunity to operate as a squadron unit. I took off flying number two to Flight Sergeant Paxton. We started into a cloud to gain height. In one clear spot I saw a line of T99 dive bombers. I broke off and attacked the last one in line. All our aircraft were loaded with straight ball type ammunition because a couple of weeks before, the 4E incendiary started to explode in one of our aircraft due to the intense heat, sitting uncovered in the sun. I was not able to see whether I was hitting the Jap or not, but finally noticed some liquid pouring out from under his wing. I then looked around and saw two very nasty looking aircraft above me, rolling to attack. I figured that they would likely out-turn me so I dove for the deck hoping to outdistance them. I saw tracers going by each side of the cockpit and I was almost immediately covered with oil and glycol. By this time I was quite low and heading across the harbour, which was full of ships. Some of them - possibly all of them - took pot shots at me. I knew I would have to crash land and the Galle Face Green appeared to be my best bet.

The next day we found that Flight Sergeant Paxton was in hospital, severely burned. The CO and Frank Bush [another unit officer, probably the intelligence officer] went to see him. First he confirmed that the Jap I shot at went down in flames. He took one of the Zero's off my tail, but was attacked himself and set on fire. He was ready to jump when another Jap flew in front of him. He stayed in long enough to shoot at him and then baled out. [...]

Before we landed in Ceylon a B17 Flying Fortress overshot the runway at Ratmalana and could not be flown out. It was sitting at the edge of the field without any engines. Apparently every Jap that attacked the field shot at the B17. After, we wondered how many B17's were claimed as destroyed by the Japs that got back.

Our communications system was very inadequate. The signal for the Squadron to scramble was for the control tower personnel to fire a Very pistol. That morning whoever was to fire the pistol was so excited that he forgot he was in the tower under the roof when he fired. Appartnly it was pretty exciting for

them dodging the flare. I believe that the only casualty among the ground crew was a chap standing under a palm tree being hit by a coconut shaken loose by a bomb blast.

Flying Officer Cartwright was being chased by a Jap Zero. He was on the deck turning around trees when one wing hit a tree. Cartwright said that the aircraft cartwheeled three times and he ended up still strapped in his seat, but jammed back in the tail. He had a slight scratch on one shin, Cartwright was later OC "A" Flight from August 1942 to some time in 1944.¹⁶⁴

The article adds that after McDonald crash-landed he was taken into the Galle Face Hotel by a staff officer who said "I expect you could use a drink". A waiter duly arrived with a tumbler of amber liquid, which McDonald gulped down only to discover with horror that it was iced tea rather than whiskey. It was only 8.30 am.

The 6 April entry in 30 Squadron's ORB also comments on what Paxton told S/L Chater when the latter visited him in hospital that day:

Paxton ... had engaged and shot down (definitely) two enemy aircraft, one of these was attacking P/O McDonald who landed at the Galle Face Green, and he confirmed seeing P/O McDonald's quarry crash into the sea. Unfortunately other enemy aircraft succeeded in hitting F/Sgt. Paxton's aircraft and it started to burn – to use his own words 'although it was getting hot in the cockpit and the throttle became to[o] hot to hold' he continued firing at another enemy aircraft directly ahead and in his sights when he had to abandon his aircraft at 1600 feet. Natives rescued this pilot from a tree, where he landed by parachute, and conveyed him to Hospital.

Another pilot, Sgt Hamilton, also provided his recollections of 5 April well after the event. At 0730 that morning he was standing outside the officers' mess waiting for other pilots to finish breakfast:

Suddenly we heard the sound of many aircraft. We looked up and there, in open sky between great banks of cloud, were two vics of nine aircraft [probably Shokaku's 19 Vals] passing over at about 3000 feet in the most perfect formation. Suddenly someone shouted 'Japs'! Then followed a mad rush to get into the 'gharri' [Hindi word for a wheeled vehicle] and a high-speed dash to dispersal. No instructions were given; it was clear what we had to do and that was to get airborne as quickly as possible. As I taxied towards the runway I noticed the CO's aircraft still parked outside the Flying Club building. Half way to the runway a 'Val' passed above my head at about 500 feet. I watched, fascinated, as a bomb slowly toppled from the rack towards me, but by the time it landed I was out of harm's way. Once airborne I looked around; there was not a single aircraft to be seen. I headed for the harbour, and was flying at about 1000 feet round a large black cloud when a 'Val' suddenly appeared. I wrenched round in a steep turn and got on its tail very close behind. I fired a long burst as we both plunged into cloud. Eventually I came out of cloud at about 700 feet above the harbour [but] there was no sign of the 'Val'.

Hamilton then headed south, climbing as he went. As he approached Ratmalana he spotted a vic of three aircraft several miles away at 8000 feet and gave chase while still climbing.

After what seemed like an age I began to close on them. I would have liked to get above and ahead of them in order to deliver a proper quarter attack, but I felt that I could not spare the time. I decided to attack from below so that their tails would hinder their rear gunners. As I got within range I put my finger on the button, but at that instant the 'Vals' began to jink about madly. I got a bead on the left-hand aircraft. Tracer was now coming back from all three in that typically lazy undulating manner. I dived under them again and came up for another go. I pressed the button but was shocked to discover that I had no ammunition left. There was no point in hanging around, so I turned for home. As I did so I looked back and was gratified to see that the left-hand aircraft had left formation, lost height and was emitting grey smoke.¹⁶⁵

A witness on the ground, Leading Airman Bert Holt of 803 NAS, has been quoted as saying that when "Scramble!" was ordered: "The most vivid thing I remember then was a sub lieutenant, towel in hand and wearing only his black beard, belting out of the showers, heading for his flying gear." He also recalled that Sgt Davies "shot down a Jap crossing the end of the field, before he had retracted his wheels."¹⁶⁶

A 2019 history of 806 NAS includes the follow summary of the fate of the six Fulmars which took off to challenge the Japanese aircraft:

The leader of the 803 Squadron section was Sub-Lt Bill Anderson:

"Just as we reached the airfield perimeter by truck, the second wave of aircraft were arriving at a much lower height, dropping what appeared to be enormous bombs (which were, in fact, long-range fuel tanks made of papier-mâché), strafing the airfield and taking an incredible toll of the Hurricanes as they scrambled ahead of us. One of the only TAGs (N/Air Fred Johnson) to reach the airfield in time for the scramble, jumped into the back of my Fulmar and used the only weapon available—a Very pistol and cartridges—to frighten off any Jap getting a bit too close!

“The only way that we could mix it with the Japs was to dive from a great height out of the sun, have a go and get the hell out of it. These conditions unfortunately were not present as the Japs already had a 10,000 feet advantage and the Fulmar was a painfully slow climber, even at full boost.” Anderson’s two companions were immediately pursued as they climbed away from the airfield, Sub-Lt Ian White-Smith’s Fulmar (X8555) diving into the sea while Sub-Lt Harry Diggins (806 Squadron) crashed into the jungle; he too was killed; his body was later recovered from the wreck of his aircraft. The 806 Squadron section was marginally more successful, although Sub-Lt Ken Pettitt was also shot down and killed, his Fulmar (X8569) seen to dive in flames into the jungle. Apparently, he was coming in to land when he was caught by an A6M. Lt Mike Hordern, the section leader, recalled:

“We were caught on the ground for a start and not many of us even got airborne. A Petty Officer with a sub-machine gun leapt in the back of my aircraft and I believe even fired it with wild abandon! I was on my own and saw a number of enemy aircraft circling over the sea—possibly reforming or in defensive orbit against some other aircraft. I approached through broken cloud cover at about 5,000 feet and made one pass before breaking off at high speed and seeing one aircraft burning on the surface of the sea. I was credited with one Navy 96 shot down, seen and confirmed by a Naval officer standing outside the Mount Lavinia Hotel.” [The Mount Lavinia Hotel is about 3 km (1.6 nm) northwest of Ratmalana. The “Navy 96” must have been a Val.]

The third Fulmar of the 806 Squadron section, flown by Sub-Lt John Sykes, was also shot down:

*“Having seen some of our boys getting into trouble almost immediately on take-off, I thought I would do a quick, tight circuit and protect anybody who was still on the ground or in the process of getting airborne. This wasn’t such a bright idea—I was jumped by two Nips who got on with the business of shooting me down. I was frightened, bloody frightened. Tracer bullets were hammering me from the rear, the instrument panel shattered, the right-hand side of my head—by my right eye—was blistered by a tracer which came a bit too close and the controls of the Fulmar stiffened. If I cried out to God, would He hear? I cried out. I heard later that the gunners, entrenched round the airfield, shot the first Nip out of the sky. The second Nip got through their fire but by this time I was heading for a paddy field. I came to a halt in the mud in the middle of the field and was unstrapped and out of the aircraft in a matter of seconds! There was the roar of an engine. I looked up. There was this Nippon bastard coming to finish me off whilst I was up to my knees in mud! Bullet holes all round me but nothing hit me! I ran, or tried to run, for the side of the field. My enemy came back three times. There were bullet holes in the mud all round my footprints but I did not even get a scratch.”*¹⁶⁷

It seems that at least three of the Zeros which attacked the Fulmars were from Soryu, whose leader, Lt Fujita Iyozo, claimed a fighter which some English-language secondary sources believe to have been a Fulmar. One of Fujita’s own wingmen, FPO 1c Takahashi Sozaburo, claimed to have damaged a “torpedo plane”, but since the six Swordfish had already been shot down he likely attacked a Fulmar and misidentified it as a torpedo plane.¹⁶⁸

Fujita’s other wingman was F1/c Higashi, the pilot of the only Zero lost on 5 April. His loss in an engagement with a 30 Squadron Hurricane probably occurred before Fujita and Takahashi engaged any Fulmars.

Christopher Shores, the well-known aviation historian, and Air Commodore (retired) Rick Peacock-Edwards, the son of F/L Peacock-Edwards, have concluded that Sykes was shot down by another Soryu pilot, F1/c Harada Kaname. Harada completed his flying training in 1937 but saw no air-to-air combat before 5 April.¹⁶⁹

Harada was interviewed between 2009 and 2012, when he was in his nineties, by Dan King, for his book *The Last Zero Fighter*. The following extract from this book covers Harada’s encounters with Hurricanes and Fulmars over Colombo. Harada’s own words are within quotation marks.

“The Hurricanes were fast and hard to chase down. I chased one but he was getting away. I fired my nose guns over his head to see if I could make him turn. It worked. He was startled and banked. This bled off some of his energy and I was able to get him in my gunsight. The plane was huge in my windscreen, and I was tempted to fire right away with a deflection shot, but I didn’t want to miss. I engaged him in a twisting dogfight until I had the textbook shot directly from behind. I hit him with the nose guns and wing cannons.”

His two wingmen stayed with him and would receive a shared kill though they had not fired.

Harada quickly pulled for altitude with his wingmen in tow. He turned to catch and flame a second Hurricane. The [pilot] appeared to be struggling to open the cockpit as it went down. “My only feeling was relief that it was him, not me,” he said.

There were other targets in the sky. He pirouetted, dropping down to engage a third and a fourth Hurricane. He employed the same trick that forced the first [Hurricane] pilot to become grappled in the Zero’s deadly python-like twisting motion. Harada’s fire must have disabled the Hurricane’s control system, because the plane rolled over slowly, giving Harada a long look at the pilot as it went down.

At this point in the interview Mr. Harada sighed, "I am still haunted by nightmares of the pilot thrashing around in the cockpit," he said as he thumbed his teacup, deep in thought. The old man looked up and exhaled deeply before continuing his story.

"The last plane I attacked that day was a British Fulmar. I had exhausted my drums of 20mm ammo so only had my 7.7mm nose guns to bring him down." Try as he might, Harada was unable to get a clean shot as the British pilot side-slipped and evaded his fire again and again. Harada refused to give up and chased after the Englishman, determined to get one more victory. After several long bursts from his nose guns he realized his anemic machine guns weren't going to bring the sturdy plane down. He gave up the attack shortly before the Fulmar made a forced landing in a marshy area.

Harada realized he had become separated from his wingmen and was alone over enemy territory. He arrived at the assembly point to meet the Kate guide planes that would lead the formation back to the carrier. He was alone. "It sunk in that I might not be able to find my way back home." Harada looked around for the other Zeros, but they were not to be found, not a single one. He nervously looked at the brief aviation notes written on the leg board strapped to his thigh, and he fought back a feeling of panic. He thought, "How am I going to make it back to the carrier without the help of the guide plane?" He flew around looking for any friendly aircraft, but finding none he decided to return to the enemy airfield and crash into a hangar. "I thought I was a dead man, so might as well sell my life dearly."

Moments later a Zero bearing the red vertical fuselage stripe from the Akagi caught him off guard by forming up on him. The other pilot wore a broad smile, and then held up three fingers, signifying his victories. "He must have seen my shōtai leader marking, and latched onto me thinking I knew where I was going, but I certainly didn't. I had given up hope and was prepared to die, but after seeing his happy expression I felt responsible for getting this man back home." Harada's attitude changed. "I looked down at my notes and decided to give it my best shot." Through dead reckoning and sure luck the pair somehow came across the fleet. As they drew closer, the other Zero split away to land on his own carrier while Harada circled the Sōryū waiting for permission to land, glad he made the decision to try to make it back.¹⁷⁰

Harada also provided the following account of his battles with the enemy aircraft for *Beyond Pearl Harbor*:

The Zero fighter pilots from my group were once again ordered to escort our Type 99 kanbaku and Type 97 kankō to bomb the British-held Colombo airfield, on Ceylon island. The air battle occurred near an airfield in Colombo, and happened just before our aircraft dropped their bombs. At that time five Type 99s and one Type 0 carrier were attacked. The enemy aircraft didn't fly in formation, and neither did our group.

I don't know the exact number, but they probably had about one hundred airplanes, and so did our side. Each airplane chased their opponents individually. The Hurricane fighters didn't want to engage us because our Zero fighters were faster, so we had to go after them. They also wanted us to fight in their airspace. Initially I used my 7.7 mm machine guns, and the enemy tried to escape using a snake-like flying motion. Then I came closer to my opponent and opened up with my 20 mm cannons to shoot him down.

I fought against five airplanes and shot down three, which were later confirmed. One of the airplanes was flown by Commander John Sykes. I also chased another Fairey Fulmar which made a forced landing, but it was not confirmed. The fifth aircraft was smoking, but it also couldn't be confirmed.¹⁷¹

Sykes and Harada survived the war, and met in 2001 when Harada visited the UK. Sykes died in 2007. Harada died in 2016, at the age of 99. He was the last surviving pilot known to have flown the Zero in combat.¹⁷²



An undated image of Sykes¹⁷²



Harada in 1938¹⁷³



Sykes and Harada in the UK in 2001¹⁷⁴

Anti-Aircraft Fire

The following account of the raid on Colombo and the role of the anti-aircraft guns in its defence was recorded in the Anti-Aircraft Command Ceylon war diary on 7 April:

- (1) *Enemy fighters and light bombers 60-80 strong approached CBO [Colombo] en masse flying in V-shaped formations of about 6 'planes each.*
- (2) *The majority of the 'planes were either Mitsubishi Navy 96s or Navy 'O' Fighters. These is evidence that Seversky Naval Escort Fighters and Kawasaki Army 97 Light Bombers were also used.*
- (3) *The attack opened with dive-bombing of the harbour and Ratmalana Aerodrome.*
 - a. *The attack on the harbour was carried out by 3 flights of 3 planes each that approached at about 8000 ft., appeared to move away, and then turned sharply and dived on their objective.*
 - b. *At RTM [Ratmalana] enemy aircraft emerged from the clouds at about 1500 ft., and dived at the aerodrome buildings in line astern.*

In both cases after A.A. guns had opened fire the original formations broke up and continued the attack individually.
- (4) *Dive-bombing was followed by high-level bombing attacks carried out by successive waves of planes in formations of six. One or two formations were broken up by H.A.A. fire, but on the whole the enemy kept in formation, maintaining constant height and a steady course.*
- (5) *At Ratmalana the object of the enemy fighters was evidently to prevent our fighters from leaving the ground. Their attacks were made at very low altitudes and were accompanied by ground strafing.*
- (6) *Enemy aircraft appeared to find L.A.A. very disconcerting. RTM aerodrome, the V.P. [Vulnerable Point] with the strongest L.A.A. defences, was attacked by a large number of planes, but remained undamaged apart from three bomb craters on the outskirts.*
- (7) *The bomb-load of enemy aircraft was small: most of the planes probably carried only one or two bombs each.*
- (8) *Their speed did not exceed 200 m.p.h. except during dive-bombing when it reached 250 m.p.h.*
- (9) *They showed great manoeuvrability*
- (10) *They made full use of clouds.*
- (11) *L.A.A. gunners used to engaging Messerschmidts in England were impressed by the slowness of their targets. Initial deflections of 1½ and 2 at the crossing-point had to be reduced to ¾ and 1. Also there was a tendency to underestimate range, due possibly to better visibility than in England.*

222 Group's June report included a section on the performance of the shore-based anti-aircraft guns. It includes some quite frank comments:

17. The following numbers of rounds were fired by the various types of anti-aircraft guns that went into action:-

<u>Heavy (3.7")</u>	<u>Light</u>	<u>Naval 12 pdrs</u>
527	1,024	22

- 18. The fire from the heavy guns was mostly erratic, and receding targets were engaged when advancing targets were available. Consequently, the bursts were mostly behind the targets and of little value as the enemy had achieved his object in dropping his bombs.*
- 19. Fire from the light anti-aircraft and automatic guns was also erratic, but in some cases was good. Regrettable incidents of firing at our own aircraft occurred.*
- 20. The morale of the anti-aircraft batteries was good, as exemplified by the crew of one site, who, though covered with debris from a near miss, stood by their guns, cleaned their equipment and went into action again.*
- 21. The anti-aircraft defences destroyed two enemy aircraft and scored hits on many more.*

Additional details are included in the war diaries of Anti-Aircraft Command Ceylon and of 65 HAA Regiment RA. These sources indicate that all 20 operational 3.7-inch guns engaged the Japanese, firing a total of 431 rounds:

C Battery 1 HAA Regiment RM (8 guns):	252
181 Battery 65 HAA Regiment RA (4 guns):	64
183 Battery 65 HAA Regiment RA (8 guns):	<u>115</u>
	431

Adding the 96 rounds fired by 14 AA Battery’s four 3-inch guns to the 431 rounds fired by the 3.7-inch guns brings the total of heavy AA rounds fired to 527, the figure given in the 222 Group report. (The Anti-Aircraft Command Ceylon war diary also gives a total of 527.) From these figures we can say that the eight guns manned by 1 HAA Regt fired an average of 31.5 rounds each, the 12 guns of 65 HAA Regt fired only 15 rounds each, and the four 3-inch guns fired 24 rounds each.

It is not known if all 35 Bofors guns in the Colombo area engaged the enemy aircraft, but 148 LAA Battery claimed three enemy aircraft destroyed while 165 LAA Battery claimed two. In addition, 22 LAA Battery claimed the have scored three hits and 2 AA Regiment CGA claimed one hit. The three RN 12-pounders mounted ashore claimed a total of three hits from the 22 rounds they fired. 181 HAA Battery claimed one aircraft shot down and 183 HAA Battery claimed one enemy aircraft “damaged and unlikely to regain carrier”.

It seems that the gunners’ total claim of seven aircraft destroyed or probably destroyed was reduced by higher authority to the total of two destroyed given in the 222 Group report.¹⁷⁶

As already noted, the anti-aircraft guns may have been responsible for the loss of Lt Fujita’s Val (and in part for the loss of McDonald’s Hurricane!), but it is unlikely that they destroyed any other Japanese aircraft. They may also have been solely responsible for the five damaged Kates, but it is not at all clear which of the other damaged aircraft, if any, they may have hit.

Casualties Sustained Defending Ratmalana

We turn now to the human cost of the defence of Ratmalana. The most trustworthy source of information on fatal casualties is the Commonwealth War Graves Commission database. It confirms that 30 Squadron lost five pilots, 803 NAS lost two and 806 NAS lost one. CWGC data does not record any other deaths among the personnel of either Fulmar squadron, which is consistent with the fact that no other source indicates that any of the shot-down Fulmars was carrying a back-seater.

Concerning the identification of the wounded, the available primary and secondary sources agree that only two 30 Squadron pilots were wounded, namely F/O Allison and P/O Cartwright, and there is no indication that anyone in the two surviving Fulmars was wounded. The dead and wounded pilots are identified in Table 13.

It appears that no one was killed or wounded on the ground at Ratmalana, but one or more bombs evidently hit the nearby railway workshops, as it suffered some damage, and it seems likely that some civilian casualties were sustained there.

Serial	Pilot	Pilot History	Pilot Fate	Aircraft Fate
30 Squadron				
BE352	F/O D Geffene, RAFVR (American)	Flew a few operational sorties from UK in 1941 but not known to have seen combat	Killed	Destroyed
?	Flt Sgt LA Ovens, RAF	Flew more than 100 combat sorties over Greece and Egypt. Awarded DFM.	Killed	Destroyed
BG795	P/O GE Caswell, RAAF	No known prior combat experience	Killed	Destroyed
Z5447	Sgt AJ Browne, RAAF	No known prior combat experience	Killed	Destroyed
BM930	F/S TG Paxton, RAFVR	Fought in Middle East, claimed three enemy aircraft	Died of wounds	Destroyed
BM910	F/O THC Allison, RAFVR	Fought over Greece and Egypt, 1940-1942	Wounded	Destroyed
BG880	P/O HK Cartwright RAFVR	Fought over Egypt, 1941-1942	Wounded	Destroyed
?	P/O DA McDonald, RCAF	Limited operational experience over Egypt, January-February 1942	Safe	Destroyed
?	S/L GF Chater, RAF	Battle of Britain veteran	Did not take off	Damaged on ground
803 Naval Air Squadron				
DR705?	SLt IK White-Smith, RNVR	No known prior combat experience	Killed	Destroyed
DR729	SLt AS Diggins, RNVR	No known prior combat experience	Killed	Destroyed
803 Naval Air Squadron				
X8569?	SLt KJM Pettitt, RNVR	No known prior combat experience	Killed	Destroyed
X8640?	SLt JHC Sykes, RN	Battle of Britain veteran, fought in Middle East 1940-42	Safe	Destroyed

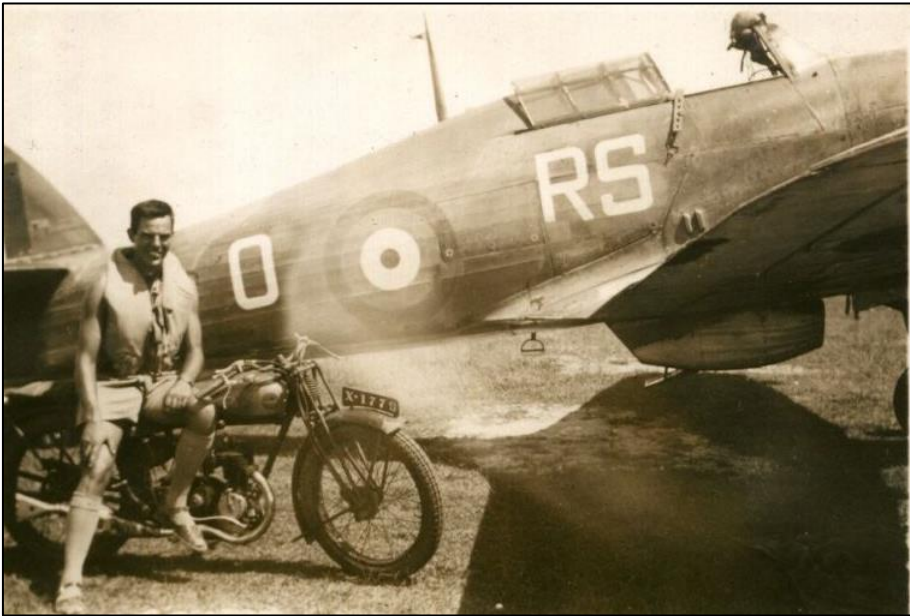
Table 13 – Aircrew and Confirmed Aircraft Casualties Sustained by Ratmalana-based Fighter Units¹⁷⁷

Listed at the top of Table 13 is Don Geffene, the only American to fight on 5 April. Born in Pacific Palisades, near Los Angeles, Geffene was fascinated by flight and in his teens worked to pay for flying lessons whenever he could get them. In January 1941, by then a trained civilian pilot, he applied to join the RAF and was soon on his way to the UK. He went straight to an operational training unit and by September was with 258 Squadron, flying convoy escort missions off the English coast He is not known to have seen combat with the Luftwaffe.

In November 1941, 258 Squadron was to be transferred to the Middle East and its pilots and planes were sent to Gibraltar by sea. They were to have been ferried to Malta by the carrier Ark Royal but it was sunk before they arrived. While other arrangements were being made, the squadron flew a number of patrols from Gibraltar, and during one of them Geffene had to force land on Spanish territory and was detained. He was released or escaped a few weeks later (one source says he was allowed to escape), after 258 Squadron had departed for the Far East but in time to join 30 Squadron before Indomitable ferried it to Ceylon.¹⁷⁸



Geffene in November 1941¹⁷⁹



Geffene at Ratmalana in March 1942¹⁸⁰

The report on Geffene's death issued by the American consulate in Colombo in September 1942¹⁸¹

American Consulate
Colombo, Ceylon, September 15, 1942.
(Place and date)

Name in full: Donald GEFFENE Age: ?
(As nearly as can be ascertained)

Native or naturalized: Not known to Consulate Occupation: R.A.F. Pilot Officer

Date of death: April 5 A.M. 1942
(Month) (Day) (Hour) (Minute) (Year)

Place of death: Vicinity of Kottawa, 15 miles from Colombo, Ceylon
(Number and street) or (Hospital or hotel) (City) (Country)

Cause of death: Killed in action against the enemy, as reported by R.A.F. authorities
(Include authority for statement)

Disposition of the remains: Buried where plane crashed (see above). Grave in custody of Imperial War Graves Commission, Ceylon Agency.

Local law as to disinterring remains: Permission must be obtained from District Judge having jurisdiction, as provided for by Section 15 of Ordinance No. 9 of 1899

Disposition of the effects: R.A.F. authorities turned effects over to Consulate, which sent them to mother. Log Book, in Consulate's custody, to be sent at end of war.

Person or official responsible for custody of effects and accounting therefor: Royal Air Force

Accompanied by relatives or friends as follows:

	NAME	ADDRESS	RELATIONSHIP
	--	--	--
	--	--	--

Address of relatives (so far as known):

	NAME	ADDRESS	RELATIONSHIP
1.	<u>Mrs. L. Geffene</u>	<u>1186 Queen Ann Place</u>	<u>Mother</u>
2.	<u>--</u>	<u>Los Angeles, California</u>	<u>--</u>

Notification sent to:

Mrs. L. Geffene by air mail on June 19, 1942
(Name) (Mail or telegraph) (Date)

-- by -- on --
(Name) (Mail or telegraph) (Date)

This information and data concerning an inventory of the effects, accounts, etc., have been placed under File 330 in the correspondence of this office.

Remarks: Deceased served in Squadron 30, No. 222 Group, Royal Air Force, Ceylon, being there enrolled as of American nationality.

George H. Graves
Consul of the United States of America.

[SEAL] **493**

No fee prescribed. Misc. Service No. **493**

(To be sent in duplicate to the Department of State. To be forwarded in triplicate when decedent is an American-Citizen seaman, a pensioner, or a Veterans Administration or Social Security beneficiary. 18-13500 U. S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE.)

As we have seen, 30 Squadron started the day with 22 serviceable Hurricanes, 14 of which survived the fighting, “several” of these landing back at Ratmalana in a “badly shot up” state. Only seven of the 14 survivors were serviceable at day’s end. These means that 15 of the unit’s 22 Hurricanes (68 per cent) were destroyed or badly enough damaged to remain unserviceable until at least the next day.

Overall Japanese Claims

Comparing the actual RAF and RN aircraft losses with the Japanese claims has proven to be an interesting exercise. The following table recapitulates the losses sustained by the defenders on 5 April:

Unit/Service	Lost	Damaged	Shot Down/Damaged By
788 Squadron RN	6 Swordfish	None	Zeros from Hiryu and Akagi
258 Squadron RAF	6 Hurricane II 3 Hurricane I	2 Hurricane I (at least)	Zeros from Soryu and possibly Hiryu, and Vals from probably Shokaku
30 Squadron RAF	8 Hurricane II	7 Hurricane II (at least)	Zeros from Hiryu, Akagi and Soryu, and Vals from probably Zuikaku
803 Squadron RN	2 Fulmar II	?	
806 Squadron RN	2 Fulmar II	?	
Total	27	At least 9	

Table 14 - Actual Allied Aircraft Losses

Table 15 tots up the Japanese claims. The upper half of the table gives the claims made by the aircrews upon returning to their carriers. It should be noted that:

- Hiryu’s claims include one Hurricane shared with Akagi but the latter’s claims do not list any enemy aircraft shared with Hiryu.
- 10 Swordfish were claimed to have been destroyed or probably destroyed when only six had been present.
- The torpedo plane claimed to have been damaged was probably a Fulmar.

The Japanese airmen’s claims to have shot down or probably shot down 61 enemy aircraft represents a significant overclaim when the actual figure was 27 (plus at least nine damaged, some of them seriously). Honest overclaiming by pilots and air gunners of all the combatants was endemic during the war, and on 5 April the defenders overclaiming was much worse, amounting to nearly four times the actual Japanese losses. The Japanese overclaiming of 5 April was in no way unusual and was certainly not deliberate.

Claims Made by Returning Aircrew ¹⁸²				
	Shot Down	Probably Shot Down	Damaged	Totals
Hiryu’s Zeros	8 Swordfish 1 Spitfire 10 Hurricanes	2 Hurricanes		
Akagi’s Zeros	12 fighters	2 Swordfish 7 fighters		
Soryu’s Zeros	10 Fighters	3 fighters	1 “torpedo plane”	
Shokaku’s Vals	5 Hurricanes			
Zuikaku’s Vals	1 Hurricane			
Totals	47	14	1	62
Totals Reported by KdB ¹⁸³				
	Shot Down	Probably Shot Down	Damaged	
Zeros	42	9		
Vals	6			
Totals	48	9	0	57

Table 15 – Japanese Claims

The lower half of Table 14 gives the claims endorsed by Nagumo and provided to his superiors. The 51 enemy aircraft destroyed or probably destroyed by Zeros were identified as:

- 19 Spitfires
- 21 Hurricanes
- 1 Defiant
- 10 Swordfish

The aircraft identified as Spitfires must have been Hurricanes or Fulmars. The nearest Spitfires were probably no closer than Malta. Neither were any Defiants present.

The Val crews’ claims to have destroyed six Hurricanes were accepted in full, bringing to 57 the number of enemy aircraft reported by Nagumo as having been destroyed or probably destroyed. This figure was included in an announcement from Imperial General Headquarters in Tokyo on 14 April, albeit all 57 were said to have been destroyed. There was apparently no reference to the fact that nine of these kills were unconfirmed.¹⁸⁴

The Bombing of the Harbour

As shown in the images on this page and Map 4 on the next page, Colombo harbour was underdeveloped, small and congested during the war. Enclosing an area of 660 acres (one square statute mile), it was about one-quarter as large as Trincomalee's outer harbour and about one-tenth the size of Pearl Harbor.



Colombo harbour in 1940, looking north. At least 18 ships are present, including the 12 liners of the first Australian and New Zealand troop convoy of the war, US.1, which stopped at Colombo from 30 January to 1 February on its way to the Middle East. The harbour was equally crowded on 5 April 1942, if not more so, but no troopships were present.¹⁸⁵



A shot of Colombo looking a bit west of north, probably taken between 12 and 31 March 1942. More than 20 ships are visible in the harbour, some of which must have been present on 5 April. The large building at lower left is the Galle Face Hotel. RCAF pilot Don McDonald crash-landed his Hurricane on Galle Face Green, visible in front of the hotel.¹⁸⁶



A fine shot of Colombo harbour taken from westward in November 1958. Some additions to the cargo handling facilities have been made since 1942 but the harbour is no larger than it was at the time of the Japanese attack.¹⁸⁷



Map 4 - Colombo in 1926.¹⁸⁸

Localities mentioned in the text (arrowed) include Galle Face Green; the Galle Face Hotel; the Race Course, where an improvised airstrip hosted 258 Squadron and 11 Squadron; and the Ridgeway Golf Links, where AMES 254's radar was installed. Off the map are the airfield at Ratmalana, about 13.5 km (about 7 nm) south of the harbour, and the 'lunatic asylum' at Angoda, about 9 km east of the harbour, where 17 patients were killed by an errant bomb.

The air battle over the harbour having already been discussed, this section focuses on the conduct and results of the bombing of the harbour area by the 22 Vals and 53 Kates which attacked it.

Numerous primary sources, and some good secondary sources, address the attacks on the ships in or near the harbour. The following is from 222 Group's June 1942 post-mortem:

At 0740 hours, four "vic" formations, each of six or seven Navy type '99' dive bombers, escorted by Navy 'O' fighters, approached Ratmalana from the south west and passed over the aerodrome "stepped-up" from six to eight thousand feet. They turned towards Colombo harbour, passed over it and, when just out to sea, one section turned sharply east and dive bombed the harbour. The other sections continued in a right hand circling movement sections breaking off and dive-bombing and machine-gunning the harbour, and shipping outside the harbour, from different directions. Aircraft bombed by flights in line astern and individually, the dive commencing at heights varying from two to eight thousand feet, bombs being dropped at between two hundred and one thousand feet. During these attacks, hits were scored on the "Hector" and the "Lucia" which were lying in the harbour, but numerous attacks on shipping outside the harbour were abortive. During the bombing enemy fighters remained overhead acting as "top cover" coming down to attack our fighters as they came in at lower heights to attack the bombers.

During this attack the sky was 8 to 9/10th covered with rain and thunder clouds, whose average base was about 2,000 feet. Heavy local showers of rain were falling and tropical gusts of wind, usual during these storms, prevailed. The enemy made full use of these conditions during his attack. A large black cloud about 5000 feet thick well defined by clear shafts covered the harbour area. Bombers, after obtaining a general view of the target through these shafts, made shallow dives through the clouds and, on coming out of the cloud at about 2,000 feet, immediately increased the angle of their dive on to the target selected.¹⁸⁹

The following summary of the attack made by Shokaku's Vals is from a secondary source but based on Japanese primary sources:

Led by [Lt-Cdr] Kakuichi Takahashi, Shokaku's Type 99s went after shipping in the harbour. [...] Takahashi targeted the 11,198-ton armed merchant cruiser HMS Hector, the largest ship present. From 3000 m, with his wingmen in tow, he dived at 0750 and scored a hit in the ship's engine room.

Following Takahashi's command shotai of three aeroplanes came Lt Masao Yamaguchi's 1st chutai of nine, then Lt Hisayoshi Fujita's 2nd chutai of seven. They left Hector sinking after scoring four hits, and also damaged the 5805-ton submarine depot ship Lucia. Their score would likely have been higher had it not been for the heavy layers of cloud that greatly interfered with accurate aiming. Lt(jg) Iwakichi Mifuku, leading the second shotai in Yamaguchi's chutai, aborted his attack twice before finally managing to drop his 250 kg ordinary [SAP] bomb.¹⁹⁰

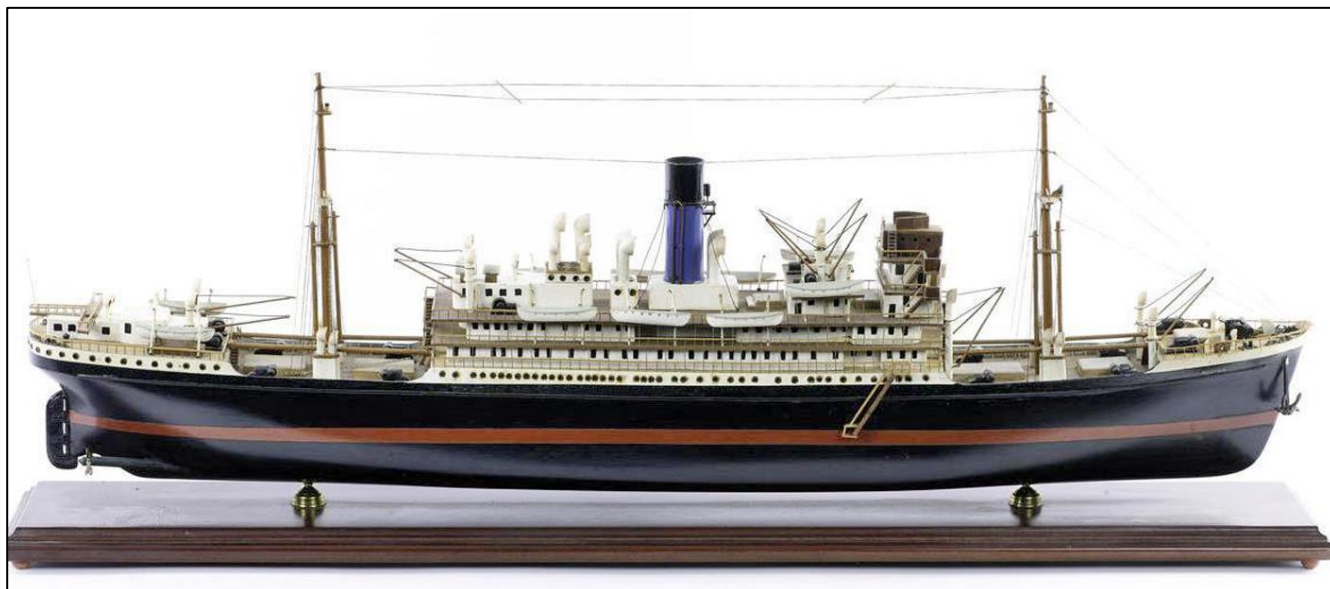


Two images of Lt-Cdr Takahashi, the commander of Shokaku's Vals. The image at left was taken in 1937, when Takahashi was a lieutenant. The date of the second image is not known.¹⁹¹

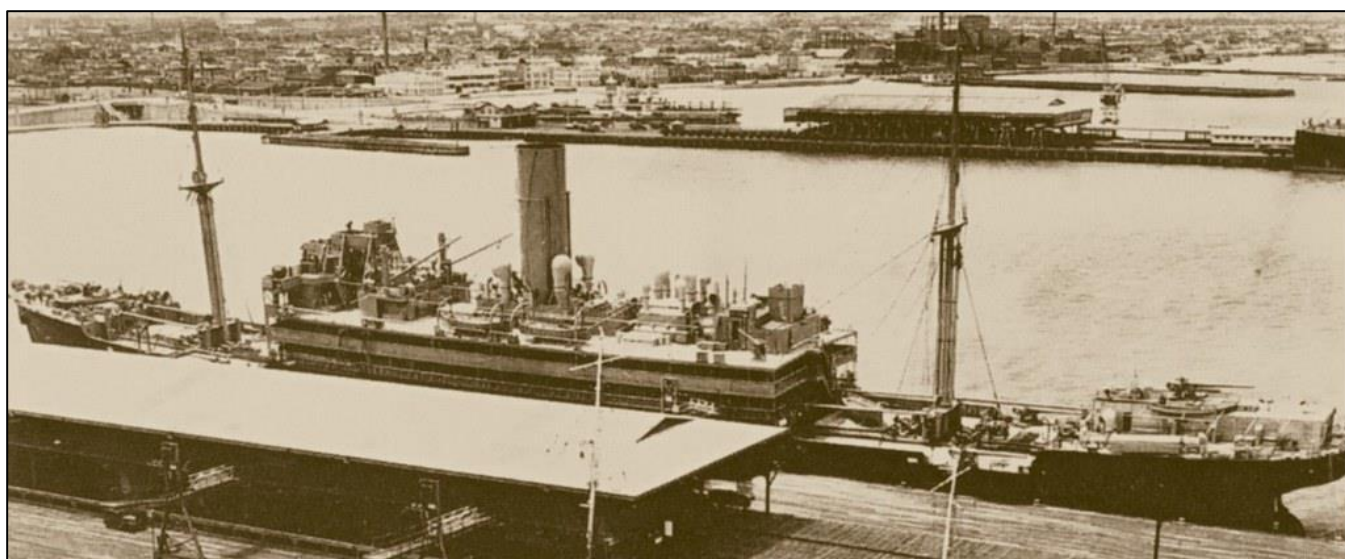
During the Pearl Harbor attack Takahashi led the first wave's Vals and he was the first pilot to drop a bomb during that attack. Takahashi was killed in action a month after the Colombo raid, on 8 May, when he led CarDiv5's attack on the US carriers Lexington and Yorktown during the Battle of the Coral Sea.

As Hector and Lucia were both Royal Navy vessels, their captains were required to submit reports on the attacks made against them and these reports are available. They are highlighted below, together with accounts from other sources.

HMS Hector



A model of the SS Hector in its pre-war livery¹⁹²



HMS Hector at Port Melbourne in February 1940. To serve as an armed merchant cruiser Hector was fitted with six 6-inch guns on open mounts and two 3-inch AA guns, with the latter located on the after end of the superstructure.¹⁹³

A refrigerated cargo liner, Hector was built by Scotts Shipbuilding & Engineering in Greenock for the Ocean Steamship Company (Alfred Holt & Co, managers). She was completed in 1924 and entered service on the Liverpool-Far East route.

On 27 August 1939, Hector was requisitioned by the Admiralty and converted to an armed merchant cruiser. The armament installed consisted of six BL 6-inch Mk XII guns and two QF 3-inch 20 cwt anti-aircraft guns. Her conversion was completed on 20 December 1939.

Most of the RN's 51 AMCs were employed in European waters but in January 1940 Hector was transferred to the New Zealand Station. In July that year she was re-allocated to the East Indies Station and employed on escort duties. Her last task as an AMC was to escort convoy C5 from Colombo to Bombay during the first week of March 1942. She arrived back at Colombo on 14 March and work was soon begun to reconvert her to a merchantman, presumably a troopship. She was apparently among the last AMCs to be converted, as most of the other 36 survivors had been withdrawn for use as troop transports by October 1941.¹⁹⁴

Hector was commanded by Captain Francis Howard, DSC, RN, from 22 August 1940 until 3 April 1942, just two days before Colombo was attacked. His successor was apparently Cdr Barendell, RAN, about whom no further information has been found.

In his 9 April report on the loss of the ship, Barendell reported that Hector was at No. 4 berth (aka No 4 N.E. Buoys), with one 3-inch gun and two Lewis guns closed up. Lack of ammunition precluded manning the second 3-inch gun. Four bombs hit the Hector. Two entered the engine room through the engine room skylight, the third struck the port side at the base of the funnel and entered the after boiler room, and the fourth struck below the water line on the port side abreast No. 2 hold, and the ship started to settle due to the inrush of water. Several fires were started and they could not be put out, the ship was abandoned at 1400.

There was apparently a requirement that commanding officers of warships attacked by enemy aircraft also had to complete a form known as a Report of Attack by Enemy Aircraft. The one submitted for the attack on Hector reported that she was attacked by two twin-engined low level bombers and three single-engined dive bombers. A total of four bombs were dropped, according to this report. Relative to the ship's head, the sun was at 100°, the low level bombers attacked from 100° and the dive bombers attacked from 135°. The low level bombers released their bombs at 800 feet, the dive bombers at 250 feet. One officer, two seamen, nine Lascar firemen and two Goanese stewards were killed. Two officers, 10 seamen and three Lascar firemen were wounded. (The wounded casualties identified simply as "officers" and "seamen" were probably all members of the Royal Naval Reserve (RNR), since the three who died were RNR.)¹⁹⁵

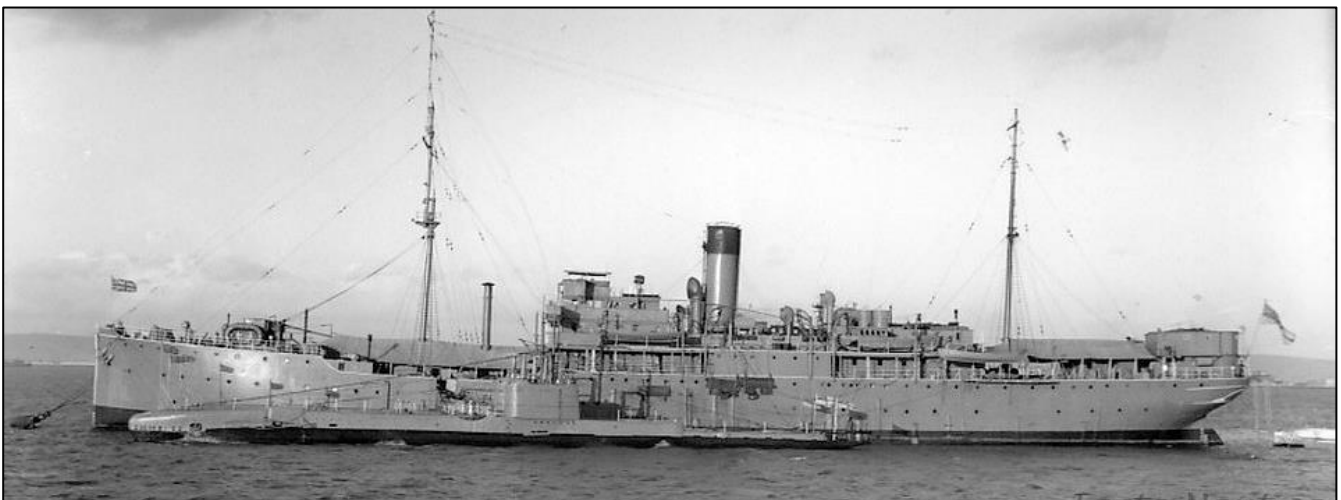
Fires aboard Hector continued to burn for a fortnight. Michael Tomlinson, who was to write a 1979 book on the attacks on Colombo (see notes), was an officer in the RAF in 1942 and when he arrived at Colombo on the troopship Devonshire on 18 April, thirteen days after the attack, Hector was still burning. The smoke was easily visible from well offshore.

Hector sank in 38 feet of water with her upper deck awash. In 1946 she was refloated by Royal Navy personnel, beached five miles north of Colombo and subsequently scrapped.¹⁹⁶



This image of smoke from Hector was taken from a troop ship off Colombo on 9 April¹⁹⁷

HMS Lucia



HMS Lucia at Portland in 1937 with three S-class submarines alongside¹⁹⁸

Lucia, completed in 1907, started life as the Hamburg-America Line's Spreewald. Captured in the South Atlantic on 10 September 1914, Spreewald was converted to a submarine depot ship in 1916 and renamed Lucia. She continued to serve the Royal Navy as such after 1918. When war with Japan broke out in December 1941, the British had no operational submarines in the Far East but Trusty and Truant were soon detached thither from the Mediterranean Fleet. To support them and any others sent eastward, Lucia was dispatched to Colombo, arriving there on 10 January. Like Hector, Lucia found herself with a new captain immediately before Colombo was attacked, when Acting Commander GH Stapleton RN assumed command on 2 April.¹⁹⁹

When Birchall's sighting report was received on 4 April, Lucia was helping Trusty prepare to depart for its next patrol, which is no doubt why she was not one of the ships Arbuthnot sent away that evening. Stapleton's report on the next morning's attack reads as follows:

Lucia was at the No. 1 berth. It was attacked by one "Navy 96" which dropped two bombs from 700 feet. One was a 500lb bomb, the other a 250lb bomb with a delay fuze. One bomb hit on the 0.5" gun position, passing through eight thicknesses of ½" plate and exploded after exiting the ship. The ship was holed on the starboard side from 135 to 154 station [frame?] and from keel to slop room flat forward. The hole on the starboard side was 20 ft by 18 ft. The other bomb near missed on the port side f[orward]. There were two killed, 10 wounded and 10 blast cases. Lucia's close range armament consisted of two Oerlikons and one multiple 0.5" machine gun.²⁰⁰

CWGC data indicates that Lucia sustained only one fatal casualty, namely Plumber 4th Class Robert Sherlow. The second person killed was almost certainly a member of Trusty's crew who was aboard Lucia when it was hit. (See below.)

The following additional description of the attack on Lucia was included in a 1952 Admiralty report entitled "H.M. Ships Damaged or Sunk by Enemy Action in World War II":

One Direct Hit 500 lb. delay action fuzed Bomb.

LUCIA, while at Colombo Harbour, sustained a direct hit by a bomb dropped by Japanese aircraft. The bomb struck on the starboard side of the .5 inch machine gun platform, perforated five decks, passed out through the starboard side and exploded under the bottom. A hole 20 ft. by 18 ft. was blown in the bottom plating, damage and flooding was extensive.

Fighting Efficiency - Seriously impaired. Speed was reduced to 5 knots.²⁰¹

In a signal he sent about three hours after the attack, Layton reported that Lucia was "slightly damaged", and in a 6 April report on the air raid the USN liaison team at Colombo (ALUSNOB) advised Washington that Lucia was "slightly holed". Lucia was "patched up locally" and sailed for Bombay on 25 April for permanent repairs, which were apparently completed by mid-June. She was later employed as a small ship repair vessel, the "small ships" in question being ships of up to destroyer size. Lucia was sold in 1948, becoming the merchant ship Sinai, and was scrapped in La Spezia, Italy, in 1951.²⁰²

HMS Trusty



A 1941 image of Tempest, sistership of Trusty, both being from the second batch of T-Class subs built for the RN²⁰³

Trusty was one of the Royal Navy's seven T-Class Group II submarines. On the morning of 5 April she was alongside Lucia, loading torpedoes for her next patrol. Her CO was Lt-Cdr William Donald Aelian King, the only Royal Navy officer to serve as a submarine captain to serve from the very beginning to the very end of the war. He received a DSO and DSC in 1940, and would be awarded a bar to his DSO in 1945. King included the following account of the air raid on Colombo in his 1983 book *Dive and Attack: A Submariner's Story*:

We had in fact just finished loading the forward torpedoes, turned Trusty around to fill her stern torpedoes and broken off for breakfast, when the fireworks started. [...] The first siren wail brought me helter-skelter from a plate of bacon and eggs in the Depot Ship [Lucia] down the ladder to Trusty's bridge. Out of a low, black thundercloud hummed a swarm of hornet-like fighter dive-bombers.

[...] Hector near by us was struck repeatedly, caught fire and sank. Lucia's multiple machine-gun was stuttering defiance at point blank range till one of the bombs actually hit the gun-layer on the elbow with its fin and plunged straight through the ship, not exploding till it reached the water.

An armour-piercing bomb designed to sink battleships [sic], it was too good for a soft-skinned old Depot Ship! It exploded just astern of us in the exact position we had just vacated in order to get in the stern

torpedoes. The luck for us was tremendous. This bomb passed clear through Lucia's mess-deck where the off-duty watches of my crew were breakfasting. The mess-deck immediately flooded and as the hatches were shut on them my sailors swam out through the scuttles or port-holes, climbing back on the submarine dripping wet and rather dazed. Only one of their number [Stoker 1c James Redman, Trusty's only casualty] died in the shambles. [...]

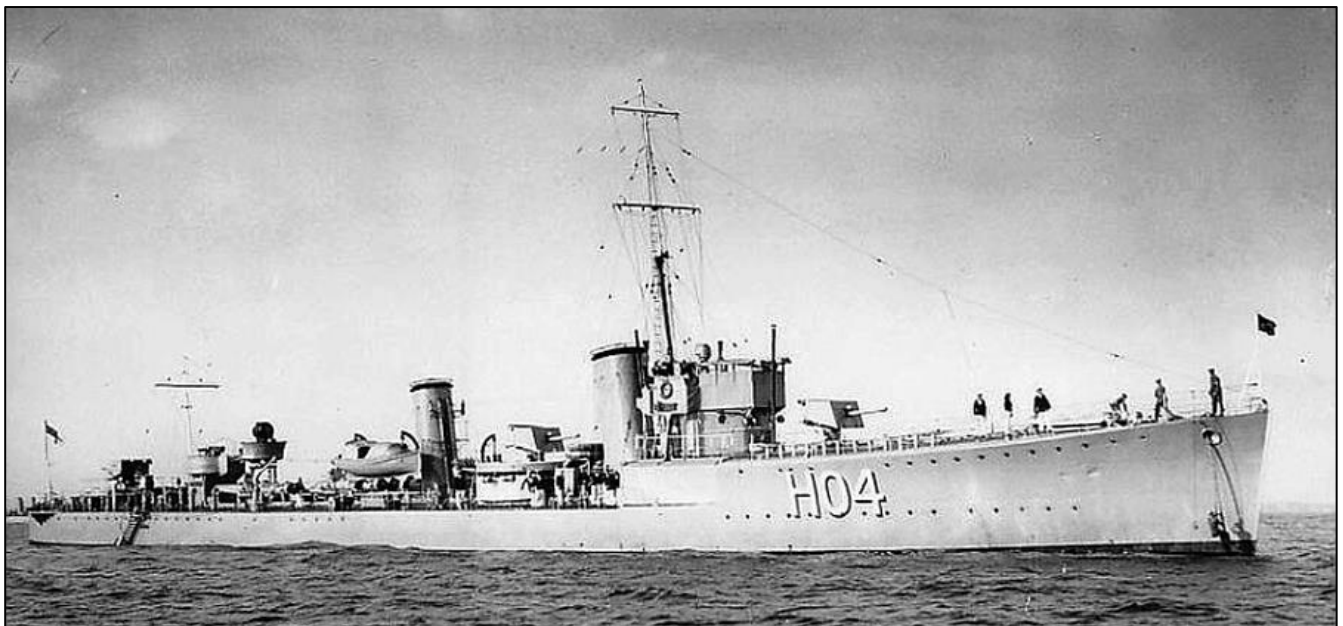
Meanwhile [on Trusty] Yeoman Gates took full advantage of an opportunity for which his temperament was well suited – the absolutely unique opportunity of shooting up several hundred [sic] Jap planes single-handed. As each bomber skimmed over us he poured a steady, accurate volley into it with his Bren gun. The rest of the watch kept busy filling up belts of ammunition below and passing these up the conning-tower to him. [Bren guns used magazines, not belts.]

How long did all this go on for? I suppose it lasted only half an hour, though it seemed an eternity, with Hector burning, Lucia holed and my crew swimming out of her port-holes and Gates blazing away as hard as he was able. Gradually the attack lessened, God knows how many bombs having been dropped into the almost-empty harbor, and I watched one lone plane coming in low from the land side. Gates turned his Bren gun on it, and just in time I spotted the roundels and thumped him on the back to stop. It was a Hurricane, one of the few mercifully halted on its way to Burma. The poor devil having been hit in combat was looking for succour, but the harbour guns, which by this time were getting into full action, thought he must be a lost Jap. I saw the pilot crouching in the cockpit as he passed over us. He turned along the jetty where he got a burst from a bofors, then belly-landing on the Colombo Club green he got out unhurt and made his way to the bar for a much-needed drink. [This would be P/O McDonald, RCAF.]

*As the last fighter-bomber disappeared a new high-level attack developed. There was no sense in fighting this with a Bren so with Yeoman Gates and the coxswain [...] I retired below to avoid bomb splinters. When a few minutes later the salvo had fallen I climbed up to the bridge again and looked across the mile and a half of harbour water which had received such tons of explosive in the last hour. Hector was on fire and sinking fast. Lucia was holed and kept afloat with difficulty but Trusty floated intact. There had been a fourth ship in harbour, an old World War One destroyer escaped from Singapore [Tenedos], and she had sunk alongside the dockyard. [...]*²⁰⁴

Not damaged during the raid, Trusty left Colombo on 13 April to patrol the Malacca Strait.

HMS Tenedos



HMS Tenedos before the war. In 1942 it was one of the Royal navy's oldest, smallest and least effective destroyers.²⁰⁵

Tenedos was one of 67 S-class destroyers ordered during the First World War. Less capable than their contemporaries of the V&W classes, only 11 S-class destroyers remained in service in September 1939. In December 1941 Tenedos was based at Singapore and on 8 December she was one of the four destroyers assigned to escort Prince of Wales and Repulse during their ill-fated sortie against the Japanese invasion forces. She was however not present when they were sunk two days later, since her low endurance compelled her to be detached on the evening of 9 December and return to Singapore.

Tenedos continued to operate from Singapore until 2 February, when she departed for Batavia. She was one of several warships ordered to Colombo when the fall of Java became imminent, arriving there on 5 March.

Tenedos went to sea again on 9 March and, with four other destroyers, escorted the battleships Ramillies and Royal Sovereign during exercises. She arrived back at Colombo on 13 March, never to go to sea again. Arbuthnot reported in mid-June that Tenedos was at Colombo on 5 April as it was "unable to move from

defects". Whatever these defects may have been, they apparently manifested themselves by 30 March, since Tenedos did not accompany Warspite, Formidable and the 10 other ships which sailed from Colombo that day to rendezvous with the rest of the Eastern Fleet south of Ceylon.²⁰⁶

Shortly after Shokaku's Vals completed their attacks on Hector and Lucia, the Kates from Akagi, Soryu and Hiryu began their attacks. The ORB of No. 20 Operations Room states that the high level bombing attack was made by about 50 aircraft and started at about 0800.²⁰⁷ The June 1942 report produced by 222 Group provides a few more details:

*At about 0800 hours, a high level bombing attack was carried out on Colombo harbour by about forty-eight aircraft. The enemy approached from the north in eight waves of six, each in "vic" formation at between 10 and 12 thousand feet. One or two waves returned from the south east to bomb the harbour for the second time. Bombs were dropped on the harbour workshops and it is thought that the "Tenedos" were hit during these attacks. These aircraft were not engaged by fighter aircraft and weather conditions prevented the ground defences from identifying them although certain trained anti-aircraft gunners have reported them as twin-engined.*²⁰⁸

A similar description was recorded by Ceylon's anti-aircraft command:

3. High Level bombing attack (type 97).

*This attack was delivered about 15 minutes after dive bombing had originally started. About 8 waves of six bombers in V formation attacked the harbour from the North to South sometimes with a slight turning to the East, and after passing over CBO [Colombo] went S.W. One or two waves returned from S.E. and travelled N.W. to bomb harbour again at 10,000 – 12,000 feet. The height varied for each wave.*²⁰⁹

Except for the erroneous identification of some of the enemy aircraft as being twin-engined, these descriptions are generally accurate, particularly in estimating that there were 48 level bombers in eight formations of six aircraft each. This were in fact 53 Kates, in eight chutai of six each and one chutai of five, the latter being from Akagi. The anti-aircraft gunners even correctly identified the aircraft as Type 97s.

The following summary of the attack on Tenedos is from BR 1886 "H.M. Ships Damaged or Sunk by Enemy Action in World War II":

Two Direct Hit 250 lb. Two Near Miss direct or short delay action fuzed bombs.

*TENEDOS was at anchor with stern secured to wharf in Colombo Harbour when an enemy air attack occurred. Two direct hits aft, a near miss astern, and another abreast the foremost funnel were sustained. The severe damage aft caused the stern to sink rapidly.*²¹⁰

Tenedos' own report states that the ship was attacked by six high level bombers flying at about 5000 feet and agrees that they scored two hits and two near misses. That the chutai in question scored two hits and two near misses out of six bombs dropped on such a small target, albeit a stationary one, represents a high level of accuracy. The ship's report also agrees that the fatal salvo consisted of 250 lb bombs, when of course they were 807.5 kg (1780 lb) weapons. (Tenedos' report may well have been the source for the statement in BR 1886 that the bombs were 250 pounders.)



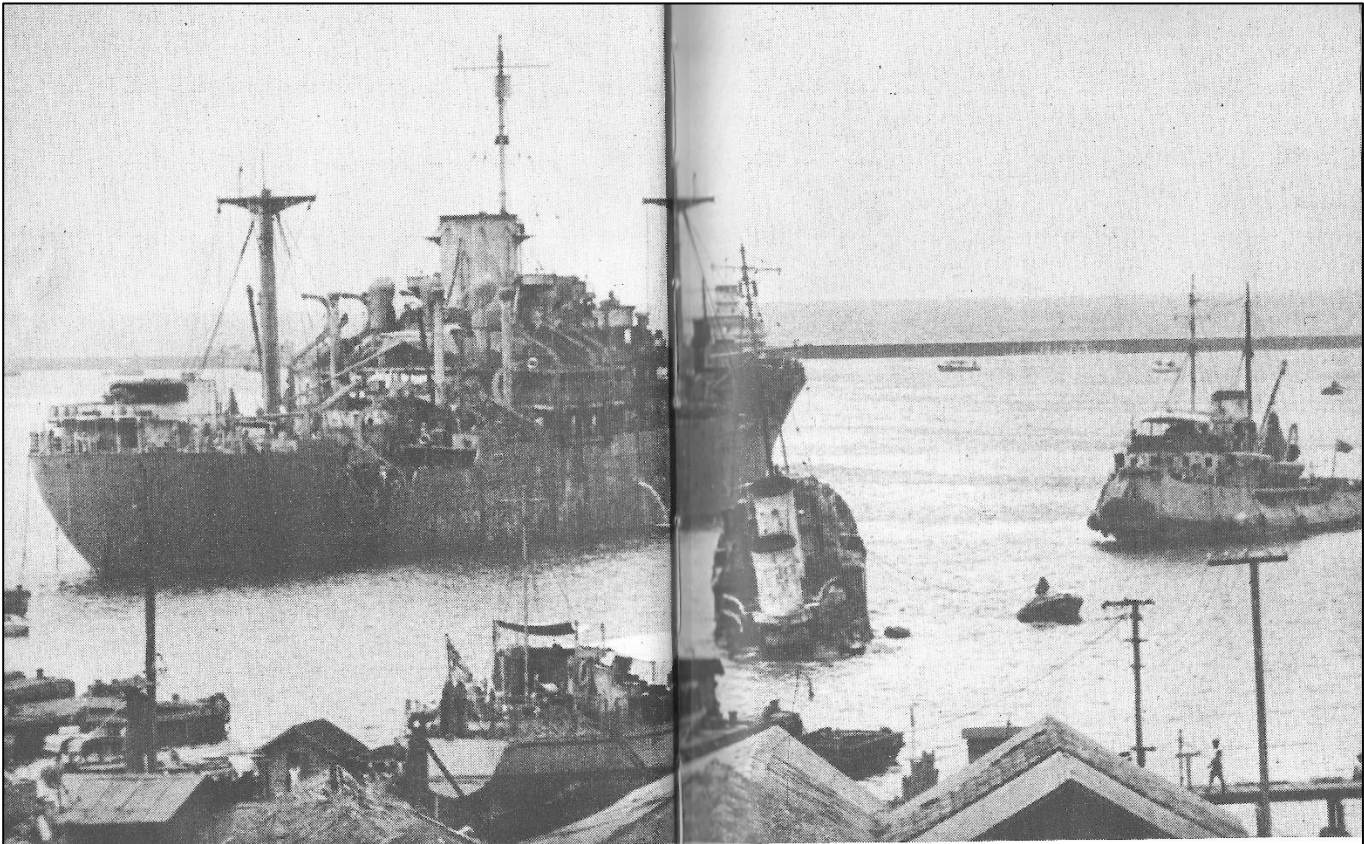
Tenedos on the harbour bottom after the raid, with a harbour auxiliary behind it. Visible in the distance is a large sign reading CEYLON FOR GOOD TEA, recalled by many veterans as being the first thing they saw on arriving at Colombo.²¹¹

Tenedos’ report adds that three officers and 12 ratings were killed, and three officers and eight ratings wounded, as does the separate “Report of Attack by Enemy Aircraft” which Tenedos also submitted. CWGC information puts the dead at three officers and 14 ratings. Among the latter were Leading Steward Foo Tee Piaw and Steward Foo Kai Heng, who were likely recruited in Hong Kong, and they were presumably the two ratings not included among the fatalities in these reports. Remarkably, there was a hereditary nobleman among the 14 ratings killed. This was Ordinary Seaman Sir Robert Peel, 6th Baronet, the only child of the late Sir Robert Peel, 5th Baronet, and Lady Beatrice Lillie Peel.²¹²

The attack on Tenedos was also witnessed by John Bennett, an engineer employed at the Colombo harbour premises of Walker Sons and Company, a firm heavily involved in ship repairs and refits:

When the raid occurred we were completing the refit of the Destroyer HMS Tenedos which was lying at the end of our jetty. A stick of bombs fell, some on the jetty and the remainder on the stern of the destroyer setting off the after magazine and torpedo warheads. The resulting explosion was of considerable force and forty feet of our very solid reinforced concrete jetty disappeared entirely and the destroyer was sunk. Parts of the destroyer actually fell in our works machine shop area some 150 yards from the Jetty.²¹³

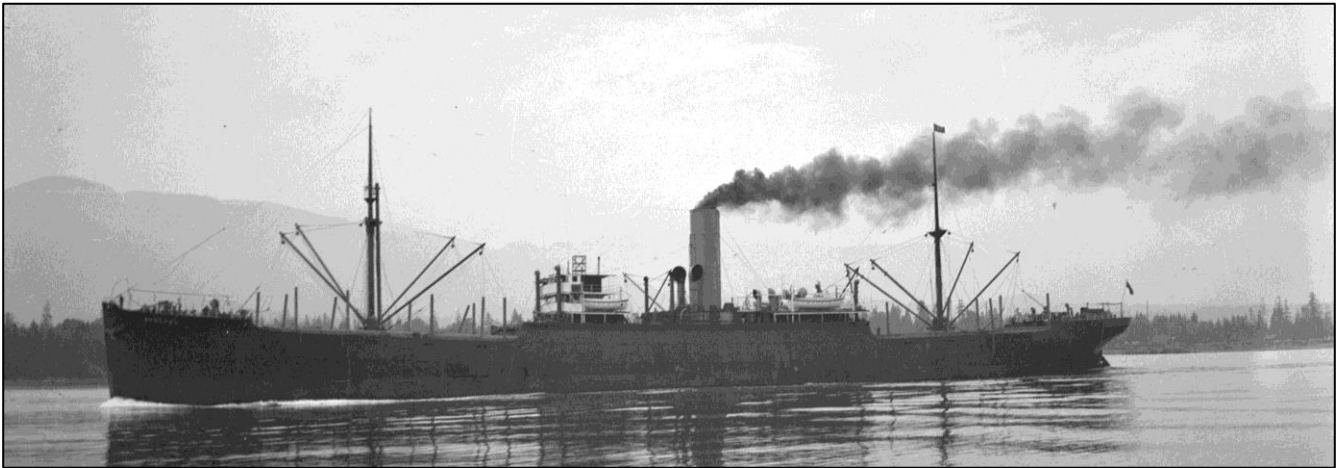
It is not known which Kate chutai attacked and sank Tenedos. The question of which target was attacked by which Kates, and which ship Zuikaku’s three Vals attacked, is discussed below in a separate section.



22 October 1942: The wreck of Tenedos still rests on the harbour floor, with its submerged stern facing the camera. Behind it is the landing ship Glenearn, leaving port with its repairs completed 10 months after arriving at Colombo.²¹⁴

Tenedos remained where she sank until 1943-44. The Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA) Salviking, a 1440 ton ocean salvage ship, arrived at Colombo on 26 July 1943 and reportedly removed Tenedos in (or by) the following February. Salviking departed Colombo for Addu Atoll on 12 February but was sunk on 14 February by the German submarine U-168 with the loss of 27 of her crew of 55.²¹⁵

Benledi



Benledi at Vancouver in 1933²¹⁶

Benledi was built at Glasgow for the Ben Line and completed in 1930. The outbreak of war with Japan found her in the Atlantic. She sailed from Halifax on 13 December for the UK and from there departed for Burma on 30 January, transporting three RAF radar units and a load of explosive material. Benledi arrived at Colombo on 25 March, having been diverted there after Rangoon fell on 8 March. She left Colombo on 30 March but returned the next day. Her departure on 30 March was presumably not in response to Arbuthnot's orders to clear the harbour in anticipation of the impending Japanese attack, since those orders were not issued until 31 March, but no alternative explanation can be inferred from her movement card or other sources.²¹⁷

Arbuthnot reported after the raid that "The only merchant ship hit was the S.S. BENLEDI, which was set on fire. As the BENLEDI was laden with explosives, this might have been disastrous; fortunately the fire was extinguished by gallant work on the part of the ship's officers and officers from the nearby tanker BRITISH SERGEANT". Arbuthnot does not hazard a guess about how many bombs may have hit her nor what damage was sustained, but her movement card states that Benledi was only "slightly damaged". The movement card is handwritten and difficult to decipher but it seems that limited repairs were undertaken at Colombo and that she sailed on 28 April for Durban, where further repairs were made.²¹⁸

The following, from a 1956 book, describes the attack on Benledi:

*On her twenty-fourth voyage in 1942 she loaded mines, ammunition and military vehicles for Rangoon. The city fell in face of the Japanese attacked before she arrived, however, and she was diverted to Colombo. In that fine harbour on Easter Sunday she was one of the targets of a fierce attack by Japanese aircraft, and the fact that she had a load of high octane petrol on her decks above layers of vehicles and ammunition in the 'tween decks and holds grievously added to the anxieties of her master, Captain Eyton-Jones. The hull was holed in forty places, the magazine set on fire, and Captain Eyton-Jones cleared his ship of all save himself and his Chief Officer, Mr Power. By some miracle there was no explosion, and in due course the holes were patched by the Chief Engineer, Mr W. Hutchison, with the assistance of an apprentice welder from the shore. Only Mr Power had to be left behind in hospital after his ordeal.*²¹⁹

Another secondary source has this account:

Dive-bombers came over first, and the Benledi's guns opened fire on one of them. Then came a high-level attack by bombers in formations of seven [actually six]; the third formation came straight for the Benledi, whose crew were able to account for four of the seven [six] bombs that were dropped. The first fell just outside the boom; the second hit and wrecked a destroyer [Tenedos]; the third struck the vessel's poop; and the fourth hit the quay. Flames were seen coming from the poop door and hatch, and from the top of No. 5 hatch.

Captain Eyton-Jones, knowing that the magazine contained enough explosive to blow the whole of the stern away, and that under the poop were 70 tons of 250-lb. incendiary bombs, ordered, "Clear ship – everyone ashore."

The chief officer [Power?], who had been in charge of the 12-pounder gun on top of the poop, was seriously wounded in the thigh, and was got ashore with difficulty. Meanwhile hoses were played on to the magazine. Fumes inside the poop were so bad that they necessitated the use of gas masks. Inside thirty minutes the fire was under control. Officers from the ship British Sergeant gave valuable assistance to Captain Jones and his officers in fighting it.

*So great was the heat in the poop that some beer bottles were melted completely out of shape, and many of the shells were too hot to handle with bare hands!*²²⁰

The tanker British Sergeant, destined to be sunk on 9 April during the attack which sank HMS Hermes and HMAS Vampire, was moored near Benledi. The following describes the efforts of an officer from British Sergeant, Third Officer Eric Pointon, to assist Benledi:

Although a merchant ship, the 'British Sergeant' possessed an impressive armament, consisting of one 4.7' gun, one 12 pounder, 2 Marlins [.303 inch machine guns], 2 Lewis Guns and had a compliment of 59, including 3 naval gunners.

On 5 April the 'British Sergeant' was in Colombo harbour discharging oil, when there was an air raid by Japanese planes looking for the British Fleet in Colombo harbour, but the fleet had withdrawn to a base in the Addu Atoll, Maldives, which had been kept secret from the Japanese.

For his next actions [Pointon] was decorated, and his commendation, written in true wartime style of understatement is as follows:

"A ship [Benledi] was hit during a Japanese air raid on an eastern harbour. Third Officer Pointon, of another ship, was sent to inquire whether assistance was needed, and he found that the magazine had

burst open and was on fire. In spite of the immediate danger of an explosion, the third officer at once entered and dragged some cordite cases away from the flames and out on deck. Although he was later helped by others in putting out the fire, it was undoubtedly his initiative, cool courage and disregard of personal safety which prevented a more serious situation developing."

The Ben Ledi's cargo at the time consisted of ammunition, high explosives and incendiaries. The crew of the Ben Ledi had already left the ship, and on approaching the Master had been told to 'get out while the going was good'. The ship's starboard magazine was on fire and despite imminent danger to himself, and without hesitation, he started to drag cases of cordite from the magazine.

The Ship's Master, inspired by his actions, started to help him drag cases of cordite from the ship. This was not an easy task, as by now the cases had become 'warm and were difficult to handle', but he carried on until all the cases of cordite had been removed and thrown overboard. Next he started to drag cases of shells out of the magazine, but the magazine sprinkler system became operative and owing to the steam and smoke he was forced outside. After being given a smoke helmet he returned to the magazine and continued to remove the shells. Fire hoses were brought into play and by the time the magazine had been emptied the fire had been put out. It had been made all the more difficult as shrapnel from a nearby warship (HMS 'Tenedos') which was sunk by the same air attack, was peppering the ship. The 'Ben Ledi' and her cargo had been saved, perhaps as well as the port of Colombo.

For this action he was awarded the MBE, and also the Lloyds War Medal for Bravery at Sea, one of only 523 [541, according to other sources] such medals bestowed upon men of the Merchant Navy in cases of exceptional gallantry at sea in time of war. The captain of the 'Ben Ledi' presented a bottle of Scotch, which was much appreciated by the crew!²²¹

Third Officer Eric Pointon aboard British Sergeant, with one of the ship's two .303-inch twin Lewis guns. As well as being awarded the MBE and the Lloyds War Medal for Bravery at Sea for his actions on 5 April, he was also to be one of five members of British Sergeant's crew commended by the King "for brave conduct" on 9 April, when the ship was sunk by Vals.



Benledi appears to have had no fatal casualties and only one person wounded. She was seaworthy again by 28 April when she sailed for Durban. The relevant part of the movement card is barely legible but it seems that she was then repaired at Durban, New Orleans and "N.W. England" (probably Liverpool) before returning to service in October 1942.²²² The Japanese had thus deprived the Allies of her services for six months.

Soli, San Cirilo, Clan Murdoch, Reynella and Kelantan

Arbuthnot's reports to the authorities in London stating that Benledi was the only merchantman hit were incorrect or deliberately equivocal. The Norwegian tanker Soli was hit and sunk, as previously noted, and two other ships, while not "hit", were near-missed closely enough to sustain damage requiring repair in distant ports. They were the British tanker San Cirilo and the British cargo ship Clan Murdoch. Another ship, Reynella, was also damaged, but whether it was from a near miss, a dud bomb or some other cause is not clear, and there is unconfirmed information that the auxiliary patrol vessel Kelantan sustained damage.



A shot of Norwegian tanker Soli taken between 1930 and 1942²²³

The only British primary source which even notes that Soli was at Colombo and was hit is its movement card. It records in an entry dated 11 April that Soli was “Damaged. Beached in shallow berth in harbour on bottom in 25 ft. of water”. An entry dated 20 April reads “In view of damage sustained, vessel cannot now be moved or repaired in present circumstances”. The final relevant entry, dated 14 October, reads “Norwegian Shipping Committee report[s] vessel a Total Loss”. Secondary sources add that Soli was not removed until January 1952, when it was refloated and then broken up at Karachi.²²⁴

Limited additional information is available from Norwegian sources, and from one Norwegian-American source. The latter comments that:

*[Soli] had 5 Norwegian officers and a crew of 24 Chinese on board, none of whom were injured or killed (they had probably moved to a shelter when the alarm went). Soli was on fire when the attack was over, and though the fire was quickly extinguished she had to be condemned because of the damages. Beached at Colombo.*²²⁵

The information on the Norwegian sites is consistent with the above. There is no source, however, which indicates how many bombs hit Soli or if they were dropped by high level bombers or by dive bombers.²²⁵⁶

Soli was the only merchant vessel lost on 5 April, but since the 27 years old vessel had been condemned in November it had in effect already been lost to the Allied cause.



San Cirilo²²⁷

Another Glasgow-built ship, San Cirilo was completed in 1937. From the spring of 1939 to late 1941 she was employed carrying petroleum products to the UK from Aruba, Curaçao, Trinidad and Mobile. This pattern changed following the outbreak of war with Japan. San Cirilo sailed from Curaçao for New Zealand in late December 1941, arriving at Wellington on 28 January 1942. She sailed for Abadan on 1 February, arrived there on 8 March, and sailed for Australia on 10 March. San Cirilo stopped at Colombo on 19 March, departing later the same day for Melbourne, but on 21 March she was torpedoed by I-62 some 320 miles south of Colombo. Although sustaining “extensive damage”, San Cirilo returned to Colombo on her own power, at 9-10 knots, arriving on 23 March.²²⁸

At Colombo an unspecified quantity of kerosene and “benzine” (a.k.a. gasoline) was pumped from San Cirilo to the 3600 ton Dutch tanker Armilla, which was ordered to sail for Cochin, discharge on arrival, and return empty to Colombo. Armilla sailed on 29 March, arrived at Cochin on 3 April and was still there on 5 April.²²⁹

It is not clear if San Cirilo was inside the harbour on 5 April or had been moved out to the examination anchorage. It is possible that most of her cargo had already been removed, in which case getting her out of the harbour may not have been deemed vital.

San Cirilo’s movement card records that it was damaged by enemy aircraft aft of the bridge, on the port side, but provides no details. Fortunately, her master, chief engineering officer, chief officer, boatswain and carpenter were granted a number of honours in January 1943, and the citation states that she was near-missed by dive-bombers:

The ship was torpedoed [on 21 March] and seriously damaged. There was grave danger of explosion, benzine fumes arising from the surface of the sea and deck. All the crew worked well throughout and, by their timely efforts, the vessel was brought safely to port [Colombo].

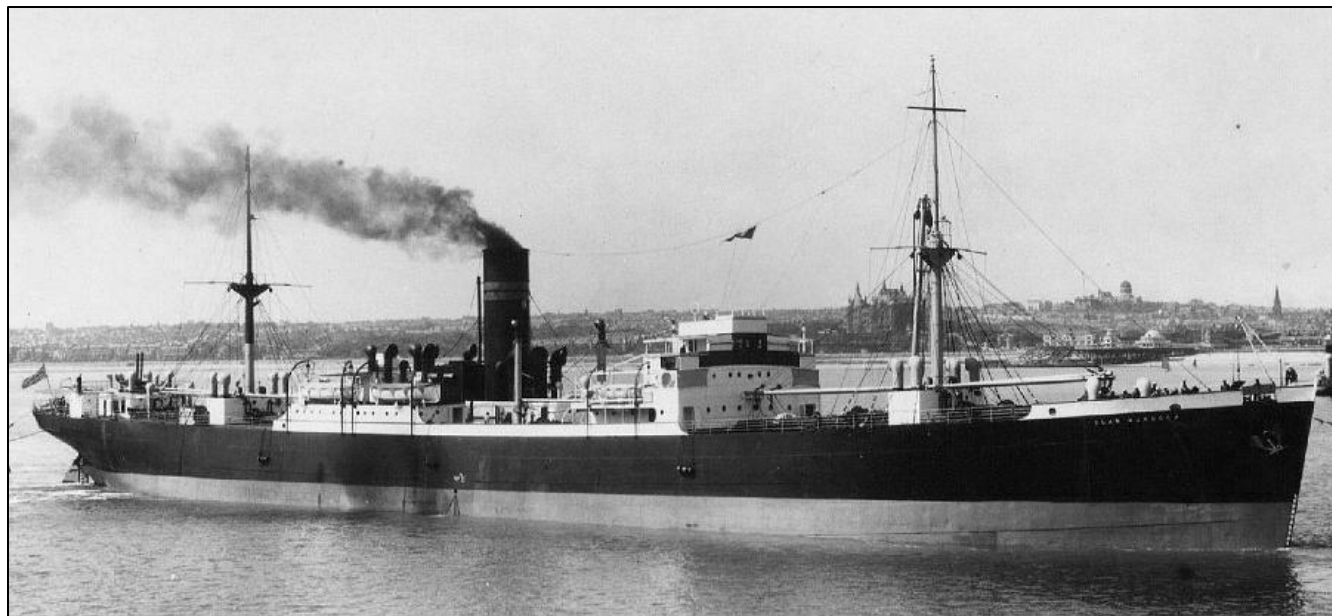
After arrival there she was dive-bombed by enemy aircraft and sustained further damage from near misses. Throughout the attack the ship's anti-aircraft guns were in action and put up a sterling defence. Her Master exercised fine powers of leadership during both actions and it was largely due to his determination, resource and skill that the ship was saved.

The Chief Engineer Officer inspired his staff with confidence and the efficiency of the engine-room personnel contributed greatly to the saving of the vessel.

The Chief Officer and the Carpenter were in charge of a salvage squad which enabled most of the spirit to be salvaged from damaged tanks.

*The Boatswain was outstanding in his control of the ship's company during both attacks and his inspiring example had a marked effect on the behaviour of the crew.*²³⁰

San Cirilo left for Bombay for temporary repairs on 12 April. Evidently the damage sustained on 5 April, on top of the earlier torpedo damage, was not sufficient to prevent her making that four-day voyage. She remained at Bombay until she departed on 10 July for New York, where permanent repairs were made. She resumed plying the high seas for the Allied cause in February 1943 and survived the war, being broken up in Italy in 1971.



Clan Murdoch before the war.²³¹

Clan Murdoch was completed in 1919 and spent twenty years plying the Clan Line's routes to Africa and India before being requisitioned by the Ministry of War Transport in 1940. On 4 August of that year she sailed from Liverpool on a long voyage to India, calling at South African ports, Colombo, Trincomalee, Madras, Vizigapatam, Calcutta and Chittagong, and returning by the same route. The return voyage was not uneventful. Clan Murdoch sailed from Freetown for the UK in convoy SL-62, which lost three ships to German air attack off Ireland, 30-31 January 1941. On 17 February, having not yet unloaded her cargo, she was herself damaged by German air attack in the Humber estuary. The damage was apparently not serious, as she was able to sail to Dundee to discharge her cargo and then to the Clyde for repairs, which were completed in about a week.

On 24 March 1941, Clan Murdoch departed Liverpool for her second wartime voyage to India, which seems to have been uneventful. She arrived at Bombay in mid-June and at Cochin on 7 July. She left Cochin for Durban only five days later and arrived at Greenock on 25 September.

Clan Murdoch sailed from Liverpool on 6 November 1941 for what was probably intended to be an uneventful third voyage to India, but the outbreak of war with Japan a month later, when Clan Murdoch was at Freetown, proved the undoing of any hopes for an absence of excitement. She sailed for Table Bay on 14 December and spent the next few weeks plying between South African ports. On 23 January she left Durban for Mombasa, arriving there on probably 29 January.²³² Clan Murdoch's master, Captain Herbert Thomas Booth, later provided the following account of what transpired next:

*At Mombasa, we loaded 1,200 tons of bombs for Rangoon and 1,000 tons of soda for Calcutta. Sailing on February 3, we had a good run until off the Little Basses, when we were attacked by a submarine. I was able to get the helm over, and the torpedo passed between our counter and log line, only thirty feet away. We were successful in evading 'It' during the night, and arrived at Rangoon on the 19th, where nobody knew anything about us. I take this opportunity of stating how well the native crew behaved, especially the engine-room ratings, who stayed below and steamed all out. At Rangoon, we got only 300 tons discharged, when we were ordered alongside to evacuate 1,000 R.A.F. personnel, with all their stores and equipment. Sailing on the 21st, we called at Akyab, where we loaded four smashed planes, 100 tons of spare parts and 250 ratings. Leaving there on the 24th, we arrived at Calcutta jetties on the 26th and commenced discharging. On March 1, I had word to stop all work and return to Akyab. We arrived on the 4th and discharged 900 tons of bombs and took on board 1,000 evacuees and 2,400 tons of rice.*²³³

The torpedo attack referred to in this account took place on 13 February, some 50 miles northeast of Little Basses Reef, which lies off the southeast coast of Sri Lanka. The submarine which made the attack may have been I-65 or I-66, both of which were in the vicinity.²³⁴

Clan Murdoch is reported to have dropped the 1,000 airmen and 250 sailors at Calcutta before returning to Akyab. Probably leaving Akyab by not later than 9 March, she called at Calcutta, Chittagong and Vizagapatam before arriving at Colombo on 3 April. The 1,000 evacuees she picked up at Akyab were reportedly still aboard, according to secondary sources, but it is not very plausible that a cargo vessel completely unequipped to accommodate anything like 1,000 people and provide them with food, water and sanitary facilities would have been required to host them for nearly a month. It seems far more likely that they were dropped at Calcutta, where the ship arrived on probably 13 March.²³⁵

Captain Booth’s account of the attack on Colombo is as follows:

*At 7 a.m. on Easter Sunday, we had an ‘Alert’. Presently, we counted about 40 planes in the sky and somebody said: ‘They have a lot of Hurricanes here.’ Then we discovered our mistake. We had a heavy ‘doing’, which lasted for one hour and forty minutes. We had no casualties but there were three near misses forward. We were very lucky, considering the damage done in the harbour. The barrage put up by the ships kept the dive-bombers up, and we had the satisfaction of pumping lead into one of them.*²³⁶

Clan Murdoch appears to have been damaged but not seriously, as she was able to leave Colombo on 6 April for Durban. Arriving on 23 April, she was put under repair there, but for little more than a week, since she sailed on 5 May for the UK, where she was under repair for a further 25 days on arrival.²³⁷



The Italian ship Remo, which was captured in 1940 and re-named Reynella²³⁸

Reynella, originally named Remo, was built at Trieste in 1926 for the large Italian shipping company Lloyd Triestino. Remo sailed to and from Australia in peacetime, and had the misfortune to be at Fremantle when Italy entered the war. She was seized by the Australian government and renamed Reynella.

Reynella made one round trip to Liverpool following her seizure, after which she made a number of trips from Australia to India and Ceylon. She arrived at Colombo for the second time as an Australian ship on 2 April 1942. Her movement card records that she was “slightly damaged” on 5 April, but as already noted it is not known if it was from a near miss, a dud bomb or some other cause. She unspecified underwent repairs before sailing on 17 April. Calling first at Bombay, where no repairs are noted as having been made, Reynella arrived at Adelaide on 29 June. She appears to have been under repair at Sydney and Melbourne for unstated reasons for most of the period July to December 1942.²³⁹



HMS Kelantan²⁴⁰

Kelantan was completed in 1921 as a passenger/cargo ship for the Singapore-based Straits Steamship Company. In December 1941 she was requisitioned, equipped with a 4.5-inch AA gun and light automatic weapons, and commissioned in the Royal Navy as an auxiliary patrol vessel.

Kelantan arrived at Colombo on 9 February. In March she transported Ceylonese troops to the Cocos islands to relieve the small force defending the important cable station on Direction Island, a relay point on the Durban-Australia cable route. A radio station and a direction finding station were also located there. The Cocos were about 1450 miles southeast of Ceylon and about 700 miles from the Tōkō Air Group’s main base at Batavia.

The Royal Australian Navy scored its first important success off Direction Island on 9 November 1914 when HMAS Sydney destroyed the German light cruiser Emden, which had arrived at dawn to destroy the cable station. Direction Island was targeted for the same reason but by a different enemy on 3 March 1942, when I-4 shelled it in the dark for 10 minutes, briefly knocking out the radio station and possibly the cable station.

On 8 May, thirty men of the Ceylon Garrison Artillery detachment in the Cocos, most of whom had apparently been ferried there by Kelantan in March, launched the only mutiny by UK, Dominion, or Empire servicemen during the war for which any participants were executed, three of the mutineers being put to death in August.

Kelantan arrived back at Colombo from the Cocos Islands on 24 March and was still present on 31 March, according to Arbuthnot’s war diary, which does not show her departing until 21 April, when she sailed for Kilindini (Mombasa’s port).

Only one source says that Kelantan was damaged on 5 April, namely the diary of Albert Mellor, a sailor serving aboard her. After noting Kelantan’s troop-carrying trip to the Cocos, Mellor wrote that:

We had another narrow escape when we were tied up at a buoy in Colombo harbour. Japanese planes bombed the harbour and the ship next to us, The Hector, was hit quite a few times and sank. We got some minor damage.

This account cannot be confirmed, but given how crowded Colombo’s small harbour was, it is certainly plausible that Kelantan may have been damaged by bombs which hit or near-missed Hector. Any damage sustained by Kelantan was likely minor, given that she was able to depart on 21 April.²⁴¹

Who Bombed Which Ship?

A few hours after the 120 returning aircraft of the Colombo strike force landed back on their carriers, the flagship advised the task force that the attacking aircraft had inflicted serious damage on five large merchantmen, setting all of them on fire, and “blew up” more than a dozen small merchantmen.²⁴² This tally represented a fairly stringent vetting of the much larger claims submitted by the aircrews. Table 16 summarizes the aircrews’ bombing claims, which were recorded in the carriers’ kodochoshos.

Aircraft	Claims
Shokaku Vals 0750-0753	4 large merchant vessels hit (with 2 - 3 250 kg bombs each) and set on fire 1 small freighter (approx. 300 tons) hit and set on fire
Zuikaku Vals	2 near misses on tanker
Soryu Kates 0756-0813	0756: 1st Chutai: Bombed large merchant ship. Minimal result. 0807: 3rd Chutai: Scored heavy damage on large merchant ship. Assessed as subsequently sunk. 0813: 2nd Chutai: Near miss on large transport. Medium results.
Hiryu Kates 0803-0810	0803: 2nd Chutai: 3 near misses on a freighter (about 7000 tons). Heavy damage. Down by stern 0805: 1st Chutai: Bombed 1 freighter (approx. 7,000 tons). 2 near misses. Sunk. 0810: 3rd Chutai: Bombed land targets
Akagi Kates 0808-0812	1st Chutai: Bombed facilities, RR dock, wharf 2nd Chutai: Bombed 2 merchant ships & oil storage tanks 3rd Chutai: Bombed wharf facilities and 10 plus small enemy merchant vessels

Table 16 – Bombing Claims made by Vals and Kates Attacking Colombo Harbour²⁴³

Dealing first with the claims which can be verified, there can be little doubt that Hector and Lucia were hit by Shokaku’s Vals, since Allied sources confirm that they were hit by dive bombers. It is also likely that San Cirilo was the tanker attacked by the solitary shotai of Vals from Zuikaku who attacked the harbour, since they claimed to have near missed their target and British sources state that San Cirilo was near missed by dive bombers.

As we have seen, only one Allied source indicates that Kelantan was damaged, but if it was indeed damaged then it may have been the small freighter which Shokaku’s Vals claimed to have hit, given that all of the other merchantmen sunk or damaged were of at least five times her displacement and given that she was reportedly moored next to Hector, which was attacked by Shokaku’s Vals.

British sources indicate that Tenedos was sunk by Kates, but as none of them claimed to have attacked a destroyer, it is not possible to say which Kates scored this success. Benledi was likewise probably hit by Kates, but we again cannot say which ones were involved.

It is also not possible to say who hit and sank Soli. Other than Zuikaku’s Vals, none of the attacking aircraft claimed to have bombed a tanker and there is no information from the Allied side about what type of aircraft may have attacked Soli. Neither is there any reliable information about who attacked Reynella or Clan Murdoch. However, because the 22 Vals which attacked targets in the area of the harbour are believed to have attacked Hector, Lucia, San Cirilo and possibly Kelantan, and given that Tenedos and Benledi are unlikely to have been the only ships attacked by the 53 Kates, it seems more likely than not that Soli, Reynella and Clan Murdoch were attacked by Kates.

Ship	Type	Tons	Assessment
Hector	Armed Merchant Cruiser	11,198	Sunk by Shokaku Vals
Kelantan	Auxiliary Patrol Vessel	1106	Damaged, according to a source which says it was moored next to Hector. If so then it may have been damaged by Shokaku Vals.
Lucia	Submarine Depot Ship	5805	Damaged by Shokaku Vals
San Cirilo	Tanker	8012	Near missed and damaged by Zuikaku Vals
Tenedos	Destroyer	905	Sunk by unidentified Kates
Benledi	Passenger/cargo	5943	Hit and damaged by unidentified Kates
Soli	Tanker	5834	Sunk, probably by Kates
Reynella	Cargo Liner	9787	Damaged, probably by Kates
Clan Murdoch	General Cargo	5950	

Table 17 – Whose Bombs Sank or Damaged Which Ship

Who Strafed Which Ship?

Vardaas²⁴⁴



Nyco²⁴⁵



When the Japanese formations completed their attacks, they headed for a designated assembly point over the ocean 10 miles west of “Point de Galle”.²⁴⁶ This was probably a reference to the small peninsula which guards the port of Galle, which is located some 55 miles south of Colombo. After re-assembling there they proceeded directly to their carriers.

As previously noted, Somerville stated in his report of proceedings that “several” merchant ships southwest of Ceylon were strafed as the Japanese aircraft withdraw. His was the only report submitted by any Colombo-based authority to mention these strafings, and from other sources it has been possible to identify only three of them, namely Vardaas, Nyco and Seawall. None of them were in Colombo harbour or the adjacent examination anchorage during the attack.

Vardaas, a Norwegian tanker, sailed from Trincomalee on 3 April on what turned out to be the first of six shuttle runs transferring fuel from Trincomalee to Colombo. Vardaas arrived at Colombo on 5 April, and according to one source:

*At around 07:50 on Easter morning, just as they had started on the approach to Colombo, they were suddenly attacked by Japanese aircraft coming over them in wave after wave while firing. Fortunately, no one was seriously hurt, and no bombs were dropped (apparently, they had all been spent on the harbour), but the ship was damaged and she was delayed while repairing.*²⁴⁷

Vardaas' movement card circumstantially supports the claim that her departure from Colombo was delayed for repairs. The movement card makes no mention of any repairs being required, but it shows that Vardaas did not leave Colombo for Trincomalee until 18 April. During its next four deliveries to Colombo of fuel from Trincomalee, Vardaas always departed within two days of arriving at Colombo.²⁴⁸

Nyco was a 1345-ton Norwegian freighter completed in 1938. On 5 April she was south of Ceylon, on her way from Sandheads to Cochin, where she arrived on 7 April. She was reportedly attacked by aircraft south of Ceylon but arrived at her destination "safely". The damage, if any, must have been minor, since Nyco's movement card makes no mention of any repairs being required and she sailed from Cochin only eight days after she arrived, resuming her duties as a wartime tramp.²⁴⁹

According to her movement card, the aging (built 1910) Panamanian cargo vessel Seawall (no photo available) was machine gunned by aircraft about 30 miles from the Colombo buoy, sustaining "only minor damage" but with three crew members wounded. Seawall had arrived on 18 March and did not leave Colombo for another port until June 1943 (she was used at Colombo as a mine carrier), so on 5 April she may have sortied simply to wait out the attack at what was thought to be safe distance from the harbour.²⁵⁰

Turning to the question of which aircraft strafed which ships, the following claims were made by the Japanese aircrews:

- After dropping their bombs and shaking off 258 Squadron, Shokaku's Vals strafed two onshore anti-aircraft batteries and "several" merchant ships outside the harbour from 0752 to 0800.
- Akagi's Zeros began to head for the reassembly point at 0830, following the end of air-to-air combat, and at 0840 sighted a medium-sized ("4000 ton class") merchant ship, which they strafed.
- Soryu's Zeros strafed the bridge of a merchant ship at an unspecified time, but probably after they began their withdrawal to the reassembly point at 0820.
- Zuikaku's Zeros strafed a large merchant ship between 0820 and 0830, with "unclear" results. Given the timing, this ship was most likely attacked while Zuikaku's Zeros were withdrawing.
- An E8N2 Type 95 floatplane (a "Dave") from Kirishima found an enemy tanker at an unspecified time and made several strafing runs at its bridge, firing a total of 70 rounds from its 7.7 mm machine gun.²⁵¹

If Vardaas was indeed attacked at 0750 by "waves" of enemy aircraft as stated, then it seems likely that it was attacked by Shokaku's Vals, since they claimed to have strafed several merchantmen outside the harbour starting at 0752. None of the Zeros reported strafing any ships before about 0820.

Only one other claim can be tentatively matched with one of the three ships known to have been strafed. It is at least plausible that Nyco, which was strafed south of Ceylon on its way from Sandheads to Cochin, was the ship strafed by the Dave from Kirishima. For one thing, the carriers' kodochoshos make no mention of any ship being strafed so far from the harbour by Zeros, Vals or Kates. For another, it Kirishima is believed to have provided one of the two Dave floatplanes which participated in the search launched at 0600. The outward legs of the two Daves ended some 110-150 miles southwest of Colombo, after which they turned to the northeast and flew 30 mile doglegs before heading south to return to KdB. Nyco could easily have been in the area searched by the two Daves as it sailed clockwise around the south coast of Ceylon.²⁵²

It is not possible to say which aircraft strafed Seawall, nor what other merchantmen may also have been strafed outside the harbour, as no relevant information has been found from any Allied source. We can perhaps infer that no other Norwegian ship is likely to have been strafed, given the comprehensiveness of the information available on Norwegian ships, and that no UK, Commonwealth or Empire personnel were killed aboard any ship strafed outside the harbour, given that none is listed by the CWGC, but beyond this it is not even possible to make guesses.

Damage to Shore Installations

The damage inflicted on shore installations was modest. In the case of Ratmalana, Senshi Sōsho states that the Vals which attacked it "Set one hangar ablaze and caused damage to two, also caused serious damage to one repair shop". The repair shop in question was undoubtedly the railway workshop located close to the airfield, which was only slightly damaged, according to wartime British sources. Ratmalana itself sustained "Negligible damage", according to the same sources, and as noted above the Anti-Aircraft Command Ceylon war diary states that Ratmalana "remained undamaged apart from three bomb craters on the outskirts".

As has already been noted, the racecourse airfield escaped attack altogether because the Japanese were not aware in advance of its existence, and when it was spotted during the early stages of the raid neither Fuchida nor any of the individual formation leaders told off any aircraft to attack it. The Japanese were equally ignorant of the fact that Ceylon's Catalinas were based on Koggala lagoon, just inland from the coast about 70 miles south of Colombo, and it too escaped attack. In this case their ignorance was due in part to disinformation from the survivors from QL-A. Birchall and his crew lied to their rescuers when questioned aboard Isokaze, telling them that they had taken off from Colombo, and they were believed. The attackers could easily have added Koggala to their target list, at the very least assigning some fighters to give it a good strafing, but this small bodyguard of lies protected this particular truth.

Senshi Sōsho also states that the Kates bombed "piers, naval office[s], barracks and other targets ... blowing up piers and railways". It is clear from British sources, however, that serious damage was inflicted only on the harbour workshops.

The most succinct report on the damage to shore installations was sent to Washington on 6 April by the US Navy liaison team (ALUSNOB). It read "HARBOR DEPT SHOPS DESTROYED X DAMAGE OTHERWISE SLIGHT".²⁵³

Five men working at the Harbour Engineer's Department were honoured in December 1942 for their conduct during the raid. Richard Shepperd Shaw and Arthur William Henry Phelps, respectively the Mechanical Superintendent and Deputy Mechanical Superintendent, were awarded the MBE, Forest Raymond Swan, Overseer, was awarded the British Empire Medal, and welders Don John Palihakkara and Kuruwitage Girigoris Silva were "Commended for brave conduct in Civil Defence". The citation for the awards to Shaw, Phelps and Swan reads as follows:

During [the] air raid on Colombo, bombs damaged buildings, fires were started and some men were trapped under debris and others under a wrecked locomotive. Shaw and Phelps immediately organised rescue work and fire-fighting. They supervised the clearing away of the wreckage to reach the men and Phelps and Swan entered the engine pit.

In dangerous conditions they worked for an hour and a half with an oxy-acetylene cutting plant and removed part of the engine which pinned down the casualties, who were eventually extricated and sent to hospital. Phelps was relieved by others only when he was completely exhausted.

*The three men showed courage and devotion to duty and the excellent work performed by all present was largely due to Mr. Shaw's leadership.*²⁵⁴

Civilian Casualties

British reporting of 1942 states that the bombing was "directed at military objectives, and civilian casualties were slight", specifying that 37 civilians, "all native", were killed. Civilian fatalities appear to have been nearly twice that number, however, as the CWGC identifies 70 civilian war dead. While there is no reason to doubt the latter number, the information about the civilians who died at Colombo is far less detailed than is usually available on the CWGC site. For 33 of them, the only information listed is a family name or a family name and initials, so even their gender cannot be determined. Neither are the date of birth or the age of any of the 70 dead given. At least 22 are identified as being someone's husband or wife, meaning that they were adults, but there is no way to say, for example, how many of the other 48 may have been children. It also appears that at least seven of the dead were probably not Ceylonese, as seven of the married men had wives in India, meaning that they may have been expatriate Indians.

By way of contrast, we may note that the full name, age and next of kin are given for each of the 12 civilians killed at Malta on 5 April. It is clear that four of them were children, three of whom, aged 8, 11 and 13, died with their 33-year-old mother, whose husband was not killed. The two oldest fatalities were the 67-year-old friar of a convent and a 70-year-old man. We may also note that full information is available for the two civilians killed at Trincomalee on 9 April, presumably because they were both expatriates from the UK. Nothing like this level of detail is available for Colombo's civilian dead, all of whom appear to have been "natives".

The locations where the 70 civilians died are not known, except that wartime British reporting states that 20 "inmates" at the "Lunatic Asylum" in the Colombo suburb of Angoda were killed. This facility, actually known at the time as the Mental Asylum and now known as the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), was located about 9 km east of the harbour, and according to a 2017 NIMH post the number of people killed there was 17. Since the Vals all attacked the harbour or Ratmalana, the bomb which hit the Mental Asylum was presumably dropped by a Kate, but it is not clear if the hospital was hit by a bomb aimed at another target or if it was mistaken for a legitimate target and bombed intentionally. It was reportedly not marked by a Red Cross visible from above.²⁵⁵

No information is available on the number of civilians wounded during the raid.

Impact on Civilian Morale

Given that the material losses sustained during the raid were for the most part either soon made good (e.g., lost aircraft replaced, damaged ships repaired) or of little long-term importance (e.g., the loss of such low value ships as Tenedos and Soli), it is at least arguable that the impact on civilian morale produced the most lasting negative effects on Ceylon's support of the Allied war effort. The following 1942 comments from two separate British military sources highlight this issue:

*This, the first test of the civil defence services, was encouraging, and the behaviour of the population was satisfactory and free from panic during the raid. After the raid, however, a considerable amount of evacuation of the Colombo area took place, both by rail to India and by road to the interior of the island, the latter creating traffic congestion on all main roads. This evacuation resulted in a serious shortage of labour for the essential services.*²⁵⁶

*The effect of the raid was an enormous exodus of people from Colombo, and the work in the harbour, workshops, etc suffered badly in consequence.*²⁵⁷

The war diary of the Australian 16th Brigade recorded on 6 April that:

*A state of nervous tension was now evident amongst the native population who commenced to move to the interior of the Island. The rail service to the N.W. of CEYLON was greatly overtaxed and the ferry service at TALAIMANNAR was flooded with evacuees to INDIA.*²⁵⁸

The main body of the Australian 17th Brigade arrived at Colombo on 21 March and disembarked three days later. The unloading of its vehicles was very slow before 5 April and became slower still after the raid, seriously compromising the mobility of the brigade. (The 16th Brigade was in the same situation.) The brigade's war diary entry for 17 April notes that:

*A nominal role [should read "roll"] of personnel in the Bde Gp inf bns [Brigade Group infantry battalions] with dock labouring or stevedoring experience was forwarded to Div HQ for the purpose of obtaining labour to assist in unloading ships with essential equipment and supplies in COLOMBO harbour. Native labourers had fled to the interior as a result of the recent bombing of COLOMBO. It was found that after A.I.F. [Australian Imperial Force] stevedores had taken over the unloading of ships the normal time of unloading a ship was cut in half. In the case of one ship the rate was cut down to one quarter of the normal time.*²⁵⁹

A more recent assessment provides a fuller picture:

The raid on Ceylon was a major shock to the people of Ceylon as well as those charged with its defence. The panic engendered by the raid caused thousands of people to flee inland, leading to steep rent rises. Many people left for India. On the day of the Colombo raid Gerard Robinson cycled to Galle Face Green to see a Hurricane [McDonald's] that had been shot down, and found himself travelling against a 'stampede' of people heading for the hills. The raid disrupted food supplies because so many people fled, and food distribution arrangements broke down. The Storekeeper of Captain's Garden in the Maradana district heard the raid and crossed the Victoria Bridge over the Kelani river against a stream of traffic as people left Colombo and headed inland. Food stocks were abandoned and people looted what they could, the Captain's Garden store area 'covered a foot or more deep in rotting potatoes and onions'. The Essential Service Labour Corps was called up to work under military direction to help make good the labour deficiency, including helping to run shops. As [Layton's] war diary recorded, a 'very high proportion of the small Indian boutique keepers left Colombo, and in order to distribute food to the populace it was necessary for their shops to be re-opened under Government control'.

*There was no good reason, known to any normal Indian or Sinhalese person, as to why Ceylon should not become the next Singapore or Rangoon, so the decision to flee was an entirely logical one. At the premises of Walker Sons and Company in the Fort area of Colombo harbour, of 3,000 workers on the books on the day of the raid, only 123 turned up for work on the [next] morning. Six weeks after the raid, only 700 people were working for Walker Sons in Colombo docks, and it took a full year for a figure of 2,000 employees to be reached.*²⁶⁰

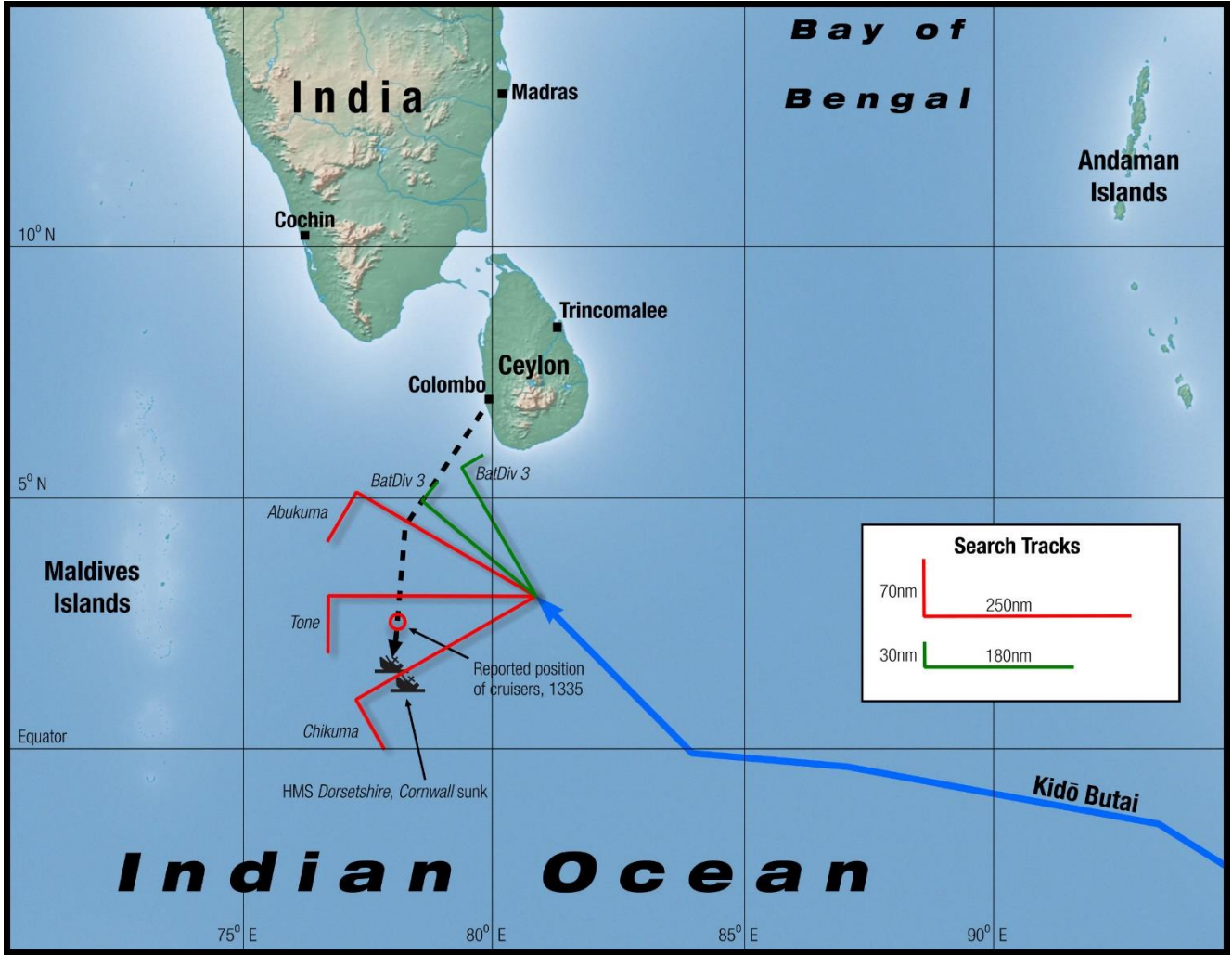
No Second Attack

As already noted, only half of KdB's strike aircraft were launched at 0600 to attack Colombo. The rest, 53 Vals on Akagi, Soryu and Hiryu, and 37 Kates on Shokaku and Zuikaku, were held back in case the five floatplanes launched at the same time found any juicy targets at sea southwest of Colombo. If the floatplanes found no ships worth attacking, the reserve aircraft could be committed to a second attack against Colombo. This was all straightforward and perfectly reasonable, but things did not unroll as expected, and instead the morning provided a foretaste of air search and re-arming problems which were to prove fatal off Midway on 4 June.

Surveying the results of the attack on Colombo from the middle seat of his Kate, and likely aware that no important enemy ships had yet been found by the search planes, Fuchida decided to recommend that Colombo be attacked again and sent the following message to KdB at or shortly after 0818:

*Request that second strike be made ready. Some 20 transports are in the harbour. There is antiaircraft fire. Enemy still has some aircraft. Dense clouds at 1,000 meters. 1118 [JST].*²⁶¹

Fuchida’s message apparently reached Nagumo at 0828.²⁶² By then the Daves from Hiei and Kirishima, flying the shortest searches, had completed their doglegs 20 minutes earlier and were now heading back to KdB. The longest searches were being flown by three E7K Type 94 (“Alf”) floatplanes which were about to reach the end of their 250 nm outward legs. (See Map 5.)



Map 5 – KdB’s Morning Search, 5 April 1942²⁶³
The two inshore searches are believed to have been flown by Daves from Hiei and Kirishima, although it is not known which search was flown by which of them.²⁶⁴

Nothing of note having been sighted by the five floatplanes during the more than 2.5 hours since they had been launched, Nagumo accepted Fuchida’s advice and at 0852 he ordered that the reserve aircraft were to attack Colombo after the aircraft returning from the first attack were recovered. Akagi, Soryu and Hiryu were to replace the 250 kg SAP bombs with 242 kg HE bombs on a third of their Vals, and Shokaku and Zuikaku were to replace the torpedoes on their Kates with 800 kg land bombs.²⁶⁵ The rearming of a third of the 53 Vals with HE bombs likely portended a second attack on Ratmalana and/or an attack on Racecourse.

While the rearming of the reserve aircraft was getting underway, Ceylon’s remaining strike force, the Blenheims of 11 Squadron, made an abortive attempt to strike back. Ten of the unit’s Blenheims, one of which turned back early with engine trouble, took off from Racecourse at 0830 to attack KdB but failed to find it.²⁶⁶

For Akagi, Soryu and Hiryu, the rearming of six Vals each was likely a simple matter, but switching the Kates from torpedoes to bombs was a tedious business for Shokaku and Zuikaku, as the author has detailed in a previous article.[‡] The latter two carriers began to rearm their Kates at 0910. This work was still underway at 1000, when Tone’s Alf, which had reached the end of its dogleg at about 0912 and was now flying its return leg, reported sighting what appeared to be two enemy cruisers.

The sighting of what proved to be Cornwall and Dorsetshire saved Colombo from enduring another attack. At 1023 Nagumo ordered that the Vals and Kates which had been rearming for the second attack on Colombo were now to attack the enemy cruisers, with the Kates being changed back to torpedoes “as far as possible”. At 1050 he further directed that the aircraft which had attacked Colombo, the last of which landed at 1025,

[‡] “A Detailed Analysis of the Loss of Cornwall and Dorsetshire”, accessible at <http://www.combinedfleet.com/articles.htm>.

were to be rearmed and await orders in their hangars. The Kates among them, i.e., those aboard Akagi, Soryu and Hiryu, were to be armed with torpedoes.

The 53 Vals detailed to attack the two cruisers were ready to launch long before Shokaku and Zuikaku could complete the “re-arming” of their Kates with torpedoes, and took off by themselves between 1149 and 1203. They attacked Cornwall and Dorsetshire at 1338 and by 1355 had sunk them both.

By 1400 Nagumo thus found himself with 53 Vals which needed to return and land (they were recovered by 1445), with most if not all of his Kates armed with torpedoes, with the possibility of further enemy ships being found within range, and with less than about five hours remaining before last light. Making a second attack on Colombo on 5 April was now out of the question.

Furthermore, at 1609 enemy aircraft were spotted by one of Nagumo’s ships. Zeros from Hiryu intercepted two biplanes which they identified as Swordfish, shooting one down and driving the other off. The aircraft were actually Albacores from Indomitable, but the Zero pilots can be excused for this minor case of misidentification and, more importantly, Nagumo and his staff correctly deduced that they must have been from a carrier, given KdB’s distance from land at this time. The consequent need to search for the British carrier task force on 6 April ruled out any possibility of attacking Colombo that day, or, as it turned out, ever again.²⁶⁷

Conclusion

After the war Fuchida likened KdB’s January 1942 attacks on Rabaul to using a sledge hammer to crack an egg. Colombo was a target worthy of a real hammering but QL-A’s sighting of KdB on 4 April caused Nagumo to use a smaller than planned hammer. He inflicted heavy losses on the defending aircraft but sank just three ships (two of them low value antiques) and significantly damaged only another three, did little damage to the harbour infrastructure, failed to knock out Ratmalana, and left Racecourse and Koggala intact. The attack was certainly much less successful than the 19 February attack on Darwin had been.

It is impossible to say what would have happened if Cornwall and Dorsetshire had not been sighted and Colombo had been attacked a second time, although it certainly may have sunk more ships and otherwise done more damage than the first attack. However, as things actually transpired on 5 April, the attack on Colombo was decidedly lacklustre for the Japanese. Their half-size sledge hammer did not smash nearly as many eggs as it should have.