**The Third Mobile Operation in the Indian Ocean (C Operation)**

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The year 1992 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the air-attack on the Island of Ceylon by the Japanese Imperial Navy. This operation took place about four months after the outbreak of the war in the Pacific, and was called “The Third Mobile Operation in the Indian Ocean”. Both ports in Colombo and Trincomalee, where the naval bases of the British Far-East Fleet were located, were subject to air raids and one small aircraft carrier and two heavy cruisers were destroyed. As a result, Japan temporarily secured the command of the East Indian Ocean region. However, this period signalled the high point in glory achieved by Japan during the war.

This paper focuses on the Third Mobile Operation in the Indian Ocean from the Japanese point of view, and mainly describes briefly the course of the operation and the lessons which we can learn from it. All responsibility for its content rests solely with its author.

1. The position and the purpose of the Third Mobile Operation in the Indian Ocean.

The basic line of thought regarding the conduct of the war on the Japanese side at the outbreak of the Pacific War was to secure quickly those areas important for southern resources and to make the necessary preparations for a war of attrition, while at the same time trying to end the war by breaking the will of the United States to continue fighting. Securing the important areas of southern resources meant in itself a war with Great Britain.

In addition to the withdrawal from Singapore, Hong Kong and Malay, Great Britain faced the crisis in Burma and was planning to rebuild its combat position on the Island of Ceylon as its central base. The Indian Ocean region was important as the supply route for food and resources between Great Britain and Australia and as the transport route to Rangoon where the starting point for Chiang Kai Shek support routes was located.

Becoming self-confident subsequent to the satisfactory progress of the Java invasion, the Japanese Imperial Headquarters executed the offensive operations against Burma, Andaman and other areas. They surmised that by these operations, the Royal Navy would certainly move into that sea area, and once they had dealt a severe blow to the British fleet, they planned to concentrate safely on Pacific operations. Therefore, the Combined Fleet sent the Southern Unit (a powerful fleet centred on mobile forces) to the Indian Ocean east of the Island of Ceylon, and decided on the strategy to execute a surprise attack on the Island of Ceylon at an opportune time (The Third Mobile Operation in the Indian Ocean).

1. Force strength and unit divisions for the Third Mobile Operation in the Indian Ocean.
2. Force Strength

The Japanese fleet was formed out of five crack units composed as follows:

the nucleus unit (one heavy cruiser, two destroyers), the mobile unit which had participated in the surprise attack on Hawaii (five aircraft carriers, four battleships, two heavy cruisers, one light cruiser, eleven destroyers and about three hundred airplanes), the mobile unit in Malay (one aircraft carrier, five heavy cruisers, two light cruisers, ten destroyers and about thirty airplanes), the aircraft unit (thirty-six middle size attack ships and six large ships), also the third-class submarine unit (the second submarine squadron and six submarines). On the other side, the combined British forces consisted of three aircraft carriers, four battleships, two heavy cruisers, five light cruisers, sixteen destroyers and seven submarines all under the command of Vice Admiral James Somerville.

The mobile forces were divided into the air-attack unit, the support unit, the defensive unit and the supply unit. The mobile unit in Malay consisted of three divisions—the Center Force, the Northern Force and the Southern Force—and assumed responsibility for the destruction of the enemy’s transport line between Madras, which is on the eastern shore of India, and Calcutta. The third-class submarine unit was assigned the task of supporting the patrolling of the operational sea-area and of analyzing astronomical and meteorological information.

1. Summary of the course of the overall operation.
2. The operation on April the 5th (the Colombo air-raid and the sinking of the Royal Navy cruisers etc.)

On April the 4th, 19:30, the Japanese mobile unit detected and shot down a British flying-boat at the point of 146 degrees and 458 nautical miles from Colombo; however, because there was a strong possibility that the movement of the fleet had been reported, it became necessary that the part of the forces intended for the Colombo attack had to be converted to attack battleships. Therefore, these ships mounted torpedoes by 06:30 on the 5th and were standing by.

On April the 5th, 09:00, 53 carrier-borne attack planes, 38 bombers and 36 fighter planes took off from the force attacking Colombo. From 10:45 onward for about one hour, they mounted an offensive attack and shot down fifty enemy planes as well as destroying airfield facilities and sinking 10 merchant ships in the harbour. At 13:00, a scout plane from the “Tone” discovered two heavy cruisers escaping towards the south. At 14:45, 53 carrier-borne bombers attacked and sunk both at 16:57. At 19:15 two assumed enemy biplanes were found and one was shot down.

Also at 10:16, the Colombo attack forces reported that there were many enemy merchant ships in the harbour and a second attack was needed; therefore at 12:10 all planes started to convert to their land-bombing gear. However, at 13:05, they received a report that two enemy heavy cruisers had been found; therefore, they had to be outfitted again with torpedoes in the middle of their conversion and they finally sunk the two cruisers at 16:50.

April 6th to 8th, they stopped attacking Colombo, decided on the Trincomalee air-raid but kept it secret, patrolled outside the 500 nautical miles off the Island of Ceylon and reconnoitered the enemy.

April 8th, at 18:20, one enemy flying boat was detected, and an attack was mounted to shoot it down, but it proved unsuccessful due to a squall.

1. The maneuver on April the 9th (Trincomalee air-raid, sinking of aircraft carriers, etc.)

On April 9th, 09:00, the Trincomalee attack forces (91 carrier-borne attack and 38 fighter planes) took off, found and shot down one enemy flying boat at 10:08. From 10:20 for about one hour an attack was mounted and about 40 enemy planes were shot down and a few planes were destroyed on the ground. Also one light cruiser and three merchant ships were sunk in the harbour and the facilities in the military port and airfield were blown up. During this time, at 10:55, a scout plane reported that the enemy aircraft carrier “Harmis” and three destroyers were moving southward. At 11:45, 85 carrier-borne attack planes and 9 fighter planes took off for the attack and at 13:55 they caught up with the “Harmis” and sunk it along with a large merchant ship and a near-by destroyer. Also around this time, nine enemy planes attacked but seven were shot down. The Japanese side lost four planes. At 13:48, nine enemy twin-engine heavy bombers attacked the ‘Tone” and the “Akagi” but there was no damage done. At 18:00, after the attack, the commander of the mobile forces stopped the operation and moved eastward. During this time, between April 4th to 6th, the Malay Task Force sunk 21 merchant ships, destroyed 6, and went back to Singapore on the 11th.

As a result of the above operation, the Japanese Imperial Navy controlled the eastern Indian Ocean for a while and made smooth progress on the Rangoon sea transport operation. And before the middle of May, the Fifteenth Division swept over most of Burma and the British Indian forces and the Chungching forces were defeated. The public in India was disturbed and the plot against India (using Chandra Base to instigate an Indian independence movement and to scheme for the separation of India from Britain) was initiated. The Navy mobile forces turned their attention from the Indian Ocean to the South Pacific. However, the operation constituted the glorious peak of the southern operation.

1. Lessons drawn from this operation.

The British side was damaged greatly by this operation. It happened right after the loss of Britain’s two great battleships at the battle off the coast of Malay. Churchill expressed his sense of shock and his feeling of anxiety for the future war effort in his *Memoirs of World War II* as follows: “It never happened like this during the battle of the Mediterranean against German and Italian air forces … Now, for a while, we gave up the Indian Ocean completely except for the shore of Africa.” However, the Japanese Imperial Navy which achieved these distinguished war results did not calmly reflect upon its conduct from the strategic military point of view. This fact exercised a great influence on subsequent operations. It might be asserted that the Japanese Imperial Navy was elated with victory and contented itself with an arrogant attitude. The following are the main lessons one can derive from this operation.

1. The code-breaking on the day of the Ceylon air-raid (April 1st, the original plan) on the British side and the Japanese reaction.

Originally, the execution day for this operation was April the 1st, and this decision was made on February the 14th. This information had already been transmitted to the British side as Captain Roskill has noted in *The War At Sea.* The enemy fleet commander Somerville was ready to ambush the Japanese fleet on April the 1st. Also the base on the Island of Ceylon made arrangements beforehand to lessen the anticipated damage by sending warships away from the harbour. However, on the Japanese side, the Fifth Air Squadron, which was a part of the mobile forces, arrived late, because of its involvement in another operation, so that the attack was postponed till April the 5th. This compelled Commander Somerville to wander the sea for three days in a confused state. Finally he judged that the Japanese fleet had changed the air-raid plan drastically, and assigned two heavy cruisers and one small carrier to a different task of sailing around the Island of Ceylon. He led the main fleet to the Addu Atoll base for replenishment (the Japanese side did not know this).

On the other hand, the Japanese mobile forces had no idea that the information of the original attack date of April the 1st had been disclosed to the British fleet. However, throughout the course of the operation, they should have suspected that the enemy had broken the code by collectively analyzing the movement of enemy reconnaissance planes and the warships that they had sunk, and by taking into consideration the fact that the very few warships were in the harbour, they should have immediately taken the necessary countermeasures to protect the code. The actual fact of the code-breaking by the British can not be found in the historical materials on the Japanese side.

1. The lack of tenacity in the pursuit of the enemy on April the 5th.

Essentially, as much as conditions permit, an operation has to make every effort to determine precisely the enemy’s movements. However, in this operation, there were two occasions where clearly the effort to find the enemy was not sufficient and valuable chances for finding the enemy fleet were lost.

The first such occasion occurred when the “Tone”, which controlled reconnaissance planes, issued instruction for only a 50 nautical-mile-search after sinking two enemy heavy cruisers and ordered the planes to return after patrolling the enemy from about 200 degrees and 50 nautical miles (17:00). They failed to detect the British fleet which was about 180 nautical miles southwest. The British fleet also did not know the position of the Japanese fleet. In this case the reconnaissance planes (scout floatplanes) from the “Tone” could make 120 knots for a duration of about seven hours. If one considers that the sun set at 21:51, there were still four possible flying hours left, and therefore, if the order had been extended till sunset in order to cover a longer reconnaissance distance, the discovery of the enemy would have been possible. Also, if they had found the enemy, even though it was almost impossible to have a night operation with carriers, they could have prepared for an advantageous combat position for the next morning.

The second situation occurred on the same day when the “Abukuma” (a light cruiser) reported to the mobile forces that it had found enemy airplanes on a course of 260 degrees, the distance 30,000 on the horizon (19:00). The cruiser shot down one of the two planes but did not send out any reconnaissance planes. Therefore, they could not discover the enemy. At 21:10, the flagship “Akagi” sent a signal to all the fleet, counselling caution since there were possibly enemy carriers in action nearby. Until the next morning, all the fleet was on full alert, taking a southeast course, proceeding cautiously with irregular movements (at first 20 knots, then increasing to 24 knots and waiting for 20 minutes), at the same time preparing for the air-raid on Trincomalee on the 9th. However, *The Full Report of the Fifth Air Combat Squadron* recorded the acknowledgement of the possible presence of enemy carriers nearby as they made contact with two suspected enemy deck biplanes on the evening of the 5th. It seems as if they were expressing their shame at not having launched reconnaissance planes by making such a bald statement. But in the atmosphere of victory, of the excitement of the day, one cannot say for sure that there were no lack of vigilance, no fatigue nor arrogance.

1. The confusion in changing weapons

During the battle on the 5th, twice there was confusion in changing the weapons for the deck planes which had already been equipped with torpedoes. It took about two hours to make one conversion and during that time the carried exposed itself most dangerously to an enemy air attack by laying out explosives on its deck. The problem is how to limit the time of exposing one’s weakness during a tense battle situation. It goes without saying that one needs self-examination as to the thoroughness of prior reconnaissance, the securing of anti-aircraft defense capability and the reduction of the time necessary for changing weapons by training. However, basically a searching self-examination is called for by the fact that one was put in a position to implement an operation which had two different, unattainable goals at the same time. The results of the Midway operation two months later show that there had been no systematic self-examination including no improvement in the equipment techniques.

1. The standard of judgement for military achievements and the basis for leaving the sea region of the operation.

The commander of the mobile forces made a judgement of the situation in the sea region of the operation and left for the eastern sea area. He thought that the enemy forces around the Bay of Bengal were not great, that more than half of the enemy forces around the Island of Ceylon had been destroyed, that the number of large enemy attack planes around India was small, and that there was a lack in aggressive fighting spirit among the enemy. He believed that this operation had accomplished its original purpose. Once this purpose was achieved, he judged that it was not advisable for the mobile forces to stay around the Indian Ocean too long. Therefore, they moved towards the East.

However, it is possible to surmise that there is a problem with the basic argument for having left the sea region of the operation because of satisfaction with the war results. According to the above-mentioned *Full Report of the Fifth Air Combat Squadron*, even though the mobile forces had two purposes: the air-raid on the Island of Ceylon and the destruction of the enemy fleet, it seems that they put more emphasis on the first and were satisfied with the results and left the war area without seeking the opportunity to engage the enemy fleet further. The possible reason for this can be found in a subtle discordance in the understanding of the operation’s purposes which each upper commanding unit (the Imperial Headquarters, the Combined Fleet, and the Southern Forces) intended. It seems that everyone mistakenly assumed that everyone else understood the operation’s purposes the same way as oneself, and everyone contented himself with the war achievements in the atmosphere of victory. Maybe it was a precaution to preserve the fleet for the subsequent battles of Midway. However, further research in this matter is required.

In conclusion, the author believes that this operation caused considerable sacrifice and hardship for the people of the Island of Ceylon. At that time Japan was fighting its enemy, Britain, and harboured no hostility towards the people of the Island of Ceylon; rather a feeling of affection would continue in the future.