

THE INDIAN OCEAN

THE MOST DANGEROUS MOMENT

The Indian Ocean has been termed the Maritime Silk Road connecting Asia, the Middle East and Europe. During the Second World War control of the Indian Ocean was critical for Allied convoys delivering aid to China and the U.S.S.R. and the deployment of troops from India, South Africa and Australia. This fact was not lost on the Axis powers: Germany, Italy and Japan all of whom sent naval vessels into the Indian Ocean to disrupt Allied convoys.

The Indian Ocean was the only sphere of military operations where the Axis could coordinate their actions. Fortunately for the Allies there was no coordination at all but this did not mean there was no strategic threat. Italian and German submarines were active on the East African coast but once the Italians lost its colonies in Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia the submarines had no bases and could not be supported. The Germans also sent armed merchant raiders, these had some success but eventually they were either sunk, withdrawn back to Europe or moved into the Pacific.

With the loss of Malaya, Burma and the Dutch East Indies the Japanese had the opportunity to extend their offensive into the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal with all that implied for British control of the India and the seas around the continent.

In April 1942 The Japanese under the command of Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo sortied into the Indian Ocean with five Aircraft Carriers carrying over 300 planes. The purpose of Nagamo's offensive, named Operation C, was to catch the Royal Navy's Eastern Fleet in Trincomalee Harbour or Columbo Harbour in Ceylon. Prewarned by intelligence sources the British dispersed shipping from all of Ceylon's harbours.

On 5 April 1942 Nagumo's aircraft arrived over Columbo and proceeded to destroy the port facilities and the remaining shipping in the harbour. The RAF put up a spirited defence but a failure in the early warning system meant that many defending fighters took off whilst under fire. Inevitably the RAF losses were high. A second Japanese strike against Columbo was cancelled as scout aircraft had discovered the cruisers HMS Dorsetshire and HMS Cornwall which

were quickly sunk, the light aircraft carrier HMS Hermes, minus its aircraft, was also discovered and sunk. The remaining elements of the Eastern Fleet, including the fast carriers HMS Indomitable and HMS Formidable, were not found as Admiral Somerville, after inspecting the base at Trincomalee, deemed the port to be inadequate and very vulnerable. He found a suitable harbour, isolated and with safe, deep-water anchorage at Addu Atoll in the Maldives and some 600 miles south west of Ceylon.

Nagumo, having caused a major crisis, did not exploit the chaos he caused and withdrew from the Indian Ocean. Four of his carriers were sent into the Pacific where they were sunk in the Battle of Midway in June 1942. Six months after the attack on Pearl Harbour the Japanese had lost the lead in that vital element of the Pacific War-carrier strength.

Nagumo's withdrawal allowed the British to rebuild its naval strength in the western Pacific and this would result in the largest Royal Navy largest Fleet. This Fleet would go onto to support the Americans in the Pacific in 1945 as well as carrying out operations against the Japanese in what was the Dutch East Indies. The British were also mindful that, had there been any degree of cooperation between the Axis powers, the Japanese could have used the Vichy French Island of Madagascar as a base. Strategically this would have been a disaster for the Allies so to ensure this would never happen the island was invaded and taken by the Allies.

Churchill wrote of the battle for Ceylon.

“The most dangerous moment of the war and one which caused me the greatest alarm was when the Japanese Fleet was heading for Ceylon and the naval base there. The capture of Ceylon, the consequent control of the Indian Ocean and the possibility at the same time a German conquest of Egypt would have closed the ring and the future would have looked black”