

Kanoya Air Group of Kanoya Kōkūtai (751 Ku), Genzan Air Group of Genzan Kōkūtai (753 Ku), and the Mihoro Air Group of Mihoro Kōkūtai (701 Ku)

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OPERATIONS OF 22ND AIR FLOTILLA IN MALAYA

TOKYO

14 NOVEMBER 1945

Interrogation of: [Captain SONOKAWA, Kameo](#), IJN; Flight Leader of Genzan Air Corps in Genzan, Korea from 1 September 1941 to 1 April 1942.

Interrogated by: Commander T. H. Moorer, USN.

SUMMARY

This interrogation is concerned with the operations of the Japanese naval land-based aircraft during the occupation of British MALAYA. Captain SONOKAWA was commanding officer of the Genzan Air Group and has furnished a detailed and interesting account of the sinking of HMS REPULSE and HMS PRINCE OF WALES.

TRANSCRIPT

Q. What naval air forces were based in SAIGON Area at the beginning of the war?

A. There were three units comprising the 22nd Air Flotilla:

GENZAN--36 BETTYS, 12 in reserve

MIHORO--36 BETTYS, 12 in reserve

KANOYA--27 BETTYS, 9 in reserve

Also attached directly to the 22nd Air Flotilla were 18 fighter planes (six in reserve) and six reconnaissance planes. GENZAN was situated at SAIGON, MIHORO located about 20 miles north of SAIGON, KANOYA Force established about 60 miles southwest of SAIGON.

Q. During the invasion of the PHILIPPINES and the NETHERLANDS EAST INDIES what was the mission of the 22nd Air Flotilla based in SAIGON?

A. We had no participation in the PHILIPPINES Operations. We acted in direct support of the MALAYAN invasion and gave slight support in the BORNEO and JAVA Operations. For operations in the PHILIPPINES and NETHERLANDS EAST INDIES the 11th Air Fleet, less

the 22nd Air Flotilla, was responsible. The GENZAN Air Group, which I commanded, later became the 755th Air Squadron.

Q. Was the GENZAN Air Group controlled by the 11th Air Fleet?

A. Yes, all naval air forces at SAIGON were under the 11th Air Fleet at TAKAO.

Q. What was the state of training of GENZAN Air Group?

A. It was the best unit in the 11th Air Fleet, which was manned with very experienced and competent pilots.

Q. What type of attack did you specialize in?

A. Bombing and torpedo attacks against ships, also night operations.

Q. Was special torpedo attack training given?

A. Yes, each pilot was trained with live torpedoes.

Q. Explain the basic torpedo tactics used by you.

A. Although the ordnance department claimed that the torpedoes could be dropped at an altitude of 500 meters, we found by experience that only 10 per cent would run properly at 200 meters and 50 per cent at 100 meters. Consequently an effort was made to drop at from 20 to 50 meters. Since the aircraft torpedo was dropped at short ranges, the low altitude also afforded protection because of depressing limit of AA guns. Pilots were instructed to attempt to drop the torpedo in such a manner that it struck the ship immediately after it leveled off at set depth. Of course conditions varied but a standard drop was made from a range of 600 to 400 meters, at a speed of 160 to 170 knots and at an altitude of from 20 to 50 meters. The aircraft torpedo was armed immediately after striking the water. It weighed 800 kg. and had a 145 kg. warhead. The above tactics were used by our carrier planes against your LEXINGTON. After the Battle of the CORAL SEA the size of the warhead was increased to 220 kg.

Q. How were the Repulse and Prince of Wales first located?

A. We had previous intelligence reports that the British battleships were probably in the area but did not know for sure. On 8 December the ships were photographed in SINGAPORE Harbor. There were no air searches on 9 December because of bad weather. However, on afternoon of 9 December the ships were sighted by a submarine which gave their position (approximately 7° North, 105° East, course 000 degrees).

Q. Upon learning of the position of the two ships, what action was taken?

A. We received the first sighting report from a submarine at 1600, 9 December. The message was originated at 1400 but not received at the 22nd Air Flotilla Headquarters until two hours later. At that time we were in the process of loading bombs for an attack on SINGAPORE Harbor. We re-armed with torpedoes as quickly as possible. This was not finished until 1800 and although it was getting dark we decided that in spite of difficulties we would attempt a night

torpedo attack because it was feared that the REPULSE and PRINCE OF WALES would attack our invasion transports. In order to cooperate with the aircraft and sink any damaged enemy ships, the HARUNA and KONGO were also ordered to make contact if possible. Due to bad weather the aircraft were unable to locate the enemy ships and returned without mishap about midnight. At 0315, 10 December a contact report was received from a second submarine which gave a new position indicating that the ships were heading south and returning to SINGAPORE. At 0600, 10 planes (GENZAN, two 60 kg. bombs) were launched to conduct a sector search for the enemy ships. About one hour later the striking force, composed of 88 aircraft (27 bombers, 61 torpedo planes) was ordered to proceed to the best estimated position of the enemy ships. The striking group was organized into 9 plane flights which proceeded south along the 105th meridian as soon as they rendezvoused. Because of reduced visibility the search planes did not discover the enemy ships until after beginning the return leg. At 1100 the contact was broadcast to the striking group and headquarters.

Q. Describe the method of attack. Who controlled the attack?

A. The attacks were controlled by the flight leaders and were ordered according to the situation. The general plan was to attack continuously, leading off with a bombing attack from 2500 meters by the GENZAN Group. They were followed in turn by the MIHORO and KANOYA Groups as soon as they arrived. The first attack began about 1130.

Q. Approximately how many planes attacked each ship?

A. The planes divided their attack approximately as shown below:

	PRINCE OF WALES		REPULSE		Total
	Bombers	Torpedo planes	Bombers	Torpedo planes	
GENZAN group	9	9		9	27
MIHORO group	9	9	9	8	35
KANOYA group		6		20	26
Total	18	24	9	37	88

Q. Why were more torpedoes directed at the REPULSE than the PRINCE OF WALES?

A. The first attack by the GENZAN planes was successful in slowing the REPULSE to such an extent that the pilots were attracted to the crippled target. It was originally planned to concentrate on the PRINCE OF WALES.

Q. Estimate the number of hits received by the British ships.

A. The REPULSE was hit by one or two bombs and about 12 torpedoes. The PRINCE OF WALES was hit by one bomb and 10 torpedoes. I am not sure about the bomb hits.

Q. How many aircraft were lost?

A. A total of 4 aircraft were lost during the attacks, one by the GENZAN Unit and three by the KANOYA Unit. I think their (KANOYA) loss was caused by the high altitude they used to drop the torpedoes. Since they were the last to attack their losses should have been less.

Q. Did all planes of the striking group take part in the attack?

A. No, a few bombers became separated and attacked a British minelayer, also one bomber formation made a premature drop. The leader dropped by mistake and everyone followed suit.

Q. What were the weather conditions at the time of attack?

A. Weather was clear over ships; some cumulus at 500 meters.

Q. At what time did the British ships sink?

A. REPULSE sank 1230, PRINCE OF WALES about 30 minutes later.

Q. What was the location of the sinking?

A. The scene of action was about 50 miles east of KWANTAN Airfield (4° N, 104° E). I think the ships were separated about 5 miles when they sank.

Q. What happened after the attack?

A. After the attack one plane was left to observe results. He remained on station until both ships sank. During this time ten BUFFALO fighters arrived but the observing plane managed to escape. Japanese fighters arrived too late to take part in the action. Six or seven bombers were reloaded for the second attack but before they could take off word was received of the sinking.

Q. What was the general operating condition in the SAIGON Area so far as airfields, technicians, etc. were concerned?

A. Supplies of fuel, parts, etc. were very good during MALAYAN Operation; also the maintenance was excellent. Furthermore, the type of pilot we had was high standard and during the whole MALAYAN Campaign my unit lost only two planes, one at PRINCE OF WALES and REPULSE battle and one at SINGAPORE. We always had full strength of 36 planes.

Q. What was the gist of the operation order for the MALAYAN Campaign so far as aircraft were concerned?

A. There were two missions: one was offensive, to support operations in MALAYA, British BORNEO, and JAVA; second was reconnaissance of the South CHINA SEA. We did not support land operations in MALAYA because that was an Army job, but we were ordered to attack the British Fleet at SINGAPORE.

Q. What Army air forces were available in SAIGON Area to support the MALAYAN Campaign?

A. About 200 planes.

Q. What mission was assigned Army planes?

A. Direct cooperation with the MALAY Landing, the Navy didn't cooperate directly at all.

Q. What effect did this tremendous success have on your future planning?

A. One result was the adoption of my conception that torpedo bombing at 20 meters was more efficient. Second result was the emergence of the conception that the airplane was more powerful than the ship. We had a conception that the aerial torpedo was very effective and so we increased torpedo training. Also the morale of the air personnel was raised very much. However the Japanese still did not fully appreciate air power. Failure to recognize value of air power was one of the greatest causes of our defeat.

Q. What missions did the 22nd Air Flotilla at SAIGON perform in the occupation of British BORNEO?

A. While our basic directive was to support and participate in North BORNEO Operations, the landings and operations there were so simple that there was nothing for us to do; so actually we didn't do a thing.

Q. After the MALAYAN force moved from SINGAPORE down to BATAVIA. did the 22nd Air Flotilla participate in any way in the JAVA and SUMATRA Occupation?

A. We had nothing to do with the SUMATRA Operation but cooperated in the JAVA Operation in two ways. One was escort of convoys to the landing point west of BATAVIA. Second way was to attack combined naval units coming out of BATAVIA to resist the landing forces.

Q. In the meantime, did you search and do escort work in the southwest area during December, January and February?

A. Until middle of January 1942 we patrolled South CHINA SEA; after that time we patrolled the JAVA SEA.

Q. How far to the eastward did you patrol the JAVA SEA?

A. Patrolled the western part of the JAVA SEA to center of JAVA.

Q. What were your total combat losses in aircraft in these three squadrons up until the capture of JAVA?

A. Altogether GENZAN lost two, MIHORO one, KANOYA three.

Q. Did you make any attacks on American submarines in this area?

A. Never sighted any.

(Note: The remaining part of this interrogation covers operations during the Allied move toward the PHILIPPINES in 1944.)

Q. On 1 August 1944 what forces were assigned to the 23rd Air Flotilla?

A. After August 1944 the 23rd was a maintenance unit with no planes.

Q. From 1 August 1944 until February 1945 did the 23rd Air Flotilla continue to act as a maintenance and upkeep unit?

A. Yes, until February 1945 our function was merely maintenance and defence. Defence was carried out by anti-aircraft guns not by planes. However, the Army had heavy-bombers based at KENDARI for attacks on MOROTAI.

Q. What bases were under your command?

A. We had only two bases, KENDARI and AMBESIA (15 miles south of KENDARI).

Q. Who maintained the other bases in the CELEBES Area?

A. 13th Air Fleet.

335

Q. Were the aircraft operating from these bases Army or Navy?

A. Army.

Q. Were there any naval land-based aircraft in the CELEBES-BORNEO Area after 1 August 1944?

A. No, these were the only bases used and they were for maintenance. At BALIKPAPEN the 13th Air Fleet had fighters for defensive work. 13th Air Fleet Headquarters were at SINGAPORE.

Q. What other forces were controlled by 13th Air Fleet?

A. BALIKPAPEN, 381st Squadron--70 fighters; SINGAPORE, 331st Squadron--10 fighters plus about 20 carrier type bombers. About 90 training planes were scattered through SINGAPORE and JAVA Area.

Q. Was the mission of these planes at SINGAPORE and BALIKPAPEN purely defensive?

A. I know for certain the planes based at BALIKPAPEN were for defense. The mission of the planes of the 13th Air Force is not certain.

Q. Did the Navy at that time (Fall 1944) abandon bases around JAVA SEA Area?

A. 13th Air Force was using them, but we were in the process of abandoning the fields and were getting rid of all the planes which were operational and could fly away.

Q. What aircraft in the BORNEO-CELEBES Area were responsible for the defence of MOROTAI, BRUNEI Bay and TARAKAN Area?

A. The Army. The Navy maintained certain bases. The 7th Air Army was responsible for the defence of MOROTAI. No Navy planes were available, only defense personnel on the spot.

Q. Did any of the 11th Air Fleet or the 22nd Air Flotilla have any previous combat experience in CHINA?

A. The whole 11th Air Force in its entirety participated in air attacks on CHINA, based at HANKOW and attacked CHUNGKING. This was July and August 1941 before basing at FORMOSA.

Note:

When furnishing details concerning the PRINCE OF WALES and REPULSE action, Captain SONOKAWA was assisted by Commander SHIGEMURA, intelligence officer of the 22nd Air Flotilla.

336

During recent years I have been fortunate in forging many close friendships with men who served onboard the ill fated British Capital ships HMS Prince of Wales and HMS Repulse; primarily because my own father served on Repulse up until the battlecruisers demise, along with the Prince of Wales at the hands of Japanese aircraft, off the coast of Malaya on December 10, 1941.

Consequently, a number of years ago I felt compelled to recollect the wartime memoirs of six men that served onboard Repulse, within the form of a limited publication entitled 'Sailors' Tales'.

Whilst conducting background research for this project, my father constantly reminded me of the sheer bravery shown by Japanese pilots that attacked the ships. Going on to describe their torpedo attacks as far in excess of anything he had ever witnessed at hands of our antiquated 'Swordfish' in training exercises during the early phases of WW2. Eventually I became convinced that I must locate (if possible) one of the pilots that attacked the ships. And after a series of correspondences with the Japanese Embassy in London, I made contact with one such man, Lt Haruki Iki of the Kanoya Air Corps.

I must admit, the first time I put pen to paper dutifully requesting his account of the battle, I felt mixed emotions; primarily because 840 British sailors perished during the battle. Nevertheless, my father and his shipmates held no resentment for Iki and his comrades, to the contrary they welcomed any contribution he could offer towards the compilation of 'Sailors' Tales'. However, there was another aspect to this: what if Iki was offended by my letter, what if he shunned my request? Hence my initial correspondence respectfully enquired of him to furnish me with his personal account of the battle. He soon replied, his sense of honour was immediately evident. Iki informed that provided I send him a draft copy of 'Sailors' Tales' and depicted the battle (from his perspective) in a factually correct manner, he would offer every assistance. Needless to say, I complied with his wishes.



Iki pictured on Graduation from Naval Academy November 17, 1934

Whilst affording attention to the Iki's brief account of the battle (which accompanies this introduction) I feel the reader should be made aware of one other important issue. This being, the actions of this honourable man the day after Repulse and Prince of Wales were sunk. I must admit that Iki had not drawn my attention to the following fact; rather I had become aware of it when reading the late Professor Arthur Marders work 'Old Friends – New Enemies'. During which the Professor, erroneously I add, describes Iki's post battle actions. The reason I state 'erroneously' is that I have a letter from Iki which is at odds with Marders account.

Such issues aside, during the battle several planes were shot down. In point of fact, Iki's two wingmen succumbed to anti-aircraft fire from Repulse, whilst they executed the final assault against the battlecruiser. Iki was so moved by their sacrifice that the following day he flew (solo) over the site of the previous days battle; dropping two wreaths. I naturally enquired as to why he did this; his reply shocked. One (understandably) was for his fellow members of the Kanoya Air Corps who had lost their lives during the action. However, the other wreath was a mark of respect from his Air Corps to all ratings from Repulse and Prince of Wales that had perished in defence of their ships. I also know from later correspondences with Iki, that the acts of bravery carried out by men from these ships remains etched in the memories of their former adversaries.

Questions and answers set for Lt Haruki Iki formerly of the Kanoya Air Corps.



Iki pictured at the controls of the 'Betty' torpedo bomber in which he attacked HMS Repulse.