

# CHURCHILL'S GREATEST FEAR

Just months after Pearl Harbor Japanese carrier aircraft would again launch a tactical masterstroke. Professor of Naval History, Eric Grove, explains how the IJN forayed into the Indian Ocean in the Easter of 1942.

**IMAGE** *Pt Off Jimmy Whalen downs two Vals in one pass over Ceylon, 5 April 1942. He downed another later that engagement. (ANTONIS KARIDIS)*  
**INSET** *Whalen with his Hurricane. (VIA ANDREW THOMAS)*

What was Winston Churchill's greatest wartime fear? Defeat in the Battle of Britain? Capitulation at Dunkirk? The U-Boat Menace? Surely, German invasion? According to Lester Pearson, Canadian Ambassador and later Prime Minister, Churchill 'considered the most dangerous moment of the war, and the one that caused him the greatest alarm, was when the news was received that the Japanese Fleet was heading for Ceylon'. This thrust into the Indian Ocean not only threatened the Empire but also the main line of communication to the vital Persian oilfields and the whole

British position in the Middle East.

The Japanese Naval Attaché in Berlin had long been pressured to carry out a coordinated move on Ceylon, information the British knew. But, Japan had very much its own agenda and although a move to take Ceylon had its attractions, shortages of troops and shipping required in the war against the Americans or in Burma precluded such a manoeuvre. There were other priorities; New Guinea was yet to fall and a major operation would be required to complete its conquest. This might be followed up by a move to the southeast to isolate Australia. >>



However, the American fleet was far from defeated, as was proven by the offensive activities of its aircraft carriers around the Japanese Empire's periphery. There was, therefore, a need to concentrate on an action to finish it off.

The destruction of the US Fleet became the main objective but other potential axes of attack and equally the British Eastern Fleet could not be ignored. The decision was taken to adopt a three-stage strategy. First, there would be Operation 'C', a raid to destroy British bases in Ceylon. This would cover the western flank of the

**RIGHT**  
HMS Cornwall.  
(HMP/NHHC)

**BELOW**  
Flagship Force 'B',  
HMS Resolution  
(V. Adm Algernon  
Willis, Somerville's  
2-in-C). Despite  
appearances, the  
unmodernised  
battleship was  
comparatively  
vulnerable.  
Behind her is HMS  
Formidable.



expedition to take Port Moresby and complete the New Guinea campaign. Finally, an operation was to be mounted against Midway, to bring on the final action with the Americans.

**POWERFUL STRIKE FORCE**

The Japanese force to carry out the raid was the same 'Kido Butai' group under

**BELOW**  
Somerville's flag,  
the modernised  
HMS Warspite  
with the Dutch  
cruiser Jacob Van  
Heemskerck.

Vice Admiral Nagumo that attacked Pearl Harbor. The carrier *Kaga* had been damaged, reducing the striking force to five carriers, however, the veteran group was still potent. The flagship *Akagi* with 27 'Zero' fighters, 18 'Val' dive bombers and 27 'Kate' level/torpedo bombers; *Hiryu* and *Soryu*, each with 21 'Zeros', 21 'Vals' and 21 'Kates'; and *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku* with 18 'Zeros', 27 'Vals' and 27 'Kates' each. A formidable group, almost certainly the most powerful carrier striking force on the planet.

Kido Butai sailed for the Indian Ocean on 26 March, the carriers accompanied by all four Kongo-class battleships, the seaplane cruisers *Tone* and *Chikuma* and the light cruiser *Abukuma*, which was leading a number of destroyers. Nagumo decided to attack Colombo on Easter Sunday, 5 April, hoping to catch

the British by surprise by striking on a holiday morning with most of the fleet in port. He hoped for a repeat of Pearl Harbor.

British codebreaking revealed an attack was on the way, although it was thought the blow would fall on 1 April. A new Eastern Fleet had just been assembled with Vice Admiral Sir James Somerville at the helm, and although the Prime Minister considered the command something of a poisoned chalice, a better choice of commander could not have been made. Somerville was thoughtful, progressive and fully aware of the potential of naval air power which he had exercised in command of Force 'H' - effectively the Royal Navy's first carrier taskforce. He was ordered to remain on the defensive, but the intelligence break presented an opportunity.



On paper, Somerville's command looked powerful, five battleships, three aircraft carriers, seven cruisers and 16 destroyers. All was not as it seemed, however. The only modernised battleship was Somerville's flag, *Warspite*, fresh from repairs at Bremerton after the damage she received off Crete. The other four battleships were all R-class, *Resolution*, *Royal Sovereign*, *Ramillies* and *Revenge*. These were powerful but not modern. They were slow and short-ranged, only capable of 18 knots for up to four days.

The main weakness was the air. Interwar problems; staff convinced naval aircraft were inevitably of lower performance than land-based types, and that guns and armour were the main defences of carriers, plus a national priority for strategic air warfare, had long rooted. The two new armoured-deck carriers *Indomitable* and *Formidable*, carried between them 25 single-seat



“A formidable group, almost certainly the most powerful carrier striking force on the planet.”

fighters, nine Sea Hurricanes and 16 Martlets. Joining them, 12 Fulmar two-seat fighter aircraft, 45 Albacore torpedo bombers and a single Swordfish tasked with towing targets. The air components were understrength, but just about adequate.

Another dozen Swordfish were on *Hermes*, the first carrier ever laid down as such, though *Hosho* was the first purpose-built carrier to be launched. *Hermes* had been placed in reserve in

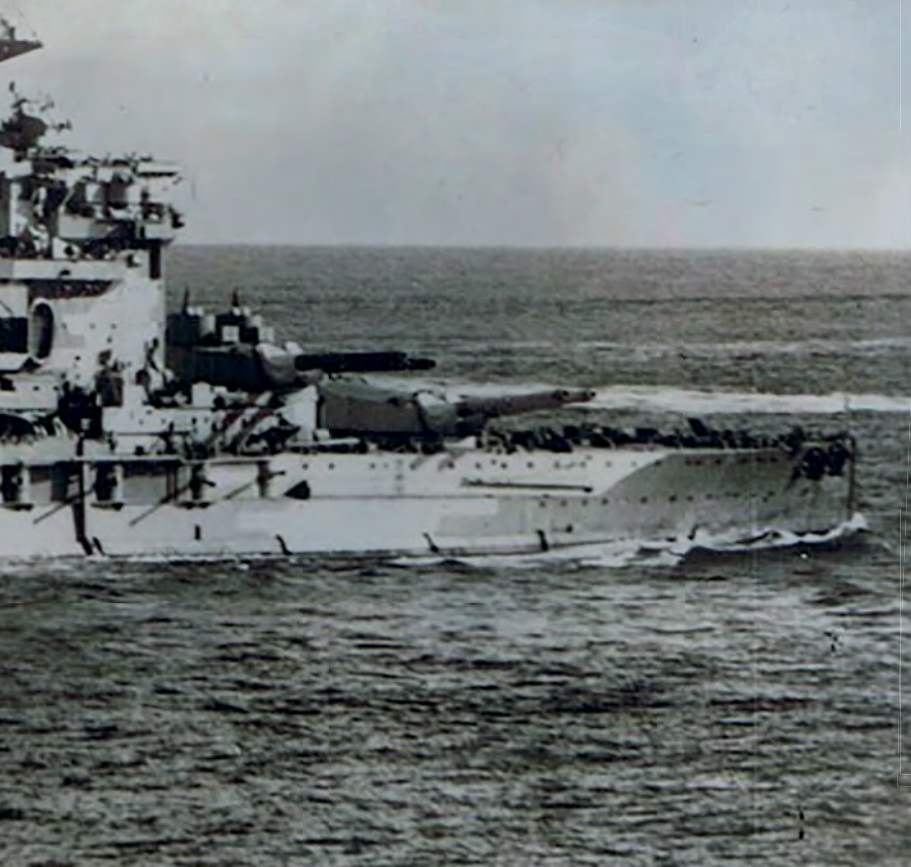
1937, forced back into frontline use after a quick refit in August 1939.

With the assistance of radar and a developing technique of fighter control, the carriers could defend themselves efficiently, if briefly, until Japanese numbers told; the agile Zeros outnumbered the Sea Hurricanes and Martlets four to one, while Fulmars were outclassed by the Japanese fighters. They were otherwise highly capable of disrupting Kates until Zeros disposed of

**ABOVE**  
Adm. Sir James Somerville (r), C-in-C Eastern Fleet, on *Warspite*.

**BELOW**  
V.Adm Chuichi Nagumo on the bridge of his flagship, *Akagi*.

them; Vals stood a good chance against Fulmars, though, once they had dropped their bombs. The Albacores were death traps by day but could operate at night; using highly secret search radar and flares. The Fulmars, which had one advantage – low-level performance – were also night operable. Fighting at night was a vital capability Somerville sought to exploit, his one true advantage, although he had serious misgivings about the training of his pilots and >>





ships have hardly been in company with another ship during the war. On top of that most of my staff are pretty green, I have to supervise almost everything myself. It will improve as time goes on but it certainly is a devil of a job at present.'

Somerville hoped for support from Ceylon-based aircraft. Especially useful were Catalina flying boats, as reconnaissance would be vital. Eight were arriving at Koggala. At the end of March, however, only one was serviceable, along with a Dutch Catalina required for liaison. There was a small force of 14 RAF Blenheim and six Fleet Air Arm Swordfish. Air defence – and potential fighter cover for Somerville – was provided by a joint RAF/FAA fighter component of 65 aircraft, three squadrons of Hurricanes and three of Fulmars.

observers, a motley crew of veterans and recruits, barely operable at best - A problem Nagumo did not have.

The Eastern Fleet also contained two heavy cruisers, *Cornwall* and *Dorsetshire*, five light cruisers, HMS *Enterprise*, *Emerald*, *Dragon*, *Caledon* and the Dutch *Jacob Van Heemskerck*, the heavy cruisers and two E-class ships were exceptionally fast, and well-armed. There were also 16 destroyers, a mix of British, Australian and Dutch vessels.

There had been no time to work up the biggest single fleet the Royal Navy had deployed so far in the war, and Somerville was concerned about its lack of training. Not since the start of the war had two British Fleet carriers

**ABOVE**

The Japanese strike force (L to R): *Akagi*, *Soryu*, *Hiryu*, *Hiei*, *Kirishima*, *Haruna*, and *Kongo* - taken from *Zuikaku*.

**RIGHT**

IJN carrier *Zuikaku* conducts operations off Ceylon, April 1942.

(BRITAIN AT WAR ARCHIVE)



operated together, and such a large force of battleships was an unusual luxury. Aware he could potentially lead the first carrier vs. carrier clash, he noted: *'The trouble is, the fleet I now have is much bigger than anything anyone has had to handle before or during this war. Everyone is naturally very rusty about during their "fleet stuff" - most*

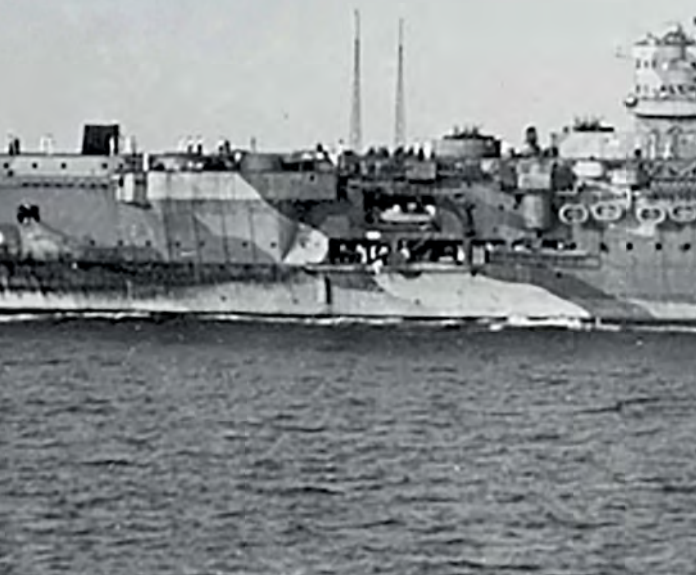
**BELOW**

Kido Butai commander, VAdm. Chuichi Nagumo. (NHHC)



**SECRET LAIR**

Despite his weaknesses Somerville had one fundamental advantage, key to his maintaining the Eastern Fleet as a 'fleet in being'. In actuality, he was not operating out of Ceylon, as the Japanese thought. He was located at a secret base 600 miles to the southwest, Addu Atoll, in the Maldives.





**ABOVE**  
A Bristol Blenheim of 11 Sqn takes off from the airfield at Colombo Racecourse.

**LEFT**  
Fulmars were important parts of both Force A's air group and the Ceylon-based fighter force, but were outclassed by Zeros.

The Admiral divided his fleet into two; 'A', a carrier task group based around *Warspite*, *Indomitable* and *Formidable*, escorted by the cruisers *Cornwall*, *Dorsetshire*, *Enterprise* and *Emerald* and six destroyers. Force 'B', was a slower group with the four 'R's, supported by *Hermes* for reconnaissance sorties and escorted by *Caledon*, *Dragon* and *Jacob van*

*Heemsherk* and eight destroyers.

Somerville sortied from Addu and had his fleet deployed in a waiting position south of Ceylon on 31 May. His aim was to avoid the Japanese by day but be in position to mount a surprise night attack with Albacore torpedo bombers, *Enterprise*, *Emerald* and his destroyers. If successful, this would leave cripples

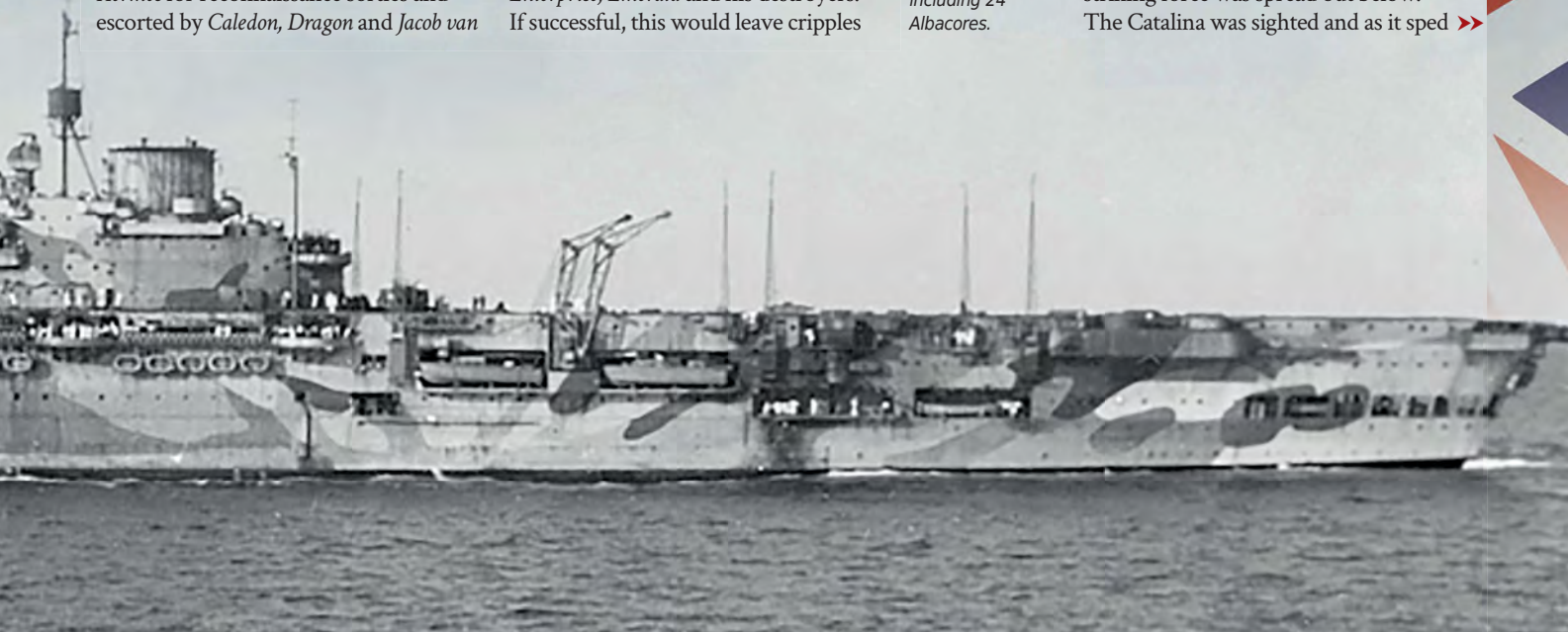
to be finished off by his heavy surface ships.

Nothing, however, turned up. Nagumo had delayed his move, awaiting confirmation the location of USN carriers last spotted off Wake Island. Some of Somerville's ships, designed for cold waters, were showing signs of the problems encountered when serving in the tropics. The 'R's were short of water and fuel and the ships' companies were suffering in stifling conditions. There were also fears of attack from submarines. Therefore, on the evening of 2 April Somerville ordered the fleet back to replenish. He had judged his position correctly. If the Eastern Fleet had remained, there would almost certainly have been a major action, probably with disastrous results. The British facing a vastly superior carrier force by day and Japanese destroyers superbly trained to fight at night with their long-range Long Lance torpedoes.

Perhaps considering that numerous attacks on individual merchant ships in the region was the extent of the raid, Somerville was now doubting his intelligence, and detached some units to Ceylon. *Dorsetshire* had interrupted a refit to join him and was sent to Colombo to resume it. *Cornwall* also went to Colombo to escort a convoy returning Australians home. The carrier *Hermes* and the Australian destroyer *Vampire* also detached for Trincomalee to prepare for the planned invasion of Madagascar.

As the Eastern Fleet began to arrive at Addu, Kido Butai was located. A first search to the east found nothing but a Canadian aircraft had taken off early on 4 April to scout 300 miles southeast of Ceylon. It was about to return to base when an object was sighted to the south. As the flying boat closed in, the Japanese striking force was spread out below. The Catalina was sighted and as it sped >>

**BOTTOM**  
*Indomitable* was the more powerful carrier in Force 'A'. She flew the flag of R. Adm Denis Boyd, and carried 45 aircraft, including 24 Albacores.



north, six Zeros were flown from *Hiryu* to intercept. Badly damaged the Catalina was forced down. Despite strafing, six survivors were picked up out of a crew of nine. They had sent off the vital, but garbled, signal reporting the existence of Japanese fleet, but not precisely what ships had been seen.

**ECHOES OF PEARL**

Somerville duly sailed. First went Force 'A', escorted by six destroyers, *Cornwall* and *Dorsetshire* immediately recalled. The next day Force 'B' sortied, four battleships (still short of water), three cruisers and eight destroyers. The aim



“A Japanese naval victory in April 1942 would have given Japan total control of the Indian Ocean, isolated the Middle East and brought down the Churchill government.” — Sir Arthur Bryant

was not to defend Ceylon but to be in position for a night attack as the Japanese withdrew.

At 03:00 on 5 April, Easter Sunday, Ceylon's defences were alerted and the harbours at Colombo and Trincomalee cleared, nearly 50 merchant ships

scattering away. At dawn, a wing of 127 aircraft flew towards Colombo, 53 Kate level bombers and 38 Val dive bombers, escorted by 36 Zeros. With echoes of Pearl Harbor, Ceylon's radar was not operational because of maintenance and relaxed shift changes. The range

of the Japanese air groups had been underestimated - it was thought there was enough time to get the system running.

The aircraft were spotted by patrolling Fulmars and a Catalina (coincidentally, the same one which found *Bismarck* the previous year) but were assumed to be British. There were also communications problems and apart from a lone pair of Hurricanes on patrol the Japanese were overhead the airfields at Ratmalana and Colombo Racecourse before any fighters took to the skies.

Caught over Colombo were six Swordfish, flying from Trincomalee to Ratmalana to refuel, before making

**ABOVE**  
IJN carrier *Akagi*, off Sukumo Bay, Shikoku, after her 1935-1938 refit, April 1939. (NHHC)

**LEFT**  
The view from a rear gunner of the IJN flagship, *Akagi*. On deck are a 'Kate' (left) and a 'Val'. *Akagi* carried 27 of the former and 18 of the latter.



an attack on the enemy fleet. All were dispatched. Nineteen Hurricanes and 12 Fulmars took off from Ratmalana but 13 of these aircraft, mostly Hurricanes, were lost. The Japanese were unaware of the fighters based at the Racecourse and the 17 Hurricanes there were able to surprise them. However, used to battling German and Italian fighters, the pilots made the mistake of dogfighting with Zeros and nine were lost. Fortunately, survival rates of Hurricane pilots over Ceylon were unusually high. The Japanese admitted five Vals lost and another two damaged - both ditched



much to the shock of Nagumo. A second strike stood by, but had been held back and reequipped to hit Ceylon. Hastily rearmed to tackle warships, the wing was sent to deal with these contacts. The spotted ships were *Cornwall* and *Dorsetshire*, speeding to join *Somerville*.

Fifty-three Vals from *Akagi*, *Hiryu* and *Soryu*, led by Lt Cmdr. Egusa, *Soryu's* air commander, gave a remarkable display of efficient dive-bombing. Walter Fudge was on *Dorsetshire*, he reflected: "A group of us were sitting in a movie house in Colombo, when on the screen, appeared 'MEN OF H.M. SHIPS RETURN TO THEIR SHIPS IMMEDIATELY'... back aboard ship and out to sea we went. It was 11:00pm and not until the next morning did we notice being in company with HMS *Cornwall*. Furthermore we had some of *Cornwall's* crew and *Cornwall* had some of ours."

The first aircraft was sighted at 11am, within three hours, the main attack force found their targets. Fudge remembered:

*"In less than ten minutes Dorsetshire was sunk and within five minutes more Cornwall went down too... Two shipmates went down in the mess and refused to leave the ship - they were non-swimmers. At a time like that it is every man for himself. I recall seeing our new Captain Agar VC giving a salute on the fo'c'sle intending to go down with the ship; but Cassier, another shipmate, would not allow that! He bundled him over the side... A yell from the bridge to the 4in AA crews - 'Why aren't you firing?' Reply - 'All dead except me!'"*

*[As she sank] there was no vortex - just ear-splitting noise from the bombs... The water was warm... We swam away and a few low-flying planes machine-gunned swimmers and I found a bullet in my ankle but only under the skin - the depth of water must have slowed down its velocity... We were [there] for over 30 hours - one man taken by a shark... Tropical sun and thirst were problems but the wounded had the worst time. Only one whaler boat survived and this was filled with the wounded and those badly burnt. The remainder of us clung to floating object, rafts, and floats." >>*

on return flight - though the British claimed 24 kills. The Japanese claimed 39 victories, but actually downed no more than 27 aircraft. The Blenheims hidden at Racecourse successfully formed up to attack the IJN carriers, but could not find them.

The Japanese were disappointed that, so to speak, the cupboard was largely bare in Ceylon's harbour. The destroyer *Tenedos*, immobilised and undergoing refit, was sunk as was the merchant cruiser *Hector*. The submarine depot ship *Lucia* was hit. Further damage was inflicted on harbour and railway installations and 85 civilians were killed and 77 injured. This was largely collateral for the Japanese concentrated on immediate military rather than logistical targets. What few bombs did land near the oil storage tanks hit a nearby hospital. There had been no raid warning and morale in Colombo cracked with an exodus from the city.

But, the main blow was still to fall. A seaplane sighted British ships hurtling south, to the west of the Kido Butai and

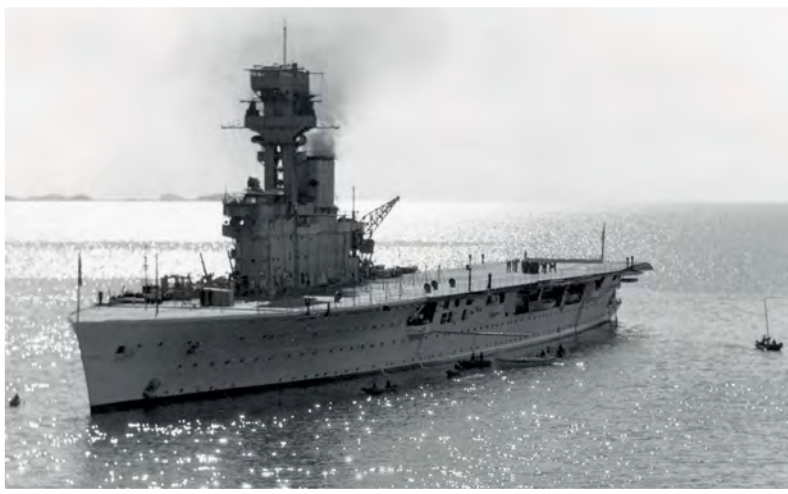
**TOP**  
*HMS Formidable launches one of her Albacores. The disparity between the strike aircraft of the two carrier groups is obvious.*

**ABOVE**  
*Sqn Ldr Birchall, whose Catalina made the first sighting of the IJN force. He was captured and endured a harrowing tenure as POW.*

**LEFT**  
*Kido Butai from Akagi. Astern are Soryu, Hiryu, the four Kongos, Zuikaku and Shokaku. Crew have added padding to Akagi's island.*







**LEFT**  
HMS Hermes off  
Yantai, 1931.  
(USN NATIONAL  
MUSEUM OF  
NAVAL AVIATION)

Despite greatly enhanced anti-aircraft armaments - and the fact the cruisers had long stood to - in just eight minutes, *Dorsetshire* was hit by several 250lb and 550lb bombs, one exploding a magazine. She sank by the stern at 13:50. Cornwall was hit eight times, sinking bow first five to ten minutes after her sister. Of their crews, 420 perished. The 1,126 survivors were picked up by the cruiser *Enterprise* and the destroyers *Paladin* and *Panther*.

Somerville, now promoted to full admiral, scrambled Albacores to try to find the Japanese carriers. Two of the aircraft were shot down but one found and partially reported Nagumo's force.

There was finally the chance for the desired night action, but, there was no information on enemy composition or a certain heading (last seen turning northwest). He could not plot an accurate course to attack and he could not position his ships to follow-up on the radar guided strike, at that moment stood ready, as further sorties failed to find the Japanese who were actually moving southeast. Somerville decided the Japanese outclassed him sufficiently, and that his only option was to withdraw. Both Churchill and First Sea Lord Pound approved intentions to send Force 'B' 'out of danger at the earliest moment' to the



**RIGHT**  
IJN carrier Hiryu,  
on speed trials,  
28 April 1939.  
(NHHC)

**RIGHT**  
IJN battleship  
Kirishima at Kure,  
March 1940.  
(KURE MARITIME  
MUSEUM)

**BELOW**  
Force B  
battleship,  
HMS Ramillies,  
pictured in 1920.  
(US LIBRARY OF  
CONGRESS)





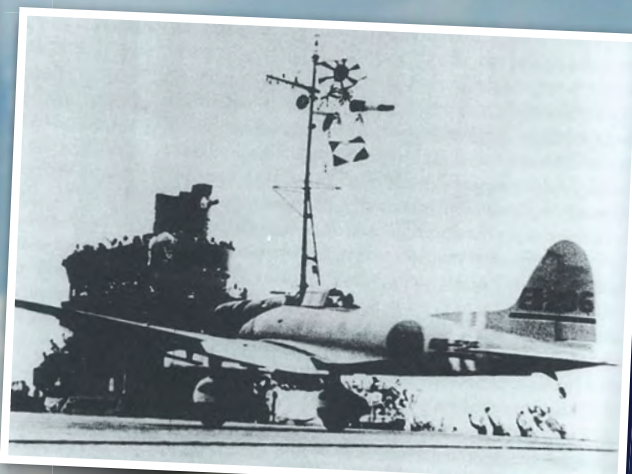
coast of Africa while Somerville was to take Force 'A' to Bombay.

On 9 April, the day the British forces withdrew from Addu, the Kido Butai was to the east of Ceylon and launched a major strike at Trincomalee. However, they had once again been spotted by a Catalina, and reports from the several merchant ships they had attacked confirmed their composition. The harbour was therefore cleared of all but the cargo ship *Sagaing* and the monitor *Erebus*. The most important of the ships escaping to sea was the *Hermes*, escorted by HMAS *Vampire*. Others were the corvette *Hollyhock*, the Royal Fleet Auxiliary oilers *Athelstane* and *Pearleaf*, and the tanker *British Sergeant*.

At sunrise, Nagumo launched 91 Kates, escorted by 38 Zeros. Despite the large wing assembled, the results were limited. *Erebus* was near-missed and *Sagaing* sunk. Damage was inflicted on what little dockyard facilities there were and 13 aircraft were destroyed and buildings hit at China Bay airfield.

This time radar warning was received and 15 Hurricanes were in the air along with six Fulmars; two more Hurricanes scrambled. They had learnt not to get into turning fights with the IJN fighters, but again the Japanese, still outmanoeuvring the British, won the air battle. Eight Hurricanes and a Fulmar were shot down in exchange for a Kate and two Zeros. Another Kate failed to return and two Zeros were shot down by AA while strafing China Bay. One crashed into a fuel storage tank north of the airfield, the only damage inflicted on the fuel sites.

Thinking they missed the bulk of the British fleet, chance would set the Japanese up for another raid. A seaplane from the battleship *Haruna* made the chance sighting of the escaped British ships 65 miles to the south of Trincomalee, heading for the Maldives. The British noticed the spotter, and ordered an immediate return to port.



**TOP**  
A Val dive-bomber takes off from *Akagi*. The type was a formidably accurate platform and could also serve as an effective fighter.

**ABOVE**  
Survivors from HMS *Dorsetshire* pictured on the deck of HMS *Paladin*. (HMP)

Nagumo, again thinking he'd been caught by the whole fleet, rearmed and sent off Egusa with 85 Vals flying from all five carriers, escorted by nine Zeros. This was a lesson the Japanese would not learn, a mistake they catastrophically repeated at Midway. *Hermes* was carrying no aircraft and had little AA protection. Plans to fit her with a High-Angle Control System, two eight gun pom-pom mounts, and to upgrade existing armaments, were repeatedly delayed and cancelled on the outbreak of war.

At least 32 bombers attacked *Hermes* and, despite the arrival of Fulmars, 90% of the released bombs hit home and she was quickly lost. On *Vampire*, they thought they escaped unscathed, until ➤

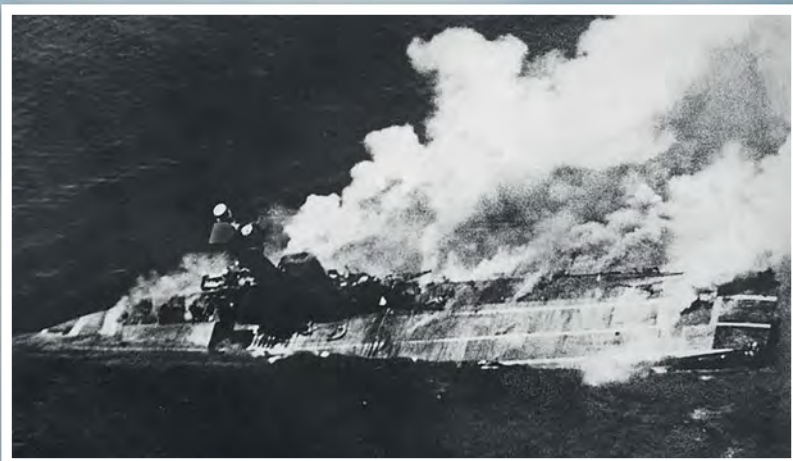


**RIGHT**  
HMS *Hermes*,  
battered by  
repeated bomb  
hits, sinks off  
Ceylon.

more aircraft came. She downed one of her attackers, but succumbed, breaking in two. Nine of her complement of 119 were killed. On *Hermes*, 307 were lost. The casualties included the captains of both ships. The survivors were picked up by the hospital ship, *Vita*.

**AT JAPAN'S MERCY**

*Soryu's Vals* sank *British Sergeant*, *Athelstane* and *Hollyhock* and only *Pearleaf* escaped. The British fighter screen lost two aircraft, but downed four Vals and damaged two more. As the Japanese strike wing returned, it found the *Kido Butai* under attack by nine *Blenheim* bombers flying from Colombo



“We were saved from this disaster by an airman on reconnaissance who spotted the Japanese fleet and, though shot down, was able to get a message through to Ceylon which allowed the defending forces there to prepare for the approaching assault; otherwise they would have been taken by surprise.” - Sir Winston Churchill

**RIGHT**  
One of a series  
of photos taken  
as *Hermes* sank.  
The negatives  
were underwater  
for four hours.  
Her crew  
clusters by the  
superstructure;  
On the horizon,  
ten miles distant  
is Ceylon.  
(HMP)

Racecourse. The carrier *Akagi* and the *Tone* bore the brunt, but were only near-missed – *Akagi* sustaining slight damage. Engaged by Zeros and Vals, five *Blenheims* were shot down, two Zeros were lost.

Nagumo, his mission accomplished, withdrew through the Straits of Malacca to participate in operations in the Pacific. After his visit to Bombay, Somerville, in *Warspite*, transported General Wavell, C-in-C India, to Colombo for discussions on the dire strategic situation. The Admiral's position was always untenable, and the British were unable to generate the deadly night attack that may have turned the potential first carrier vs carrier clash, a British Midway, but Somerville was nonetheless compared to Jellicoe, a man who could, but didn't, lose the war at sea in a single afternoon.

Both the Prime Minister and the First Sea Lord defended the commander from parliament, after all, the bulk of the fleet survived, and the Japanese were opposed. *Indomitable* and *Formidable* were sent to Kenya, where the fleet concentrated. These carriers, with *Warspite* and *Ramillies*, supported the

invasion of Madagascar and this success against Vichy France helped assure control of the sea off East Africa.

The rest of the Indian Ocean was, for now, at Japan's mercy. Only her lack of resources and other priorities saved the fleets of the British Empire. ☉

**BELOW**  
The burning  
hulks of heavy  
cruisers *Cornwall*  
and *Dorsetshire*  
as they sink.  
(ALL IMAGES VIA  
AUTHOR UNLESS  
OTHERWISE  
STATED)

