

TAC NEWS

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FORCE Z IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

UKN10

BB *Prince of Wales*



IJN11 CA *Atago*



IJN10 BB *Haruna*

Naval wargamers looking for a hypothetical battle scenario possible at the outbreak of the war in East Asia in 1941 need look no farther than the beginning of the Japanese invasion of Malaya, 8 December 1941. In response to Japanese landings on the shores of the Kra Isthmus in the Gulf of Siam, the British battleship *Prince of Wales* and battlecruiser *Repulse* sailed from Singapore on an ill-fated mission to attack the Japanese invasion transports. The two capital ships and their escort of four destroyers (designated Force Z) were commanded by Admiral Sir Tom Phillips. Historically, the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* did not contact any Japanese ships and both were attacked and sunk on 10 December by torpedo bombers of the Japanese 22nd Air Flotilla flying from airfields in Indochina.

Of interest to naval wargamers is that the British ships passed close by a group of Japanese warships during the night of 9 December, but neither the British nor the Japanese sighted each other. The Japanese warships were Adm. Kurita's Cruiser Division Seven of four *Mogami*-class heavy cruisers and three destroyers of the 11th Destroyer Division.

Kurita's cruisers and other groups of Japanese warships were searching for Force Z with orders to contact the British and make a night torpedo attack. At their closest point, Kurita's cruisers were on the south-bound leg of a search pattern and Force Z had just turned west towards Singora at 7:00 that evening. The British and Japanese ships were too far apart to sight each other visually, but with only a slight change of course these two forces could have made contact. According to one historian, "had Phillips continued to the north, he would have found Kurita's cruisers within the hour." Thus, contact with Kurita's Cruiser Division Seven depended on Force Z being about twenty miles north of its planned route after turning west towards Singora.

Historical background:

The Deployment and Loss of *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*.

The battleship *Prince of Wales* and battlecruiser *Repulse* were sent to Singapore as part of a long-term project to build up a powerful Eastern Fleet by the spring of 1942. Hopefully, a strong Eastern Fleet would deter Japanese aggression. The British Admiralty wanted

to send the battleships *Nelson*, *Rodney*, and four *Royal Sovereigns*, battlecruiser *Renown*, one aircraft carrier, ten cruisers and 24 destroyers, all to be assembled at Singapore by March 1942. In August 1941, the *Prince of Wales*, *Repulse* and the new CV *Indomitable* and the four *Royal Sovereign* class battleships were allocated to the Eastern Fleet. But fate stepped in. The *Indomitable* was damaged by accidental grounding off Kingston, Jamaica on 3 November 1941 and did not join the fleet.

In December 1941, the Commander-in-Chief, China, Admiral Sir Geoffrey Layton possessed only the old CLs *Danae*, *Dauntless* and *Durban* and two old destroyers at Singapore, three old destroyers at Hong Kong and two Royal Australian Navy (RAN) destroyers. Admiral Sir Tom Phillips succeeded Adm. Layton on 8 December. Before arriving at Singapore, Phillips met with the American C-in-C of the Asiatic Fleet, Admiral Thomas C. Hart, and decided on warship dispositions which stressed preventing the Japanese from penetrating the Malay Barrier. The British battle fleet was to be based on Singapore and act as a striking force against Japanese movements in the

(continued on page 4)



ROYAL NAVY: EASTERN FLEET

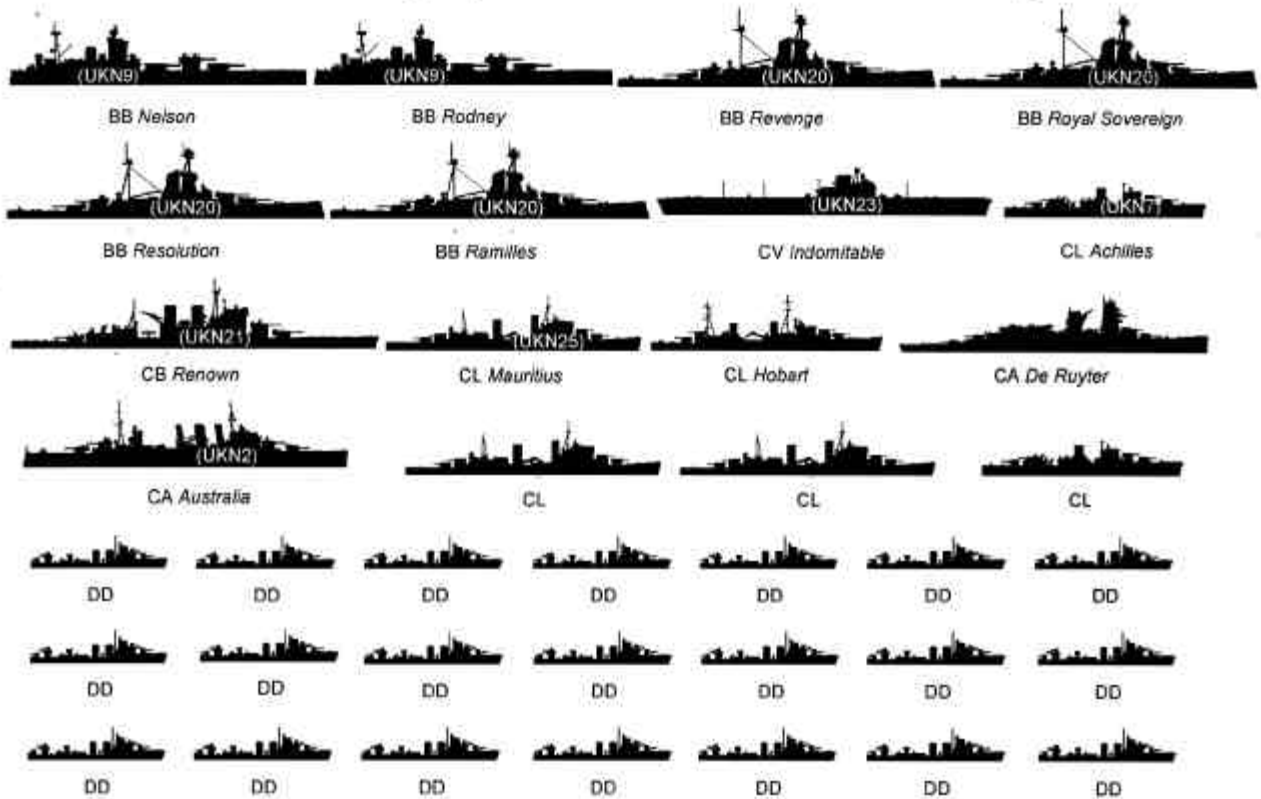
Force Z: Sortied Singapore 8 December 1941



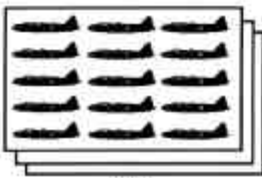
Forces Still in Singapore 8 December 1941



Forces to be Deployed to South China Theatre early 1942



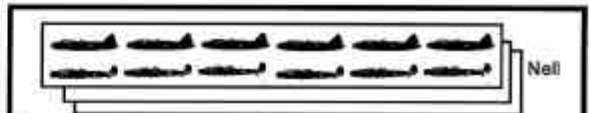
Imperial Japanese NAVY: 22ND NAVAL AIR FLOTILLA



Betty



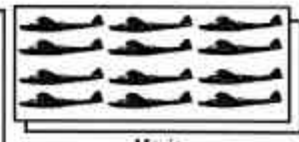
Nell



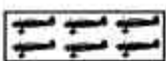
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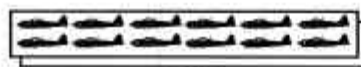
Mavis



Babs



Claude



Zeke

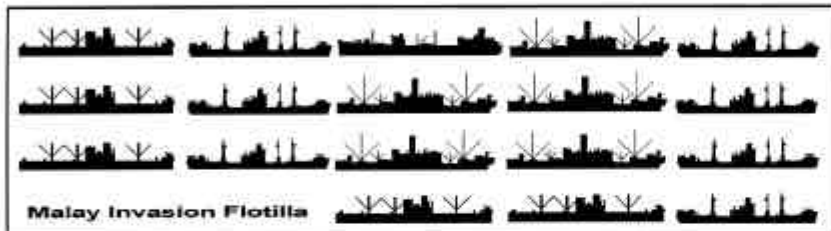
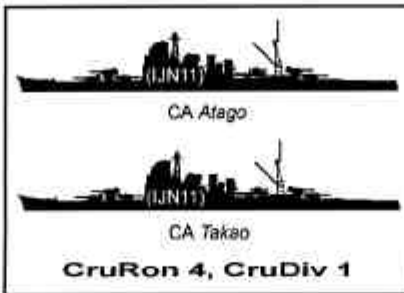
Attached to 22nd Naval Air Flotilla

Attached from 21st Naval Air Flotilla



Imperial Japanese NAVY: 2ND FLEET

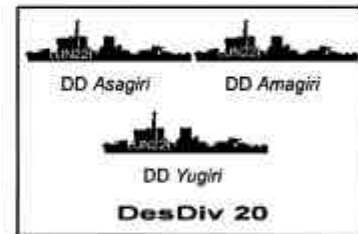
Southern Force: Malay Invasion Force Vice Admiral Kondo



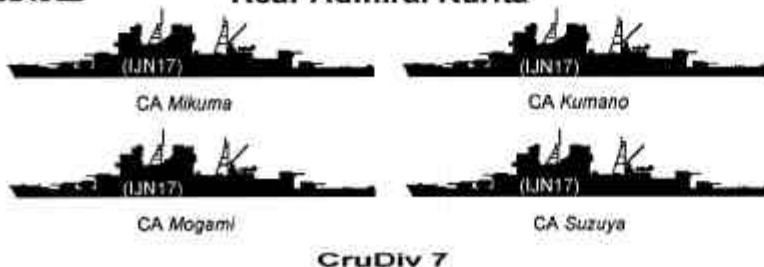
Southern Force: Covering Force Vice Admiral Ozawa



DesFlot 3



Southern Force: Covering Force Rear Admiral Kurita



On Station:
Ordered to report to Adm. Kondo



China Sea, Dutch East Indies or through the Malay Barrier. A second striking force of cruisers was to be based on East Borneo, Soerabaya and Port Darwin to cover and escort convoys. Warships then available to be based at Singapore included the *Prince of Wales*, *Repulse*, *Revenge*, *Royal Sovereign*, light cruisers *Mauritius*, *Achilles*, *Hobart* (RAN), *Tromp* or *De Ruyter* (Netherlands), possibly the heavy cruiser *Australia* (RAN), ten British, six Netherlands, and four United States destroyers. All these plans had to be set aside, however, after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

D-day for the Japanese invasion of the Malay Peninsula was 8 December. On 4 December, nineteen transports of the

invasion force sailed from Samah Bay, Hainan and on 6 December the force rounded Cape Kamao and headed up the Gulf of Siam. After making a feint toward Bangkok, the force changed course and headed for Singora, anchoring there at 11:40 the night of 7 December. From this force, detachments of transports were sent to other landing points on the coast.

The *Prince of Wales*, *Repulse* and destroyers *Electra*, *Express*, *Vampire*, and *Tenedos* sailed from Singapore at 5:35 p.m., 8 December to strike at reported Japanese landings in the Singora area. (*Tenedos* turned back for Singapore on the evening of 9 December to refuel.) On 9 December Admiral Phillips was informed that the expected air cover by Brewster

Buffalo fighter planes could not be provided because the Royal Air Force had been forced to evacuate its air base at Kota Bharu, the closest base from which the fighters could have reached Singora. Phillips was also informed that air attacks on Malaya were by Japanese aircraft flying from Indochina and that these planes could quickly be diverted to attack his ships.

Force Z on its northward journey was sighted and reported by submarine 165 on 9 December. Adm. Kondo then ordered all his transports to return to Siam and ordered his air fleet in Indochina to shadow the British. Reports by submarines and cruiser seaplanes kept Kondo informed of the location of Force Z. Next, Kondo ordered his warships to close in on the British. The light cruiser *Sendai* and her ten destroyers, with Kurita's Cruiser Division Seven, were to make a night attack on Force Z when it was sighted. Kondo would then bring up his fast battleships, more cruisers. The combined force would make a daylight attack.

Adm. Phillips did not know that the Japanese transports had departed. He continued on his planned course, hoping to surprise a Japanese convoy at Singora. However, after sighting several more Japanese reconnaissance planes he decided that his position was untenable and turned his force southward to return to Singapore. During the night of 9 December the British striking force passed very close to the Kurita's force. The two forces missed sighting each other in the dark, probably because Force Z changed course to the south and Kurita turned northeast to rendezvous with Admiral Kondo's distant cover force near Poulo Condore Islands. Unfortunately, based on a false report, on 10 December Phillips turned towards Kuantan to strike at a reported enemy landing force there. This move proved fatal, as Japanese aircraft flying from Indochina found and attacked his force. Both capital ships were sunk with the loss of more than eight hundred men.

