

NO ESCAPE *from* SUMATRA

It was an audacious operation: insert an MI9 team into Japanese-held Sumatra to locate Allied servicemen still at large, aid in their escape, and mount a recovery effort. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the ground element proved unsuccessful, but not so the airborne aspect, performed by RAF, Canadian and Dutch Catalinas **WORDS:** DAVID MILLER



On 19 October 1945, an unnamed RAF officer gave a talk on Radio Ceylon about No 222 Group, outlining its activities over the Indian Ocean from its establishment in 1942 to its recent disbandment. Hidden deep in his text was a passing reference to a 1942 operation by Consolidated Catalinas in which they conducted, “a bombing raid on Sabang, at that time the longest bombing mission of the war”. This was a veiled reference to an operation named ‘Minerva’, but what he could not say — because it was still classified ‘most secret’ — was that the bombing had actually been a diversion to cover the landing of a small group on a special operation, and while the air tasks went almost exactly as planned, the ground mission was a total failure.

Commanded by AVM Alan Lees DSO CBE AFC, No 222 (General Reconnaissance) Group was responsible for maritime reconnaissance over the Indian Ocean. Three of its Ceylon-based units, all flying Catalinas, took part in ‘Minerva’. No 205 Squadron was based at Koggala, a small town on the south-western coast of Ceylon, where a large lake is separated from the sea by a narrow strip of land. During the war this lake was developed into the largest seaplane base in the Far East. No 321 (Dutch) Squadron consisted of crews and aircraft from the Royal Netherlands Naval Air Service that had escaped from the disaster in the Dutch East Indies. Its main location was at RAF China Bay, close to Trincomalee, the primary Royal Navy base on the island, although the squadron had detachments all around the Indian Ocean. No 413 Squadron, Royal Canadian Air Force had moved from Stranraer to Koggala in Ceylon in April 1942, arriving just as the Imperial Japanese Navy conducted its only serious surface incursion into the Indian Ocean.

The Japanese struck on 7 December 1941 and quickly overran the Philippines, Malaya, Singapore and Burma, sweeping on to conquer the Dutch East Indies. By December 1942 they were threatening north-east India. But even before they had halted the Japanese advance, the Allies were already considering aggressive operations behind Japanese lines, and the body responsible for most of them was the Special Operations Executive (India). There seemed to be possibilities in Sumatra and its offshore islands, an area in which both the British and the Dutch had interests.



The initial operations in 1942 and some planned for 1943 involved transport by submarines, which were in very short supply. The first mission to Sumatra was by HNLMS K XV, which landed just one Dutch officer near Padang on 12 May 1942. He was quickly captured by the Japanese, tortured and shot as a spy. Seven months later another Dutch submarine, O 24, landed 10 men for 36 hours near Troemon on 12-14 December 1942. All were recovered and the vessel returned safely to base. These submarines were relatively safe, but they were slow and had limited space for passengers, while the naval authorities wanted them to be held back for allocation to more traditional maritime taskings such as sinking enemy ships.

Operation ‘Minerva’ was different in two respects: it was conducted not by the SOE, but by Military Intelligence 9 (MI9), while deployment — and the predicted recovery — was to be by air, in the absence of submarines. MI9 was a joint-service organisation responsible for Allied prisoners of war in enemy camps, escape and evasion in hostile territory, and interrogation of enemy PoWs in Allied custody. MI9’s efforts in South-east Asia were

the responsibility of the General Staff, Intelligence Section ‘e’ (GSIE) in HQ India. One of its RAF officers devised a plan to send a party of five men to Sumatra, whose first task would be to contact any Allied servicemen still at large on the island and arrange their escape to India. Concurrently, they would send two men across the Straits of Malacca to reach Japanese-occupied Singapore and assess the situation there for Allied prisoners of war. This done, the group would return to the southern shore of Sumatra and sail 100 miles to the island of Simaleur, from where they would be picked up. The operation was divided into two elements: ‘Minerva I’, the deployment on 20 December 1942, and ‘Minerva II’, the recovery phase in February–March 1943.

The man who devised this plan and commanded it on the ground was Sqn Ldr Basil Russell RAFVR, a staff officer with GSIE, who had been with the Spears Mission at Dakar and in the Levant. His second-in-command was Capt Fred Sladen, a regular from the Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Regiment, who had fought the Japanese briefly in Singapore and then been ordered to escape, which involved trekking across Sumatra and taking a ship to Ceylon. Capt Alex Hunter, Royal Engineers, had

ABOVE: Parked at Koggala during late 1942, No 205 Squadron Catalina I W8406 took part in Operation ‘Minerva’. All the aircraft involved were optimised for range, carrying extra fuel tanks and with unnecessary equipment removed. VIA DRA. BANKS

LEFT: Catalina I Z2144 was a No 205 Squadron mount. The unit was stationed at Coggala, Sri Lanka, from July 1942 onwards. VIA DRA. BANKS



ABOVE:
Another 'Minerva' participant, Catalina I W8409 is moored here at Saldanha Bay near Cape Town in mid-1942, while in the service of No 202 Squadron prior to 205 being re-formed.

CLIFF HARDMAN

ABOVE RIGHT:
Lt Cdr G. F. Rijnders of the Royal Netherlands Navy piloted Catalina Y-57 of No 321 Squadron. He was awarded the British Distinguished Flying Cross for this mission.

VIA DAVID MILLER

worked in Sumatran tea plantations for the previous nine years. Sgt Richard Keyte from Penang had served in the Singapore Royal Artillery and, after the surrender in Singapore, escaped with a group of Australians to Ceylon. The fifth man, originally from Batu Pahat in Johore, was Sgt Lau Teng Kee, a medical student, who had gained much recent experience with the British Army Advisory Group in China and had twice infiltrated into Japanese-occupied Hong Kong.

'Minerva I' had two components, the first being the delivery of the ground party by a single No 321 Squadron Catalina. The second was a diversion by three aircraft, two of which attacked Sabang harbour on the island of Pulau Weh. This was a significant naval base, with excellent Dutch-built port and refuelling facilities. The harbour was used by Japanese warships, merchant ships and flying boats, which at the time of 'Minerva' were Kawanishi H6K 'Mavis' maritime patrol aircraft. There was also an airfield at Sabang, whose main occupants in December 1942 were some Mitsubishi A5M 'Claude' fighters, outdated by the A6M Zero, but with a useful performance in minor theatres. The third RAF

aircraft was tasked with reconnoitring and then attacking the airfield at Lhoknga. This too was a pre-war Dutch field, but in December 1942 it was being totally reconstructed by the Japanese and had no known aircraft occupants.



First of the diversionary aircraft to depart was a No 205 Squadron Catalina coded FV-O (Catalina I AJ161 was given these codes around the time of 'Minerva', and it is uncertain whether this example or W8409 actually flew the mission). Flown by Flt Lt T. Maxwell-Hudson RAFVR, it took off from Koggala at about 08.20hrs on 20 December 1942. The flight to Pulau Weh was uneventful, and as he approached Sabang harbour Maxwell-Hudson descended to 40ft for his attack. The Japanese defences were quick to respond and the Catalina was met by intense light flak, probably from the warships, being hit in numerous places. The aircraft was so low that in taking evasive action it hit the sea and bounced off again, but Maxwell-Hudson regained control remarkably rapidly, climbed to a safe height and set out for home.



“The Catalina was met by intense light flak. It was so low that in taking evasive action it hit the sea and bounced off”

Astonishingly, not one member of the crew had been hit, although one had a bullet hole through his ammunition pouch, but the hull was badly holed. Worse was that the port engine was not functioning correctly, the vibration becoming so intense that the pilot had no alternative but to feather the propeller and fly the remainder of the mission on just one powerplant.

Maxwell-Hudson transmitted a situation report shortly after starting the return flight, indicating that his aircraft was damaged, but then he maintained radio silence, leading group HQ to believe that he had gone down in the sea. Shortly after dawn on 21 December, however, Maxwell-Hudson sent a second message. Realising he was still airborne, group immediately despatched a No 321 Squadron Catalina, Y-64, which met FV-O around 240 miles from Ceylon and escorted it home. An air-sea rescue launch was also despatched in case the damaged aircraft ditched in the sea. In the event, Maxwell-Hudson reached his base and, aided by the port engine which was restarted just before touchdown, made a downwind landing on zero fuel at 07.20hrs. The crew had spent



23 hours in the air, of which some 11 hours were on one engine. It was a remarkable achievement, for which Maxwell-Hudson was given a well-deserved DFC.

Catalina W8406/FV-T of No 205 Squadron, captained by Flt Lt Lane, took off from Koggala at 09.15hrs on 20 December and had an uneventful flight to Pulau Weh, arriving overhead about half an hour after FV-O. Lane carried out a thorough reconnaissance of Sabang harbour before dropping his bombs, which were also six 250-pounders. Despite meeting heavy flak during the attack run, FV-T was not hit. Lane returned to Ceylon, arriving at 03.40hrs on 21 December.

The third aircraft of this group was originally No 413 Squadron's Z2135/QL-H, flown by the commanding officer, Wg Cdr J. C. Scott, RCAF. Also based at Koggala, he took off at 08.57hrs, but had not long been airborne when serious engine trouble forced him to return to base, landing at 10.30. He had radioed ahead and a replacement aircraft, FV-K of No 205 Squadron (possibly FP241), had been hurriedly prepared and was waiting. Scott and his crew were able to transfer and be on their way again at 11.07. The aircraft made landfall off Pulau

Breueh at 19.30. Descending to 50ft, Scott flew down the coastline for some distance before turning north and climbing to 4,000ft. His first task was to look for Lhoknga airfield, but he could not spot it in the darkness, even when he descended to 1,800ft, so he went on to Kutaraja (now Banda Aceh), where he dropped six 250lb general-purpose bombs in a single stick, together with some incendiaries. He then set course up the east coast of Pulau Breueh and, at 20.40, turned for home. He came down on the water at 04.39 on 21 December. Scott was awarded the DSO.



Catalina Y-57 of No 321 (Dutch) Squadron, the fourth of the original aircraft, had a quite different and most secret mission. The pilot was Lt Cdr Gerhard Frederic Rijnders of the Royal Netherlands Navy, who knew Sumatra well. Russell met and briefed him in early December, when they agreed the delivery point, timings and loads, even though the Dutchman had severe reservations about the practicality of the plan. The main factor in the timing was that the Catalina should arrive in Sumatra as near last light as possible, so Rijnders' take-off time was 04.00 on

20 December. His aircraft was stripped of its usual weapons and armour protection, and fitted with extra tanks, while the normal crew was reduced to just six, all of which enabled it to carry Sqd Ldr Russell and his team, plus their stores.

The overloaded Catalina needed a much longer take-off run than usual, but once that had been achieved the outward flight was without incident until it reached a point approximately 20 miles west of Pulau Nias, where Rijnders let down to 30ft for the final run to Sumatra. As they passed Nias the crew noticed little puffs of smoke which indicated that they were under anti-aircraft fire. They were not hit, but had been detected. They also flew over some Indonesian fishermen, who would almost certainly have noticed the Dutch insignia on the aircraft as it passed low overhead.

The sea was particularly calm and Rijnders brought his Catalina in to a smooth landing in an unnamed bay 20km north of Baroes, in the lee of Pulau Panjang (Long Island). He stopped his engines and anchored 30m off the beach. Unloading began at once. A large dinghy carried three men and the heavy stores, such as machine guns and rations, but the second, ➤

ABOVE:
A PBV-5 of No 321 Squadron, pictured in the rather different surroundings of Masirah in November 1943.

G. McKENDRICK



ABOVE: W8409 at the Koggala flying boat base. This Catalina may have been involved in the initial diversionary mission. DON NEWMAN

smaller dinghy was delayed as it had a leak which had to be topped up from the CO₂ bottle in the aircraft. The remaining two men paddled it ashore. As the machine prepared to take off, one of the crew observed the larger dinghy already on the beach and the second nearly there. Since all appeared well, Rijnders got airborne at 17.30 for a long but uneventful flight back to China Bay, arriving 21 hours 30 minutes after he left. He received the DFC for this sortie.

Not a single radio transmission was heard from the shore party, so the next phase was 'Minerva II', the recovery. It was due to take place from Dalum Bay, 30 miles up the coast of Pulau Simaleur from Sinabang Bay. The first attempt was on 20 February 1943, when Lt Hamers left Ceylon in Y-25 at 08.05 and flew to the rendezvous point. As there were no signals from the ground, he returned to Ceylon, arriving at 06.30. Rijnders departed in Y-57 at 06.20 on 25 February, but despite flying around for some time there were no recognition signals from

the ground. After 24 hours in the air he made it back to Ceylon at 06.20 on 26 February. Rijnders returned one last time on 21 March, but once more no signals were seen. With that, and in accordance with the pre-arranged plan, no further attempts were made to recover the 'Minerva' party.

Nobody knows for certain what happened to Russell and his four companions. They had a radio and presumably carried spare parts and batteries, but not a single transmission was ever heard from them. The set might have been damaged, either in transit or after landing, there could have been misunderstandings over the frequencies to be used, or they could have been overwhelmed by the Japanese so quickly that they never had the opportunity to attempt to transmit.

The British occupied Sumatra for some months in 1945-46 and efforts were made to discover the fate of the five men, but nothing firm was discovered. The names of the three officers are on the Singapore War

Memorial while that of Sgt Keyte is on the Rangoon War Memorial. For unknown reasons, Sgt Lau's name is not recorded on any memorial.

With hindsight the 'Minerva' plan was courageous and well-intentioned, but far too ambitious. It required five men, none of whom were special forces-trained, to land on a Japanese-occupied island with an indigenous population that either supported the Japanese or had been cowed by them into submission. They were to cross the island, set up a base, and send two of their number to Singapore. Once the pair had returned, all five would cross Sumatra once more and somehow — it is not clear how — sail across 100 miles of open sea to the much smaller island of Simaleur, which was also Japanese-controlled, and from which they would be extracted by air. It was doomed from the start. However, the British, Canadian and Dutch aircrews carried out their missions with daring and heroism, especially considering the distances flown, and did all that was required of them. **A**

“ ‘Minerva’ was doomed from the start. However, the British, Canadian and Dutch aircrews carried out their missions with daring and heroism ”