

# PRIDE'S FOOLISH GAMBLE

## The Loss of PRINCE of WALES and REPULSE

*Stubbornly clinging to a doctrine of naval warfare that, even in 1941, was out of date, a vain English Admiral resisted all help and advice even as his ship lay dying beneath him*

BY REMO SALTA

**D**uring the early evening of 9 December 1941, six Allied warships were steaming on a northerly course in the South China Sea just off the coast of Malaya. The second day of the new war in the Pacific was coming to a close and the ships in this small task force were searching for a Japanese amphibious assault group that was, according to Allied aerial reconnaissance reports, heading for northern Malaya.

Codenamed *Force Z* by the British Admiralty, the ships in this Allied task force were stationed at the sprawling naval base at Singapore and consisted of the battleship *Prince of Wales*, the battlecruiser *Repulse*, and four escorting destroyers. Little did the men on these ships know that the historic battle they would fight the following day would not only mark the end of an era, but would also demonstrate how one man's stubbornness could lead to disaster.

Strategically located and completed at great cost in February 1938, the modern British naval base at Singapore had two major drawbacks. The first was that, during the lean

financial years of the 1930s, Britain could not afford to station battleships in the Far East or the Pacific on a permanent basis. Therefore, the British Admiralty decided that if Japan ever seriously threatened any of Great Britain's interests in the Pacific, battleships from other parts of the Empire could rapidly reinforce Singapore before

hostilities started. The only units to be



Dramatic painting showing *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* under attack. However, it should be noted that the painting shows Nells making low-altitude runs when the enemy aircraft should be Betty torpedo-bombers.

permanently stationed at Singapore were cruisers and smaller warships.

The second major drawback to the new naval base was its lack of adequate air cover. The Royal Air Force (RAF) was the newest branch of the British armed services and the more established British Army and the Royal Navy received the lion's share of the defense budget.

Between 1920 and 1934, 47% of the defense budgets went to the Navy, 40% to the Army, and only 13% to the RAF. This meant that the RAF had to keep the bulk of its limited resources at home just to protect Britain. The next priority was the Mediterranean and Egypt, and whatever was left over was sent to the Far East.

By 1941 there were only 158 RAF aircraft stationed in all of Malaya, and these were either

obsolete or outdated machines — no match against the newer and faster aircraft possessed by the Japanese.

Shortly after the new base opened in 1938, the political situation began deteriorating rapidly throughout the Far East. Japan had invaded China in the early 1930s but by 1940, shortly after the fall of France, the Japanese invaded the northern part of French Indochina. This meant that Japan now had obtained bases only 450-miles from Malaya and 700-miles from Singapore itself. The new British naval base was now within easy range of Japanese bombers, a fact that alarmed the Western nations.

By July 1941, as Japanese troops were marching into southern Indochina, the Western powers decided to



During the Atlantic Charter Conference (10-12 August 1941), USS *McDougal* (DD-358) pulls alongside *Prince of Wales* to transfer Franklin D. Roosevelt to the battleship for his historic meeting with Winston Churchill. The meeting took place in Placentia Bay, Newfoundland.

