

CAUGHT IN THE OPEN

Sinking of HMS Repulse and HMS Prince of Wales
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Even though it is of poor quality, this low-level photograph of Force Z's demise taken from a Japanese torpedo-bomber shows the incredible drama and violence of the last minutes of the two British warships. At far left is *Prince of Wales*, with *Repulse* in the background, second from left. In the foreground is a British destroyer. *Prince of Wales* was heavily damaged in the first wave of torpedo attacks. (National Archives)

As war clouds darkened the horizon during the November and December 1941, the British Empire took steps to protect its interests in the Far East. In an attempt to prevent the Japanese from attacking British possessions in Borneo, Malaya, and the territory known as the Straits Settlements — which included Malacca, Penang, and Singapore among others — the Royal Navy battleship *Prince of Wales* and battle cruiser *Repulse* were dispatched to Singapore as a projection of strength.

Known as *Force G* during their deployment from the United Kingdom, *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* were accompanied by destroyers HMS *Electra*, *Encounter*, *Express*, and *Jupiter*, arriving in Singapore on 2 December 1941. The group was redesignated as *Force Z* upon arrival. The aircraft carrier *Indomitable* was to rendezvous with the *Force Z* ships at Singapore, but the carrier ran aground off Jamaica. She was in dry dock at the American naval base at Norfolk, Virginia, and did not make the passage to Malaysia. Thus, the *Force Z* ships had no sea-based air cover available to protect them.

In the early morning hours of 8 December 1941, Japanese high-altitude bombers attacked the British stronghold at Singapore. *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* responded with anti-aircraft fire, but did not suffer any damage. Simultaneous to the bombing, 24,000 Japanese troops landed at Kota Bharu, approximately 460 miles north of Singapore.

At 5:10 pm, local time, *Force Z* (*Prince of Wales*, *Repulse*, and destroyers *Electra*, *Express*, *Tenedos*, and *Vampire*) sortied from Singapore Harbor to attack the Japanese invasion force. The following afternoon, 9 December, the Japanese submarine *I-65* detected the British ships and trailed them, reporting their position as they moved north. Having received *I-65*'s reports, the invasion force's commander, V/Adm. Jisaburō Ozawa, turned his now-empty transports back toward port at Cam Ranh Bay in Japanese-occupied French Indochina.

The British force was then located by scout planes from the cruisers *Kinu*, *Kumano*, and *Yura*, around 5:30 pm. Shortly thereafter, destroyer *Tenedos* left *Force Z* heading back to Singapore as she was low on fuel. Darkness fell over the British ships as they pursued the