

that the only course open to us to maintain our effort in support of the Army in Burma—once our airfields and warning at Rangoon had been lost—was to establish base landing grounds in India, operational landing grounds at Akyab and Magwe with advanced landing grounds in the Rangoon area to provide what fighter and bomber support could be given. Failing immediate instructions to the contrary, I proposed in my telegram putting this plan into action.

128. Arrangements were accordingly made to leave a mixed Wing one Hurricane Squadron, one Blenheim Squadron and half an Army Co-operation Squadron, organised as a mixed Wing, with one Squadron of the A.V.G. in Upper Burma, based at Magwe, one mixed Wing of one Hurricane Squadron, one Bomber Squadron and one G.R. Squadron at Akyab and to build up and feed these two Wings from a base organisation in India.

129. The decision which set the size of the Wing left at Magwe was based on the amount of maintenance in the country on the 20th February. It was calculated by the staff that there was sufficient maintenance in this mixed Wing for a period of three months. As regards Akyab, access by sea was still open and maintenance therefore would be satisfactory. There was no overland communication between Magwe and Akyab. The route from India in the North down the Manipur Road had not been completed.

130. The decision to base the force in Northern Burma at Magwe was made because it lay behind two lines of observer corps telephone lines, one down the Valley of the Salween towards Rangoon and the other down the Valley of the Irrawaddy. It was proposed to attempt to evacuate the R.D.F. set if Rangoon fell. By this means it was hoped to provide sufficient warning at Magwe to secure the base against anything but the heaviest scale of attack. Since Singapore had fallen on the 15th February the weight of the Japanese air force could now be turned towards Burma. I therefore expected that if Rangoon fell, with the considerable number of airfields now prepared in the Rangoon area, heavy reinforcement of Japanese aircraft would be flown in at will to Burma. The enemy would have control of the communications and the free use of the Port of Rangoon and thus a large air force could be maintained.

131. I received no reply to my telegram.* Action was commenced. I had received a personal telegram from Air Headquarters, India on the 19th in which the A.O.C.-in-C. informed me that if the necessity arose he had prepared a plan for the withdrawal of my force to India. On the 20th we requested air transport to be flown to Magwe, whence it would work a shuttle service between Magwe and Akyab. Onward transport of personnel from Akyab would be by sea. The personnel to be evacuated numbered some 3,000, the majority of whom were in the Rangoon area. A proportion were moved by sea, the remainder by air.

132. On the 21st the Postmaster General reported to me that the telephone system in Rangoon would cease functioning at 18.00 hours that day. Except, therefore, for our single R.D.F. set—worn-out and of the wrong

kind—there would be no warning for the defence of Rangoon and our airfields. Arrangements were at once made to man the observer centre in the Central Telegraph Office with R.A.F. personnel. This limited warning continued until within a few days of the fall of Rangoon.

133. Beyond the general statement by the Army that in the event of the evacuation of Rangoon they would proceed to the North and generally in the direction of China, there was always the element of doubt as to whether they would proceed to China or fall back towards the Manipur Road and so towards India. Rear Headquarters had been established at Maymyo and stocks were being back-loaded up country to the Mandalay-Maymyo area. The initial line of withdrawal, I had always been informed, would be along the Prome Road, a road 150 miles in length.

134. Our air bases in general lay on the other main route to the North—up a Valley of the Sittang. The main railway system ran through this Valley to Mandalay and branched to Myitkyina in the North, and Lashio in the N.E. The Burma Road lay along the same route to Mandalay and Lashio.

135. In consequence, from the air point of view the Prome route was unsatisfactory since there were no air bases of any kind of withdrawal between Rangoon and Mandalay suitable for the operation of modern fighters and bombers with high wing loading—except Magwe, and that had no accommodation, no pens and no dispersal. Indeed the only other aerodromes were at Myitkyina, 600 miles to the North (runway incomplete) and Meiktila—our depot of the future—where a runway was finished. But Meiktila was rather too much to the North and East to be effective in the initial stages and had only slight warning facilities.

136. I had foreseen the possibility of having to operate my mixed fighter and bomber effort in what might well be—and later proved to be—a tense situation, in which the Army would be attempting to withdraw along this single line of communication. There would be no opportunity of dispersing off the road and no cover from air attack. Accordingly, I had a series of strips cut into the hard paddy land along this line of communication and on the 1st March, when the C.-in-C., India, visited Rangoon, I was able to report that I was prepared to operate on this route.

137. But operating a numerically inferior force from such landing grounds against a weight of air attack without adequate warning was a risky and fortuitous operation. Thus I had grave doubts about our ability to maintain ourselves in being. But when and if this situation arose we should have done our best to secure the Army against enemy air action.

138. Against this threat, therefore, the location of our “kutchas” strips had been kept as secret as possible and a very useful number had been prepared in the vicinity of Mingaladon and towards the North and West up the Irrawaddy to Prome.

139. At night all first-line aircraft, bombers and fighters, were flown off the parent airfields at Mingaladon and Zayatkwint to “kutchas” strips. Thus the location of our fighting force, when based on such temporary airfields, was not readily obvious to the enemy. Pilots and

* See covering letter from General Wavell.