

finally planned involved the large scale use of transport aircraft to fly in and supply the brigades, and the energetic employment of close support aircraft to make up the mobile columns' deficiencies in artillery. The First Air Commando Unit under Colonel Cochran, U.S.A.A.F., had been specially created and sent to this theatre to fill these needs, and acted as a task force in support of General Wingate. I have dealt with the activities of this force separately.

35. The long range penetration brigade which was making its way across the Chindwin overland towards Katha received its first airborne supplies on 10th February, and its maintenance thereafter became a continuous commitment. The remaining two brigades were landed on two strips improvised in the jungle during the nights of 5th/6th and 10th/11th March, and a fourth and fifth brigade were flown into another landing ground during the nights of 24th/25th March and 5th/6th April. The successful accomplishment of the air side of this operation was shared directly by the First Air Commando Unit and by the British and American Transport squadrons which participated, although the whole operation was only made possible by the high degree of air superiority gained by the tactical air forces in the preceding months.

36. The initial fly-in was the work of gliders which carried an American airfield engineer company whose task it was to receive Dakotas (C.47) on the following night, and also a sufficient number of combat troops with equipment to defend the locality meanwhile. Although this preparatory operation was a complete success, it was twice in danger of being compromised. The first occasion was when at the last moment it was discovered by photographic reconnaissance that one of the jungle clearings earmarked for use and called "Piccadilly" had been deliberately obstructed by the enemy. The commanders on the spot decided to continue with the operation and divert the aircraft intended for "Piccadilly" to the other landing zone—"Broadway". Secondly, the towing of gliders in pairs proved impracticable under the difficult flying conditions encountered; tow ropes snapped and a number of gliders failed to reach their destination. Moreover there existed in the clearing a number of undulations not visible on air photographs, so that even on making the best of landings the earlier gliders frequently crashed, and each wrecked glider became a source of danger for its successors. Worse confusion and damage was avoided by the airfield control improvised by Lt.-Col. Allison of the U.S.A.A.F. who was able to stop the arrival of additional gliders. Despite these difficulties, by the next night the American airborne engineer unit and British troops had levelled "Broadway" sufficiently for Dakotas (C.47) to land. The Air Commander 3rd T.A.F. commented particularly on the quality of the airfield control and the excellent flying discipline that were features of the operation, which enabled the strip to be used almost to saturation by a constant stream of transport aircraft in the short hours of darkness available. His report remarks as follows: "Nobody has seen a transport operation until he has . . . watched Dakotas coming in and taking off in opposite directions on a single strip all night long at the rate of one landing or one take-off every three minutes".

37. By D plus 6 day there had been flown in 9,052 personnel, 175 ponies, 1,183 mules and 509,083 pounds of stores.

38. The element of surprise which had accompanied the entry of these forces and which had been aided by diversionary bombing around Bhamo and Indaw was maintained throughout. Even when the enemy divined our intentions, our air superiority was instrumental in rendering his attacks ineffectual. It was not until 11th March and 13th March that the enemy attacked the two landing grounds which had been first extemporised—by which time one had already been evacuated and a detachment of Spitfires of No. 81 Squadron had been installed on the other. Other landing strips were contrived as the occasion arose, though for the most part the thirty columns of the division were supplied by dropping. Much of the effectiveness of this air supply depended upon the standard of training of the Dakota crews. The dropping zones were continually being changed as the columns moved from place to place. Delivery normally took place by night and there was often no other guide than navigational skill supplemented by pre-arranged light signals which became visible only when the aircraft arrived in the vicinity of the dropping zone. Danger from ground fire whilst dropping was a frequent and accepted risk. This was no less true of occasions on which Dakotas were able to utilise a landing ground, for enemy detachments were often in the neighbourhood. The strip opened in the later stages of the operation at Hopin was evacuated because of small arms fire through which our aircraft had unavoidably to pass before landing.

39. Before the advent of the rains made the use of fairweather landing grounds impossible, one Brigade (No. 16) was flown back to its base in India. The others subsequently joined the Chinese-American forces advancing upon Myitkyina under General J. W. Stilwell, and participated in the operations around Myitkyina, to whose success their columns, supplied entirely by air, had contributed.

First Air Commando Unit.

40. This unit came to my command with the specific duty of assisting the fly-in of Special Force, the initial maintenance of its columns and the evacuation of casualties. These functions were extended to include direct support of the ground forces and sustained attacks on installations and communications to hinder the eventual mobilisation of the enemy against these forces. The Bomber-Fighter component was engaged from the 3rd February onwards in attacks on railways and airfields and, as soon as the fly-in had been accomplished, in direct support when called for by the columns. In these tasks the Mustangs (P.51) flew 1,482 sorties and the Mitchells (B.25) 422. Their claims against enemy aircraft destroyed on the ground and in the air amounted to ninety. The glider component of the force carried out fourteen separate operations involving the release of 99 gliders which took into Burma a variety of equipment ranging from bulldozers to river-craft.

41. An important part was played in the operation by the hundred light communication aircraft which the Air Commando possessed.