

end of the month. The major part of the available direct support effort was now being expended on this front, and our advances at Buthidaung and Maungdaw were both preceded by intensive dive-bombing of enemy strongpoints. More than once the two Vengeance squadrons, Nos. 82 and 8 I.A.F., mounted nearly fifty sorties between them in a day. In the Arakan too this month, the Strategic Air Force took part in direct support bombing to clear a salient in anticipation of the general advance. The target was a position near Razabil, another enemy fortress, three miles east of Maungdaw. The attack was carried out by sixteen American Liberators (B.24) and ten Mitchells (B.25), with an escort of R.A.F. Spitfires and Hurricanes, preceded by twenty-four R.A.F. and I.A.F. Vengeances which indicated the target. The majority of the bombs fell in the area, one 2,000-lb. bomb obliterating the top of a small hill containing enemy positions, but again there was an appreciable time lag before the Army moved to the assault, and the enemy appeared to have suffered no appreciable or lasting damage from the bombardment. The area of attack was 1,000 by 600 yards and the bomb load 145,250 pounds. The target area was too large for the weight of the bombardment, and it is clear that, to be really effective, future attacks will have to be more concentrated.

83. Early in February, the enemy, anticipating our intended offensive by four days, himself attacked in the Arakan. His plan was to separate 5 and 7 Indian Divisions, cut off their overland communications, and then destroy them in detail. 224 Group, therefore, instead of assisting this offensive, found itself involved in a very grim defensive battle. The enemy's move to outflank 7 Indian Division reached as far as Taung Bazaar, harried the whole time by the two Vengeance squadrons. Although there was some difficulty in finding targets in the battle areas, every opportunity was taken to attack reported concentrations, bunkers and lines of communication. Over 600 Vengeance and 800 Hurricane sorties were directed to this end during the month.

84. At the height of the battle, additional weight was lent to the support given the ground troops by the employment of Wellingtons, carrying 4,000-lb. bombs, from Nos. 99 and 215 Squadrons in a tactical rôle. Targets included enemy headquarters at Godusara and Rathedaung, and enemy-held villages were reported completely devastated. In addition one operation with R.A.F. fighter escort was carried out, with excellent results, by nine Mitchells (B.25) of No. 490 U.S. Squadron against the entrances to the tunnels on the Maungdaw-Buthidaung road.

85. By the 4th March the battle in Arakan had been brought to a successful conclusion. There is little doubt that our overall air supremacy was largely responsible for this, since it enabled transport aircraft to drop food and ammunition to 7 Indian Division, which could not otherwise have maintained the fight, the Strategic Air Force to lend its weight against tactical targets, and the close-support squadrons to break up many attacks, to maintain a constant harassing of the enemy's line of communication, and to pin him down in his bunkers while our own troops moved in de-

ployment or attack. Air Commander, Third Tactical Air Force, commenting on operations in this area, says "It is interesting to note that in 15 Corps support was allied with artillery rather more than infantry H.Q. This was considered by the Corps to be more satisfactory in that gunners are more used to thinking in terms of supporting fire. . . ."

86. In the first few days of March the enemy launched an offensive across the Chindwin on the 4 Corps front. This was not unexpected. During February he had shown increased activity on the east bank of the river, and attacks had been made by Vengeances and fighter-bombers on enemy storage areas along the river as far north as the Uyu river and upon small vessels and concentrations of rafts on the Chindwin. The battle in Arakan had precluded any large reinforcement of the Imphal Plain, although during the preparations for operation "Thursday" it became evident that the enemy's preparations threatened Imphal and the Assam railway. It was indeed a question which only events would resolve, whether the fly-in or the enemy's offensive would start first. As it happened, although the first enemy units crossed the Chindwin on the night of the 7/8th March, the fly-in was begun on the 5/6th, in sufficient time to release important air resources for dealing with the new situation. Had the reverse been the case, the demands of defence and counter-attack against the enemy's thrust and of support for the fly-in could not both have been fully met. The brunt of air support was now switched from the 15 Corps to the 4 Corps front.

87. The Army's intention was, in the event of Long Range Penetration Brigades creating a favourable situation, to push forces across the Chindwin. To give air support to these forces airfields had been developed in forward areas, including one as far forward as Tamu. Now, however, instead of fighting in support of an offensive, direct support squadrons again found themselves taking part in a defensive battle, and Tamu itself was overrun.

88. Having crossed the Chindwin the enemy pushed onwards towards Imphal by the Tamu and Tiddim roads, and towards Kohima through the Somra hill tracts and from Homa-lin via Ukhrul. Air support to meet the threat was provided to the maximum from the resources available, the two Vengeance squadrons already on this front being joined by No. 82 Squadron from the Arakan and, towards the end of the month, by No. 7 I.A.F. Squadron. There was also at this time a welcome increase in the number of Hurricane squadrons equipped to carry bombs. No. 42 Squadron had been so equipped since January, No. 34 since the end of February; now, at the end of March, No. 60 and No. 113 Squadrons, too, began to carry out bombing operations.

89. In April Kohima was seriously threatened as well as Imphal, and support was consequently divided between 4 and 33 Corps, although till May the greater part of the effort was centred around Imphal. The four Hurricane fighter-bomber squadrons flew over 2,200 sorties, the majority of which were in the Churachandpur area, on the Imphal-Tiddim road, against the road block set up at Kanglatongbi on the Imphal-Kohima road, against concentrations of enemy troops attempting to