

82. The area finally selected for the crossing of 20 Indian Division was at the bend, south of the village of Allagappa. The river here is about 1,500 yards wide, and the current is strong (three knots). High ground to the south-east gave the enemy observation over the area initially. Not being an ideal crossing-place, it was only lightly defended. Moreover it was the junction of 31 and 33 Japanese Divisions, which, as was hoped, led to confusion when we struck. The crossing was made by 100 Brigade on the night 12th-13th February, and, by the following night, a bridgehead six miles wide by two miles deep had been developed. The success of this operation was in great measure due to the diversionary attacks made elsewhere by 32 Brigade which attracted troops away from the real crossing. This crossing by 20 Indian Division is also notable for the fact that it was supported by the only Corps artillery concentration attempted during the whole campaign. Generally, the artillery's rôle was unspectacular but it should not be thought for that reason that it was unimportant. The often few guns in action, brought forward sometimes by tremendous effort, played a vital rôle and Commanders repeatedly commented on the effectiveness of the fire support that was provided.

Early on the 15th, hostile air action caused considerable damage to our already scant river crossing equipment, but the damaged boats were replaced by the evening of the 17th. By the 16th February, our bridgehead had been sufficiently extended to allow crossings to be made in daylight.

83. 4 Corps' crossing, which I shall next describe, was a model of its kind. For some weeks before the actual crossing, widespread deception measures were instituted indicating that a minor operation was in progress down the Gangaw Valley with the Yenangyaung oil-fields as its objective. Shortly before the crossing, obvious preparations were made further east, towards Pakokku. The real crossing was timed for the night 13th-14th February. At dawn on the 13th, 28 (East African) Brigade, which had been fighting its way down the Yaw Chaung, suddenly appeared on the west bank of the Irrawaddy opposite Chauk, after capturing Seikpyu. These feints were entirely successful. The Japanese moved more troops to both Pakokku and Chauk, while, as will appear, we crossed practically unopposed at Nyaungu roughly half-way between these two places.

84. Nyaungu was selected as the crossing site for two reasons. First, it was on the boundary between 15 and 28 Japanese Armies and experience had shown that the enemy were notoriously weak at tying-in at such points. Secondly, it was, for topographical reasons, the most unsuitable place for a crossing, and, consequently, its defence had been largely entrusted to an "Indian National Army" division.

85. Three crossing-places were selected. The longest, a diagonal crossing of two and a half miles, was to be made by the assault brigade (33 Brigade of 7 Indian Division). The other two were about 1,800 yards and 1,300 yards wide respectively. The current was about one and a half knots. This, combined with a steady east wind (i.e. with the current),

rendered navigation between the islands and sandbanks difficult. The approaches on the west bank were open and completely overlooked from the steep 100-foot cliffs on the opposite side. No power craft were used for the first assault wave. Paddling silently in the darkness for over two miles, they landed at the foot of the cliffs and gained the crest without a shot being fired. The second flight attempted the shorter crossing, using outboard motors, but were heavily fired on. The drivers were killed or wounded and the attempt failed. By this time, however, troops of the first wave had established a small bridgehead and they were immediately reinforced by the rest of 33 Brigade and a detachment of tanks, which crossed in broad daylight practically unopposed. The Divisional Commander's selection of the crossing site had been justified.

86. 33 Brigade captured Pagan on the 15th February. The build-up in the bridgehead continued. On the west bank 114 Brigade entered Pakokku on the 18th after overcoming strong opposition to the west of it. It then started to clear the large island which lies off Pakokku. By this time (20th February), the Japanese were attacking the bridgehead from the south, but prisoners stated that our crossing was regarded merely as a diversion. 28 (East African) Brigade were also heavily counter-attacked in Seikpyu area on the 16th. They regrouped at Gwebin, but were again severely attacked on the 20th and withdrew to Letse. Here the threat to our right flank was held. It was evident that the enemy still continued to regard the feints which had been made on both sides of Nyaungu as a greater menace than the real crossing, despite our build-up in the bridgehead.

87. While 7 Indian Division was operating on and across the river, the other division of 4 Corps, 17 Indian Division (Major-General D. T. Cowan), was closing up ready to cross, leaving its air-transportable brigade (99 Brigade) at Pael ready to fly in. By the 22nd February, two brigades of 17 Indian Division and 255 Indian Tank Brigade had actually crossed into the bridgehead. 5 Indian Division (Major-General E. C. Mansergh) who had taken over the Division after the death of Major-General D. F. W. Warren in an aeroplane crash) less its air-transportable brigade (99 Brigade), was, during this period, also being brought forward. It was directed on Nyaungu, via the Kabaw Valley, Ye-U and Monywa. The intention was that this formation should assist 17 Indian Division in the Meiktila area and, also, exploit southwards.

88. Back in 33 Corps' sector, the last crossing of the Irrawaddy was made by 2 British Division at Ngazun, some 10 miles to the east of 20 Indian Division's bridgehead, on the night 24th-25th February. The river here contains many large sandbanks and shifting shoals and varies in width between 1,000 and 1,500 yards. The current is considerable (two and a half knots). It was originally hoped to cross further to the east, but reconnaissance showed that beach obstacles had been erected, and defences manned, in all suitable areas. It was planned to land on three beaches simultaneously: Beaches A and B lay some two miles and one mile respectively west of Ngazun Village, and C Beach on the large island north of the village, which it was necessary to secure since