

the enemy continued to operate at his best performance height, that is 10,000 feet. No. 136 Squadron, who re-equipped with these aircraft in February, could not effectively employ their high overtaking speed against an enemy who exploited the manoeuvrability of his aircraft to the full. At first attacks were delivered at too high a speed with a resultant falling off in marksmanship.

23. When the battle switched to the Chindwin front in the second week in March and it became clear that the main Japanese ground effort was to be aimed at Imphal and the railway to the north, 243 Wing and eight squadrons were moved into the area from 224 Group. Spitfires did not immediately repeat their successes of the Arakan campaign for the following reasons. Firstly, although the three Ground Control Interception Stations were excellent and brought off fine interceptions against Dinahs (No. 81 Squadron scored their first successes in this theatre by destroying two in four days at the beginning of March), the rugged nature of the terrain produced technical difficulties in the way of echoes which left many blank spots in the radar coverage. Secondly, the substitution of Indian Mobile Wireless Observer Companies for R.A.F. Wireless Units resulted in a lower standard of reporting. Thirdly, squadrons which had already lost a number of experienced pilots in action were now losing many more as operational tours were completed. Moreover, the sudden influx of personnel, both Army and R.A.F. could not be met with a similar growth of transport, accommodation and communications. Finally, as the Japanese advanced, more and more of our early warning system was overrun, and the Army Corps Commander decided that he could not employ troops on local protection of airfields and the warning net. Squadron personnel became exhausted through disturbed rest, and guard duties by night combined with operations by day. Certain squadrons were therefore withdrawn from the Imphal Valley whilst others were flown out every night.

24. Once again the problem of protecting transport aircraft operating so near to Japanese bases asserted itself. Deteriorating weather and absence of warning made it increasingly difficult to ensure interception, but that our superiority was never lost is shown by the fact that between the opening of the battle and the end of May, thirty-one enemy aircraft were destroyed, twenty probably destroyed and sixty-six damaged in air combat over the Manipur area, for the loss of seventeen. Of this number, three were destroyed by No. 176 (Beaufighter) Squadron operating at night from advanced airfields near Imphal.

25. Meanwhile the accretion to the Command of long-range American fighter aircraft enabled tactics to be developed which were to have most damaging results for the Japanese Air Force. Already Mustangs (P.51) had proved their worth, notably in a combined victory with Kittyhawks (P.40) against an enemy formation in the Digboi area on 27th March, claiming 26 destroyed and 4 probably destroyed, for the loss of two. The Army reported finding twenty-two crashed enemy aircraft in the area after the interception. At the same time, No. 459 (U.S.) Squadron, equipped with Lightnings (P.38) began to

operate under 224 Group. Thus, it was possible to employ Lightnings (P.38) and Mustangs (P.51) to supplement the work of the Spitfires which were still in short supply, and had to be husbanded for purely defensive work. The serious contraction of the warning system around Imphal could now be partly offset by sending the American long range fighters to intercept the enemy on his return to the Central Irrawaddy strips.

26. The first success of the policy of intrusion fell to No. 1 Air Commando Force, which surprised a large concentration of aircraft on the Shwebo group of airfields on 8th March, and destroyed 46 of them. Three days later, the Lightnings (P.38) squadron scored 15 against the enemy at Heho. The primitive nature of the Japanese warning system in the area augured well for the successful continuance of the operations. Pilots became increasingly familiar with the details of those airfields which were within range, and photographs and models aided quick identification of dispersal areas and anti-aircraft posts. In early strikes of this nature the enemy were not airborne and awaiting attack, and it was possible to make more than one run over the target, the first run being utilised to locate aircraft in their dispersal pens.

27. In May, an improvement in the enemy's warning system became evident, since often fighters were airborne and awaiting the attack. However, losses remained low, since No. 459 Squadron discovered that if they maintained an indicated airspeed of 300 m.p.h. and refused to enter into combat with the slower and more manoeuvrable Oscars and Tojos, they were still able to deliver their attacks at aircraft on the ground, perhaps fire one burst at any fighter which attempted to intercept and make their withdrawal without loss. The prospect of combat during the intrusion therefore proved no deterrent. In this manner No. 459 Squadron destroyed 121 enemy aircraft on the ground or in the air in March, April and May. The enemy was forced in consequence to discontinue the use of the Shwebo group of airfields and even Heho and Meiktila became practically untenable. By the end of May, the J.A.F. had been forced into the humiliating position of providing such support as their army, 600 miles away in the northern mountains, could receive from the comparative safety of airfields around Rangoon.

28. To sum up, the extent of Allied superiority in the air throughout the period can be seen by a comparison of the effort and losses of the opposing forces. The enemy scale of effort amounted to 2,700 sorties sighted or plotted, or less than three per cent. of the Allied effort. To achieve this, the J.A.F. lost 402 aircraft destroyed in the air or on the ground, or some 14 per cent. of their effort, while the comparable total for British and American forces amounted to 230 or less than one-third per cent. of the effort. The air superiority maintained over the period needs no further emphasis.

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II.—AIR TRANSPORT OPERATIONS

29. Throughout the period under review the number of transport squadrons under my command steadily increased, though their growth was by no means out of proportion