

138. Whilst these exploits revealed the magnificent work of aircrews, they illustrated at the same time the confidence and daring of the British-led irregular, for whom the pilots of 221 Group squadrons felt most strongly that it was a case of "Hats right off" to the guerillas.

139. "From Letpangon we were attacked by two hundred Japs at 23.30 hours. We only killed fifteen of them, but we kept them there for you to attack next day when you put in two good strikes. They cleared out after dark, and went on to Yindaikaein where you were able to attack them again," said Captain Waller.

140. The combined attacks on the Japanese aircraft and guerilla parties constituted a war of attrition on the enemy. They could never be sure of safety in any village they passed through, and roads, planked with thick scrub, were a perpetual nightmare. The guerillas were masters in the art of ambush. With the air forces to supply and assist them they seemed to be everywhere, and to know the enemy's next move. This was evident from the casualties they inflicted against the Japanese.

141. It was after an attack by air forces on a large concentration of Japanese troops at Letpangon, that the Okpyat Guerilla party, which had been pinning down the enemy until the aircraft arrived, went out in a most successful mopping-up task.

142. Captain Waller reported to the R.A.F., "We only killed 15 of them but you killed 105 in three cracking good air strikes. You also saved the lives of almost three thousand occupants and evacuees in Okpyat who were completely cut off."

Japanese Break-through from Pegu Yomas Fails

143. The desperate and last bid by the 28th Japanese Army to escape across the Sittang began on July 21st, when some 15,000 to 18,000 enemy troops, sick and demoralised, moved out of the jungle and scrub shelter of the Pegu Yomas.

144. The moment for which the squadrons and Allied ground forces had been awaiting had now come. The ground forces of 17 Indian Infantry Division, ranged in groups along the 100 miles stretch of roadway between Toungoo and Pegu, which formed part of the railway corridor, engaged the enemy, bursting over the road at several points simultaneously, and slaughtered them.

145. The squadrons of 221 Group were switched over to this battle area in support of 17 Division, and for almost nine days air assault was directed on the wretched Japanese as they made desperate attempts to reach the Sittang River.

146. From a captured enemy document it was revealed that the main break-through from the Pegu Yomas had been delayed by the enemy to allow the move of the Japanese 28th Army to co-ordinate. The greater part of the Mayazaki Group (Lt.-Gen. G.O.C. 54 Division) had planned to attempt to cross the Sittang between Nyaungbentha and Pyu. Coinciding with this move, Koba Group (Major-General Koba) had planned another major break out, and while the area of the

move was not determined, it was anticipated that it would take place north of Toungoo in 19 Division area where troops were deploying along the Toungoo-Mawchi Road.

147. The enemy's plan was to form road blocks at selected points and to pass through them assisted by "Jitter Squads" to create diversions. All movements were to be made by night and the keynote of the break-through was to be "speed" so that the maximum time would be available for the collection of boats and rafts from the Sittang river in order to complete the crossing before daylight. The enemy had planned, on reaching the Sittang, to cross on a wide front using barges, rafts, logs, bamboo poles and even petrol tins to assist the buoyancy of escapees in the water.

148. It would be invidious to state that one squadron, more than another, inflicted the greatest punishment on the escaping enemy. All squadrons thrown into the "Battle of the Break-through," overcoming monsoon with low clouds and heavy rain for long periods, did what was expected of them with credit. The keenness of squadron ground personnel was equal to the occasion. They worked hard and ungrudgingly. All, indeed, in the air, as well as on the ground, felt that something substantial was being accomplished in this last show-down with the Japanese in Burma.

149. The July killing lasted until the 29th. The Thunderbolt squadrons, carrying three 500 lb. bombs on each aircraft, played havoc among concentrations of moving Japanese troops. The Spitfires too, carrying one 500 lb. bomb on each aircraft, pursued the enemy relentlessly, strafing them as they ran for cover. As many as 62 sorties were flown on July 23rd by Nos. 152 and 155 Squadrons.

150. The extent of the full air effort by the R.A.F. squadrons in this battle cannot be adequately measured in the many squadron reports which told of the effectiveness and killings made during their strikes. The confusion and disruption caused among the Japanese forces, amounted to almost chaos. More convincing, perhaps, were the reports sent by 12th Army Divisional Commanders to H.Q. 221 Group, who were not slow to express their gratitude for the support given to their troops.

151. After almost nine days of intense fighting, the attempted break out by the Japanese from the Pegu Yomas ended in utter and complete failure. More than 10,000 men were killed, as against only three hundred odd casualties sustained by the Allied forces. Out of approximately 1,300 Japanese troops who succeeded in crossing the Sittang between Meikthalin and Wegyi, it was estimated that 500 of their number had been killed during air strikes by Spitfires and Thunderbolts.

152. The whole Japanese plan for organised escape petered out in the closing days of July, and the air and ground attacks were then transferred once more to the Sittang Bend, where the other Japanese forces, to their credit, had held out bravely in their struggle to keep open the last doorway leading out of Burma. In the July battle, R.A.F. squadrons had flown a total of 3,045 sorties—92 per cent. of which were offensive strikes in support of ground troops, while a total weight of 1,490,000 lb. of bombs had been dropped.