

27. After a few days' pause, a series of concerted crossings at various points of the Irrawaddy below Mandalay began on the night of 12th-13th February. A new bridgehead was established by 33 Corps opposite Myinmu, in the teeth of determined opposition on the part of the Japanese, who took it to be part of a major encircling movement against Mandalay in conjunction with the forces in the Singu bridgehead to the north. They accordingly threw in most of their available reserves to combat it. A feint crossing was made far to the south, opposite Seikpyu, while the main thrust was made a little upstream, opposite Myitche, where 4 Corps was able to establish a foothold against comparatively light opposition from the enemy, who still underestimated the threat to his left flank. When this bridgehead had been consolidated, a motorised brigade was concentrated behind its lines.

28. On the 23rd, this Brigade moved swiftly eastwards, reaching the railway at Taungtha the next day. It then turned south-east along the line towards the junction of Meiktila, a nodal centre in the communications of central Burma, in the neighbourhood of which there were also several good airfields. The enemy was completely taken aback by this thrust into his rear areas, and although his line of communication troops fought hard, they were unable to do more than delay slightly our advance. By the afternoon of 3rd March, the garrison of Meiktila had been annihilated and 4 Corps had thus placed a brigade, which our air transport speedily built up into a division, squarely athwart the main enemy line of communication from his base at Rangoon to the fighting zone.

29. It was in March that the battle which was to decide the fate of most of Burma north of the Gulf of Martaban was fought. The Japanese reacted speedily to the major strategic thrust whose significance they had grasped too late, and hastily moved southwards all their available forces, in an effort, first, to break our stranglehold on their communications, and, when this failed, to withdraw to safety as many as they could of their troops in the Mandalay-Meiktila noose. Mandalay itself fell to our troops advancing from the north by the middle of the month.

30. Meanwhile the whole area Mandalay-Myingyan-Meiktila had been transformed into a vast battlefield, in which the Fourteenth Army and No. 221 Group attacked from three directions the disorganized forces of the enemy, whose casualties were heavy. A number of scattered units made their escape, but by the beginning of April it might fairly be estimated that Japanese military power in Burma had been shattered. In the Northern Combat Area Command sector, the course of events in central Burma had helped to quicken the pace of the Japanese withdrawal; Lashio was captured by a Chinese division on 8th March, and the enemy soon broke contact, retreating southwards into the Shan States.

31. The Fourteenth Army resumed its large-scale offensive on 12th April, after a short period for regrouping its forces. 4 Corps, supplied by air, struck along the main Mandalay-Rangoon axis; by the end of the month it had covered some 250 miles and had reached the outskirts of Pegu, less than 50 miles from Rangoon, which the Japanese were

known to have evacuated two or three days earlier. 33 Corps had moved south-west to Magwe, which was captured on the 18th, and thence advanced down the Irrawaddy valley; its forward elements reached the railhead at Prome on 1st May. Nowhere was the enemy able to bar the advance by a frontal stand. Such were the circumstances when the combined operation for the capture of Rangoon from the south was put into execution at the express wish of C.-in-C. A.L.F.S.E.A.

32. As already explained, Operation "Dracula" met with little or no opposition. It was a copy-book operation, and the troops advancing into the city from the south partook more of the nature of a triumphal procession than an assault force. They were met by the commanding officer of No. 110 Squadron R.A.F., Wing Commander Saunders, who on the previous day, perceiving no signs of the enemy at Mingaladon airfield, had decided to land and reconnoitre the city. He took formal possession of Rangoon on behalf of the Allied forces. It was fitting that the vital part the Air Forces had played in the campaign should be symbolically rounded off by the occupation of Rangoon by the Royal Air Force.

* * * *

PART THREE.

ALLIED AIR DOMINANCE.

33. Until October, 1944, when the enemy began to withdraw aircraft from this theatre to reinforce his garrison in the Philippines, the overall strength of the Japanese Air Force in this theatre remained at some 450 aircraft in operational units. Normally about 150 aircraft, 70 per cent. of which were fighters, were disposed in Burma and Thailand for immediate use. The majority of the remainder were retained in Malaya and Sumatra, and comprised bombers and floatplanes for shipping escorts and anti-submarine duties, fighters for the defence of the Sumatra oilfields, and operational echelons refitting or training. With General MacArthur's invasion of the Philippines, when up to 100 aircraft left S.E.A.C., a steady decline in strength set in, aggravated by the constant attrition caused by our fighters, for which full replacement was not forthcoming, until in May, 1945, the enemy could muster but 250 aircraft in the S.E.A.C. area, of which over 100, stationed in Malaya and Sumatra, were for most purposes ineffective by reason of their distance from the battle areas.

34. Following the sharp lessons he received between March and May, 1944, the enemy's warning system became somewhat less embryonic, so that it was difficult to achieve complete surprise in any part of the theatre. By listening to Allied W/T and R/T, and by supplementing a skimpy radar system with observation posts and sound locators, a comprehensive albeit somewhat thin warning-system had been established around the whole of the Western Perimeter, and it was only a question of time before growing technical proficiency rendered the task of Allied aircraft in search of all too rare targets, even more difficult.