

33 Corps. The Squadron Commander, it was interesting to note, considered that the factor limiting the monthly carrying capacity of a squadron was the ability of the pilots, rather than that of aircraft, to withstand the strain of intense activity. Few of the pilots in question could have remained efficient if the squadron had attempted to carry on for longer than six weeks at the same level of activity.

Maximum Monthly Carrying Capacity of L.5 Aircraft.

256. While the average daily number of cases evacuated per aircraft was 5, some of the aircraft actually exceeded this number, while some failed to reach it. On the other hand, had all aircraft been used to the same extent as those which flew more than the average for the whole squadron, the average daily number evacuated would have been six, or 180 for the squadron of 30 aircraft. This figure was agreed upon by the Squadron Commander, who estimated that the maximum daily carrying capacity of a single squadron of light aircraft was 180 and the maximum monthly capacity 6,000. This, of course, was based on the maximum distance of 65 miles between the rear and forward strips.

257. The situation was somewhat altered in the instance of 4 Corps' advance down the Meiktila-Rangoon road in April, 1945, when an American light aircraft squadron was evacuating cases from Toungoo to Meiktila for a short period. The distance involved was 330 miles for a whole sortie, and the flight lasting approximately four and a half hours. This meant that it was not possible to evacuate more than two cases per plane per day for more than a total of 60 casualties per day for the whole squadron. It was interesting to note in this connection, however, that 4 Corps' rate of advance in April was approximately 14 miles per day. While the distances flown by light aircraft engaged on casualty evacuation were correspondingly great, the squadron was nevertheless well able to handle all cases, because ground casualties were very light.

258. Altogether the data derived as a result of the operational experience of these light aircraft in Burma suggests that one squadron of 32 L.5 aircraft is sufficient to evacuate all the cases requiring evacuation from the forward areas of a Corps of three Divisions, provided the average daily number of cases does not exceed 180 and the average distance flown is not greater than 60 miles per trip (120 miles per round sortie). One other important proviso, of course, is that we have air superiority and that there is no prolonged heavy fighting with an exceedingly high sickness rate.

GENERAL RECONNAISSANCE.

A Period of Great Versatility for G.R. Aircraft.

259. When the period under review opened, offensive general reconnaissance had become effectively established as the primary operational function of air-sea power in this Theatre. The opening weeks of 1945 had incontestably indicated an entire absence of enemy U-boats throughout the vast expanses of the Indian Ocean, and pointed to the urgent need for alternative employment. Thus evolved the plan for an intensive anti-shipping campaign

to disrupt the enemy's sea transport in and around the waters of the Andaman Sea. Four months of vigorous anti-shipping strikes and carefully planned air-sea mining operations revealed that these tactics were greatly harassing the enemy, and an intensification of offensive general reconnaissance was rightly considered a remunerative policy to pursue.

260. Although the primary operational rôle of 222 Group in May 1945 was that of sinking and immobilising the enemy's shipping, it must be borne in mind that there were continued and increasing commitments in the spheres of photographic reconnaissance, meteorological flights and air-sea rescue. I had, in fact, delegated the responsibility for the organisation and control of air-sea rescue operations and units to Air Marshal Commanding 222 Group as from 1st April, 1945, for the whole of South East Asia Command. Moreover, there was always the possibility that the enemy might recommence his U-boat warfare with renewed vigour, and the G.R. forces under my control had always to be prepared for such a contingency.

Developing the Anti-Shipping Campaign.

261. With the re-occupation of Rangoon on May 3rd, 1945, it became possible to establish a new and invaluable base from which to develop the anti-shipping campaign in more easterly waters. Sunderland aircraft of 230 Squadron (relieved in July by a detachment of 209 Squadron, similarly equipped) operating from the depot ship S.S. "Manela" under the operational control of 346 Wing were able to spread their tentacles over the areas of the Tenasserim Coast, Kra Isthmus, Gulf of Siam and South China Seas, adding confusion and perplexity to the enemy with their constant armed reconnaissance and timely attacks wherever suitable targets presented themselves.

262. As a counterpart to this newly established base of Rangoon in the north, the development of Cocos Island in the south constituted an equally important strategic base for similar operations off the west coast of Sumatra, the south coast of Java and the Sunda Straits. No. 321 Squadron, equipped with Liberators (Mark VI), commenced operating a detachment of six aircraft from Cocos Island on July 22nd, 1945.

263. No. 354 Liberator Squadron, which had initiated the offensive anti-shipping strike aspect of the campaign in early February, disbanded on 15th May, 1945. No. 203 Liberator Squadron, however, which had commenced strike operations on 20th March, 1945, continued its programme of incessant and forceful attack over the Andaman Sea, Straits of Malacca, Gulf of Siam, Java Sea, Bangka Strait and off the west coast of Sumatra until the cessation of hostilities. This squadron was based at Kankasanturai (North Ceylon) but frequently operated detachments from Akyab, Ramree and Cocos Island under adverse conditions.

264. The paramount problem of the shipping strike operations was the lack of forward bases. Liberator aircraft had been operating from bases far removed from this scene of operations, and the period of patrol in the operational area was inevitably curtailed, thus