

enemy. The Japanese casualties showed a sharp rise as a result of these sudden air attacks.

111. The air patrol on the Sittang River, on the other hand, consisted of three standing patrols daily—dawn, midday and dusk. The duration of the patrols up and down the river was so varied that the Japanese could never be certain of escape.

112. During one such patrol in June, two Hurricanes of 28 Squadron came upon 50 river craft of all types in the Suppanu Chaung and, after damaging them by strafing, went on to Letpan and there strafed several boats drawn up on the bank of the river near some villages.

113. There could be no doubt that the vigilance maintained by aircrews engaged on offensive patrols over the Sittang River was a contributory factor to holding up any river crossing in strength, which the Japanese may have contemplated during June.

#### *Disaster overtakes the Japanese in Burma.*

114. Disaster overtook the Japanese during July, when their final bid to break through the Allied net and escape from Burma ended in a debacle.

115. It was one of the blackest periods for the enemy throughout their ill-fated campaign. More than 10,000 men were killed in the month's operations. Those who succeeded in getting away and joining the main Japanese forces at Moulmein, took with them a picture of the punishing they had faced from the British air forces, the warring guerillas, and the newly-formed 12th Army under Lieutenant General Sir Montague Stopford.

116. Operations by the air and ground forces in this last major battle in Burma took on an entirely new character from the mobility and speed which had so characterised the pursuit of the enemy down the central railway corridor during April and May. Instead, the lull period in June had given the squadrons and ground forces a better opportunity to deploy at strategic points in Southern Burma, so that the enemy break-through from the Pegu Yomas, when it ultimately took place, developed into a wholesale killing. The monsoon forced R.A.F. Squadrons to base themselves at air-strips other than they would have preferred, but, even so, the operations were maintained.

117. The squadrons of 221 Group, R.A.F., accounted for at least 2,000 Japanese casualties. Throughout the campaign it was always difficult to assess with accuracy the number of actual casualties inflicted by the air forces and our own artillery.

118. Four separate phases characterised the July battle.

(a) There was a sudden flare-up of enemy activity on the Sittang Bend at the opening of the month where the Japanese, firmly established at Mokpalin, succeeded in making a bridgehead across the river and, after some grim fighting, succeeded in holding on the right bank, an area of approximately one square mile of country, encompassing the villages of Nyaungkashé, Abya, and Myitkye.

(b) Up country, on the Sittang, taking in an area between Shwegyin and Kyaukkye,

parties of Japanese troops, as they endeavoured to escape by crossing to the left bank of the Sittang, continued to fall into the hands of organised guerillas.

(c) Yet further to the north 19 Indian Division and Patriot Burmese Forces in the worst of monsoon weather, were struggling along the Mawchi Road from Toungoo in an effort to reach Mawchi, and cut the main escape route of large Japanese forces retreating southwards down the road from Loikaw, and Kemapyu, on the Salween River, and then south by valley tracks which led to Papun and Kamamaung. From Papun, one escape route continued south-west to Bilin with easy access by road and rail to Moulmein. The second escape route from Papun went south-east to Kamamaung, thence by ferry down the Salween to Shwegun, and there joined a track leading through Pa-An to Moulmein.

(d) The final, and major phase, was the large scale attempted break-through across the railway corridor from the Pegu Yomas, starting on July 21st, by Japanese troops whose strength had now been estimated to be about 18,000, of which about 1,000 were left behind sick in the Yomas and could not take part in the breakout operations.

119. Squadrons which played such a conspicuous part in these operations were deployed as follows:—

(a) When the sudden flare up at the Sittang Bend began, No. 906 Wing with Nos. 273 and 607 Squadrons; one detachment of night Beaufighters, and the H.Q. and one flight of No. 28 Fighter Recce Squadron, were based at Mingaladon, Rangoon, thus within easy reach of this enemy force.

(b) Based at Kinmagon was No. 908 Wing with Nos. 47 and 110 Mosquito Squadrons, which were able, weather permitting, to afford valuable support to the parties of guerillas in their successful attacks on the Japanese in the Sittang river area.

(c) No. 910 Wing was based at Meiktila with four Thunderbolt squadrons, Nos. 34, 42, 79 and 113, ready for action at the first sign of the break-through from the Pegu Yomas.

(d) Assisting 19 Indian Infantry Division on the Mawchi road, was 909 Wing at Toungoo, with No. 155 Spitfire Squadron, and later strengthened by No. 152 Spitfire Squadron which moved down to Thedaw for a short period, and, at other times, staged through Toungoo.

120. When the break-through by the Japanese from the Pegu Yomas started on July 21st, the whole of the air support was switched over to this area and, for eight or nine days, the bewildered enemy was strenuously harassed by the squadrons supporting the 12th Army.

#### *Battle of the Sittang Bend.*

121. In an attempt to create a large scale diversion of the Allied ground forces, the Japanese, at the opening of July, launched an offensive at the Sittang from the bridgehead which they tenaciously held on the right bank opposite Mokpalin.