

These aircraft (L.1s and L.5s) could land more or less at will even in bad country to convey messages and supplies of small bulk, to carry commanders from one unit to another, evacuate casualties and perform a host of miscellaneous services without the risks attendant upon wireless silence or employing heavy aircraft. I consider their widespread use in future comparable operations essential.

42. The record of the small force of selected personnel with first-class equipment, which constituted the Air Commando, was naturally good, but that record cannot be advanced in support of extending the principle of Air Commando Units. Such a principle gives rise to the danger of tying down fighter and bomber aircraft permanently and exclusively to one particular Army formation with the consequent risks of duplication and lack of flexibility.

43. Such units have a place as spearheads for airborne and air transit operations, but as soon as normal supply can begin, fighter cover and air support, as requisite, should be provided by the tactical air forces as a whole under the direction of the appropriate air force Commander.

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The Siege of Imphal.

44. Concurrent with the heavy claims on Troop Carrier Command from Special Force and General Stilwell's forces arose an emergency that surpassed in importance all other transport operations, and on whose successful solution by air supply depended the fate of Imphal and the continuance of support to China.

45. On the 7/8th March the enemy crossed the Chindwin in force with the three-fold object of occupying Indian soil, capturing our main base at Imphal, and cutting the Bengal-Assam railway which fed the airfields from which supplies were flown to China.

46. Before the end of March, the enemy had cut the Tiddim-Imphal and Imphal-Kohima roads, occupied Tiddim and part of Kohima and swept round to the Bishenpur area west of Imphal. From the air point of view, the over-running of our warning system and the loss of advanced landing grounds on the perimeter of the Imphal plain were a serious inconvenience. The encirclement of the IV Corps divisions at Imphal, however, had immediate and heavy repercussions upon the transport situation, since I was forthwith confronted with unprecedented demands for the large scale delivery of reinforcements and supplies, not merely to the beleaguered forces in the Imphal Plain, but also to the garrisons holding out at Kohima and elsewhere. These demands were met, though not without considerable strain upon an already hard-worked force.

47. It was clear that the needs of our ground forces could not long be satisfied by the existing number of transport aircraft under my command. Thus, when the threat of a Japanese offensive westwards from the Chindwin had become apparent, although before it actually materialised, I made strong representations for further reinforcements of transport aircraft. As a result I received on loan from M.A.A.F. the services of the 64th Troop Carrier Group, U.S.A.A.F., consisting

of five squadrons and a detachment of No. 216 Squadron, R.A.F. These six squadrons were all operating on the Burma Front by the second week in April. In addition, I was permitted to retain for a further period the Commandos (C.46) temporarily withdrawn from the India-China Wing of the Air Transport Command for supply dropping in Arakan.

48. The needs of our forces in the Manipur area were many and pressing. No. 50 Parachute Brigade was flown from the Punjab to reinforce the garrison at Imphal, and a little later No. 5 Indian Division was moved by air complete from the Arakan in 758 sorties. Between 10th/15th April, an infantry brigade was flown from Amarda Road, south-west of Calcutta to Jorhat in Assam. 99 Commando (C.46) and 189 Dakota (C.47) sorties lifted 3,056 all ranks, 937,000 pounds of stores and the following equipment: 50 motor-cycles, 40 jeeps, 31 jeep trailers, 16 25-pounders and eight 3.7 howitzers. An Army Air Support Control unit was taken by air from Poona to Jorhat for service with 33 Corps. The movement by air of the servicing echelons of tactical squadrons became a matter of routine. In regard to the maintenance of our troops, the most varied articles were delivered to the forces momentarily engulfed within the flood of Japanese infiltration. At Kohima, for instance, owing to the enemy seizure of the wells, it was necessary to drop drinking water as well as routine supplies and medical necessities. Three hundred and seventy tons of bitumenised hessian were delivered by air at Tulihal to make the airfield there all-weather. On the return journeys all transport aircraft brought out with them casualties or troops not needed for active combat.

49. The 79 aircraft borrowed from the Middle East were due to be returned at the beginning of May. If this arrangement had been adhered to the consequences might well have been disastrous. General Stilwell's forces would have been forced to withdraw to their Ledo base, the Imphal Plain would have become untenable, the air route to China threatened, the morale of the Fourteenth Army troops encircled in the Imphal Plain would have been considerably affected and the all-weather airfields and warning system in the Surma and Brahmaputra Valleys would have been lost. Moreover, the major victory the enemy might have won would have had serious repercussions in India.

50. I was compelled to represent that these vital aircraft must stay until the reinforcements envisaged by the Chiefs of Staff arrived and became operational. Agreement was obtained, and I instructed the Air Commander, Eastern Air Command, to employ aircraft of the Strategic Air Force in a transport rôle should there be any gap between the departure of the M.A.A.F. squadrons and the new reinforcements becoming fully operational.

51. On 15th April my commitment for air supply to the besieged garrison at Imphal was established at the figure of over 400 short tons per day—which even then entailed the occupants going on short rations. The fulfilment of this contract depended upon a modicum of fair weather and upon the speedy loading of aircraft at Army supply bases. Neither of these conditions was entirely fulfilled, and it was only by reorganisation of the ground