

## OPERATIONS IN ARAKAN.

3. The operations in Arakan had only a limited objective, the capture of the air-fields on Akyab island at the end of the Mayu peninsula. There is no practicable land route out of Arakan into Burma proper, from which it is separated by a range of steep jungle-clad hills with no roads. Arakan itself is extremely difficult campaigning country with poor communications, much thick jungle and steep hills, and a wet and unhealthy climate. In the First Burmese War more than one hundred years previously it had been the scene of a British expedition, in which the force had been almost entirely destroyed by disease.

The capture of Akyab had been originally planned as a seaborne expedition, for which the 6th British Brigade of the 2nd Division had been specially trained and was to form a landing force with the 29th British Brigade, which had taken part in the Madagascar operations. The rôle of the 14th Indian Division in this plan was a purely diversionary advance from Chittagong. Unfortunately, I was not provided with the necessary resources for the landing operations.\* The 29th Brigade and their landing crews suffered from malaria in Madagascar and had to be sent to South Africa to recuperate. It became apparent that neither naval escorts, transports, landing craft, nor air forces to cover the landing would be available in sufficient numbers during the winter of 1942-43 to undertake the sea-borne expedition against Akyab; which had every prospect of success, if it could have been carried out at the end of 1942 or beginning of 1943, since the Japanese garrison was small and there were few defences on the island.

4. I was unwilling, however, to give up the attempt to capture Akyab, and considered that it might be possible by a rapid advance down the Arakan coast by the 14th Indian Division to reach the southern end of the Mayu peninsula (Foul Point) and thence launch a short-range assault in the few landing craft available and in local vessels, by the 6th Brigade and part of the 14th Division. Speed in the advance was essential so as to reach Akyab before the Japanese could reinforce the island or strengthen the defences.

There were, however, serious obstacles to a rapid advance in the nature of the country and the communications. There were no road communications other than those we could make as we advanced, which entailed the bridging of numerous creeks. The forward echelons had to be organised on a pack transport basis, which caused difficulties in a formation which had been trained on a mechanised basis. Sea communications were hampered by the nature of the coast line, which offered no landing facilities except within the Naf and Mayu rivers; they could only be used as their mouths were secured by our advance. Supply by air was out of the question, owing to our lack of transport aircraft.

5. At the beginning of the campaign the enemy held Maungdaw and Buthidaung with a force estimated at two battalions with eight guns. The initial advance of the 14th Division

was delayed by the weather and administrative difficulties. The leading Brigade, the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade, was about to attack the enemy positions, in the middle of December, 1942, when the enemy withdrew, and we occupied Maungdaw on December 16th and Buthidaung on December 17th. The 14th Division followed up on a two-brigade front; the 47th Indian Infantry Brigade moving down the coast towards Foul Point, and the 123rd Brigade east of the Mayu river towards Rathedaung. By December 27th, the 47th Brigade had reached Indin, and a patrol actually rounded Foul Point and reached Magyichaung; by the same date the 123rd Brigade arrived opposite Rathedaung and a patrol reported it clear of the enemy, though this cannot have been correct. At this time it appeared that the Japanese did not intend to hold the Mayu peninsula. If the troops had been able to push on at once, the whole peninsula might have been secured.

6. There now occurred an unfortunate delay of some ten days, due to administrative difficulties. It may be that the urgency of the situation was not fully realised and that troops should have been pushed forward in spite of all difficulties to take advantage of the situation. But the brigades were operating at the end of a very tenuous line of communications of over 150 miles from railhead, and the weather was unfavourable, heavy rain making the road impassable.

When the advance was resumed on January 6th, the enemy had constructed strong defences in the Donbaik-Laungchaung area and at Rathedaung. The 47th Brigade attacked the Donbaik position on January 18th and 19th. The attack failed, mainly owing to the difficulty of locating enemy machine-guns and mortars in the jungle.

The 47th Brigade was now relieved by the 55th Indian Infantry Brigade, and preparations were made for a fresh assault with the aid of tanks. This was made on February 1st and failed, two of the six tanks used being ditched and two knocked out by anti-tank fire. An attack on Rathedaung by 123rd Brigade on February 3rd also failed after some initial success. The 55th Brigade attacked Donbaik again on February 17th and again failed. It was now relieved by the 71st Brigade of the 26th Indian Division. The intervals between the attacks were due entirely to difficulties of communications which made reinforcement and supply very slow. The long stretch of hastily constructed road was continually interrupted by rain; and supply by sea was hampered by the lack of vessels of suitable size and draught to enter the river and use the anchorages at Cox's Bazaar and Maungdaw; it even proved necessary to withdraw vessels of the R I N from mine-sweeping and patrol duties, to remove their guns, and use them as cargo ships.

7. By this time it became obvious that the Japanese had been reinforced and had probably the whole of one division on the Arakan front. Strong defences had now been made on Akyab island. I discussed the situation with General Irwin, commanding the Eastern Army. It seemed improbable that the Mayu peninsula could be cleared in time to deliver the assault on Akyab before monsoon conditions, which

\* The landings in North Africa and later in Sicily (November, 1942—July, 1943) took higher priority and there were insufficient resources for both operations (Note by the War Office)