

Fourth, in the area of Mawchi and to the north were H.Q. 15th Japanese Army, 56 Division (less 113 Regiment), 15 Division, 144 Regiment of 55 Division and various other units.

Fifth, to the east of the Sittang from Shwegyin down to Moulmein, were H.Q. Burma Area Army, H.Q. 33rd Japanese Army, 31 and 33 Divisions, 24 Independent Mixed Brigade and L. of C. and Base units.

270. This force was not in fact as formidable as it first appears. 56 Division and 24 Independent Mixed Brigade were the only major formations which had not been severely handled, with the loss of a large proportion of their artillery and transport. Moreover these two formations alone had managed to retain their inter-communication systems reasonably intact. There was therefore, I appreciated, no immediate possibility of a major counter-offensive, and the only possible intention of the Japanese would be to extricate those troops west of the Sittang from their almost hopeless situation.

271. I also appreciated that, in broad terms, the Japanese would endeavour to hold the east bank of the Sittang as a rear-guard position under cover of which the bulk of their forces now west of the river could be withdrawn east into Siam or south to Moulmein. While this was in progress the Japanese were likely to oppose any advances by our forces on the Taunggyi and Mawchi roads as likely to turn their position, and cut off or disrupt an organized withdrawal south or east of his forces west of the Sittang. Elements of 56 and 15 Japanese Divisions did in fact oppose our advance on the Taunggyi and Mawchi roads respectively until the surrender.

It was obvious that the extrication of the Japanese formations west of the river was an operation involving tremendous difficulties. There were the truly formidable natural obstacles of the Irrawaddy, the Pegu Yomas mountains and the Sittang to be crossed, during the monsoon, by jungle tracks and without wheeled transport or river crossing equipment. They were also already cut off from all normal supply and while they might live by foraging they could not be maintained in ammunition and other expendable military stores. Our air superiority forbade the use of air supply.

272. Against this situation, Fourteenth Army was in general extended over several hundreds of miles on the Yenangyaung—Rangoon and Mandalay—Rangoon axes. It was only possible under such conditions to hold key points and patrol the intervening gaps, while the movement eastwards of the considerable body of enemy might well disrupt our tenuous lines of communication.

Although we had gained a valuable fortnight by the capture of Rangoon from the sea, the administrative situation now limited our capabilities for further action, coupled as it was with the necessity to begin immediately the preparations for the attack on Malaya. Although it is dealt with in Part II of this Despatch, I think it desirable to draw attention here to the two routes by which our supplies arrived, and to point out that I was responsible not only for the maintenance of the Army, but also for that of all Naval and Air Force bases in Burma and for the carriage

to distribution centres in Burma of civil supplies.

The Northern supply route ran by rail to Manipur Road in Assam thence by road through Imphal to Kalewa then by Inland Water Transport to Myingan, and finally by rail to Thazi for distribution. It could be supplemented by air transport from Imphal to Myingan, but this method was as liable to monsoon interruption as was the worn-out road route. In fact, the rapid deterioration of this route had already caused 4 Corps to be put on half rations as a precautionary measure.

The Southern supply route was by sea to Chittagong, Akyab or Kyaukpyu and thence by air to Central Burma or Inland Water Transport to troops in Arakan.

273. It was therefore essential to open, develop and stock Rangoon as the main base for Southern Burma, and improve its communications northwards as rapidly as possible. This was underlined by the administrative problems with which we would be faced when operating in the Moulmein area, for here roads were few, and monsoon conditions precluded the maintenance by sea of an advance down the Tenasserim coast. Finally, no further resources of aircraft or shipping were available, and I was forced to the conclusion that no major operation could be undertaken at any distance from the main Mandalay—Rangoon road or railway.

274. I accordingly directed General Slim to complete the destruction of the enemy west of the Sittang and to maintain constant pressure against Moulmein, Mawchi and Taunggyi.

SECTION XVI (paras. 275-281) OPERATIONS IN MAY

New orders issued by General Slim : Arakan operations : 4 Corps operations : 33 Corps operations : Note on guerilla organizations.

275. To carry out the tasks I had now given him (see para. 274) General Slim issued fresh orders to his subordinate commanders. Besides 4 and 33 Corps, General Slim had 26 Indian and 36 British Divisions, and 64 Indian Brigade (19 Indian Division), under his direct control.

He instructed 4 Corps (General Messervy) to capture Mokpalin and Bilin, east of the Sittang and reconnoitre towards Moulmein : to destroy any enemy forces attempting to escape from the Pegu Yomas across the Mandalay—Rangoon road and railway ; and to capture Thandaung on the road from Toungoo to Mawchi.

33 Corps (General Stopford) at the same time was ordered to destroy the enemy in the Irrawaddy Valley, open the Prome—Rangoon road and railway, and capture Bassein. 26 Indian Division was ordered to advance on Prome from Rangoon to meet 33 Corps, and on the 15th May a battalion group from 2 British Division (then in the Rangoon area) was sent to carry out the capture of Bassein.

Finally General Slim ordered 64 Indian Infantry Brigade to relieve 36 British Division on the Taunggyi—Thazi road and capture Kalaw, the Brigade coming under command of 4 Corps on the 18th May.

276. In Arakan there remained 82 (West African) Division directly under my control,