

detracting from the efficacy of the sorties. Furthermore, flying-boat facilities at Rangoon were inadequate, and prevented the Sunderlands from being used to the fullest operational capacity. For example, there were no slipway or beaching facilities, so that it was impossible for flying-boats to undertake operations likely to cause severe damage to their hulls. Neither the Sunderland nor the Liberator aircraft is ideal for low-level shipping attacks, but the nature of the operation and existing conditions demanded long-range aircraft and these were the only types available.

265. It is interesting to note that Liberator aircraft of Nos. 203 and 354 Squadrons carried out a series of long-range sea reconnaissance patrols during May 13th-19th which proved invaluable in the location and eventual destruction on May 16th of the Japanese heavy cruiser "HAGURO" in the Straits of Malacca by H.M. Naval forces. (26th Destroyer Flotilla—Captain M. L. Power, C.B.E., D.S.O., in H.M.S. "SAUMAREZ".)

266. Having regard to the many and varied complexities of conducting strike operations within this vast theatre of operations, such as the unfortunate paucity of air bases, the irremediable problem of distance and the unsuitability of aircraft, my G.R. Air Forces achieved results both impressive and commendable. The enemy's shipping sustained considerable blows at a time when every ship in his possession was of vital importance. When the war came to an abrupt conclusion, offensive general reconnaissance was getting into its stride. Had hostilities continued, past experience permits an optimistic speculation in connection with the heavy toll general reconnaissance would have taken of Japanese sea transport, particularly on the shipping routes between Batavia and Singapore.

Air-Sea Mining as Part of the Campaign.

267. Mine-laying operations were planned as an essential part of the anti-shipping campaign, to be executed concurrently with the more directly offensive anti-shipping strikes programme. Initially, it was planned to lay mines during the hours of darkness in the shipping lanes of Northern Sumatra and Northern Malaya, and 160 Squadron (Liberators Mk.V.) underwent an intensive period of training in long range flying and the technique of mine-laying to implement these plans. They commenced these operations on 21st January, 1945 and continued until 24th May—a period of 124 days during which 196 sorties were flown. After operational experience had been gained, the mining commitments were increased to include drops in the areas of Sonchkla, Chumborn, Port Swettenham and Singapore. Mine-laying operations were discontinued after 24th May, 1945, because the stage was then being finally set for Operation "Zipper", and to have continued mine-laying beyond that date might have had serious repercussions when Allied landings took place on the west coast of Malaya.

268. It is difficult, if not impossible, to assess accurately and fully, the damage and inconvenience caused to the enemy by these particular operations. The strategy employed was to mine a number of different and well-separated targets at frequent intervals so as

to cause the enemy the greatest possible inconvenience in constantly deploying his inadequate force of mine sweeping craft over a large area. It is reasonable to assume that many thousands of tons of enemy shipping were immobilised at a time when they could ill be spared, and the task of constant mine-sweeping must have been heart-breaking if not overwhelming. Whatever the material achievements of these operations, it must be added that the programme was extremely well-conceived and well executed.

Employment of General Reconnaissance Aircraft on Special Duty Operations.

269. The year of final and complete victory in South East Asia Command was a period of strenuous re-orientation for G.R. Air Forces. With the Indian Ocean no longer a hunting-ground for enemy U-boats, the days of vigilant defensive warfare had passed, and it became essential to re-model the defensive Air Forces into a strong and penetrating arm of offence with which to sever the enemy's sea communications. (The broad strategy of general reconnaissance in the Indian Ocean had always been concerned with the passive protection of shipping rather than the hunting of U-boats—a strategy rendered inevitable by the enormous expanse of water to be reconnoitered and the inadequate number of aircraft and few advance bases at our disposal.)

270. Unfortunately, it was impossible to devote our entire G.R. resources to the execution of this offensive plan, for there were more urgent operational demands to be satisfied, and general reconnaissance aircraft could be quickly and satisfactorily diverted to the rescue. When mine-laying operations ceased, it was envisaged that 160 Squadron, together with Nos. 8 and 356 Squadrons, would reinforce the shipping strike campaign, but the growing requirements of the S.D. organisation absorbed these squadrons to the detriment of offensive general reconnaissance. The effort of G.R. aircraft operating in the S.D. role does not properly belong to this chapter, but rather to that of S.D. operations as a whole. Suffice it is to say here that these squadrons acquitted themselves in a creditable fashion, and manifested once again the comparative ease with which Air Power can be moulded into different forms or styles to meet the changing requirements.

271. Towards the end of the war, No. 222 Group had become responsible for the operational control of some six squadrons engaged on S.D. operations, with the result that the functional and administrative experience gained therefrom provided the Command with a competent and well-versed organisation for the vital and intricate operations immediately following the end of the war. No. 222 Group also played a large and important part in Operations "Birdcage" and "Mastiff", for the requirements of these operations were in many ways similar to those of S.D.

272. The achievements of general reconnaissance aircraft engaged upon the relief and liberation of Allied prisoners-of-war, are recorded in the appropriate chapter. It was a satisfying conclusion to the history of general reconnaissance in the Indian Ocean—a history of dexterous and highly competent adaptation to the many and varied exigencies of an immense and complicated theatre of war.