

to the continually increasing importance of their task in the operational areas. Indeed, it is not too much to say that their services were instrumental in preserving the existence of the Fourteenth Army as a striking force on the Burma frontier. Operations on the Eastern front made calls upon them at an ever increasing rate, so that despite reinforcement, transport squadrons worked at a high rate of effort from the moment they became operational. In consequence, crews underwent a period of considerable strain, for not only does supply dropping in this theatre involve intricate low flying over the dropping zone for as much as an hour in a hot aircraft interior, but the crews were normally responsible for the arduous work of unloading 6,000 to 7,000 lbs. of freight.

Development of Troop Carrier Command.

30. In November, the only R.A.F. transport squadron operating was No. 31, an experienced and pioneer unit, but the 1st and 2nd Troop Carrier Squadrons U.S.A.A.F. had begun to work over the northern sector of the front and there were other squadrons both British and American, either in training or on their way. Unified operational control of these forces was effected by the institution in December of Troop Carrier Command, Eastern Air Command, under Brigadier General W. D. Old, U.S.A.A.F., administrative control remaining in the usual British or American channels. Headquarters was established at Comilla on 2nd January, 1944, in close proximity to the Headquarters of Fourteenth Army and of the Third Tactical Air Force, as well as to main Army supply bases. Subsequent operations illustrated the dependence of air transport operations upon the tactical air situation, and in order to combine final responsibility for the former with the exercise of our air superiority—as well as to integrate air transport with army policy—Troop Carrier Command was placed under the control of the Air Commander, Third Tactical Air Force, from 1st May. Subsequently Troop Carrier Command was dissolved as from 4th June, by when its component squadrons numbered 8—4 R.A.F. and 4 U.S.A.A.F. Moreover, in February the Air Transport Command had loaned to me twenty-two Commandos (C.46) to meet the emergency in the Arakan, and when it became necessary to return these in April, five U.S.A.A.F. Troop Carrier squadrons and the larger part of 216 Squadron R.A.F. were detached to work with my Command from M.A.A.F. Upon their return to the Mediterranean theatre in June, aircraft and crews from the Strategic Air Force were attached to the Third Tactical Air Force to fill the gap until the first of the U.S.A.A.F. Combat Cargo Groups became operational. During its short but eventful life of little over six months, Troop Carrier Command had thus increased more than four-fold in size, and even more in significance.

31. The routine supply dropping missions of No. 31 Squadron over the Chin Hills and Arakan were being continued at the time of the formation of South East Asia Command. The first additional need was that of 81 (West African) Division which already in December received supplies landed for it at Chiringa by U.S.A.A.F. It then moved eastwards over the mountains to the Kaladan Valley at

Daletme and began its advance southwards, being dependent throughout for its maintenance upon air supply. From 7th January, 1944, onwards, this became a commitment of No. 62 Squadron R.A.F. At the same time U.S.A.A.F. aircraft came to the help of No. 31 Squadron in building up a large reserve of supplies at Tiddim, while further north, Nos. 1 and 2 Troop Carrier Squadrons U.S.A.A.F. in addition to maintaining the air warning centres screening the Assam Valley, began to supply on a much larger scale the two Chinese Divisions advancing south-east from Ledo down the Hukawng Valley. They also gave help to the Kachin levies waging guerrilla warfare in the Fort Hertz district, as well as to the Gurkha garrison of Fort Hertz itself.

The Arakan Battle—February, 1944.

32. When the Japanese offensive in the Arakan opened on 4th February, the needs of the 14th Army for air supply greatly expanded with only a few days' warning. The land communications of 7th Indian Division were soon cut and those of 5th Indian Division in danger, and it was only by supply dropping that the encircled forces could be expected to stand their ground and turn a potential catastrophe into a decisive victory. Japanese preparations for an offensive had been observed, however, and the possibility of encirclement envisaged, so that when supply by air was called for on 8th February, there was no delay.

33. On the first day some of our transport aircraft encountered an enemy fighter sweep and one was shot down. Such was our air superiority that throughout the Arakan operations this was the only loss sustained by transport aircraft from enemy fighters, although many aircraft were damaged by fire from the ground. Later, as a measure of protection, much of the supply dropping was done by night with but little falling off in efficiency. The operation while it lasted was of such unexpected magnitude that I was compelled to request the loan of a number of Commandos (C.46) from the India-China Wing of the U.S. Air Transport Command. These aircraft were promptly and unstintingly supplied. The critical period from the 8th February to 6th March inclusive involved the delivery of 2,010 short tons of supplies of all kinds, including rations, animals, ammunition and P.O.L.* With such large scale help, ground forces were able to break out of their encirclement and inflict a decisive defeat on the enemy—significant in that it pointed the way towards the neutralisation of the long familiar Japanese offensive tactics. By the end of the month, air supply to the Arakan, though it still continued, was no longer of an emergency nature.

Operation "Thursday".

34. The major offensive action planned and carried out by 14th Army before the onset of the monsoon, was a penetration of enemy-occupied territory by columns of Special Force under Major General O. C. Wingate. Its purpose was to disrupt enemy communications and thereby aid the recapture of northern Burma and create a favourable situation for the 14th Army to exploit. The operation as

* Petrol, Oil, Lubricants.