

likewise landed at airstrips as close as possible to troops in the line. Allied transport aircraft were often being unloaded on captured airfields within a few hours of their being seized. But as the army units advanced, it frequently proved impossible, despite the presence of enemy troops lurking in the neighbourhood, to leave garrisons behind to protect the airfields they had overrun. The defence of the latter thus fell to the squadrons of the R.A.F. Regiment. On their shoulders there thus rested the defence of the army lifeline and also of the air bases indispensable for air support and defence, and they were accordingly moved forward step by step with the progress of the campaign, sometimes by air.

185. The main airfield at Meiktila for instance, was occupied early in March, 1944, and was speedily transformed into a forward base for the supply of the Fourteenth Army, whose units had forged ahead both southwards and eastwards, leaving numerous organised parties of the enemy in their rear. The defence of the airfield thus fell mainly upon two field squadrons of the R.A.F. Regiment, which went into action on a number of occasions against Japanese parties attempting to dig themselves in within the airfield perimeter. For a short period indeed, the landing strip used to change hands twice daily, the enemy infiltrating by night only to be expelled the next morning when, as soon as all was clear, the transport aircraft would begin to land. The Regiment casualties in the course of these engagements included two officers and twelve other ranks killed.

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PART TEN.

CONCLUSIONS, RESULTS, AND LESSONS LEARNED.

I. Operations.

186. One of the major difficulties under which an Air Force works is the impracticability of ever drawing up a full balance-sheet which will give in detail the full results of air action. Unless a detailed examination of enemy records is made, air forces must rely upon the disjointed accounts of the ground forces, the reports of informants, and photographic reconnaissance, for an assessment of their results. This has been particularly the case in Burma, where so much of the effort has been expended upon fleeting targets, reported troop concentrations, or objectives obscured by thick jungle. Notwithstanding the vagueness of the information, it is certain that the number of casualties inflicted upon the enemy as a direct result of air action has undoubtedly been large, the isolation of the battlefield by the interdiction of the supply lines has been almost complete, and prevented the enemy from deploying his full strength in every major engagement that has taken place, while the new mobility given to armies by the unstinting use of air transport has undoubtedly been the major factor in the expulsion of the enemy from Burma.

187. There have at times been grounds for a belief that the effort of our close support squadrons has not been used to full advantage because of a lack of experience on the part of

Army commanders of the relative efficacy of certain types of air attack against the varied objectives. A more scientific application of the fire-power afforded by ground-attack aircraft might have led to an economy of effort thus made available to apply to other targets. Whether the attack by twelve fighter-bombers against a well-camouflaged single machine-gun is justifiable, must always be a moot point until machinery is devised to assess the debit and credit side of the picture. It is not difficult in a staff study to deduce that the effort is unprofitable, but the same point of view may not be held by the troops making the actual assault. The results of the air bombardment may be just what was needed to make the action successful. It is certain that the high standard of accuracy developed in our tactical squadrons during 1944-45 has had an enormous effect upon enemy resistance.

188. The low incidence of casualties during assaults by our own troops also bears this out, as do the unvarying tributes paid by battalions and divisions to the work of the squadrons who supported them. Recently, further evidence has come to light from informants on the efficacy of attacks. With the co-ordination of Visual Control Post teams and other sources, an even more efficient direction of fire-power on to targets and better observation of results will be possible. If analysed, the plans compiled from these sources would provide valuable proof of the decisive part that can be played by close support squadrons properly trained and handled.

II. Planning.

189. The amount of planning that has been necessary to bring the campaign to a close has been large, due in part to some misappreciation of Japanese intentions and to frustration imposed by non-arrival of resources. There was a tendency also on the part of ground forces to formulate a plan of operations without consulting the Air Commander in the early stages of planning. In consequence, much effort was expended in the recasting of operational plans to take advantage of the striking power of air forces.

190. Much of this could have been avoided had the Army Commander been able to remain alongside the Supreme Commander and the Allied Air Commander-in-Chief instead of having to base himself at an Advanced Headquarters in Calcutta. Not only was proper liaison at C.-in-C. level impossible, but the full flow of information and views between the staffs was rendered difficult. The Burma campaign proved that no plan of operations is complete unless it represents the views of the air as well as of the ground forces at all stages.

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III. Maintenance.

191. South East Asia Air Forces have a background of three years' development under trying conditions with insufficient resources. The organisation became vast and was spread over a wide area. The first phase for which this organisation was designed is now completed; the flow of supplies has become secure, and the necessity for tying down large numbers