

made its decisive crossing of the Irrawaddy below Mandalay, another Beaufighter located some fifty vehicles all moving eastwards along the Chauk—Meiktila highway.

91. A little later, on the night of the 27th/28th, a Mitchell on intruder patrol discovered a convoy of over a hundred vehicles, together with some armoured cars and six tanks, travelling northwards along the road from Taungdwingyi to Myothit, doubtless to be thrown into the attempt to stem the advance of the Fourteenth Army. The aircraft delivered attacks by both bombing and strafing for the space of an hour. It then attacked another smaller group of vehicles some distance to the south-east, after which it returned to the large convoy and was able to observe that some forty units had been knocked out by its previous attacks; finally it delivered one more strafing attack, setting three more vehicles on fire.

92. In the second half of April, with the final stages of the advance southwards in progress, such targets became unprecedentedly plentiful. A Hurricane squadron, for instance, caught over forty vehicles on the 19th standing nose to tail, heavily loaded and camouflaged, off the road a little south of Pyinmana, and was subsequently able to count seventeen in flames and many more severely damaged. The same squadron located an even larger number near the site of the bridge over the Sittang at Mokpalin on the 30th, when a total of forty-three lorries finally was counted in flames. Both Mustangs of the Second Air Commando Group and Beaufighters of 224 Group had each already made a haul similar in size and nature in this escape corridor on the 26th. In all, during this second half of the month, approximately three hundred and fifty motor vehicles were successfully attacked behind the enemy's lines throughout Burma. The analogous figures for the whole period covered by this despatch may conservatively be assessed, on the basis of visible evidence, at 3846 M.T. vehicles.

93. One operation in tactical support of the Fourteenth Army is worthy of special mention, namely the achievement of a Hurricane IID squadron, firing rocket projectiles, which on February 19th—in the course of a single day—put out of action twelve tanks which the Japanese were about to throw into the battle for the bridgehead opposite Myinmu. These belonged to the single tank regiment of which the Japanese forces in Burma were known to dispose, and it was a measure of the importance attached by the enemy to the outcome of the struggle in the Myinmu bridgehead that he now sought to commit them in the field for the first time since they had been withdrawn from the Imphal front in the previous June. They were, however, destroyed before they came within range of infantry weapons, their destruction being shortly afterwards verified by advancing Allied troops who inspected their remains.

94. Somewhat different in character from the harassing of Japanese road communication was the interdiction of the railways used by the enemy in supplying his troops in Burma. Already, before the opening of the period covered by this despatch, the operation of ground-attack fighter aircraft over these lines had become a difficult and expensive undertaking. Trains had practically ceased to run by day,

their component parts generally being camouflaged and dispersed until sunset with the locomotives hidden in specially constructed shelters, often at the end of long sidings deep in the jungle. All obvious railway targets were guarded by efficient anti-aircraft defences, dummy or derelict locomotives being placed to decoy the aircraft into traps or at least to draw their fire. Nevertheless, some three hundred and ten locomotives were successfully attacked by day, Beaufighters accounting for one hundred and eighty-seven. Most of the remainder were claimed by Mosquitos, Mustangs, Lightnings and Thunderbolts.

95. Of the number of rolling stock destroyed it would be unsafe to give any estimate, but in any case there were always more than enough waggons available in Burma to satisfy Japanese military needs—in contrast to the position in regard to locomotives, which, as a result of past Allied air attacks were always in short supply, the Japanese going so far as to import them from Siam and to use petrol-driven cars to haul railway waggons. Water-towers always presented a vulnerable target, difficult to hide, and thirty-nine were holed during the period. It should be noted that these day attacks by ground-attack fighters reached as far as the northern extremities of both the Burma-Siam and the Bangkok-Chiangmai railways.

96. A further one hundred and twenty-two locomotives were put out of commission as a result of night attacks, thirty-seven being contributed by Mosquitos and thirty-seven by Mitchells. These attacks were of course delivered upon trains in full employment, and were not infrequently accompanied by spectacular results, with engine boilers exploding, trucks aflame and a series of secondary explosions. They may be reckoned as having inflicted greater material injury upon the enemy than a numerical comparison between the numbers of locomotives damaged by day and by night would suggest.

97. Concurrently with attacks upon locomotives, key points in the Burmese railway system, such as the junctions at Thazi and Pyinmana, were bombed, mainly by Mitchells and Lightnings. But the main weight of attack continued to be directed upon bridges, which were so numerous that it was impossible to provide anti-aircraft defences for more than the most important. The enemy pursued his established policy of erecting by-pass trestle bridges to serve as temporary substitutes for the permanent structures wrecked or menaced by air attack.

98. In all, about three hundred bridges were put out of commission by medium, light and fighter bombers; of this total, one hundred and twelve were railway bridges. So great, however, was the success of the bridge destruction policy, that in connection with the unexpectedly rapid advance of the Fourteenth Army it provoked the query whether we were not destroying our own future land line of communication in advance, and agreement was reached by which, from February onwards, the indiscriminate destruction of bridges was abandoned in favour of a policy of keeping specified major bridges unserviceable. When, in course of time, the sites were occupied by Allied