

the withdrawal of R.A.F. fighter protection for the air transports—a protection which had been maintained consistently from the beginning of the Allied advance through Burma after Imphal in 1944, and had involved fighter cover over a front extending many hundreds of miles.

81. When Fourteenth Army marched a thousand miles through Burma in six months they achieved a great military feat in a country which had been deemed hitherto to be almost physically impassable and medically disastrous for the mass movement of men. With that Army, the Air Forces went every mile of the way—scouting, supporting, reinforcing, supplying, evacuating wounded and striking ahead of the advancing troops, to disrupt Japanese lines of communication and supply bases.

82. The same air-ground co-operation which brought about the fall of Rangoon and the re-conquest of Burma would have been repeated on a grand scale for the assault planned on Malaya—forestalled only by Japanese surrender. Even then the flexibility of Air Power was such that, in the emergency which followed the cessation of hostilities, it was able to re-direct its energies in one of the greatest relief and liberation operations of World War II.

83. In any final analysis of the war in South East Asia, air superiority is of paramount importance, and an indispensable factor upon which maintenance and supply of all our Forces in the Theatre depended.

TACTICAL AIR OPERATIONS.

After Rangoon.

84. When the Japanese pulled out of Rangoon, and the remnants of the main army succeeded in reaching Moulmein after the disastrous retreat down the Central Corridor in April, hostilities in Burma were by no means over.

85. There was no question of the enemy's capacity to stage a serious comeback; his supply lines were no longer reliable and the Japanese Air Force was out of the race.

86. But there was one aspect of the campaign which was not yet complete and one which began to assume greater importance now that the Allied Forces had established themselves firmly in Southern Burma and Rangoon. It was the presence of the large isolated forces of Japanese troops in Central and North Burma, estimated at over 50,000 men. While the Allied advance down the Central Corridor during March and April had driven a wedge through a crumbling enemy defence, it had, at the same time, forced a considerable strength of Japanese troops into the hill regions of Eastern and Western Burma, isolating them from the main Japanese army as it retreated on Moulmein.

87. The Air Forces, principally those of No. 221 Group, and the Allied ground forces deployed in Southern Burma, swung round to face these large concentrations of Japanese troops in the north between the Irrawaddy and the Mandalay railway corridor in Central Burma and the railway corridor and the Sittang and Salween Rivers to the east. Their object was to close the principal escape routes which these Japanese forces must pass through to get out of Burma.

88. Few factors sustain the morale of fighting men more than the knowledge that supplies of provisions and equipment are assured. The isolated Japanese forces in Burma, however, as the result of disruption and disorganisation of their rear lines of communication, were ill-equipped, and certainly denied any possibility of supply by air. They suffered considerably through shortages of food, also medical supplies, and took to eating attractive looking but dangerous fruits.

89. So long as these trapped Japanese forces remained on Burmese soil, however, they required considerable effort from the air to watch their movement and to destroy them as opportunity arose.

The Competitive Spirit of Squadrons.

90. The task of hunting and destroying these isolated pockets of Japanese forces, in co-operation with the Allied ground troops, fell largely upon the squadrons of No. 221 Group, since No. 224 Group, after its fine record of achievement in Burma, was now in the process of pulling out for training and re-equipment in Southern India prior to the assault on Malaya.

91. The competitive spirit among squadrons soon produced keen offensive patrols in seeking out the enemy with Mosquitos, Beaufighters, Hurricanes, Spitfires and Thunderbolts covering wide areas of country—in spite of Monsoon weather—and succeeding in driving parties of Japanese troops off the main escape routes and forcing them to seek the cover of jungle or scrub.

92. In this offensive drive by the squadrons during May and June, a total of 4,813 sorties was flown by our aircraft in monsoon weather to bomb and strafe the enemy.

93. It was during this period that a return was made to jungle warfare in Burma, as grim and fierce as anything experienced by the air and ground forces during previous months. The air forces faced the considerable hazards of monsoon flying conditions as they attacked enemy troop concentrations attempting to regroup and reach appointed regrouping areas.

94. The effectiveness of these R.A.F. jungle strikes was not only substantiated in appreciative messages by the Army, but also by Japanese officer prisoners-of-war captured at this period. Of the air forces operating against them, a Japanese officer, a L/Cpl., and a Superior Private had said during interrogation:—

“Dawn found us heading towards a village on the opposite shore. Later, we found that it was near Mumbu. We cooked some rice and afterwards all went to sleep in a bamboo clump on the bend of the river. Sleep, however, was not so easy, for the enemy planes were roaring overhead, and we would awake in a cold sweat in the midst of a horrible nightmare.”

95. There could be no doubt that the enemy had a healthy respect for our British Air Force and sought the cover of undergrowth when surprised by our fighters, which strafed them incessantly. A Japanese Private of the 82nd Air Field Battalion, captured in Burma, when shown a collection of silhouettes of Allied aircraft, picked out the Spitfire as the aircraft most feared by the Japanese.