

13th January against Mandalay, the keystone of the whole Japanese defensive system in central Burma and directly threatened in two directions by the advance of the Fourteenth Army. Fifty-four aircraft attacked the Japanese-occupied district and a further 12 the suburb of Sagaing on the opposite side of the river, the operation being preceded by attacks by Thunderbolts upon anti-aircraft gun sites in the neighbourhood, and accompanied by fighter sweeps over the airfields at Aungban and Meiktila. Photographic evidence confirmed the destruction of some 70 major buildings in the Japanese quarters, while intelligence reports variously estimated Japanese casualties alone at 600 and a 1,000, in addition to those inflicted upon Burmese puppet troops.

85. Such operations undertaken at the request of the Allied land forces reached their zenith in February, during which month nearly two thirds of the total number of sorties flown by Liberators of the Strategic Air Force were directed against targets in or near the battle-front as requested by the Fourteenth Army. These included, for instance, the stores dumps near the railhead at Madaya, from which the enemy forces fighting to contain the Singu bridgehead were supplied, which was attacked by forty-five heavy bomber aircraft, and the garrison districts at Yenangyaung, which were attacked by 50. Later in the month, heavy bomber targets included objectives designated by the Army at Myittha, Mahlaing and Myingyan—all towns lying on or close to the path being followed by the armoured columns of 4 Corps in their thrust towards Meiktila. To take a final example, the climax of the air attacks upon the potential stronghold of Toungoo, where the enemy was expected to make a serious effort to stop the drive of 4 Corps southwards towards Rangoon in the second half of April, was supplied by over 40 Liberators, which bombed the garrison area there on the 21st, when the nearest Allied troops were already within striking distance, and indeed entered the town the following day.

86. Very effective operations against targets in the immediate rear of the enemy were carried out by ground-attack fighters throughout the period; their most vulnerable objectives were to be found along the lines of communication, where animal and motor transport units were carrying to his troops in the field, and also along the waterways where miscellaneous rivercraft served the same purpose. In these operations varied aircraft were employed, from Hurricanes and Spitfires to Beaufighters, Lightnings, Thunderbolts and Mosquitos, while Mitchells also participated, particularly by night. Armament included rocket projectiles and bombs, as well as 40 mm. cannon, also guns of lesser calibre.

87. Some small foretaste of the weight and pattern of this tactical support of the army was given in July, when the enemy was endeavouring to withdraw from the perimeter of the Imphal plain, and good toll was taken of his transport forced to brave the open road to Tiddim and the other routes eastward to the Chindwin. Direct attacks upon vehicles, mainly by Hurricanes, were varied by successful efforts to block the Tiddim road by causing landslides, and to break the bridges both along it and in the Kabaw Valley—achievements for

which Lightnings and Vengeances were responsible. In all, over 75 motor transport units were successfully attacked in this area during the month. These operations, though invisible to the army, were controlled with the military situation always in view, and evidence was subsequently forthcoming in plenty from captured diaries of enemy officers and men of their effectiveness in hindering the passage of supplies and the movement of personnel, and in aggravating the conditions of disease and undernourishment under which the Japanese ground forces laboured.

88. In August the tactical picture on the Fourteenth Army front came to centre round the Chindwin river, which for two or three weeks became of considerably enhanced importance as a supply route. It had long been in use by the Japanese as a line of communication, and the riverine ports, particularly Monywa and Kalewa, were active points of supply. The still worsening military situation continued to impose upon the enemy the necessity for emergency movements of men and supplies behind the Manipur sector of the front. Since the capacity of the Sagaing—Ye-U railway had been greatly reduced by air action, and the other overland routes were more or less unusable owing to the monsoon, they were forced to have increased resort to the Chindwin as a line of communication.

89. Early in the month the toll of rivercraft successfully attacked began to increase and it became apparent that something was afoot. The Spitfires and Hurricanes which had hitherto been covering the river were reinforced by a detachment of Beaufighters from 224 Group. "Hurribombers" were joined by Wellingtons, and later by Mitchells, in a series of attacks upon riverside targets. In addition, mines, both magnetic and ordinary, were laid in the Chindwin by Mitchells so as to catch traffic attempting to move under cover either of cloud or darkness. The total number of rivercraft successfully attacked on the Chindwin during the month was not far short of five hundred, and included seven launches; of this total the Beaufighters accounted for slightly over half, together with five of the launches.

90. Attacks upon road transport vehicles continued throughout the campaign, their effectiveness being increased with the advent of better weather at the close of the monsoon. In particular, the periods during which a major Allied advance was in progress and the battlefront was therefore fluid, were marked by the presence of transport targets in otherwise unusual quantity. This was so during the advance to the Irrawaddy in December, the thrust towards Meiktila during late February and early in March, and above all during the final advance of 4 Corps towards Rangoon in the second half of April. Ox-carts belonging to the local population had long been habitually pressed into service by the Japanese, and were attacked at all times. But lorries moved mainly under cover of darkness, and the Beaufighters which lit upon a convoy of forty to fifty vehicles travelling westwards along the road from Meiktila to Kyaukpadaung on the afternoon of February 5th and successfully strafed them made an exceptional discovery. But it was probably no coincidence that on the night of February 15th/16th, just after the Fourteenth Army had