

JAPANESE OFFENSIVE BEGINS.

Mergui and Tavoy.

95. On the afternoon of the 18th January the situation at Mergui and Tavoy suddenly deteriorated and I was informed by the B.C.S. Burmarmy that instructions had been issued for the evacuation of Mergui. I accordingly ordered the withdrawal of our refuelling parties from both aerodromes, and as Tavoy was closely invested, an attempt was made to evacuate our detachments by air. On arrival of the aircraft the following morning the aerodrome was, however, in the hands of the enemy. Both detachments were safely evacuated by sea.

Action at Kawkareik.

96. Concurrently with this, reconnaissance beyond the Kawkareik position on the track through Mesoht and Raheng had disclosed some, but not unusual activity. We had also destroyed a number of enemy bombers and fighters on both these forward landing grounds. The country was densely covered with jungle and unsuitable for air action since movement on the ground could not be seen from the air.

97. On the 20th the enemy commenced their attack on the Kawkareik position. Air action in support of the troops holding this position was difficult, since no clear picture of the whereabouts of the enemy or our own troops was possible. Accordingly the enemy forward landing ground and base depots at Mesoht was attacked by bombers and fighters. Two enemy aircraft were destroyed on the aerodrome. Reconnaissance was carried out over this position and towards Tavoy in the South with the object of locating our own troops and the enemy.

98. The withdrawal from the Kawkareik position to Moulmein took place on the 22nd January. On the 21st and 22nd the Blenheims attacked Raheng aerodrome and village and Mesarieng, dropping some 6,000 lbs. of bombs on each raid. Fighter escort was provided with the object of clearing the air for short periods over the Army front and providing support for the bomber operations. Moulmein was bombed by a strong formation of enemy escorted bombers which was intercepted by the escort of our bomber raid on its outward journey—an occasion on which our attempt to choose the right time proved correct. Seven enemy bombers and 9 fighters were destroyed in this air action. Reconnaissance was continued over the battle area.

The Action at Moulmein

99. On the 30th January the Japanese attacked Moulmein. Our forces were disposed holding Moulmein and the right bank of the Salween from Pa'an, southwards, with one Brigade in the Bilin area. During the period between the 23rd January and the 30th, frequent low visual reconnaissance by fighters was carried out covering the battle area and the coast of Tenasserim together with Japanese lines of communication. Information obtained, however, was sketchy owing to the nature of the country and the fact that, in open country, the enemy lay close in the day time and moved by night. Our available bomber force—an average of about 6 a day—with the aid of such fighters as could be spared from the defence of Rangoon, acted in support of our land forces in the area.

100. Our bombers and fighters attacked enemy aerodromes, M.T., and the enemy line of communication, through Kawkareik, Myawaddy and Mesoht, while the enemy main base at Bangkok was attacked again on the nights of the 24th, 27th and 28th. In these operations a total of 42,100 lbs. of bombs were dropped.

101. Limited escort to our ships coming into Rangoon, anti-submarine patrols and G.R. reconnaissance in the Gulf of Martaban were carried out from day to day.

102. The fighter support which was provided over the Army forward positions each day on a limited scale had accounted for at least 7 aircraft shot down and 13 damaged (to end of January). Our losses were slight.

103. The main objective of the Japanese air force, outside the Rangoon area, during this period, was Moulmein, which was attacked on 7 occasions between the 3rd and 22nd January. The first attack was carried out by 9 fighters, and the later ones by bombers, in pairs by night, and in formations up to 27 in number by day with fighter escorts of up to 15 aircraft, the chief target being the aerodrome.

The Action on the Bilin.

104. From the 30th January until the 15th February, when the 17th Division took up a line on the Bilin River, all available bombers were employed in direct Army support with the maximum number of fighters it was practicable to spare each day. Bombing operations took the form of support to our hard pressed detachments. Attacks were made on river craft on the River Salween and off Moulmein with both bombers and fighters. The fighter effort available was employed in attempting to intercept at this great distance from its base the enemy raids on our forward positions, and providing security for our bombing operations. During this period river craft, batteries, enemy concentrations, troops, landing stages, railway stations and barracks and stores were attacked. A total weight of 70,136 lbs. of bombs were dropped on these objectives, with successful results. Most of the bombing was carried out from a low altitude and, in consequence, the results could be seen, provided objectives were not in the jungle. The raids were carried out on such places as Kado, Martaban, Pa'an, Moulmein, Minzi, Heinze, the Thaton Road and the Dunzeik Road. The fighter effort diverted from the Rangoon defence in support of the Army and bombing operations was usually from 6 to 12 per day and sometimes sorties were repeated.

105. During this period the Japanese air force continued night activity against Rangoon on a small scale up to the 8th February. Daylight operations, apart from support of their land forces, comprised 4 attacks on Toungoo aerodrome by raids of 6 to 15 bombers on the 3rd and 4th February. From the 8th to the 12th enemy bombers attacked our troops between Pa'an and Thaton, but generally with little effect.

The Battle of the Sittang.

106. The withdrawal to the Bilin River commenced on the 15th February, and this position was attacked by the Japanese on the 17th. On the 18th the River had been crossed and the