

67. The following points in regard to the above plan deserve emphasis. First, a wide, but converging, advance was being made against a retreating enemy—a strategy which is bound to discover weak points in his dispositions. Secondly, the significance of the switch of 4 Corps from the left to the right flank; this switch, with its object the creation of a surprise thrust over the Irrawaddy in the neighbourhood of Pakokku, and then the seizure of the Meiktila airfields by a sudden armoured assault, reinforced by air-transported troops, was the key of the whole battle plan. Secrecy was therefore of paramount importance. The advance of 4 Corps was to be led by 28 (East African) Brigade to give the impression that 11 (East African) Division was again in the line under command of 33 Corps, and that 4 Corps was still operating north of Mandalay. Whereas, in point of fact, 11 (East African) Division and 5 Indian Division had both been withdrawn for rest and refitting after the capture of Kalewa. We calculated that, by bringing the enemy to battle in the Mandalay plain, we should be able to defeat his northern wing in detail and thus have an open corridor for a rapid advance towards Rangoon, since at last we would be operating in country suitable for the employment of armoured and mechanised forces. Thirdly, the boldness of the plan should be noted. Not only were we taking considerable (but calculated) administrative risks, but the whole essence of the operation lay in deception and speed. Two divisions and a tank brigade had to move down the Gangaw Valley for 320 miles making their own roads, establish a bridgehead, and then make a mechanised dash on Meiktila. It would not, of course, be possible to conceal our movements from the enemy; however many ingenious devices were operated by Fourteenth Army, to persuade the enemy that 4 Corps was still concentrating on the left of 33 Corps and that any movement in the Gangaw Valley was merely a demonstration by a small force to distract his attention from our main thrust toward Mandalay. Further deception measures were also designed to tie down enemy forces which might otherwise be moved up from South Burma. Finally, I draw attention to the selection of Meiktila as an objective. It was the focal point of all Japanese communications to their 15 Army, and their chief airfield centre. The manner in which the enemy reacted to its seizure affords sufficient proof of the value they attached to it.

68. There is one other point I would like to mention at this stage. Ever since its formation in 1942, Fourteenth Army had been operating in jungle-clad mountains. It was now entering flat, open country, where mechanisation would have full scope, and speed, mobility and dash would have to replace the slow and cautious tactics imposed by enclosed terrain. As much training as circumstances allowed was carried out to meet these changed conditions. The results achieved bear witness to the skill, energy and versatility of both Commanders and men.

69. For the accomplishment of these plans, and particularly for the exploitation which their success would make possible, one thing especially was required and that one thing we

had not got—a sufficiency of transport aircraft. I continued to press the point, and finally, early in January, the Supreme Allied Commander sent his Chief of Staff, Lieutenant-General F. A. M. (later Sir Frederick) Browning back to the United Kingdom to put the case personally before the Chiefs of Staff, and point out how great was the prize at stake. This had the desired effect, as on the 26th January, the Supreme Allied Commander received a signal saying that the transport aircraft would not only be made up but increased. Besides the two Combat Cargo squadrons which it had already been agreed would be returned from China by the 1st February, two R.A.F. Dakota squadrons would be made available, one being on loan, from 1st March. In addition, it was proposed to raise the aircraft establishment of all R.A.F. transport squadrons in the theatre. Thus, by March, our estimated essential requirements in air-lift were going to be met in full.

SECTION V (paras. 70-91) THE IRRAWADDY CROSSINGS.

The establishment of 19 Indian Division's bridgeheads: The advance of 33 Corps up to the river: The bringing forward of 17 Indian Division: The plans for the crossings: Operations in 19 Indian Division's bridgehead: The four main crossings described: Progress by Northern Combat Area Command.

70. I will now resume the narrative of operations from the point reached at the end of Section III. While 64 Brigade of 19 Indian Division was engaged at Shwebo, the other two brigades were switched eastwards, *via* Myemun and Kinu, to the Irrawaddy. Destroying all resistance in their path and relying on speed to achieve surprise, they rushed the river and effected two crossings. 98 Brigade established a bridgehead at Thabeikkyin, 28 miles north-east of Shwebo, on the 9th January, after overcoming enemy defence in the village; 62 Brigade followed suit at Kyaukmyaung, due east of Shwebo, on the 16th. The river at Thabeikkyin runs between steep rock banks, jungle-covered almost to the water's edge. It is only about 500 yards wide, but is swift and deep. Concentrated artillery harassing fire rendered raft assembly difficult by night and impossible by day, but our crossing at this point was evidently unexpected and the enemy infantry build-up was slow. At Kyaukmyaung, the river is some 800 yards wide; the current is not strong, but shifting sandbanks caused difficulties. The terrain on both banks is flat and covered by scrub, except for open cultivation round the village itself. The leading troops of 62 Brigade actually reached the river on the 12th January, but enemy rear parties between Onbawk and Kyaukmyaung had to be cleared, and engineer equipment brought forward. The first crossing was made on the night 16th-17th January. As at Thabeikkyin, the enemy kept up a steady harassing fire with guns and mortars, but again we were allowed time to strengthen our bridgehead before any infantry or tank counter-attacks developed.

71. During the period of the above crossings, 64 Brigade concentrated at Onbawk, ready to reinforce 62 Brigade. Meanwhile 2 British