

question now arose as to the priority of our further crossings. If the next crossing were again to be effected by 33 Corps, it would further indicate that our main objective was Mandalay. On the other hand, it was essential that 4 Corps should secure their bridgehead early, in order to allow sufficient time for the mechanised force designed for the thrust on Meiktila to pass through it—an operation which, once he realised its significance, the enemy would strain every nerve to delay. General Slim, therefore, decided that one division from each Corps should cross simultaneously: 20 Indian Division from 33 Corps and 7 Indian Division from 4 Corps. He considered that even if the enemy regarded 4 Corps' crossing as the greater menace, he would not be able to react in time to upset our plans in this sector, in view of the existing threat to Mandalay and the pressure exerted by 33 Corps elsewhere.

79. The Japanese were completely deceived by 19 Indian Division's crossing. They believed, as we had intended they should, that this Division was the advanced guard of 4 Corps and they decided to exterminate it before its two bridgeheads could be consolidated. I had hoped, when I had originally directed 19 Indian Division on to Indaw in the "railway corridor," that Northern Combat Area Command would be able to exert sufficient pressure from the north that the Japanese would be unable to concentrate in strength against the left flank of Fourteenth Army. Unfortunately, as I have already indicated, the sudden transfer of the two Chinese divisions to China had disrupted General Sultan's plans, and temporarily halted Northern Combat Area Command's advance. This enabled the enemy to concentrate the bulk of his 15 and 53 Divisions against the Kyaukmyaung bridgehead, thereby pinning 19 Indian Division to this restricted area for a much longer period than would otherwise have been the case. Moreover, the Commander, 15 Japanese Army, was able to support these two Divisions, not only with the bulk of his Army artillery, but also with batteries drawn from 31 and 33 Divisions, and with tanks. Covered by what General Slim described as "the heaviest artillery concentration our troops had yet endured," the Japanese infantry hurled themselves against our defence night after night, keeping up their attacks for nearly a month. Not only did 19 Indian Division hold its ground, but, despite heavy casualties, it actually expanded its bridgehead. Gradually, as their losses mounted, the enemy attacks lost their sting until it became apparent, even to the Japanese, that we could not be dislodged.

I wish to pay tribute to the gallantry and determination displayed by 19 Indian Division in this their first major encounter with the enemy. Although, like all troops new to battle, when opposed by veteran formations, they had to buy their experience, their firm stand at this stage against serious odds contributed materially to the success of our operations elsewhere. It is perhaps worthy of note that this Division, except for a few small units, was composed entirely of pre-war regular troops.

80. It may serve to clarify the picture of this vital phase of operations if, before

describing what occurred at each crossing-place, I summarize the crossings which were made. Four crossings of the Irrawaddy were undertaken. Briefly they were as follows:—

(a) 19 Indian Division crossed north of Mandalay at Thabeikkyin (9th January) and Kyaukmyaung (16th January), as already described. They then, as will be shown later, advanced south on Mandalay, shifting their bridgehead south to Singu.

(b) 20 Indian Division crossed near Allagappa, west of Mandalay, in the Myinmu area, on the 12th February, with the object of advancing east along the south bank of the river towards Mandalay.

(c) Twelve days later (24th February), 2 British Division crossed at Ngazun, a village between Mandalay and 20 Indian Division's bridgehead.

(d) Meanwhile 4 Corps (7 and 17 Indian Divisions with 255 Indian Tank Brigade), with Meiktila as its ultimate objective, had advanced down the Gangaw Valley crossed the Irrawaddy at Nyaungu, to the west of Pakokku, between the 13th and 19th February.

It will be noted that the Army Commander's decision that simultaneous crossings should be made on both 33 and 4 Corps' fronts was successfully implemented; 20 and 7 Indian Divisions crossed within 24 hours of each other.

The crossings will be described in the order in which they took place.

81. First I will deal with 20 Indian Division's advance to, and crossing of, the river. After the capture of Budalin, 20 Indian Division continued its advance with all three brigades up. On the right, 32 Brigade, directed on Monywa, there met with fanatical resistance. This important river port was captured on the 22nd January after three days fierce fighting. In the centre, 80 Brigade occupied Wadan, on the Ayadaw-Monywa road, and pushed southward. On the left, 100 Brigade, advancing from Ayadaw, made a lightning thrust at Myinmu, on the Irrawaddy, which fell on the 22nd January after bitter hand-to-hand fighting. An incident occurred here which illustrates the Japanese mentality: a detachment pinned against the river, formed up and marched straight into it, deliberately committing mass suicide by drowning. For the capture of both Monywa and Myinmu we received magnificent air support. The next three weeks were spent by 20 Indian Division in closing up to the north bank of the Irrawaddy between the Mu and Chindwin Rivers. The Japanese rear parties remaining on the north bank put up a stubborn resistance. While this area was being cleared, we pushed patrols out across the river. These operated with the greatest daring, not only reporting on possible crossing places, but in the words of the Army Commander, maintaining "a reign of terror among the Japanese posts on the southern bank." The enemy responded by sending a small detachment round the left flank of 20 Indian Division; this detachment crossed the Mu River from the east bank, under an artillery concentration, and recaptured Nyaungyin, a village two miles east of Myinmu. They then split up into small harassing parties, which had to be hunted down and eliminated.