

late September the Japanese Air Force began a series of reconnaissances with disastrous results. Cover was attempted of the Manipur Road, Silchar, Chittagong and battle areas. Four Dinahs were destroyed during this brief spell and since then no reconnaissance over the India border has been attempted. On Christmas night three bombers attempted to penetrate to the Calcutta area; of these, two were destroyed by Beaufighters and the third returned in a damaged condition. Enemy attempts to interfere with shipping off Akyab in January were decisively dealt with by the Spitfire squadrons who moved in five days after its occupation, No. 67 Squadron destroying five out of six attacking Oscars in one day.

44. Thereafter, the enemy effort degenerated into a series of sporadic and infrequent attempts to disrupt our forward columns. The ineffectual nature of these attacks was evident to all who flew over the battlefield and noted, on the enemy side no signs of activity, but, behind the British lines, long lines of transport moving in uncamouflaged safety, supply-dropping parachutes in use as tents, and all the apparatus of war left in full view by troops whose immunity from air attack was scarcely ever violated even by fast-flying fighters, for the enemy dared not send a bomber over the Allied lines by daylight.

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45. It is unnecessary to recount in detail the enormous advantages accruing to both ground and air forces when the enemy air arm is small and misemployed, and when our own squadrons are superior in performance, training and control. It is, however, worth pausing to consider the results had enemy aircraft been allowed unrestricted use of the sky. The air supply on which the whole land campaign hinged would have been impossible, the attrition rate of our close support squadrons, which worked with accuracy and effect, would have been prohibitive, and the disruption caused by our strategic bombers to the enemy's communications far to the rear could not have been such as to have materially influenced the battle.

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PART FOUR.

TRANSPORT SUPPORT OPERATIONS AND DEVELOPMENT.

46. The Burma campaign has proved beyond all doubt that once air superiority has been achieved, the air maintenance and supply of forces in the field is governed primarily by the availability of airfields and of transport aircraft. The supply and maintenance of the Army, in the field and engaged in intensive operations together with a tactical air force in support, is a major problem under most favourable conditions. It should be borne in mind, however, that supply bases were some 250 miles distant, and that the intervening country comprised vast stretches of impenetrable jungle and a formidable mountain barrier rising up to 10,000 feet. In addition, weather conditions were by no means favourable, and experience has shown that monsoon cloud develops a

degree of turbulence which has been the cause of a number of fatal accidents.

47. Despite these many difficulties, the success of the air supply operations in the Burma campaign has been fully testified. It is fair to say that without air supply the Burma campaign could never have been fought on its present lines. It was in fact a decisive factor of the land campaign. Admittedly mistakes occurred, sometimes due to miscalculation but more often due to unforeseen contingencies. Even so the air supply operations in Burma will probably rank as one of the greatest, if not the greatest, of air supply achievements in this war.

48. The organisation and operation of air supply is a problem which calls for mutual understanding of each other's difficulties by the respective Services. In this respect it cannot be too strongly emphasised that it is the operators and not the consumers who determine the most efficient method of delivering the goods. Moreover, it is up to the consumers to state precisely what is required, in a given order of priority. It is their responsibility also to deliver these goods in the required quantities and at the right time to the air supply heads. The swift and unco-ordinated growth of the air transport organization did not allow of a full appreciation, by either the Army or the Air Force, of the importance of the ancillary services necessary to promote the full effectiveness of the machine. As the campaign advanced, this tendency has been progressively eliminated, and the situation is now that only a lack of resources prevents the air transport organisation from incorporating all the lessons that have been learnt, and giving it the full effectiveness with which experience can endow it. From this observation, the air supply organization that has developed within the area of Northern Combat Area Command and Tenth Air Force is excepted. There, a realisation of the importance of firm backing to the supply system was evident from the outset, and resulted in a very high standard of operating efficiency.

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49. In June, 1944, there were in Air Command eleven transport squadrons engaged on air supply, four British and seven American. By May, 1945, these figures had risen to nine and sixteen respectively, an increase which still left the air supply force with little or no margin of reserve. The growth of air supply during the period can well be imagined.

50. At the beginning of the period, attention was still centred upon the critical position of 4 Corps besieged in and around the ancient capital of Manipur. There were still twenty-three days of June to go before the road to Imphal was to be re-opened. Working to supply the garrison and to build a stockpile to exploit the anticipated Japanese retreat, as much as 700 tons were being flown in on a single day under monsoon conditions. When the road was re-opened, effort was not allowed to drop and for the remaining days of June the squadrons flew at maximum effort in order to build up stocks and ascertain the peak air lift that could be achieved. The wisdom of this was doubtful; all concerned were already exhausted, and experience has illustrated the value of retaining a margin of effort in reserve, and of not over-straining a complicated machine without urgent necessity.