

Rangoon after the 1945 monsoon. Now we were aiming at capturing Rangoon by land advance from the north, an operation which for long had been regarded as impracticable. There were additional reasons for this change. After the Yalta Conference, the Chiefs of Staff had sent the Supreme Allied Commander a new directive. This was not only influenced by the speed and success of our advance in Burma, and the opening of the Ledo/Burma Road, but also by the general quickening of the tempo of the American operations against Japan in the Pacific and in the Philippines. The new directive ordered South-East Asia Command to defeat the Japanese Army in Burma and capture Rangoon; thereafter to open the Straits of Malacca and to capture Singapore. After the Chiefs of Staff's promise to give us the necessary transport aircraft, on the 5th February I received a directive from the Supreme Allied Commander ordering me to "secure the Ledo/Burma Road, capture Rangoon by 1st June, 1945, and destroy the main Japanese forces in Burma excluding the Tenasserim." In furtherance of the second half of his directive from the Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mountbatten decided to capture the island of Phuket, as an air base and a station for the assembly of naval landing craft, with a target date in June 1945. This proposal was put up to the Chiefs of Staff on the 26th February, and received their general approval on the 2nd March.

94. 34 Indian Corps was formed for this operation. It had been obvious for some time that if operations were to be extended beyond the Burma theatre, additional formations would be required, and in particular another Corps Headquarters. There was only one immediate source of man-power, namely Special Force, until the redeployment of forces from Europe began. I therefore recommended the immediate formation of a Corps Headquarters and Corps Signals to plan and train for future operations and, in February, the Supreme Allied Commander asked the Commander-in-Chief, India, to implement the formation of such a Headquarters from the assets becoming available from the disbandment of Special Force. By the end of February, H.Q., 34 Indian Corps, had been established at Poona, becoming an assigned formation. Placed under its command were 23 Indian Division, which was the General Headquarters, India, reserve division, but which was released for my operations by General Auchinleck; 81 (West African) Division, which had just come out of the Kaladan, and 3 Commando Brigade, which had carried out highly successful operations at Akyab, Myebon and Kangaw with 15 Indian Corps. Planning by 34 Indian Corps for the Phuket operation began in Delhi on the 1st March, under Lieutenant-General O. L. Roberts, who was appointed to the command of the Corps early in March. (See also Sec. XVIII.)

95. Returning to the operations in Central Burma, if the Japanese reactions to our successful crossings of the Irrawaddy are to be understood, it is necessary to look at their plans and the situation as it must have presented itself to them at the time. It had been the intention of the Commander of the Japanese Burma Army that the main battle should be fought on the banks of the Irrawaddy. By the

second half of February it must have been clear that this battle was not going very well, but the position did not yet seem irretrievable. At that time 19 Indian Division had broken out of their bridgehead at Kyaukmyaung and begun their advance on Mandalay (I refer later to these operations), but they had not yet crossed the formidable Chaungmagyi Chaung, which most effectively bars the approach to Mandalay from the north. 2 British Division had only penetrated five miles inland from Ngazun. 20 Indian Division were being bitterly attacked and were still confined to a narrow semi-circle of ground. They had not yet linked up with 2 British Division. 7 Indian Division had already captured Pagan, but believing, as they did, that 4 Corps was still operating on the left of 33 Corps, the enemy regarded this crossing merely as a diversion which could be dealt with by the troops on the spot. General Kimura therefore decided to restore the generally adverse situation by a counter-offensive. The main effort was to be by 15 Army, which, reinforced by most of 18 Japanese Division, was to launch an offensive with 18 and 31 Divisions from Madaya and Sagaing towards Wetlet (on the Shwebo railway line from Sagaing). On the right flank of this counter-offensive 33 Army, with 56 Division and a regiment of 18 Division, was to hold the areas round Lashio and Namtu, whilst on the left 28 Army was to defend the Irrawaddy valley about the Yenangyaung and Mount Popa areas and launch an offensive in the Pakokku area. The scale of the latter—it was to be made by a composite force of less than divisional strength—showed that the real threat in that area was not yet appreciated. The general offensive was to begin on the 10th March.

96. This plan involved considerable movements of formations, which, in view of the state of the Japanese communications and our air superiority, were executed with remarkable speed. Besides the move of 18 Japanese Division (less a regiment) from opposite Northern Combat Area Command to the Mandalay area, the remainder of 49 Japanese Division (less the two regiments already committed on the Northern Combat Area Command front and in the Yenangyaung area respectively) together with a regiment of 55 Japanese Division (from the Henzada-Bassein area) were ordered up south of Mandalay. In addition, a regiment of 2 Japanese Division, destined for Siam, was stopped at Pegu and counter-marched north. From the Arakan front, 54 Japanese Division was ordered to concentrate north of Yenangyaung and to block the An and Taungup-Prome roads with detachments. This attempt at reinforcement from Arakan by the Japanese must have been in the nature of a forlorn hope and reflects their lack of knowledge of the situation there. Thanks to the energetic operations carried out by 15 Indian Corps, very few troops reached the Irrawaddy from Arakan. In short, General Kimura decided to abandon Arakan, weaken South Burma and reduce the forces holding the Northern Combat Area Command front to a minimum in order to concentrate his troops in the Mandalay sector which he regarded as the vital one. As will be seen later, he was too late.