

with long range tanks and flown over escorted by Hudsons on the 11th February. These aircraft were able to carry out reconnaissance until the Andamans were evacuated.

116. Daily coastal reconnaissance was also carried out throughout the campaign against possible Japanese attempts to attack our Army by landing behind them. Such an attack did happen on one occasion—at night.

117. This concludes the air operations carried out in support of the Army in Tenasserim.

Air Directif—ABDA Command.

118. On the 17th January air directif 0087 from Headquarters, South Western Pacific, was issued to Norgroup. This gave our primary tasks as:—

(a) To secure the arrival of reinforcements and to protect the Port of Rangoon, and

(b) To reduce the scale of air attack on Malaya.

Subsequent directifs received from ABDA Command related more to the battle in the South Western Pacific than to operations that could be based in Burma.

PART V—AIR OPERATIONS COVERING THE EVACUATION OF RANGOON.

119. In February it seemed to me that the troops available in Burma might be unable to hold the country against the form and scale of land attack which the Japanese were exerting through Tenasserim. This question was discussed in the Joint Commanders' Committee on several occasions. Our forward air bases at Mergui and Tavoy had fallen. The Moulmein airfields had been captured. Our warning system East of the Sittang was in enemy hands.

120. At this time the fighter force and bomber squadrons building up in Burma comprised the only Allied air force between the Japanese and India, indeed between the Japanese and Middle East. Had we had time to establish and consolidate the forces in passage from the U.K. and Middle East comprising personnel, equipment, maintenance and warning system, there would have been a good chance of presenting a firm front to the enemy air force with their inferior equipment. On the other hand, if the Port of Rangoon fell into enemy hands in March or April, the flow would stop, and there was a grave possibility that our air force might well be destroyed piece-meal in Burma before it was strong enough and had time to organise. Such a defeat in detail could be of no help to the Army in Burma and would uncover India at a critical time.

121. The question therefore arose as to whether plans should not be prepared to prevent the annihilation of our force by moving our base to India and providing it with strong mixed Wings in Burma maintained from India. Thus dispersed, air support could be given to the Army in Burma and bombers based in India could support operations in Burma. Such action, moreover, would contribute to the air defence of India in her critical and naked sector.

122. On the 12th February I therefore telegraphed ABDA Command, A 677 of 12/2, indicating that in the unlikely event of the loss of Rangoon administrative plans might be necessary to enable fighter equipment to be

withdrawn, and requesting a directif as to whether the R.A.F. units should proceed with the Army North towards China or whether they should proceed in the direction of India for the defence of Calcutta and North Eastern India. I pointed out that if they were withdrawn to the North there was no adequate warning on the airfield line Toungoo-Heho-Namsang-Lashio and that the forces there located would therefore be open to fighter attack without warning when on the ground. If withdrawn to Calcutta they could provide a strong defence. R.D.F. cover could be provided. Once separated from Rangoon (the only point through which maintenance for an air force could pass) the force instead of building up to its planned size would become a wasting force. In China there were few or no facilities for operating our bombers and fighters, whereas with lay-back bases in India and forward bases and strong detachments in Northern Burma, bomber and fighter action in support of the Army could continue. No reply was received to this telegram.

123. On 15th February Singapore fell.

124. On the 18th February, General Hutton sent off his telegram 0.749 of 18/2 which indicated the possibility that the enemy might penetrate the line of the Sittang and that the evacuation of Rangoon might become an imminent possibility. Consequently, in view of this serious situation, I telegraphed my appreciation in which I set out the factors of the air situation and indicated three courses of action. Firstly, to remain with the Army during the move northwards towards China. In these circumstances the R.A.F. units would have become a wasting force, since maintenance would be difficult if not impossible once Rangoon had fallen, while heavy losses for small return would be inevitable in the event of reinforced enemy scale of attack. Secondly; to withdraw the air force to India when Rangoon was closely threatened. The final course was to leave a mixed force of 1 Hurricane Squadron, 1 Blenheim Flight and 1 Army Co-operation Flight, withdrawing the remainder of the force to India. No reply was received to this telegram.*

125. On the 20th February instructions were given for the withdrawal of the 17th Division behind the River Sittang. A meeting was held at Government House at which General Hutton and I were present. The G.O.C. stated that he had instructed the Commander of the 17th Division to fall back behind the Sittang. He outlined the steps that he proposed to take in this situation in regard to commencing the evacuation scheme of Rangoon and the establishment of Rear Headquarters at Maymyo.

126. Our Rangoon air bases were closely threatened. The warning facilities except for limited R.D.F. and Observer Corps observation had practically gone. As a result of this meeting the G.O.C. despatched his telegram 0.792 of 20/2.

Decision to organise base landing grounds in India with mixed Wings in Burma.

127. I therefore telegraphed Headquarters ABDA Command indicating the situation described at this meeting. There was no time to be lost. General Hutton agreed with me

* See covering letter from General Wavell.