

78. Of the general success of the V.C.P. system there can be no doubt, from both air and ground points of view. It contributed materially to that close and efficient co-operation of ground and air forces which was so marked a feature of the campaign of 1944-45. It led however to a tactic of less unquestionable value in the employment of the "cabrank" method, by which aircraft patrolled continuously over selected areas, maintaining touch all the time with the V.C.P., who as opportunity offered would call them down to attack any fresh target revealed by the progress of the battle. This tactic was very popular with our own troops, as the continued presence overhead of our own air support had excellent morale effect. Furthermore, air support was available to engage any target at a moment's notice. It was however wasteful of flying hours and reduced petrol stocks, in that the aircraft were liable to be kept waiting and targets could not always be provided, while it diminished the weight of air attack, since in order to maintain a continuous patrol the aircraft could seldom operate in more than pairs. If the army requires direct air support to be available at such short notice, it is considered that their desires could more economically be satisfied by providing the air forces with airfields as close behind the front line as the reasonable security of the ground installations will warrant.

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Close support of the Fourteenth Army.

79. The aircraft employed in close support operations were of various types. In June, 1944, there were still four squadrons of Vengeances operating, two on the Imphal and two on the Arakan front; they had done excellent work in the 1943-44 campaign, but had soon to be withdrawn. In September, the first R.A.F. Thunderbolts began operations; Thunderbolts had already been in use for some time with the Tenth U.S.A.A.F. which had also occasionally employed its Lightnings (P.38) in close support work. As the new campaign developed, and it became clear that the enemy was in no position seriously to challenge the Allied air superiority, Spitfires were increasingly diverted to the ground-attack role, particularly in the Arakan sector.

80. But the backbone of direct air support was always provided by the Hurricane, with or without bombs. The "Hurribomber" had well proved its worth in the 1943-4 campaign, and some in particular of the "Hurribomber" squadrons enjoyed an immense reputation for their accurate pin-pointing of targets within a comparatively few yards of our own positions. Their value in this was particularly evident during the period of mountain warfare that ended at the beginning of December, 1944, and subsequently in the interval of semi-static fighting that was marked by the battle of the bridgeheads in late January and February, 1945. In conjunction with fighter-bombers as well as independently, ground-attack fighters also frequently operated in close support, doing particularly effective work in attacks upon gun sites and patrols over areas in which enemy artillery was suspected to be located.

81. Heavier aircraft were also taken into service in support of ground attacks. Mitchells

(B.25) had already been employed for this purpose in the 1943-4 campaign, but the four squadrons of the Twelfth Bombardment Group were now withdrawn from the Strategic Air Force and placed under the operational control of first 224 Group and later 221 Group, so that their work might more simply be dovetailed into the general tactical pattern. They operated sometimes independently, but in close support more frequently in conjunction with fighter-bombers, and added greatly to the weight and effectiveness of large-scale close support operations; the term "Earthquake" which was ultimately taken into official use to describe these concerted attacks upon Japanese bunker positions originated among these Mitchell squadrons, who earned for themselves the name of "the Earthquakers."

82. An outstanding "earthquake" operation, for instance, was the air contribution to the combined army and air attack directed on 10th January against the enemy stronghold at Gangaw in the Kabaw Valley, where an extensive and well-defended system of bunkers and gun emplacements was holding up the advance of 4 Corps southwards in its vital thrust against the Japanese left flank. Four Mitchell squadrons participated in this operation, as did some thirty-four "Hurribombers," defensive cover being supplied by Spitfires and Thunderbolts. It turned out to be a highly successful day; the bombs were dropped at approximately 1430 hours and within ninety minutes five out of the six main Japanese positions were in Allied hands. The subsequent withdrawal of the enemy from the whole neighbourhood during the next few days was attributed by 4 Corps to be due in great measure to a lowering of his morale as a result of this air attack. But the participation of so large a number of aircraft in a single operation was not usual, and as the campaign wore on it was realised that Mitchells operating in numbers as low as two or three could do effective work in accurately winking out small enemy parties from their lairs.

83. Heavy bombers of the Strategic Air Force were also employed on "earthquake" operations from time to time, mainly in support of the Fourteenth Army during the battle for the bridgeheads in January and February, 1944, though they also intervened effectively in support of 15 Corps during the struggle for the possession of the coastal road at Kangaw at the end of January. But well-marked targets suitable for their employment in direct co-operation with the ground forces were of necessity few, owing to the Japanese skill in camouflage, and the heavy bombers were therefore of most assistance to land operations in their attacks upon targets not in the immediate battle-zone.

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Indirect Support of the Fourteenth Army.

84. On numerous occasions the ground forces requested the help of the Strategic Air Force, and nominated targets some distance behind the battle area though still in the tactical zone of land operations. These targets were, in the main, supply centres or nodal communication points or built-up areas in which the enemy was believed to be living. A notable attack of this type was mounted on