

or aircraft on strength. Moreover it was consistent practice for the Army to require full data on the performance of our aircraft and explanations for any short-fall that might occur, while never giving equivalent information upon their own short-fall in overland or inland water transport.

73. Air supply depends on so many agencies, and is affected by so many imponderables, that the allocation of resources and good brains to ensure efficiency, speed and good liaison can never be too generous. The campaign in Burma would have been rendered easier had the engineering resources that were poured into less profitable projects been directed towards timely building of forward airfields, more efficient supply depots and stronger lines of communication to the air haulage centres. The Ledo Road, for example, is surely the longest white elephant in the world. Had the wealth of ability and material that went to its building been employed in strengthening the air supply system, the recapture of Burma could probably have been advanced by an appreciable period.

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PART FIVE.

TACTICAL SUPPORT OF THE GROUND FORCES.

The Organisation of Tactical Support.

74. Air forces operating in tactical support of the Allied Land Forces in Burma comprised Nos. 221 and 224 Groups R.A.F. and 10th U.S.A.A.F. all under the command of Headquarters, Eastern Air Command. Each worked in close association with a corresponding army headquarters—the Tenth U.S.A.A.F. with the Northern Combat Area Command, 224 Group with 15 Corps and 221 Group with 33 Corps and 4 Corps, and finally from the beginning of December onwards with the Fourteenth Army. 221 Group and Fourteenth Army remained together at Imphal only until the end of December, when the latter moved forward to Kalembo, being accompanied by the A.O.C. and his air staff. The two headquarters were again united fully at Monywa from 9th February until the middle of April, when they moved to Meiktila, their final staging post before Rangoon. The mobility of 221 Group headquarters had a less active counterpart in that of 224 Group, which remained with the headquarters of 15 Corps first at Cox's Bazar and later at Akyab. In both cases the close relationship of the headquarters of the two Services was an essential element in their successful co-operation.

75. In the campaign in central Burma, just as all the ground forces came under the Fourteenth Army, so all the aircraft engaged in close, as distinct from tactical, support of the former were controlled by Headquarters, 221 Group. There were however two exceptions. The two Air Commando Groups operated directly under Eastern Air Command, and the Mustangs of the Second Air Commando Group, which played so important a role in the operations of 4 Corps which led to the seizure of Meiktila, were for the crucial period of these operations controlled by an advanced headquarters of the Combat Cargo Task Force located with 4 Corps headquarters.

The second exception was provided by the Thunderbolt squadrons of 905 Wing, for which, owing to administrative reasons, there was no room east of the Lushai Hills and which were therefore located in Arakan under 224 Group.

76. In this connection the very difficult problems of administration confronting 221 Group must be recalled. Its wings and squadrons operated from bases covering a front of some two hundred miles, and a depth which at the beginning of the campaigning season in November was no less, and which by the end of April had expanded to some six hundred miles, from the Mosquito wing at Khumbigram to the fighter squadrons on forward strips near Toungoo. Most were on a highly mobile basis, with personnel reduced to the minimum; the separation of squadrons from servicing echelons which was generally effected towards the end of 1944 contributed materially to the mobility of units in the group. Fighter squadrons moved forward in pace with the advancing front as quickly as the army were able to prepare landing grounds and forego air transport for them; the squadrons of 906 Wing, for instance, were operating from airfields near Ye-U by the middle of January, a fortnight after the occupation of the district by 33 Corps, and before the end of April no less than nine fighter squadrons were located at Toungoo, which had not been captured until the 22nd, and another four at Magwe, which fell on the 18th, in preparation for the assault upon Rangoon. These moves were effected with the aid of transport aircraft, overland communications being almost non-existent. There was, however, some feeling among the squadrons that in the matter of motor transport and indeed of supplies generally the army was at a distinct advantage.

77. The enormous area over which the squadrons of 221 Group were scattered, together with the meagreness of communications by land and telephone, also precluded the wholesale adoption, for the operational control of fighter aircraft in close support, of the organization which had been evolved in the European theatre of war for army-air co-operation. The former system of Army Air Support Units was replaced in the closing months of 1944 by the establishment of Air Support Signals Units with Visual Control Posts (V.C.Ps.), Air Advisers being also provided for both corps and divisional headquarters. A Combined Army/Air School for training V.C.P. personnel was set up at Ranchi, and it was soon found that the greatest difficulty in the establishment of Visual Control Posts was the provision of personnel, particularly of Controllers, who it was agreed must be chosen from experienced junior officers of the General Duties branch. Ten teams were however operating by the end of 1944 and by the beginning of May, 1945, their number had risen to thirty-four. The special value of the V.C.Ps lay in the extra flexibility and accuracy which they lent to air operations planned in conjunction with the ground situation; the former device of indicating targets by smoke shells, always liable to inaccuracies in both place and time as well as to counterfeiting by the enemy, was now needed only when the target lay in flat jungle country, invisible from the air and not determinable in relation to any obvious feature of the landscape.