

efficiency eliminated a multitude of small delays; these ancillary organisations worked with the industrial efficiency of a large commercial factory.

59. A comparison between the American packing loading agencies at Dinjan and the R.I.A.S.C. Air Supply Companies at Hathazari reflected no credit on the British ground organisation. Here it should be emphasised that no reflection is intended on the personnel involved; British Officers and Indian Other Ranks were strained to breaking-point, and often had to work seventy-two hours at a stretch to complete their tasks; the fault lay in the fact that the importance and nature of the work demanded a much more generous scale of personnel, facilities, and organising ability than could be allotted by the Army.

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60. An examination of the data gathered on Air Marshal Garrod's tour brought to light the differences of organisation and procedure between the two air supply systems, and revealed a crying need for improvement in the organisation operated by C.A.A.T.O. and C.C.T.F. Too numerous to recount here, these points did have the effect of initiating action to improve the operating procedure. Meanwhile, Air Command was pressing for the speedy development of the recaptured bases along the Arakan Coast at Akyab and Ramree whose employment would shorten the haul into Central Burma. Journeys from the established bases at Chittagong, Comilla and Tuliha were now becoming so long that in order to complete three trips in a day, aircraft had to take off at first light and perhaps not finish until after dark. The strain on technical maintenance, flying and loading personnel can well be imagined.

61. It was in February that an overland advance to Rangoon supplied entirely by air was first put forward as a serious proposal. Fourteenth Army prepared a plan which envisaged two parallel drives southwards along the axes of the River Irrawaddy and of the Mandalay-Rangoon railway, while a large force from 33 Corps, of up to three and a half divisions, struck east to Takaw with the object of containing and destroying all enemy forces cut off north of Meiktila.

62. Air Command reactions to the plan were

(i) a re-orientation of supply lines, using Akyab and Ramree as advanced air supply heads which would result in substantial reduction in length of the air supply line as the force advanced south of Mandalay.

(ii) We doubted the soundness of the plan which aimed at a total destruction of the enemy in addition to the capture of Rangoon if the former necessitated a drive eastwards to cut off and destroy the enemy in the hills. This would inevitably involve a supply problem in that direction in addition to sustaining a main advance southwards.

63. A study of the situation after the fall of Rangoon shows that these reactions were fully justified. Apart from this, the plan had many advantages, and at a major conference in Calcutta on 23rd February which heralded my arrival as Allied Air Commander-in-Chief, it was approved in principle and the target for

tonnage to be hauled in its execution decided. The maximum lift was assessed at 1,887 tons per day between 20th March and 1st April and 2,075 tons per day between 1st May and 15th May. I emphasised that these figures would entail a very high rate of effort from the squadrons involved, and would entail considerable retrenchment during the monsoon to pay off the mortgage in maintenance and overstrain we would have contracted in its achievement.

64. Meanwhile, the air lift was still increasing. In February, C.C.T.F. hauled 51,210 short tons of supplies into the operational area. In addition, at the end of the month, a small though vital airborne operation took place to consolidate the capture of Meiktila, which had been seized following an armoured dash from their bridgehead on the Irrawaddy by 17 Division.

65. Troops were landed to reinforce the flying column which had seized the airfield and was now being fiercely attacked on all sides by the enemy. Transport aircraft landed and discharged their loads under fire, many suffering damage while so doing. One aircraft taking on wounded for its return journey had a shell explode inside it, causing further injuries to the casualties who were already emplaned. Thus, within very few days, landing became impossible, and it was necessary to resort to the less economical practice of dropping, which still further increased the load on our transport squadrons.

66. The Meiktila operation was a success, and a captured Japanese Staff officer assessed it as the turning point in the battle for Burma. It was not accomplished without mistakes, however, which rendered it far more hazardous than it might otherwise have been. It should be established that aircraft will not land until the possibility of the airfield being subjected to heavy fire is ruled out. Planning should be carried out on this premise. Secondly, the R.A.M.O. that was established on the airfield was pitifully inadequate, the officer in charge having to guide aircraft to unloading points instead of being free to organise their quick turn-around under fire. In a critical operation, such points might make all the difference between success and dismal failure. They merit much greater consideration in combined planning than has hitherto been accorded them.

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67. By the beginning of April, Meiktila was again safe for landing, although shells were still bursting less than 200 yards from the strips. Preparations were immediately commenced to build up stocks to maintain Fourteenth Army in the final dash which was to carry them 250 miles southward in the second half of the month. On the 20th, the main airfield at Lewe was captured and speedily prepared for light aircraft and gliders, which began landing on the morning of the 21st. Toungoo, 50 miles further south, was occupied on the 22nd and, in spite of bad weather, over 100 Dakotas and Commandos landed on the 24th. Within five days, Pyuntaza, another airstrip 70 miles further south, was also receiving supplies, and a battalion group was flown in to cut the enemy escape route eastwards from Pegu. The enemy was still active on both sides of the narrow strip along the Mandalay-Pegu railway which had formed our