

SECTION VII (paras. 102-117) THE BATTLE FOR MANDALAY

The importance of Meiktila: The capture of Meiktila and its effect on the Japanese plans: The capture of Mandalay: Japanese counter-offensive to retake Meiktila.

102. While the Japanese were concentrating their forces against 33 Corps (*vide* paragraphs 95 and 96) the thrust at their vitals by 4 Corps was developing. I use this term advisedly for all the Japanese communications radiated from Meiktila and Thazi; north to Mandalay and Lashio, south to Rangoon, north-west to Myingyan, west to Kyaukpadaung and thence to the oilfields at Chauk and Yenangyaung, and east, *via* Kalaw, to Siam. Meiktila was the advanced supply base for all the Japanese forces in Burma, with the exception of those in Arakan. At Meiktila, too, were located the principal Japanese airfields, the capture of which would be of inestimable value to us. If we could seize Meiktila, and hold it, the whole structure of the Japanese defence in Central Burma was bound to collapse.

103. The great dash on Meiktila started on the 21st February, when a mechanised and armoured column composed of 48 Brigade (17 Indian Division), with tanks, broke out of the Nyaungu bridgehead, captured Hnawdwin 15 miles to the east, and were then temporarily held up by deep ravines beyond the village. Here they were joined by the rest of the Division and 255 Indian Tank Brigade (less one regiment left with 7 Indian Division). The advance continued the same day, but to avoid the difficult country between Pyinsin and Welaung, the Division fanned out, 48 Brigade and a proportion of armour moving on Taungtha, *via* Kainye, and 63 Brigade with the main body of the Tank Brigade directed south-east on Seiktin and then north-east, *via* Welaung. Both columns reached Taungtha on the 24th February after overcoming desperate resistance and clearing many minefields. By the evening of the 24th, our leading troops had progressed five miles south-east of Taungtha, towards Mahlaing. By 0900 hours on the 26th we had captured the important Thabutkon airfield intact, smashing through a determined Japanese effort to protect it. The fly-in from Palel of the air-transportable brigade (99 Brigade) of 17 Indian Division began next morning, by which time our tanks were engaged within five miles of Meiktila.

104. This rapid drive merits attention. It was the first opportunity we had had of utilising our mechanised and armoured superiority on a large scale and the Japanese were completely bewildered and overwhelmed. The enemy positions, manned by such scratch forces as could be hastily collected, were subjected to heavy air attack, encircled by tanks and lorried infantry, and rendered untenable. Forced into the open, the enemy suffered enormous casualties. The "Cab Rank" method of air support was here employed most successfully for the first time in Burma, squadrons remaining over the operations area and being directed on to fleeting targets from ground control centres. These were known as Visual Control Posts (V.C.Ps.) which comprised an Army and a R.A.F. officer and which were usually located at brigade headquarters. It

proved a most efficient method, though uneconomical from an Air Force point of view, of providing instantaneous air strikes during rapidly moving operations. The finding of the necessary officers for these V.C.Ps., and their training had in the past been matters of some difficulty. The efforts which had been made to overcome these were now rewarded in full.

105. The Japanese garrison at Meiktila totalled 3,500, according to a document captured later. Unfortunately, our arrival in the area coincided with that of one regiment of 49 Japanese Division, which was being rushed from Pegu to Mandalay. The enemy was also strong in artillery. The commander of the garrison, General Kasuya, had acted with vigour in the short time at his disposal. The defences were strong and ingeniously sited, and all available men, including hospital patients, were put in to man them. The large lakes to the west of the town narrowed the areas of approach and, in all sectors, the lines of advance suitable for tanks were well covered by artillery, which included many anti-aircraft batteries used in their anti-tank rôle. All this in an area where the deployment of armour was already hampered by broken country and deep irrigation cuts.

106. As dawn broke on the 28th February, the attack on Meiktila went in from four directions. On the north-west, 48 Brigade drove down the axis of the main road, while 63 Brigade attacked from the west. Simultaneously, 255 Indian Tank Brigade, with two infantry battalions, attacked from the east and north-east. The tanks experienced difficulty in deploying and the infantry were at first pinned down by heavy fire, but later succeeded in capturing Point 859, which dominates the town from the south-east. 48 Brigade were temporarily held up by a blown bridge, but by nightfall Point 859 had been consolidated and Meiktila had been entirely surrounded. There followed three days and nights of hand-to-hand fighting as savage as any yet experienced in the campaign. The enemy put up the most fanatical resistance and houses and dug-outs were only cleared after the last defender had been bayoneted. By the morning of the 4th March, all Meiktila north of the railway had been cleared, but on both sides of the lake suicide parties still held out, which it took some days to eliminate. In this bitter fighting, the Japanese garrison had been practically annihilated—over 2,000 bodies being counted in the town alone. The booty captured included 48 guns.

107. In the meantime, the fly-in of 99 Brigade of 17 Indian Division, which had begun on the 27th February (paragraph 103), was completed early on the 2nd March, three days ahead of schedule, and the Brigade moved forward into battle. In all, 353 sorties were flown without the loss of a single man, a very fine achievement by the R.A.F. and U.S.A.A.F.

108. On the 4th March, leaving the complete clearance of the town to 63 Brigade, columns of all arms were despatched along all the roads radiating from Meiktila. The important road and railway junction of Thazi was reported clear, but, in other sectors, columns of reinforcements, guns and lorries heading for Meiktila were encountered. The fighting in the