

against steadily increasing resistance. By the 23rd March, 80 Brigade were two miles west of the important enemy base of Kyaukse, where they were held up. With a view to outflanking the Japanese positions, 32 Brigade began an encircling movement south-west of the town. A week's hard fighting ensued before Kyaukse was entered on the 30th March, the booty captured including rolling stock, motor transport, and a quantity of valuable stores. The fall of Kyaukse was a severe blow to the enemy, strategically as well as administratively, since it formed the bastion behind which their disorganized forces, streaming back from north and west, were attempting to rally. Since crossing the Irrawaddy on the 12th February, 20 Indian Division had killed over 3,000 Japanese (counted), and captured 50 guns.

125. While the other two brigades of 20 Indian Division were advancing on Kyaukse, 100 Brigade (less one battalion) and two armoured car regiments made a spectacular raid against the enemy's communications to the south. Moving with great speed, this mechanised column captured Pyinzi on the 20th March and Pindale the following day. Turning eastwards, it then captured Wundwin on the 22nd, destroying large enemy dumps. It then turned north, surprising and killing a considerable force of Japanese encountered at Kume, 18 miles due south of Kyaukse.

The effects of this daring raid can well be imagined; it inflicted severe casualties, captured guns, and created havoc in the enemy's rear. But it did much more than this: it completely disrupted the Japanese system of command over a wide area, just at a time when its smooth working was essential to restore their crumbling battle fronts.

126. 2 British Division began its break-out from the Ngazun bridgehead on the 7th March. 4 Brigade captured Myintha on the 8th, and cleared the area to the west to the common boundary with 20 Division during the following week. 5 Brigade captured Kyauktalon on the 11th March and pushed rapidly eastwards. By the 15th, they were within two miles of the Myitnge River. On this date also, 6 Brigade operating to the south of 5 Brigade against strong opposition, inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy and reached a point two miles south of Tada-U. On the 17th March, 5 Brigade captured Ava Fort, liquidating a stubborn defence and, by the 21st, Japanese pockets of resistance had been mopped up, the Ava-Mandalay road opened, and junction effected with 19 Indian Division. 6 Brigade in the meantime had reached the Myitnge River and proceeded to inflict severe casualties on the enemy retreating before 19 Indian Division. 4 Brigade, transferred from the west, passed through 6 Brigade on the 18th and continued the advance towards Sado. While 19 Indian Division continued to advance southwards, 2 British Division were deflected south-west clearing the triangle Myitnge—Myingyan—Meiktila. On the 27th March, 4 Brigade cleared Pyinzi and on the 31st reached Mahlaing. 5 and 6 Brigades cleared the area between Myitnge and Myingyan, linking up with 268 Indian Infantry Brigade at Natogyi, 17 miles east of Myingyan, on the 30th March. 268 Brigade had cleared Sagaing at the north end of the Ava bridge on the 18th March, and then advanced south-west *via* Myotha.

127. By the end of March, Kimura evidently realised that "The decisive battle of the Irrawaddy Shore" had ended for him in decisive defeat, for he ordered a general withdrawal. His plan now was for 33 Japanese Army, comprising 18, 49 and 53 Japanese Divisions, to stem our advance in the east down the railway axis, and for 28 Japanese Army, comprising Yamamoto's force and other detachments, to hold us in the west in the Irrawaddy Valley. Not for the first time, the Japanese Commander had left it until too late. From now on his losses in artillery and transport were to hamper his defence and restrict his mobility.

128. Another event occurred about this time to add to the Japanese difficulties. On the night of the 24th March the Headquarters staffs of the Burmese forces, which they had raised during their occupation, deserted. Three days later there was open revolt. The Burma Defence Army had turned against its masters. The revolt was widespread and considerable numbers of Japanese were killed. This rising, although in no way decisive, proved of great value to our operations, and forced the enemy to divert forces to deal with it. On joining the Allies the force was re-named the "Burma National Army".

129. But we ourselves were now faced again with the ever recurrent crisis of transport aircraft. General Sultan had agreed to hand over 36 British Division to Fourteenth Army, for General Slim to use for mopping-up work in the Mandalay area, with a view to the release of 19 Indian Division into Army reserve. 36 British Division would in any case have to be flown out to India as soon as possible as it could not be maintained for long, and it also needed a rest after a year's continuous fighting. An examination of the position on the 19th March had shown that we had insufficient transport aircraft to meet our present needs. This was likely to have the serious result that another division—probably a British one—would have to be flown out in April to relieve the supply situation. Further, I felt that the time had come when we should start to insure against the probable removal of the United States aircraft in the fairly near future. Admiral Mountbatten accordingly held a conference at my Tactical Headquarters at Monywa on the 22nd March, to discuss air supply. The following attended: Lieutenant-General Sultan, Air-Marshal Park, Major-General Stratemeyer, Lieutenant-General Slim, Major-General Fuller and Air Vice-Marshal Vincent. All the resources in transport aircraft which could be made available were to be used to help Fourteenth Army in their battle of annihilation and their subsequent dash for Rangoon. I asked for sufficient aircraft to enable me to keep 2 British Division in Fourteenth Army, and for a few over to enable General Christison to continue mobile operations in Arakan to contain the enemy there. Owing to the nature of the country, operations up the An track or inland from Taungup were impracticable on an effective scale without air supply. I also suggested that as many now unwanted American and Chinese troops as possible should be flown out, so as to release transport aircraft for Fourteenth Army. But I insisted that no transport aircraft could be spared for this task from those supplying my forces at this critical stage.