

space to the very adverse effects of the transfer of troops and aircraft from the theatre at such an inopportune moment, despite the representations made by the Supreme Allied Commander and myself, as at that time it appeared that the consequences of the reduction of Northern Combat Area Command's effort might seriously prejudice the whole success of the operations of Fourteenth Army. It was, however, agreed by the Chiefs of Staff that two United States Combat Cargo squadrons would be returned to South-East Asia Command by the 1st February, 1945.

54. General Slim's plan of concentrating the whole Fourteenth Army in the loop of the Chindwin and Irrawaddy, as given in paragraph 32, was based on the belief that the Japanese would fight to cover Mandalay and the Shwebo airfields; that is, that they would stand west and north of the river. About mid-December, however, it became apparent that the enemy was not going to do so and was withdrawing his main forces southwards. It is therefore worth while reviewing the enemy's situation at this stage.

55. At the end of November, the enemy's alignment was as I have described in paragraph 22. By the 3rd December, however, we had crossed the Chindwin at three points and held bridgeheads at Sittaung, Mawlaik and Kalewa. The Japanese, of necessity, had conformed to the advance of Fourteenth Army and Northern Combat Area Command by withdrawing southwards. The enemy situation on the 7th December was that 33 Japanese Division held from Gangaw to the north of Kalewa, with 15 Japanese Division on its right extended up to the railway above Wuntho. 31 Japanese Division remained in the Ye-U area, while 53 Japanese Division filled the gap between Wuntho and the Irrawaddy, with 18 Japanese Division on its right up to the Bhamo-Namhkam road. 56 Japanese Division held between Namhkam and the Salween River. 2 Japanese Division had been withdrawn from this front and was believed to be in reserve in Central Burma in the vicinity of Pynmana. Further south, 49 Japanese Division remained in the Pegu area.

56. By mid-December, the results of our policy of applying continuous pressure over a broad front began to be apparent. The enemy appeared to be readjusting his dispositions as follows. In 15 Army's sector, in the north, 53 Japanese Division was crossing the river and taking up positions east of the river; 15 Japanese Division was also withdrawing across the river into the Mandalay area. 31 Japanese Division was withdrawing from the Ye-U area into the strong natural bridgehead, west of the Irrawaddy, formed by the Sagaing Hills, while 33 Japanese Division was apparently pulling back to a line running west-south-west from Myinmu to Pauk, in prolongation of the line to be held by 31 Division. Pauk was the junction of 15 Army with 28 Army, which controlled the Irrawaddy Valley. It was known that 28 Army was building up a strong force in the Yenangyaung oilfields area comprising one Independent Mixed Brigade, a part of 49 Japanese Division, and a considerable force of I.N.A. troops.

57. The following points will be noted about this new positioning of the Japanese forces. Once the enemy had decided not to fight on

the line of the escarpment running through Pinlebu and Pyingaing he had virtually lost the battle for the "dry belt" of Central Burma. The line of the escarpment represented the last opportunity he had of compelling us to fight him on a narrow front and on something approaching level terms. From this line onwards the country opened out and our superiority in mobility, firepower and armour would increasingly assert itself. There would be two divisions (the 53rd and 15th) disposed in depth east of the Irrawaddy, protecting Mandalay from the north, with their left flank protected by the river. The Sagaing Hills position (31 Division), which the Japanese had been preparing for some time, would deny us observation across the river and provide an outlet for counter-attack. Also, in conjunction with 33 Japanese Division further west, it would cover any reserve formations which the enemy might bring up south and east of the Irrawaddy.

58. The main reasons which compelled the enemy to make this alteration in his plans were probably three in number.

First, helped by our air superiority we had sprung a strategical surprise upon him by the speed with which we had got strong forces across the Chindwin.

Secondly, the troops (15 and 33 Divisions), with which he had intended to hold a covering line, had been given no respite during the monsoon and were thus no longer in a condition seriously to impede our offensive. Resistance to our entry into the Shwebo plain was crumbling before our rapid advance. We were now learning gradually just how badly damaged some of the enemy formations were from their earlier defeat.

Thirdly, the time and space factor would not allow the enemy to bring his reserve troops up from the south. Not only was he short of transport, but, lacking air supremacy, his movements by day were restricted, and his lines of communication damaged by bombing.

59. At this point I would like to draw attention to a factor which will re-appear from time to time in this Despatch, and that is the poorness both in quantity and quality of Intelligence about the enemy in the Burma theatre. I found that, compared with the African and European theatres, the information which we received about the enemy from all sources was very bad, and we were often virtually fighting in the dark. Although there was a large number of special and guerrilla organizations, full benefit was not obtained from these sources owing to overlapping and the differing channels by which they reported. Very often little more operational Intelligence was available than was obtained from forward troops. I was very keen to improve this state of affairs as it made planning extremely difficult, and it did grow better somewhat later on.

60. General Slim had at once appreciated that the Japanese had now no intention of seriously defending the Shwebo Plain, and that the enemy's covering forces were virtually evacuating the river loop, while the main forces would be grouped in depth, protected by the great river obstacle. It appeared that the Japanese intended to fight for Mandalay and on the line of the Irrawaddy, but it must be remembered that, at this stage, reports only