

97. The bringing forward of 17 and 5 Indian Divisions, which had been made possible by the increase in transport aircraft promised by the 1st March (*vide* paragraphs 69 and 93), had raised the number of divisions in Fourteenth Army to six. Had the Japanese redistribution of their forces, mentioned above, been effected in full, it would have meant that their total strength opposed to Fourteenth Army would have been increased by the equivalent of three divisions, i.e., up to a total of eight divisions (less one regiment), excluding the two I.N.A. divisions. In view of this disparity in formations, General Slim asked that 36 British Division should be placed under his command. I was, however, unable to accede to this request at this juncture (though I was in a position to do so later), both because it would have upset the Northern Combat Area Command plan and also because of administrative difficulties connected with air supply. It will be remembered that I had already instructed General Sultan to accelerate his advance and co-operate in the coming Mandalay battle (*vide* paragraph 92). But while, on paper, I had apparently ordered six divisions to destroy a force of nearly eight, there were several factors, which have been mentioned before, operating in our favour. We were now beginning to realise how far the state of the enemy was deteriorating. We had overwhelming air superiority and all the great advantages of security from air attack, close air support, regular air reconnaissance, air supply and air movement of troops—advantages which were denied to the Japanese, owing to their marked inferiority in the air. We possessed great advantages in mobility and in armoured strength, and were in terrain where we could exploit them. And, last but not least, there was the proved fighting value of our own troops and their now most marked moral ascendancy over the enemy.

98. In 33 Corps' sector, 19 Indian Division made substantial gains in the third week in February, capturing Singu after stiff fighting and inflicting heavy casualties. On 98 Brigade's front, there were indications that the enemy was pulling out from the Thabeikkyin area, after ten days of continuous attacks. 98 Brigade was, therefore, ordered to clear the area between Thabeikkyin and the southern bridgehead and rejoin the remainder of the Division. This operation was successfully completed by the 20th February, on which date 19 Indian Division commenced its drive south on a two brigade front against continued resistance. 2 British Division encountered only light opposition to their build-up, as the enemy in this sector had concentrated his strength in an all-out effort to destroy 20 Indian Division. In 20 Indian Division's bridgehead, a prolonged and bitter struggle was raging, but the Japanese, following their usual custom, flung their reinforcements in piecemeal and their casualties continued to mount. By the 16th February, we had passed to the offensive, capturing Alethaung Village after savage hand-to-hand fighting. Fierce counter-attacks followed against the extreme west of our position; but, by the 26th we had taken Tabinon and extended our bridgehead to a width of eight miles and a depth of two and a half.

99. In 4 Corps' sector, after the capture of Pagan on the 15th February already recorded,

7 Indian Division's bridgehead at Nyaungu was considerably enlarged. By the end of February, 33 Brigade was thrusting east, along the south bank of the Irrawaddy, with Myingyan as its ultimate objective. Meanwhile, 89 Brigade was striking south towards Singu. On the north bank, 114 Brigade continued operations about Pakokku. On the right flank of 4 Corps, west of the river, 28 (East African) Brigade had repulsed enemy attacks south of Letse. Further west, a detachment composed of the Chin Hills Battalion and the Lushai Scouts was pushing back the Japanese rear parties in the area of Point 468, west-north-west of Letse. As already stated (paragraph 87) 17 Indian Division (less its air-transportable brigade) and 255 Indian Tank Brigade, had concentrated in 7 Indian Division's bridgehead at Nyaungu by the 22nd February. The success or failure of the whole Fourteenth Army plan depended on its subsequent operations and they will be described separately.

100. On the Northern Combat Area Command front 36 British Division (less 29 Brigade), advancing on Mongmit from the north, effected a strongly opposed crossing of the Shweli River during the first week of February. The first attempt failed, but the second one, made with increased air support, was successful near the bend of the river north of Myitson. Myitson fell on the 9th February and the advance continued against stiff resistance. On the 17th, the enemy counter-attacked in strength, using flame-throwers and much artillery. They succeeded in penetrating our forward positions, but were ejected by a spirited attack by an Indian battalion after bitter hand-to-hand fighting. Our further progress towards Mongmit continued to meet with determined resistance. 29 Brigade, advancing on Mongmit from the west, captured Nabu on the 18th February and, by the end of the month, had reached a point approximately half way between Nabu and Mongmit. Further east, 50 Chinese Division entered Namtu on the 23rd February, capturing eleven locomotives and a quantity of rolling stock. Further east again, 30 Chinese Division captured Hsenwi on the night 18th—19th February against light opposition. This village lies on the Burma Road about 30 miles north-east of Lashio. The enemy in this sector appeared to be falling back to positions immediately north of Lashio, with a view to defending that town.

101. Although the Japanese were withdrawing along the whole of Northern Combat Area Command's front, they were doing so at their leisure. Since the weakening of Northern Combat Area Command's front by the loss of two divisions and the securing of the road trace through Namhkam and Muse by the capture of Hsenwi, the pressure had slackened and this front was not fulfilling the task I wanted done, namely the containing of the Japanese forces there and the prevention of enemy concentration against Fourteenth Army. It was for this reason that, in my Operation Instruction of the 27th February (see Appendix A), I directed the Commanding General, Northern Combat Area Command, to secure the general area Kyaukme—Lashio with all speed.