

Burma, I also ordered that the convoys containing reinforcements which had been turned back from Rangoon should again be diverted towards that port.

I arrived at Magwe in Upper Burma on the morning of 1st March and held a conference with the Governor, General Hutton and Air-Vice Marshal Stevenson. There seemed to me no reason why Rangoon should not continue to be held at least long enough to enable the reinforcements on the way, 63 Indian Infantry Brigade and a field regiment, to be landed. There was no evidence of any great enemy strength west of the Sittang, the 7 Armoured Brigade was still intact, and Chinese troops were moving down towards Toungoo. I therefore gave instructions that any orders that might have been issued with a view to the evacuation of Rangoon should be cancelled and directed that all ships with troops or stores for Burma should proceed.

I flew during the afternoon with General Hutton to Rangoon. On arrival there we found a telegram from the G.O.C. 17 Division recommending the immediate evacuation of Pegu. I motored with General Hutton to Divisional Headquarters at Hlegu and found that the report on which the Divisional Commander's recommendation was based had proved a false one. The Divisional Commander was obviously a sick man, and I replaced him by Brigadier Cowan, who commanded the 17 Division with success for the remainder of the campaign.

On 2nd March I visited the troops of the 17 Division and 7 Armoured Brigade on the Pegu front and then flew to Lashio, since I had heard that Marshal Chiang-Kai-Shek would be there. I had two satisfactory interviews with him that evening and next day returned to India. At Calcutta I met General Alexander, who was on his way to take over command of the Burma Army, and instructed him to hold on to Rangoon for as long as possible.

While my intervention on this occasion postponed the evacuation of Rangoon for a week and enabled reinforcements of an Infantry Brigade and a field regiment to be landed, it eventually placed General Alexander in a difficult position and led to his forces being nearly cut off, as described in his report. On balance I am satisfied that we gained by the delay.

OPERATIONS AFTER FALL OF RANGOON.

22. Once Rangoon had fallen, there was comparatively little that G.H.Q. in India could do to influence the operations in Burma. Until the road from Assam was completed, reinforcements of personnel and stores could only be sent in by air, and the number of transport aircraft was extremely limited.

The chief requirement of the forces in Burma at this time, British and Chinese, was air support, which India was unable to provide in the necessary strength. At first it was hoped to maintain the ascendancy which our air forces in Burma had so far held over the Japanese in spite of great numerical inferiority. The loss of the port of Rangoon, however, stopped the flow of R.A.F. personnel and equipment planned by the Air Ministry, and the loss of the airfield organisation in Southern Burma greatly affected air operations. Once Rangoon had gone, the maximum force that could be

maintained in Upper Burma from the resources available was one Bomber Squadron, one Fighter Squadron and one Army Co-operation Flight, in addition to one A.V.G. Fighter Squadron. It was decided to form also a mixed Wing of one Fighter, one Bomber and one G.R. Squadron at Akyab. Shortage of aircraft, however, prevented this Wing being fully formed and with the exception of a few obsolescent fighters, all the serviceable operational aircraft—fighters and bombers—were absorbed by the formation of the Wing in Upper Burma. This Wing was based at Magwe, the only airfield left in Burma with any degree of warning. On the 21st and 22nd March, over a period of some 24 hours, it was attacked by the enemy in force. The available Hurricanes and Blenheims had been engaged in the early morning of the 21st against an enemy concentration of aircraft at Mingaladon on which they had inflicted severe losses. When the enemy retaliated only 12 of our fighters were serviceable and able to take off to engage the first raid. Although four of the enemy were shot down and two were damaged, the weight of attack got home. In his attacks the enemy made Magwe temporarily untenable for first-line aircraft and destroyed or rendered unserviceable 17 bombers and fighters on the ground. The cause of this reverse was our weakness in fighters, the failure of the warning system and an almost complete absence of aircraft pens and dispersal arrangements. The loss of these aircraft, which constituted practically the only air force available at the time, and the withdrawal of the R.A.F. to Lashio on the northern frontier of Burma and Loiwing in China, several hundred miles further north, made the support of the Burma Army an extremely difficult problem. Aircraft were only reaching India in small numbers, and it was essential to organise the defence of Calcutta and of Ceylon. I had reluctantly to decide that I must use the air forces reaching India to build up a defence in that country, and that I could not afford the heavy losses that Japanese numerical superiority, the lack of training of our air squadrons, the absence of a warning system and the difficult flying conditions in Upper Burma were bound to cause in an attempt to give air support to the forces in Burma. The Japanese air arm had therefore almost a free hand in the later stages of the Burma campaign, and it was fortunate for us that they failed to take full advantage of their opportunity.

23. I had little confidence in being able to prevent the Japanese from reaching the Burma oilfields at Yenangyaung or from occupying Mandalay if they made a determined attack on these objectives. We could not relieve or reinforce our troops of whom the majority had been fighting continuously for some months in difficult conditions, while the enemy had practically unlimited powers of reinforcing his land and air effort. During March and April he increased his forces in Burma by three divisions and gradually drove back the Chinese and ourselves.

I hoped that we might still manage to retain a hold on Upper Burma north of Mandalay and a common front with the Chinese. I discussed with General Alexander during a visit which I