

153. As the last few hundreds of exhausted Japanese were making their escape to Moulmein with bitter recollections of the ordeal they had passed through, Lieutenant-General Sir Montague Stopford, G.O.C. 12th Army, when recalling the severity of the weather, its flooding, rains and cloud, showed his appreciation of the R.A.F. in these words :—

“Grateful if you would accept and pass on to all ranks under your command my most grateful thanks for the admirable support given during break-out battle and my congratulations on splendid results achieved. Flying conditions must have been most difficult but on all sides I hear nothing but praise of the keenness and determination of pilots to get through. You have all played a great part in the Twelfth Army’s first big operation.”

154. Over and above the R.A.F. contribution, our victory was won by our superiority over the Japanese in training, fighting ability and weapons; the accurate intelligence which was obtained before the battle began; the fine work of the guerillas, and above all the high morale and fighting efficiency of the troops.

STRATEGIC AIR OPERATIONS.

A Well Sustained Offensive against Enemy Supply and Communications.

155. With the capture of Rangoon and the disbandment of the integrated Anglo-American Strategic Air Force on June 1st, the R.A.F. heavy bombers of 231 Group were left to carry out the next phase of the battle against the enemy’s communications leading to Singapore, and on other important targets.

156. The partnership which had been forged between heavy bomber units of No. 231 Group, R.A.F., and the 7th Bombardment Group, U.S.A.A.F. had, over a period, produced a striking force so effective that it brought about a serious disruption to Japanese strategic communications in this Theatre, with a critical decline in the quantity of supplies intended for their ground forces in Burma.

157. The departure of the 7th Bombardment Group had one important significance. The Group had operated twelve aircraft fitted with “Azon” equipment, consisting of a radio transmitter in the aircraft and a radio receiver on the bomb which, once released, could be guided in such a way that line errors could be eliminated. Throughout the series of “bridge-busting” missions on the Burma-Siam railway, which, on account of anti-aircraft defences could not be attacked from low level by Liberators, the Azon equipment was used with great success.

158. The destruction of bridges in Burma and Siam, notably on the Bangkok-Pegu railway, which was one of the principal tasks of the Strategic Air Force, was a vital factor in crippling the enemy’s land communications.

159. In a six-month period between December 1944 and May 1945, there was photographic confirmation of bridge destruction as shown hereunder :—

				Destroyed	Damaged
Rail	...	...	...	96	36
Road	...	...	...	13	4
Total	...	...	...	109	40

160. Feverish efforts made by the Japanese engineers, who worked with great energy repairing and rebuilding bridges, failed to keep open many of the vital communications upon which the Japanese in Southern Burma depended.

Greater Distances Flown to Target Areas.

161. On the Allied occupation of Rangoon, R.A.F. Liberators carried the heavy bomber offensive much further afield into the enemy-occupied territories of South East Asia, involving frequent flights of over 1,000 miles radius from their Indian bases in Bengal. This was inevitable, as the newly occupied airfields in Southern Burma, after the capture of Rangoon, were not yet big enough to take heavy bombers. The long distance flights undertaken by these aircraft across the Bay of Bengal in difficult monsoon weather were most hazardous.

162. From Moulmein, at the mouth of the Salween River, to Victoria Point, the southernmost tip in Burma, is nearly 500 miles. This coastal tip, known as the Tenasserim, together with Japanese bases in the Andaman Islands, came in for attention by the heavy bombers after our entry into Rangoon. Nearly 1,000 tons of bombs were dropped by the R.A.F. squadrons during May, which reflected the determination of the crews to carry on their heavy bombing work in the disruption of the enemy’s communication system. Indeed, what was to have been a V.E.-Day celebration in May, was spent by crews of the squadrons standing by for an attack on shipping in the Andamans. This culminated in a bombing raid on May 17th against the most westerly Japanese base in the Bay of Bengal—Port Blair. The bombing force on this occasion concentrated on important harbour installations, including marine workshops at Phoenix Bay, while buildings at Hope Town, the main coaling point, were destroyed. A large orange red explosion, with flames rising up to 1,500 feet, was seen by the crews after they had hit their target. The enemy had fortified the whole area of Port Blair with shore batteries and A.A. guns, which succeeded in shooting down one of our aircraft.

163. But the main battle against the enemy’s communications—notably those affecting Singapore—was now on. The same air strategy which had disrupted the Japanese supply line between Bangkok and Rangoon was applied in the succeeding months with equal effectiveness to the line linking Bangkok with Singapore.

164. Communications on this mountainous peninsula, embracing territory of three States—Burma, Siam and Malaya—had, for the most part, been seaborne, though, as the Japanese advance in 1941 showed, Singapore still had a backdoor by means of the rail route to the north.

165. With the sea lanes in the Strait of Malacca made more and more hazardous for Japanese shipping through the effectiveness of our mine-laying from the air and the vigilance shown by R.N. submarines, the enemy was forced to fall back steadily on the use of the Bangkok-Singapore railway for the movement of supplies. This line snaked for a thousand miles up the narrow neck of land between the Gulf of Siam and the Andaman Sea.