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R.A.F. NARRATIVE

(FIRST DRAFT)

THE CAMPAIGNS IN THE FAR EAST

VOLUME V

AIR SUPPLY OPERATIONS IN BURMA 1942 - 1945

AIR HISTORICAL BRANCH (1)
AIR MINISTRY.

G.169066/ZGR/5.49/30

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MAPS

PREFACE

This document contains a brief preliminary account of the growth and development of air transport as a means of supply to the land forces engaged in the campaigns in Burma from 1942 to 1945. It was in this theatre that the technique of supply by air evolved on a scale unprecedented in the history of the Second World War. The object of this narrative is to trace, from its earliest beginnings, the development of this new technique of warfare in relation to the strategic and geographical requirements of the Burma theatre. It is written, however, in general terms and is in no way a detailed study of air supply. In covering the early period of 1942-43 the narrative is believed to be as accurate as possible, but in its account of operations after the setting up of S.E.A.C. it suffers from certain limitations. These arise mainly from a lack of complete statistical and other data from Japanese and, in particular, American sources. Although the narrative is primarily concerned with R.A.F. activities and problems, the very large part played by the American transport units - under both integrated and independent commands - has necessitated the treatment of the Allied transport operations as a whole. On the basis of currently available information this has inevitably involved, in the record, a certain lack of balance between the British and American transport effort. The reader should, therefore, bear in mind that the U.S. transport support aircraft in S.E.A.C. were superior in numbers to those of the R.A.F. and that, except where specifically stated, the account of operational and administrative problems connected with air transport applies solely to the R.A.F.

With the above reservations, the following pages aim at affording as concise an account of transport support operations in Burma as currently available source material allows. The subject is one capable of almost indefinite expansion in the light of additional information.

May, 1949.

Air Historical Branch (1)
Air Ministry.

G.169066/ZGR/5.49/30

CHAPTER I

THE EARLY DAYS

1942-1943

The Geographical Background

1. The history of air supply to the land forces in the South-East Asia Theatre can be traced back to within a few months of the out-break of war against Japan. Its expansion and development were dictated by the great size and inhospitable nature of the wilderness, which formed the battleground on the Burma front, as well as the scanty ground communications available to the Allied land forces behind their own lines. Apart from certain lines of communication, which did not even join together to make access from one end of the country to the other, transport facilities were dated - if not primitive. Burma was still the land of the bullock-cart and the sampan. Wide tracts of country were covered by thickly-grown, almost impenetrable stretches of palm and jungle-wood, and there were fair-weather roads which disappeared under water during the months of the monsoon.

2. From India the railway penetrated only the northern fringe of Burma, striking north-east to Ledo and south-west to Chittagong and Dohazari. Thereafter, large mountain ranges stood as a barrier to central Burma, isolating Mandalay on the eastern side of the Irrawaddy and Chindwin rivers. This town had access by rail to Rangoon in the south and Lashio in the north-east. Whoever held Rangoon retained, therefore, the only strategic key to the control of the whole country.

The First Air Transport Operations Over Burma

O.R.B. No. 31 Sqdn. Dec. 1941 - Apr. 1942.

3. The outbreak of hostilities against Japan in December 1941 found the India Command lamentably short of transport aircraft. At that time, there were only two serviceable D.C.2. aircraft in the Command, belonging to No. 31 Squadron, and these were sent to ply between Calcutta and Rangoon, carrying urgent stores and evacuating personnel. At the beginning of February 1942, some D.C.2. aircraft of the same squadron, which had been detached to the Middle East Command, returned to India and these, together with the two D.C.2s already there, moved to Akyab. From this base off the Arakan coast, the squadron flew in reinforcements to Burma and evacuated sick and wounded on return trips. These operations continued until the end of March 1942 when the squadron was forced to move back to Calcutta after enemy action had rendered Akyab untenable.

4. Up to mid-April 1942 No. 31 Squadron continued to operate from Dum-Dum airfield, Calcutta, carrying reinforcements into Magwe, Shwebo and Myitkyina in turn as the battle moved northwards. Sick and wounded were also evacuated from these places and civilians were brought out when there were no casualties to move. During April, three D.C.3. aircraft were delivered to No. 31 Squadron and these, together with one D.C.2., were sent to Din Jan in Assam, commencing operations on 22 April. These tasks continued until the fall of Myitkyina on 8 May 1942, after which there were no

/airfields

airfields left to the Allies in Burma. The Army was then forced back to its nearest lines of communication with India, which guaranteed it ground supply, such as it was. These lines of communication extended from Chittagong, west of the Arakan, to the north-east, through Imphal and Kohima in Manipur State. The Army was thus placed between the Chindwin and the Brahmaputra. While this undoubtedly gave the land forces a line capable of defence, they were nevertheless powerless to advance on the basis of ground alone.

File AHQ(I) 83/23/Air.

O.R.B. No. 31 Sqdn. May-June '42.

5. At this time - May 1942 - the Japanese were in all respects the masters of Burma and had, indeed, achieved one of their major objectives - that of sealing the Burma Road into China as it passed through Lashio. After Myitkyina had fallen, the only allied outpost which remained in Burma was a remote and isolated garrison at Fort Hertz. This consisted of a small party of British personnel, including some women, who had reached this point after the Japanese had pushed north through Burma. They were without food, money, arms or spare clothing, and the only means of maintaining them was by air. It was here that supply-dropping in Burma had its modest beginnings, when No. 31 Squadron first dropped supplies at Fort Hertz on 9 May 1942. This means of supply continued during the month until it was decided that a determined attempt should be made to evacuate the party by air. Several sorties were mounted by the R.A.F. in early June but were frustrated by the bad weather conditions. On 13 June, however, the weather cleared sufficiently to enable a D.C.3. of No. 31 Squadron to reach Fort Hertz where, landing and taking off in a very confined space, the aircraft successfully evacuated twenty-three persons.

Despatch by F.M. Wavell March-June 1942.

6. In addition to the Fort Hertz commitment, India Command had to deal with some 400,000 refugees of varying categories and in different stages of distress. Some came by sea from Akyab before it fell into enemy hands; large numbers passed through Imphal and others through the Hukawng valley route to Ledo. Inevitably, the feeding and transportation of these people presented a very serious problem, particularly in the Hukawng valley where, from Shingbwiyang onwards, the route consisted of only a difficult mountain track crossing several rivers. After the rains had begun, this route became impassable and many refugees, less fortunate than those who reached Fort Hertz, perished in the attempt to make their way to Ledo. In the midst of this turmoil, other refugees were marooned at Shingbwiyang and throughout the monsoon had to be supplied by air.

IIJ50/47/56 U.S.A.A.F. Narrative 1942-44.

7. In all these operations involving air transport in the first half of 1942 the Americans also participated. As the situation in Burma became critical, a few B-17 heavy bombers based in India were pressed into service as transports. In March they transported from India to Magwe a fully-equipped battalion of Inniskillin Fusiliers and on return trips they brought out from Burma some 425 civilian refugees. In April, further American transport effort was mounted by ten D.C.3s, which had arrived from Africa. These aircraft carried ammunition and supplies to the retreating Chinese and evacuated wounded personnel and civilian refugees. After the fall of Mandalay on 1 May, the American D.C.s defied every normal limit of pay-load in order to evacuate as many personnel as possible before the Japanese could close in on the few remaining airfields in Allied hands. When these were captured the U.S.A.A.F. joined with the R.A.F. in dropping supplies to the retreating forces and refugees. At the same time, several Army detachments, located in the Chin

/hills

hills, and various local levies had their supplies dropped by both British and American aircraft. In all these operations No. 31 Squadron, R.A.F., and the 2nd Troop Carrier Squadron, U.S.A.A.F., were the pioneers of air supply in South-East Asia. This transport work continued throughout the 1942 monsoon.

Despatch by A.V.M. Stevenson Jan-May 1942.

8. In all, a total of 8,616 persons, including some 2,600 wounded, were evacuated by the allied air forces during the retreat from Burma. In addition, 49 tons of supplies were dropped to refugees and troops.

File AHQ (B) 8/13/Air

9. With the fall of Burma and the closing of the road to China, the Americans turned their attention to the problem of keeping China in the war by means of ferrying supplies by air over the mountainous route known as "The Hump". This became an exclusive American commitment which falls only indirectly within the scope of this narrative. India Command, however, realized the possibilities of developing Fort Hertz as an emergency landing-ground on this India-China air route and also as a base for the raising of guerilla bands to assist in the ultimate re-conquest of North Burma. With this end in view, various plans were considered as to the best means by which troops could be transported to Fort Hertz to garrison the base. Finally, it was deemed advisable, owing to the uncertain condition of the landing-ground, to drop a parachute detachment near Fort Hertz to investigate local conditions. After some delay, this force, comprising two officers and nine other ranks, was successfully dropped in the vicinity of Fort Hertz on 13 August 1942 by a Lodestar aircraft borrowed for the occasion from a Communications Flight. Then, on 20 August, an Army Colonel, together with a W/T Set and Wireless Operator, was landed at Fort Hertz in an Audax. By 24 August, the landing-ground, measuring 1,000 x 50 yards, had been prepared for transport aircraft and, on the following day, a D.C.3. of No. 31 Squadron made a trial landing there. On the same day U.S.A.A.F. and R.A.F. bombers attacked the Japanese occupied airfield at Myitkyina in order to stop possible interference during the fly-in of the garrison. By 10 September a total of 197 persons, together with necessary equipment, had been transported to Fort Hertz by air. Thereafter, the garrison was entirely dependent on air supply carried out by No. 31 Squadron detachment based at Din Jan.

The Potentialities of Air Supply

10. Air supply, as a primary means of supporting land forces in an advance into Burma, was not originally conceived and planned - even on a long-term basis - by the Service Commanders in India. It was not until 1944 that the enormous potentialities of air supply were generally realized and early 1945 that they were fully developed. It was, indeed, necessity rather than foresight which heralded the triumph of this new technique of warfare in South-East Asia. Whether this would ever have come to pass on such a scale had amphibious resources been made available, as originally promised by the Combined Chiefs of Staff, is problematical.

India Cmd. J.P.S. Paper No. 15. '42

11. In 1942, the Commander-in-Chief in India saw only two long-term answers to the Japanese threat: to retake Burma by invading the Rangoon area from the sea, thus avoiding the mountain barrier and advancing up the central valley, or, alternatively, striking across the mountains and building a road over which to supply the advancing Army. The use of the

/third

third method - air supply - was not then considered. With one exception, there is no record of the possible accomplishments of air power in this direction being fully appreciated at that time. This exception took the form of ideas put forward by the A.O.A. at Air Headquarters, India, Air Vice Marshal A.C. Collier.

File AHQ(I) 158/Air

12. Even in 1942, Air Vice Marshal Collier undoubtedly realized the vital role which air supply, efficiently controlled and operated, could play in the future re-conquest of Burma. Commenting on a paper on plans for future air mobility drawn up by the Air Staff planning committee, Collier wrote on 14 July: "It is surprising to see no mention of transport aircraft for the solution of supply problems during the initial stage of an advance into Burma. In my opinion, the success or failure of operations .....in this communicationless area would depend very largely on the intelligent use of transport aircraft." Such foresight was significant. Nevertheless, even if the potentialities of air supply had received earlier recognition, the acute shortage of transport aircraft in India and the inability of the Combined Chiefs of Staff to provide reinforcements, through the pressing needs of other Theatres, made this solution initially impracticable.

13. It was, therefore, a gloomy background against which General Wavell, as Commander-in-Chief in India, planned such limited offensive operations as he considered his forces could undertake in the campaigning season of 1942-43. In these, air transport, due to the shortage of aircraft and to enemy air superiority, could play no effective part. Hence the first Arakan campaign failed largely through lack of adequate air support. In any case, there are no grounds for assuming in retrospect that, had transport aircraft been available to supply the land forces cut off by the Japanese in the Arakan, they could have operated successfully without grave risk of being shot from the skies by enemy fighters.

Post-Monsoon Air Transport Support Operations 1942

14. In the above circumstances, the first priority in air supply operations between October 1942 and January 1943 had to be given to the task of the provision of Fort Hertz as a base; second priority was the supply of refugees still using the Hukawng valley route, particularly at Shingbwiyang; third priority was the supply by air of Army detachments and local levies in the Chin Hills, a commitment which became increasingly important.

File AHQ(B) S.12/Air Part II

15. The number of transport aircraft available was too few for the fulfillment of all these tasks, especially as "ad hoc" commitments constantly arose to the detriment of routine work. Moreover, operations were often interrupted by the absence of fighter escort, which was considered essential owing to the danger of interception by enemy aircraft. When urgency outweighed considerations of safety, transport aircraft operated without fighter escort and three Hudsons were lost through enemy action.

Ibid

16. At the beginning of this period, there was some confusion in meeting supply-dropping commitments due to misunderstandings over the allocation of resources. The Army in Manipur made many demands for emergency supply-dropping in the Naga Hills and these tasks inevitably affected the supply of other areas. In the Hukawng valley the situation had deteriorated, while at Sumprabum, to the south of Fort Hertz, a force of about six officers and three hundred men were in contact with the Japanese

/and

and short of food. The U.S. Air Force, being fully committed in supplying China over the "Hump", could help but little. The result was that, for a short time, the situation among the isolated parties of refugees in North Burma was critical.

17. In November 1942, an attempt was made to establish a clear-cut policy for supply-dropping. It was evident, however, that emergency drops could not be avoided and an understanding was reached between A.H.Q. Bengal and H.Q. Eastern Army that the diversion of transport aircraft from routine tasks would inevitably interrupt the regular flow of supplies to priority recipients. Fortunately, the supply-dropping position was soon under control. Fort Hertz was stocked and the situation at Sumprabum was satisfactory.

O.R.B. Nos. 31, 62 and 194 Sqdns. Oct. 1942-Jan. 1943.

18. These operations were carried out by a detachment of transport aircraft based in Assam, first at Din Jan and later at Tezpur. This detachment comprised a few D.C.3s of No. 31 Squadron and two Hudsons of No. 62 Squadron. The latter were subsequently replaced by Hudsons of No. 194 Squadron.

Air Supply to the First Wingate Expedition

Passim

19. At the beginning of 1943, while the Japanese Air Force was engaged in tactical operations against our forces in the Arakan, the first Wingate Expedition was launched into North Burma. Its strategic value was neglible beyond the planting of trouble in the enemy's rear, though originally it had been intended to synchronize with a Chinese advance. When this failed to materialize, Wavell decided to let the operation continue in order to gain experience. From the air point of view, however, the significance of the operations lay in the fact that they demonstrated for the first time - albeit on a limited scale - the real implications of air supply to mobile land forces. Thus Wingate went forward from Imphal in February 1943, seemingly in an antique way with pack-mules and bullock-carts, but taking with him R.A.F. liaison officers and radio apparatus so that each column could call for air aid and supplies when needed. During the months of March and April 1943, the expedition was maintained behind the enemy lines by aircraft of No. 31 Squadron, assisted by Hudsons of No. 194 Squadron, operating from Agartala, and for the first time supplies were dropped by night as well as by day. Once the bulk of the infantry were beyond the Chindwin and approaching the Myitkyina railway, it was impossible to give direct air support, or even to escort the transport aircraft, owing to the then limited range of our fighters.

O.R.Bs. Nos. 31 and 194 Sqdns. Feb-May 1943

20. Most of the supplies dropped during the expedition were collected by the ground forces, though on the first occasions aircrews were less expert than they subsequently became. On the night of 16 February, for instance, over ten per cent of the supplies dropped were lost in marsh and forest. This was at least equally the fault of columns who took very little trouble to observe and recover distant parachutes while local villagers showed great celerity. Subsequently, however, when supplies assumed a more vital aspect, the columns made every endeavour to collect packages which had been inexpertly dropped.

IIJ50/47/25 Appendix "B" Report by RAF Liaison Officer

21. It was found that, if the locality was safe, the most suitable area for supply-dropping to the columns was a large paddy-field. Other suitable sites were found in occasional jungle-clearings and, even in those early days, successful

/dropping

dropping was at times carried out in mountainous country having an appropriate plateau and adequate circuit. The main consideration of the R.A.F. Sections was to ensure that the Dropping Zones were clear of obstructions, particularly at night and, more especially, on moonless nights.

IIJ50/47/25 Appendix "B" Report by the Staff Captain 77 Brigade

File AHQ(I) 117/5/Air

22. Wingate's Staff Captain considered that, in spite of the fact that the R.A.F. personnel concerned were greatly interested in the operations, "the tendency was to study R.A.F. convenience without considering the man on the ground" and "there were occasions when supply-dropping was unsuccessful through an unnecessary time-lag. Perhaps the R.A.F. failed fully to realize that, when certain limits of time between which the drop should take place were stipulated by troops in the field, then those limits should be kept." These comments brought forth a counter-attack by the Officer Commanding, No. 31 Squadron, who stated: "Both these allegations are as untrue as they are malicious. On no occasion was R.A.F. convenience studied to the detriment of the men in the field, nor was there a single occasion when supply-dropping was unsuccessful through a time-lag attributable to the R.A.F."

IIJ50/47/25 Report by Brig. Wingate on the Operations of 77 Brigade

23. According to Wingate, the supply-dropping operations of the R.A.F. were a "brilliant and unexpected success". Reports from personnel in the field, who returned from the expedition, also indicate that supply-dropping and maintenance from the air were highly successful. The Commander of IV Corps, however, thought otherwise. While not disparaging the efforts of the R.A.F. whom he praised, he thought that false conclusions might be drawn from the apparent ease with which air supplies were delivered. To quote his own words: "During the whole course of the operation, enemy air opposition was not once encountered and we were fortunate in not losing a single aircraft through any cause. During the operation, all columns of 77th Brigade suffered some degree of starvation for several days at a time". This was not entirely the fault of the R.A.F., however, since at times the ground situation forbade supply-dropping while W/T communications, by which drops were arranged, were not always reliable.

IIJ50/47/25 Appendix "B" Report by RAF Liaison Officer

24. The methods used for indication of Dropping Zones are of interest since, from these early experiments, much experience was gained which later proved invaluable as more and more troops became entirely dependent on air supply. D.Z.s had to be varied according to circumstances and to prevent the enemy imitating our methods. By night, any suitable pattern of fires was satisfactory, either a straight line, a "T" or an "L", the number varying on different occasions. Fires could be seen for several miles and, providing pin-pointing was accurate, an indicator point - generally a prominent landmark - was unnecessary. Sometimes it was not always possible for aircrews to discern the pattern of fires and, especially towards the end of the dry season, jungle fires added to the confusion. If there were any obvious natural features nearby, and the bearing and distance from the dropping zone were given, ground markings on the sight were often sufficient by day. It was found, however, that pre-arranged Verey light signals and recognition signals on an Aldis lamp made doubly sure that aircraft located their objective. Smoke fires were not often used as they proved inadequate when the wind was strong or the jungle thick. In general, it was surprising how highly successful were the results often obtained when drops were made in thick jungle country as opposed to pre-selected open spaces.

25. Whatever may be the conclusions of military analysts on the

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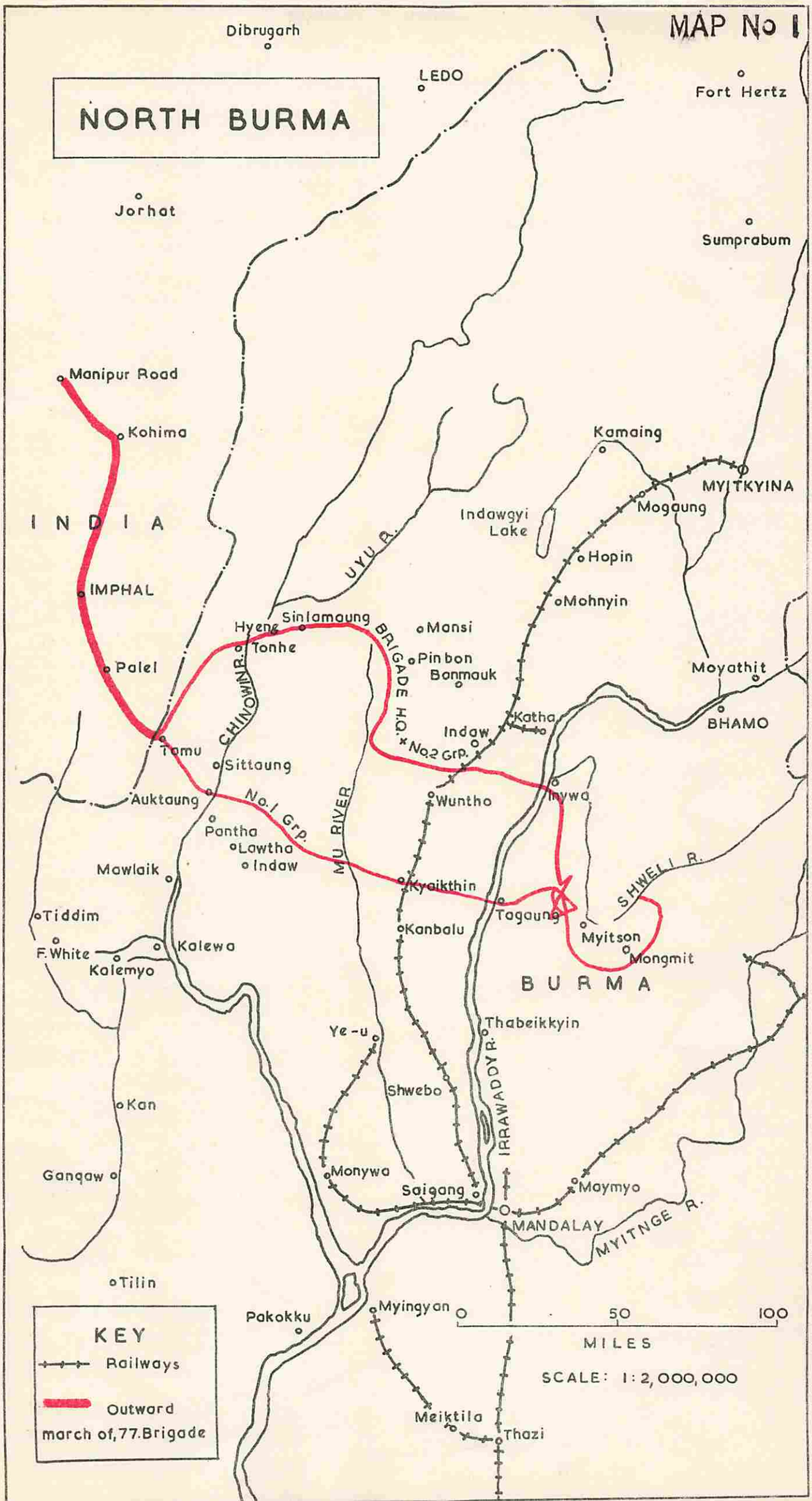
MAP No 1
NORTH BURMA
Dibrugarh
LEDO
Fort Hertz
Jorhat
Sumprabum
Manipur Road
Kohima
INDIA
IMPHAL
Palel
Tamu
Auktaung
Mawlaik
Tiddim
F. White
Kalemyo
Kalewa
Kan
Ganqaw
Tilin
Pakokku
Myingyan
Meiktila
Thazi
Ye-u
Shwebo
Monywa
Saigang
MANDALAY
Maymyo
MYITNGE R.
IRRAWADDY R.
Thabeikkyin
Kyaikthin
Kanbalu
Wuntho
Indaw
Lawtha
Pantha
Sittaung
CHINDWIN R.
MU RIVER
No.1 Grp.
No.2 Grp.
BRIGADE H.Q.
Hyene
Tonhe
Sinlamaung
Mansi
Pinbon
Banmauk
UYU R.
Indawgyi Lake
Kamaing
MYITKYINA
Mogaung
Hopin
Mohnyin
Katha
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SHWELI R.
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BHAMO
BURMA
KEY
Railways
Outward march of, 77. Brigade
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relative value of the first Wingate expedition, two major lessons were learned by the air forces which undoubtedly had a profound influence on the future conduct of the war in Burma. First, the Wingate expedition clearly indicated that the answer to Japanese tactics of infiltration and envelopment would lay in air supply. Such means of supply would enable ground forces to ignore land lines of communication which in jungle country had already proved so vulnerable. Secondly, it was widely realized that some effective method of rescuing sick and wounded personnel was a vital necessity in the terrain over which the future battles would be fought. Before entering Burma, Wingate had impressed upon all ranks that should anyone become a casualty he would have to be left at a village with money and medical supplies to survive as best he could, since the columns could not afford to carry passengers. This policy may have cured hypochondria but must have had a bad effect on morale. The answer to the problem lay in the development of an air evacuation service, a method which was actually employed once during the expedition. Failing a large number of suitable landing grounds, however, light aircraft, capable of landing and taking off in a very confined space, were required for this purpose. By such means, personnel could be evacuated speedily by air from almost any part of Burma. The great value of casualty air evacuation was later to be proved on many occasions during the re-conquest of Burma.

O.R.Bs.
Nos. 31 and 194
Sqdns.
Feb-May 1943

26. During the course of the first Wingate Expedition, the R.A.F. flew some 178 supply-dropping sorties, of which nineteen were abortive, and dropped just over three hundred tons of supplies to the columns. It is remarkable that the Japanese Air Force permitted the transport aircraft to undertake their missions unimpeded. This may well be attributable to the Japanese concept of air forces primarily as direct arms of their Army and Navy, whose officers excercised command. This was reflected throughout all the campaigns in Burma in the concentration by the enemy on the tactical use of their aircraft to the detriment of strategical considerations.

Other Air Supply Commitments in First Half of 1943

27. Although the results of the campaigning season of 1942-43 were inconclusive, the period witnessed a further unfolding of air transport resources which, in the light of later events, proved significant. The highly complex ground organisation, which subsequently supported the air transport force, had not then emerged; maintenance facilities were rudimentary and aircraft and aircraft spares were scarce. The latter shortage had been foreshadowed at the close of 1942 when the Air Ministry had signalled A.H.Q. India: "Transport aircraft. Regret impossible give you further allotments. We have received no allocation of U.S. transport aircraft since May last, except one hundred Hudsons VIs of which twenty-five have been allotted you.(1) Transport position in all Commands is exceedingly tight and we have no resources on which to draw to meet even the modest increase for which we ask".

A.M. File
CS. 13962

/28.

(1) Formed in India as No. 194 Squadron and originally operated on internal air-line duties.

O.R.B.s Nos. 31 and 194 Squadrons Jan-June '43

28. In spite of these difficulties, the evolution of Air Supply as a new dimension in warfare continued unabated. In January 1943 an average of five aircraft dropped one hundred and sixty-eight tons of supplies, but by June the totals had risen to fifteen and three hundred and eighty-six respectively. In these six months, the small detachments of Nos. 31 and 194 Squadrons, operating an average of ten aircraft, flew seven hundred and seventeen sorties and dropped one thousand five hundred and sixty five tons of supplies. This effort was achieved for the loss of only two aircraft, for which it is unlikely that the enemy was responsible.

File AHQ(B) 80/5/Air

29. In addition to the supply of the Wingate expedition, already outlined, R.A.F. transport commitments were many. There was a continuous heavy air lift for Army detachments in the Chin Hills, while the Chinese-American units in the Hukawng valley, in addition to Sumprabum and Fort Hertz, had to be maintained. Yet the Army's demands for air lifts continued to outstrip that which could be carried in the aircraft available. It was, therefore necessary for a time to restrict these demands to the minimum. Towards the end of February, when the U.S.A.A.F. were able to offer some assistance in supply-dropping operations, it was agreed between A.H.Q. Bengal and the 10th Air Force that the latter would take over the Hukawng valley commitment, thus leaving only the Fort Hertz and Sumprabum tasks to the R.A.F. in North Burma.

Ibid

30. With this reduction in commitments, six R.A.F. transport aircraft were based at Agartala under the direct control of No. 170 Wing. Hitherto aircraft had been based at Agartala, Din Jan and Tezpur and no co-ordination of effort had taken place. It was arranged that the supply of Sumprabum and Fort Hertz would be carried out by the aircraft at Agartala, using Tezpur as an advanced base for these operations. In this way, IV Corps always knew the extent of available supply resources and could detail priorities in conjunction with No. 170 Wing accordingly. Moreover, No. 170 Wing, primarily a tactical formation, was in a position to arrange fighter escort to the transport aircraft as required.

31. In April, Dakotas became available for use as supply-dropping aircraft and in due course replaced the obsolete D.C.s. This resulted in an appreciable increase in airlift. During the period under review - January to June 1943 - the R.A.F. dropped nine hundred and forty-five tons of supplies in the Chin and Naga Hills, three hundred and three tons to Wingate's forces and one hundred and fifty-four tons in North Burma. In addition one hundred and sixty-three tons of supplies were flown in to Fort Hertz.

Air Supply During 1943 Monsoon

IIJ/50/47/70 Review of Air Transport Ops (ACSEA Air Staff)

32. The return of Wingate's intruder force in May 1943 did not diminish the activity of transport aircraft on the Burma front. During the ensuing monsoon period the regular commitments to Fort Hertz, north Burma and the Chin hills were augmented by the needs of many Army units isolated by the seasonal interruption of communications. Indeed, despite the weather and the formidable difficulties of the ground crews, the number of supply-dropping sorties flown and the tonnage of supplies dropped in July 1943 reached record figures - two hundred and eighty-six sorties and seven hundred and eighty-four tons - attained with an average of only fifteen aircraft. This

/transport

O.R.B.
No. 31 Sqdn.
July-Nov '43

transport work went on throughout the monsoon period and, up to mid-November, one thousand and fifty-nine sorties had been flown and two thousand nine hundred and thirty tons of supplies delivered to Army units. Bad weather interfered with these operations and one hundred and ten sorties were completely unsuccessful, ninety-seven of them during the worst months of July, August and September. The principal area of supply lay in the Chin Hills where two thousand and seventy tons were dropped. The Chinese-American Forces in North Burma received five hundred and fifty-four tons and another two hundred and seventy-six tons went to troops in Arakan cut off by flooding. The remaining hundred and thirty tons, most of which were landed, were delivered to Fort Hertz where, in addition to supplies, reinforcement troops were flown in.

33. These figures are creditable, bearing in mind the hazards of the monsoon over mountainous jungle country, and yet only one aircraft was lost. The whole transport effort was accomplished by No. 31 Squadron, whose aircraft operated from Agartala for supply in the Chin Hills and Arakan, and from Din Jan for North Burma, including Fort Hertz. Their average serviceability throughout the period amounted to only ten Dakota aircraft.

Appendix I
to O.R.B.
No. 31 Squadron
Oct. 1943

34. At the end of the rainy season, the G.O.C.-in-C., Eastern Army, expressed the view in a letter to the A.O.C., Bengal, that without the maintenance of supply by air the Army could not have held throughout the monsoon the positions in which it had entrenched itself at the end of the campaigning season in May. He added that, owing to the efforts of No. 31 Squadron, none of the troops had ever gone hungry and many friendly inhabitants of distant tracts had been saved from great hardship.

35. By the autumn of 1943, a body of experience was being gradually built up as to not only the great flying difficulties involved in the delivery of supplies by air but also concerning the complementary problems of Army liaison and inter-service administration. It was soon learned that air supply required more than a sufficiency of transport aircraft and crews; it had to be supported by an extensive ground net-work of administration and equipment. This aspect of air supply, on which so much depended in 1944 and 1945 and of which little was known in the early days of experiment and improvisation, is covered in more detail elsewhere in this narrative. At the close of the period under review, the seeds of knowledge ahd been sown in many spheres of this new technique of warfare, and already training and experiment in the use of transport aircraft was being carried on at the Airborne Forces Research Unit, an inter-services formation located in the Punjab, with an eye to the future developments that were so clearly being compelled by topographical and strategic needs.

CHAPTER 2

THE GROWTH OF AIR SUPPLY

1943-1944

1. The re-conquest of Burma was not effected at Rangoon. It was achieved in a series of stiff and sometimes desperate encounters with the Japanese by the Allied ground and air forces in the second Arakan campaign, at Imphal, Myitkyina, Mandalay and Meiktila. These names stand out boldly in the history of the war in Burma. Yet they also have an even greater significance for they represent the principal air supply operations which so decisively spelt defeat for the enemy. The significance of these operations will be traced in the following sections of this narrative.

2. It was not until the opening of the 1943-44 campaigning season - which coincided with the formation of the South-East Asia Command under the Supreme Allied Command of Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten - that transport aircraft began to flow steadily to India and, equally important, that sufficient experience of air supply had been gained to ensure support to the ground forces in reasonable dimension. It had to be so. No ground force could be expected to trek deep into enemy territory on assurance that it would be maintained by air and then find itself only half supplied. The lessons learned in air supply technique during the early days of 1942 and 1943 proved to be invaluable assets when the land forces were in a position to hit back against the enemy.

The Significance of Air Superiority

3. It should also be remembered that the most important single factor moulding the progress of all operations in Burma, particularly air supply, was the gaining of air superiority. This superiority over the Japanese did not begin to be achieved until the winter of 1943-44 with the arrival of Spitfires on the Burma front, and it may be said to have been finally gained in February 1944. Thereafter, this supremacy, with the possible exception of the brief German-Polish campaign of 1939, was unprecedented in the history of land warfare between industrialized nations. It was only fitfully contested by the Japanese, whose air strategy after February 1944 was based upon the evasive tip-and-run policy of the confessedly weaker side. It is precisely for this reason, however, that the factor of virtually unchallenged Allied air superiority has not always been given its due when the fortunes of war on the Burma front were first weighed. Without it, our land forces would have received no more direct air support than the enemy and our transport aircraft could never have delivered their supplies without constant risk of interception. By March 1944, so great had allied air superiority become, one hundred and seventeen Japanese aircraft were destroyed in an unsuccessful attempt to attack transport and supply bases in upper Assam. By the summer of 1944 the threat by the Japanese to Allied air activities in India and Burma had become negligible and the transport aircraft were able to fly at will with little fear of interception. Thereafter, air supremacy provided the unchanging background upon which the pattern of events was unfolded.

IIJ50/47/71
ACSEA Air Staff
Review of Siege
of Imphal

/The

O.R.B.
No. 31 Squadron
Nov-Dec 1943

The Build-Up of Air Transport Reinforcements

4. The opening of the new campaigning season in the autumn of 1943 found No. 31 Squadron fulfilling its routine supply-dropping commitments in the areas of Fort Hertz and the Chin Hills much as it had been doing throughout the previous twelve months. Future operations, however, were to be considerably affected by the arrival during the winter of many more transport aircraft. No. 31 Squadron was joined in early January 1944 by No. 62 Squadron (1) and in February by No. 194 Squadron (2) and No. 117 Squadron (3). The American 1st and 2nd Troop Carrier Squadrons, which had begun to supply the Chinese-American forces in north-east Burma, were also reinforced in January 1944 by a further two - the 27th and 315th Troop Carrier Squadrons - making a total of four. This augmentation of Allied transport aircraft in India was built into the framework of Air Command, South-East Asia, which, on its formation on 15 November 1943, included all Allied air forces in the Theatre. From December 1943 direct operational control of these forces was vested in a new Headquarters - Eastern Air Command - under Major-General George E. Stratemeyer, U.S.A.A.F. All transport squadrons, operating in support of the land forces in Burma, came under a subordinate organisation called Troop Carrier Command, commanded by Brigadier-General Old, U.S.A.A.F.

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Air Transport Support in the Second Arakan Campaign

Despatch by Earl Mountbatten on Operations in SEAC '43 '46

5. Operations in Burma were influenced to a profound extent by two distinct but quite separate factors which developed in the winter of 1943-44. The first was the decision of the Combined Chiefs of Staff to withdraw from South-East Asia Command all amphibious resources in view of developments in Europe which received an overriding priority. This move had the effect of destroying piecemeal the framework of the offensive operations against the Japanese for which detailed planning was well advanced. The second factor was the Japanese plan to invade Bengal with the intention of inciting a general insurrection in the hope of bringing down the Indian Government. There were two Phases to this plan. In the first, an offensive was to be launched against our forces in the Arakan, with the object of capturing the port of Chittagong, while in the second, timed to commence about a month later, an attempt was to be made to capture British bases at Imphal and Dimapur and forestall any Allied advance into Burma.

Ibid

6. In making their plans for this overall offensive, the Japanese assumed that all available Allied resources would have to be committed to meet their attack in the Arakan before Phase II was launched on the central front. The enemy did not appreciate the fact that their advantage in interior land and

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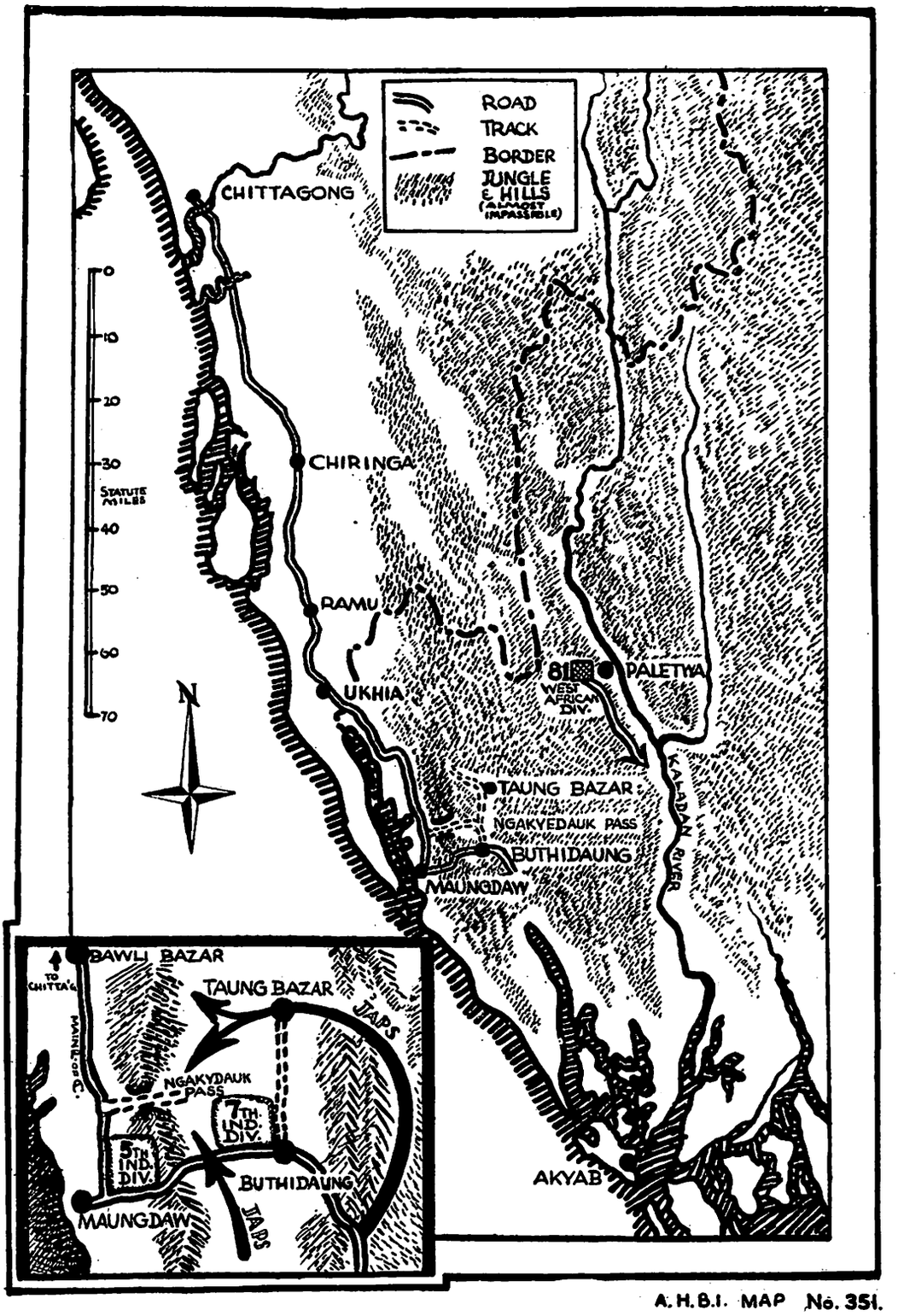
(1) Converted to Dakotas having previously undertaken bombing and G.R. missions from India.

(2) Converted to Dakotas after operating internal airlines in India with Hudsons since October 1942. Replaced in these duties by No. 353 Squadron.

(3) A veteran transport squadron posted from the Middle East.

SECOND ARAKAN CAMPAIGN



A.H.B.I. MAP No. 351.

water lines of communication could be counterbalanced by the Allied use of air supply. Moreover, as a corollary of this, they did not realize that, when they had cut our lines of communication, our troops would no longer be forced to fall back and fight a battle to re-establish those lines; they would be able to hold their positions with the aid of supplies dropped from the air.

IIJ/50/47/70 Review of Air Transport Ops (ACSEA Air Staff)

7. The situation in the Arakan at this time also differed in other ways from that which had prevailed twelve months earlier. One striking new feature was the appearance of the 81st West African Division in the Kaladan valley on the left flank of XV Corps. In December 1943, this Division concentrated at Chiringa, then moving eastwards over what had hitherto been considered impassable jungle-clad hills into the valley of the Kaladan. This move had the object of protecting the flank of the main land forces in the Arakan, which were then astride the Mayu range north of the Maungdaw-Buthidaung line. From the moment it entered the Kaladan valley, the 81st Division became exclusively dependent upon air supply for food and ammunition alike. Its maintenance thus remained a continuous and inescapable obligation for the Allied transport aircraft.

Ibid

8. The exploits of 81 Division were thrust somewhat into the background early in 1944 by a series of events which took place on the main Arakan front. Here the 5th and 7th Indian Division, astride the Mayu range, were holding approximately the line of the Maungdaw-Buthidaung road. On 4 February, the Japanese initiated Phase I of their overall offensive, the plans for which have already been briefly mentioned. Their first objective was the Ngakyedauk Pass across the Mayu range, over which the 7th Division maintained its communications with the 5th Division to the west and with the Maungdaw-Bawli Bazaar road to the north. The Japanese then aimed to cut the road and annihilate both divisions, thus leaving the way clear for a victorious advance on Chittagong.

IIJ50/47/11 Despatch by Maj-Gen Stratemeyer on E.A.C. Ops Dec.1943-June 1945

IIJ50/47/70 Review of Air Transport Ops (ACSEA Air Staff)

9. At first, this plan must have seemed to the Japanese to be well on the road to fulfillment. The infiltration through XV Corps' lines and past their left flank was accomplished, control of the Ngakyedauk Pass was secured and the Bawli road brought under fire. The 7th Division was thus cut off from the main body of the land forces while the communications of the 5th Division had become highly precarious. According to all precedents from the Malayan campaign onwards the Allied forces, deeply embarrassed by the severance of their communications, should have hastily abandoned their fortified positions and beaten a retreat towards their base, thus affording to the Japanese the opportunity for which they were seeking. In fact, nothing of the sort occurred. The reinforcement of the enemy had been observed and arrangements had already been made for air supply when the offensive developed. Its significance was not under-rated. Although, as already mentioned, additional transport squadrons had by this time become available for operations in Burma, the fact that the fly-in of Wingate's second expedition was shortly due to begin increased the commitments of Troop Carrier Command.

Despatch by Earl Mountbatten on Operations in SEAC '43-'46

Mountbatten was, therefore, forced to ask permission of the Combined Chiefs of Staff to divert aircraft from the Hump route for the period during which the supply of the 7th Division might overlap with the practice flights and actual

/fly-in

fly-in of Major-General Wingate's Special Force. This permission was granted and twenty-five C.46s operated over the Arakan from the third week in February to the middle of March. Their operations were additional to the main air supply effort by Nos. 31, 62, 117 and 194 Squadrons. With this aid, the 7th Division was enabled to stand its ground and finally, assisted by reinforcements in the form of the 26th Division advancing from the north, to turn the tables on the Japanese troops in its rear.

Ibid

10. The air supply to the 7th Division - since referred to as the "Admin. Box" because it contained a preponderance of administrative troops - was carried out by the transport aircrews with great skill and courage, only one Dakota being lost in the process. Not only basic supplies were dropped, but also the new SEAC newspaper, cigarettes and mail from home. The dispatch of these amenities made the troops realize that their predicament was temporary and by no means hopeless. Not only did the 7th Division and a brigade of the 5th Division prove that morale had been re-established in South-East Asia but administrative forces, who had had no battle experience, took their place in the fighting and played a part in waring down the enemy's attacks.

11. It should be recalled at this point that the success of supply-dropping operations in the Arakan struggle of February-March 1944 was only possible with the maintenance of an air superiority, which the Japanese did their utmost to contest. Their fighters were mobilised in central Burma and sent for a time almost daily over the battle area. As many as eighty sorties - an unprecedentedly high number for the enemy - were mounted on a single day, although it is interesting to note that their bombers, other than Oscar fighter-bombers, rarely appeared.

IIJ50/47/70 ACSEA Review of Transport Ops

12. Accurate small arms fire from isolated detachments of the enemy ensconced within Allied lines provided another threat to the success of the air supply operations. This danger, together with that from enemy aircraft, was partly met by transferring the time of dropping to the hours of darkness. This in turn involved the adoption of a special recognition procedure, though the fact that no loads were brought back undelivered was due more to the invention and resourcefulness of the aircrews than to the smooth working of the recognition arrangements. The standards of co-operation between ground and air naturally varried from place to place. Night supply-dropping was further complicated by ingenious attempts on the part of the Japanese to entice the aircraft to deliver the loads to themselves; at various times green Verey lights were seen from the air to be discharged from areas which were undoubtedly occupied by the enemy. It was, however, impracticable to supply the Headquarters "Box" of the 7th Division by night since its dropping zone was overlooked by, and within small-arms range of, features held by the Japanese. For the delivery of supplies to the "Box", special circuits were designed for the aircraft in order to keep them as far as possible out of range of the enemy's fire. While the dropping was in progress, covering fire was sometimes provided by tanks. Nevertheless, the transport aircraft were frequently hit by small arms fire.

O.R.Bs Nos. 31, 62, 117, and 194 Sqdns.

Despatch by Maj-Gen Stratemeyer on EAC Operations Dec 43-Jun '45

13. Statistics of air supply during the Arakan battle are instructive. Transport aircraft conveyed over ten thousand short tons to the 5th, 7th and 81st Divisions during February in just over three thousand sorties. During the fortnight covering the period of greatest pressure, 7 - 20 February, a varied freight was transported in six hundred and thirty-nine sorties by R.A.F. and U.S.A.A.F. transport aircraft, whose fighter escorts flew three hundred and forty-two sorties.

Despatch by Earl Mountbatten on Operations in SEAC '43-'46

14. The intervention of large numbers of transport aircraft in the Second Arakan Campaign had a decisive effect on the Japanese offensive. Mountbatten, however, points out that, although the enemy left more than five thousand dead on the battlefields during the month of February alone, the scope of the battle was a limited one, the significance of which lay in its effect on morale. The morale of the land forces was undoubtedly raised at this time by the realisation that the hitherto baffling mobility of the Japanese soldier could be neutralised by the intelligent use of transport aircraft. The results of the first Wingate Expedition had pointed the way in which this technique of supply by air could be subsequently adapted in a major battle; the second Arakan campaign proved the soundness of the principles on which the technique was based. Its result in terms of land control did not constitute any real gain against the Japanese; it merely restored the status quo to that which had prevailed before the enemy attacked. The whole episode, however, was brimful of lessons for the strategist and may well be considered to have marked a turning point in the history of land warfare in the Far East.

The Role of Air Transport in the Second Wingate Expedition

15. Scarcely had the struggle in the Arakan subsided when a conflict on a larger scale flared up in the north, the battle area of which extended from the confines of northern Burma across the Chindwin and the Naga Hills into Assam and the plain of Imphal on the one hand and, on the other, eastwards over the Salween to the Chinese outposts in Yunnan. The ultimate prize for which General Stilwell's forces were fighting in this difficult terrain was the re-opening of the land route to China from the west, from Ledo through Myitkyina to the railhead of the old Burma road at Lashio. Since the beginning of the 1943-44 campaigning season, these American and Chinese forces, advancing from their base in Assam, had crossed the mountains into the Hukawng valley while other detachments were moving southwards from Fort Hertz in the direction of Myitkyina. The objectives of this campaign thus included by implication the eventual reoccupation of North Burma. It was against this background that Wingate's plan for the fly-in of Long Range Penetration Groups behind Japanese lines to the Wuntho-Bhamo area was put into effect. The object of the expedition was to operate against the communications of the enemy forces opposing Stilwell's advance towards Myitkyina.

Despatch by Maj-Gen. Stratemeyer on EAC Operations Dec '43-June '45

16. Although there has been controversy over the long-term military value of the second Wingate Expedition in terms of actual damage inflicted on the enemy, its importance in relation to the development of air transport technique was more considerable than that of its predecessor a year earlier. For Wingate's plan depended, not merely on the establishment of troops in the midst of enemy-held territory, but on the transport of those troops to their destination by air and on the construction and manning of impromptu air-strips within the area of operations. For the accomplishment of this enterprise, General Arnold, Chief of Staff of the U.S.A.A.F., provided a special American task force, including not only transport aircraft but strong fighter and bomber contingents

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and light aircraft[1], known as the 1st Air Commando and commanded by Colonel Philip G. Cochran, U.S.A.A.F. At the same time, many other aircraft, American and British, under the control of Eastern Air Command, were also deployed for both the main and ancillary operations. Major-General Stratemeyer, forseeing that the general direction of air operations would be complicated by the variety of commands involved, designated Air Marshal Sir John Baldwin[2] as his representative to co-ordinate all air operations in support of the expedition. Forty-four Dakotas from Nos. 31, 62, 117 and 194 R.A.F. Squadrons and thirty-nine Dakotas of the 27th T.C. Squadron, the 315th T.C. Squadron and one squadron of the 5318th Air Unit participated in the operation. The R.A.F. Squadrons were based at Tulihal and the U.S.A.A.F. at Lalaghat.

Report by Brig. Lentaigne on Operations by Special Force, 1944

17. Prelude to the fly-in of the main forces was the trek by foot of 16 Long Range Penetration Brigade into Burma from Ledo[3]. At the beginning of February 1944, this Brigade had set out with their mules trekking southwards over very difficult country which was practically uninhabited and almost trackless. From 10 February onwards it had been supplied by air and its maintenance became a permanent commitment of Troop Carrier Command. On 2 March, the leading columns of the Brigade crossed the Chindwin using rafts and rubber dinghies delivered in gliders of No. 1 Air Commando and brought to earth on the sandbanks of the Chindwin. Later on their trek to the battle area, the Brigade was enabled to cross the Irrawaddy in collapsible boats delivered, also in gliders, on the sandbanks of the river on the night of 11/12 March. Two of the gliders were damaged but the other two were safely "snatched" out after their freight had been unloaded. These operations considerably speeded up the rate of the Brigade's advance and by the third week in March it had reached the Mawhun-Indaw area after an arduous trek of over four hundred and fifty miles.

Ibid

18. In addition to 16 Brigade, Wingate's Special Force contained five other brigades - 77 and 111 Indian Infantry Brigades, 3 West African Brigade, and 14 and 23 British Infantry Brigades - grouped together and known for security reasons as the "3rd Indian Division"[4]. It was originally planned that one of these five Brigades - No. 23 - should also march into Burma but, owing to Phase II of the Japanese offensive developing in March, this plan had to be modified and the brigade was turned over to XXXIII Corps for use in a medium-range penetration role. This left four brigades to be introduced by air in two stages - the maximum number which our air resources could undertake.

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(1) Used for the evacuation of casualties. See Chapter 4.

(2) Air Commander, Third Tactical Air Force.

(3) This was necessary owing to the limited number of available transport aircraft.

(4) The whole force contained mostly British troops, with some Gurkhas and West Africans - but no Indians. According to Brigadier Fergusson, commander of 16 Brigade, its designation as an Indian Division was a psychological error which caused resentment among the troops.

Despatch by Maj-Gen. Stratemeyer on EAC Operations Dec '43 - June '45

19. The first phase of the fly-in was timed to start on the night of 5/6 March 1944. Three sites in the target area within fifty miles of rail Indaw - "Broadway", "Chowringhee" and "Piccadilly" - had been selected for the glider-borne landings. It had originally been intended to carry 77 Brigade in two halves, making two main landings of fifty gliders each on "Piccadilly" and "Broadway". But half-an-hour before the fly-in was due to commence on the night of 5 March, a final air photograph revealed that "Piccadilly" had recently been obstructed by the enemy. At the time it seemed, therefore, that the Japanese must have found out about the operation. On the other hand, the enemy undoubtedly knew of the existence of "Piccadilly" where the landing of a Dakota had been photographed a year earlier in the American magazine "Life". The responsible commanders on the spot, Lieutenant-General Slim, commander of the Fourteenth Army(1), and Air Marshal Baldwin, in consultation with Wingate, decided that the obstruction of the clearing may have been no more than a routine precaution(2) and that the operation should proceed using only "Broadway" as the destination for the whole of 77 Brigade. "Chowringhee" was not used at this stage as its lay-out was different from the other clearing and no time was left in which to brief the aircrews. The first wave carried the Brigade commander with a detachment of U.S. airfield engineers, whose task was to receive the Dakotas on the following night, and a number of combat troops with equipment to defend the area meanwhile. Of the sixty-one gliders dispatched on the night of 5/6 March, only thirty-five reached "Broadway".

J.I.C.A. Rep. p. 12. 27.

Despatch by Earl Mountbatten on Operations in SEAC 1943-46

ACSEA Signal ACC. 808 Pierse to C.A.S.

20. This misfortune was due to a combination of unfavourable circumstances. First, the heavily loaded gliders had to be towed in pairs owing to the shortage of tug aircraft. Secondly, in order to allow the nylon tow-ropes to unkink, they had been laid out for about a fortnight along the edge of the airstrip at Lalaghat, where trucks had driven over them weakening their threads. Thirdly, since the operation was carried out by night and launched from air bases very near to the mountains, the pilots had to make rapid climbs to operational heights and the excessive drag on the tug aircraft in many cases caused engines to overheat and fuel consumption to become abnormal. Consequently, some of the tug pilots had no alternative but to abandon their missions and, in extreme cases, to cut the gliders adrift. Two gliders landed in the immediate neighbourhood of a Japanese divisional headquarters, while three more came down near a regimental H.Q. These forced landings, however, did create an impromptu deception effect, which caused Japanese attention to be diverted from the area of the main landings. Mountbatten has stated that the losses in gliders and complements were thus largely counterbalanced, but at best this can be no more than a point of view, as which it was no doubt intended. The positions at which the lost gliders landed were purely fortuitous and it is impossible to estimate

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(1) Formed from Eastern Army, which ceased to exist, in October 1943.

(2) This assumption later proved correct.

what might have been the effect on the operations as a whole had no such losses occurred.

Ibid

21. On "Broadway" itself many gliders crash-landed while others ran into uneven ground which preliminary air reconnaissance had not revealed. Since each wrecked glider became a source of potential danger to the next, a stage was reached when no more could be received and the last flight was returned to base. Nevertheless, in spite of these difficulties, by the next night the American engineers, with the British and Ghurka troops, had levelled "Broadway" sufficiently for the Dakotas to land. Only part of 111 Brigade was landed at "Chowringhee" owing to the tactically more suitable position of "Broadway", with the result that the latter was crowded to the limit of its capacity(1). By D day plus 6, Troop Carrier Command had flown into "Broadway" nine thousand and fifty-two personnel, one hundred and seventy-five ponies, one thousand one hundred and eighty-three mules and two hundred and twenty-five tons of stores.

Report by Brig. Lentaigne on Operations of Special Force

22. Meanwhile at "Chowringhee", twelve gliders single-towed, containing engineer, communications and security personnel, with equipment, had been landed on 6 March. All the gliders landed safely except one, which overshot and crashed into the jungle killing the crew and destroying the equipment on board. This temporarily held up work on the strip owing to a shortage of bulldozers. These were quiclly obtained, however, and work on the strip was continued, enabling the first waves of transport aircraft to be landed there on the night of 7/8 March. Henceforth, operations at "Chowringhee" went smoothly. Seventy-eight C.47s were landed on the night of 8/9 March and forty on the night of 9/10 March. This completed the schedule for "Chowringhee" and the field was abandoned on the morning of 10 March. The same afternoon it was bombed and strafed by enemy aircraft, but the attack came too late to be effective. 111 Brigade had left the area to cross the Irrawaddy and operate towards Bhamo. The enemy, however, had still remained ignorant of the location of "Broadway" and it was not until 13 March, the day of the completion of the stronghold there, that it was attacked by air in two waves of fifteen aircraft each. By this time a detachment of Spitfires of No. 81 Squadron had been installed at "Broadway" and these destroyed three of the enemy aircraft and damaged six, while one other aircraft was destroyed by A/A fire. One Spitfire was lost shortly after being airborne. Three days later, on 16 March, the first real clash between Special Force and the enemy occurred when 77 Brigade attacked Japanese positions near Mawlu. They then established another stronghold and airstrip in that vicinity, known as "White City", and cut the road and rail communications of the Japanese forces opposing Stilwell's advance.

O.R.B. No. 81 Squadron March 1944

Despatch by Earl Mountbatten on Operations in SEAC 1943-1946

23. By this time - mid-March - the Japanese offensive on the central front had grown serious. Wingate(2) then decided that his time-table must be accelerated by the fly-in of the two remaining brigades, Nos. 3 and 14, to a new stronghold in the

/Manhton

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(1) In his report on the air transport fly-in, Air Marshal Baldwin commented: "Nobody has seen a transport operation until he has watched .... Dakotas coming in and taking off on a single strip all night long at the rate of one landing and one take-off every three minutes".

(2) Wingate was killed in an air crash on 24 March and was succeeded by Brigadier Lentaigne.

Manhton area, known as "Aberdeen", which had been reached and fortified by 16 Brigade at the end of their long trek from Ledo. Thus, the second phase of the fly-in commenced on 22 March. Unfortunately, it coincided with the most critical stage of the main battle on the central front, during which almost all available transport aircraft had to be used for supplying IV Corps and transporting the 5th Division(1). Although very few transport aircraft could be allocated, the fly-in of 14 Brigade was completed on 4 April and that of 3 Brigade on 12 April. These operations, however, were also hindered by bad weather which, at one time or another, put all the fair-weather strips out of action. At the same time, the enemy took advantage of the fact that the area to which the brigades had been flown was beyond the effective range of our fighter aircraft; they were thus able to make sporadic, but not serious, attacks on the strips from 28 March onwards.

Despatch by A.C.M. Peirse on Air Ops Nov '43 - May '44

24. The subsequent operations of Special Force were spread out over the area Indaw-Banmauk-Pinlebu at the same time as Stilwell's forces were making a spectacular advance on Myitkyina airfield. For the most part, the thirty columns of the "division" were supplied by dropping, the effectiveness of which depended on the standard of training of the Dakota crews. This standard had noticeably improved in the year since the first expedition had taken place. Much depended on accuracy of dropping since the D.Z.s were constantly being changed as the columns moved from place to place. Moreover, dropping normally took place at night and there was often no other guide than navigational skill, supplemented by pre-arranged light signals which became visible only when the aircraft arrived in the vicinity of the D.Z.s.

25. With the onset of the rains in the second half of May, air supply commitments to Special Force dwindled, though they continued on a small scale throughout the monsoon during which night-dropping ceased. Day-dropping by Dakotas, escorted by Mustangs, encountered no enemy opposition. In May, 16 Brigade was withdrawn by air, while the other brigades subsequently joined Stilwell's advancing forces and participated in the operations around Myitkyina, to the success of which their columns, supplied entirely by air, had contributed.

Report by Brig. Lentaigne on Operations of Special Force. (Part VI)

ACSEA Signal ACC 842, 1/4/44 Peirse to C.A.S.

26. During all the operations undertaken by Special Force in 1944, particularly in the initial fly-in, a remarkable degree of co-operation was achieved between the land and air forces. The friendly teamwork between Wingate and Cochrane typified this spirit and soon became legendary. The results of this partnership between Special Force and No. 1 Air Commando led the Army to advocate the provision of separate air units to train with and give direct support to the land forces in all similar operations. This desire of the Army is understandable once they had enjoyed the fruits of what might be termed a "private air force", pledged to provide specific land units with exclusive fighter, bomber and transport support. The idea was strongly opposed by the R.A.F. as being unnecessary and fundamentally unsound. While the record of the small force of selected personnel

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(1) See page 22.

with first-class equipment, which constituted the Air Commando, was naturally good, that record, in the opinion of the Allied Air C.in.C., could not be advanced in support of extending the principle of Air Commando Units. This view was upheld by the Air Ministry, it being agreed that the principle of Air Commando Units gives rise to the danger of tying down aircraft permanently and exclusively to one particular Army formation with the consequent risks of duplication and lack of flexibility.

A.M. Signal AX. 257,12/4/44 CA.S. to Peirse

27. The standards of supply-dropping during the second Wingate expedition were, as already mentioned, very high. There was, however, a difference in the methods adopted by the British and American air forces, which was commented on by the Force Commander. The R.A.F. method required the detailed indication of the target sufficiently in advance to permit careful briefing of the aircrews; it did not favour indication or change of target by R/T between ground and air while aircraft were over the dropping area. The U.S.A.A.F., on the other hand, did not insist on these requirements and preferred to have their exact targets indicated by ground troops through R/T in combination with smoke or other means. In Brigadier Lentaigne's view, the U.S. method was preferable for the land forces on the grounds of speed and flexibility. This accent by the Army on flexibility is understandable in its broadest sense since, in their desire to be able to meet every eventuality, the columns carried too much equipment. The Army, therefore, wanted to reduce the loads of both men and mules to immediately foreseeable requirements, to be supplemented later by stores dropped by air. Given an adequate number of transport aircraft, this would have obvious advantages for the land forces but it would also involve the waste of such dropped equipment as could not be carried.

Report by Brig.Lentaigne on Operations of Special Force

28. Major-General Wingate's technique for jungle fighting, with air support and supply, suffered from certain limitations. The lightly-armed troops of Special Force, divided as they were into small columns, were not suitably equipped to undertake large-scale operations against fully organised troops. Consequently their basic philosophy had, of necessity, to be that of "hit and run". Their contribution would have been greater if it could have been made in co-ordination with normal formations. It should be remembered that this is what had been orginally intended during both the first and second expeditions, but in each case last-minute developments necessitated the operations taking place without the backing of an advance by the main forces. Just how much effect Wingate's brigades had on Stilwell's advance towards Myitkyina is a problem for military analysts. Some assistance was certainly rendered but whether this bore much weight is problematical. What is not in dispute is that the Japanese appreciated the Allies' intentions with remarkable accuracy and, as is clear from Japanese sources, they realised that the Wingate landings were designed to cut the Mandalay-Myitkyina railway, to compel the diversion of troops from the central front and to consolidate a base for future large-scale operations. At the time, therefore, the expedition's value was greater in propaganda than in strategy. Had it been possible for Wingate's real plan for long range penetration, backed up by a substantial advance by the main land forces, to be carried out, the results might have been much more worthwhile. As it was, the lessons learned in the sphere of air transport support were paramount and were put to valuable use when the re-conquest of Burma commenced at the end of 1944.

Despatch by Earl Mountbatten on Operations in SEAC 1943-1946

/29.

Report by Brig. Lentaigne on Operations of Special Force (Appendices "A" and "E")

29. During their operations in Burma between February and August 1944, the units of Special Force killed five thousand three hundred and eighty one Japanese, wounded seven hundred and six, and captured eighty-six alive. Between 10 February and 5 August, Special Force received just over five thousand four hundred and thirty-eight tons of supplies by air. All were dropped except approximately five hundred and seventeen tons which were landed.

Air Supply During the Siege of Imphal

IIJ50/47/70 Review of Air Transport Ops (ACSEA Air Staff)

30. Soon after the initial fly-in of the L.R.P.G.s into the upper Irrawaddy area, the situation on the central front became immensely more complicated by the opening of Phase II of the main Japanese offensive, the commencement of which had coincided with the launching of the second Wingate expedition. It had always been recognised by the Allies that their lines of communication from the Assam railway at Dimapur through Kohima to their main base at Imphal and outposts at Tiddim and elsewhere in the Chin Hills were peculiarly vulnerable since they ran roughly parallel to the front. The steady building-up of Japanese forces east of the Chindwin, together with the methodical development of lines of communication across the hills further east, had long been observed and an offensive was therefore expected. It began on 8 March, shortly after which large enemy forces crossed the Chindwin and made for the vulnerable road running south from Dimapur through Kohima and Imphal to Tiddim. The Japanese plan was on this occasion no less ambitious than that which had characterized Phase I of their offensive in the Arakan. 17th Indian Division, then holding Tiddim, was to be initially encircled and annihilated, while Kohima in the north was simultaneously to be occupied. The way would then be open for an advance from three sides on the Imphal base, which the enemy expected to enter early in April. From there could be threatened a descent into the plains of Bengal and Assam and the vital Assam railway could be cut.

31. It was impossible to prevent the movement of enemy troops along the devious paths westwards through the jungle-clad hills to the threatened highway. The only practicable counter-measure was to make a stand at selected points, as in the Arakan battle, until the enemy in turn found his communications falling. With great speed the 17th Division was withdrawn northwards from the Chin Hills - its motor transport, which the Japanese had planned to seize and utilize, being safely removed from Tiddim - and the main British forces were concentrated in an improvised fortress on the Imphal plain, surrounded by mountains on all sides. To the north, the garrison at Kohima was being besieged while the enemy had not only established himself athwart the main road at various points but had infiltrated further west and cut the tracks leading down to Silchar. Communications overland with Imphal had thus been severed and henceforth the forces there, together with the garrison at Kohima and various other units, were entirely dependent on air supply for their maintenace. Tactically, the situation was similar to that which had developed during the Arakan struggle, except that the forces involved were much larger. The Imphal plain extends well over a thousand square miles and on it IV Corps, comprising four divisions, together with No. 221 Group, were besieged.

/32.

32. This siege, which lasted some three months, was a colourful and impressive incident in the wide-spread fighting throughout and around North Burma. Since, however, the possibilities of maintaining encircled forces by air transport had just been demonstrated in the Arakan, it cannot be held that any novel principles of warfare were illustrated by the course of the siege. For the air, its main significance hinged upon the unprecedented extent to which those principles were applied and developed at a time when transport aircraft were all too few and when the consequences of failure would have been disastrous. It was clear at the outset that, unless Troop Carrier Command - consisting of only eight Dakota squadrons already fully employed - received additional aircraft from some other source, it could not bring up reinforcements to the Imphal plain in time to influence the course of the battle nor could it continue to supply indefinitely those units already there. The Supreme Allied Commander, therefore, decided to take responsibility for diverting twenty C.46s off the "Hump" route for use by Troop Carrier Command. This decision of 16 March was upheld by the Combined Chiefs of Staff but they stipulated that the aircraft must be returned after one month. Mountbatten then ordered the 5th Indian Division to be flown to Imphal from the Arakan, thereby transforming into a ninety minute flight over the mountains what would otherwise have been a long and arduous trek by land. This feat was accomplished in seven hundred and fifty-eight sorties by 194 Squadron, assisted by some of the Commandos diverted from the "Hump" route. The move, which commenced on 19 March and ended early in April(1) marked the first time in history that any Division, let alone one completely untrained in an airborne role, was transported by air from action on one front to action on another hundreds of miles away.

Despatch by Earl Mountbatten on Operations in SEAC '43-'46

O.R.B.s No. 194 Squadron March-Apr. '44

33. The arrival of the 5th Division, coupled with the escape from Tiddim of the 17th Division, which the enemy had expected to crush, meant that they were now faced with four divisions in Imphal instead of the two originally contemplated. It soon became apparent to the Allies that the resources of Troop Carrier Command would still be insufficient to meet the growing demands for air transport. XXXIII Corps had moved to Manipur(2), with the object of relieving the troops besieged at Kohima, but this could not be effected for some weeks at the least and the air transport position thus remained unchanged.

34. In this critical situation, the problem of adequate air supply became an increasing source of worry to the Allied Air Commander-in-Chief. On 25 March, as a result of representations made in Washington by General Wedemeyer, of Mountbatten's staff, General Arnold offered to set up four special Combat Cargo Groups for A.C.S.E.A. and also to build up four more Air Commandos (3). But this was part of long-term strategy for the theatre and since the first of these aircraft could not reach Burma before July 1944, they could have no effect on the

Despatch by A.C.M. Peirse on Air Operations Nov 1943 to May 1944

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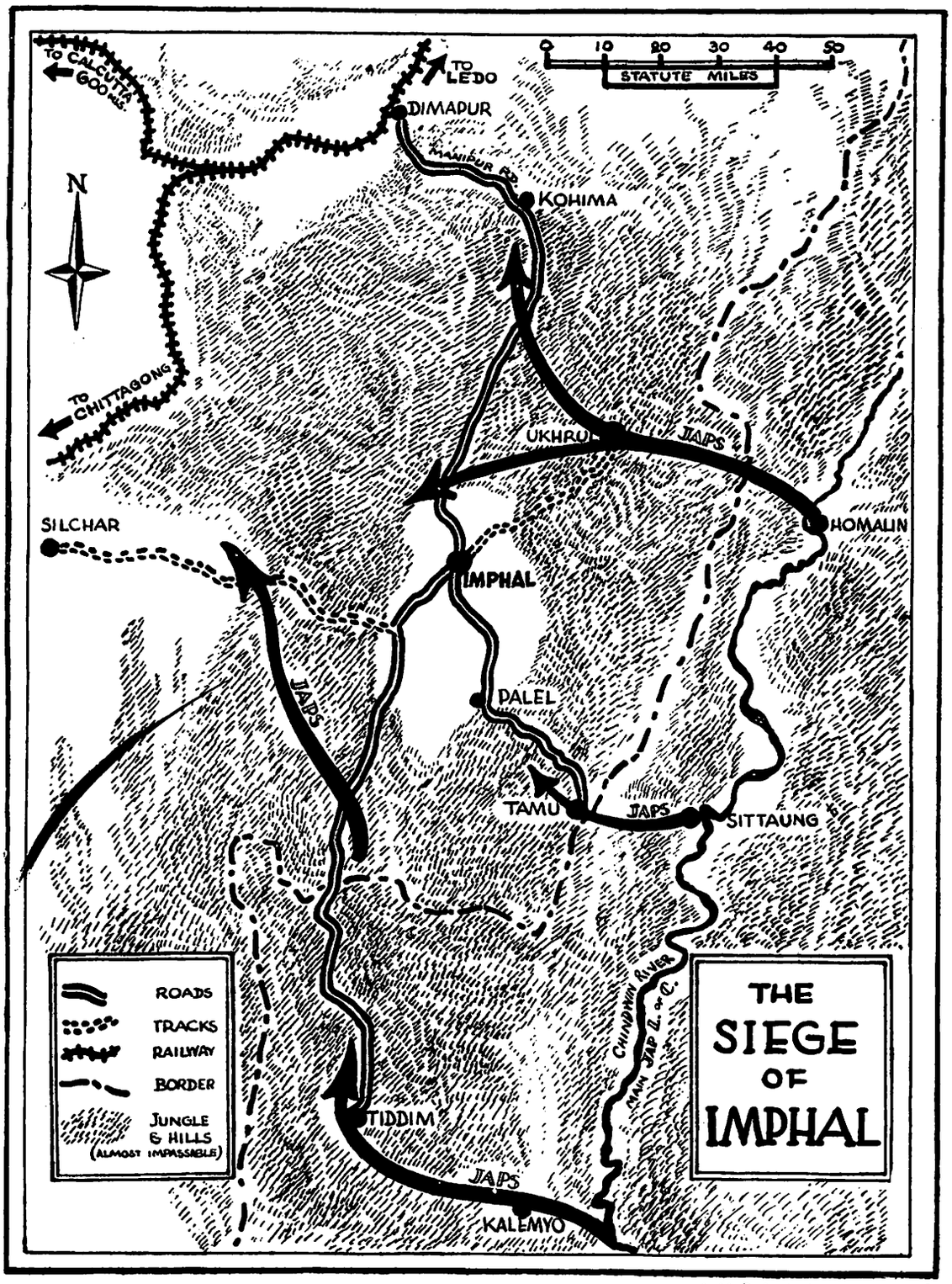
(1) Two brigades joined IV Corps in Imphal and the third brigade was flown direct to Dimapur to join the first arrivals of XXXIII Corps.

(2) Where it was joined by one brigade of the 5th Division. In the latter half of April, the 7th Division was also air transported from Arakan.

(3) Mountbatten, Peirse and Stratemeyer stipulated they should not 'specialize' like No. 1 Commando.



A.H.B.I. MAP No. 350.

Despatch by Earl Mountbatten on Operations in SEAC '43-'46

serious tactical situation at Imphal. Mountbatten was, therefore compelled to ask the Combined Chiefs of Staff - ironically enough on the very day of General Arnold's offer - to let S.E.A.C. retain for longer than one month the Commandos borrowed from the Hump route. The Combined Chiefs of Staff were unwilling to agree to this but decided instead to authorize the diversion from the Middle East of the U.S. 64th Troop Carrier Group, consisting of sixty-four Dakotas, together with a detachment of No. 216 Squadron, R.A.F., for a period of one month. These aircraft arrived early in April and began to operate immediately. Stratemeyer then appealed to Mountbatten, through Peirse, for their retention until the first U.S. Cargo Group arrived in the Theatre in July. Stratemeyer considered that, if this was agreed to, the twenty Commandos on loan from the Hump route could be returned. The tenseness of the situation on the central front ruled out lengthy discussion and Mountbatten immediately acquiesced to the return of the Commandos which commenced on 20 April. The Supreme Commander then informed the Chiefs of Staff of this action to back his request for retention of the transport aircraft borrowed from the Middle East.

IIJ50/47/71 ACSEA Air Staff Review of Siege of Imphal, 1944

35. The importance of the decision, which the Combined Chiefs of Staff were required to make, cannot be over-emphasized. The only remaining centres of resistance against the Japanese offensive were with XXXIII Corps on the Assam railway and with IV Corps on the Imphal plain. All were dependent on air supply. On 17 and 18 April, a high-level inter-service conference had been held at Comilla, at which the requirements of the besieged units on the Imphal plain were stabilised at five hundred and forty long tons. It was realized at the time, however, that this figure had, of necessity, to be elastic since the future commitments of other fronts could not be accurately anticipated. Furthermore, other factors, including the pre-monsoon storms which made flying hazardous, combined to wreck the basis of the air supply plan. Whether, with the air transport resources then available, that plan could ever have been precisely executed must remain an academic question since, from its very inception, the current of events began to undermine its foundations. Despite the fact that the transport aircraft were flying all out and that the soldiers' and airmen's rations at Imphal had been reduced in April to 65% of the regular field standard, the stockpile of supplies in the besieged zones went down to danger point. There is no evidence, however, that this was the fault of the staffs of either Service. The causes lay further afield. Some of Troop Carrier Command's aircraft had to be diverted to meet the pressing needs of Special Force in North Burma and some time then elapsed before the requirements of the latter could be standardized. There were various unforeseen movements of personnel by air, including those of R.A.F. squadrons and of 57 Parachute Brigade which had to be transported to Imphal from North-West India. Moreover, the commitment to the West Africans in the Kaladan Valley proved both heavier and longer than had been anticipated while, early in May, the carriage of over three hundred tons of "bithess"(1) from Calcutta, in an attempt to make the

/airfield

(1) Bitumenized hessian, used for the surfacing of airfield runways and taxi-tracks.

airfield at Tulihal weatherproof, further ate into the services of the available aircraft. Above all, there was the capricious behaviour of the weather. In April and May, bad weather not only prevented the flying of supplies to Imphal for hours or even days; it also concentrated supply operations into the fair periods, during which the administrative symptoms of strain and congestion were greatly magnified and the facilities at Imphal and at base airfields were subjected to unexpected pressure.

Despatch by A.C.M.Pierse on Air Operations, Nov '43 to May '44

36. Every trick of economy was tried. Major-General Stratemeyer instructed Strategic Air Force to allocate Mitchells for the ferrying of ammunition and Wellingtons for the delivery of bombs to the Imphal squadrons. These Mitchells and Wellingtons provided a vital service by supplementing the Dakota runs and enabling the Dakota crews to reduce the back-log of supplies to other areas. Typical of the varied tasks undertaken at this time is the following extract from a Dakota pilot's report:

O.R.B. No. 62 Squadron May 1944

"All our jobs are mixed up. One day we take in reinforcements to Imphal, the next day go to Comilla and collect flour, ammunition and petrol from the dumps for delivery to Imphal, where we pick up a load of "useless mouths"(1) and return them to the Brahmaputra. Then we take casualties from the Kohima battle and the next day we are back again at the old supply-dropping job in the Kaladan. It means seven hours flying a day, every day, a strain which I don't think we could have kept up except for the nervous tension of the crisis".

O.R.B. HQ 3rd T.A.F. May 1944

37. On 1 May 1944, the activities of Troop Carrier Command(2) were co-ordinated with those of the Third Tactical Air Force, under the overall command of Air Marshal Baldwin and, although this re-organisation resulted in the maximum economy possible in the transport effort, no arrears could be made up. The Imphal plain had, therefore to remain on short rations. It was against this critical background that the Combined Chiefs of Staff were considering Mountbatten's request to retain the aircraft borrowed from the Middle East. The length of time which elapsed before their decision was forthcoming indicates the gravity of their problem. Factors governing the whole strategy of global war were involved since the borrowed transport aircraft were to have been allotted to Europe in support of the Normandy invasion. It was not until 16 May that Mountbatten was informed that the seventy-nine transport aircraft from the Middle East could remain in S.E.A.C. until July, when the first of the Combat Cargo Groups was due to arrive(3).

Despatch by Earl Mountbatten on Operations in SEAC 1943-1946

Despatch by General Giffard on Operations by 11th Army Group June to November '44

38. The resultant lack of interruption in the air supply rate enabled the land forces to launch a counter-offensive against the enemy. By the second half of May, units of XXXIII Corps, moving south-east from Dimapur, were able to relieve the garrison at Kohima and, after bitter fighting, to clear the enemy from the district. They then advanced, not only southwards along the

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(1) Administrative personnel whose presence was not essential. In May 30,000 were flown out.

(2) This Command was disbanded on 4 June 1944 and the R.A.F. transport squadrons remained under 3rd T.A.F. until a new organisation was formed in the autumn. (Vide page 44).

(3) Eventually, only three of the four promised Groups were allotted to S.E.A.C. The fourth went to General MacArthur.

road to Imphal but, fortified by the expectation of receiving supplies by air, eastwards and south-eastwards across the mountain tracks centring on Ukhrul, thus cutting the communications of the Japanese still fighting in the west. Meanwhile, elements of IV Corps were fighting their way northwards along the Manipur Road towards the advancing troops of XXXIII Corps. At the beginning of June, the transport aircraft, working to supply the garrison on the Imphal plain and to build a stock-pile to exploit the expected Japanese retreat, were flying in as much as five hundred tons a day under monsoon conditions, the average daily rate being four hundred and sixty-four tons. This was achieved in response to a call by the Supreme Allied Commander on 8 June for a special effort to increase the air-lift and replenish the stocks of IV Corps' supplies, which were rapidly dwindling. In the next two weeks, during which the weather temporarily improved, the lift of supplies by air gradually increased and the gap between IV Corps and XXXIII Corps on the Dimapur Road steadily closed. On 22 June 1944, leading elements of both Corps met each other (twenty-nine miles from Imphal and one hundred and nine miles from Dimapur), thereby re-opening the Imphal-Kohima road. Convoys for the relief of Imphal, which had been loaded in readiness, were then sent in immediately behind the leading troops. During the period 18 to 30 June, the average daily air lift to Imphal increased to six hundred and four tons; with the raising of the siege a start was able to be made on reducing the overall back-log.

IIJ50/47/71
ACSEA Air Staff Review of the Siege of Imphal

39. Although, by the end of June, the siege of Imphal - which, because of air power, had never been a true siege - had been raised and the number of Japanese counted killed on the battlefield had risen to thirteen thousand five hundred, the direct enemy threat to the plain had not been completely removed. The remaining Japanese clung to their positions above Palel, from which they were able occasionally to shell the airfield, and it was not until towards the close of July that they were finally ejected. Only with the re-occupation of Tamu on 6 August could the plain of Imphal be said to have been freed from the menace which had over-hung it for almost exactly five months. Thereafter it was again prepared for the role for which the Allies had originally cast it - namely as a stepping stone from the Burma valley to that of the Chindwin and as a main base for the recovery of North Burma.

Ibid

40. The maintenance of the Imphal plain during its siege was a remarkable achievement for air power on a scale without precedent. An Army Corps of four divisions, and a number of R.A.F. units, were maintained for three months entirely without the use of land lines of communication. One hundred and twenty thousand British and Empire troops and airmen were wholly supplied by air by aircraft of the R.A.F. and U.S.A.A.F., the latter being in the majority. A division was flown in and fifty thousand administrative personnel and ten thousand sick and wounded were evacuated. In all these operations the contributions of the fighter and fighter-bomber squadrons of No. 221 Group were vital and, although their activities have not been traced in this narrative these squadrons played a highly important role. At the height of the struggle, their ground crews worked all day and every day to maintain aircraft serviceability and by night undertook onerous periods of guard duty, often under enemy fire. All on the plain shared the alarms and vigils inevitable in a besieged fortress.

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Report on Operation "Stamina" by 14th Army and 3rd TAF

41. The lessons learned in the realm of air supply during the Imphal siege were mainly administrative. They were bound up with the long-term problem of assembling, selecting and delivering to Imphal all the varied types of article necessary to transform defence into offence. These tasks required the rapid expansion and continual re-adjustment of the air supply units, whose functions involved the close collaboration of quartermaster, engineer and air liaison officer. By 1944 the technique of transporting supplies by air and dropping or landing them at selected points had developed beyond the capacity of both the Army and Air Force authorities on the ground to build-up the administrative organisation without which there could be no guarantee that supplies of the right types would be brought to the waiting aircraft in the right quantities. This all formed part of the larger problem of inter-service liaison and administrative control of air transport - a problem which had yet to be solved when the Japanese offensive made the Imphal siege a testing point of land/air co-operation in the realm of supply and maintenance. Inevitably, adaptation and improvisation characterized the administrative background to these operations and, although certain mistakes were made in matters concerning inter-service co-ordination, the actual results achieved were undoubtedly creditable in the prevailing conditions. These important aspects of air supply during the Imphal siege are touched upon in more detail in Chapter 5, in which is outlined the development of operational and administrative control of air transport during the campaigns under review.

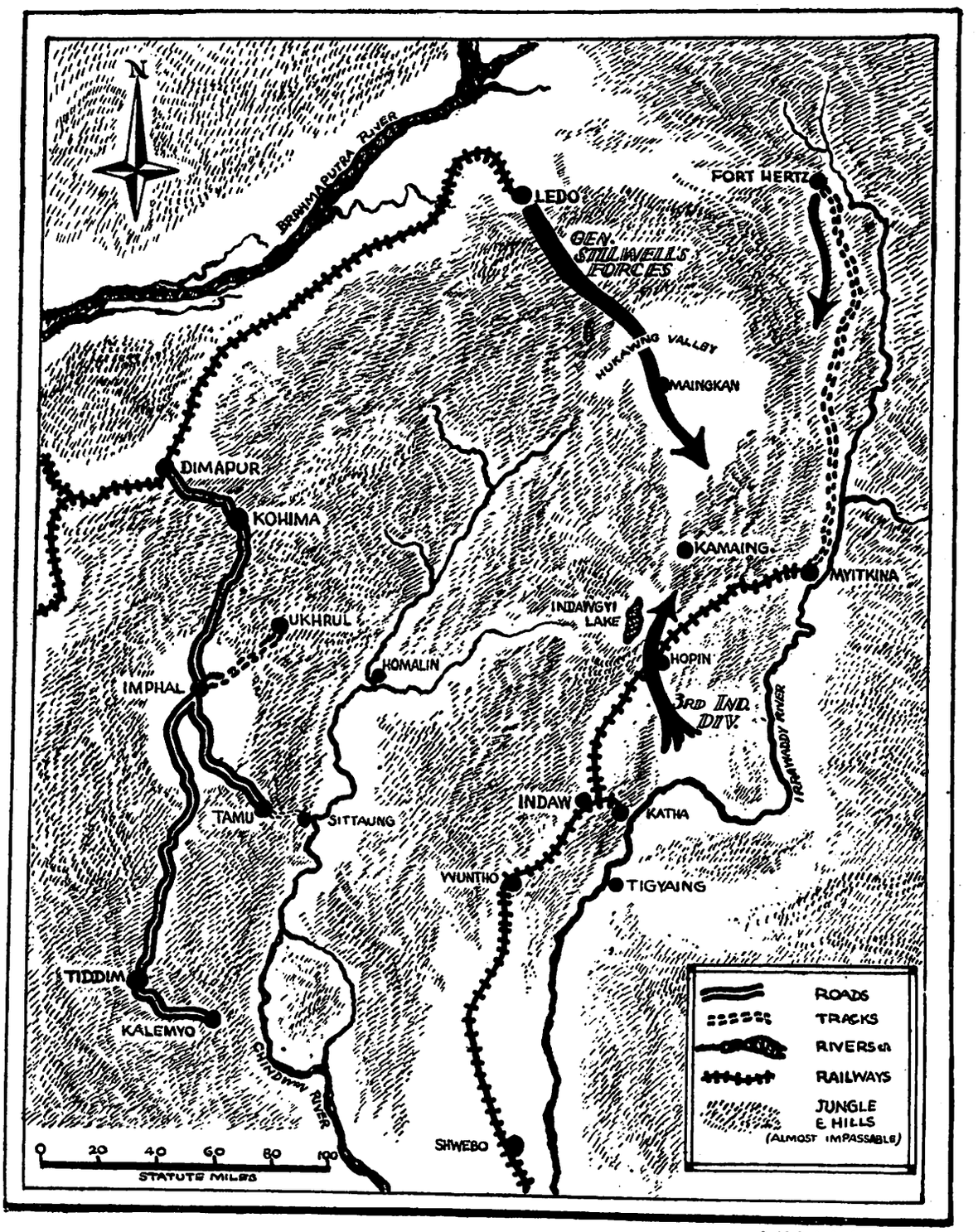
Air Aspects of the Assault on Myitkyina

ILJ50/47/70 Review of Air Transport Ops (ACSEA Air Staff)

42. While the momentous events at Imphal and Kohima were taking place, another landmark was reached in the history of air transport support operations in Burma. Throughout 1944 the air supply of the Sino-American forces operating from Ledo under General Stilwell had been proceeding. These troops continued to advance down the Hukawng and Mogaung valleys, thereby gradually bringing the opening of an overland route to China nearer realization. Each advance took the troops further from their base and consequently their calls for air supply increased, necessitating as many as one hundred sorties per day. As the road took shape behind the advancing forces, landing grounds were constructed by American engineers wherever possible. By this means fresh troops were landed who in turn advanced, consolidated their positions and built further landing grounds - a process which reached its consummation on 17 May when the all-weather airfield at Myitkyina was seized by a fast-moving American force, known as Merrill's Marauders, accompanied by a Chinese Regiment. These operations over difficult and, in places, almost impassible terrain, were only made possible by the support given throughout by the 1st and 2nd Troop Carrier Squadrons, the latter being a squadron whose experience and versatility rivalled that of the R.A.F.'s veteran No. 31 Squadron. In April, these two American squadrons flew in an entire Chinese division to Maungkwan - the total number of men transported exceeding fourteen thousand. The actual capture of Myitkyina airfield in May was swiftly executed and caught the Japanese unawares. All units of Troop Carrier Command in the north were standing by to carry in reinforcements as soon as the signal was given. The first glider was towed by a Dakota, of which Brigadier-General Old, the American Commander of Troop Carrier Command, was himself the pilot. Thereafter, C.46s followed in the wake of the gliders and, within thirty-six hours of intensive operations, there were landed a Chinese Regiment and mortar company, one U.S. Airborne

/Engineer

THE ASSAULT ON MYITKYINA RELATED TO OPERATIONS OF SPECIAL FORCE



A.H.B.I. MAP No.352.

Engineer Company, six light A.A. batteries and twelve Bofors guns and crews - in addition to food, ammunition and stores.

Despatch by Earl Mountbatten on Operations in SEAC '43-'46

"The Stilwell Papers"

Despatch by Earl Mountbatten on Operations in SEAC 1943-1946

Despatch by Maj-Gen Stratemeyer on SEAC Operations Dec '43 - Jun '45

43. Two days after its capture, the airfield was in full operation but it was overworked even after its reconstruction and expansion. To relieve the pressure, three U.S. Air Engineer battalions were flown in on 28 May. The ground forces then attacked the town, which they had hoped to capture within two days. This they failed to do, partly due to the exhaustion of the Marauders and partly to confusion among the Chinese who had been flown in. According to Stilwell, several of the Chinese battalions mistook each other for Japanese and succeeded in inflicting severe casualties on themselves before recognition was achieved. This description would seem to be accurate since Mountbatten has also referred to "the fumbling of the Chinese" in their first action at Myitkyina. Certainly there was an ensuing panic, during which the enemy were able to rush in reinforcements. Thereafter they offered fanatical resistance, hanging on to the town for eleven weeks at the height of the monsoon. During this period, the intensity of operations on the airfield increased until there were daily five hundred landings and take-offs on the strips, averaging almost one per minute. Between May and October 1944, approximately fourteen thousand landings were made at Myitkyina, carrying over forty thousand tons of cargo, including personnel.

44. The extent to which air supply made possible the capture of Myitkyina airfield on 17 May and that of the town on 3 August 1944 is not without a degree of irony. In theory Stilwell's Ledo Road was to have become a spectacular artery for the ground supply of the Sino/American forces as they advanced towards Myitkyina. In practice, however, even the builders of the road had frequently to rely entirely on air supply and, once the monsoon had broken, the rain closed the road behind them giving it the appearance from the air of a jungle river. For six months after the capture of Myitkyina airfield in May till the first ground convoy reached the town in November 1944, the Ledo road made no contribution to the supply of the forward troops.

O.R.B. AHQ Burma May 1945

45. Equally significant was the report of Brigadier-General Godfrey, U.S.A.A.F., Chief Engineer of the American Air Service Command. This report indicated that, during the fly-in to Myitkyina, seventy-five Dakotas did the work of twelve hundred $2\frac{1}{2}$ ton trucks, that the number of men required for the air transport of supplies was less than half that which ground transport would have required had the road been ready for use. The report also showed that in the subsequent construction of new airstrips in North Burma the manpower required and flown in for the task was one fifth of that which would have been needed for the building and maintenance of roads. On the subsequent value of the Ledo Road, there has been much controversy which is outside the scope of this narrative. It had become clear by 1944, however, to both the land and air forces, that in jungle warfare, supply by air was a practical substitute for supply by land.

CHAPTER 3

THE TRIUMPH OF AIR SUPPLY

1944-1945

Plans for the Re-Conquest of Burma

1. When the land forces advanced eastwards from Imphal to the flat plains of Burma across the Chindwin between July and November 1944, S.E.A.C. plans still did not envisage the possibility of an overland re-conquest of the whole of Burma. The land forces, in their advances along the Kabaw valley and down the Tiddim road, were supplied entirely by air as part of the R.A.F.'s routine commitments, but it was not considered that all Burma could be re-conquered without the assistance of amphibious operations. Two main plans existed at this time - "Capital" and "Dracula". The former was to be a concerted advance by both IV Corps and XXXIII Corps against the enemy in the Yeu-Shwebo area, while airborne troops were to seize Kalewa and make additional landings at the entrance to the Mandalay plain. Stilwell's forces, including the British 36th Division and the Chinese, were to make a complementary advance to the south. The latter plan, "Dracula", was to be a combined air/sea assault on the Rangoon area, in order to cut the main enemy lines of communication and enable an advance north to be undertaken.

2. Subsequent events caused the cancellation of the airborne phase of "Capital". In December 1944, a serious situation developed in China where the enemy were threatening both Chungking and Kunming, the vital air terminal of the "Hump" service. This danger necessitated the transfer to China of three squadrons of the Combat Cargo Groups, two U.S. Troop Carrier squadrons and two Chinese divisions, with the result that the airborne phase of "Capital" was rendered impracticable. Further difficulties ensued. The continuance of the war in Europe prevented the release of additional land forces and even L.S.T.s, so that the whole of "Dracula" had to be postponed. In these circumstances South-East Asia Command became even more dependent on air supply to support advances by the land forces than had ever been envisaged - or would have been considered necessary had not the Command been deprived of amphibious resources.

Reconstruction of the Air Transport Framework

IIJ50/47/46
Report by Air Commodore Hardman on Air Transport Support Operations of CCTF/232 Group

3. The operational and administrative lessons learned during the siege of Imphal and the second Wingate Expedition made it clear that an organisation separate from the Third Tactical Air Force was required for the control of air supply operations to the Fourteenth Army. In October 1944, therefore, an integrated U.S./British Headquarters, known as Combat Cargo Task Force, was formed and became responsible for the control and planning of air transport operations supporting all the land forces except those in North Burma, where air supply was undertaken separately by the U.S. Tenth Air Force. C.C.T.F. Headquarters worked alongside, and in close co-operation with, an Army formation, also newly formed, called the Army-Air Transport Organisation, whose role

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was that of co-ordinator of Army requirements with the supply delivery capacity of the Air Forces.

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4. This reorganisation formed part of extensive changes in the framework of S.E.A.C.'s land and air forces made at the commencement of the 1944/45 campaign, which was destined to end in the re-conquest of Burma. Air Chief Marshal Peirse left the Command in November 1944 and was succeeded three months later by Air Marshal (later Air Chief Marshal) Sir Keith Park. In the interim period, Air Marshal Sir Guy Garrod was acting-Allied Air Commander-in-Chief. Under him all air operations over Burma continued to be operationally controlled by Eastern Air Command, of which the newly formed C.C.T.F. was a component. The latter was commanded by Brigadier-General F.W. Evans, U.S.A.A.F., with Air Commodore J.D.I. Hardman as his deputy in command of the R.A.F. Element of the Force(1). There were also parallel changes in the command of the land forces. Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek and General Stilwell parted company, the latter being given another appointment in the U.S.A. This resulted in Mountbatten's P.A.O., the American General Wheeler, becoming Deputy S.A.C. General Sultan, who had been Stilwell's Deputy, became commander of all American and Chinese forces in India and Burma, while General Wedemeyer, who had been Mountbatten's Deputy Chief of Staff, replaced Stilwell in the capacity of Chief of Staff to the Generalissimo and commander of all U.S. forces in China. Meanwhile a Headquarters to control all Allied Land Forces in S.E.A.C. was set-up under Lieutenant-General Sir Oliver Leese, the Eleventh Army Group Headquarters being simultaneously disbanded.

The Deployment of Transport Squadrons

O.R.B. R.A.F. Element of HQ, CCTF Dec 1944 to Jan 1945

5. The main Allied offensive commenced at the end of November 1944. At this time, two R.A.F. transport squadrons - Nos. 31 and 62 - were operating over Burma in addition to the American squadrons. Nos. 117 and 194 Squadrons had been withdrawn earlier for rest and training but, consequent on the 1st, 2nd and 4th U.S. Combat Cargo Squadrons being sent to China in December(2), they were recalled for resumed operations from Hathazari and Imphal respectively. Nos. 31 and 62 Squadrons were based at Agartala but in the latter half of December they moved to Comilla and were replaced by the U.S. 4th Combat Cargo Group. On 20 December, 435 (R.C.A.F.) Squadron commenced operations from Tulihal and shortly afterwards was joined at the nearby airfield of Kangla by No. 436 (R.C.A.F.) Squadron.

6. The first airstrip in Burma to be used for the landing of supplies in support of Fourteenth Army's advance was opened at Indainggale on 20 December 1944. Others followed in quick succession at Taukkyan near Kalemyo, at Kawlin and Indaw, and at Kan in the Myittha valley where IV Corps had returned to the line(3). Thus, by January 1945, there had been a gradual and sustained rise in the demands of the land forces for air supply.

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(1) In April 1945 the R.A.F. Element of C.C.T.F. received additional status and was designated No. 232 Group, Transport Command.

(2) See page 29.

(3) IV Corps had been withdrawn for rest and re-equipment after the siege of Imphal.

Despatch by General Leese on Operations by ALFSEA - Nov 1944 to August 1945

The rate of the advance was so rapid that it did not accord with the plans on which resources had been allocated. Many unforeseen difficulties came to light and, when Mountbatten visited the forward areas in January, he was told by General Leese that the air forces were not carrying enough supplies. General Leese circulated a memorandum to the effect that, without further transport aircraft, the Fourteenth Army might be forced to withdraw beyond the Chindwin for the monsoon(1). The result of these representations was an urgent request by Mountbatten to the Chiefs of Staff for additional transport squadrons, and in March Nos. 238 and 267 R.A.F. Squadrons arrived in S.E.A.C.

IIJ54/10 Despatch by ACM Park on Air Operations June '44 - May '45

7. Of more importance than the provision of adequate numbers of transport aircraft was the necessity for obtaining new transport bases nearer to the forward elements of the rapidly advancing land forces. By December 1944, it was realized that, unless these bases could be captured, there was a real danger that the flow of supplies by air would be checked by the inability of the aircraft to cover the necessary distances. with sufficient supplies. (They could cover the distances but only with a very small payload) The operations of XV Corps in the Arakan assumed, therefore, a new importance since Akyab and Ramree appeared to be ideally situated for development as main transport airfields. The Japanese were withdrawing steadily in the Arakan at the end of 1944 and it seemed feasible to the Army and Air Force planners that, even with the limited resources available, minor amphibious assaults could be launched on the Arakan coast to capture these bases. These expectations were realized in a swift series of amphibious attacks between January and March 1945 when elements of XV Corps captured in succession Akyab, Myebon, Ramree, Kangaw, Ru-ywa and Letpan, while the East Indies Fleet, under Vice-Admiral Sir Arthur Power, captured Cheduba. These operations were supported by supply-drops after the landings had been made and the troops made their way slowly through the difficult jungle terrain of the Arakan. This airlift was not heavy and was reduced even more in March when some supplies were able to be brought in by sea.

The Fly-In at Meiktila

Despatch by Earl Mountbatten on Operations in SEAC '43-'46

8. It was while the initial stages of the advances by the Fourteenth Army and XV Corps were taking place that an overland advance as far as Rangoon, backed throughout with air supply, was first put forward as a serious proposal. On 3 February 1945, the Supreme Allied Commander received a new directive from the Combined Chiefs of Staff to liberate Burma at the earliest possible date and, subject to this, to liberate Malaya and open the Straits of Malacca. On this basis the Fourteenth Army prepared a plan, which envisaged two parallel drives southwards along the axes of the Irrawaddy and the Mandalay-Rangoon Railway, with a large force of XXXIII Corps striking east to Takaw to destroy enemy forces cut off north of Meiktila, the nodal point of communications below Mandalay. To accomplish this plan involved the switching in secret of IV Corps from the northern flank of Fourteenth Army above Mandalay and the launching of it across the Irrawaddy near Pakkoku, one hundred miles to the south. From there was planned a drive

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(1) See page 50.

to Meiktila. The main Japanese Army in Central Burma was thus caught between the anvil of IV Corps and the hammer of XXXIII Corps descending from the north.

IIJ50/47/46 Report by Air Commodore Hardman on Air Transport Support Operations of CCTF

9. The plan was an ambitious one and its success depended to an unprecendented degree on the direct support rendered by the squadrons of Combat Cargo Task force. From the point of view of air transport support, the highlight of the operations was the assault on Meiktila. At the beginning of February a number of personnel from C.C.T.F. Headquarters were attached to the Headquarters of IV Corps to control the air phase of the Irrawaddy crossing and subsequent dash to Meiktila. This was code-named "Operation Multivite". In broad outline, fighter aircraft were to provide direct and close support for the 7th Division which was to effect the Irrawaddy crossing and win a bridge-head; similar cover was then to be provided for the 17th Division to whom the capture of Meiktila was entrusted. As soon as the land forces arrived in the area, a captured enemy strip, Thabukton, was to be prepared to receive the fly-in of reinforcements.

IIJ50/47/63 CCTF Intelligence Extract, No.10

10. 14 February was crossing day and within twelve days enemy resistance had been overcome and Thabukton airfield secured. The air-lift began on 27 February and in four-and-a-half days of use six hundred and fifty-five trips were made to this airfield. Although American squadrons were responsible for the greater part of the lift, Nos. 31, 62, 117, 194, 267 and 435 R.A.F. Squadrons all played important parts. Approximately four thousand troops, together with vast stores of petrol, ammunition and rations were landed. Many aircrews averaged more than twelve hours flying time per day. On 3 March, organized resistance in Meiktila town ceased entirely and Operation "Multivite" was successfully concluded.

Ibid

11. By no means, however, had all difficulties been overcome. The transport aircraft were landing on Meiktila airfield which was still within range of enemy guns. Often the Japanese occupied the strip by night to be driven away the following morning, while during day-light they kept up intermittant mortar and shell fire. Two Dakotas were destroyed by a 75mm. gun firing from a position at the end of the runway. After three more weeks of bitter fighting the enemy shelling continued so persistently that the field had to be closed for a week to transport aircraft and the necessary supplies were dropped. The enemy, realizing the importance of the Meiktila base, made a desperate stand in which fanatical resistance was put up against the Allied forces. Heavy casualties were suffered on both sides and it was not until the beginning of April that Japanese resistance weakened and the whole of Meiktila was secured as a vital base. But for the part played by air transport, it seems reasonable to conclude the struggle might well have been even more bitter and the outcome less fortunate for the Allies. As it was, however, the position in which the land forces found themselves after the fall of Meiktila was supremely advantageous. This was in part due to the successes gained by XXXIII Corps, which had simultaneously been executing the other part of the Fourteenth Army's plan to re-capture Rangoon before the monsoon. Mandalay was entered on 10 March in the face of fierce opposition and heavy fighting for Fort Dufferin developed until this point also fell as a result of sustained bombing attacks by R.A.F. Thunderbolts and Hurricanes and by American B.25s. With the fall of Mandalay the Japanese were deprived of the key to all their road, rail and river lines of communication, on which they were dependent in a way the air-supplied Allied land forces were

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not. Thus the first week of April 1945 saw the beginning of the rout of the Japanese forces in Burma which ended in the re-capture of Rangoon on 2/3 May.

The Peak of Air Supply in Burma - March 1945

IIJ50/47/46 Report by Air Commodore Hardman on Operations of CCTF

12. The two great successes against the Japanese at Meiktila and Mandalay do not alone indicate the enormous air supply effort - often routine and unspectacular - which lay behind them. February and March 1945 witnessed the making of air transport history. Since November 1944 tonnages of supplies delivered had steadily increased as new forward airstrips were built and consolidated. This remarkable effort reached its peak in March 1945 when approximately ninety-five thousand short tons of supplies were transported by air to the Allied land forces in Burma. Of this total, some seventy-five thousand tons were delivered to Fourteenth Army and XV Corps by the British and American squadrons of C.C.T.F., while the Tenth Air Force, operating independently, carried the remaining twenty thousand tons to the Sino-American forces in North Burma. About seventy-three thousand tons of the grand total was conveyed in the American C.46s, and the British and Canadian squadrons, operating Dakotas, carried the remaining tonnage of approximately twenty-two thousand tons. These figures, however, can be misleading if taken too literally. Air supply to the land forces engaged in the major operations against the Japanese at this time was carried out entirely by the Anglo/American Combat Cargo Task Force and, although the number of its squadrons varied from time to time, it operated on an approximate basis of 50% American and 50% British and Canadian. The tonnage capacity of the American C.46s, though, exceeded that of the C.47s by approximately 25%. The part played by the American transport squadrons in Burma, although considerable, cannot therefore be accurately assessed on the basis of tonnage figures alone(1).

Ibid

13. The advances by Fourteenth Army during the period December 1944 to March 1945 were so rapid that the transport aircraft supplying the leading elements seldom dropped their loads twice on the same D.Z. The troops advanced and signalled back their D.Z.s for the next day, though sometimes enemy opposition or rough terrain prevented them being reached within the anticipated time. At first, these D.Z.s were often located in jungle clearings, indicated by a cross and a "T" made out of white stones and covered by brush, which was removed by the troops at E.T.A. The accuracy of the dropping was very high during this period and congratulatory signals were frequently received by the transport squadrons from commanders in the field.

O.R.B.s R.A.F. Element H.Q. C.C.T.F. Nos. 31, 62, 194, 267, 436 Sqdns March-Apr. '45

14. Towards the end of March 1945, the plans already outlined for the use of Akyab as a main air transport base were put into effect. Nos. 62, 194, 267 and 436 Squadrons moved there, Nos. 194 and 436 Squadrons commencing operations on 20 March and Nos. 62 and 267 Squadrons on 1 April. In April, Ramree was also opened as a transport base from which detachments of Nos. 31, 62 and 436 Squadrons operated on and after 16 April. Also during April, C.C.T.F. was reinforced

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(1) The above figures are approximate for illustrative purposes only. See Appendices for details.

by the arrival of two more squadrons, Nos. 96 and 215. No. 215 Squadron was converted to Dakotas in India prior to moving to Tulihal in May, while No. 96 Squadron underwent training and acclimatization at Bilaspur prior to moving to Comilla in May to commence operations.

The Military Background April, 1945

Despatch by Gen. Leese on Operations of ALFSEA No. '44 to August '45

15. By the beginning of April a considerable re-deployment of the Fourteenth Army had been effected, with the result that XXXIII Corps henceforth operated along the Irrawaddy axis and IV Corps down the Mandalay-Rangoon railway corridor. As the latter advanced south XXXIII Corps moved south-west and by 18 April reached Magwe where, three years earlier, the R.A.F. had suffered its greatest disaster in Burma. Despite these new successes, however, an element of danger entered the situation in the first half of April. Because the battle at Meiktila had taken longer than had been anticipated, the time-table for IV Corps' dash to Rangoon was in jeopardy. The prospect of a race against a reduced time-limit caused considerable anxiety in the mind of General Leese. In his opinion, the overland advance by the highly mobile elements of IV Corps was unlikely to have sufficient impetus to overcome both opposition en route and the resistance expected to be offered by the defenders of Rangoon. Upon his urgent recommendations, therefore, the former plans for the "Dracula" operation were again considered - this time on a much reduced scale. A modified plan, incorporating a combined airborne and seaborne assault, was produced at General Leese's insistence and approved by the Supreme Allied Commander on 16 April, only two weeks before it was put into effect(1). Meanwhile, IV Corps continued their lightning advance down the Railway Corridor, supported throughout by the transport aircraft of Combat Cargo Task Force.

The "Gumption" and "Freeborn" Operations

IIJ50/47/63 CCTF Intelligence Extract No.16

16. The use of American glider-borne engineers to build and repair transport strips for the reception of landed supplies and troops down the Corridor was an integral part of the plan for IV Corps' advance toward Rangoon. The air phase of this plan was effected by the "Gumption" Operations. By mid-April, fifty-five gliders and eight-six thousand gallons of aircraft petrol were available at Meiktila in readiness for operations supporting IV Corps, which reached the vicinity of Pyinmana on 19 April. The town was by-passed - and later mopped up - as leading elements advanced south-east for Lewe airfield, which was cleared on the following day. British and American engineers prepared the strip for the reception of the gliders then at readiness on Meiktila airfield, and on 21 April the fly-in commenced. The gliders carried a variety of loads which included runway equipment, bulldozers, jeeps, tractors, food and water. Skirmishing went on all day long and many snipers were shot or captured. On the following day, eight Oscars attacked Lewe, strafing the gliders, five of which were destroyed. Only ten minutes after the enemy aircraft had left, the first supply-dropping transports arrived in the area.

17. As the finishing touches were being put to Lewe airfield, leading troops of the 5th Indian Division pushed into Toungoo against unexpectedly light opposition, due largely to enemy confusion. The Japanese elected to defend the Toungoo-Mawchi road, east of the town, but were not across the axis of the

/Army's

(1) See page 36.

Army's advance in sufficient strength to be really effective. The division continued to push south as fast as possible and further landing fields in the Toungoo area were then required. On 23 April, six gliders from Meiktila were released over Tennant airfield, all landing safely with loads similar to those delivered to Lewe. Immediately the airborne engineers set to work; craters were filled in and a strip of 6,000 feet was made serviceable. On 24 April Tennant absorbed fifty-six landings by C.C.T.F. aircraft and the second "Gumption" was over.

Ibid

18. The other part of the original plan was a lift by C.C.T.F. of a battalion group to the Pegu area, about forty miles north of Rangoon. This was known as Operation "Freeborn" and was necessary in order to cut the Japanese escape route to the east. The enemy was far from being in a strong position. Available for movement east of the Sittang were the north to south tracks parallel to the river. Several of these tracks effected a junction at the town of Shwegyin, the Allied occupation of which was therefore vital. Preparations were made to fly in to that vicinity a battalion group of the 9th Brigade and on 29 April the plan was put into effect. Twenty-eight transport aircraft of C.C.T.F. conveyed the troops to Pyuntaza airfield, north of Pegu, together with a considerable variety of stores including ammunition, small arms, jeeps, trailers, and the complete equipment of a mobile radio station. On the same day about half of Pegu town was cleared of the enemy while, nearby, some four hundred British and American prisoners-of-war were rescued by the advancing troops. They had been marched north from Rangoon jail by the Japanese, whose original intention had been to take them across the Sittang and into Siam. On the following day, 30 April, the transport aircraft commenced flying the ex-prisoners back to Rangoon. On the morning of 1 May there remained one hundred and fifty-nine trips of the original "Freeborn" lift. Planned to be completed in four days, this time-limit was cut by half in an attempt to prevent delays due to weather and field conditions. Most, but not all, of the trips were completed in this time, a very creditable achievement in view of the appalling weather conditions with which the aircrews had to contend. Many trips were made during violent thunderstorms, while on the ground the mud was up to the hubs of the aircraft wheels on the deeply rutted strips. To the south of Pegu bad weather also slowed up the advance but by 4 May C.C.T.F. engineers had reached Zayatkwin airfield, to which, two days later, gliders were towed from Tennant and the last "Gumption" began. Other gliders were later towed there from Lewe on 8 May with miscellaneous loads. Thus ended the last special transport operation in support of IV Corps' advance on Rangoon.

19. It should be noted that all these glider operations in support of IV Corps were carried out by U.S. Aircraft of Combat Cargo Task Force and that the airborne engineers were members of American units of which the R.A.F. had no counterpart. The operation went remarkably smoothly considering the handicaps present in the form of bad weather and the need for speed. The fact that the enemy were rapidly withdrawing down the corridor undoubtedly facilitated the operations as a whole; moreover, apart from the incident at Lewe, there was no interference from Japanese aircraft. The system of transport support to the land

/forces

forces as represented by the "Gumption" and "Freeborn" operations was in many ways a model of inter-service organisation and co-operation. It would appear by results to have been well planned and efficiently executed. These results, however, should not be analyzed, and far-reaching conclusions drawn, except against a background of freedom from enemy opposition both in the air and, with certain exceptions, on the ground.

Air Aspects of the Re-Capture of Rangoon

20. Mention has already been made of General Leese's plan for Operation "Dracula", the combined air and sea assault on Rangoon, involving army para-troops and air and naval forces. It commenced in the early hours of 1 May 1945. By this date, not only had IV Corps reached the outskirts of Pegu, less than fifty miles north of Rangoon, but elements of XXXIII Corps, after capturing Magwe, had advanced down the Irrawaddy valley and reached the railhead at Prome. Nowhere was the enemy able to bar these advances by a frontal stand. Yet it was precisely in these circumstances that General Leese considered it expedient that a combined operation should be launched to capture Rangoon from the south. On 1 May, two pathfinder aircraft left Akyab for the paratroop dropping zone at Elephant point south of Rangoon, and the drops were made without opposition. These were followed by the main serial of thirty-eight C.C.T.F. transports, all of which effected their drops unhindered. The next day, 2 May, rations and ammunition were dropped by Dakotas of Nos. 194 and 267 Squadrons to the troops on Elephant Point and further drops were made there on the two following days. "Dracula" might well be described as a "copy-book" operation, with the troops advancing into Rangoon from the south taking on more the nature of a triumphal procession than an assault force. The town was entered on 3 May, but not without some measure of irony. The previous day, a Mosquito aircraft, piloted by an R.A.F. wing-commander(1), made a low reconnaissance of Rangoon. Finding the town empty of Japanese and Allied flags flying over P.O.W. camps, he landed at Mingaladon airfield, hitch-hiked into Rangoon and released some of the P.O.W. This officer then borrowed a native boat and rowed down the river to meet the seaborne expedition sailing towards the capital and to tell the British commander than Rangoon had been evacuated by the Japanese. This unusual incident finally disposed of the Army's belief that the enemy had large land forces defending Rangoon.

IIJ50/47/46 Report by Air Commodore Hardman on Operations of CCTF

O.R.B. No. 110 Squadron May 1945

21. It is too early for any objective decision to be reached as to whether the "Dracula" operation was justified at the time it was planned. As events turned out, it was obviously not. Much evidence, some of it not yet available, will, however, have to be sifted before it becomes clear whether or not the situation on 1 May 1945 warranted a last-minute cancellation of the operation. In Air Chief Marshal Park's opinion, the necessity for the whole of "Dracula" was dubious from its inception. General Leese, however, defended it on the grounds that, even as events turned out, the port of Rangoon was opened at least fourteen days earlier than if it had been left to the Fourteenth Army to take from the north. In any case, these are mainly problems for military analysts. As far as the airborne phase of "Dracula" is concerned, the operation was effective without being distinguished by any remarkable characteristics. That it

IIJ50/47/6 Despatch by ACM Park on Air Ops May-Aug 1945

Despatch by Gen. Leese on Operations of ALFSEA Nov '44 - Aug. '45

/was

(1) Officer Commanding, No. 110 Squadron, W/Cdr. Saunders.

IIJ/50/47/63
CCTF Intelligence
Extract No. 19

was well executed is without doubt - in fact all the participating aircrews of the U.S. 317th and 319th Troop Carrier Squadrons, who flew in the paratroops, described it as the most perfect mission they had ever flown. In view of the complete lack of enemy opposition, on both ground and in the air, this is hardly surprising. Assessed against the broad background of the campaign, the transport phase of "Dracula" was far less significant than the transport support operations at Meiktila. Conversely, however, the very fact that the air phase of "Dracula" took the form of an exercise rather than an operation is itself a tribute to the sustained transport support efforts of the Allied Air Forces which culminated in the crucial battle at Meiktila and enabled the land forces to inflict a shattering defeat on the Japanese Armies in Burma.

Effect of Re-Occupation of Rangoon on Air Supply

22. Although the re-capture of Rangoon brought to an end the more intensive Army/Air co-operation in Burma, the day by day air supply to the ground troops, concentrated in the southern half of the country and still engaging large isolated forces of the enemy, continued to be maintained. There was no alternative. Air supply had to continue until seaborne supplies began to function and road and rail communications inland from Rangoon were re-established.

ILJ50/47/6
Despatch by
ACM Park on
Air Operations
May-Aug '45

23. While the period May - August, 1945 cannot be termed spectacular in air supply operations, it was, nevertheless, an exacting period for the transport squadrons for the following reasons:-

(a) The advent of the monsoon in May made flying, on the scale necessary to maintain the land forces, extremely hazardous.

(b) The Army's demands were not immediately reduced after the re-entry into Rangoon, due to difficulties in re-starting the port facilities.

(c) The British and American Air Forces were disintegrated on 1 June 1945. The American transport squadrons were withdrawn to China leaving the R.A.F. squadrons of No. 232 Group to continue air supply unaided. With hostilities in Burma virtually over, this was to be expected and had been agreed on well in advance. What had not been anticipated was the enormous concentration of Allied land forces which had been sent into Rangoon at the last minute. Consequently, Army demands for air supply continued on a scale which it was not always practicable for the Air Forces to meet in the face of bad weather and fewer available aircraft.

Air Supply During the Monsoon, 1945

24. Following the re-occupation of Rangoon, there was a further re-deployment of transport aircraft. On 10 May, Nos. 31, 117 and 436 Squadrons moved from Hathazari to Ramree, from which, as already mentioned, small detachments had been operating since 16 April. By 15 May the move had been completed and the squadrons were operational from that

/date.

date. Nos. 62, 194 and 267 Squadrons continued to operate from Akyab. No. 435 (RCAF) Squadron remained at Tulihal for the supply of the civil population in North Burma. The two new squadrons, 96 and 215, commenced operations during May, the former from Comilla and the latter from Tulihal, but in June both were withdrawn from the line for airborne training in India in acticipation of future operations. No. 238 Squadron also ceased operations in June and left the Theatre. The U.S. squadrons of C.C.T.F. continued to operate during May but after 1 June they were gradually withdrawn. During this final month in which R.A.F. and U.S.A.A.F. squadrons undertook the air supply of IV, XV and XXXIII Corps, the total tonnage delivered was sixty seven thousand two hundred and ninety-three short tons and was divided between the Corps, except for certain supplies of rations dropped to the civilians in North Burma.

IIJ50/47/65
No. 232 Group Fortnightly Intelligence Review No. 2. June '45

25. During May and June, the land forces were occupied in eliminating the remaining Japanese in Burma who were endeavouring to escape over the lower Chin Hills into Thailand. The principal areas where fighting took place were Toungoo, Kalaw and Pegu. In all areas, however, operations were considerably hampered by the monsoon conditions; but, while the land forces were often prevented by these conditions from effectively engaging the enemy, their continued supply by air was essential. The bad weather was the one dominant factor which affected air supply operations throughout Burma after the breaking of the monsoon. This was no new problem for the air forces but its significance was greatest in 1945 owing to the considerable increase in air supply commitments. It is no exaggeration to record that the transport aircraft, probably more than any other aircraft employed in the Burma theatre, had to wage a day by day battle against the elements. During the crucial months, while the Allied advance down through central Burma was in progress, transport aircraft had been able to fly long hours often in excellent weather which greatly contributed to the successful completion of their commitments. The proposition, however, was very different after the advent of the monsoon; not only did the weather make flying hazardous and difficult but it was frequently impossible for the meteorological staffs to determine in advance what weather the aircraft were likely to encounter en route to their destination. Some picture of the toll the monsoon took can be obtained by a study of No. 232 Group's losses for the month of June 1945. During this month, the Group's squadrons lost twelve aircraft due to bad weather, casualties to crews and passengers, inclusive of those killed, injured and missing, totalling seventy-two.

IIJ50/47/6
Despatch by ACM Park on Air Operations May-Sept '45

26. Other factors beside the weather had an adverse effect on the air supply organisation in June. On 11 June, H.Q. A.L.F.S.E.A. signalled H.Q. S.A.C.S.E.A. that the short-fall in supplies transported by air in the first nine days of June totalled nine hundred and fifty-five long tons. There were various reasons for this that are worth detailing since they illustrate the many links upon which air transport depended at the time. Factors which had upset the air supply target planned for June included the following:-

(a) Ramree airfield, which had been built by the Army for the express purpose of monsoon air supply operations, was often so waterlogged that aircraft were unable to take-off.

(b) Aircraft reinforcement flow was insufficient to equip the transport squadrons to a U.E. strength

/of

of 24 plus 6 as planned and, in consequence, aircraft strength was 12% deficient.

(c) Although there had been a margin of surplus lift in May, the Army's "Q" planning had not proved flexible enough to take advantage of it.

(d) There had been an epidemic of main bearing failures in Dakota aircraft engines, thus causing an appreciable drop in serviceability.

(e) Army demands remained high since sufficient troops could not be withdrawn through Rangoon due to continued shipping and communication difficulties.

27. These factors would appear to indicate that responsibility for the air supply short-fall was approximately equally divided between the Army and the R.A.F. In Air Chief Marshal Park's opinion, the Army, by signalling a complaint direct to the Supreme Allied Commander, illustrated their strong disinclination to accept any responsibility for breakdowns in air supply. This may be so but there is no evidence to support it. What is clear is that both the Air and Land Commanders-in-Chief took immediate steps to overcome the difficulties which had been revealed. In addition, the Supreme Commander authorized Air Chief Marshal Park to withdraw No. 96 Squadron from airborne training to transport to India personnel and equipment of various R.A.F. tactical units selected for training in preparation for the planned assault on Malaya in September. All the measures taken proved effective and it is a remarkable tribute to the air forces that in July, the only complete month in which No. 232 Group operated without any U.S. Squadrons, the actual effort in hours flown and tonnages delivered was (approximately) greater than had ever been achieved before. probatinately

IIJ50/47/46 Report by Air Commodore Hardman on Operations of No. 232 Group

Air Supply in the Battle of the Sittang Bend

28. Mention has already been made of the difficulties which faced the land forces between May and July 1945 in hunting the large Japanese forces still in Burma. They were mostly in a disorganised state, hiding in the hills and the jungle regions and awaiting a favourable opportunity to effect a break-out. In mid-July, they evidently considered the time was ripe to attempt a mass movement eastwards across the Railway Corridor. Thereafter, the whole of the ground situation was dominated by the bitter and bloody fighting in what became known as the Battle of the Sittang Bend.

IIJ50/47/46 Report by Air Commandore Hardman on Operations by No. 232 Group

29. The anticipated enemy break-out materialized on 20 July. For many days heavy fighting took place along a seventy mile front extending from Toungoo in the north to Nyaunglebin in the south. Whilst this break-out was a concerted effort, it was made in several groups of approximately five hundred each and it was not always possible at first to assess exact casualties. Ground operations were supported throughout by transport aircraft of No. 232 Group but with the situation on land ever fluid, the ensuring of accurate drops was no easy task. Many of the D.Z.s used were less than a hundred yards from enemy forces and all depended on the skill of the aircrews, whose accuracy was most creditable. Only on one

/occasion,

occasion, when a D.Z. was closely surrounded by enemy troops, did some containers overshoot the mark and fall into Japanese hands. It is remarkable that, in the circumstances, this did not occur more frequently. During all these close support operations the transport aircraft were often subjected to enemy A.A. and small arms fire, directed at them from the vicinity of the D.Z.s, but no substantial damage was caused to any aircraft.

Ibid

30. The general ferocity of the battle continued at its height until 27 July. Those depleted enemy remnants, which did manage to weather the storm, were constantly hammered by air-strikes by No. 221 Group, who had prepared the way by heavily attacking Japanese concentrations in the foot-hills of the Pegu Yomas. After the break-out commenced, Spitfires maintained a "cab-rank" under V.C.P. control and were able to strafe the fleeing enemy across the open country. Throughout this crucial period, the land forces, daily supported by Nos. 221 and 232 Groups, inflicted huge casualties on the Japanese, some six thousand being killed in the process.

31. By the beginning of August, virtually all Japanese resistance in Burma - with the exception of isolated elements - had been overcome, and two weeks later the war was over. This final Burma campaign had been a striking illustration of a fact new in warfare - namely that Air Power can be used to transport, supply and support ground forces entirely independently of ground channels. This achievement may well be described as having been South-East Asia's contribution to the art of war.

CHAPTER 4

CASUALTY AIR EVACUATION

1. The development of casualty air evacuation in Burma was inevitably bound up with the growth of air transport support to the land forces and thus requires brief mention in this narrative. Prior to 1944, the year in which evacuation of casualties by air on a large scale first became a practicable undertaking, opportunities for the provision of what was destined to become a vital service to the land forces were few in number. During 1942 and 1943 supplies were delivered largely by dropping owing to the absence of suitable landing fields; occasionally, however, it was possible for casualties to be emplaned in Dakotas, as during the retreat from Burma in 1942, at Fort Hertz and in the first Wingate expedition. Nevertheless, the evacuation of wounded by air in South-East Asia did not begin on any scale until the opening of the Japanese offensive in Arakan in February 1944, when heavy fighting was precipitated. A number of light aircraft of miscellaneous provenance, including five of the U.S.A.A.F., were collected and with their aid a shuttle service was operated between improvised landing grounds at Taung Bazaar, Paletwa and Goppe Bazaar and the airfield at Ramu, which at that time provided the most advanced strip suitable for use by heavy aircraft. With the help of the Army, a number of ambulance personnel were established there and the casualties, that had either been conveyed overland or deposited by the light aircraft, were picked up by the Dakotas and transported to the hospital bases west of the Brahmaputra. At various times, all types of aircraft took a hand in the evacuation from the Arakan front and, after some weeks, Dakotas were able to land on the strip at Bawli Bazaar, almost within the fighting zone. The numbers of casualties thus evacuated from Arakan in February 1944 reached the figure of six hundred and sixty-six.

IIJ50/47/70
Review of Air Transport Ops (ACSEA Air Staff)

2. The air evacuation of casualties from the Imphal plain presented fewer initial problems since the besieged garrison there possessed several excellent airfields, enabling supplies to be landed instead of dropped, and, consequently, casualties to be picked up. Similarly, the Dakotas were able to land on the various strips improvised by the forces operating under Wingate and Lentaigne in 1944. The light aircraft of the 1st Air Commando, supporting the second Wingate expedition, also proved invaluable in the sphere of casualty evacuation from areas in which Dakotas or any other heavy aircraft could not land; in particular, a helicopter was of peculiar value in places, surrounded by jungle, where no strip of any description could be improvised. Altogether, during the crucial period of 5 March to 4 April 1944, two hundred and seventy-eight casualties were removed to safety from behind the Japanese lines. The Imphal figures were naturally of a much higher order; this was reflected in the greatly increased number of casualties evacuated from the whole fighting area during April when the total reached eight thousand nine hundred and ninety-six.

Ibid

3. Up to this period, the air evacuation of casualties from Burma had been effected very largely on an "ad hoc" basis - a business of invention and expediency, often

/extemporized

extemporized on the spot. Apart from serious administrative difficulties, it was not possible for any aircraft to be permanently and exclusively engaged upon casualty evacuation, which had to be carried out mainly as a by-product of their principal work. This largely remained the case throughout the whole course of the war in Burma, but in the autumn of 1944 efforts were made by the R.A.F. to establish in liaison with the Army a greater degree of control over the movement and reception of casualties. The general policy was for C.46 and C.47 aircraft to deliver supplies to forward airfields from which they took back loads of casualties on their return trips. The casualties were then landed at Comilla for reception in the special centres established there or were conveyed to other base hospitals.

Despatch by ACM Park on Air Operations May to September 1945

4. With the formation of Combat Cargo Task Force, R.A.F. Casualty Air Evacuation Units were set up to implement the policy outlined above. These units, having an average strength of forty British Other Ranks plus a varied number of Indian personnel, were set up on the transport strips covering particular areas of operations. Approximately one hundred wounded could be staged at these C.A.E.U.s for as long as was necessary, emplaning being effected according to each case's degree of urgency for base hospital treatment. Since, however, many seriously wounded and sick personnel required medical treatment whilst en route to base, an air ambulance orderly pool was established there. This was composed of specially trained nursing orderlies fully equipped, who flew in all aircraft, many of them averaging two hundred hours per month.

Ibid

5. By the end of April 1945 - three days before the re-entry into Rangoon - the total casualties evacuated by British and American were one hundred and ten thousand seven hundred and sixty-one, of which fifty thousand two hundred and eighty five were transported by R.A.F. aircraft. In the period May to August 1945, the closing stages of the war against Japan, R.A.F. aircraft evacuated from Burma a total of nine thousand nine hundred and seventy-two casualties.

6. That air casualty evacuation proved itself a triumph, from the point of view of both morale and of lives saved, is undisputed. The Japanese possessed no such organisation of their own and the low condition in which many of their troops were found, as a result of acute sickness in the jungle, was a contributory factor to their defeat.

CHAPTER 5

THE OPERATIONAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE CONTROL OF AIR SUPPLY

1. During the early war years of 1942 to 1943, when air supply in Burma was in its infancy, the transport squadrons were not backed by any clear-cut organisation governing their operational and administrative control in liaison with the Army. This lack of a proper framework to co-ordinate the needs of the land forces with the resources of the air forces produced various anomalies and difficulties already outlined in Chapter 1 of this narrative. From the resultant lessons it was soon learned by both the Air Forces and the Army that air supply required more than a sufficiency of transport aircraft and crews; it had to be supported by an extensive ground network of administration and equipment. The packing and housing of parachutes was an art in itself, while the collection, disposition and loading of the many and varied articles required by the forces in the field raised the most complicated problems of administration and storage. The major problem may be summarized as being that of co-ordinating the needs of the troops in action against the enemy with the numbers of transport aircraft available, with the storage capacity of the base airfields and with the ability of the railway or any other lines of communication to keep them supplied. It was under the necessity of resolving such difficulties as these that an Army organisation was improvised.

Despatches by Gen. Wavell. Mar-Dec. '42 & Jan-Jun '43

2. The basis of the Army organisation was the Air Supply Company, with its depots in close juxtaposition to the base airfields. The origins of this liaison unit can be traced back to the administrative arrangements improvised by officers of the R.I.A.S.C. to ensure an even flow of freight to transport aircraft when, in the course of 1942, the latter first began to give support to Allied ground forces. By the end of 1942, preparations were in hand for raising a number of air supply companies, of which five were working at the end of the 1943 monsoon at a line of bases stretching from Assam to Chittagong. Under the impetus of the continuous development of air transport on the Burma front, the Army air supply organisation grew alike in size and complexity. By 1944, the air supply company had evolved into a specialized unit, with subordinate sections for storage, packing, signals, supplies and loading, and with the responsibility for maintaining touch with sources so diverse as the Quartermaster General's Branch of the Army, the railway authorities, the transport squadrons and the troops in the field.

IIJ50/47/ ACSEA Air Staff Review of the Siege of Imphal

3. When, in March 1944, there suddenly arose the obligation to maintain by air an entire Army Corps and substantial R.A.F. units on the Imphal plain, it became necessary for the whole air supply organisation to be expanded - a process which brought with it a train of urgent supplementary problems. Extra depots were built up, according to the capacity of the local railway, and on this basis the additional transport and labour required to convey stocks to store and thence to aircraft were provided. There were many handicaps. Save at Chittagong, where a

/second

second runway could be used, none of the base airfields in use possessed sufficient hard-standings or completed taxi-tracks adequate for the quick turn-around of transport aircraft. Moreover, even though the existing depots were used as far as possible, their organisation had to be wrested to meet novel needs. They had in the main been developed as bases to supplement inadequate land lines of communication and it had not been foreseen that they would become universal providers, not only to an Army Corps fighting for its life, but to many other diverse land forces, such as Wingate's troops, spread out over wide areas of Burma.

4. Similar difficulties faced the air side of the growing transport organisation. During 1942 and 1943 the activities of the transport squadrons were not operationally controlled under a separate transport Headquarters. The R.A.F. Squadrons came under A.H.Q. Bengal and the U.S. Squadrons under the Tenth Air Force. Liaison was to some extent effected in practice between the two Air Forces, though in theory there was no provision for it. Consequently, the early air transport operations over Burma, though on a small scale, suffered from all the disadvantages inherent in a divided set-up. Furthermore, the R.A.F. had no specialist framework within which the transport squadrons could operate and their control was largely effected on an "ad hoc" basis. It was not until January 1944, shortly after the integration of the British and American Air Forces in South-East Asia, that a proper Transport Headquarters, known as Troop Carrier Command, was established to exercise operational control over all transport squadrons in the Theatre. Even this organisation had its teething troubles - the enormous demands made upon it during the crucial period between February and May 1944 were a strain on its resources far in excess of anything which had been anticipated. Eventually the organisation proved too inflexible to deal with increasing commitments. On 1 May 1944, Troop Carrier Command was placed under the operational control of 3rd T.A.F. and on 4 June its Headquarters was disbanded. Thereafter, the control of air transport was vested both in the Third Tactical Air Force, under which all R.A.F. transport support aircraft operated, and in the U.S. Tenth Air Force, which became responsible for the control of all U.S. transport support aircraft. Operationally this change worked reasonably well since the Air Commander, Third Tactical Air Force, who was responsible for direct air support operations to the Fourteenth Army, was placed in a position whereby he could exercise centralized control over transport support operations in co-ordination with fighter support. On the other hand, the change had many draw-backs. It had already been recognised that air transport support to the Fourteenth Army needed to be backed by specialist knowledge of the various problems which were peculiar to a new technique of war. The Third Tactical Air Force, unlike the Tenth Air Force which had numbered among its new component formations a specialist Air Cargo H.Q., was not constituted to deal with these problems. Hence it became necessary for a small "cell" of specialist officers to be detached from Headquarters, No. 229 Group, which controlled internal air lines in India and was a formation of R.A.F. Transport Command. These officers acted as advisers on air transport to the Air Commander, Third Tactical Air Force, and assisted in formulating plans for a new integrated transport Headquarters. This was all very well as far as it went but, paradoxically, the very means adopted to resolve current problems in turn succeeded in creating new ones. It was not sufficiently realized at the time that there was a danger of Air

/Transport

Transport becoming a tool in the hands of too many agencies, each of which had a vested interest in its general welfare. Whether within the growing and complex network of S.E.A.C. in 1944, this danger could have stood much chance of being averted is problematical. To the fact that it was not, however, can be attributed much of the administrative nightmare which characterized the control of air transport during the final campaign in Burma and which is referred to later in this chapter.

Despatch by ACM Park on Air Operations June '44 to May '45

5. By the autumn of 1944, recognition that the planning and operational control of air supply operations required an organisation separate from the Third Tactical Air Force had become widespread among the Army and Air Force authorities. In October, therefore, Combat Cargo Task Force, an integrated U.S.A./British Headquarters, was formed(1). One of the first measures undertaken by this new formation was a re-organisation of the allocation of tasks, whose importance, when demand always tended to outrun supply, was paramount. The previous procedure had been that, prior to the beginning of each month, Fourteenth Army submitted to the Third Tactical Air Force (earlier to Troop Carrier Command) its planned air supply requirements, which were based on the assumption that the Army's advance in the various sectors would always be strongly opposed. Consequently demands had always been high while supplies had occasionally been fifty per cent below the planned figure but more than sufficient for current requirements. The Rear Airfield Maintenance Organisation(2) received its day's tasks direct from the Headquarters of the Corps which it was supplying and at the same time asked the Air Forces for the requisite number of aircraft. If, as often happened, the Army's daily requirements exceeded the air resources available, considerable confusion resulted since no proper system of allocating priorities had been evolved. This problem was overcome to some extent by forming alongside C.C.T.F. the Combined Army-Air Transport Organisation which received and collated daily requests, assessed their urgency and, having a full knowledge of aircraft states, allotted the tasks accordingly. This organisation was thus not dissimilar to that which was then currently in practice in Europe, but there were two notable exceptions. First, the lack of signals and telephone communications was such as to clog any air supply machine, no matter how well planned, and, second, there were crippling deficiencies of personnel in such ancillary bodies as Staging Posts and Casualty Air Evacuation Units.

6. The inauguration of the Army-Air Transport Organisation alongside the C.C.T.F. had obvious advantages and led to the solving of many problems on the spot to the mutual advantage of the Army and the Air Force. One difficulty, however, which had always existed between the two Services, was never

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(1) See page 29.

(2) Formed in 1944 and consisted of small Army staffs on each base airfield to ensure close liaison between the neighbouring Air Supply Companies and the local air force commander. Similarly, F.A.M.O.s, Forward Airfield Maintenance Organisations were established on receiving airfields to co-ordinate distribution of supplies.

A.M. File C. 34248/47 Enc. 16a

adequately overcome. The military administrative authorities always wanted to stock one type of store at one particular airfield, and one only, in order to simplify storage, economize in personnel and ease the adjustment of priorities. This policy, however, involved the flying of aircraft from airfield to airfield to collect the ingredients of a varied freight, with the consequent wastage of flying hours, and was regarded by the Air Forces as suggesting that the military planners looked upon the transport aircraft as lorries. The Air Forces not unnaturally favoured the mixing of commodities at the R.A.M.O.s on each base airfield. Owing to Army opposition, this system was never properly put into practice, with the result that there was always the danger that, if anything went wrong at a particular airfield or with the aircraft on it, the land forces would have been held up for lack of ammunition or rations or whatever the store happened to be.

7. Possibly these conflicting view points were inevitable. For the fundamental and inescapable difficulty of the Army's air supply companies arose from their buffer position between two Services, which functioned in sharply contrasted ways. The military planners, measuring exactly the capacity of railways, roads and waterways could make neat calculations as to the quantities of supplies transportable from place to place, the time to be taken in transit and the numbers of personnel required for handling and storing goods whose flow could be reckoned at a fixed rate. The air forces were not in a position to offer corresponding certainties in the carriage of supplies from one place to another. Apart from the intricacies of maintenance and repair, there was always the weather to be regarded as an imponderable factor and, during the monsoon periods, transport aircraft operations inevitably tended to become concentrated into the fair intervals. Whether the Army authorities in Burma during the successive campaigns of the war fully realized the extent of the difficulties of air as opposed to land transport would appear to be doubtful.

Historical Record of the Allied Air C-in-C, SEA Jan. 1945

8. On the other hand, the transport organisation of C.C.T.F., in common with its predecessors, also suffered from limitations and handicaps. These were due in part to a lack of experience among C.C.T.F. Headquarters staff, both British and American, in the numerous aspects of air transport support and supply. Experience level in airborne training and operations was high, but this was outside the scope of the operations in progress. At the same time, physical handicaps which were uppermost in the organisation were largely connected with maintenance problems and with the poor quality of the signals communications between Headquarters and the transport Wings(1) and Squadrons and between squadron bases and forward airfields. There was also a lamentable shortage of R.A.F. signals and flying control personnel and equipment. These factors adversely affected the efficiency of transport support operations in general and the control and turn-around of aircraft at reception centres in particular. Throughout the whole period covering the final campaign in Burma R.A.F. flying control facilities wer, in comparison with their American counterparts, inadequate for the

IIJ50/47/46 Report by Air Commodore Hardman on CCTF Operations

/tasks

(1) Mobile Transport Wings were established on the main squadron bases in the 1944-45 campaign to exercise local operational control and administer the squadrons in respect of local needs.

tasks they were called upon to fulfil. In the peak period of air supply to the land forces in 1945, eleven forward transport airfields were in use supporting the Fourteenth Army and of these, at any one time, never more than seven had adequate control facilities. To surmount this difficulty, control was carried out by the crew of the first aircraft to land in the early morning; when this aircraft returned after unloading, other aircraft crews took over, this improvised method of control continuing throughout the day in accordance with the conditions locally prevailing. Considering the extent to which supplies were landed, as opposed to dropped, during the 1944-45 campaign, the disadvantages of this improvisation are clearly apparent.

Ibid

9. These were not the only limitations under which Combat Cargo Task Force laboured. Equally significant in the chain of adverse factors affecting air supply at this vital period was the complex command network which seriously hampered the smooth operational and administrative control of the R.A.F. squadrons within the integrated transport organisation. The structure of the whole of Air Command, South-East Asia, was at all times complicated but the complexities of the R.A.F. background to the air supply organisation in its final form were unparalleled in the Theatre. During the period covering the final land advances up to the re-occupation of Rangoon, the control of the R.A.F. transport squadrons was exercised through three different channels as follows:-

Operational Control	-	C.C.T.F./E.A.C./A.C.S.E.A.
Administrative Control	-	No. 229 Group/Transport Cmd.
Administrative Services	-	Nos. 221 and 224 Groups/ AHQ. Bengal-Burma.

This was a double contradiction of the first principles of sound organisation - namely that operational and administrative control of units should not be divorced but vested in the same authority. The results of this system were administratively chaotic, as might have been expected when squadrons had to look to three different masters for their essential needs and direction. In the first place, although the operational chain of command through Eastern Air Command and A.C.S.E.A. was clearly defined, there was an understandable tendency for Transport Command Headquarters in London to take an active interest in the operations of its squadrons in Burma; this in turn led to a constant flow of paper between C.C.T.F. and Transport Command in England furnishing operational information on numerous matters but in a different form to that required by Eastern Air Command and A.C.S.E.A. This duplication of effort placed a severe strain on clerical staffs in every formation from squadrons upwards. In the phere of administrative services, the transport picture was even more unsatisfactory. It was anomalous that Nos. 221 Group and 224 Groups, both of which were composite fighter/bomber groups, should have had to be responsible for providing administrative services to transport units within their geographical areas. As these groups moved forward they found these responsibilities more and more irksome and increasingly difficult to discharge. The question of administrative control presented equally anomalous features. The R.A.F. transport squadrons of C.C.T.F. were Transport Command squadrons and, as such, were administratively controlled by the only Transport Group in the Theatre, No. 229 Group. Yet the R.A.F. Element of

/C.C.T.F.

C.C.T.F. was not a Transport Command formation. This fact alone inevitably placed a severe strain on the relationship between the R.A.F. Element of C.C.T.F. and No. 229 Group, particularly as the Headquarters of each was separated by a distance of over one thousand miles.

Ibid

10. So long as Transport Command's position vis-a-vis overseas commands remained unchanged, the only solution to these difficulties appeared at the time to lie in the elevation of the R.A.F. Element of C.C.T.F. Headquarters to the status of a fully-fledged Transport Group H.Q., licensed to exercise administrative as well as operational control over its transport squadrons. Air Commodore Hardman was quick to press for implementation of this policy but it was not actually authorized until April 1945 and thus took effect after the period when the change was most needed. The new Group - designated No. 232 - while giving to the R.A.F. Element of C.C.T.F. the necessary administrative control over its units and relieving Nos. 221 and 224 Groups of the burden of providing administrative services, did, nevertheless, suffer from some of the limitations of the former organisation. The Group was immediately required to assume responsibility for the provision of administrative services to all R.A.F. units, irrespective of function, located in its area, and thus found itself in a position similar to that previously held by Nos. 221 and 224 Groups. Furthermore, it was responsible to A.H.Q. Burma (the R.A.F. Element of Eastern Air Command) for the operational, functional and administrative control of units assigned to it but not belonging to Transport Command. At the same time, the decree "nisi", which had been granted to No. 232 Group from No. 229 Group, was not made "absolute", the latter being authorized to retain administrative control over the former in all matters affecting establishments, manning, honours and awards, specification of specialist transport requirements and the posting of officers and aircrew. The new Group thus emerged in the unenviable position of being partially controlled by an R.A.F. formation of equal status.

Despatch by ACM Park on Air Operations Jun '44-May '45

11. All these anomalies, which appear curious, if not incomprehensible, when regarded strictly from the point of view of the air supply organisation in Burma, cannot be accurately judged other than in relation to the wider problems which faced the Command as a whole. The reasons governing the structural complexities of Air Command, South-East Asia, were manifold and outside the scope of this narrative, but the confusion within the framework of the transport organisation was all part of the same problem. It grew from the centre of the vast administrative network which was required to cover the huge areas of the Command. As the land forces advanced, the area to be controlled grew and the net was in many places thin. This was particularly so in the areas vacated by the advancing transport and tactical Groups, with the result that extra provision had to be made for administering the formations left behind in the backwash of the advance. It was this reason which made it necessary for additional administrative responsibilities to be thrust upon No. 232 Group through lack of personnel and the requisite administrative framework. As air supply enabled the land forces to advance with a rapidity previously considered impossible, the conflicting factors of function and distance called for an organisation far more complex than would have been the case in a more compact Theatre. The situation was further aggravated by the fact that Transport Command, unlike other R.A.F. Commands, retained world-wide control over its Squadrons and units in overseas Theatres; this chain of command, extending over many

/thousands

thousands of miles, and the lack of co-ordination between H.Q. Transport Command and the local Theatre Commanders resultant upon these geographical drawbacks tended, despite the good will of all the staffs concerned, to promote friction and inefficiency. This was not so much the case when the squadrons were operating in the role of internal air-lines (e.g. No. 229 Group); but, once they undertook the tasks of combattant transport support and supply, their relationship to the local Air Command radically changed. There would appear to have been a good case for the transport support squadrons being divorced from Transport Command entirely and coming directly under the Theatre Commander in all matters, administrative and operational, affecting their control. This did in fact come to pass after the war against Japan was over(1) but until then the whole question of Transport Command's overseas responsibilities remained the subject of much controversy.

Personal Historical Records of Allied Air Commander-in-Chief. Nov '44 to May '45

12. Alongside the above difficulties, all of which emanated from high-level policy, must be matched the faults which occurred on the spot in the actual operating of the aerial life-line in Burma. There were many aspects. In the sphere of supply-dropping, D.Z.s were not always located where a drop was feasible. Though much experience was gained in this respect between 1942 and 1945 and although the Army was naturally not always able to provide a wide choice of sites, there was often a tendency for D.Z.s to be located in narrow valleys whose negotiation after each run was a major hazard for the aircraft. When supplies were landed, forward airfield commanders and R.A.F. flying control personnel took a long time to realize that air supply traffic was as vital as any other; consequently transport aircraft were often kept circling an airfield while tactical aircraft took off on a routine operation, whose delay by half-an-hour was immaterial. In general, the Air Supply organisation in Burma was marred from its inception by the failure of both the Army and the R.A.F. to provide for meticulous efficiency in a sphere where great efforts could be rendered nugatory by inaccuracy in minor details. The following examples provide an illustration. During the peak period of operations in March 1945, ten thousand tons of potatoes and onions were flown into Shwebo where, through lack of distributing facilities, they were allowed to stay and rot. At another time, an aircraft was detailed to fly into Burma a load of pineapples which, on being unloaded, were found to be rotten, while fresh pineapples could be bought for eight annas each in a nearby village. Packing of loads was often so poor that containers burst in transit; not infrequently the ejection of supplies from aircraft in the air had to be effected on a floor of shifting rice grains from broken baskets. On the ground, refuelling facilities for night maintenance were always scarce and their absence kept grounded many aircraft which could otherwise have been making effective contributions to the land battles. Finally, provision by the R.A.F. for feeding and resting aircrews, engaged on arduous transport support operations, was primitive in the extreme.

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(1) On 1 March 1946, operational and administrative control of transport units overseas was vested in the local Air Commanders.

Despatch by ACM Park on Air Operations Jun '44-May '45

13. The above examples, though random illustrations, were typical of a general trend. This might have been avoided, as was the case in the Northern Combat Area Command(1), had collective responsibility for the tasks of air supply been rated higher than Service allegiance, each body trusting the ability of the others to carry out their part of the work without attempting to dictate on matters outside its sphere. For instance, confusion was caused within the C.C.T.F./C.A.A.T.O. framework by the Army attempting to quote and work on flying hours per aircraft without knowledge of the implications of aircraft serviceable or aircraft on strength. Similarly, the Air Forces were impatient at delays emanating from the R.A.M.O.s on base airfields without always realizing that British Army officers and Indian Other Ranks were strained to breaking-point, often having to work seventy-two hours at a stretch to complete their tasks. This in turn arose out of belated appreciation that the importance and nature of the work demanded a much more generous scale of personnel, facilities and organising ability than was allotted by the Army to its air supply companies. These factors emphasize the vital necessity for combined administrative, as well as operational, planning when an Army is entirely dependent on an air L. of C. Had this been more widely recognized in the final Burma campaign, it appears conceivable that a greater economy in transport aircraft could have been effected. As it was, the capture of Akyab and Ramree in 1945, against neglible opposition, was not related in time to the main campaign, and it was not until virtually the last minute that General Leese gave consideration to the establishment of transport bases at these two places to support his land forces. Thus it happened that Akyab and Ramree were not sufficiently developed in time to support the Fourteenth Army's advance and the distance which the transport aircraft had to cover from their bases remained greater than would otherwise have been necessary. Consequently, complaints by the Army of the shortage of transport aircraft became frequent and, as already outlined, reached a peak in January 1945 when General Leese mentioned the possibility of having to withdraw his land forces beyond the Chindwin(2). The shortage of transport aircraft in South-East Asia has been stressed throughout this narrative, but shortages are largely relative and it is not always easy to draw a line between what is desirable and what is actually necessary. A shortage of transport aircraft undoubtedly existed in Burma, yet there is room for speculation as to whether, in the face of the land forces' constantly increasing demands, supply could ever have caught up with demand in the conditions of the campaign.

Despatch by Gen. Leese on Operations by ALFSEA Nov '44-Aug. '45

A.M. File C. 34248/47 Enc. 14a

14. Nevertheless, despite all the mistakes and disappointments that were inseparable from the successes of a victorious campaign, Air Supply emerged from the war against Japan in South-East Asia as a vital new factor in modern technique, meriting continuous study, experiment and adaptation. In acclaiming this achievement, however, it should be constantly borne in mind that the maintenance of the land forces in Burma by air was only

A.M. File C. 34248/47 Enc. 19a

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(1) Where as already mentioned air supply to the limited land forces was entirely an American commitment of Tenth Air Force, in which no R.A.F. Squadron participated.

(2) See page 31.

possible because the Divisions supplied were specially stripped down to enable them to operate by means of an air L. of C. This was done by drastically cutting scales of divisional M.T., the administrative tail and even guns. As a result, the daily maintenance tonnage required for each of the divisions dropped to less than 50% of that required for operating under offensive conditions in Europe. This drastic cut was practicable because of the types of land operations experienced in Burma - namely those with greater stress on raiding, pursuit and infiltration, rather than on European land battle tactics. There were also other factors, which had a bearing on this situation; most important of these were the complete air superiority enjoyed by the Allies in 1944 and 1945 and the climatic conditions which were such that the Air Forces were able to operate despite monsoon periods at times when ground activity was severely limited.

15. These facts clearly discourage any tendency to regard the air supply achievements in Burma as a basis for a world-wide doctrine. Air supply is inevitably uneconomical in comparison with land or sea lines of communication, when the latter are available. It does not, therefore, follow from the success of this new technique, great as are its potentialities in conflicts carried out over territory similar to that of Burma, that it can be regarded as of universal application irrespective of tasks, opposition or terrain.

A P P E N D I C E S

Appendices in course of preparation.

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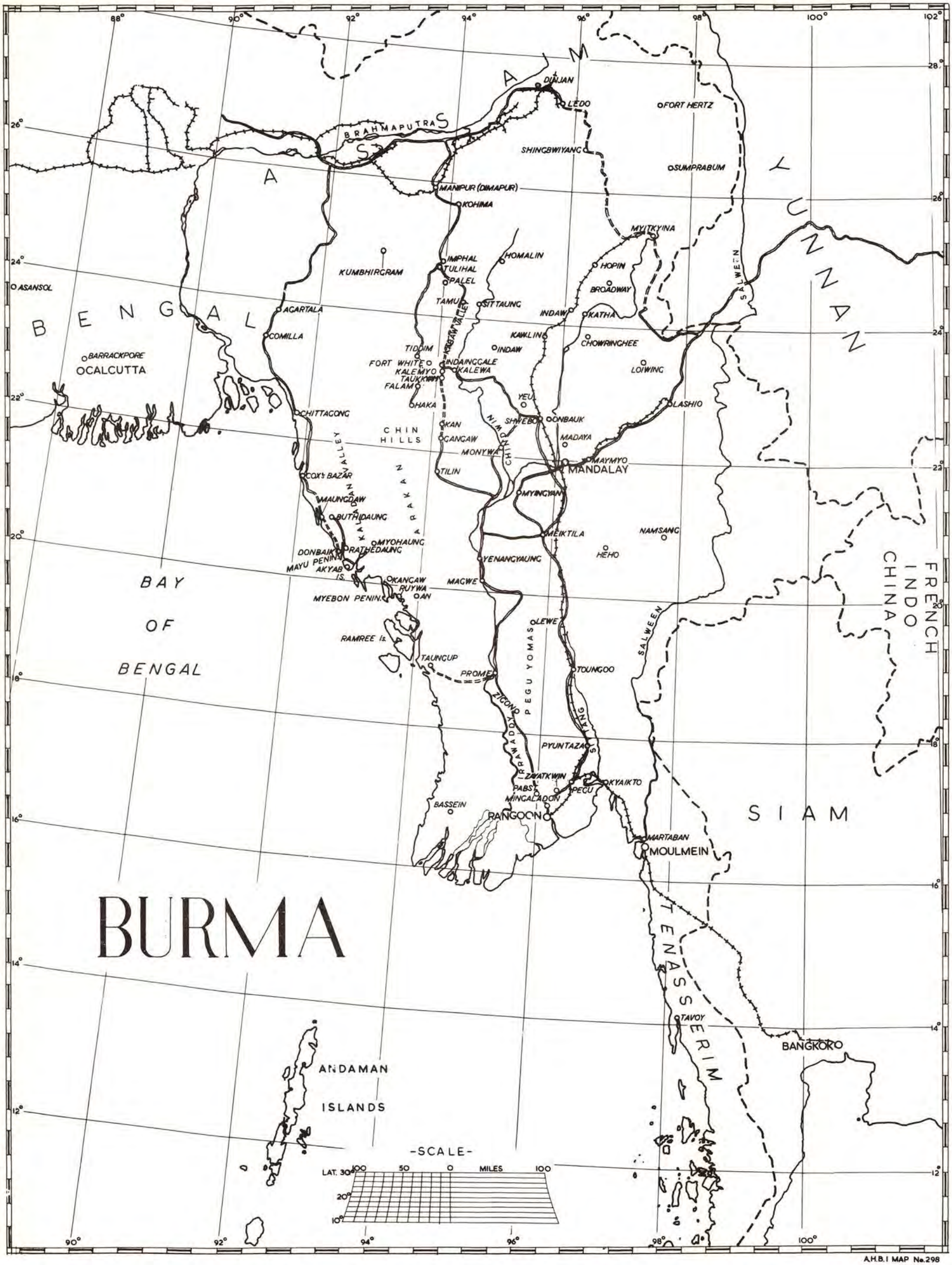

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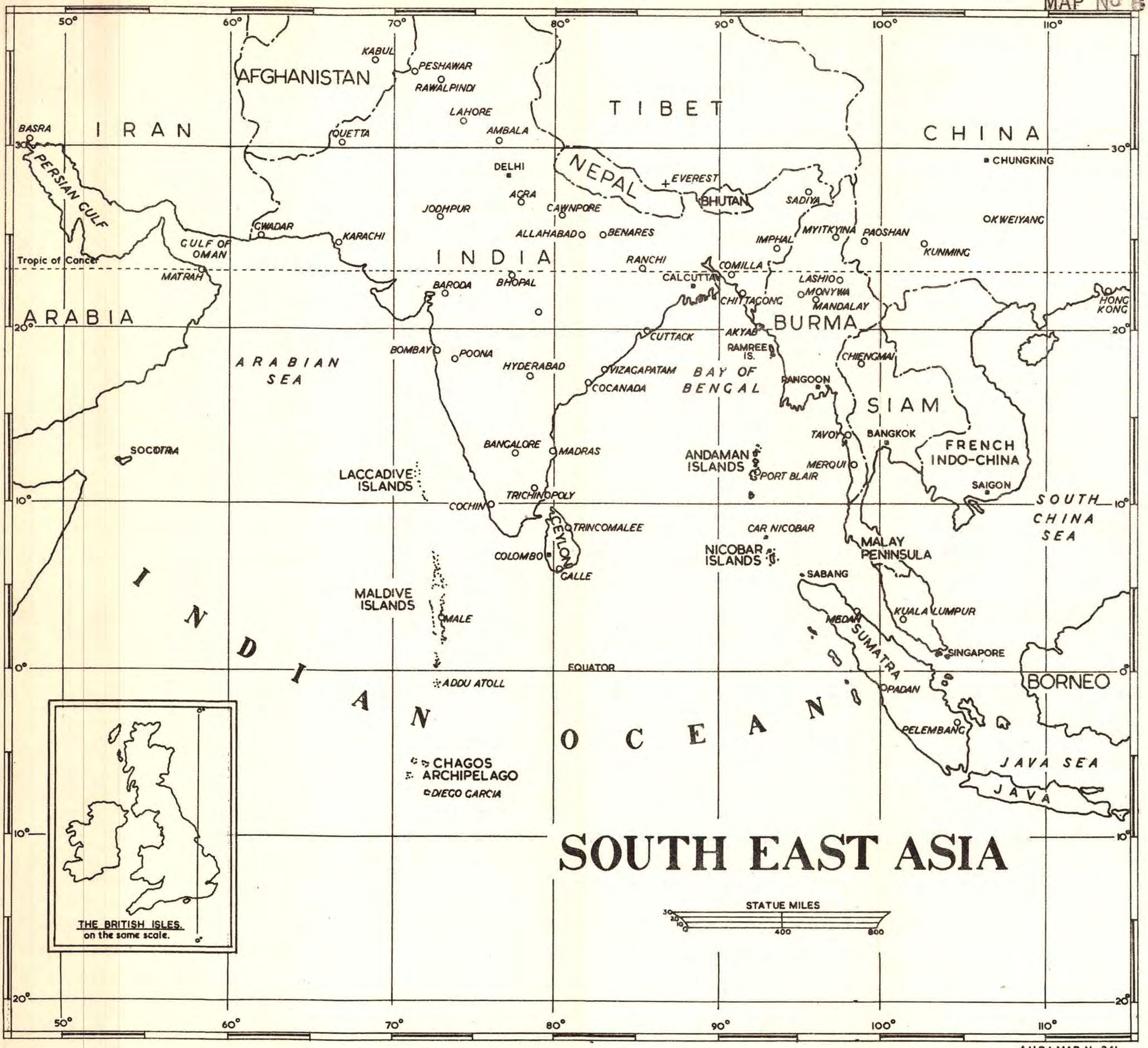
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MALAY PENINSULA
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BORNEO
JAVA
JAVA SEA
SOUTH CHINA SEA
BAY OF BENGAL
ARABIAN SEA
INDIAN OCEAN
PERSIAN GULF
GULF OF OMAN
Tropic of Cancer
EQUATOR
CEYLON
LACCADIVE ISLANDS
MALDIVE ISLANDS
CHAGOS ARCHIPELAGO
DIEGO GARCIA
ADDU ATOLL
ANDAMAN ISLANDS
NICOBAR ISLANDS
SOCOTRA
BASRA
KABUL
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GWADAR
KARACHI
MATRAH
BARODA
BHOPAL
BOMBAY
POONA
HYDERABAD
BANGALORE
MADRAS
TRICHINOPOLY
COCHIN
TRINCOMALEE
COLOMBO
GALLE
MALE
CUTTACK
VIZAGAPATAM
COCANADA
RANCHI
CALCUTTA
COMILLA
CHITTAGONG
AKYAB
RAMREE IS.
RANGOON
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MERQUI
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SABANG
MEDAN
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PELEMBANG
KUALA LUMPUR
SINGAPORE
BANGKOK
SAIGON
CHIENGMAI
LASHIO
MONYWA
MANDALAY
IMPHAL
MYITKYINA
SADIYA
EVEREST
CHUNGKING
KUNMING
PAOSHAN
OKWEIYANG
HONG KONG
THE BRITISH ISLES, on the same scale.
STATUE MILES
400
800
50°
60°
70°
80°
90°
100°
110°
30°
20°
10°
0°