

afforded daily targets for Beaufighters and, latterly, Lightnings (P.38) and Mustangs (P.51). In November, 1943, there occurred an event of prime importance as regards the supply problem of the enemy troops in Burma—the opening of the Burma-Siam railway. This did not diminish the importance of the routes of Northern and Western Burma, but it did bring into strategical prominence their relationship to these routes from the south and east. New objectives such as the railway junction at Thanbyuzayat, the ferry termini at Moulmein and Martaban, the bridge over the Sittang river at Mokpalin and in general the railway system north, south and east of the all-important junction at Pegu became of cardinal significance.

97. The armament of the Beaufighters of Nos. 27 and 177 Squadrons, consisting of four 20 mm. cannon and six machine guns, proved very suitable weapons for attacking the river-craft, motor transport, rolling stock and locomotives on these routes. They first reached Moulmein on 27th February; thereafter they regularly attacked targets as far south and east as the Burma-Siam railway itself, and the terminus of the main Siamese railway to Bangkok at Chiengmai.

98. In January, 1944, a third squadron of Beaufighters (No. 211) began to operate under my command using rocket projectiles (R.Ps.). The enemy had by this time instituted a system of pens and shelters to protect his locomotives, and although a target thus protected was immune from cannon and machine-gun fire, it was often vulnerable to R.P. attacks. Another development rendered the advent of rocket projectiles even more timely. The opening of the Burma-Siam railway now allowed the Japanese to bring replacement engines into Burma by this quick and easy route. Accordingly, the emphasis of attack was moved to the more permanent installations on Burmese and Siamese railway systems, since the destruction or damaging of locomotives was not now so serious to him. In attacks on stations, water-towers, curved portions of the track which could not easily be replaced, and bridges, the rocket projectile proved a valuable supplement to existing weapons.

99. The delay fuse which was all that was available with which to arm R.P.s was soon found to be unsuitable for attacks on bridges, and their destruction was left more and more to bomb-carrying aircraft of both the Strategic and Tactical Air Forces. I have dealt in more detail with this aspect of strategic bombers' work in the section devoted to their activities. In attacks by tactical aircraft the long range of Mustangs (P.51) and Lightnings (P.38) was exploited to the full. The Shweli suspension bridge for example had often been attacked by bombers but its position rendered bombing from any height difficult. Fighter-bomber attack was not possible until the long-range Mustangs (P.51Bs) of No. 1 Air Commando Unit arrived. Immediately after their arrival the bridge was destroyed by them in April and its emergency replacement a fortnight later. Other attacks on communications by Mustangs (P.51) and Lightnings (P.38) included many against the vital Mandalay-Mytikyina railway particularly on the section between Shwebo and Wuntho which fed both the divisions attacking Imphal and the forces opposing Special Force.

100. Although not primarily intended for attack on rivercraft, the 40 mm. cannon, with which the Hurricane IIDs of No. 20 Squadron were fitted, did great damage to hundreds of assorted craft with which the enemy supplied his forces dispersed among the waterways of the Arakan coast. This squadron began to operate in December, 1943, using A.P. shells. In February, H.E. ammunition became available and the rate of destruction increased. Craft when holed could no longer be beached, but disintegrated in the water, with the inevitable instead of occasional loss of their cargo. When, finally, aircraft with additional internal tankage arrived, the effective radius of attack was extended south of Akyab, and the rate of destruction reached a peak which seriously hindered the reinforcement and supply of all Japanese forces occupying the coastal region from Cheduba Island northwards to the front line, a distance of roughly 150 miles.

101. The damage and hindrance that the enemy suffered from these widespread attacks are hard to assess, but one criterion of their effectiveness was the energy with which the Japanese attempted to defend their communications. The statistics show that in 1,276 effective sorties by R.A.F. long-range fighter aircraft, 35 were destroyed by enemy action or did not return from operations, and 29 were seriously damaged by enemy fire, but no statistical summary can adequately record all the damage and delay that the enemy suffered. For example, it was estimated that in April reinforcements travelling from Bangkok to Manipur took six weeks to reach their destination.

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VI.—GENERAL RECONNAISSANCE

Control and Planning.

102. The vast areas of ocean for which aircraft in this Command were responsible in November precluded the density of patrol that was desirable. Moreover, it was difficult to maintain a sufficiently close liaison with those formations responsible for the security of sea communications in neighbouring areas. In December, however, a new directive from the Chiefs of Staff enabled a more clear-cut policy to be introduced and better defined the system of control and responsibility. The boundaries of the Naval C.-in-C.'s Command were extended to include Aden. This facilitated co-operation with coastal aircraft there, which were, in the interests of consistency, to come under my command. I thus became responsible for all flying boats, G.R. landplane and coastal striking force units allotted for operations in the Indian Ocean, the Mozambique Channel, the Gulf of Aden, the Gulf of Oman and the Bay of Bengal. Day-to-day operational and administrative control remained with the A.O.C. in whose command the aircraft were located. Broad control was normally to be exercised through A.O.C. 222 Group, who was to work in close liaison with the appropriate Naval authorities and South African Air authorities. Thus A.O.C. 222 Group had a dual responsibility, combining with the command of his own Group the organisation and direction of all G.R. operations in the Indian Ocean. To aid him in this latter task a new body was formed—Indian Ocean G.R. Operations, or "IOGROPS"—with a Deputy A.O.C. and separate staff.