

Directive issued by the Supreme Allied Commander on the 3rd December, 1944, he instructed his Commanders-in-Chief to plan an operation for the capture of the Hastings Harbour Island Group, which lies off Victoria Point, the southern tip of Burma. The object of the operation was to establish an advanced naval and air base for the exploitation of our naval and air superiority, to assist operations in Burma and to prepare for an early advance on Malaya. I represented to the Supreme Allied Commander that we had insufficient force to do this operation in addition to the Arakan and Fourteenth Army operations, and planning was suspended.

18. I have already mentioned in paragraph 11 that a number of formations were due from Europe, but that this redeployment had been postponed. Two aspects of this deserve mention at once as they were problems which remained during the whole period on which I am reporting.

The first problem was the lack of sufficient formations with which to affect the relief of battle-worn troops. General Giffard, with the help of the Commander-in-Chief, India, had done much to improve the situation, but it was still acute. It was only possible to spare one division at a time for rehabilitation in India. Moreover, the time and space factor, including the limited number of transport aircraft available in the theatre made this process necessarily slow. To send a division from Burma to India, from the point of view of time and availability, was equivalent to moving such a formation from Italy to rest and refit in Palestine. Further, I could not afford to send more than one division outside the Fourteenth Army area. Reorganizations for specific tasks and reliefs were achieved by resting formations within the Army area. But most of the formations under my command had been in forward areas for six months—some much longer. Lack of trained reinforcements, especially in British personnel, made it difficult to keep some of them up to full establishment.

The second problem concerned the redeployment of formations from Europe. This scheme, known as "Minerva," involved the large-scale transfer of formations, units and cadres initially to the command of General Headquarters, India, for subsequent employment in operations in S.E.A.C. Although it was not implemented to any extent during the period covered by this Despatch, it was a matter under very active consideration the whole time. The principal difficulty was the time lag. In the case of an Indian division in Italy, it would be eight and a half months from the time the order to withdraw from Italy was given to the date of readiness for operations in S.E.A.C.: for a British division from North-West Europe the corresponding delay was eight months. Moreover, the formations could not at this stage be linked up with a particular projected future operation but had to build up a balanced force suitable for any future operations in the theatre. The composition of the force table and the necessary priority of arrival in India were matters of close co-operation between General Headquarters, India, and my Headquarters.

SECTION II (paras. 19-27) THE OPERATIONAL SITUATION IN NOVEMBER

The failure of the Japanese invasion of Spring, 1944: The importance of the 1944 monsoon operations: The state of the enemy, his strength and dispositions: Relative strengths: Our assets of sea and air power: Air supply.

19. In February and March, 1944, Fourteenth Army (15 Corps) had decisively beaten the Japanese in Arakan. This was followed by our outstanding victory in the Kohima—Imphal battle (May-July). Thus the offensive, which the Japanese had launched in the Spring with the object of seizing the gateway to India, had completely failed. They had suffered tremendous casualties, estimated at 100,000 during their offensive and their subsequent retreat during the monsoon, when privation and exposure took a toll to which the thousands of enemy bodies counted by our advancing troops bore witness.

20. During the monsoon, Fourteenth Army and Northern Combat Area Command both exploited success to the full. I wish to emphasise the importance of these monsoon operations. In the Kohima—Imphal battle we had inflicted a crushing defeat on the enemy and our continuous pressure throughout the rainy season had kept him on the run, allowing him no respite. This was largely due to the tenacity of 5 Indian Division (Major-General D. F. W. Warren) and of 11 (East African) Division (Major-General C. C. Fowkes) which refused to be daunted by appalling conditions of weather and terrain.

21. My problem, which was largely an administrative one owing to the paucity of communications, was how to maintain the impetus of our advance until we could bring the enemy to battle on ground of our own choosing. Moreover, to be fully effective, this impetus had to be maintained over a broad front. It appeared likely that the enemy, having failed to stop us west of the Chindwin, would attempt to hold the Shwebo—Mandalay area; and that his intention would be to reorganize and reinforce his armies behind a covering line, with the view ultimately of passing again to the offensive. His forward covering troops were disposed well north of the general line Lashio—Shwebo—Myingyan—Akyab.

22. The location of Japanese formations at the end of November was as follows:—

In the coastal sector, two divisions (the 54th and 55th), comprising Twenty-eighth Japanese Army, were distributed between Maungdaw and Bassein. The enemy, however, appeared to be withdrawing from the Paletwa area in the Kaladan, leaving only small detachments north of the Khawei—Paletwa line.*

Facing Fourteenth Army were three Japanese divisions, the 15th, 31st and 33rd, all much reduced in strength but with fresh drafts arriving. 15 Division was based on the Wuntho—Pinlebu area, and had recently withdrawn its

* Documents captured after our offensive opened in the middle of December showed that the Japanese intended to hold forward as long as possible, but that their main line was to be the Kaladan River from, and including, Akyab and Kyauktaw.