

35. By comparison, the strength and composition of the Allied fighter force was most satisfactory. Spitfires, Lightnings, and latterly Thunderbolts and Mustangs, completely transformed the situation which had obtained until November, 1943, when our Hurricanes were outclassed and out-manoeuvred by the enemy. Backed by a warning and control system of high standard, Allied fighters had without fail rendered the enemy's incursions into our defended areas costly and ineffectual. During the eleven months covered by this despatch 165 enemy aircraft were destroyed on the ground or in the air, together with 47 probables and 152 damaged. This destruction was achieved against a total enemy effort, offensive and defensive, of 1,845 sorties. One enemy aircraft was destroyed for every eleven sighted; that the air superiority established before the period of this narrative was well maintained over the year, needs no further proof.

36. This virtual dominance of the air over Burma was the result of hard work with small dividends upon the part of our fighter organisation. Freed from the necessity of establishing superiority, the major problems remaining to Allied fighters by the time this despatch opens were the interception of sneak raids, usually undertaken by the Japanese Air Force under the protection of cloud-cover, and the searching-out and destruction of a meagre enemy air force dispersed upon a generous network of rear airfields. Initially, the greatest danger was to the stream of transports hauling supplies to the Imphal Plain, which offered the best prey ever presented to any air force. Some one hundred unarmed aircraft flew daily in and out of the area, and fighter patrols laboured under the handicaps of extensive cloud conditions and a shortage of P.O.L.* at their bases.

37. Moreover, the mountainous terrain to the east precluded efficient early air raid warning, and the enemy could at will come unannounced through the valleys. To minimise the danger, traffic was routed along a corridor from the Khopum Valley to Palel under a fighter umbrella. Ground signs were displayed en route to indicate the presence of enemy aircraft which was also broadcast by R/T. The sight of a stream of transports flying into the Imphal Valley with a screen of Spitfires circling overhead was a most heartening sight to the garrison, who thereby received constant assurance that their aerial life-line was unbroken. The precautions taken and the impotence of the enemy resulted in only two transports being destroyed by enemy action during the whole of the siege, a remarkable achievement.

38. The danger to transport aircraft persisted during the whole of the advance, since they were continually operating in front of the warning screen, and fighter bases were not always established as far forward as was tactically desirable. For this there were two main reasons; in the early stages of the advance through hilly jungle no airstrips could be constructed near the front, and second, having debouched on to the plains, the Army were not willing to devote supplies and resources to

establish fighter bases in the area of dropping operations.

39. On two occasions, therefore, our transport aircraft were victims of enemy sneak raids; on one day in November while dropping along the Tiddim Road, five aircraft were destroyed by the enemy, and on the 12th January four were shot down while supply dropping near Onbauk, an airfield recently recaptured from the enemy which, however, had not by that time been prepared for defensive fighters. Even when during the temporary halt around Mandalay, and Spitfires were able to occupy the Shwebo and Momywa airfield groups, air supply was proceeding over a hundred and thirty mile front which the four available squadrons of Spitfires were hard pressed to cover in conjunction with their other defensive commitments. It is a lesson of the campaign that the air supply of ground forces depends on the immediate deployment as far forward as possible of fighter squadrons to patrol the Lines of Communication. Had the enemy used his fighters effectively instead of frittering away their effort on infrequent low-level attacks against forward troops, he would have been able to do great execution among our Dakotas and Commandos, thus seriously impeding the advance.

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40. Since it was not always possible to engage the enemy in the air, it was necessary to search out his aircraft on the ground. To this end, intruder raids were undertaken at frequent intervals, and paid a dividend of 80 destroyed, 25 probably destroyed and 78 damaged aircraft on enemy airfields. In October, a series of raids were undertaken against the Rangoon airfields with the additional motive of hindering the transfer of units to the Philippines. In this operation, many types of aircraft were employed, including Beaufighters, but, as aircraft resources became more suited to operational requirements, intrusion was progressively left to the Mustang squadrons of the Air Commandos, who on more than one occasion in the spring of 1945, made the 1,500 mile round trip to the Japanese base airfields in Siam with good results totalling 38 destroyed, 10 probably destroyed and 21 damaged aircraft.

41. The problem of destroying an enemy intent on conserving his forces and possessing a wide choice of airfields containing many revetments (Meiktila airfield disposes of over a hundred) is not an easy one. In addition, the enemy's skill with light anti-aircraft and machine-gun fire is well-known, and low-level "strafing" runs are apt to be costly. It was found uneconomical to make a preliminary reconnaissance run to discover which revetments were occupied, and often only a quick snap-shot at a target seen late in the "strafe" was possible. In view of these factors it will be seen that the result achieved is more than creditable.

42. Early attempts to ground or destroy the enemy by bombing his airfields were ineffective and were discontinued in favour of more worthwhile targets.

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43. The enemy's offensive effort was so ineffectual as to be hardly worth mentioning except to recount the losses he sustained. In

* Petrol, Oil, Lubricants.