

to Imphal, from Myitkyina-Mainkwan-Shing-bwiyang to Ledo and from Katha-Indaw-Homalin/Tonhe to Imphal. Evacuees travelling along these routes required supplies of food and medical stores to maintain them during their march to India. Additionally, many of our wounded were evacuated by air from Magwe, Shwebo and Myitkyina in turn as the battle moved northward. Civilians were also evacuated when there were no wounded to move.

222. In all a total of 8,616 persons, which included 2,600 wounded, were flown out to India and 109,652 lbs. of supplies were dropped for victualling refugees and troops. In carrying out this task we had the help of D C.3 aircraft of the American Air Force—I have to record the good work carried out by these crews.

223. About the middle of March a serious situation had risen in the Bay of Bengal. In the Port of Calcutta there was some one-quarter of a million tons of shipping. It was not known how long the enemy naval force would remain within striking distance of our line of sea communication between Calcutta and Ceylon. There were none of H.M. ships available at this time to provide the necessary cover to secure this shipping now also within the range of attack of the enemy long range bombers based at Mingaladon and Magwe.

224. Instructions were issued for the Port to be cleared. There were two courses of action—either to sail convoys close in shore and to provide what fighter protection against bomb attack—and bomber protection against attack by surface units—as was practicable or to use diversional sailing which would spread the ships over a large area in the Bay of Bengal. The latter course was chosen.

225. It seemed possible that the attacks of our coast-wise shipping on the 6th April were an offensive move covering the arrival of the large convoy of troops in Rangoon. Consequently it was likely that if enemy air reconnaissance could be prevented—the sailing of this large tonnage of shipping over a short period might be secured from enemy surface and air attack, since the enemy would be unaware of the operation.

226 We knew where the enemy reconnaissance force was. Nine four-engined and two-engined reconnaissance flying boats had been located at Port Blair. On the 14th April this figure had risen to 13. Moreover, there were indications that the enemy had developed the aerodrome at Port Blair and that local fighter defence had been put in. Two out of the 3 serviceable Hudsons of 139 (now 62) Squadron, the only aircraft that could (refuelling at Akyab) make the range, were instructed to carry out an attack with the object of destroying and damaging all aircraft of this reconnaissance force. A determined low-flying attack was carried out in which 2 twin-engined boats were left burning, 1 four-engined flying boat left sinking and all the other flying boats were believed to be damaged. This attack was repeated on the 18th, when 2 Hudsons again attacked 12 four-engined flying boats. Two of these were destroyed and 3 severely damaged. On both occasions the enemy were moored in lines and the Hudsons carried out a number of mast-height runs on them using their turret

guns. On the 18th, Navy "O" fighters engaged our 2 aircraft—1 failed to return and the second was hit by cannon shell and machine gun fire. After these attacks this enemy reconnaissance force remained inactive. Not only during the critical time when some 70 of our ships made the passage through the Bay of Bengal, but until the end of July no activity by it was recorded.

PART IX.—CONCLUSION.

227. To summarize, during this air action which commenced on the 23rd December, a small Allied air force, consisting of 1 Squadron of the A.V.G., the equivalent of 2 Hurricane Squadrons, the equivalent of 1 Bomber Squadron, 2 Army Co-operation Bomber Squadrons and the equivalent of half a G.R. Squadron, engaged the Japanese air force in the defence of Rangoon and in the support of our Army in Tenasserim and Burma. But the early fall of Rangoon, diversion of reinforcements and the shortage of aircraft equipment prevented the air force building up to 16 Squadrons (6 Fighters, 7 Bombers, 2 Army Co-operation and 1 G.R.) and full maintenance promised on programme. Up to the fall of Rangoon—by which we lost our warning system and our organised airfields, in this vicinity—air superiority over Rangoon had been maintained and after its fall continued until the Magwe action on the 21st March.

228. During this period the enemy, finally unable to subject the base of Rangoon to unrestricted day bombing, which would have given him the best chance of surrounding and destroying the Army, turned his effort to defend his troops and aid their advance. In Tenasserim, enemy day bombing attacks were carried out on our forward troops and Headquarters. Although support was given, our attempts to prevent this bombing were not successful, it being impossible in the circumstances of poor warning and shortage of fighter equipment.

229. It is a remarkable fact that from February 25th—when the enemy's last attack to achieve air superiority over Rangoon failed—he would not face our fighter force until Rangoon was in his hands and considerable reinforcements had been flown into the country after the fall of Singapore. Consequently, this absolute state of air superiority remained over Rangoon at this critical time—and no "Namsos" here took place.

230. On March 21st he began his determined attack to stamp out our now fast dwindling air force at Magwe and Akyab. Having achieved this, although good bombing objectives were constantly present as our Army withdrew to India, he did not follow up his success by attacking our moving columns. Thus the casualties to our Army from enemy air action during withdrawal over great distances with poor cover from air attack were small. This may well have been because the enemy did not know the temporary success that he had achieved. The main weight of the enemy bomber attack was directed on such places as Prome, Mandalay and Maymyo, where great damage resulted with considerable moral effect on the civil population. The bases at Toungoo, Heho, Namsang, Lashio and Loiwing were constantly searched and attacked, though except at the latter there were no aircraft present.