

IV Corps was deployed. Further north still he was confronted by two Chinese Divisions based on Ledo, and beyond this we held positions as far as the River Salween with a small force based at Fort Hertz. The enemy's bases and lines of communication stretched for 900 miles from Bangkok to Myitkyina, over the whole length of which it was possible to attack him.

15. The security of sea communications meant that General Reconnaissance aircraft had to cover an area ranging from South Africa to Sumatra. The patrol of this vast expanse of sea contributed a problem that could only be met by the careful husbanding and disposition of the small forces available.

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16. The account of a campaign covering such a wide area and diversity of activities does not admit of chronological treatment. I have therefore dealt separately with each strand of the pattern of operations, commencing with the primary task, the maintenance of air superiority, and placing air transport operations next in view of the importance they were to assume.

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PART TWO

OPERATIONS

I.—THE MAINTENANCE OF AIR SUPERIORITY

17. The advent of Spitfires in Bengal early in November had already begun an era of successful interceptions in which the enemy discovered for the first time in this theatre the efficacy of modern fighter aircraft backed by a well developed system of warning and control.

18. The first squadrons (Nos. 615 and 607 A.A.F.) were based on Chittagong in order to protect and cover that vital port and to cover the Arakan front which was to be the scene of the first major battles of the campaign. Within the month the Spitfires destroyed four enemy photographic reconnaissance aircraft of the Dinah type whose excellent performance had hitherto allowed them to range with impunity over our forward bases at a height and speed which Hurricanes could not equal. The enemy reacted by sending out fighter sweeps to test the new arrivals and whittle down our Spitfire strength in order that he could once again range over the Arakan suffering only the minor casualties that Hurricanes could inflict. In both these objects he was unsuccessful, and by the end of December had lost twenty-two aircraft, probably lost seven and had suffered damage to twenty-six against our loss of thirteen. The greatest success scored in these raids was by No. 136 Squadron who, on the last day of the year, scored 12 destroyed, 3 probably destroyed, and 8 damaged against a mixed force of bombers and fighters which were attempting to attack light Naval forces off the Arakan coast. As a result of this victory the Secretary of State for Air signalled his congratulations and commented that the newly arrived Spitfires had come into good hands.

19. The one occasion the enemy could claim as a success at this time was a bold strike aimed at Calcutta with the double object of damaging port installations and demoralising the city. He divined that over a front of 700

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miles, defence in depth could not be so uniformly effective and that in the rear areas which included Calcutta, he would probably be met with Hurricanes. On 5th December he sent a mixed force of approximately sixty bombers and fighters in two waves which succeeded in bombing Calcutta for the loss of 2 destroyed, 1 probably destroyed, and 4 damaged, while the three and a half Hurricane squadrons (the half being night fighters) suffered five destroyed and six damaged. That the enemy put his maximum effort into the attack is evidenced by the fact that the second wave included Naval aircraft.

20. During January the Spitfire squadrons gained valuable experience in air fighting and tactics that was to stand them in good stead in the greater battles to come. The enemy continued to send fighter sweeps over the Arakan, but Spitfires were able to inflict casualties upon them in the ratio of eight to one. By this time two squadrons of Spitfire VIIIs (Nos. 81 and 152) had arrived from Middle East, and I now had at my disposal in the forward areas of Bengal four squadrons of Spitfires and nine of Hurricanes for fighter operations; the stage was thus set for the opening of the battle in Arakan on the 4th February. Anticipating our own ground offensive by four days the enemy launched an attack with the object of annihilating the 5th and 7th Indian Divisions and pressing on to capture Chittagong. This ambitious plan was attended by the most impressive measure of air support afforded by him in this theatre, sweeps by formations of fifty plus aircraft being reported daily. The objects of the J.A.F. appear to have been firstly to intercept our aircraft engaged on close support, secondly to increase the morale of his own troops and thirdly to give some measure of ground support by attacks on our positions and forward bases. As the battle developed, one other task assumed overriding priority for the enemy air forces. The 7th Indian Division, cut off from its supply bases, was being supplied wholly by air. It was of vital importance to the enemy that our supply-dropping aircraft should not succeed in this task, but the air superiority which we had established, the provision of standing patrols—particularly in the Kaladan Valley where, owing to the intervening hills, no radar cover below 10,000 feet was available—and resort to supply dropping by night enabled transport aircraft to maintain the beleaguered forces for the loss of only one Dakota (C.47) to enemy fighters.

21. The tactics which were employed to gain this dominance over the Arakan battle front centred around the three forward squadrons equipped with Spitfire Vs and a few Spitfire VIIIs. Hurricanes were used for airfield cover when Spitfires were re-fuelling and re-arming, and for standing patrols over possible target areas during hostile raids in case of a missed interception. The enemy countered by introducing the Tojo, whose performance exceeded that of the Oscar, adopting the defensive circle and splitting into small groups when the circle was broken. This brought them a relative measure of success inasmuch as their losses decreased whilst those of the Spitfires gradually increased.

22. The advantages of the Spitfire VIII in this battle were not immediately apparent, for