

enable the primary tasks of the Command, the re-opening of the land route to China and the clearance of Burma, to be accomplished.

6. The dry-weather campaign which was drawing to a close had brought few positive results. Only in the north-east had any territorial gains been made, and here General Stilwell's forces had cleared the Hukawng Valley and were in possession of Myitkyina airfield. In the Fourteenth Army sector, Imphal was still invested, though 33 Corps was driving the Japanese from the Kohima-Imphal road, and 4 Corps was attacking the Japanese in the Imphal plain. In Arakan, although one enemy offensive had been frustrated, the Japanese still held the Mayu peninsula and the rice port of Akyab. The other British forces operating on the offensive were the long-range penetration groups of Special Force.

7. The Air Forces, having just completed a period of intensive operations, were envisaging some retrenchment, a "reculer pour mieux sauter". An extensive programme of re-equipment was in train which would convert nine squadrons of Hurricanes to Thunderbolts, the two Wellington squadrons to Liberators, and four squadrons of Vengeances to Mosquitos. The relative sparsity of all-weather airfields in the forward areas entailed a withdrawal of these squadrons to bases in India for their conversion, and the monsoon campaign was undertaken with a total of 17 squadrons out of the line, re-equipping, resting or training. Having regard to the nature of monsoon conditions and of the fighting in progress, the forces remaining in the line were ample, nor indeed could any more be deployed. The net result was that the air component conducting tactical operations that culminated on all three sectors in the capture of springboards for a dry-weather assault, was a moderate, well-balanced force of experienced squadrons, versed in the ready identification of jungle targets and trained in close co-operation with the formations whom they were supporting.

* * * *

Plans for 1944-5 Operations.

8. The broad mission of S.E.A.C. was formulated at the Octagon conferences as . . . "the destruction or expulsion of all Japanese forces in Burma at the earliest date. Operations to achieve this object must not however prejudice the security of the existing air supply to China, including the air staging post at Myitkyina and the opening of overland communications with China".

9. The plans that were prepared to this end during the monsoon of 1944 envisaged an elaborate series of airborne assaults that did not appreciate the reliability and self-sufficiency of an army supplied unstintingly from the air. Indeed, had it then been suggested that Rangoon could be reached by an army travelling overland and supplied largely by air, the proposal would not have received serious consideration. The overall strategy can best be judged from the four main plans which were formulated during the 1944 monsoon:—

(i) Plan "X" involved an overland advance from the Mogaung-Myitkyina area to Katha and Bhamo, co-ordinated with

another advance from Imphal to the Chindwin and an airborne operation in the vicinity of Wuntho. The furthest penetration that was envisaged was the occupation of territory north of a line stretching between Kalewa and Lashio.

(ii) Plan "Y" intended to employ airborne troops in the seizure of Kalewa, and a second air landing at the point of debouchment into the Mandalay plain to exploit the confusion that would be caused.

(iii) Plan "Z" entailed an airborne assault in strength with all transport aircraft in the theatre immediately north of Rangoon, to capture the city.

(iv) General Stilwell's plan was for British forces to press forward towards Shwebo-Mandalay, while N.C.A.C.* profited by the diversion to occupy Bhamo, whence they could mount an airborne operation to capture Lashio.

10. The part that the Air Forces were to play in these operations was given in an Operational Directive in which the order of priorities was interesting, putting as it did close support and transport operations very low in the scale. In the event, a reorientation of tasks took place which gave greater emphasis to the work of close support and air supply. The results of such a shift in the centre of gravity to a machine geared to the classical form of air warfare involved changes in organisation, control, supply and maintenance which are discussed at more length in the appropriate context.

11. Plans "Y" and "Z" were approved in principle by the Chiefs of Staff in July and August, and called "Capital" and "Dracula" respectively. In point of fact, however, operations in Central Burma progressed more quickly than anticipated. Continually out-flanked by Allied forces, to whom the manna of air supply gave an unprecedented degree of mobility, and continually harried by our close support aircraft, the enemy was never allowed to consolidate the new positions that he occupied along the line of his retreat. Thus by January, the airborne aspect of "Capital" had been rendered unnecessary, a fact which caused great relief to the Allied Commanders, for it was increasingly evident that the transport aircraft to train for and launch the operation, scheduled for mid-February, would be difficult to find from existing resources.

12. Operation "Dracula" was to be the greatest airborne operation yet conceived, involving a fly-in over a distance of 480 miles by some 900 transport aircraft and 650 gliders. The necessity for retaining these forces in Europe, and their high attrition rate in operations there, precluded their re-deployment in this theatre as planned, and in October "Dracula" was postponed with the prospect of not being mounted until the winter of 1945-46.

13. The emphasis now lay on Central Burma operations. An advance to the Monywa-Mandalay area was considered to be the furthest point that could be reached before the 1945 monsoon. Exploitation further south was not thought to be practicable in view of the difficulties of supply. In the event, the

* Northern Combat Area Command.