

THE BURMA CAMPAIGN

Since the Japanese first invaded Burma from Siam, at Myawaddi, some 140 miles east of Rangoon, on January 21, the campaign has mostly been a mournful record of the steady progress of invading forces usually superior in numbers and equipment. Despite stiff resistance and occasional successful counter-attacks, the British and Indian troops have been forced back. The enemy has pushed across lower reaches of the Salween, Sittang and Irrawaddy rivers one after another and has occupied in turn Moulmein, Martaban, Rangoon (the capital) and Prome, before pushing north toward Mandalay, the principal city of Central Burma, and the important oil fields further west.

At the outset Burma was evidently held by only slender British forces inadequately supported from the air. In the earlier stages of the campaign it was not found possible to reinforce them sufficiently, and as the enemy pressed further west the difficulties of reinforcement and supply greatly increased, as the large measure of naval control which the Japanese established in the Bay of Bengal practically closed the sea route, and adequate land communications between India and Burma do not exist, although frantic efforts are now being made to provide them.

In these circumstances it was fortunate indeed that Britain had the Chungking National Government of China as an ally, and the Burma road, over which for years British and American war supplies have been sent to China in great quantities, proved a providential means of enabling Chinese military reinforcements to be poured into Burma to aid the British and Indian troops. These seem to have been sent mainly to Central Burma, and in the early stages they complained of inactivity and wanted to know why, while their Allies were badly handled by the enemy further south, they were not employed. With the advance of the enemy, however, the Chinese have come well within the radius of hostilities,

well within the radius of hostilities, and for weeks past they have seen plenty of fighting, in which, like the British and Indians, they have often found themselves inferior in numbers and equipment, including air support; and they seem fully to have maintained the reputation for stubborn resistance and refusal to admit defeat which they have earned during four years of fighting against the invaders in their own country.

It seems, indeed, to be principally due to the gallant efforts of the Chinese expeditionary force, under the American, General Sitwell, that the Japanese, after three months of almost unbroken success, have received their first serious check in Burma. About April 17 the Japanese captured the town of Yenang-yaung from the British, who were just able to complete the destruction of the adjacent oil wells before

being compelled to retire, and several thousand of them were surrounded by the enemy. It was at this stage that the Chinese came into the picture. After a forced march from their base 35 miles further north, they attacked and recaptured Yenang-yaung after fierce fighting lasting two days, in which they and the British inflicted heavy losses on the invaders in one of the bloodiest battles in Burma; and the encircled British were able to make an orderly withdrawal across the Pinchaung River.

The Chinese, so far as can be gathered from the cabled reports, now constitute the greater part of the Allied forces in Burma and are engaged on three active fronts—the Salween River, the Irrawaddy River and the Mandalay-Rangoon railway. It is a matter for deep regret that up to date these gallant Allies have been compelled to fight with “glaring” air inferiority. Indeed, most of the air support in Burma seems to have been given by the American volunteer group, which has a remarkable record of success in the air against heavy odds.

cess in the air against heavy odds. During the past few days, however, the Royal air force has come much more into the picture in Burma, and is increasingly active and aggressive. This would imply that it has received heavy reinforcements—General Wavell has announced that the air defences of India have been greatly strengthened and Burma should have participated in the distribution. If our air strength in Burma can be built up to and maintained at something like parity with that of the enemy, the prospects of the campaign should greatly improve, particularly now that the Japanese have been checked at Yenang-yaung.