

Burma

1941

24 July Japanese forces occupy southern French Indo China. The occupation of air and naval bases in the region allow the Japanese to launch aircraft and naval forces in support of their invasion of British Malaya and the Philippines.

26 July The US President, Franklin Roosevelt, seizes all Japanese assets in the US. Britain and the Dutch East Indies follow the US lead. The embargo resulted in Japan losing most of its imported oil and 75% of its overseas trade.

07 December The Imperial Japanese Navy attacks the US Naval Base in Pearl Harbour, Hawaii.

08 December Japanese troops invade Thailand. The Thai Government agree to Japanese demands for access through Thailand to invade Burma and Malaya.

15 – 16 December Japanese troops cross the border on the Kra Isthmus, the land bridge that links the Malayan Peninsula to the rest of South East Asia. Victoria point is taken giving the Japanese access to an air field in southern Burma.

21 December A mutual offensive/defensive pact is signed between Japan and the Thai Government. Japan now has access to the Thai railways, roads, airfields and naval bases.

23 December The first Japanese air raid on Rangoon. General Wavell (Commander in Chief, India) flies to Chungking to ask for help from the Chinese Government. The Chinese offer the 5th and 6th Armies. Civilians (mainly Indian) start to flee on foot to India.

25 December Rangoon is bombed for the second time by the Japanese.

1942

19 January A battalion of the Japanese 55th Division crosses into southern Burma from Eastern Thailand and takes the town of Tavoy and its airfield. The Japanese now hold 3 key airfields in southern Burma.

20 January The main body of the 30,000 strong 15th Army lead by General Ida, crosses the Thai border into Burma.

21 January General Wavell reports to London that a 'large scale effort against Burma seems improbable at the moment'.

22 January General Shojro Ida broadcasts to the Burmese people that he was going to 'sweep away British power which has been exploiting and oppressing you for 100 hundred years and to liberate all Burmese people and support your aspiration for independence'.

The Japanese 55th Division advances through the Kawkareik Pass forcing the 16th Indian Brigade (part of the 17th Indian Division) into a disorganised withdraw to new defensive positions around the town of Moulmein on the Salween River. Moving into Burma with the Japanese was 300 members of the Burmese Independence army who acted as guides and agitators stirring up the anti-British feeling amongst the general populace and nationalist Buddhist monks.

27 – 29 January The Japanese infiltrate the jungle surrounding Moulmein.

30 – 31 January Japanese attack Moulmein and after a fierce engagement the British withdraw to the other side of the Salween. Moulmein and its airfield are captured.

14 – 18 February The British, having retreated, attempt to defend the Bilan River fall back line. They hold the position for two days until the Japanese infiltration tactics threaten to encircle the defenders. The Burmese Government orders the compulsory evacuation of all Europeans and selected Asians from the country.

21 – 22 February The battered remnants of the 17th Indian Division reached the Sittang Bridge with the Japanese hard on their heels. During confused fighting around the bridge, the British manage to hold on and elements of the 17th Indian Division are able to get across to the relative safety of the other side. Fearing a Japanese paratrooper assault to seize the bridge, it was destroyed at 04.30am on the 22 March, stranding more than half of the Division on the wrong side of the Sittang. Fortunately, the Japanese were focused on crossing the river and capturing Rangoon, so found another a crossing place and ignored the survivors who swam or ferried themselves across to safety. All their equipment was left on the East bank.

28 February The Chinese take over the responsibility for defending the Shan States in Northern Burma.

6 – 7 March The Japanese advanced towards Rangoon and managed to set up a roadblock at Taukkyan to the North of the city this was to prevent the British garrison from escaping Rangoon.

8 March The British manage to force their way through the roadblock after fierce fighting. Around lunchtime the Japanese enter Rangoon and are surprised to find it deserted.

13 March General Alexander, newly appointed Army Commander in Chief, orders a withdrawal to the Prome area in central Burma.

16 March Lieutenant General W J 'Bill' Slim arrives in Central Burma to take command of the army in Burma which is now renamed 'Burcorps'.

21 – 27 March The RAF and the American Volunteer Group (Flying Tigers) are virtually wiped out by the Japanese Army Airforce. All surviving aircraft and personnel are withdrawn to India.

28 March – 02 April Japanese forces, now re-enforced by troops from Malaya, push into central Burma, attacking 'Burcorps' and the Chinese. Prome, an important town on the Irrawaddy River, falls on the 02 April. The 17th Indian Division manages to slip away Northwards.

2 – 8 April 'Burcorps' withdraws to a new defensive line south to the important oil fields at Yenangyaung. On the 03 April the Japanese bomb Mandalay, causing extensive damage and casualties.

14 – 16 April Demolition of the oil fields at Yenangyaung were completed. The Japanese having infiltrated around the town set up roadblocks to trap the garrison in the town and the first Burma infantry Division defending the southern perimeter.

17 – 19 April With Chinese support Slim manages to extricate the first Burma Infantry Division from the Yenangyaung pocket.

18 – 20 April Under severe Japanese pressure, the Chinese 6th Army falls apart, exposing Slim's Eastern flank to attack. The only option left for Slim was abandoning Burma and withdrawing what remained of his forces back into India before the monsoon rains made any retreat impossible.

26 April British Indian and Burmese troops join the 500,000 British, Burman and Indian refugees on the extremely arduous march to India, across some of the most inhospitable terrain in the world.

29 April Laisho falls, effectively closing the Burma Road. The allies now have to organise an airlift to maintain supplies to the Chinese.

1 – 10 May The Japanese take Mandalay which has been abandoned. The retreating 'Burcorps' crosses the Chindwin without most of its equipment and straggles into India at Imphal and Kohima. The Japanese take Akyab on the West Coast and by the end of May control all of Burma except Fort Hertz in the far North.

1942 – 1943

With extended supply lines and the need to consolidate their conquests, the Japanese did not continue their advance into India once the 1942 Monsoon had ended. The Allies, smarting from their defeat in Burma, conducted two offensive actions during the dry season. On 21 September 1942 an attempt was made to re-occupy the Mayu Peninsula and Akyab Island. The fighting continues until the 08 May 1943 when, out fought, the Allied force withdrew back to the Indian border, abandoning most of its equipment. The other operation was a long-range penetration into Burma with the intention of destroying the railway link between North and South Burma. Although casualties were heavy, the expedition proved that the Allies were as capable of fighting in the jungle.

In August 1943 the Allies created the South East Asia Command under Lord Louis Mountbatten. This coupled with Lieutenant General Bill 'Slims' reorganisation of the British Forces in North East India ensured that the Force, now renamed the Fourteenth Army, were well trained and supplied with all the equipment it needed. The Fourteenth Army reflected the British Commonwealth with troops from India, Britain, East Africa and West Africa.

1944 – 1945

In December 1943 the Fourteenth Army launched a second offensive to secure Arakan. Japanese defensives were strong and employing their usual tactics of infiltration, roadblocks and encirclement in order to keep their enemy off

balance. They anticipated that the Allies would cut and run. However, the Allies did not retreat but concentrated their forces into strong holds. The largest was known as 'The Admin Box' near Sinzweya. The Admin Box was sustained by the RAF which dropped supplies and carried out close support operations. All Japanese attacks were defeated and in February 1944 a relieving force broke through Japanese lines, and it was now they who withdrew.

Whilst the Japanese were withdrawing from Arakan, in the North they launched 'Operation U-Go', the invasion of India. The battles of Imphal and Kohima were vicious and hard-fought encounters but the Japanese offensive was weak in weaponry, fire power and supplies. Used to victory, the Japanese high command expected that their offensive action and decisiveness would be enough to force the Allies to run. This did not happen. Both Kohima and Imphal were besieged, but supplied from the air, they held on. On 22 June 1944 the siege of Kohima was lifted, and on the 31 July 1944 Imphal was also relieved. The Japanese retreat turned into a shambles and a diseased and starving Army withdrew into Burma. The defeat the Fourteenth Army had inflicted on the Japanese was the greatest in their countries history. A Japanese Foreign Office Official stated that 'most of this force perished in battle or later of starvation'. It is estimated that 60% of the Japanese Force became casualties.

The battle for India was over, and the reconquest was about to begin. Between January and March 1945 central Burma was retaken with Meiktila falling on the 5th March to the Seventeenth Indian Division who then defeated numerous Japanese counter attacks. Mandalay fell on the 20th March with central Burma under Allied control, Rangoon was the next objective. It fell on 1st May, luckily before the monsoon started.

By the end of the Burma campaign the Japanese had lost 185,000 men, a clear indication that Japanese Generalship had little regard for the lives of their men. It was also very good at killing Prisoners of War (POW) and civilians in the countries which fell under its control.