

## Reminiscences of the Long March

# Forced Crossing of the Tatu River

by Yang Teh-chih

IN May 1935, our Workers' and Peasants' Red Army, after crossing the Chinsha River, entered Huili in southwestern Szechuan Province and reached Mienning via Tehchang and Luku. I was then commander of the First Regiment of the First Army Group's First Division which took on the glorious task of being the advance unit. To strengthen leadership and increase combat effectiveness, the Military Commission appointed Comrades Liu Po-cheng and Nieh Jung-chen commander-in-chief and political commissar respectively of the advance unit and placed the army group's engineer company and artillery company under the command of the First Regiment.

### Glorious Mission

We were given the mission of forcing the Tatu River at Anshunchang in Hanyuan by our superiors. Though it was raining, we immediately set out from a village some 160 *li* south of the river.

The Tatu is a tributary of the Minchiang River. The section that flows past Anshunchang was said to be where Shih Ta-kai of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom [see footnote in "Looking Back on the Long March" in issue No. 45, 1975] and his army met their doom. Now we, too, were in a very precarious position with several hundred thousand Chiang Kai-shek's troops hard at our heels and two Szechuan warlords' "crack forces" defending all the ferry landings along the river. Chiang Kai-shek arrogantly bragged that, sandwiched between the Chinsha and Tatu Rivers and blocked and attacked by his several hundred thousand troops, the Communist forces could never escape even if they had wings. He even dreamt of making our army a second Shih Ta-kai.

After a whole day and night march in the rain, we stopped a dozen *li* from Anshunchang on a hillside where the turbulent Tatu could be heard. The fighters were so exhausted from the 140-*li* forced march that they fell asleep the moment they bedded down. It was already past ten at night, so I hurriedly sent for several villagers to give us some information.

What they told us more or less tallied with our own reconnaissance findings. Up ahead, Anshunchang was a small town of nearly 100 households, guarded by two enemy companies to stop us from crossing the river.

Except for one kept for their own use, all the boats had either been taken away or destroyed. Stationed on the other side of the river opposite the town was an enemy regiment whose main force was deployed 15 *li* down the river from the ferry landing. There also were three "backbone regiments" in the city of Luting on the upper reaches and two regiments belonging to another Szechuan warlord on the lower reaches. To cross the river, therefore, we must first capture Anshunchang and seize the boats.

Hardly had we got the situation clear when the command post ordered: Launch a surprise attack on the enemy defending Anshunchang today, seize the boats and force the river. Commander-in-Chief Liu Po-cheng and Political Commissar Nieh Jung-chen instructed us in particular: "The lives of tens of thousands of Red Army men hinge on this crossing! You must surmount every difficulty to fulfil the task and force a way out for the whole army to win victory!"

After reading the order, Regimental Political Commissar Comrade Li Lin expressed the firm determination of all when he said: "We are not Shih Ta-kais but the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army led by the Communist Party and Chairman Mao! There is no enemy we cannot vanquish and no natural barrier we cannot break through. We are resolved to write another brilliant chapter in the history of the Chinese revolution right here on the Tatu River."

### Prelude to Victory

After being awakened, the fighters continued their march in the dark despite a drizzle.

According to our plan, Political Commissar Li was to lead the Second Battalion to feint an attack somewhere down the stream from the Anshunchang ferry so as to lure the main force of the enemy regiment there, while I would take the First Battalion to storm Anshunchang and then force the river. The Third Battalion would stay behind as rear guard to provide cover for the command post.

It was pitch dark and the rain came down without letup. We had covered a dozen *li* along a muddy trail and got near Anshunchang when I ordered the First Battalion to advance by three routes.

The enemy garrison at Anshunchang never expected the Red Army to get there so soon. Thinking we had not yet passed through the areas inhabited by national minorities, they were completely off guard.

"Who goes there?" enemy sentinels challenged on encountering our "dagger platoon."

"We're the Red Army! Drop your guns, or we'll fire!" With this reply which was like a bolt from the blue, our fighters pounced on them.

Banging away, the enemy opened fire, which touched off ours blazing from all sides. The rat-a-tat of shots drowned out the Tatu's roaring water and the enemy's screams. Enemy troops who refused to give up were shot dead, some of those still alive were taken prisoner while others turned tail. Two enemy companies were completely put out of action in less than 30 minutes.

While the battle was on, I arrived at a house by the roadside. From it suddenly came a shout "Who is it?" Noticing there was something fishy about the voice, my orderly cocked his rifle and yelled back: "Don't move! Lay down your arms, or I'll fire!" Unaware of what was happening, the enemy troops inside obediently surrendered. It turned out that they were in charge of the ferry-boat that had been left behind. I immediately told the orderly to take the prisoners to the First Battalion headquarters and get the boat without delay.

After great efforts, the battalion got the boat which became the only means we could count on to cross the river.

With Anshunchang in our hands, I went to the riverside where the Tatu was about 300 metres wide and a dozen metres deep, with mountains on both sides. The swift water billowed against the reefs. Without boatmen and proper preparations, it was indeed difficult to cross right away. To gain time, I got down to making the necessary preparations while reporting to my superiors and asking for instructions. I was up all night in a small house on a street corner, now pacing up and down and now sitting by the oil lamp, and thought over all the problems relating to crossing the Tatu.

The idea of swimming across came to my mind first. But considering the width of the river, its rapids, billows and whirlpools, anyone who jumped in was liable to be swept away in no time.

Then I thought of throwing up a bridge. After careful calculations, however, I saw that it would be difficult to drive a pole into the riverbed, let alone a pile, since the flow rate was four metres a second. Racking my brains, I saw no other way than using that boat. So I told the First Battalion commander to look for boatmen.

He sent many of his men into the surrounding hills. By the time a dozen or so boatmen were found, the sun was already up.

### Seventeen Brave Fighters

The rain stopped at dawn. White clouds drifted in the blue skies and the rain-washed cliffs loomed larger than ever. The turbulent river roared as it swept along. Using field glasses, I could see everything in the distance clearly: About one *li* from the ferry landing on the opposite bank was a small village of four or five households walled in about waist high and there were several pillboxes among the soot-black boulders close by. We estimated that the main enemy force was lying in ambush there, obviously ready to drive us back into the river by a counter-charge when we approached the landing.

"Take preemptive action!" Having made up my mind, I ordered the artillery company to place three 82 mm. mortars and several heavy machineguns at vantage points and every light machinegunner and sharp shooter was to take up his position along the bank.

With firepower thus organized, the question remained how to cross the river. Since a small boat couldn't ferry too many people at a time, it was necessary to get across first a shock detachment of staunch and courageous fighters. Again the First Battalion commander was given the task of selecting the qualified men.

The news soon spread and the fighters all crowded around him asking to be in the detachment. They would not go away without a promise no matter how hard the commander tried to explain.

When asked what to do, I was both happy and worried. Happy, because ours were all brave soldiers; worried, because no time was to be lost. I decided to focus the selection on one unit.

The First Battalion commander decided to choose from the second company. Lining up in the open, everyone in the company pricked up his ears when the battalion commander read out the approved list: "Company leader Hsiung Shang-lin; second platoon leader Tseng Ling-ming; third squad leader Liu Chang-fa, deputy leader Chang Keh-piao; fourth squad leader Kuo Shih-tsang, deputy leader Chang Cheng-chiu; fighters Chang Kuei-cheng, Hsiao Han-yao. . . ." Sixteen courageous fighters stepped forward and fell into a new line. Tough and serious, they all were outstanding cadres and fighters in the second company.

Suddenly one fighter burst into tears, dashing out of the ranks and shouting: "I want to go! I must go!" Taking a closer look, I saw that he was the company orderly. The battalion commander looked at me with great excitement. And I was deeply moved, too. What a good fighter! I nodded approvingly to the commander and he announced: "All right!" Breaking into a broad smile, the orderly raced off to join the sixteen.

The shock detachment was thus formed with Comrade Hsiung Shang-lin as the leader and each armed

with a sword, a sub-machinegun, a pistol and five or six grenades as well as other necessary equipment.

### Forced Crossing

Finally came the time for Hsiung Shang-lin to take his sixteen comrades aboard the ferry-boat.

"Comrades! The Red Army's hopes are on you. Be determined to cross the river and wipe out the enemy on the other bank!"

Amidst heart-warming encouragement, the boat left the south bank.

The terrified enemy troops opened up on the boat.

"Fire!" I ordered the artillery. Comrade Chao Chang-cheng, a crack marksman who had already zeroed in on the enemy fortifications, blew up a pillbox with two well-placed shells. Our machineguns and rifles let loose with withering fire. While shells rained on enemy pillboxes and machineguns laid down a cross-fire, the boatmen rowed with all their might.

Riding on the turbulent waves, the boat cleaved forward amid splashing water whipped up by bullets. All of us on the bank watched it with great anxiety.

Suddenly, a shell exploded near the boat, churning up a towering wave that violently shook the small craft.

Tensed up, I watched the boat toss up and down several times and then balance on its keel again.

It continued speeding towards the north bank when enemy troops entrenched in the hills concentrated their fire in an attempt to block the boat's advance. But the seventeen dauntless men pressed forward, cutting through big waves and braving the hail of bullets.

A burst of fire hit the boat and I could see through the glasses that one fighter hastily pressed one hand on his arm.

"What's the matter with him?" Before I had time to think further, I saw the boat plunge headlong for scores of metres and bump against a huge reef.

"Hard luck!" I muttered, my eyes riveted on the boat. Several boatmen pushed against the rocks with their hands as white foam swirled all around it. If it were to plunge further towards the whirlpool below the reef, it would surely capsiz.

I couldn't help shouting to them: "Hold on!" All the others joined me in encouraging the comrades on board.

Just then, four boatmen jumped into the rushing torrent, holding the boat in position with their backs, while other four boatmen on board used bamboo poles to anchor it. Thanks to their herculean efforts, the boat continued to head for the opposite bank.

When the vessel was barely five or six metres from the bank, the fighters, defying the enemy's frenzied fire, sprang to their feet, ready to jump ashore.

Suddenly a group of enemy troops came charging from the village and closed in on the ferry landing. They obviously intended to wipe out our shock detachment on the shore.

"Shell them!" I ordered the gunners at the top of my voice.

Two mortar shells fired by Comrade Chao Chang-cheng boomed and burst right in the midst of the enemy troops. He was followed by Comrade Li Teh-tsai who finished off one enemy soldier after another with his heavy machinegun.

Shouts of "Hit! Hit hard!" resounded everywhere on the bank. The enemy was routed, fleeing in panic.

"Fire! Extend fire!" I gave the order again.

Under cover of our fierce gunfire, the boat finally got to the bank. Leaping ashore with lightning speed, the seventeen brave fighters beat back an enemy onslaught with grenades and sub-machineguns and occupied the fortified works at the landing.

Unreconciled, the enemy counter-attacked, trying to force the detachment back into the river before it secured its foothold. Again our shells and bullets showered down on the enemy, inflicting heavy casualties. Taking advantage of the clouds of smoke, the daring seventeen slashed away with their swords. Thrown into confusion, the enemy troops ran north to the other side of the hills. The ferry was thus completely in our hands.

Shortly afterwards, the boat returned to the south bank to ferry the machinegunners across. They were led by the commander of the First Battalion. I crossed the river soon after them. It was already dark and the boatmen rowed faster to get one boat-load of Red Army men after another across. While pursuing the fleeing foe, we captured two more boats on the lower reaches of the river. Thus our follow-up units crossed the Tatu without meeting any resistance.

The successful forcing of the Tatu River by the Red Army's First Regiment co-ordinated and provided strong support for the army group on the left wing in seizing Luting Bridge. Before long the bridge was taken by the Fourth Regiment, thus enabling the entire Red Army to cross the Tatu. Chiang Kai-shek's pipe dream of making our army a second Shih Ta-kai vanished like a soap bubble. The heroic feat of the seventeen valiant fighters who forced the Tatu will be remembered for generations to come.

The victory of this operation is to be attributed to the wise leadership of the Party Central Committee and Chairman Mao, the correct command of our leading comrades Liu Po-cheng and Nieh Jung-chen, the people's unstinting support and the courage and tenacity of the commanders and fighters of the First Regiment who resolutely carried out the orders of their superiors. This historical fact vividly tells us that so long as we follow Chairman Mao's teachings and act according to his instructions, we can overcome every difficulty in our march forward and be ever victorious.