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Reminiscences of the Long March

Laying the Cornerstone

by Hsu Hai-tung

A new situation arose as soon as the Long March was over. In the battle of Chihlochen the Central Red Army and the Northwestern Red Army, fighting in fraternal solidarity, shattered the traitor Chiang Kai-shek's campaign of "encirclement and suppression" against the Shensi-Kansu border area and thus laid the cornerstone for the task undertaken by the Central Committee of the Party, the task of setting up the national headquarters of the revolution in northwestern China.

Mao Tsetung: *On Tactics Against Japanese Imperialism.*

IT was late November, 1935, and a freezing northern Shensi winter had already set in.

"Win victory to welcome the Central Red Army!"

With this slogan as inspiration, the 15th Army Group of the Red Army occupied Changtsunyi, southwest of Fuhsien County, broke into Tungtsun and, at one stroke, wiped out two small adjacent positions. When the battle was over, the Central Red Army led by Chairman Mao arrived in the vicinity of Tungtsun, and the 15th Army Group joined forces with it. This glorious event greatly heartened the 15th Army Group comrades. The Central Red Army, whose coming we had looked forward to day and night, was at last here at our side!

The Red Army's triumphant arrival in northern Shensi at the end of the Long March proclaimed the bankruptcy of the scheme hatched by the imperialists

and Chiang Kai-shek to destroy the Red Army, and presaged a new high tide of the Chinese revolution. The headquarters of the Chinese revolution was to be set up in northwestern China. To this end Chairman Mao, immediately upon his arrival in northern Shensi, worked out an overall plan for a battle of annihilation, that is, the battle of Chihlochen.

Open the Bag

The situation on the northern Shensi front was this: After the Laoshan and Yulinchiao victories won by the Red Army stationed in northern Shensi, the enemy organized five divisions for a new attack. A division on the east route drove northward by way of Lochuan and Fuhsien, while the other four divisions on the west route followed the Hulu River towards Fuhsien, northern Shensi, via Chingyang and Hoshui in Kansu. To smash the attack, Chairman Mao decided to con-

concentrate the northern Shensi joint forces of the Red Army to deal the enemy a head-on blow in and around Chihlochen. He instructed us to examine the terrain prior to making dispositions.

Following this instruction, the Central Red Army and 15th Army Group officers above-regimental level met west of Changtsunyi and set off for Chihlochen that very day.

Reaching Chihlochen some 15 kilometres away in less than an hour on horseback, we dismounted and climbed to the top of a hill southwest of the town to get a bird's-eye view of the place and its environs. This small town of less than a hundred houses was surrounded by hills on three sides. It was bisected by the main thoroughfare running east and west like a white ribbon. At its east end we could see a little old fortification; the houses within had collapsed but most of its stone wall was intact. A small stream flowed quietly through the northern part of the town. Through our field glasses we studied the roads, hilltops, villages and rivers in the area. Every hillock, young tree, narrow ditch or lone structure was noted; nothing escaped the commanders' scrutiny. We realized that to overlook a single ditch or mound could add unforeseen difficulties later during the battle. We whispered while surveying:

"This is certainly favourable terrain!"

"When the enemy enters Chihlochen, it's like getting into a bag!"

Walking from one height to another, we reached a conclusion after careful reconnaissance: Let the enemy enter Chihlochen, then wipe them out. We decided to demolish the small fortification in advance to make sure they could not use it as a stronghold. After the disposition was finalized, the 15th Army Group sent a battalion to pull down the fort that night. Fighting orders were not issued, but by their own experience the fighters guessed that a battle would be fought there before long. They knew full well — the more sweat in peace, the less blood in battle. Therefore, regardless of fatigue, they hacked at the walls until they were down. Captive soldiers who had recently been reorganized into our ranks were mystified:

"Is the enemy really coming?"

"They're coming all right, that's Chairman Mao's calculation," answered one of the veteran fighters.

Battle of Annihilation

In anticipation of a big victory, our first since joining forces, the 15th Army Group stationed one platoon in Chihlochen to stand watch while the main force remained in Changtsunyi making energetic preparations. Cadres at various levels went among the rank and file to organize the combat. We raised the slogans: "Win victory to celebrate the joining of forces!" "Welcome Chairman Mao with a victorious battle!"

The Red Army was energetic and brisk and everything was ready. On the third afternoon, under cover of six planes, enemy troops came to Chihlochen just as

expected. They were led by Niu Yuan-feng, commander of the 109th Division.

Chairman Mao issued the order that evening. According to the planned disposition, the Central Red Army and the 15th Army Group were to reach Chihlochen by forced march and mount the siege before daybreak, the former driving from the north, the latter from the south. Both Chairman Mao and Vice-Chairman Chou En-lai came in person to command the battle. Chairman Mao's command post was on a hilltop not far from Chihlochen. Before the battle, Chairman Mao made a point of reminding the responsible comrades to fight a battle of annihilation without fail. When the battle was on, he admonished them once more: "It's to be a battle of annihilation!"

At dawn, the Red Army descended upon Chihlochen from the hills to the south and the north and pounded it like two iron fists. The enemy was prepared to defend it, but hadn't expected us to get there so soon. The hills on two sides of Chihlochen were already in our hands by the time they discovered their plight. Gunfire from the south sent them scampering north, volleys from the north sent them rushing back south again. Sandwiched in between two hills, the 109th Division sent up such a wild din of shouting and firing that the whole gully reverberated. Our heavy onslaught dispersed the enemy troops, and one after another they surrendered. Those who resisted fell under our bullets.

Thus a pincer-drive of less than two hours ended in the capture of Chihlochen, where the enemy divisional headquarters was stationed. Niu Yuan-feng was forced to retreat to the small fortification at the town's east end, where he put up a stubborn resistance with hardly more than a battalion of men.

The fortification which we had demolished had been rebuilt by the enemy immediately upon arrival the previous afternoon. It was easy to defend, but hard to attack because of the tricky terrain. The unit which we sent to attack it failed to dislodge its occupants. As the second attack was being organized, a messenger reported: "Vice-Chairman Chou is here."

The sun was already high in the sky by then. We watched Vice-Chairman Chou come down the hill with some other comrades. Along the way they stopped to study the enemy fortification through their binoculars. When they arrived the Vice-Chairman shook hands with each of us and inquired in detail about the first attack. On leaving he gave the instruction: The enemy troops are like turtles in a jar. If it's difficult to attack them right now, just besiege them for the time being. They have neither grain nor water, so sooner or later they are bound to make a break for it. Do your best to wipe them out in action.

The gunfire gradually died down; captured arms and ammunition lay in piles on the hillsides and in the town; captive soldiers stood around in groups here and there. The Red Army fighters were thrilled with the joy of victory.

Ensnconced in the fort, Niu Yuan-feng, commander of the enemy 109th Division, sent one message after another to Tung Ying-ping for help. Little did he know that the 106th Division sent by Tung had been routed on its way to Chihlochen, and one of its regiments annihilated by the Red Army.

That night, giving up all hope of reinforcements, Niu and his remaining men broke through the siege and fled west. Hot on their heels, the fighters of our 75th Division pledged: "We'll grab him and bring him back!"

Niu Yuan-feng and his men, not many more than a battalion all told, met their end 13 kilometres away on a hill southwest of Chihlochen. Niu himself was captured.

"A battle in which the enemy is routed is not basically decisive in a contest with a foe of great strength. A battle of annihilation, on the other hand, produces a great and immediate impact on any enemy. Injuring all of a man's ten fingers is not as effective as chopping off one, and routing ten enemy divisions is not as effective as annihilating one of them." (Mao Tsetung: *Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War*.)

The battle of Chihlochen once more testified to the greatness and correctness of Chairman Mao's military thinking. The annihilation of the 109th Division and one regiment of the 106th Division completely foiled the enemy's plan to attack northern Shensi, and forced the enemy's 108th and 111th Divisions to retreat to Kansu Province; while its 117th Division which tried to invade from the east also retreated from Fuhsien County. A new situation emerged in the Red area in northern Shensi.

New Situation, New Tasks

Chihlochen was ours. We left the battlefield with trophies and prisoners. At night, as we passed by the village Chairman Mao was staying in, we could see the light still shining in his cave-dwelling. He had been terribly busy these days — why was his room still lit at this small hour?

Approaching the entrance with a feeling of respect and affection, I asked the comrade on guard:

"Hasn't Chairman Mao gone to bed yet?"

"He doesn't sleep at night. . . ." He showed me in.

Chairman Mao was working intently under an oil lamp, a worn blue cotton overcoat draped over his shoulders. Spread out on the table was an old map to the scale of 1:300,000. Apparently our next move was in the offing; Chairman Mao was planning a new campaign.

Putting down his pencil, Chairman Mao offered me his large, firm hand and said with a smile: "You've been fighting hard!"

"It's so late," I said, "and you haven't gone to bed yet!"

"I'm used to it," Chairman Mao said. "How's everything? Have all the troops pulled out?"

He spoke briefly about the significance of this victory and the enemy's present position. He went on to inquire with great concern about our casualties and where the wounded were being put up. As I was leaving he asked me to make sure the fighters all washed their feet and had a good rest. I was deeply impressed by his sincere consideration for the troops and by his meticulous, down-to-earth working style.

It was already midnight when I set out on horseback. After covering a fairly long distance, I looked back to find the light still shining in Chairman Mao's room.

Soon the troops moved south of Fuhsien County to Yangchuanyuan, where a meeting was held to celebrate the victory. Both the Central Red Army and the 15th Army Group sent delegations to visit each other.

At a cadres' meeting held in Tungtsun on November 30, Chairman Mao made a report entitled "The Battle of Chihlochen, the Current Situation and Our Tasks." Touching on the significance of this battle he said: This victory thoroughly shattered the third enemy campaign of encirclement and attack in northern Shensi, and laid the cornerstone for the Party Central Committee and the Red Army to set up a vast base area in the northwest and to push forward the nationwide War of Resistance Against Japan.

Chairman Mao explained the reasons why we won: First, the joining of the two Red Army forces and their solidarity (this was fundamental); second, grasping of the strategically and tactically crucial pivot (Hulu River and Chihlochen); third, thorough preparation before the battle; and fourth, our close links with the masses.

We pointed out: The most important reason must be added — Chairman Mao's correct military thinking and wise command.

In his report, Chairman Mao also analysed the international and domestic situations in detail. He explained that Japanese imperialism was then attacking north China with the aim of swallowing up the whole of China. The Kuomintang was convening a traitorous meeting in Nanking. Our victory announced to Japanese imperialism that we would not allow it to subjugate north China and the country as a whole; our victory also announced to the Kuomintang that its policy of national betrayal was impermissible. The Red Army, shoulder to shoulder with the people of the whole country, would use its guns and blood to defeat Japanese imperialism. . . .

Chairman Mao's stirring voice and clear, eloquent words were imprinted in the hearts of each and every Red Army cadre. His words also found an echo in the hearts of the people of the whole country, and expressed the determination of every Red Army fighter to resist Japanese aggression and save the country.