

## 16.1 COMMUNIST SURVIVAL: THE TALE OF THE LUDING BRIDGE, 1935

Between 1928 and 1934, the Nanjing government launched five "Bandit Extermination" (*jiaofei*) campaigns against the Jiangxi Soviet. The first four of these campaigns were successfully countered by the guerilla tactics of the Red Army. In the Fifth Extermination Campaign in the late summer and fall of 1934, however, Nanjing mobilized an army of nearly two million men and adopted a strategy of encirclement that steadily reduced the size of the Jiangxi Soviet.

To escape the ring of steel that was closing down on them in Jiangxi, Bo Gu, then the general secretary of the Communist party, and the German adviser Otto Braun decided to launch a breakout. In October 1934, some one hundred thousand men and women fought their way through a vulnerable part of the Nationalist lines and began the famous Ten Thousand Li Long March to safety in northwestern China. In a grim, year-long epic of endurance, most of the Long Marchers died. Reduced by combat with Guomindang troops and some six thousand miles of forced marching over some of the most rugged and desolate terrain in China, only ten thousand survivors arrived in Shaanxi in the fall of 1935. But through their relocation to Yan'an, Communism in China survived, as a movement and an idea. Later, in a celebrated reference to the Long March, Mao Zedong wrote that it was "a manifesto, a propaganda force, a seeding-machine." As years passed the epic story of the Long March, with its episodes of heroism and self-sacrifice, was evoked again and again, particularly by the survivors of the March who now led the party, to symbol-

ize, with almost mythic force, the commitment, the courage, and the inner vitality of the Chinese Communist party and its army.

In this selection, Yang Chengwu, a Red Army regimental commander in 1935 and later the chief of staff of the Chinese Air Force, describes an especially hair-raising moment during the Long March. Although his account undoubtedly embroiders the Communist army's heroism, it nonetheless captures the drama and risk of this episode in the Long March. Less than a century before, a Taiping army had been destroyed at the Anshunchang crossing and the Communist army might have faced a similar fate if the Luding Bridge had not been secured through resourceful leadership and suicide tactics, the Communists were able to make a perilous crossing of the Luding Bridge and continue their meandering journey to Yan'an.

On May 25, 1935, the First Regiment of the Red Army's First Division made a successful crossing of the Dadu River at Anshunchang. The current was too rapid to permit the building of a bridge there, and it would take many days to transfer our thousands of men to the other side, as only a few small boats were available to serve as ferries.

Chiang Kai-shek had ordered Yang Sen and other Szechuan warlords to rush up their troops and prevent our crossing. . . . Decades before, the famous general of the Taiping Revolution, Shih Dakai, and his army had been annihilated by the Ching soldiers at Anshunchang. Chiang Kai-shek had dreams of causing the Red Army to meet a similar fate. It was imperative to capture the bridge at Luding and ensure swift crossing of the river to prevent encirclement by the enemy. At such a critical moment, this task was given to the vanguard Fourth Regiment of our left-route army. The First Division, our right-route army, which had already crossed the river, would advance north along the east bank of the river in co-ordination with our efforts to capture Luding Bridge. . . .

After we had occupied several buildings and a Catholic church to the west of the bridge, our men prepared for the coming battle. When Regimental Commander Wang and I went out with the battalion and company officers to study the location, we were taken aback by the difficulties to be overcome. The reddish waters, cascading down the mountain gorges of the river's upper reaches, pounded against ugly boulders rising from the river bed and tossed white foam high into the air. The roar of the rushing torrent was deafening. In such a current even a fish could not keep steady for long. Fording or crossing in boats was out of the question.

We examined the bridge. It was made of 13 iron chains, each link as thick as a rice bowl. Two chains on each side served as hand-railings, while the other nine formed a cat-walk. Planks had originally been laid across the nine chains but were now gone, taken away by the enemy, and only the black swinging

chains remained. At the head of the bridge two lines of a poem were inscribed on a stone slab:

*Towering mountains flank Luding Bridge,  
Their summits rising a thousand li into the clouds.*

The town of Luding was built half along the shore and half on the mountain slope, located directly beyond the eastern end of the bridge and surrounded by a wall more than seven meters high. Its west gate faced the end of the bridge. Luding was garrisoned by two enemy regiments, and strong fortifications had been built along the mountain slope. Machine-gun emplacements close to the bridge kept us in continual fire, and mortar shells rained down on us.

The enemy soldiers were confident that their position was impregnable and yelled sneeringly: "Let's see you fly over! We'll give you our arms if you can do it!"

Our soldiers shouted back: "We don't want your weapons. It's the bridge we want!"

Back from our survey we soon set a battalion in position to seal off the narrow path and prevent the movement of any enemy reinforcements on the eastern bank of the river. That was the only path between the mountainside and the river along which they could come. Then we went among our companies to begin our battle rallies. Enthusiasm ran high, each company submitting a list of volunteers for an assault party, and each wanting the men of their particular unit to be given the task of taking the bridge.

All the officers of the regiment met in the church at noon to decide on the composition of the assault party. Discussion had just started when enemy mortar shells blew a big hole in the roof of the building where we gathered. Shell fragments and bits of broken tile showered down on us, but not one of us moved.

"The enemy is urging us on," I said. "We must drive across the bridge immediately. Now let's decide which company shall be responsible for the assaults."

Liao Ta-chu, commander of the Second Company, jumped to his feet. A quick man, he forced himself to speak, his dark, sunburned face flushed with effort, and his short wiry frame trembled with excitement as he said:

"The First Company was commended as a model for their forced crossing of the Wuchiang River. We'd like to emulate them and distinguish ourselves in the battle to take Luding Bridge."

"You've got to give the assault mission to the Third Company," interrupted Yang Yu-tsai, the quick-tempered commander of that company, spluttering like a machine-gun. "Our Third Company has done well in every battle. We guarantee to take Luding Bridge." Standing as solid as an iron turret, he added

plaintively, "If you do not give the assault mission to the Third Company, I dare not go back and face my men."

A heated debate followed, no company willing to yield to another. It was left to the leaders to decide. Commander Wang and I talked it over. Then he stood up and announced that the Second Company would be given the mission. I then rose and said:

"If it's fighting you want, there's plenty more to come. You'll each get your chance. At the Wuchiang River it was the First Company that led off; this time we'll let the Second Company start. The assault party will be formed of twenty-two men, Communists and non-Party activists, and will be led by Company Commander Liao. It seems like a good arrangement to me. What do the rest of you think?"

The response was a burst of applause from all present. Commander Liao jumped for joy. Only the Third Company commander was not satisfied. "The Third Company's job is not easy either," I assured him. "You have to go over directly behind the Second Company and lay planks across those chains so that the rest of the men can charge into the town. Is that all right?" The commander smiled.

Men fight better on a full stomach, so I told the company commanders to give each man a good meal. After the meeting, Lo Hua-sheng, secretary of the general Party branch, went to the Second Company to help with their preparations for the assault.

The attack began at four in the afternoon. The regimental commander and I directed it from the west end of the bridge. The buglers of the regiment gathered together to sound the charge, and we opened up with every weapon we had. The blare of the bugles, the firing and the shouts of the men reverberated through the valley. The 22 heroes, led by Commander Liao, crept across on the swaying bridge chains in the teeth of intense enemy fire. Each man carried a tommy-gun or a pistol, a broadsword and 12 hand-grenades. Behind them came the men of the Third Company, each carrying a plank in addition to full battle gear. They fought and laid planks at the same time.

Just as the assault party reached the bridgehead on the opposite side, huge flames sprang into the sky outside the town's west gate. The enemy was trying to throw a fire barrier across our path. The blaze, reddening the sky, licked fiercely around the end of the bridge.

The outcome of the attack hung by a hair. Our assault party hesitated for a few seconds and the men standing by the regimental commander and me shouted in unison: "It's a critical moment, comrades! Charge in! The enemy is crushed!" The shouts gave the heroes courage, confidence and strength. With the clarion call of the bugles, our assault party swiftly plunged into the flames. Commander Liao's cap caught fire. He threw it away and fought on. The others also dashed through the flames, closely behind Liao. In the street fighting that

followed, the enemy brought their full weight to bear, determined to wipe out our assault party. Our gallant men fought until all their bullets and grenades were spent. There was a critical pause as the Third Company came charging to their rescue. Then Regimental Commander Wang and I sped across the bridge with our reinforcements and entered the town. Within two hours we had destroyed the greater part of the two enemy regiments while the remainder fled in panic. By dusk we had completely occupied the town of Luding and were in control of the bridge.