

THE CHINESE ARMY
AS A
MILITARY FORCE.

BY LAWRENCE IMPEY.

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SECOND
AND ENLARGED EDITION

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CHAPTER ONE.

Recent events throughout China seem to indicate that sooner or later there will be a definite clash between the military forces of the Republic and the armies of some foreign Power or Powers. This struggle appears to be inevitable not so much from animosities existing between the Chinese and any alien race as from the ultimate force of economic conditions, which, unless some measure of birth control comes into play, will compel an overpopulated East to wage an economic war upon the commercialised West. Granting this premise, it is of the utmost interest to gather together what data is available on the military forces of China, and from this to obtain some idea of their strength and the probable outcome of any conflict with a foreign Power or Powers.

Such an estimate can best be derived from a consideration of the civil war of 1924 between

Marshals Chang Tso-lin and Wu Pei-fu, leading the Fengtien and Chihli forces respectively, and as the writer was attached to Marshal Wu Pei-fu's Staff Headquarters during the whole struggle in the capacity of special war correspondent he ventures to examine below the conditions existing in and the efficiency of the Chinese army as it appeared to him during this interesting period. In this connection it is particularly necessary to remember that the war was in reality the first genuine test to which the bulk of the army had been subjected, from the point of view of the military standards of other nations, for the other civil war of 1922 was so brief and one combatant party so inefficient that no judgment as to the real value of a Chinese fighting unit could be formed. The only opinion regarding that struggle which has remained in the writer's mind after the lapse of three years is to the effect that the quality of the troops of General Feng Yu-hsiang was in the main responsible for the defeat of Marshal Chang Tso-lin and the unexpectedly sudden victory of Wu Pei-fu, though it must be admitted that the strategy of the campaign with its night march and flank attack was formulated by Marshal Wu and that much of the credit is therefore due to him. It is unfortunate that the recent struggle has afforded no opportunity of proving or disproving the excellence of General Feng Yu-hsiang's soldiers, for beyond a route march to the Jehol area at the beginning of the war and the spectacular coup d'etat by which Peking was seized on October 23rd and the government of the Chihli party overthrown, these divisions

had practically nothing to do with the conduct of the war in the sense of military conflict. It must seem somewhat extraordinary to the ordinary observer that an army composed of some of the best troops in China could thus remain inactive during the whole of a campaign, but it may be pointed out in this connection that the conditions prevailing in the Chinese Republic at the present time are such as obtain in no other country in the world, politics being intermingled with and influencing military strategy to an extent which is almost unbelievable elsewhere.

For example, it is difficult to comprehend why Marshal Wu Pei-fu allowed General Feng Yuxiang to remain in command of the army destined for the Jehol front, when he must have realised by his attitude at the previous Cabinet councils in Peking that his loyalty was uncertain, unless one recognises the complexity of the political influences that were operating behind the scenes, and which not only kept Feng in his post as generalissimo of an important sector but also enabled him to take with him a far greater proportion of heavy artillery and ammunition than was necessary for the mountain regions in which his troops were supposed to operate. Furthermore, the Christian General also received an aviation force which was practically useless, terrain suitable for aerodromes being almost undiscoverable in the Jehol area, while the nature of the enemy positions rendered both observation and bombing flights extremely difficult.

One cannot believe that Marshal Wu Pei-fu, for he is admittedly a capable general, would begin

his campaign with an error of this magnitude and follow it up with such a blunder as the appointment of Tsao Ying to command the 26th Division at Shanhaikwan, unless the strongest political influences had been brought to bear upon him. When these two fatal mistakes are considered from a strategic point of view it is difficult to decide which was the more important of them, but after considerable reflection the writer is inclined to favour the latter, on the grounds that the loss of the Chiu Men passes by the 26th Division under Tsao Ying led to the partial collapse of the initial campaign, secure in the knowledge of which General Feng was emboldened to attempt his coup d'etat.

From a military viewpoint the Chiu Men disaster is almost incomprehensible, for anyone who has visited the spot will recognise that it is a position which is so strong as to be practically impregnable as long as the defending force's ammunition holds out, and the only satisfactory reason which has been advanced for the loss of the passes is based on a peculiarity in the formation of the Chinese army which is worthy of particular attention. The Chinese, whether he be soldier or bandit, is capable of the strongest sense of loyalty to some one leader, and if this commander be removed for one reason or another, the unit which he has controlled is slow to transfer its allegiance to a newcomer. This factor is said to have been the decisive one in the fight for Chiu Men, for a general of brigade in the Chihli defensive troops was superseded, with the result that the unit which he had commanded refused at the critical moment to obey

the orders of a new officer, and this defection appears to have caused a panicstricken retreat on the part of the whole 26th Division. It was the more regrettable that this defeat occurred when it did from the fact that Marshal Wu Pei-fu had not yet arrived at Chinwangtao, for the writer is of the opinion that had the Generalissimo been present at headquarters he would undoubtedly have devised some means to speedily restore the situation, which as it was, became graver from day to day and ultimately proved to be the turning point of the whole campaign on the Shanhaikwan front. The writer accompanied Marshal Wu's special train when it left Peking on October 11th, and was with it until the war was concluded by Wu Pei-fu's flight from Tientsin on November 3rd, so that he had ample opportunity to observe the troops composing the Chihli army in all the stages of their advance and retreat. For the purpose of estimating the practical military value of these as efficient fighting units it seems best to classify them under the headings of the different branches of the service, and to consider each separately before judging them as a coordinated whole.

CHAPTER TWO.

INFANTRY.

The rank and file of Wu Pei-fu's troops varied very greatly both from the point of view of physical fitness and military training, and from the quality of their morale and their steadfastness in adversity. If one considers at one end of the scale the 26th Division under Tsao Ying, which was not only badly led by an incompetent officer but was also ill-disciplined and poorly drilled in all those functions which go to make up a first class fighting unit, one will probably contrast it with the highly efficient 3rd Division, its complete antithesis. The 3rd Division had had the good fortune to be under Wu Pei-fu's personal supervision for some time, and with the 14th and 24th was considered the best body of troops at his command, so that it was particularly significant to find all three divisions located on the Shihmenchai front by October 18th. They were unfortunate in that they were being used as emergency troops in an endeavour to restore a most threatening situation, for the incompetency and cowardice of the 26th Division was really responsible for the extremely difficult task with which

they were confronted. The Fengtien troops had pushed through the Chiu Men pass so rapidly after its unexpected capture as to reach Shihmenchai before Marshal Wu was informed as to the situation, and by the time that he reached Chinwangtao Chang Tso-lin's troops had completed their southward march from Chiu Men and were facing east on the immediate flank of the Chihli line of communications. This had created a threat to the strategy of the campaign which rendered any advance at Shanhaikwan both unlikely and dangerous until the Chiu Men position could be regained, and it was towards that end that Wu Pei-fu directed all his energies immediately on his arrival at the field headquarters at Chinwangtao. It was interesting to note that the Generalissimo realised the position almost immediately the staff train reached Shanhaikwan, for whereas it had proceeded through Chinwangtao without a stop, as soon as Wu Pei-fu had conversed with his generals for ten minutes at Shanhaikwan he appreciated that the first-named station was the real railhead, and the whole headquarters returned there almost without delay. The Fengtien troops were then distant from Chinwangtao some fifteen or sixteen miles according to most estimates, and were already threatening to debouch into the plain through which the Peking-Mukden Railway runs, so that the task which was demanded of the counter-attacking force, composed of parts of the 3rd, 14th and 24th Divisions, was no easy one. The Fengtien guns already occupied the high ground and vantage points available, while their infantry had had

time to consolidate their positions, so that direct frontal attack upon them was the only method availing under these conditions. The terrain is composed of undulating foothills sloping up towards the passes through the main range of hills both north and west, and excellent cover is therefore afforded for the movement of troops, as well by the hills as by the small watercourses that intersect the countryside. Besides the usual river beds the watercourses present another feature which is perhaps worthy of more particular notice, though none of the Chihli staff officers appear to have appreciated its possible value from a military point of view. The heavy rains which pour down from the hills in the months of July and August have cut for themselves special channels which of course eventually drain into the larger river beds, and those channels are six to ten feet in depth and from four to fifteen feet wide at the top. As many of them ran in the direction of the Fengtien lines it would seem that they might have been used to considerable advantage, for not only did they afford admirable cover against machine gun and artillery fire for troops in rest, but they seemed entirely suited as a means whereby to mass an unexpected attack against any particular portion of the line. To illustrate the writer's meaning it is only necessary to mention that on one occasion he himself wandered by mistake to a point where by looking out of one of these watercourses he could observe the working of a Fengtien machine gun at fairly close range.