

FLAMES AHEAD

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I

SOUTH China in July is really hot. The sun seems to spurt flames that threaten to consume the atmosphere. Our troops were advancing rapidly in the Chingmen Mountain section of the front in western Hupeh, and their ration bags, their cartridge pockets, their leather belts, all were soaked black with sweat.

Then, three days later, an unexpected storm arose, and rain fell in a deluge. It poured roaring down, bending trees swishing against the ground. The surrounding mountain peaks were lost in shadowy obscurity. The men couldn't open their eyes, the horses couldn't raise their heads. Shielding their faces with their hands, soldiers muttered angrily, "This is a hell of a place! The raindrops hit like bullets!" For two days and two nights the storm raged without a let-up. The bumpy road, twisting like a sheep gut, became a mire of slippery mud.

Our troops were in a tearing hurry. From the very first day they made contact with the enemy, the latter had gone into continuous retreat, hoping

to escape our grasp. Our men, determined to wipe them out and push across the Yangtse, drove on in relentless pursuit. Now the rain was holding up the enemy too. They weren't far ahead. With one more spurt we could catch them and finish them off.

But that night, after our troops crossed a mountain, they found themselves in a vast watery region of lakes and ponds.

It was pitch black. The measured tread of feet sloshing through the mud was all that broke the silence. A small group of men detached themselves from the ranks and walked to the side of the road. Then a beam of light shone beneath a clump of bamboos. Division commander Chen Hsing-tsai was squatting in the mud, examining a map with his flashlight. A staff officer and an orderly held their raincoats over his head. Chen spread the map on his knees. Raindrops, caught by the beam of the flashlight, shone in a golden line.

At Chen's side, two staff officers consulted quietly. "Is there a river ahead of us?"

"Yes, a big one."

The division commander was searching his map in vain for a fording point. He overheard the staff officers and quickly turned to them in annoyance.

"A big one? So big that men can't cross it?"

Nobody replied. There was only the incessant nerve-tautening hissing of the rain. Chai Hao,

chief of the reconnaissance section, was returning from a mission to the river's edge. He had borrowed the division commander's horse. The beast hadn't eaten its fill for three days and it wheezed as it galloped through the mud, splattering the soldiers generously. Cursing, the men shouted, "Dismount! Get off!" The horse's churning hoofs had splashed mud all over the reconnaissance chief's head and face too. Although rain continued to fall, the weather was still hot and muggy, and rain mixed with perspiration streamed from Chai Hao's forehead to sting his eyes.

"Where is 306 (the division commander's designation)? Where is 306?" he shouted as he wound his horse among the troops. Then he spotted Chen, leaped down—right into a puddle—splashed across, saluted and gave his report, his voice coming in harsh gasps:

"A big white stretch of water—can't tell which is the river and which is the road. . . ."

The division commander folded his map and stood up.

"The enemy?"

"They crossed the river before it flooded."

Chen peered intently at Chai Hao's face. He knew that this man with the swarthy pockmarked visage was brave and enthusiastic. The report was quite correct. The river certainly was flooding, flooding terrifically. Paddy fields, paths, ponds and mounds were all indistinguishable. A while ago,

standing on the river bank, the division commander could hear clumps of earth crumbling beneath his feet into the water.

Now, reports began coming in from the different units: "Big river." "We can't find a fording place." "Await instructions." "How shall we advance?" The messengers crowded around Chen, waiting for his reply.

Lightning flashed, and the division commander caught sight of an old scout, his brimless straw hat perched at a comic angle on his head. Rain poured from its crown on to his neck, and from there down into his clothes. This old scout was always calm and cheerful at the front. He never lowered his head. Once, a bullet thudded into a sapling right beside him, but he only laughed and said, "Hey! That's what I call good shooting!"

Chen now said to him, "Old Hsia, you go take a look. There must be a road."

"Commander," said the old-timer, "in the Northeast I could find a road if I had to feel it out. But here in the south—"

Cracking rifle fire interrupted his words. The shooting sounded about five *li* away.

No doubt about it—the enemy was just ahead. The division commander raised his head and listened. Around him, the men stood motionless and silent in the rain. They didn't want to disturb him while he was coming to a decision.

Actually, Chen was thinking of his past. In

1933, the Communist Party had sent him to this region of lakes and ponds to lead a group of guerillas. For about a year he travelled in and out of all kinds of intricate bays and inlets on small boats. At that time he knew this section in much greater detail than was shown on any map. Here he had been wounded twice, and once he had lost contact with his unit. It was here that he had been through countless storms and floods; he had run all over this place. But now he couldn't find a fording place on the map. It wasn't that he had forgotten. Many years had passed and the appearance of the terrain had changed. The military situation was different too. He couldn't put all his men on one small boat today. There were thousands of men under his command, with trucks and artillery. Then the lakes and streams were perfect for fighting guerilla warfare; today they were a hindrance.

A flash of lightning ripped across the sky and thunder rumbled without cease. In that sharp eye-piercing flash, the whole surrounding countryside was illuminated: the bamboo groves, the shimmering water that covered the ground, the green sheen of the raincoats, the wet rifle stocks, the pale faces of the men—then all was dark and invisible again.

The division commander listened to the thunder. He thought how similar it sounded to the artillery fire during the battle of Szepingkai¹ in the

¹ A strategically important place in the northern part of Liaoning province in Northeast China.

summer of 1947. It was as though the very heavens were falling, the sound rolling and rumbling endlessly. That battle had made a great impression on him. The lake region was a long way from Szepingkai. Whatever made him connect the two?

All this went through his mind in less than a minute. Suddenly he began walking forward. He didn't turn his head, he looked at no one.

"Comrades!" he cried. "Our army fought its way through here . . . this place isn't going to stop us. . . . Which is the vanguard company?"

"Number Six."

"Let the Seventh Company take over--and drive forward hard! I'm going to the Seventh Company right now. We have a way to get across!"

Messengers and scouts from the different units left him immediately. In an instant they were gone. He instructed his orderly:

"Tell the chief of the radio section to make contact with Corps and Army while we're crossing the river. I'll be on the other side!" Chen strode off without another word.

Back on the road, he saw the troops moving steadily ahead. Arms and equipment clattered in the dark. The men rolled forward like a tide. They were not going to let anything stop them. No one even thought of stopping. Chen heard two soldiers talking:

"Go a little faster! We'll be soaked here or drenched there anyhow. Don't let the enemy get away!"

"Balls they will!"

"Balls they will? A dumb hulk like you—maybe they're waiting to give you all the comforts of home!"

"Listen, *huochi*,¹ this is a surprise attack! They think we're stuck, that we're groaning in the mud. But we'll hop across that river in no time. You'll see!"

"Look at that!"

A string of red flares rose into the sky ahead. The enemy was signalling.

Division commander Chen wanted to see who the two soldiers were, but an artilleryman leading a horse cut across his path, and the soldiers were lost in the crowd.

The road was submerged under water and the troops continued their march on the raised paths between the paddy fields. Chen walked behind the artillerymen. He was unable to pass them on the narrow winding path. There was barely enough room for one man. It was even more difficult for the horses, whose hoofs kept slipping. The water in the paddy fields on both sides had risen almost to a level with the path. The rice stalks looked like reeds in the water, only a bit of the grain heads

¹ Pal.

showing above the surface. Horse after horse slid into the water. The Northeast soldiers, who had never walked between paddy fields before, slipped and fell and got to their feet again. By the time a company passed over a section of path, they trampled it out of sight.

The artillery unit ahead of Chen stopped, looking for a road. The horses had splattered the men with mud from head to foot. Chen jumped into the water to detour around them. Before him was a stretch of paddy fields; the river was beyond. He could hear splashing on all sides. The soldiers, holding hands, were wading forward. Chen caught up with them. In his wet sticky clothes his body felt scalding hot. He stepped into a hole beneath the water and was about to fall when the strong hand of a soldier steadied him.

"Comrades!" shouted Chen. "Push across the river and get the enemy!"

Gradually, the flashes of lightning withdrew into the distance and the rain lessened.

In a grass shack behind a grove of trees, a radio operator was working feverishly in the light of a flickering candle. Covered with mud, his sleeves rolled up to the elbow, lines of black water trickling down his arms, he was absorbed in his apparatus. Suddenly he turned his head and cried joyfully:

"Corps is calling us! Corps is calling us!"

Standing behind the operator, the chief of the radio section, his glasses gleaming on his pale face, grabbed the earphones. He put them on his head, sat down and began recording the message himself.

For two days and two nights they had been buffeted by the storm, cut off from outside contact like a ship lost at sea. Now, how delighted they were to again hear the sharp, clear call signals! The piping staccato sounds pulled everyone to the table like a magnet. In the candlelight the men's faces were grey, dirty, but they smiled victoriously.

They could hear a hubbub of noise coming from far beyond the trees—horses neighing, men shouting. The division commander was leading his troops to the river's edge!

Just then, Lei Ying, chief of the liaison section, came into the shack. He slung his oilcloth-covered haversack from behind his back on to his chest, sat down on a pile of straw and promptly fell fast asleep. Lei Ying was a bold youngster. During the heat of battles in the snowstorms of the Northeast, he could always be seen flying off on some mission on his big chestnut horse. "Our young section chief really moves!" the soldiers used to say.

The excited chief of the radio section finished taking down the message and handed it to a short, rosy-cheeked code clerk for deciphering. He then turned to talk to Lei Ying, but refrained when he saw how soundly the latter was sleeping, his chin resting on his chest, rainwater slowly dripping from

his clothes to the floor. He drew out one cigarette after another from an inside jacket pocket. They all were sopping wet. Finally, he roasted one in the flame of the candle.

Corps evidently was also on the move. At the end of their rush message, they had signed off fast. Contact with Army's station so far had been impossible. Suddenly the radio picked up a faint signal. "Peking," said an operator with a grin.

"See if there's any statement by Chairman Mao," said one of the men.

"Chairman Mao's resting. How would he be making a statement in the middle of the night!"

"You're talking through your hat! Chairman Mao works all night. He knows we're marching in a big storm. He's thinking about us, for sure!"

The radio chief listened, smiling. The clerk handed him the decoded message. He took one look at it and shouted, "Start dismantling!" He woke Lei Ying, and the two of them rushed out together.

Division commander Chen at that moment was standing in the mud on the river bank, supervising the crossing. The water before him flowed in a vast white expanse. There was no telling how deep it was.

Number Seven Company was the strongest company in the strongest regiment of the division. It had been awarded the red pennant inscribed "Fighting Heroes Company." The men of the Seventh marched past Chen and plunged into the

river. They listened to the stentorian orders of Chai Hao, the reconnaissance chief, who was directing them.

Company Six felt very hurt over this change in plans. Chin Teh-kuei, its commander, strode through the rain, his face red, every hair on his head burning. He was the first of his men to jump into the river. A mass of black shadows waded through the white water. The lapping of the waves muffled all other sounds.

On the bank, division commander Chen felt as though he were standing in space. The river was eating away the ground beneath his feet; clumps of earth kept crumbling into the water. Messenger after messenger came running up to report on the crossing. It was dangerous! Would they fail? He suddenly recalled a method that had been used to ford a river in this region in his guerilla days. Excitedly, he shouted for the commander of the Seventh Company, and told him about it. The latter then leaped into the water.

Fighting and struggling through swirling current up to his chest, Chin, commander of Company Six, at last reached the other side of the river. But his men were laden down with many pounds of equipment, most of it on their backs. They were top-heavy and they couldn't keep their footing in the fast moving water.

"Come on!" yelled Chin, looking like a mud figure on the opposite bank. "Come on!"

"Hey! Company Seven's swimming!"

Immediately a number of soldiers in Company Six who could swim followed suit, and threaded their way across.

Then came the order, Chen's method—"Tie your puttees together!" Soon a line of knotted leg bindings over a li in length stretched across the rushing water. With this aid, the two companies crossed the river.

The happy cry spread through the ranks:

"The advance companies got across! The advance companies got across! Hey! They made it!"

Chen's orderly had to hold him tight to prevent him from leaping into the water with joy and wading over. Chen was roughly pushing the orderly's hands aside when Lei Ying was seen galloping up in the distance on a white mare. The horse slipped and foundered in a deep mud puddle. She struggled to rise, whinnying. Lei Ying shouted and flailed his crop, and she finally pulled herself out and flew toward the river bank. Galloping like a whirlwind, Lei Ying could vaguely see several black lines in the river. Soldiers were wading across.

"Don't cross the river! Don't cross the river!" he kept bellowing as he drew near. Then he spotted the division commander rolling up his trousers. Before the horse came to a full stop, Lei Ying sprang to the ground and saluted.

"Commander, there's a new order from Corps!"
He handed over the message.

Chen turned on his flashlight. Its glare hurt his eyes. After he finished reading the message, he gave instructions to Lei Ying. The liaison chief then ran from one unit to the next, shouting at the top of his voice. Immediately the cry was taken up, spreading far and near, all the way to the men in the turbulent river:

"Stop the crossing! Don't ford the river!"

II

THERE had been a change in the situation. Kuomintang general Sung Hsi-lien, who had boasted of his "bastion north of the Yangtse River," began running as soon as he became aware of our attack. Corps ordered the division, driving west across the Tsushui River toward the city of Ichang in pursuit of the enemy, to turn south immediately, cross the Yangtse and then sweep west to cut off the enemy's retreat.

By midnight the night before, a battalion had forded the Tsushui. But Commander Chen ordered his division to march south at once, without waiting for the battalion to cross back. The entire division about-faced and set out toward the south.

At dawn on a high hill, the men were allowed a long rest. They had been marching in two long

lines on either side of a highway. Too exhausted to eat, the soldiers lay down where they stood and instantly fell fast asleep.

The division commander sat drinking boiled water in a grass thatched shack—the village tea shop. He had already dispatched a messenger to summon to a meeting the officers of the first regiment in the line of march. That ruled out any sleep for him. Strangely enough, he didn't feel the least sleepy. His mind was full of the new orders he had received and he was calculating how to execute them. The rain had stopped before dawn. Now, misty clouds drifted in the sky. Lovely jade green trees and groves of bamboo dotted the landscape. A reddish glow was spreading on the eastern horizon. The storm was over, but when Chen thought of the fierce midday sun in this region he looked toward the sleeping soldiers and frowned.

Two mounted men appeared, coming down the same road the troops had travelled. At first Chen assumed they were being sent from the regiment further back to make contact with the advance unit. He didn't pay any particular attention. It wasn't until they were only about five yards away that he noticed the face he knew so well—Liang Pin, the division's political commissar, had returned!

Liang Pin had been home on leave when the division had started its chase, but now, suddenly, he had caught up. A tall man who always held his head high, he was an alert, steadfast person of