

Document 9.5: “Jinsha Jiang” (“The River of Golden Sand”), an anonymous account describing this segment of the Long March, 1934–35

Of the three columns advancing westward [from Guizhou to Yunnan], our Red Cadres Regiment was the central one, whose duty it was to protect the Party and government leaders.

The Cadres Regiment consisted of two infantry battalions and a Special Course Battalion, in addition to a Senior Cadres Group. The members of the regiment, except for those of the Senior Cadres Group, were all officers of company or platoon ranks—vigorous young men with rich fighting experience. I was in command of the 5th Company of the 2nd Battalion from 1932 till we entered northern Shaanxi at the end of the Long March.

Yunnan in April was hot enough to make people feel sticky. Even if one were to put on a single tunic, he would sweat profusely. In the wet paddy fields tufts of young shoots nodded in the wind, as though welcoming us. The hills on both sides were heavily timbered and blanketed with grass and flowers. Bees hummed among the honey-laden blossoms and butterflies fluttered from flower to flower. The scene in spring was enchanting. But we were not destined to enjoy it. We could not linger, for more than a 100,000 Guomindang troops were after us.

One night we billeted in a village. At midnight, I went out on a round of inspection. As I passed the courtyard where the [Communist] Party and government leaders had been put up, I saw the light of a lamp within. Which one of our leaders was still not abed at this time of night? I was exchanging a word with the sentry when a man came out from the room. When he came near, I realized that it was Comrade Zhou Enlai. I stood at attention in the darkness. “Vice-Chairman, you haven’t gone to bed yet?” I asked.

“No. Ah! Is it you? Have you finished inspecting? Come in and have a chat.”

The house, formerly the property of a landlord, was of better quality. In the room in which the Vice-Chairman lived were a handful of quaint-looking chairs and a table to match. On the table stood an oil lamp and a few pieces of writing material. There was also a paper packet. A large map hung on the wall. The Vice-Chairman was studying the route of advance. In the dim reflection of the oil lamp, his face looked yellow and thin, and his eyes were not as brilliant as usual.

When we were seated, he asked: "How many men are there in your 5th Company?"

"We suffered some casualties during the battle in Zunyi and Dushan. We are now one hundred and twenty strong," I replied.

He proceeded to inquire about the conditions of our company during the march; about the weapons and equipment; about the morale of the rank and file. To each of his questions I made reply.

The Vice-Chairman thought for a moment, then said, smiling: "Your company fought well in Zunyi and Dushan. You must maintain this glory in the future."

He opened the packet of biscuits on the table and invited me to eat. It was his midnight ration prepared by his orderly.

"You yourself had better eat, Vice-Chairman," I said. "I've eaten too much during the evening meal. I still feel full."

He shoved the packet before me and pressed me to eat. So I had to pick up a half piece, and chewing, waited for further queries. But he raised no more questions. Finally he said: "All right! It's rather late now. Go and have a rest."

Coming out of the Vice-Chairman's room, I felt puzzled. The Vice-Chairman had inquired about the company in detail. Did he mean it as a general investigation or was he

looking for a company to which he would entrust an important mission? My heart beat rapidly. I regretted I had not been bold enough to ask for information.

The troops did not march the next day. The men availed themselves of the opportunity to clean up or supplement themselves with rations. Some were husking rice, patching up clothes, polishing their rifles or sharpening their bayonets. I and some others were sitting under the eaves of the house, making straw sandals and listening to the mixed chattering.

“The enemy are hard upon us, but here we have come to stay. Isn’t it strange!”

“What is so strange about it? Either we are waiting for the enemy to come up to fight, or an important mission calls for preparation.”

“What important mission? Is it the march against Kunming or the crossing of the Golden Sand River?” someone put in.

That question brought silence. Everybody looked at me.

“Who knows? The leading comrades have given no direction,” I said.

By afternoon, preparations were nearly complete. Clothes were washed and darned, ration bags refilled, and rifles and bayonets shining. The men kept asking me why we were not leaving. I was very anxious myself, and their question made me feel the more restless. I went out to hunt for news.

The village was fair in size, with more than 200 households. It was quiet and tranquil, with cottages and hedges surrounded by green paddy fields. The people lived not at all badly, much better off than those in Guizhou. Judging from their costumes, there were quite a number of minority people here. But in every family, the young people had fled, leaving only the old folk and the children. Doubtless the Guomindang had spread all sorts of lying rumours—they always did when they were licked.

Before a deserted primary school I picked up a map of Yunnan among a heap of paper fragments eddying in the wind. We had relied on the leadership and the guides to give the directions. Now a map, though simple, would give a lot of help. From the map it was clear we must cross the Golden Sand River if we were to march north to resist the Japanese. The Golden Sand River, which the enemy would guard jealously, confronted us with yet another obstacle. If we were to cross in force, a grim battle would ensure.

Coming back I passed the house where the Party and government leaders lived. People were hurrying in and out. It seemed a meeting was being held. Though I knew some of them, I did not feel it appropriate to raise a question. I went to the other companies but they were just as puzzled as I. It seemed a new, important question was presenting itself.

By the forenoon of the third day, the pursuing enemy, it was said, was pressing in and was beginning to surround us. Still no order for action. Every fighter was feeling increasingly uneasy. At noon, I saw the regimental messenger come towards our company headquarters.

“Does the regimental commander call for us?” I hurried to ask.

“How did you know?” replied the messenger.

At once I knew it was true. Overjoyed, I ran towards regimental headquarters, pulling with me Political Instructor Li.

The house was crowded with people. Apart from Regimental Commander Zhen Geng and Political Commissar Song Renjiang, there were also responsible comrades from the Central Authority, some of whom I recognized. The air was heavy with the smell of dried tobacco leaves. A meeting was in progress. Seeing us enter, the regimental commander said: “The Central Authority had decided that our force cross the Golden Sand River, and has given our regiment the task of capturing the ferry. We in turn have decided to

send the Second Battalion as the advance contingent and the Fifth Company as the vanguard. Your mission is: Capture the ferry at all costs and as quickly as possible; cover the succeeding troops in crossing the river. Start as soon as you are ready!" He pointed at a comrade in black uniform. "This is Comrade Li, who is to lead the task group sent by the Central Authority to help you fulfill the mission. He will be in general charge."

We shook hands with Comrade Li, had a few words with him about the time to start, and returned to company headquarters.

The troops were mobilized and, after eating a full meal, set out with equipment along a short-cut to the Golden Sand River. I and Deputy Battalion Commander Huo Haiyan walked behind the vanguard platoon; the political instructor and the task group brought up the rear. The cadres, after scoring two splendid victories in Zunyi and Dushan, were in high spirits. Two days' rest had freshened them up. As the vanguard company of the advance contingent, they were greatly exhilarated and marched briskly. Though the path was rugged and was undiscernible in some parts, and despite the blazing sun which caused them to sweat profusely, they walked a dozen *li* without a break. Nobody complained; not a single one fell behind. They marched the whole night through. At daybreak, after ten minutes' rest, during which they gobbled the cold rice they had brought with them and drank a few mouthfuls of cold water, they continued on their way. They marched more than seventy *li*.

After scaling a mountain, the troops took a breather at a point some sixty *li* from the Golden Sand River. During the break, Comrade Li and we studied how to capture the ferry. It was decided to wipe out the enemy guards on this side of the river first, and capture the boats for a forced crossing; then we would put the enemy on the opposite shore out of action, and protect the ferry so that the main force which followed might cross.

At sunset we approached the river bank. In the distance towered a pitch-black mass: we couldn't tell the trees from the mountain slope. Before the mountains lay the Golden

Sand River like a long grey sheet. Between the mountains and the river glittered points of light, like the eyes of the enemy peering at us. Who knows whether the enemy has discovered us? Maybe they are already waiting for us. But never mind, we are bound to have it out. Now we are nearing the bank. I passed back the order: "The Golden River is reached, make ready for action!"

In the darkness the leader of the First Platoon ran up, panting and reported the situation. The enemy, it was found, had learned of the Red Army entering Yunnan. Fearing that we might force a crossing of the Golden Sand River, they had in the last few days stationed troops on a line stretching for hundreds of *li* on the opposite shore, keeping under control all the ferries, seizing all the boats and sending them to the opposite shore and breaking all communication. They kept sending plain-clothes scouts across the river to hunt for information. Today those agents had probably gone to blackmail the local people again, leaving the boats that sent them across waiting by the riverside. When our scouts went down there a boatman, thinking their men had returned, said drowsily: "So you've come back." "We have," replied our scouts, quick at seizing the chance, and with a few sprints were at the boatmen and the boats became our booty.

When the platoon leader had finished, I hurried to the bank and, after confronting the scared boatmen, tried to elicit from them what information they had regarding the situation on the opposite shore. The boatmen spoke stutteringly, supplementing each other. The situation thus gathered was like this: On the opposite shore was a small town where there was a taxation office in which were stationed thirty or so policemen. That morning a company of regular troops had arrived. They were quartered at the right wing of the town. In the centre of the town, by the riverside, was a stone jetty. It had always been picketed by a policeman, but since the situation had become more tense, the enemy had put one more man on the beat. Though the enemy was afraid the Red Army might cross the river, they thought this was not the main ferry. Nor did they believe the Red Army would come so soon. So their defense there was rather slack.

After consulting with the deputy battalion commander, I decided on crossing at once. The political instructor questioned the boatmen, promising them rewards. These people had been roughly handled by the enemy. Now, when they saw they could gain something, they were all eagerness; “At your service, sir! At your service!”

I ordered the 1st and 2nd Platoons to cross with me, leaving behind the deputy battalion commander, the political instructor and the task group. The Third Platoon was to patrol the riverside and shoot to support us if anything should happen to the boats crossing.

The 3rd Platoon deployed on the beach, training their rifles on the lamp-lit town. After I had told them what we should do after landing or if some emergency should arise, I and the men of the 1st and 2nd platoons quietly boarded two boats, which pulled out from the shore.

It was a windy night. Over the 300-meter-wide river, the boats were tossed by the waves on the quick-moving waters. Some of the men gave a hand to the boatmen at the oars. The rest crowded together clasping their rifles to prevent them from being wet by the spray.

Nearer and nearer we drew to the shore. The outline of the town was now visible and the lights became brighter. Shadows could be seen moving about and shouts were audible. A fierce battle was impending. My heart tightened. Grabbing my Mauser I looked intently at the approaching town.

As the boat drew up along the bank, I pushed lightly the two sitting next to me who quickly jumped ashore and mounted the stone steps holding their rifles.

“Hey! You, why have you come back so late?” said a cracked voice in a Yunnan accent.

The two made no immediate response. Then we heard one say quietly: “Don’t move!”

As soon as I heard that, I led the others up the steps, and before they knew a thing, the two enemy sentries were captives.

The depositions of the captives were more or less like the boatmen's. I ordered the 1st Platoon to go up the street and attack the Guomindang regular troops and the 2nd Platoon to attack the police. I stayed on the jetty. They were to report back to me.

The boats were sent for reinforcements.

According to plan, I made the messenger gather some rushes and burn them by the riverside as a signal that our company had succeeded in crossing.

The fire lit up quickly, lending a glow to the shimmering waters. Now that the signal was given, it all depended on the smooth progress of the action of the platoons. While I was thus thinking, a few shots rang out on the street, then a few more, then silence. What did it mean? I was getting fidgety when the messengers of the 1st and 2nd Platoons came running back.

The situation, it appeared, had developed thus: When the 1st Platoon reached enemy company headquarters, the sentry shouted "Who goes there!" "Your own people, the police", answered the captives, as directed. Before the sentry could throw out more questions, the advance squad rushed up and grabbed him. After a brief interrogation, the platoon entered the courtyard and ran towards separate rooms. Kicking open doors, they shouted, "Hand over your weapons and you live!"

The enemy soldiers looked up, stupefied. Then slowly, they raised their hands and said in puzzled tones: "We just arrived today. Maybe there is a misunderstanding!"

"Rest assured", said our men. "There isn't any misunderstanding. We are the Red Army; we have come for you all right!"

The enemy soldiers looked at one another with bewilderment and walked amid the menacing bayonets to the courtyard to assemble. Only the enemy company commander and some officers who were in a separate small room escaped after firing a few shots. It being dark and the road unfamiliar to us, we did not pursue them.

The 2nd Platoon had the same experience as the 1st. They disguised themselves as taxpayers and entered the taxation offices. The policemen were caught like fish in a net; not even the captain escaped.

All was now plain sailing. Excitedly, I put my Mauser back into its holster and ordered the messenger to light a bonfire on the shore as a second signal.

The jetty having been captured, I walked leisurely towards the town. As I put my feet down the slab-paved street and saw the black mass of houses, a sense of exhaustion came over me and I would fain at that moment have found a place to eat and sleep my fill. I was on the point of consulting with the political instructor when the deputy battalion commander came along.

“In order to consolidate the defense of the ferry and extend our control,” he said, “the regimental commander orders you to advance with your men fifty *li* along the mountain path leading to Huili to keep a look out.”

Source: *Stories of the Long March*. Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1958. 35–50.