

**Document 9.6: “The Bridge of Iron Chains,” an account describing crossing the Luding Bridge on the Long March, 1934–35**

*Yang Zhengwu was the Political Commissar of the regiment that was given the task of taking the bridge. (He later rose to become Acting Chief of Staff of the People’s Liberation Army during the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s.) Let him tell his own story:*

Early in the morning of the 23<sup>rd</sup> I set out with our regiment from Anshunchang, heading along the west bank towards the bridge, about 320 *li*<sup>1</sup> away. We were given three days in which to reach it. The road twisted like a sheep’s gut along the side of the mountains, and was full of ups and downs. To the left was the side of the mountain, rising sharply vertical as if cut by a knife, straight up into the clouds. On the higher slopes was snow that never melted all year round. It dazzled the eyes and gave off a frigid chill. To the right, dozens of yards below, were the white-capped waves of the rushing river. One mis-step and you were a goner. But no one worried about the danger. There was only one thought in everyone’s mind: Hurry on; take the Luding Bridge.

After we had marched about thirty *li*, enemy troops on the opposite side of the river began firing at us. To avoid needless losses, we made a detour of a dozen *li* through the mountains. This consumed a bit of time.

After covering about sixty *li*, we found ourselves confronted with a large mountain. Our vanguard ran into a company of the enemy and pounced on them like tigers. There was a brief fierce clash and the enemy unit was smashed.

The mountain was about a dozen *li* high. On the other side was a stream, not wide but very deep. The enemy had destroyed a bridge that had been there, and fording was impossible. We felled some trees and soon were across.

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<sup>1</sup> A *li* is approximately half a kilometer

Cheered by our first victory, we marched with a spring in our step. Scattered firing broke out ahead. Suddenly, one of our scouts came flying back to report: “There’s a mountain pass ahead of us on the left. It’s being held from above by an enemy unit about the size of a battalion. They’re blocking our advance.”

At once, together with the regimental C.O., I led a few men forward at the double to scout out the terrain. The mountains ahead rose in sheer cliffs. There was only a narrow path between them climbing so sharply it was like a ladder to heaven. Your cap fell off when you tried to look all the way to the top. Forts had been built both on the mountain summits and at the head of the pass.

The river was on our right, so we couldn’t circle around from that direction. The heights directly ahead looked impregnable. On the left was a sharp cliff sparsely covered with shrubs and brambles; from the top of the cliff, the tall mountain continued to rise steeply.

After careful scouting, we decided to send a party up from the left to circle around, attack the enemy from the rear, and take the pass from behind. While one company was around from the left flank, our 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion pretended to make a direct assault. The enemy put on a tremendous show with their machine-guns, sealing the mouth of the pass so tight that even a bee couldn’t have flown through.

In less than an hour we heard shots from the enemy’s rear. 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion then attacked in earnest, and the enemy were driven out of their fortifications. We pursued them relentlessly, destroying three companies at the foot of the cliff. We captured one battalion and one company commander and over 200 prisoners.

The next day we received an order reading as follows: “Our Left Route Army has been given until the 25<sup>th</sup> to take the Luding Bridge. You must march at the utmost speed and act in the shortest possible time to accomplish the glorious mission. We are confident you can do it. Are preparing to congratulate you on your victory.” Below was the forceful signature of General Lin Biao....

When we finished reading the order, Commander Wang and I looked at each other, then said together: “A glorious but very tough mission!”

The 25<sup>th</sup>! The 25<sup>th</sup> was the following day, and we were still 240 *li* from the Luding Bridge. We would have to cover two days’ march in one. No one had thought our time schedule would be changed so quickly and made so urgent. 240 *li* in one day is a tremendous march, and we had to do it on foot, every step of the way! What’s more, we’d have to fight our way through strong enemy resistance.

But orders were orders. It was a glorious task and we certainly had to carry it out. We couldn’t delay a minute, not a single second. Time was everything now. Originally there were two enemy regiments holding the bridge. But we had seen with our own eyes two more brigades on the other side of the river hurrying to reinforce them.

Part of the bridge’s forces were left to block our 1<sup>st</sup> Red Division crossing over at Anshunchang, but the main body was racing us to the bridge. If we got there first, there was hope of victory. Otherwise it would be very difficult, if not impossible, for the Red Army to cross at Luding.

We couldn’t stop. Time was too precious. As we marched we held a meeting of military and political officers to discuss what we should do. First we issued a number of rallying cries: “The 4<sup>th</sup> Red Regiment has a glorious battle record. We must complete our mission and preserve our glory!” “Emulate the 1<sup>st</sup> Red Regiment, which captured Anshunchang. Compete with them and take the Luding Bridge!” “Our mission is glorious but very difficult. We can pass the test!” We set 6:00 the following morning as the deadline for reaching our objective.... After the meeting, the officers went back to their units to rally their men.

Just about the time this was completed, Wild Tiger Mountain was sighted ahead.

To cross the Wild Tiger Mountain you have to go up some forty *li*, then come down the same distance. It is a dangerous climb, with the Dadu River on the right, high cliffs on the left, and the path just a narrow twisting trail. People say it's the neck of the road between Anshunchang and the Luding Bridge, and that's no exaggeration in the least....

An enemy battalion held the path where it cuts through the summit. It was the height of the foggy season; you couldn't see five paces beyond your nose. They spotted us as we neared the summit, but because of the fog they couldn't see us clearly. They could only fire wildly in our direction. Taking advantage of this help from nature, we ordered our men to hold their fire. When we got close enough, we charged with hand grenades and bayonets. You could hear them bursting in the fog, and the exultant cries of our men. Terrified, the enemy turned and fled. Our vanguard battalion pursued them all the way down the other side of the mountain, capturing prisoners and considerable booty—including not only rifle bullets, but white flour! As the chase reached the village of Moximian, the battalion ran into an enemy battalion and a regimental headquarters unit which were quartered there. Our victorious spearhead plunged in, and again the enemy scattered. We then occupied Moximian.

The wretched enemy had destroyed a bridge over the stream to the east of the village, putting a new obstacle in the way of our march. After spending two hours repairing the bridge, we continued our advance, covering fifty *li* without a stop. We arrived at a little hamlet of ten or so families by the edge of the Dadu at about seven in the evening. We were still 110 *li* from Luding.

Troubles never come singly, and no one can control the weather. Suddenly there was a tremendous downpour, with thunder and lightning. The sky was so black you couldn't see the fingers of your own hand. Our men had not eaten all day; they were suffering from hunger. Marching at night in the slippery mud, the pack animals with our food and supplies couldn't keep up. As we came down Wild Tiger Mountain we had seen the enemy on the other side of the river still racing with us neck and neck. If they beat us to the bridge, everything would be finished. We simply had to find a solution and at once.

The more difficult our problems became, the more we had to intensify our political work among the men. We put out a call to all our Communists, Youth Leagues, and other enthusiasts; we stated plainly the hardships that lay ahead, but insisted that we must be at Luding by six the next morning. An order was issued for every man to cut himself a staff. Anyone who couldn't march could walk leaning on the staff. Those who couldn't walk with the aid of staffs could crawl—but they still had to reach our objective on time! We couldn't stop to cook. Everyone was directed to eat his rice ration raw—and wash it down with unboiled water.

The call, spreading through the ranks like wildfire, roused the men's fighting spirit. From the look of them, not even a mountain of knives could have held them back. But how could we march 110 *li* through slippery mud in pitch-darkness? That question weighed on my heart like a thousand-catty stone.

Suddenly a few points of light appeared in a dip in the mountains on the opposite side of the river, changing in an instant into a long string of torches. Enemy troops were making a forced march by torchlight. That gave us an idea. We'll do the same, I thought, and conferred immediately with our regiment commander, our chief-of-staff and our Party secretary. But the problem was this: The enemy were only across the river. Suppose they signal us and ask that we identify ourselves? If they find out who we are and engage us in combat, how will we reach the bridge in time?

“When things are toughest, strike out boldly.” We decided to adopt the designations of the three enemy battalions we had beaten yesterday and today. Buying all the reed fences from the folks in the hamlet, we tied the reeds together to make torches and issued one to each man. On the march, one torch was lit by each squad—the torches were not to be wasted. Our aim was to cover at least nine *li* per hour. We directed our bugler to be prepared to give the responses we had learned from the captured enemy materials. Liu Wenui's troops were all Sichuanese; we picked out a few Sichuan comrades from our

own ranks and some Sichuan men from among the prisoners so that they could shout back replies to any questions.

For the sake of speed, we left all our animals, baggage and heavy weapons—including my horse and the mount of the regimental C.O. —in the care of a platoon led by two officers, with instructions that they follow behind as best they could.

I had a leg wound at the time which had not yet healed. It caused me some inconvenience on the march. The comrades—especially the regimental C.O. —urged me to continue on horseback. But at a time when all officers should set an example, how could I ride? I issued a challenge: “We’ll all march together, comrades. Let’s see who walks the fastest. Let’s see who gets to the Luding Bridge first!”

Delighted, the men held their torches high and pressed forward.

Our torches and those of the enemy column, facing us on the opposite bank, crimsoned the waters of the Dadu. From a distance the lines of torches looked like two writhing fiery dragons. Above the sound of the waves we heard the sharp notes of an enemy bugle, followed by the weaker cry, “Which unit are you?” The enemy was making contact with us.

Our bugler blew the call required by enemy regulations as a response, and our Sichuan comrades and prisoners shouted an answer back in chorus. The stupid pigs on the other side never guessed that marching parallel with them was the gallant Red Army that day and night they dreamed of eradicating. They marched along with us for nearly thirty *li*. At about midnight, the rain grew heavier, and the torches and the opposite bank disappeared. We figured that they must have found the going too hard and made camp. The news spread quickly through the regiment. Our comrades were overjoyed. This is our chance, they said. March on!

...In single file, we pushed ahead for all we were worth.

The rain pelted mercilessly; torrents rushed down the mountain gullies into the river. The twisting path along the side of the mountain had been difficult enough before; now the water made it slick as oil. Our walking staffs proved of little use. One slip and you landed on your head. It was a case of every three steps a skid, every five steps a fall. We rolled rather than marched forward.

Even under those conditions, men kept dozing off. A soldier would slowly come to a halt and the comrade behind would push him and yell, "Keep going! They're way ahead of you!" Only then would he suddenly waken and hurry to catch up. Finally, the men simply unwrapped their puttees and tied themselves together in a long chain, each pulling the other along.

After proceeding at a forced march all night, at a little after 6:00 the following morning, we succeeded in reaching the Luding Bridge and capturing its western end and western approaches. In 24 hours, besides fighting and repairing wrecked bridges, we had marched 240 *li*. Truly an exploit of winged feet!

We occupied several buildings at the western end of the bridge, and there the men dried out their clothes, cooked some food, and rested. Regimental Commander Wang and I went out with the battalion and [the] company officer took over the terrain.

The Luding Bridge was located in a dangerous setting indeed. Even we who had braved the greatest difficulties couldn't help being taken aback. Below, the reddish waters, cascading down from the mountain gorges of the river's upper reaches, pounded against the ugly boulders rising from the river bed and tossed white froth high into the air. The roar of the rushing torrent was deafening. Not even a fish could hold its own against the water. Forging or crossing in boats was out of the question. The bridge was the only way to get to the other side.

We examined it. It was made not of stone or of wood but of iron chains—thirteen in number, each big link as thick as a rice bowl. Two chains on each side served as railings; nine formed the surface walk. Originally, planks had been laid across the nine chains, and the whole bridge, suspended between two cliffs, swayed like a cradle with the motions of the person walking upon it. Now the planks were gone having been taken by the enemy into Luding City. All that remained were the black hanging chains. At the head of the bridge two lines of a poem were inscribed on a stone slab:

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

Across the river on the eastern side was the city of Luding, half of it along the shore, half of it against the slope of a mountain. Surrounded by a wall seven and a half metres high, the city was directly beyond the eastern end of the bridge. After you crossed the bridge you had to enter the city's West Gate. There was no other road. Luding was garrisoned by two enemy regiments; they had built strong fortifications along the mountain slope. Machine-gun emplacements close to the bridge kept us under continual fire, and mortar shells rained down on us.

Confident that their position was impregnable, the enemy sneered and yelled at us: 'Let's see you fly over! We'll give up our arms!'

Our soldiers shouted back: "We don't want your arms. It's your bridge we're after!"

We set a battalion in position to seal off with rifle and machine-gun fire any enemy reinforcements, which might try to reach the eastern end of the bridge from the south. Just as on our side, there was only a narrow 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 submitted a list of names of men volunteering as an assault squad, each demanding that the men of their unit be given the task of taking the bridge.



At noon we called a meeting of all the officers in the regiment to decide on the composition of the assault squad. No sooner had we started our discussion than enemy mortar shells blew a big hole in the roof of the building in which we were gathered. Not one of us moved, but every pair of eyes stared angrily at the east bank.

“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 driving the opening wedge.”

Liao Dashu, the commander of 2<sup>nd</sup> Company, jumped to his feet. Usually a taciturn man, he now forced himself to speak, though his dark sun-burnt face blushed to the ears with the effort. His short wiry frame trembled with excitement as he said:

“1<sup>st</sup> Company was commended as a Model Company when we forded the Wujiang River. We’d like to emulate them and win the title of Heroes Company in taking the Luding Bridge.”

“You’ve got to give the assault mission to 3<sup>rd</sup> Company”, the excitable commander of that company interrupted, sputtering like a machine-gun. “3<sup>rd</sup> Company has done well in every battle. We can guarantee to take the bridge.” Standing as solid as an iron pagoda, he added plaintively, “If you don’t give the assault mission to 3<sup>rd</sup> Company, I won’t be able to go back and face my men.”

A heated debate followed, no company willing to yield to any other. It was up to the leaders to decide. Regimental Commander Wang and I talked it over then he stood up and announced that 2<sup>nd</sup> Company would lead the assault. I then rose and said:

“If it’s fighting you want, there’s plenty more to come. You’ll each get your chance. At Wujiang River, 1<sup>st</sup> Company led off; this time we’ll let 2<sup>nd</sup> Company start. The assault squad will be formed of twenty-two men—Communists and other bold young fellows—

from 2<sup>nd</sup> Company, and will be led by 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. Only the commander of 3<sup>rd</sup> Company continued to sulk. “3<sup>rd</sup> Company’s job isn’t easy either”, I assured him. “You have to go over directly behind 2<sup>nd</sup> Company and lay planks across those chains so the rest of the men can charge into the city.” Only then did his face break into a smile.

Finally I instructed the company commanders to issue to each man one catty of the salt pork we had captured from some of the local tyrants. The men fought better on a full stomach. After the meeting, I asked the regimental Party secretary to help the assault squad of 2<sup>nd</sup> Company get ready.

We began our attack at 4:00 in the afternoon. The regimental C.O. and I directed it from the west end of the bridge. All the buglers of the regiment blew the charge call in unison, and we opened up with every weapon we had against the enemy on the opposite bank. The firing, the shouts of the men, reverberated through the valley. Carrying tommy-guns, big knives strapped across their backs, twelve grenades apiece tucked into their belts, twenty-two heroes, led by Commander Liao, climbed across the swaying bridge chains, in the teeth of intense enemy fire. Behind them came the officers and men of 3<sup>rd</sup> Company, each carrying a plank in addition to full battle gear; they fought and laid planks at the same time.

Just as the assault squad reached the opposite side, huge flames sprang into the sky outside Luding City’s West Gate. The enemy was trying to block us by fire, to consume us in its flames. The blaze, reddening half the sky, licked fiercely around the east end of the bridge.

The whole outcome of the attack hung by a hair. Confronted by the fire at the city gate our assault squad hesitated. The men standing with me and the regimental C.O. shouted

across the river: “Go on, comrades, charge! Victory depends on you! Never mind the fire. Charge! The enemy is cracking.”

Emboldened by our cries, the twenty-two men, at the sound of a clarion bugle call, plunged boldly into the flames. Commander Liao’s cap caught fire. He threw it away and fought on. The hair and eyebrows of the men were singed, but, streaming smoke and flame, they continued charging behind Liao, smashing their way into the city. In the street fighting that followed, the enemy brought their full weight into bear, determined to wipe our assault squad out. The twenty-two fought until all their bullets and grenades were gone. The situation was critical. It seemed to be all over for them.

But just then 3<sup>rd</sup> Company came charging to their rescue. Next Regimental Commander Wang and I sped across the bridge with our second contingent and also entered the city.

In two hours’ time, we destroyed half of the enemy’s two regiments. The remainder broke and scattered. By dusk we had completely occupied the city of Luding and were in firm control of the bridge.

Source: Yang Zhengwu. “The Fight at Luding Bridge.” *Stories from the Long March*. Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1958. 61–76.