

WARFARE

Still marching through history

Eighty years after its conclusion, the legacy of the Chinese Red Army's Long March continues to transcend borders and influence people across the world. **Sun Xiaochen** reports.

This month, as China commemorates the 80th anniversary of the Long March — a strategic military shift against the forces of the Nationalists — the epic trek still resonates with non-Chinese observers, who acknowledge the effort, determination and sacrifices made by Mao Zedong's army against almost overwhelming odds.

In October 1934, about 200,000 Red Army officers and soldiers of the Communist Party of China set out on a 12,500-km expedition to break through the encircling Nationalist troops.

During its two-year odyssey, the Red Army fought more than 600 battles against better-armed forces and traversed hundreds of raging rivers, precipitous mountains and dangerous swamps before arriving at Yan'an in the northwestern province of Shaanxi, where it laid the foundations for victory in the civil war.

After learning about the maneuver through literature from the late 1930s, generations of interested foreigners have retraced the route, studied archival material and handed down stories about the expedition.

Discovering China's soul

In 2005, David Ben Uziel spent five months following in the marchers' footsteps, visiting almost every major town and village on the route from Jiangxi province to Shaanxi. The 81-year-old Israeli national describes his own trek as a journey to rediscover the soul of China.

"The same question was repeated in every county and village I visited: 'Why would a 70-year-old foreigner want to retrace the Long March?' My answer was that I wanted to find the soul of China. People looked at me and asked 'What is the soul of China?' I said it's the leadership," said the former lieutenant colonel in the Israeli army.

"All the soldiers of the Red Army who fought, starved and froze, yet continued to walk the Long March are the foundations upon which China was united," said Uziel, who gave a speech in Tel Aviv, Israel, on Sept 20, to promote knowledge of the Long March among his compatriots.

Like many older people, Uziel was inspired by *Red Star over China*, the famous account of the Long March written by Edgar Snow, a journalist from the United States who spent months with the Red Army and conducted extensive interviews with Party leaders Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai in Yan'an in 1936.

Retracing the route across the dangerous terrain of West China helped Uziel put the sacrifice of the Red Army leaders and soldiers into perspective.

"The Long March was unique because of the conditions, which were so cruel. The Red Army's secret weapon was the soldiers' and the leaders' personal examples (of sacrifice for each other)," he said.



Antony Harrold (second right), a 13-year-old dual British-Polish national, takes a photo at an exhibition in Beijing earlier this month to commemorate the Long March. WANG ZHUANGFEI / CHINA DAILY



Edgar Snow (right), a journalist from the United States, conducts interviews in Shaanxi province in 1936. XINHUA NEWS AGENCY

“It was one of the most important events in China's history. The rebirth of China was only possible because of the people who made the Long March ...”

John Ross, an economic researcher with the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University of China in Beijing

According to a documentary broadcast by China Central Television, the Red Army had to march about 37 km and fight at least one battle every

day, while every kilometer gained saw the deaths of three marchers on average, as a result of combat injuries, illness or sheer fatigue.

Rebirth of a nation

Even after eight decades, the archives, sculptures and relics, such as pistols and blankets, displayed at numerous museums along the route can still take visitors back in time.

When he visited a museum dedicated to the Long March in Yan'an earlier this year, John Ross, an economic researcher with the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University of China in Beijing, was impressed by the living history on display.

He said reviewing the indelible history of the event through exhibits, such as Mao's chess table and the caves where the soldiers avoided Nationalist air raids, offer intriguing ways of better understanding modern China.

"It's fascinating to see all those details on show at the museum, because when you

have a better sense of how people struggled and lived, you have more feeling for what shaped them," said Ross, who worked as an economic and business policy advisor to London mayor Ken Livingstone during his term in office.

"It was one of the most important events in China's history. The rebirth of China was only possible because of the people who made the Long March, which was an incredible sacrifice that allowed modern China to come into being. It's impossible to understand the real dynamic in China without studying that period of history."

New insights

Although the archived materials may seem too weighty to appeal to young people, a TV adaptation of *Red Star over China*, which is currently being screened in China, has provided a new generation with an entertaining way of commemorating the epic journey.

The 30-episode-long adap-

tation tells the story of Snow's experiences in China before, during and after the Long March, while depicting military and political history during the civil war.

Matthew Knowles, an actor from the US who played Brigadier General Evans Carlson of the US Marine Corps, said working on the series gave him the opportunity to learn about his character, who was a friend of Snow, and also helped him gain insights into the Long March and Chinese culture.

"Through doing the research and the acting as I actually experienced it, it was a lot different," said Knowles, who has been developing a career in China since 2013, when he accepted an offer to study drama at the Beijing Film Academy.

Knowles, who learned to speak and read Chinese during two years as a volunteer teacher in Guizhou, one of 14 provinces the Red Army crossed during the Long March, studied archival material about Carlson in Chinese and English, plus works about important historical events and meetings.

"Every line in the script had something I had to research to figure out what really happened. There is so much history in that one event. It gave me a different perspective of how huge an event it was, one that changed the history of China," he said.

"The Long March is a huge part of Chinese culture, and it has shaped China in the last 80 years. The more you understand it and the history of communism in China, the more you understand the collective will of the people and why the country runs the way it does."

Zhao Xinying contributed to the story.

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The best-known Western literature about the Long March

Red star over China by Edgar Snow (1937)

As the first Westerner to meet the leaders of the Chinese Communists, Snow's book provides the authorized account of their lives, in addition to offering a detailed history of the Long March from the author's own perspective and his delight at seeing this promising political force gradually mature. The book also includes a number of photographs that add veracity to Snow's account.

The Long March 1935: The Epic of Chinese Communism's Survival by Dick Wilson (1982)

Wilson believes that there was not one Long March, but a series of treks, as various Communist armies in the south of China headed to the north and west. The depiction of Mao Zedong is not necessarily based on accounts by people who knew him, but is much more about the way the author wanted him to be.

The Long March: The untold story by Harrison E. Salisbury (1987)

A well-rounded documentary-style work that mainly focuses on the circumstances that led up to the Long March, and how the Red Army overcame numerous difficulties. Harrison adopted a neutral position to

ensure that the book would be unbiased toward China or the Red Army. It contains a large selection of first-hand material collected by the author during a 1984 visit to China.

The Long March: The true story behind the legendary journey that made Mao's China, by Ed Jocelyn and Andrew McEwen (2006)

An account of the march based squarely on eyewitness accounts that combine the story of the historic trek with images of a changing society and the protagonists' personal experiences. It provides a picture of China, past and present, seen through the eyes of two Chinese-speaking Western journalists who backpacked from one remote village to the next through mud and rain.

Choosing Revolution: Chinese women soldiers on the Long March by Helen Praeger Young (2007)

About 2,000 women participated in the Long March, but their experiences of this seminal event in the history of the CPC were rarely represented. To rectify this omission, Young presents oral histories of 22 female veterans of the legendary walk to victory.

Major non-Chinese participants

Otto Braun, better known in China as Li De

Braun was a German Communist who worked as an agent for the Comintern

(The Communist International, a group that advocated global communism) who was sent to China and advised the Communist Party on military strategies during the 1930s. He not only undertook the Long March, but was also an early proponent of the maneuver. However, Braun's poor decisions during the early part of the strategic shift took a heavy toll on the Red Army. After he was removed from the military command at the Party's Zunyi Conference, Braun's authority was in tatters and he flew to Moscow in August 1939.

Nguyen Son, aka Hong Shui

Inspired by the example of Ho Chi Minh, the Vietnamese revolutionary and later president, Hong

took part in both the Chinese revolution and the Long March. He was the only non-Chinese to work with the Red Army from its foundation until the victory in the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (1937-45). During the Long March, Hong made great contributions to Red Army and CPC publicity, inspiring the troops and helping

to win the support of the masses. In 1955, he was made a major general in the People's Liberation Army. Hong held the same rank in the People's Army of Vietnam, giving him the distinction of being a general in two countries.

Rudolf Alfred Bosshardt, aka Bo Fuli

Bosshardt was known for his unique participation in the Long March. He was a British Protestant

missionary who adopted a Chinese name. On Oct 1, 1934, Bosshardt, his wife, Rose Piaget, and several other missionaries were captured by the Sixth Corps of the Red Army, led by General Xiao Ke.

Piaget was later released, but Bosshardt and a fellow missionary were forced to join the Red Army on the Long March. Bosshardt helped Xiao translate a French map of Guizhou province into Chinese, which was considered a good guide for the army's military maneuvers. After 560 days in captivity, Bosshardt was released on the morning of Easter Day, 1936. He spent three months recounting his unique experience, and his book, *The Restraining Hand: Captivity for Christ in China*, was published in London later the same year, while Xiao and his army were still on the road to Yan'an, the ultimate destination of the Long March, in Shaanxi province.

Battle of Luding Bridge remains a powerful event

By **DAVID LEFFMAN**

Of all the incidents during the Long March — the strategic shift from Red bases in East China; the Zunyi Conference, where the Party abandoned its Russian advisors' plans for urban warfare in favor of Mao Zedong's uniquely Chinese strategy of a rural uprising; or the Red Army's final arrival at Yan'an, Shaanxi province, after an exhausting struggle across Sichuan's airless, high-altitude Aba grasslands — perhaps

none is better known than the battle at the Luding Bridge.

To appreciate what happened in May 1935 you need to cross the mountains into western Sichuan and visit Luding, a tiny township stretched thinly along the Dadu River gorge: it's a spectacular setting, with Daxue Mountain's frosted peaks rising more than 5,000 meters above the sea level and the Dadu's brown waters tearing roughly through the gorge below. The river is spanned by a single 100-meter-long suspension bridge,

once the only reliable crossing for hundreds of kilometers in any direction, which was built in 1701 after a blacksmith won a 30,000 tael reward for designing it. Decked in wooden planks, the bridge was originally supported by nine chains, but afternoon winds howling through the gorge made it buckle and twist uncontrollably, so the number of chains was eventually increased to 13 to provide extra stability.

Having failed to cross downstream using boats, the Long

Marchers arrived at Luding to find that the local warlord's forces had pulled up the bridge's planking, leaving just the chains intact. But the Red Army soldiers were toughened from their months on the road, besides being well-armed with modern weapons: while one branch of the Communist forces attacked the town, it took just 22 Red Army soldiers to climb hand-over-hand along the chains and defeat the pro-Nationalist forces on the far side, despite coming under heavy

rifle and machine-gun fire.

Today, visitors can simply walk over the bridge to a museum, where photographs and paintings recall the efforts of the Long March troops.

David Leffman is a long-term observer of China and a lead author for the Rough Guide travel series. His latest book, The Mercenary Mandarin: How a British adventurer became a general in Qing-dynasty China, is published by Blacksmith Books.



People walk over the Luding Bridge above the Dadu River in Sichuan province. DAVID LEFFMAN / FOR CHINA DAILY