

# The Chinese People's Liberation Army since 1949

Ground Forces



**BENJAMIN LAI**

**ILLUSTRATED BY ADAM HOOK**

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*Series editor Martin Windrow*

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# THE CHINESE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY SINCE 1949 GROUND FORCES

## INTRODUCTION

The Chinese People's Liberation Army (Zhōngguó Rénmín Jiěfàngjūn – hereafter, PLA) is the armed wing of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It traces its origins to the Red Army of Workers and Peasants (Gōngnóng Hóngjūn) that was established by the Nánchāng Uprising of August 1, 1927 by men of the Kuomintang army's 24th Division led by General (later Field Marshal) Zhū Dé. August 1 is still regarded as “PLA Day” in China, and the emblems of the PLA still bear the Chinese characters for 8 (Bā) and 1 (Yī), recalling the first day of the eighth month.

In the mid-1920s the Chinese communists were cooperating with the then-dominant political force in the country, the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, KMT) led by Chiang Kaishek (Jiǎng Jièshí), against various regional warlord armies.<sup>1</sup> A series of disputes resulted in a split between the CCP and KMT, and the first battle between them in August 1927. The Nánchāng Uprising saw the defeat of the pro-communist troops; Zhū Dé then led them in a retreat to Jǐnggāng Mountain, where they were joined by another defeated rag-tag army from the failed Autumn Harvest Uprising, led by Máo Zédōng. To crush this communist guerrilla force the KMT established a series of encirclements, but the Red Army eventually broke out, and in October 1934 embarked on their historic “Long March” that was to end a year later in the mountainous desert plateaux of Yánān. These soon became a CCP-controlled zone and stronghold, despite continuous pressure from the Nationalist Army.

However, the Japanese invasion of northeast China in 1931, and the 1937 Marco Polo Bridge Incident, prompted the creation of a temporary “united front” by the CCP and KMT against the Japanese (though this truce was not universally observed by either side). During this time, the CCP established the Eighth Route Army and the New Fourth Army; instead of preying on the peasants like the armies of old, these forces drew support from the rural populations, and were able rapidly to expand their areas of control beyond Yánān. The KMT was soon faced with a two-front war – on the one hand fighting the Japanese, on the other hand having to divert resources to contain the CCP's ever-expanding influence over large areas of rural China.



The current PLA Ground Forces cap badge, Model 07 uniform. Note the Chinese characters for “8” above “1” on the red star. (Author's photo)

1 See Osprey Men-at-Arms 463, *Chinese Warlord Armies 1911–30*



The PLA Ground Forces flag, with an alternative presentation of the characters “8.1.” The predominance of the gold star on red indicates the Chinese Communist Party’s superiority to the army, represented by the green lower one-third of the field. (Author’s photo)

The end of World War II in the Pacific in 1945 saw the start of the Chinese Civil War proper, and the “Red” Army was then renamed as the Chinese People’s Liberation Army. It was able to take advantage of large quantities of leftover Japanese weapons and ordnance, and consequently its military capability expanded considerably, to include for the first time large-caliber artillery and tanks. The PLA progressed from guerrilla tactics to set-piece battles, such as the campaigns of Liáoníng/Shěnyáng (Liáoshēn Zhànyì, 1948), Huáihǎi (Huáihǎi Zhànyì, 1948), and Běijīng/Tianjin (Píngjīn Zhànyì, 1949). These campaigns, in which the PLA destroyed 173 KMT divisions and eliminated some 1.5 million Nationalist troops, essentially sealed the victory of the CCP. In September 1949, Chiang Kaishek escaped to the island of Taiwan with some two million supporters; he proclaimed Taipei as the temporary capital of the Republic of China, and continued to assert his government as the sole legitimate authority over all of China. On the mainland, the CCP, with Máo Zédōng at the helm, established the People’s Republic of China (PRC) on October 1, 1949.<sup>2</sup>

In the more than half-century since then, the PLA has expanded from an ill-equipped, ground-only army into combined armed forces that include a potent nuclear capability and steadily growing naval and air services. In the early days the PLA drew its support from the Soviet Union and developed largely along Soviet lines; however, the split between the two communist powers in the mid-1960s saw China begin to embark on a self-modernization program, eventually acquiring equipment originating in Israel, the United States, Russia, Ukraine and France. Since the “opening” of China in the early 1980s the country’s economic success has also given the PLA a long-awaited opportunity to modernize its bloated organization, demobilizing almost a million soldiers in 1985. By the first decade of the 21st century the PLA has been transformed from a largely conscript army modeled on Soviet lines into an increasingly professional force more comparable to Western models.

2 See MAA 306, *Chinese Civil War Armies 1911–49*



October 1, 1949: PLA soldiers march past during the first National Day parade in Tiananmen Square, Běijīng. They wear captured Japanese steel helmets, and are armed with Czech-made ZB vz 26 light machine guns; at this date the PLA had a motley armory of Japanese weapons and those taken from the Chinese KMT, including Czech, US and even some British small arms. Note that they are marching in a conventional cadence – the Soviet-style “goose-step” had not yet been adopted. (*China Magazine*)

## CHRONOLOGY & KEY EVENTS

**1949, October 1** Establishment of the People’s Republic of China.

**1949, October 25–27** PLA attempt to control Jīnmén island (a.k.a. Quemoy) is thwarted in battle of Gǔníngtóu (Gǔníngtóu Zhīyì or Jīnmén Zhīyì).

### THE 1950s:

#### The Korean War, 1950–53

In October 1950 the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army (PVA) entered the Korean War in support of North Korea, and its battle-hardened troops rapidly gained successes against the UN forces. As the war drew on, however, the lack of cold-weather protection and effective air cover, and weaknesses in firepower, caused the PVA to suffer severely. Despite material setbacks the PVA was able to hold the much superior UN forces to a stalemate, culminating in an armistice in July 1953. According to Chinese sources, China committed 1.9 million soldiers to Korea plus another half-million as combat replacements, giving a total of 2.4 million over the three years of the war. (If militias, mostly in rear areas, are included, the grand total of those serving during this period rises to 3 million).<sup>3</sup>

Chinese casualties were reported as 115,786 combat deaths, 221,264 combat injuries, and 29,085 captured, giving a total of 366,135. Non-combat casualties to the PVA were as high as an additional 556,146; however, of the many that were hospitalized 173,405 eventually returned to active duty, reducing final non-combat losses to 382,741. Accidental deaths accounted for 10,808; 73,686 were deemed unsuitable and returned to civilian duties; 786 committed suicide, 64 were executed, 3,089 were imprisoned for criminal activities, 450 dismissed, 17,715 went AWOL, and 4,202 died of illness.

<sup>3</sup> See MAA 174, *The Korean War 1950–53*

## Final clashes with the Nationalists

For most of the 1950s the PLA was almost continuously engaged in mopping-up operations against the remnants of the Nationalist Army. In 1950 the PLA completed the conquest of Hǎinán Island (Hǎinándǎo), the battle of the Wànshān archipelago (Wànshān Qúndǎo Zhīyì), and the retaking of Zhōushān Island (Zhōushāndǎo). In 1952 the PLA won the battle of the Nanpeng archipelago, and in 1953 the Dongshān Island campaign (Dongshān Qúndǎo Zhīyì). By 1955 the Yījiāngshān Island campaign (Yījiāngshāndǎo Zhīyì) saw the elimination of the last significant KMT forces from offshore China, bar the islands of Jīnmén and Mǎzǔ. The Jīnmén artillery duels (Jīnmén Páozhàn) across the strait of Quemoy lasted for some 20 years, though they were at their most intense between August and October 1958. (Between late 1958 and 1979 both sides scaled down the military contest into a political demonstration that eventually became farcical, with both sides agreeing to only shoot on alternate days, deliberately aiming at unmanned zones to minimize casualties. By the 1970s most of the shells contained only propaganda leaflets.)

## Burma and Tibet

Supported by the CIA, surviving KMT troops escaped to Burma, where these diehards continued the struggle in the Sino-Burmese frontier zone between 1950 and 1961. By the 1970s support for their guerrilla campaign was dwindling, and in order to survive some turned to opium cultivation, creating the infamous Golden Triangle. By the 1980s many of these old soldiers and their descendents had tired of a criminal/guerrilla lifestyle and took advantage of an amnesty to settle in Taiwan, although some chose to stay in Thailand to this day.

October 1959 saw a CIA-inspired and supported uprising by exile Tibetans; this Lhasa Uprising was quickly crushed by the PLA, although sporadic guerrilla attacks by Tibetan exiles continued into the early 1960s.

## The French Indochina War

For more than 25 years, China provided military, economic and political support to communist Vietnam. Late in 1949 Ho Chi Minh, the leader of the communist Viet Minh resistance to French postwar reoccupation, asked China for assistance. In response China formed a military advisory group (CMAG), and 281 military and political officers crossed the frontier into North Vietnam incognito. They were headed by Gen Wéi Guóqīng, and Máo's personal representative Gen Chén Gēng – the latter chosen because he knew Ho from his days at Whampoa Military Academy. China took on the missions of arming and training Vietnamese troops in camps established inside China, and of advising them within North Vietnam. Under direct orders from Máo, the CMAG was to allow the Vietnamese to take all the glory from any consequent military successes.



Propaganda poster depicting a PLA hero of the Korean War – Huang Jiguang (1930–52), who was posthumously awarded the title of Hero Special Class for his conduct in the Battle of Triangle Hill (in Chinese, Shǎng Gān Lǐng) in October 1952. Huang wears Model 50 PLA uniform, but the People's Volunteer Army in Korea actually fought with all insignia removed. (*China Magazine*)