

The Chinese People's Liberation Army since 1949

Ground Forces



BENJAMIN LAI

ILLUSTRATED BY ADAM HOOK

Elite • 194

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Series editor Martin Windrow

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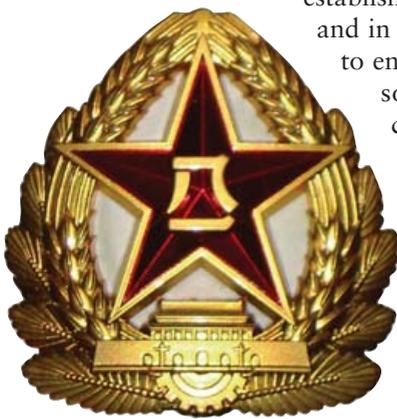
THE CHINESE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY SINCE 1949 GROUND FORCES

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.¹ 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, 1949.²

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).³

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.

³ 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 – Huáng Jiguāng (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 Líng) 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*)

An historic photo dating from 1950–51, showing the PLA's General Chén Gēng (second from left, round spectacles) with a youthful-looking Vo Nguyen Giap (third from left), commander of the People's Army of Vietnam.



With this help, Gen Vo Nguyen Giap's People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) was able to expand its main force to seven divisions by 1954, including an artillery division. To sustain this effort the PLA military support team would expand to more than 15,000 men, including substantial numbers of logistic, technical, tactical and political advisors attached at all levels of the PAVN command structure. General Chén provided key input in the development of the master plan that forced the French to evacuate Lào Cai, Cao Bang, Lang Son, and Hoà Binh, abandoning virtually all of Vietnam north of the Red

A

THE 1950s

(1) Field Marshal Peng De Huai, Model 55 generals' dress uniform

Field Marshal Peng De Huai (1898–1974) was the commander-in-chief of the People's Volunteer Army in the Korean War, and Defense Minister from 1954 to 1959. The Model 55 general officer's dress uniform was modeled on the Soviet Army equivalent of April 1945, in a dark "sea green" with red piping and gold "Russia braid" on the collar and cuffs. Note the gold oakleaf wreath around the cap badge, gold chin cords, a gold star and oakleaf spray on the collar, a larger star above the cuff piping and braid, and a line of oakleaves around the cuffs. The gold braid shoulder boards show red edging except at the outer end; they bear marshal's ranking of a large gold and red national crest centered, and a large silver star. Marshal Peng displays on his right breast the stars of three decorations: (top to bottom) PLA "8.1" Medal 1st Class, Independence and Freedom Medal 1st Class, and Liberation Medal 1st Class.

(2) Sergeant, infantry, Model 55 field uniform

The summer-weight Model 55 field uniform was made in a number of hues by dispersed factories, often this yellowish-green drab shade. Officers had four internal jacket pockets, with "bracket"-shaped flaps on the chest and straight flaps below the waist; enlisted men had the breast pockets only. This uniform included a sidecap resembling the Soviet *pilotka*, which was very unpopular. The only insignia are the small Model 55 PLA badge on the cap, and collar patches. The latter are in the PLA's red, with (for enlisted ranks) silver metal pin-on insignia, overlaying (for NCOs) a single yellow stripe; three stars denote the rank of sergeant. His simple bandolier equipment is made from canvas, and holds clips

of ammunition for his 7.62mm Type 56 semiautomatic rifle – the Chinese copy of the Soviet Simonov SKS, with a folding cruciform-section spike bayonet.

(3) Corporal Lei Feng, Transport Corps, Model 55 winter uniform

Lei Feng (1940–62) was a driver JNCO in the Transport Corps who was killed in a traffic accident. He was posthumously selected as the perfect model of a communist citizen, and was made the subject of a propaganda campaign initiated by Máo, the youth of the country being exhorted to "Learn from Comrade Lei Feng." He wears the padded green winter version of the Model 55 uniform, with a brown fur-flapped cap resembling the Soviet *ushanka*. His collar patches with two silver stars and a "head-on car" badge identify his rank and corps, and he displays a gold "Máo" pin above a commemorative badge on the left breast (this latter is not an official medal). He is armed with the 7.62mm Type 54 submachine gun – the Chinese copy of the folding-butt Soviet PPS-43. A brown leather four-pocket magazine pouch is slung from his right shoulder on a webbing strap, held steady by his leather waist belt.

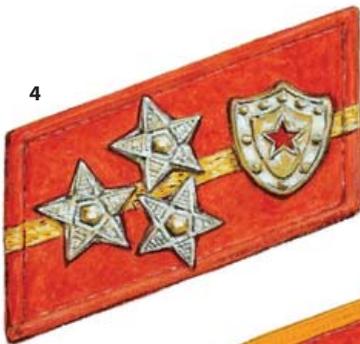
1950s insignia:

(4) **Model 55 PLA Police collar patch, sergeant.** This design was in use by the forerunners of today's PAP from November 26, 1955 to December 31, 1958. The officer's version had the Police shield, but no stars or yellow stripe; the general officer's patch had yellow edging.

(5) **Model 58 PLA Ground Forces collar patch, captain.** This design was in use from January 18, 1958 to May 31, 1965. All officer ranks had the yellow edging on three sides.

(6) **Model 55 PLA Ground Forces daily dress shoulder board, lieutenant**

(7) **Model 55 PLA cap badge**



River Delta by the end of 1950.⁴ In June 1951 Gen Chén was recalled to China, and that August he was appointed deputy commander of the Chinese PVA in Korea; thereafter Gen Wéi bore the sole responsibility for advising the PAVN.

The signing of the Korean armistice in July 1953 allowed even greater resources to be devoted to supporting the Vietnamese struggle. China's material support, always substantial, was to reach as much as 4,000 tons a month just before the battle of Dien Bien Phu in early 1954, and included significant numbers of US 105mm howitzers captured in Korea. Simultaneously, new cadres of battle-hardened PLA officers fresh from Korea arrived to give invaluable assistance during the preparations for that climactic battle. ("Cadre" is a communist term often used in reference to those in command – whether officers in the PLA, or managers in factories.) It was the CMAG, drawing upon hard-learned lessons from Korea, who insisted that all artillery must be hidden in shellproof dugouts, which proved to be the battle-winning factor at Dien Bien Phu. Two battalions equipped with "recoilless rifles" and MBRLs were sent south; to counter French airpower China also furnished the PAVN with four battalions of AA troops equipped with 37mm guns, and engineering experts were sent to assist in the construction of hundreds of miles of siege and communication trenches. On the victorious conclusion of the battle of Dien Bien Phu in May 1954 the CMAG ended its mission in Vietnam, but Chinese military aid continued to flow.

THE 1960s:

The Vietnam War

When the North Vietnamese faced major intervention by the US in their war against South Vietnam, they once again asked China for help, and this time China participated directly with combat support troops such as AA, truck and railway units as well as engineering and construction troops. From August 1965 to March 1968 alone, more than 15,000 PLA troops entered North Vietnam, participating in 2,153 direct engagements, and shooting down 1,707 aircraft and helicopters.

All in all, during the whole war some 320,000 PLA troops would serve in Vietnam in various capacities. The largest category were AA troops, numbering some 150,000 men with 16 divisions' worth of air defense assets. China also sent some 100,000 PLA construction and engineering troops; during the war they were responsible for building or repairing 1,778 railroad facilities, 577km (358 miles) of railroad tracks, 1,206km (749 miles) of major roads, 305 bridges, 4,441 underground shelters, two military airfields with associated hardened shelters, 9 harbors, 123 underground military facilities, 103km (64 miles) of undersea communication cables, and 5 petroleum pipelines totaling 159km (99 miles). The third largest group were the 2nd and 13th Divisions of the Railroad Corps, a specialist PLA troop category responsible for rail transport and maintenance of railroad facilities. Entering Vietnam from 1965, these troops were formed into two specialist corps, Nos. 1 and 6; later rotations brought the 12th Div, 58th Regt and 10th Independent Regt of the Railroad Corps to Vietnam. In the eight years 1965–72 the PLA in Vietnam suffered 5,270 casualties, of whom 1,070 were killed.

4 See MAA 322, *The French Indochina War 1946–54*



In addition to direct involvement, China also provided free training for more than 6,000 Vietnamese cadres, and facilitated the delivery of military aid from other communist countries, transported via the Trans-Siberian railway and delivered into Vietnam by the PLA Transport Corps. According to Vietnamese sources, North Vietnam received 160 million tons of aid from China, of which 93.3 percent was free of charge. This total included 2.2 million rifles and machine guns; 74,000 artillery pieces; 1.2 billion rounds of small arms ammunition; 18.7 million artillery rounds; 176 naval vessels; 170 aircraft; 552 tanks and 320 APCs; 16,000 trucks; 3 surface/air missile battalions and 180 SA-2 missiles; 2 radar systems; 2 pontoon bridges; 18,240 tons of explosives; 1 million sets of radio and telephone equipment; 130 tons of diesel fuel; and 11.2 million sets of military uniform.

Three of a set of six training posters of the 1960s depicting the basic infantry skills that every member of the PLA had to master: here, throwing grenades, use of satchel charges, and digging-in. The others covered shooting, bayonet-fighting, and swimming with personal weapons and equipment. Note that at this date none of the soldiers is shown wearing a helmet. (*China Magazine*)

Other theaters and events:

1962 In October–November, India and China fought a brief border skirmish that resulted in a Chinese military victory. The clash was initiated when India granted asylum to the 14th Dalai Lama, and began to place a number of outposts north of the McMahon Line on what the Chinese regarded as Chinese territory.

1967–76 China entered a long period of internal chaos; during this **Cultural Revolution** political infighting would hinder economic, social and military development. The PLA's operations during this period must be seen against that background.

The 1969 Sino-Soviet border skirmishes

Although disputed ownership of Zhēnbǎo (Damanskii) Island in the Ussuri River was a hangover from the days of Imperial China and Tsarist Russia, during the era of communist solidarity frontier patrols of each nation often exchanged greetings, and the disputed border line was never a problem. However, during the Cultural Revolution increasing Sino-Soviet tensions led to brawls between patrols, and shooting broke out in March 1969. The USSR responded with tanks and APCs as well as artillery bombardment. Over three days the PLA successfully halted Soviet penetration and eventually evicted all Soviet troops from the island. During this skirmish the PLA deployed two reinforced infantry platoons from 3rd Co, 202nd Regt of 68th

During the Zhēnbǎo Island clashes with the Soviet Army in March 1969 one Chinese RPG team, Huá Yùjié (left) and his assistant Yú Hǎicháng, destroyed four AFVs and achieved more than 10 kills. Huá and Yú received the accolade “Combat Hero” from the CMC, and their action was commemorated on a postage stamp. In this posed photo they wear the fleece-flapped cap and padded Model 65 winter uniform. (*China Magazine*)



Div with artillery backup. According to Chinese sources, the Soviet Army initially deployed some 60 soldiers and six BTR-60PBs, and in a second attack some 100 troops backed up by 10 tanks and 14 APCs, as well as artillery including BM-21 “Katyusha” rockets. (In the ensuing battle a Soviet T-62 tank fell through the ice and sank, but was eventually recovered by PLA divers; it is now displayed at the Běijīng Military Museum.) Other notable border incidents in this period included a clash at Tiělièkètí in China’s Xīnjiāng Province in August 1969, when a PLA patrol of 22 soldiers and three journalists were surrounded by about 300 Soviet troops with supporting arms, and annihilated.

This incident and the Zhēnbǎo Island skirmishing almost led to all-out war between China and the Soviet Union, with each side massing huge numbers of troops at the border. However, the border disputes were subsequently resolved when China, Russia and Kazakhstan signed agreements to ratify their frontier lines.

Chinese characters of slogan
“Service to the People,”
associated with Máo badges
(see Plate B3a).

为人民服务

B

THE 1960s

(1) Female soldier, Model 65 uniform

The Model 65 uniform was devoid of all insignia except for a large red star cap badge and plain red collar patches. The female soldier’s equivalent of the “Máo cap” was peakless, and tended to be worn pushed back on the head; some photos show a line of red piping at the crown seam. Regulations for female soldiers were more relaxed, allowing more variety of hair styles, though simple fringes and/or pigtailed were the most common. Before the mid-1990s uniforms did not include any shirt or undergarments, and it was common to see a privately purchased civilian blouse worn under the green jacket. Medical personnel displayed the red Geneva Cross on a loose armband attached with a safety pin.

(2) Soldier in bayonet training

At the height of the Sino-Soviet border disputes the PLA were prepared for invasion by the Soviet Army at any time.

Basic bayonet-fighting techniques were taught with dummy rifles, and protective gear in the style of Japanese *kendo* equipment, with stiff leather “armor plates” attached to the front and left side of quilted garments; here it is worn over the padded Model 65 winter uniform.

(3) Cold-weather field uniform, Soviet border

The padded Model 65 winter uniform is worn with an *ushanka* of synthetic fleece, thick mittens, and a snow-camouflage cape. During the Cultural Revolution every citizen was expected to wear a “Máo pin” (see 3a above); the slogan at the base, “Service to the People,” is still popular today. His weapon is a Soviet-made SKS semiautomatic rifle, distinguishable by its folding knife bayonet from the Chinese-made Type 56 with a spike bayonet, and his webbing has eight pouches for its magazines. A water canteen is slung to his left hip.



THE 1970s: The 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War

Sino-Vietnamese border country, 1984: men of a PLA commando group taking a cigarette break. They wear Model 74 uniforms, and this was the first conflict for which steel helmets were issued. The soldier at left carries a Model 77 stick grenade in his webbing; such wooden-handled grenades are still in PLA use today, being less costly to manufacture than all-metal "egg" grenades. Note the foreground soldier's plain red collar patches; during the Cultural Revolution military ranks were abolished – there were only "soldiers" and "officers." During this period they were often addressed according to their appointment, such as "Comrade Squad Commander" or "Comrade Company Commander." (*China Magazine*)

After the PAVN's 1972 spring offensive against the Army of the Republic of Vietnam failed, China soon made up the tremendous material losses, and in 1975 the North Vietnamese were able to launch the offensive that led to final victory. After the fall of Saigon direct military aid from Běijīng ceased, but Chinese support continued; for example, China established a torpedo-boat building yard, and factories for the production of light and heavy machine guns, AA guns, and ammunition. Although Sino-Vietnamese relations began to sour during the 1970s such aid continued until 1978, just before the Sino-Vietnamese War of the following year. In February 1979 China entered into a month-long war with Vietnam under the pretext of self-defense after numerous Vietnamese incursions into China that had resulted in deaths and damage to civilian property.

The decision for war was taken by the Central Military Commission on December 8, 1978, and preparations were completed by January 8, 1979. The PLA massed a force of 560,000 troops, divided into 9 corps, 29 infantry divisions, 2 artillery divisions and 2 AA divisions, supported by the Railroad, Engineer and Construction corps as well as local militias. The main thrust entered North Vietnam from two directions on February 17, 1979. An attacking force of 100,000 from Yúnnán Province in the west, commanded by Yáng Dézhì, and another 100,000 from Guǎngxī Province in the east, headed by Xǔ Shìyǒu, formed the key spearheads. Facing the Chinese on these fronts were six Vietnamese infantry divisions (3, 316A, 337, 338, 345 & 346), 16 local and 4 artillery regiments, giving a total of 100,000 troops.



The principal objective of Xǔ's Guǎngxī command was the capture of Cao Bang by means of a pincer movement, with 41st Corps advancing from the southeast spearheaded by 122nd and 123rd Divs, and 42nd Corps attacking from the northwest with 125th and 126th Divs in the lead. Facing them were local units backed by the PAVN 346 Division. In the first three hours the eastern prong broke through to Thông Nông (in Chinese, Tongnóng), but met heavy resistance at Trà Lĩnh (Chá líng). Xǔ's second objective was Lang Son (Liàngshān), protected by the PAVN 3 Division. With 55th and 43rd Corps in the lead, the PLA first annihilated stubborn resistance around an old French fort at Dong Deng (Tóngděng), then penetrated as far as Mong Cai (Mángjiē), Lộc Bình (Lùpíng), and later Khau Ma (Kòumǎshān). After the encirclement of Lang Son on March 2 the PAVN 308 Div counterattacked, but were beaten back. In the western sector, Yáng's objective was Lào Cai (Lǎojiē), which he attacked with 11th, 13th and 14th Corps. Facing the Chinese on this front were the Vietnamese 316A and 345 Divs, but the town fell by February 22. After achieving its stated objectives, on March 5 the PLA declared a ceasefire and started to withdraw; the last vehicle crossed the frontier at 22.30hrs on March 15.

Despite achieving its strategic objectives and overwhelming stiff Vietnamese resistance, the PLA suffered significant losses. According to Chinese sources this war cost the PLA 6,954 killed and 14,800-plus wounded. Again according to the Chinese, Vietnamese casualties were as high as 80,000. (However, a Vietnamese publication claims that Chinese losses were as high as 20,000 dead and 60,000 wounded, and 280 tanks.) The PLA learned valuable lessons from this brief but hard-fought war. The organizational havoc caused by the Cultural Revolution, with its insistence on a rankless military structure, had created serious confusion and administrative chaos.

THE 1980s:

Renewed Sino-Vietnamese hostilities, 1980 & 1984–91

The ceasefire of 1979 did not bring peace; the Vietnamese artillery continued harassing fire across the border, and a series of small frontier clashes began almost immediately. What may be described as a battle for the border highlands was fought over a series of peaks straddling the Sino-Vietnamese frontier on both the former battle fronts. In 1980 a company-size clash occurred on Luójiāpíng Mountain in Yúnnán Province, and the following year further fighting took place on the 1,705m (5,592ft) Kòulín Mountain, and for Bǎilíhé East Hill. In the eastern sector, a more serious battle for Fākǎ Mountain in Guǎngxī Province lasted for 57 days in 1980, when soldiers from the Guǎngzhōu Military Region's 2nd Bn, 9th Regt, 3rd Inf Div fought against elements of the PAVN's 52 Regt, 337 Division.

Prolonged and larger-scale combats in the western sector, considered by many as the PLA's second punitive campaign against the PAVN, broke out in April 1984 and lasted until 1991 in the border region of China's Yúnnán Province and Vietnam's Ha Giang (Héjiāng) Province. In 1984 China initiated a series of actions to capture hills astride the frontier; the PLA's furthest incursion was no deeper than 5km (3 miles), but capturing this high ground enabled the Chinese to dominate the surrounding area and push the Vietnamese outside artillery range from the border. To the Chinese this series of actions are known as the battles of Lǎo Shān and Zhěyīn Shān, but in Vietnam they are collectively known as the battle of Yì Xuyén. On April 28,

Still wearing the “Máo cap” of the Model 65 uniform, this soldier in the jungled hills on the North Vietnamese border, photographed in about 1988, has a first-generation camouflage suit in “woodland” pattern. His weapon is the folding-stock Type 56-1 assault rifle. (*China Magazine*)



1984 the 40th Div of the PLA 14th Corps attacked Lǎo Mountain while the 49th Div of 16th Corps headed for Zhěyīn Mountain; the PAVN 313 Div and batteries of 168 Arty Bde conducted a fighting withdrawal.

The contest for these highlands bickered on over many years, with frequent artillery duels, and PLA units were constantly rotated to give commanders combat experience. By 1991 the two nations eventually agreed a border demarcation by which China gained all the disputed territories, thus securing the advantage of the high ground in the frontier zone. However, these hostilities against Vietnam in the 1980s again exposed major deficiencies within the PLA. There was a serious need to invest in quality rather than quantity, and, as part of badly needed reforms, in 1985 the CMC announced a million-man reduction in overall strength.

Consequences of the Tiananmen Square incident, 1989

This controversial internal security operation blighted the reputation of the PLA. Instances of blatant insubordination occurred, loyalties were questioned, and subsequent purges were carried out at many levels of the PLA. One consequence would be a clear separation of national defense and internal security responsibilities between the PLA and the People’s Armed Police (PAP).

THE 1990s TO DATE:

1991 saw the PLA’s first overseas deployment as part of a United Nations “blue beret” peacekeeping force, to Cambodia, following the final withdrawal of the PAVN occupation forces. Subsequent UN deployments included the Congo and Liberia in 1993. Between 1995 and 2000, further cuts of 500,000 men were made; the PLA Ground Forces avoided most of these, at the expense of the PLA/Navy and PLA/Air Force. In 1997 and 1999 respectively, political agreements brought the peaceful transfer to China of sovereignty over the last vestiges of the old “treaty ports” – Hong Kong from Great Britain, and Macau from Portugal – and the PLA took over the defense of these two Special Administrative Regions.