The Battle of Tengxian, 14-18 March 1938

By Terence Co

In January 1938 the Japanese high command in China planned to win the war there by conducting a campaign to capture the city of Wuhan. Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist government had moved its capital there after the fall of Nanking late the previous year. Wuhan was also important as it was China’s second-most industrialized city, the center of its armament industry, and astride the main railway in central China, the nation’s breadbasket. The Japanese reasoned, by capturing Wuhan, they would effectively collapse all Chinese resistance.

Before moving against Wuhan the Japanese plan called for the capture of Xuzhou, which was an important transportation hub between eastern and central China and a gateway to Wuhan. Accordingly, the Imperial Japanese Army’s (IJA) 13th Division was to attack from the south, followed soon thereafter by the 5th and 10th Divisions attacking from the north. That preliminary offensive started in early January, with the advance of 13th Division. By 20 February, however, the Chinese had concentrated against it and driven it back across the Huai River.

Even so, the 5th and 10th Divisions then attacked from the north. The 5th was to move through the town of Linyi while the 10th pushed through the town of Tengxian and then converged. After that the two divisions were to consolidate and together attack and capture the city of Xuzhou.

The 5th Division (20,000 men) attacked Linyi on 22 February, but became bogged down there until 6 March due to a carefully orchestrated fighting retreat by the Chinese Third Army (13,000 men in five infantry regiments). That delay further upset the larger Japanese timetable, so their high command committed 10th Division sooner than had been planned.

On the other side, the head of China’s Fifth War Zone—a geographic command and an approximate Western army group equivalent that encompassed the entire Xuzhou area—Gen. Li Tsung Jen, declared it a priority 10th Division not reach Taierzhuang before that city’s defenses were completed. Since the Japanese were advancing along the Jinpu railroad, he surmised the logical place to delay 10th Division was at the town of Tengxian.

In 1938 Tengxian was the county seat of Teng County, in Shandong province, and was home to some 50,000. The main part of town was surrounded by 15-foot-high stone walls and a 10-foot-deep moat. The majority of the local population actually lived in a series of villages lying outside that core area.
Desperate to find troops to garrison Tengxian and carry out his plan, the transfer of Twenty-Second Army Group from Sichuan into Fifth War Zone came as a godsend to Gen. Li. The newly arrived army group set up its headquarters in Lincheng, 20 miles south of Tengxian, while it deployed its combat units around Tengxian in two lines, with its XLV Corps in the outer line and XLI Corps forming the inner line.

The first line deployed around Jiehe, 11 miles north of Tengxian, with XLV Corps deploying its 125th Division in entrenched lines around that village. Corps headquarters tasked 127th Division to conduct guerrilla warfare in an area roughly 25 to 38 miles north of Tengxian.

The second line was set up immediately around Tengxian itself, with 124th Division deploying its 372nd Brigade inside the city center and its 370th Brigade northwest of there to protect the western flank. The 122nd Division’s 364th Brigade deployed along both banks of a 25 mile stretch of the Grand Canal, which flowed toward Taierzhuang to the south of Tengxian. The rest of the 122nd was deployed as a reserve.

First Moves

IJA 10th Division first fortified a basecamp at Zouxian. It then sent a battalion-sized advance party to Liangxiadian, six miles northwest of Jiehe, the center of...
the first Chinese defense line. On the night of 14 February several hundred members the local “Red Spear Society” (a Chinese militia guerilla force), armed mainly with edged weapons, supported a surprise attack by two battalions of the 746th Regiment (373rd Brigade/125th Division) on the Japanese camp. The attack failed, bogged down in barbed wire and mowed down by dug-in Japanese machineguns. On the morning of the next day, 700 Japanese infantry supported by tanks and artillery launched counterattacks on the Chinese, but that effort in turn also ended in failure. On 21 February the Chinese Twenty-Second Army Group redeployed its troops. Elements of its 124th, 125th and 127th Divisions moved in around Jiehe. The stalemate at the Japanese basecamp lasted into early March. Beginning on 4 March, elements of the IJA 10th Division began aggressively conducting reconnaissance raids into the Chinese front line. Those efforts increased until they had dispersed the Chinese besiegers. With the 10th’s position fully stabilized in that way, on 13 March Lt. Gen. Nishio Toshizo, commander of the IJA Second Army, ordered the division to move toward Tengxian. That was done in coordination with IJA 5th Division at Linyi. The plan was for an eventual pincer attack from those two units.

14 March

The Seya Detachment, the main strike force of IJA 10th Division, consisted of that larger formation's 33rd Brigade under Gen. Hiraku Seya and reinforced with two tankette companies and three artillery regiments (for a total of about 3,600 men). It began to move at dawn on 14 March. Initially resisting Seya Detachment was the Chinese 727th Regiment (364th Brigade/122nd Division). That unit prepared suicide squads armed with bundles of grenades and dynamite to ambush the Japanese tankettes moving along the Jinpu railway. As those vehicles moved toward Jiehe, they were ambushed at multiple points resulting in the destruction of six of them. The accompanying Japanese infantry were then subjected to Chinese machinegun fire from prepared positions. The Japanese took heavy losses to the point their advance was halted and the situation seemed to be developing into another stalemate.

At 3:00 p.m., supported by air and artillery bombardment, the Japanese rushed the Chinese lines. After only a short advance, however, they ran into the entrenchments of the Chinese 127th Division. The Japanese then maneuvered around the Chinese right flank to surround Jiehe. Gen. Li Tsung Jen had meanwhile ordered Gen. Tang Enbo’s LXXXV Corps to Tengxian. Not wanting to divide his army, Enbo sent his entire Twentieth Army. Its main body was to reach Tengxian by 17 March, with its spearhead 89th Division scheduled to arrive two days earlier.

15 March

At noon Seya Detachment made an all-out effort against Jiehe. By 1:00 p.m. the Japanese managed to break through and encircle the Chinese 379th Brigade (127th Division) and 373rd Brigade (125th Division). After a brief but brutal hand-to-hand fight and another Japanese artillery bombardment, by 2:30 p.m. the Chinese were entirely overwhelmed. The way to Tengxian was open.

By 5:00 p.m. the Japanese had managed to reach and penetrate the outer defenses of Tengxian, and they were poised to attack into the town itself. The only Chinese reinforcements arriving on the scene were three infantry companies of the Special Tasks Battalion of the XLI Corps of Twenty-Second Army Group.

The major reinforcements (Enbo’s Twentieth Army of 80,000 men) had been delayed in their arrival by the mountainous terrain. It wasn’t until 6:00 p.m. the lead element of that army (20th Regiment/4th Division/LXXXV