

FT Magazine Taiwan

Taiwan's everywhere war

As the threat of a Chinese invasion intensifies, one soldier is waging his own battle on defeatism

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Night was falling when sergeant Pa Wen-shan rode his motorcycle up the steep, narrow road that leads home. It had been a long journey. Four hours on the train from Chiayi, then another 45 minutes on the road from the station in Taitung, the only city on Taiwan's remote south-east coast. Once the Pacific fell back behind him and he entered the valley where Jialan, his village, is located, a rush of cool air dried the sweat on his face. The village sits on a slim, slanted plateau. Pa, then 25, passed the baseball field where he played as a boy. The cemetery where his father was buried a month earlier. On the final ascent to his family's home, he saw that the neighbours had started drinking. Sitting around wood fires in front of their one-storey cement houses, they called out to him: "Galawas!"

That is his name, not the Chinese name on his uniform patch, which he, like all indigenous Taiwanese, was forced to wear until recently. These were his people, the Kaaluwan tribe. But the young soldier was in no mood to join them. It was September 2012, and he had reached the end of his road. It led him back to the poor, remote village he'd been in such a hurry to leave six years earlier.

Back then, the moment he finished vocational school at the age of 19, Pa enlisted in the military. He joined the army because he was the eldest child and he wanted a stable job to help provide for his family. For the next few years, he was attached to the army's Aviation and Special Forces Command in south-western Taiwan. He parachuted from planes and participated in assault drills. He learnt to hide, to survive, to ambush an attacker in the jungle or in the towering mountain range that runs down the island like a spine.

These mountains have long divided Taiwan into two worlds. The cities on the plains to the west, facing across the strait to China, are home to 22 million of the country's 23.5 million people. That's where the factories that make most of the world's semiconductor chips are located, as well as the country's major highways, rail lines and power plants. But on the east side of the range, farming villages perch on slim slivers of flat land between stretches of sheer cliff that drop into the ocean. Typhoons and earthquakes frequently cut off the few roads and single rail line that connects them to the west.

The only scenario for the guerrilla-like missions young Pa was training for in the special forces would be a Chinese invasion, something the [People's Liberation Army](#) (PLA) has been planning and training for since 1949. That year, the troops of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek fled to Taiwan as his communist opponents toppled his Republic of China government and founded the People's Republic of China. Neither Chiang nor the communist leader Mao Zedong had shown any interest in Taiwan until the Chinese civil war. The island had been under Japanese rule since 1895 and, even before that, it was never more than loosely attached to China. But in 1945, with the help of the US, Chiang took over Taiwan. As Chiang slipped through Mao's fingers, the Chinese Communist party claimed Taiwan had been part of China since time immemorial. Ever since, Beijing has insisted the island must unify with China, through military force if necessary.

That threat is now being invoked almost every day. Since Taiwan became a democracy in the early 1990s, most of its people have resisted the dictum that they are part of China. But Chinese President Xi Jinping has made it clear he will not accept such self-determination. The PLA, fed on the proceeds of a 40-year economic boom, has grown into a force that vastly dwarfs that of its neighbour. American generals have warned that Xi wants the PLA to be ready to take Taiwan as soon as 2027.

In Pa's days in the special forces, war was the furthest thing from his mind. China's military then was nowhere close to being capable of invading the country. Taiwan's president at the time, [Ma Ying-jeou](#), was promoting dialogue with Beijing. And the Chinese Communist party, eyeing a path towards unification, was playing nice.

Pa enjoyed life in the military. "I was young. I had joined the special forces because I liked challenges," he told me. He developed a sense of pride and belonging. Short, tanned and muscular, he believes indigenous Taiwanese are better suited to being soldiers than their compatriots of Chinese heritage. Living in the mountains where they are often out hunting and fishing has made them tougher, he said. Pa rose quickly through the ranks to become a non-commissioned officer.

Then came the call from home. His father, a primary school teacher, had died. His two younger sisters were still at school in the city. His mother was all alone. Pa applied for a transfer to an army unit closer to home and the morning after that September night in 2012 when he returned to Jialan, he reported to work at Taiping, a garrison a 40-minute motorcycle ride to the north.

This was a true backwater. The narrow roads to the base passed through small indigenous villages and plantations of custard apple. Backed up against the mountains, the base was often wet with drizzle from the heavy clouds that settled on the mountains in the afternoon. From beneath that grey blanket, the white buildings of Taitung City and the Pacific Ocean could be seen gleaming under the sun in the distance.

The base was home to the army's Taitung Area Command. Its main task remains protecting Chihhang Air Base, where Taiwan's air force would shelter part of its fighter fleet if the PLA were to invade across the strait on the other side of the island.

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Previously, I didn't think they could attack. But I began to understand that the PLA is getting stronger and stronger

Pa Wen-shan, trainee army officer

“When the Communist military didn't have so much advanced equipment and so many ships yet, this was the rear,” Major General Tan Yong, commander of the Taitung Area Command, told me. “The Central Mountain Range was our shield, and the enemy's weapons couldn't reach us.” The army classes Taitung together with the outlying islands as “secondary areas”. Most officers rotate away back to western Taiwan as soon as they complete their minimum two-year deployment

here.

Pa was a mechanised infantry sergeant, leading a squad of foot soldiers equipped with old rifles and ageing tanks. It was a far cry from his glamorous special forces days, but he made the best of it. Living so close to home, he became part of a close-knit group of fellow indigenous soldiers.

More than half of the 1,800 soldiers who serve at Taiping are indigenous, at least 40 of them from Jialan. “I encourage the youngsters from my tribe to join the army and brought many of them in here,” Pa said. One such soldier from his company lives to the right of his home, another to the left. In his free time, Pa often drops by the home of Huang Ting-sheng, the 42-year-old chief of another tribe in the village, who retired after 20 years in the marines. Tseng Ming-sheng, a retired policeman who lives in the house behind Pa’s family and watched him grow up, has three sons-in-law in the military.

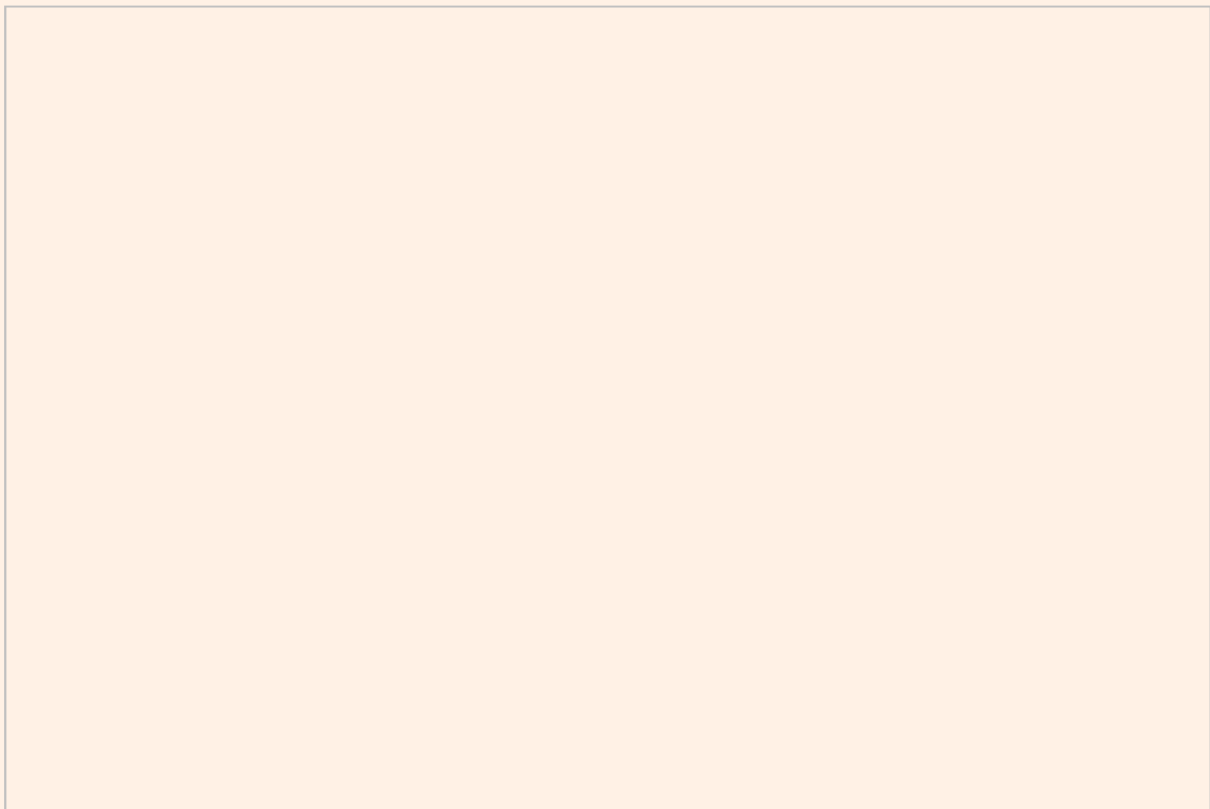
In 2014, the army sent Pa on a year-long business administration course through which he earned a university degree. This is the entry qualification for an exam the following year that put him on the officer track, something that is still rare for indigenous Taiwanese. Then, things started changing. On March 30 2015, a Chinese H-6 bomber transited the Bashi Channel, the strait between the southern tip of Taiwan and the Philippines, and flew out into the Pacific to the east of the island. The enemy had taken its first look behind Taiwan’s mountain shield.

Over the next few months, the bombers appeared in pairs, then in packs of four, and later they came with electronic warfare planes and fighters. In November 2016, a group of Chinese warplanes flew the first full circle around Taiwan. As it cruised north, it had a panoramic view, theoretically allowing the crafts to target any point in eastern Taiwan. Warships soon followed. In April 2018, the Liaoning, China’s first aircraft carrier, held a battle drill east of Taiwan for the first time.

The men and women at Taiping realised their mountain range was no longer a shield. “Previously, I didn’t think they could attack at all, and anyway we felt safer here. But I began to understand that the PLA is getting stronger and stronger,” said Pa.

The threat had been a long time coming. For years, China had been spending more than 15 times what Taiwan did on its military, but Taiwan's armed forces took their time to act. After the former navy commander Admiral Lee Hsi-ming took over as chief of the general staff in 2017, he proposed a new defence strategy. Instead of trying to defeat China's vastly superior air and naval forces head-on, Taiwan should ensure that any force attempting to come ashore would be slaughtered.

The US, which [supports](#) Taiwan's defences with arms sales and officer training, was delighted with this plan, having long urged Taipei down that road. But the military brass resisted. Lee's concept would mean concentrating budgets on buying large numbers of relatively small weapons that would be easy to hide and move. [Tsai Ing-wen](#), who became president in 2016, started boosting the military budget, but the generals kept spending the lion's share on big new ships, planes and tanks.



Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen (centre) during a visit to inspect reservists in Taoyuan, May 2023 © Chiang Ying-ying/AP Photo

The Pentagon made its displeasure known. Six months after the Liaoning carrier exercise in the Pacific, US and Taiwanese defence officials and weapons company executives gathered at a hotel in Annapolis for a conference. “Taiwan cannot count on Beijing’s forbearance for its security,” David Helvey, then the principal deputy assistant secretary of defence, told General Chang Guan-chung, Taiwan’s vice-minister for defence. “Taiwan [. . .] cannot afford to overlook preparing for the one fight it cannot afford to lose,” he said. Helvey told Chang that Taipei needed to train and organise its forces better and empower junior and non-commissioned officers to make decisions at the lowest level — a matter of survival when a military unit is cut off from communications with senior commanders.

One year later, little had changed. Admiral Lee retired, and implementation of his plan stalled. Back at Taiping, Pa’s unit continued their monotonous routine. The soldiers got shooting training every now and then, but the defence ministry was providing no more than 120 bullets per soldier, per year. Even if each one fired just 10 rounds per training session, it would be their turn only once a month. They engaged in large-scale training exercises once every 18 months and those drills were always held inside the base. The view was that bringing heavy armoured vehicles out into the field would cause too much public disturbance, Tan said.

It was only after Russia launched its full-scale [invasion of Ukraine](#) in 2022 that the government jerked into action. Defence reforms followed quickly, strengthening the country’s reserve force and restoring one year of conscription on all Taiwanese men. Orders came down to step up shooting training and make drills more realistic. “We now go on combat readiness patrols off base four days a week,” Pa said.

He takes his soldiers to inspect every corner on the perimeter of the air base and the civilian airport they need to protect. They test which roads and back alleys their armoured vehicles fit through, and what detours to take when they hit a roadblock. His soldiers memorise the terrain of riverbeds, orchards and beaches. They learn to find their way through the countryside with maps and a compass, crucial skills if a cyber attack were to bring down mobile communications.

On base, the sound of rapid gunfire echoes across the training range every afternoon. The garrison now has 826 rounds per soldier, per year. Instead of shooting at a fixed target standing up, they kneel, lie down and fire on the run. Both the two mechanised infantry companies at Taiping have specialised sniper teams. Pa had unexpectedly found himself back on the front line.

On April 1, a dozen special forces soldiers wearing red berets scaled the fence on the eastern flank of the Taiping base. Pa's unit was practising fending off an infiltration from a special commando force of PLA paratroopers played by other Taiping infantrymen. His soldiers sent up a commercial-use drone to get an overview. Snipers began attacking, backed by their comrades in tanks behind. A small group of soldiers used a jamming gun to bring down a drone the PLA hit team had sent up. A team of special forces stormed some shacks where the attackers were hiding out.

Such [drills](#) were starting to feel ever more real. Over the following days, Japan's military spotted Chinese warships heading down Taiwan's east coast, and Taiwan's defence ministry reported between seven and nine PLA vessels and 30 warplanes near the country. Helicopters were spotted taking off from warships less than 100 nautical miles east of Taiping, drills for exactly the kind of airborne assault the April 1 exercise was envisioning.

But Pa's confidence is at a high. He has started the six-month "regular class", at the end of which he will become an officer. His soldiers are being equipped with electronic warfare gear and this summer, the first Harpoon anti-ship missiles procured from the US will arrive in Taiping, one of six deployment locations across the country.

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If we fight the Chinese communists, their missiles will drop, everyone will be dead, and everything will be over

Tseng Ming-sheng, retired police officer

The day after the drill, we drove to Jialan, past murals depicting the soldiers who rescued villagers from the raging floods after a typhoon hit in 2009. Their uniforms bore fantasy patches combining the wings of the paratrooper symbol with the hundred-pacer, a venomous snake that is the emblem of the Rukai people Pa's tribe belongs to. Despite the close mesh between tribe and army, many in the village told me they doubt the force is

anywhere near ready to fight.

Huang Ting-sheng, the tribal chief, had friends over — all soldiers — sitting around a pot of “stinky tofu”, big chunks of fermented soya bean curd simmering in a spicy broth. Someone had brought beer. The chief gently mocked Pa's earnestness. “I used to have this strong feeling about protecting my homeland when I first joined the force, when I was young,” he said. “But we haven't fought a war for too long, so in the army now they just talk, they don't do anything.”

He doubted Pa would be able to assert his authority once he made officer rank. “The flatlanders will not obey us. There is discrimination,” he said. “They are hard to lead. They may tell you to your face, or let you know some other way. You tell a soldier to sweep the floor over there, and he can spend half a day messing around but not sweeping.”

The problems exist beyond the military. Many of the people Pa wants to fight for are deeply ambivalent in their national identification. Tseng Ming-sheng, the policeman, was in a good mood watching his three grandchildren play. But he balked at the idea that Taiwanese democracy and independence were worth fighting for. “I would rather have unification,” he said.

President Tsai has personally apologised for the wrongs done to Taiwan's indigenous peoples by the ethnically Chinese majority and her government has supported the teaching of indigenous languages and the preservation of their cultures. But Tseng was unconvinced. After all, he said, his people, the Paiwan, were robbed of their way of life long ago when the Japanese rulers forcibly resettled them from the upper reaches of the river to Jialan in 1937. His marriage reflects that resettlement. His wife belongs to the Kanakanavu, one of the smallest tribes, and their only common language is Mandarin.

The country he identifies with is the nationalist China that came with the Generalissimo, Chiang Kai-shek. Back then, he said, Taiwan was stronger than China both economically and militarily. "Look at them now and look at us. They have overtaken us, their drones are the best in the world," Tseng said. "Look at Russia and Ukraine, how they fight, it's no longer face to face. If we fight the Chinese communists, their missiles will drop, everyone will be dead, and everything will be over."

Overcoming such despondency will be one of Pa's greatest challenges as an officer. He has been explaining to his friends and family for years how China uses psychological warfare to instil defeatism in its opponents. "The young people today have been growing up differently, in a democracy but also with all sorts of strange things they pick up on social media," he said. "So we have to lead them differently. We have to explain to them what we are exercising for."

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