

Hannibal crosses the Alps

247-182 BC



Early years

Hannibal Barca was born in Carthage, North Africa, (now a suburb of Tunis, Tunisia) in 247 BC. At that time this once prosperous seaport was losing a long and exhausting war with the Romans over who should rule the western Mediterranean. His father, Hamilcar, was a general in the army, and it is said that he made his son promise to hate the Romans forever.

The 23-year-long war was finally lost in 241 BC. Hannibal and his family moved to Spain, where the Carthaginians were trying to build a new empire. Hannibal grew up to be a bold and fearless fighter like his father, and eventually became commander of the army. In 218 BC the Romans again threatened to attack. In a daring and dangerous plan Hannibal decided to march from Spain to Italy before the Romans had even declared war. This march was to be a journey of 2,415 kilometres across both the Pyrenees and the Alps.



The journey

In May, 218 BC, Hannibal left Spain with an army of about 90,000 men and 37 elephants, which he believed were needed to get them over the mountains. In the next few months under his inspiring leadership, they marched through Spain to the Pyrenees and then to the South of France. They moved about 16 kilometres a day, and were frequently attacked by local tribesmen. They reached the River Rhone and accomplished the unbelievable task of building huge rafts to ferry the elephants across. Some fell off but managed to swim using their trunks as snorkels. It was now autumn, and snow started to fall as they approached the Alps. The army, helped by the elephants, struggled on, slipping and sliding over ice and snow, over the main pass. Finally, they were in sight of Italy. Their five-month journey at an end, Hannibal's army of 90,000 was reduced to 36,000 – over half his men had perished or deserted on the way. Winter storms now killed all but one of his elephants.

Final years

In some ways Hannibal's march was hugely successful because he took the Romans by surprise and initially defeated them in numerous battles. However, after many years and many more battles his army failed to overcome Rome's superior resources and manpower. Hannibal, who had been 29 at the start of his journey, sailed back to North Africa aged 45. He finally committed suicide in 182 BC, aged 65. Despite his final defeat, he is still recognized as one of the greatest military leaders in history.



Mao Zedong and the Long March

1893–1976



Early years

Mao Zedong (Mao Tse Tung) was born in Hunan province in Southern China in 1893. His father was an ambitious but illiterate farmer, who wanted his son to have the education he didn't have.

At university Mao became active in revolutionary student groups and, in 1921, helped found the Chinese Communist Party. He established a base in the remote Jiangxi province, where they formed the Red Army to fight against the Nationalist Government under Chiang Kai-shek. However, in 1934, after many bloody battles, they were forced to escape from the area. They set off on a remarkable journey, which became known as the Long March.



The Long March

The march began on October 16th. No one was sure where they were going but 86,000 men and 30 women, including Mao's wife, set out to walk from the south to the north of China. The journey took one year, ending in the northwestern Shaanxi province.

They started the march quite well, armed with 33,243 guns, but five weeks later suffered their first disastrous defeat at the Xiang River crossing. They lost 56,000 men and much of their equipment was thrown into the river.

It was at this time that Mao Zedong became leader of both the Red Army and the Communist Party. He was a tough but popular leader.

One of the worst experiences was crossing the Great Snowy Mountains, 5,000 metres high. Many men died from lack of oxygen. Exhausted, they knew that to stop to rest meant certain death. If they managed to reach the top, it was best to sit down and slide to the bottom on the ice. Many men were catapulted over cliffs.

It was now September 1935 and the army had to cross the Marshland, between the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers. It looked innocent, covered with flowers, but beneath the flowers were bogs that could swallow a man in a minute. Mao lost more men during this seven day trek than in the Snowy Mountains.

Eventually, on October 19th, after marching for 370 days and 12,500 kilometres they reached Shaanxi province. Of the 86,000 who began, only 4,000 remained.



Later years

The Long March began the ascent to power of Mao Zedong. On October 1, 1949, he proclaimed the People's Republic of China and the Great Cultural Revolution followed. This radically changed every aspect of Chinese society. In October 1966, Mao's Little Red Book was published, and his ideas were taught throughout the country. Mao's image was displayed everywhere: in homes, offices, shops and streets. He finally died on September 9th, 1976, aged 82.