

In January 1899, the 2nd Battalion The Royal Welsh Fusiliers disembarked at Hong Kong, a posting that was to earn them a Battle Honour unique in the British Army. China, at that time ruled by the Dowager Empress Tsu Hsi, was in process of disintegration, due largely to the corrupt incompetence of the imperial dynasty and the rapacity of the outside powers. The Chinese have never taken kindly to foreigners and there had grown up a secret society calling itself the Fists of Righteous Harmony and known abroad as the Boxers which was dedicated to extirpating the 'foreign devils' from the empire. Their first targets were missionaries whom they either murdered or terrorized and their atrocities were moving ever nearer the capital. In 1900 the Dowager Empress, never behindhand in xenophobia, threw in her lot with them and allowed them to lay siege to the legation quarter in Peking on 15th June. The German Minister was murdered in the street and the eleven legations found themselves invested in an apparently indefensible area based on the British Legation with a flock of Christian Chinese refugees. The guard consisted of 400 seamen and marines drawn from eight navies with an inadequate supply of rifle ammunition. Despite the fact that the Boxers had convinced themselves that their beliefs made them invulnerable to earthly weapons, they did not press their attacks and their marksmanship was adversely affected by the conviction that they would increase the muzzle velocity of their rifles if they raised the sights.

The siege of the legations produced a most unusual unanimity among the Powers who decided to send an international force to secure their missions and see that the criminals were punished. Their first attempt was made by 2,139 seamen and marines drawn from the warships lying off the mouth of the Pei Ho river, contingents being provided by the navies of Britain, Germany, Russia, France, Japan, Italy, Austria-Hungary and the United States. Commanded by a British admiral, they set off to Peking by railway since they had no land transport but, when within 35 miles of Peking, the Boxers, who had been firing ineffectively at the trains, blocked the lines by tearing up the track. The expedition, much harassed, retraced their steps on foot and managed to install themselves in a large fortified arsenal six miles from Tientsin, a city whose international settlement, hastily garrisoned by Russian troops, was itself under siege by Imperial Chinese soldiers who occupied the walled city.

There was some delay in assembling the international force. It had been agreed that it should be under German command and the Kaiser had promoted a new field-marshal to command it and was forming a new regiment for the purpose, but neither arrived in time to take part. The Russians and Japanese were quick to produce troops and the Americans brought a force of infantry and marines from the Philippines, but there were delays in providing the other contingents and, thanks to the demands of the war in South Africa, the British contribution was limited to two Indian battalions, a field battery Royal Artillery, a detachment of Skinner's Horse, some engineers and, from Hong Kong, three companies of the 2nd Battalion, Royal Welsh Fusiliers, to which another company and battalion headquarters were added later.

A start on 22nd June was made when the three companies of the Regiment with some sappers and 250 sailors set off by train for Tientsin, following another train carrying German sailors, and soldiers from Russia and the United States. Twelve miles from their objective, the trains were halted by demolitions and the troops had to continue on foot. According to Lieutenant Harry Rotherham RWF, 'The Russians were five miles ahead of us and attacked the Chinese at the Arsenal. We caught them up after burning some Boxer villages When we found they did not want us we went off to attack the Military College just outside Tientsin. Our advance was across an open plain with a most awful dust storm blowing in our faces. We could not see the enemy but there were plenty of bullets kicking up the dust all around us. Eventually we got within 500 yards of a large village where they opened a very heavy fire on us. We fixed bayonets and charged but they bolted before we got to them. In the charge we lost one killed and five wounded. We were now within a mile of [the International

Settlement] and got in without further casualties, although they were sniping at us the whole way. There was a great scene when we got in. We were the first to arrive and they rushed at us with lager beer. I never had such a good drink in my life ..'

The next task was the capture of the walled city 'about two miles square and its population is about 800,000. Besides these there are 10,000 Imperial Chinese troops.' The storm of Tientsin was largely undertaken by the Japanese who, wrote Rotherham, 'are an awful surprise to me. They are very well disciplined and will go anywhere, in fact they err if anything on the side of foolhardiness.' The Regiment's three companies were in close support of the Japanese and, to quote Rotherham again, 'The whole of the city wall was lined with Chinese firing through loop-holes and they just fired all day as hard as they could. They also attacked our left flank and we were told off to keep them back, so we were under fire all day from the front and the left flank as well. I never want anything quite so warm again At 2.30 the Japs blew up the gate and rushed in followed by the United States Marines and ourselves There was a good deal of street firing but we had no casualties there, the Chinese being on the run. We had 200 men engaged and our casualties were 5 killed and 19 wounded The Japs fought awfully well and lost heavily but I am sorry to say the French were useless.'

Two weeks followed while the Germans pressed for a delay until their field-marshal should have arrived and the Americans waited in vain for their artillery. These two weeks proved a happy period for the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, as was remembered by Private Owens: 'We were on outpost duty defending Tientsin railway station, and we were posted into the engine shed. The American Marines took one end of the shed and we took the other end There was a custom that we used to exchange rations with the Americans, because theirs was nice biscuits and bacon, and ours was hard biscuits and bully beef.'

The United States Marines, who were suffering under an army general who disliked Marines, were only too glad to have some other English speakers with whom to make friends and the friendship forged first at Tientsin has continued to this day and was especially commemorated when the Marines commissioned John Philip Sousa to write a special march for the Royal Welsh Fusiliers which the band and drums first played under the composer's baton in 1930.

On 16th July the *Daily Mail* published a wholly imaginary account of the massacre of all the inmates of the Peking legations but, still without an overall commander, the international force stayed in Tientsin. The inertia was overcome when Major-General Sir Alfred Gaselee arrived on 27th July to take over command of the British contingent and let it be known that his men were going to advance whatever the other contingents might do. The force amounted to 18,000 men with the Japanese providing the largest number while Britain, Russia and the United States each contributed 3,000 men. Thus stirred to action, the advance was continued astride the Pei Ho river which was used for bringing forward supplies and evacuating the sick and wounded. From this point forward the march became a race with every national commander determined to reach the capital first, although the French contingent, two battalions of Tonkinese Infanterie de la Marine, proved quite unable to keep up with the pace set by the others. On 5th August the Japanese, fighting shoulder to shoulder and losing heavily, broke their way through the main Chinese position at Peitsang and on the following day the 2nd Battalion, now commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel the Honourable RH Bertie, and 14th United States Infantry stormed through several lines of defence to take Yangtsun. In this attack there occurred one of those incidents to which international ventures, especially those without an overall commander, are only too liable. The attack was supported by a Russian and a British battery which were firing side by side and passing each other the ranges, oblivious of the fact that one was calculating in metres and the other in yards. As a result a

