

THE LIFE AND DEATH DECISIONS OF GENERALS

We are now at Tientsin; a force of many thousands massing to relieve those poor souls trapped in the foreign legations at Peking. But they are now telling us that all are already dead; tortured, murdered, slaughtered by these Chinese barbarians. So who is left for us to rescue? Has our mission failed by days? Are we here to relieve? Or are we now here to revenge?

For a description to capture the moment that we arrived, I could have likened it only to walking into the depths of Hades itself. The overpowering stench was more revolting than any I had suffered, even in the fetid swamps of Kumassi; and was matched in intensity only by the visual horrors before us. There was hardly a building standing and a pall of thick smoke hung everywhere, giving an acrid, ugly taste to the very air that we breathed. Thousands of people milled aimlessly from ruin to ruin; or squatted, expressionless, like dumb animals unaware that they were about to be slaughtered.

We cannot be certain of course, until can see for ourselves the truth of what has taken place at Peking. For now, we have only the press headlines to inform us; and we can only pray that they are an exaggeration of reality.



It was with more than a little relief that we were called to a press briefing on the morning of the 27th July. The young officer, Captain Jennings, who had briefed us previously aboard the USS Solace was freshly dressed, quite dapper and apparently unperturbed by what was happening in the streets and houses surrounding our base. His manner and delivery was, again, efficient and his briefing was detailed and comprehensive:

“Gentlemen, you are aware that the relief expedition led by General Seymour, was forced to return to Tientsin in late June, but alongside this, despite many rumours and press reports to the contrary, we can report that the citizens and guards in the foreign legations at Peking are safe and that, since the 17th July, there appears to have been a lull in the hostilities there.

Concerning the situation here in Tientsin, which was under siege from early June, the allied forces initially underestimated the capability of the Chinese forces, thinking that they could easily be brushed aside. This turned out to be a grave error in the face of fierce Chinese resistance. However, on 13th July, after further

reinforcements had arrived, the eight nation allied force to assault the walled city of Tientsin consisted of about 6,900 soldiers: 2,500 Russians, 2,000 Japanese, 900 Americans, 800 British, 600 French, and 100 Germans and Austrians. The challenge was substantial. The walls of Tientsin are 20 feet high and 16 feet thick, the Chinese had about 12,000 soldiers within the city or in nearby forts. The plan of the allies was to storm the city on two sides: British, American, Japanese and French troops would attack the South Gate; Russian and German troops would attack the East Gate.

Initially the attack went poorly for the Allies, in large part due to some breakdown in overall command, a number of communication failures and un-coordinated troop deployments. The main effort against the South Gate became pinned down in an exposed position under Chinese fire from within the city. The allied troops were forced to lie face down in mud, wherein the dark blue American uniforms provided targets for the Chinese troops, and severe losses were suffered by the allies.

Eventually the allied attacks were successful and at 3 am. on the morning of the 14th, the Japanese force broke through the South gate, followed shortly by the Russians at the east gate and, in the face of these allied victories, the Chinese defenders made good their escape.

For the alliance, this was a difficult battle with heavy casualties. Two hundred and fifty soldiers of the allied armies were killed and about 500 wounded. The Japanese lost 320 killed and wounded; the Russians and Germans 44 killed and some 100 wounded; the Americans 25 killed, and 98 wounded; the British, 17 killed and 87 wounded; and the French 13 killed and 50 wounded. Chinese casualties, military and civilian, are unknown, but probably heavy.”

Captain Jennings then said that he would answer questions, but I doubt that he expected the furore that this simple statement unleashed. The two issues to which the assembled media demanded responses were: the looting, the atrocities and the killings to which most had already been horrified witnesses; and an explanation of why the relief expedition had not yet left for Peking. He responded:

“Once inside the city there were some additional communication breakdowns and some instances of looting by the allied forces. As the Chinese soldiers had already withdrawn it was the local Chinese who suffered the most and some civilians were killed in the

skirmishes. We have no reports of American troops being involved but there have been some instances of allied troops assaulting civilians, including the rape of some women. The German and Russian commands are currently conducting inquiries into reports that their troops have behaved with particular savagery, bayoneting their victims after they had abused them. In addition, we are aware that the Japanese have executed some suspected Boxers by beheading them but, conversely, they are acclaimed by the local citizens to be the best behaved of all the foreign soldiers. So far as the relief expedition is concerned, our latest information is that, because of the fighting prowess and the strength of resistance already demonstrated by the Chinese, it is estimated that at least 50,000 to 70,000 troops will be necessary to mount a successful campaign. More troops from all of the eight nations in the alliance are currently en route for Tientsin and the expedition will be mounted as soon as these forces are in place. Major-General Gasalee, who will be leading the expedition has indicated that he expects this to be within the next three to four weeks.

Thank you Gentlemen, that is all."

To say that the silence was deafening as Captain Jennings left the briefing room, would be an understatement of the highest order, and it took several minutes for us to assimilate what we had just been told. Had we heard correctly that the 900 souls in Peking, who had already been under siege for more than a month were to be left, isolated and alone, for at least another four weeks? Could it be true that, with more than 35,000 troops already garrisoned in Tientsin, and more arriving daily, our gallant Generals had decided that this force needed to be at least double in strength before they would be able to challenge an enemy that was already defeated and in flight?

How can it be that those considered to be amongst our best soldiers, promoted to the highest military offices, appear habitually incapable of making clear, correct and courageous decisions?

In the immediate aftermath of the disturbing news that the advance to Peking was to be delayed, every correspondent in Tientsin spent every hour feverishly trying to gather, and make order of, whatever information could be gleaned from those that had been based in the city; and those that had experienced or witnessed the events of previous weeks.

All communication with Peking was down, so nothing could be verified and, inevitably, the worst was feared. For each report purporting that the

legations were safe, another presented shocking details of slaughter and massacre; and still Gasalee refused to move.

But this morning, I received the most welcome news that General Adna Chaffee, with whom I had seen action in Cuba, was on his way from the Philippines and would be in Tientsin by the end of the month. His orders were to assume command of the US forces and to take all necessary action to reach Peking as soon as possible. I knew him as a decisive and courageous leader, considered by Washington to be one of their most capable officers, and I was confident that he would be the man to break us out of Gasalee's slough of inaction.

General Chaffee reached Taku at dawn on 29th July and immediately pushed on to Tientsin, arriving just before noon on the 30th. Within hours, he had called on the various generals commanding the troops of the eight nations to assess the alliance's overall readiness and capability; and arranged a full conference of generals for 31st July. The press outnumbered the generals by a ratio of some ten-to-one at this conference, which was introduced as having the single purpose of deciding whether the alliance was ready to make a movement for the relief of Peking.

It was disclosed in the conference that the Japanese, whose forces occupied the right bank of the river in and about Tientsin, where the British and American forces were also located, had been able to determine that the Chinese were in considerable force in the vicinity of Pei-tsang, about seven miles distance up the river from Tientsin, and that they were strengthening their position by earthworks extending from the right bank of the river westward something like three miles, and from the left bank to the railroad embankment. The Chinese forces were variously estimated from between 10,000 to 12,000 men in the vicinity of Pei-tsang, with large bodies to the rearward as far as Yangtsun, where it was reported that their main line of defence would be encountered.

I believe that, irrespective of this intelligence, Chaffee's mind was already set. Nevertheless, the first question that he submitted for decision was "whether a movement could be made at once". This was answered with dissent, based on doubt that the force we could put in movement was not sufficiently strong to meet the opposition that might be expected. To this, Chaffee replied that, in addition to the Italian and Austria-Hungarian naval contingents that could remain in defence of Taku and Tientsin, the alliance forces available numbered around 18,800 and that the US contingent of some 2,100 men of the 9th and 14th Infantry regiments, together with a division from the 6th Cavalry and a Marine battalion would be leaving for Peking on Sunday 4th August.

This statement, brazen and defiant in the face of General Gasalee's previous stance, triggered an approving cheer from the press benches; but this was nothing compared with the raucous roar that followed Chaffee's subsequent announcement that he would be accompanied by a further 3,000 British troops under the command of Admiral Seymour, who had already attempted an earlier relief expedition.

I thought that General Chaffee's brief nod of recognition as he left the conference was all that I should expect from a man so busy. We had met in Cuba, but only briefly following his victory over the Spanish garrison at the battle of El Caney. I was pleasantly surprised, therefore, to be called by his aide-de-camp and told that I was assigned to travel with the 14th Infantry, under Regimental Commander, Aaron Daggett, on our impending expedition to Peking.

Preparation and planning were the orders of the day and there was little enough time to make sure that kit was packed, rations arranged, stores requisitioned and munitions loaded before our departure. In the midst of all this frenetic activity, though, I received news of two out of context events that managed to bring some light relief to the urgency of the day, and to the chaos and misery that was Tientsin at the beginning of August.

First, the publication of my latest book, "In South Africa with Buller," which I had completed only a few weeks previously, had been received with a detailed and favourable review by the literary editor of the Washington Times. It appeared that this review had been widely circulated and reproduced in a number of other journals; a fact that was endorsed by the numerous comments and congratulations that I received from my friends, old and new, and my fellow correspondents.

Second, again from the Washington Times, was a report that I was missing in action in Peking along with George Morrison, the China correspondent of the Times. Although, we had never met, I was aware of Morrison's status and reputation as one of the most experienced journalists in the field. We had also heard about a week ago from a Chinese messenger that Morrison had been gravely wounded along with Captain Strouts, the senior Marine officer at the British legation. It appears that several shots were fired at them as they were moving through a particularly dangerous area, two hitting Morrison in the thigh and one striking Strouts in the groin. Strouts only lived a few hours but Morrison was said to be up and about within a matter of days.

What was particularly unusual about this report was that not only was it patently incorrect, but that it appeared to have been penned by somebody who possessed very little factual knowledge, but an extremely active imagination. Accuracy aside, however, I found it quite comforting to read

that because of my “hitherto remarkable escapes under fire”, my friends believed that, along with the senior British Minister in Peking, Sir Claude MacDonald, I would eventually be “found among the survivors.”

