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“55 Days At Peking” The Boxer Rebellion and the Siege of the Foreign Legations, Peking, China, Summer 1900

Throughout the world the year 1900 was an eventful one for the Marine Corps. Having gained vast new territory in the War with Spain, the United States had entered the world stage as a colonial power, and along with it had come the responsibilities and tribulations of those gains. By the beginning of the new century the U.S. Had become entangled in a native tribal insurrection in the Philippines, and was rapidly being drawn into another “rebellion” against foreign occupation thinly veiling international territorial disputes in Imperial China. As always the Marines were on the sharp end.

For much of the 19th century China suffered a series of humiliating defeats at the hands of various foreign powers and as a result a great deal of authority now rested in the hands of foreigners. Resentment among the Chinese ran high, with riots and the massacre of foreigners and Chinese Christians being commonplace. The Manchu Dynasty was tottering and near collapse, with the Dowager Empress and the Imperial Government refusing to take action, secretly siding with the anti-foreign elements. By the end of the 19th century the most visible and best remembered of these elements was the Righteous Fists of Harmony, commonly known as the Boxers.

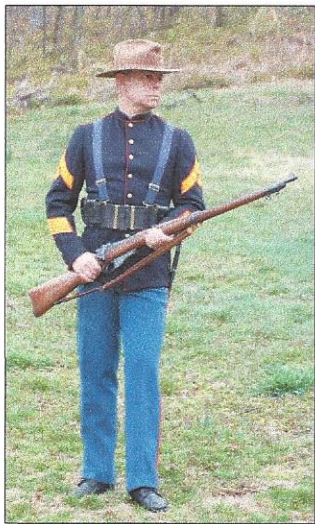


Original photograph taken in Peking of the US Marine Detachment sent to protect the United States legation.

By May 1900 conditions in Peking were desperate enough that the various Foreign Legations requested the Imperial Government’s permission to increase the size of their guard detachments. The Imperial Government refused. The Foreign Ministers then called upon their naval forces in the Far East for protection.

On May 24, 1900, Captain John “Handsome Jack” Myers of the *U.S.S. Oregon*, with 28 Marines and 5 bluejackets, landed at Taku with orders to establish a guard at the United States legation. He was joined on May 29, by Captain Newt Hall and 26 additional Marines from the *U.S.S. Newark*. Myers, being senior to Hall, assumed command of the consolidated detachment and, in several junks towed by a commandeered steam tug, proceeded to the foreign

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This Marine sergeant is typical of the detachments sent to defend the legations. He wears the 1892 Undress uniform and is armed with the Lee Navy 6mm rifle.

colony city of Tientsin. The Marines were followed by forces from Britain, Austria, Germany, France, Russia and Japan. The need to push on to Peking being critical and inspired by British threats to hang the stationmaster, on May 31 a train to Peking was finally arranged. On the train were Captains Myers and Hall, 48 Marines, five bluejackets, one Colt machine-gun with 8,000 rounds of ammunition, plus 372 rounds per man. In addition to the Marines were 79 British Marines, 75 French sailors, 72 Russian sailors, 51 German Marines, 30 Austrian Marines, 39 Italian sailors and 24 Japanese Special Naval Landing Force. They brought a motley assortment of support weapons, with the Russians loading 1,000 rounds of ammunition for a field gun then forgetting to load the gun. All told 22 officers and 423 enlisted men offloaded at Peking, met by relieved representatives of the legations and thousands of silent Chinese. Captain Myers reported, "The dense mass which thronged either side of the railway seemed more ominous than a demonstration of hostility would have been."

By June 6 the Boxers had completely isolated Peking. They had blown up rail bridges, torn up track and demolished most of the stations along the route to Tientsin. Now, parading around Peking in full regalia, stirring up the populace to a fever pitch, the Boxers prepared to clear North China of foreigners. Demonstrations against the Legation compound began on June 13. Captain Hall, with a small detachment of Marines was posted at a Methodist mission, some distance from the legation, making every effort to protect both foreign and native Christians, who were being massacred by the Boxers.

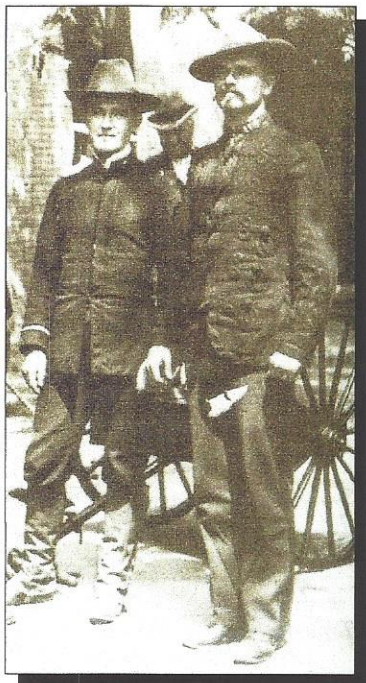
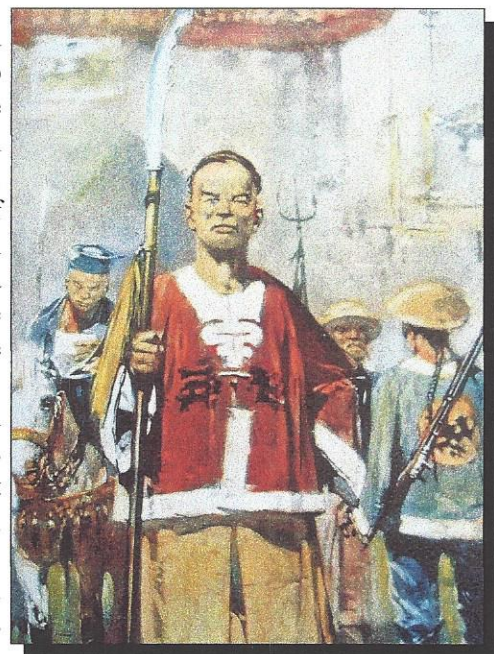
On June 20, the Imperial Government, becoming openly hostile, issued an ultimatum for all the foreign legations leave for Tientsin immediately. This

order was refused as the Imperial Government could not or would not guarantee their safety. In rioting the same day, the German Minister, Baron von Ketteller was killed by an Imperial Chinese soldier. Captain Hall and his charges retired to the Legation compound, the Marines clearing the streets at the point of the bayonet. Twenty-four hours after delivery of the ultimatum, Chinese troops opened fire on the Austrian and French lines. The French replied and the siege of the legations had begun.

The Legation Compound was bounded on the south by the immense Tartar Wall, 60 feet high and 40 feet wide. The American Legation lay in the shadow of the wall and thus the Tartar Wall was the key to the defense of the American sector. This section of the wall was assigned to Captain Myers and his Marines. The British Minister would later write, "Captain Myers' post on the wall was the peg that held the whole thing together."

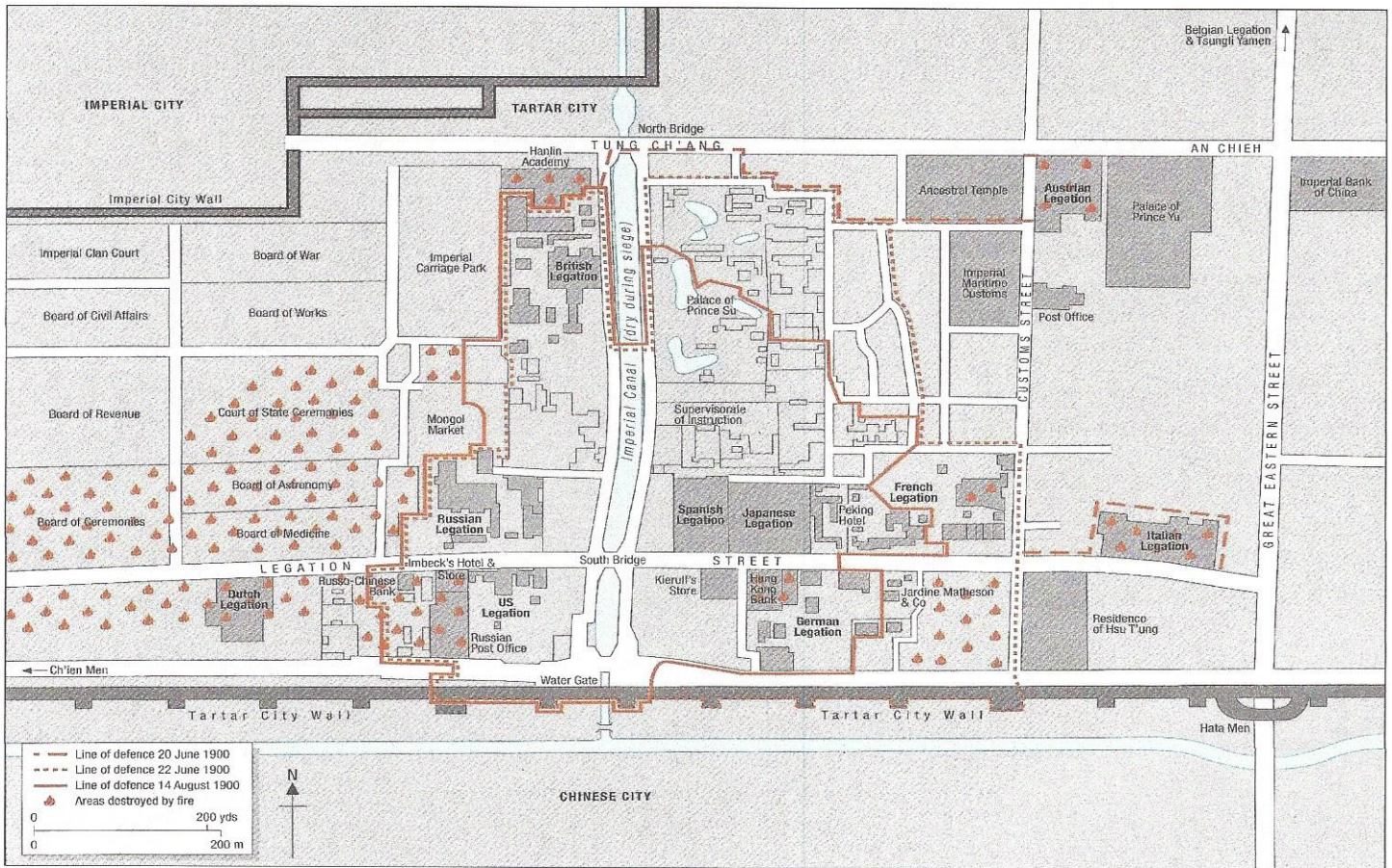
The besieged foreigners immediately began to erect barricades and stockpiling provisions. Fresh meat proved no problem as more than 150 ponies had been assembled for a race day. The Peking Hotel's cellars yielded up vast stores of Dry Monopole champagne and anchovy paste. However, a loss sorely felt was the Russian's forgotten field gun.

Captain Myers barricade positions on the Tartar Wall included a bastion 40 yards across, with a ramp leading into the American compound. To the west, a series of Chinese barricades faced the Marines. Overlooking the American and Chinese barricades was the Chien Gate tower, where the Chinese had an observation post and an artillery piece, which shelled the American positions.



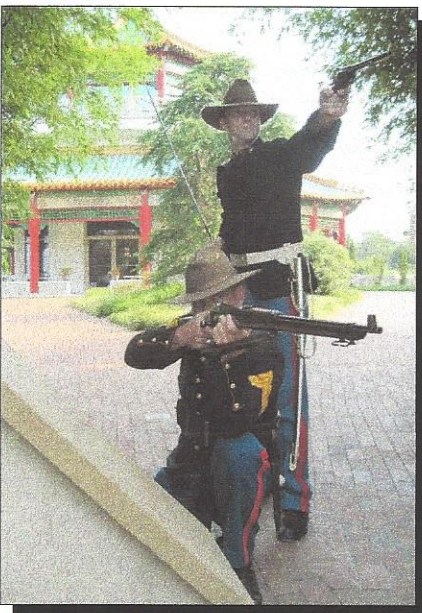
Capt. "Handsome Jack" Myers (right) commanded the Marine detachment during the defense of the legations.

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Map showing the defence of the Legation Quarter outside the Imperial City in Peking, Summer 1900

The first Legation sortie, on June 23, was in response to the Boxer's firing of the Hanlin Yuan, the repository of a large amount of written Chinese history, in an attempt to burn out the neighboring British Legation. American and British Marines, attacked through the fire to drive off Boxers who were interfering with the bucket brigades. The next evening the Boxers again attacked with fire, setting some outbuildings south of the British Legation alight. In the counterattack that followed, Captain Halliday, the British Royal Marines commanding officer was shot through the shoulder and lung. He still had the wherewithal to drop three Chinese with his revolver while covering his Marines withdrawal and then stagger unaided to the hospital, winning the Victoria Cross.



Meanwhile, Captain Myers, taking advantage of the excitement in the British sector, led a party of Marines along the wall towards the Chien Gate. He ran into approximately 2,000 Chinese massed behind six successive barricades. Myers withdrew in good order, not willing to take on the Chinese Army with 29 men.

On June 27, the Chinese attacked the American bastion in broad daylight. Between the steady fire from the Marine's Winchester Lee rifles and the Colt machine-gun, the Chinese attack was beaten off leaving more than half their number killed or wounded on the wall. The next day the Chinese again attacked Myers' position, this time only in sufficient strength to keep the Marines pinned in position while their main attack on the German position behind the Marines developed. On July 1, the Chinese, supported by three guns, overran the German positions. The Germans withdrew, signaling the Marines that they were retiring. Following a prearranged plan, the Marines withdrew to a lower barricade covering the ramp. Myers, obtaining reinforcements from the British Royal Marines,

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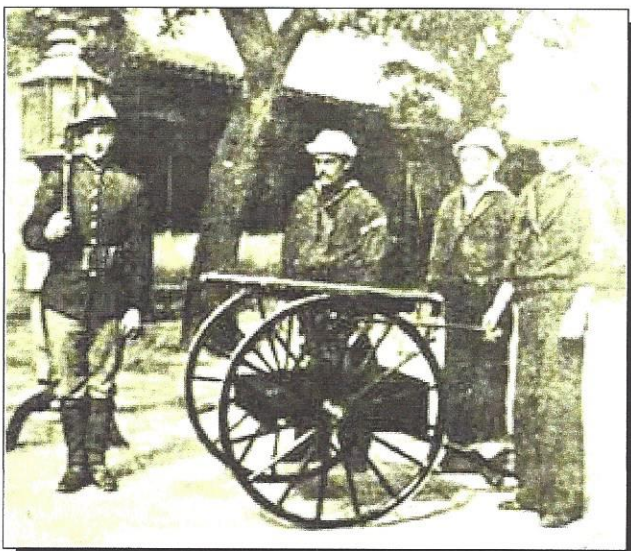
counterattacked and retook the position with three casualties. The German counterattack was less successful and only managed to retake an intermediate position. This forced Myers to build and man a barricade to his rear as well as his front.

By now Captain Myers was exhausted, having taken the exposed post on the Tartar Wall himself, leaving Captain Hall to the less arduous posts in the compound. He had been without sleep for more than five days. Finally, on July 1 Myers was ordered by Sir Claude MacDonald, British Minister and de-facto commander of the Legation Garrison, to turn over his post to Hall and get some sleep. This he did and Captain Hall assumed command of the Tartar Wall barricade.

Myers resumed command to the Tartar Wall barricade on July 2 finding that in his absence the Chinese had been allowed to advance their barricade some 40 yards along the wall and build a

15-foot tall tower that overlooked and threatened the Marine positions. Myers knew this was unacceptable so on July 3 at 0130, Myers with 30 U.S. Marines, 26 British Royal Marines and 15 Russian sailors launched an attack. With Myers in the lead, the Marines attacked the Chinese barricade and tower while the Russians made a secondary attack on the right. The Chinese, having left the tower unmanned, allowing Myers and his Marines into the rear of the Chinese positions. Although Myers was wounded by a Boxer spear, the attack was a complete success. The Boxer barricade was now manned by the Marines and become the new front line. Total casualties were two U.S. Marines killed and one wounded (Myers) and a Royal Marine and a Russian sailor wounded. Thirty-six Chinese lay dead and two colors were taken.

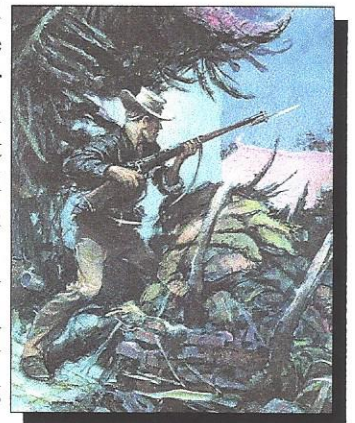
As inconsequential as this attack may seem, it was the turning point of the siege. "The bravest and most successful event of the whole siege was an attack led by Captain Myers," reported Minister Congers. However, Myers' success was very nearly the end of him as his wound became infected and he also came down with typhoid. Thus Captain Hall was left in command of the Marine detachment.



After Myers' attack on the tower the siege settled into a sniper's battle. As the Chinese made increasing use of their artillery, the need for a gun to provide counterbattery fire became imperative. On July 7 an ancient cannon was found and Navy Gunner's Mate Mitchell improvised a weapon that could make use of the Russian's store of artillery ammunition. The Russian shells worked well, being supplemented with bags of nails, whose lethal effect on the Chinese exceeded all expectations. Christened "The International" but soon called either "Betsy" or the "Old Crock", this gun shared honors with the Marine's Colt machine-gun which, it was noted afterwards, "... has killed more men than all the rest put together."

Fighting flared up briefly on July 15, while Captain Hall was building a

new barricade to cover the rear of his position, the Chinese attacked. Private Daniel Daly won his first Medal of Honor holding an advanced post alone until Captain Hall could bring up reinforcements.

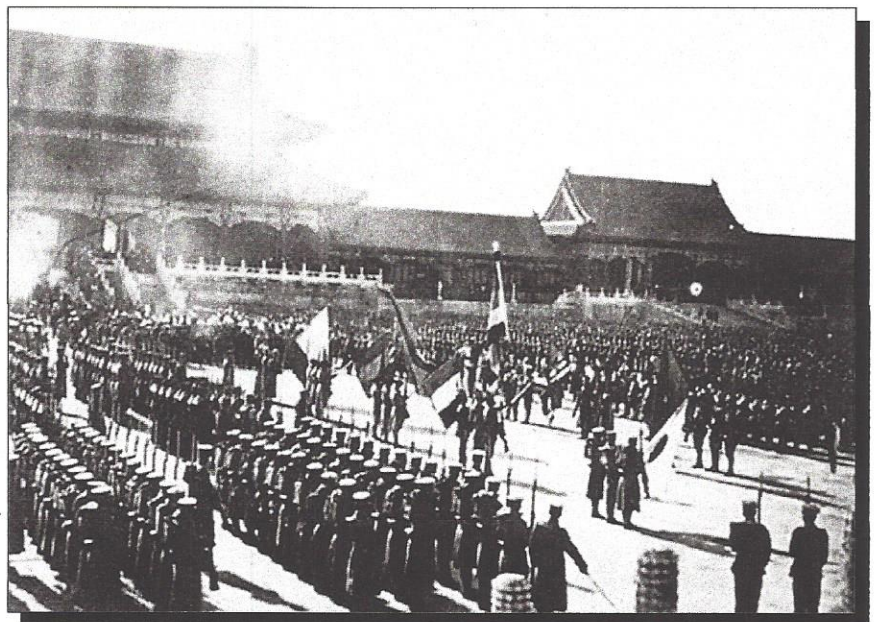


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From July 16 until the siege was relieved on August 14 a kind of truce prevailed, with occasional potshots being taken by both sides. By the time the relief column arrived, 17 of the original Marine and Navy defenders had been killed or wounded.



On August 3 the 18,600 man International relief force departed Tientsin arriving at the eastern outskirts of Peking 10 days later. All through August 14, the walls of Peking fell before successive assaults of American, British and Russian troops. Marines were in the forefront of the battle, supporting Riley's battery when it breached the Chien Gate. For political reasons, entry into Forbidden City was delayed until August 28, when a representative column, including two companies of Marines marched through the Forbidden City, to demonstrate to the Chinese that it could be done. On September 28 the Marines marched south from Peking and by October 10 they had sailed for the Philippines.



When the Marines left Peking, the Legation guard consisted of soldiers of the 9th Infantry, stirring a protest to the Secretary of the Navy from General Heywood, Commandant of the Marine Corps stating, "It has always been the custom to furnish guards for the legations in a foreign country from Marines... Army troops are never supposed to be sent to a foreign country except in time of war, and, for this reason, legation guards have... always been furnished by the Marine Corps." However, the Marines would have to wait until September 12, 1905, before a Marine detachment resumed the guard, restoring the responsibility for the safety of the legation to the Corps that had so gallantly preserved it from the Chinese assault.

