

KEYSTONE BATTLE BRIEF
THE BOXER REBELLION, CHINA, 1900

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The Boxer Rebellion: Keystone Battles in Marine Corps History

Notes for the instructor: *The text below can be read, or you may just use it for background and speak informally, using the slides to cue you. If you read every word below – not counting the parts marked “Notes for the instructor” – the whole lecture will take approximately 35-40 minutes, which will leave 20 minutes for the slide marked “discussion.”*

Slide 1: Title Slide

No Text

Slide 2: Overview

Good Morning. For today’s Marine Corps history class, we’re going to discuss The Boxer Rebellion. But to do that, I have to cover some background: why we were Americans in China in the first place? What was the Boxer Rebellion anyway? Why did it start? So I’ll explain all that today.

Then, we’ll turn to the actual events of the Boxer Rebellion: the siege of Peking, the defense of the Legation Quarter, the Seymour Expedition, the Battle for Tientsin (pronounced TEE-en-SIN), the International Relief Expedition, and the eventual rescue of the Americans in the Legation Quarter.

Then, we’ll have a discussion about what lessons the Boxer Rebellion offers us today.

And finally, I’ll explain to you how the events occurring in the Boxer Rebellion are actually relevant for how and why the U.S. ends up fighting the Japanese in World War II.

Slide 3: The USMC in 1900

It’s important to remember that at the time of the Boxer Rebellion, the Marine Corps looked nothing like what it looks like today. It was tiny – just 157 officers and 5,500 men. The major duty of the Marine Corps at this time was guarding naval installations ashore and providing ship’s guards at sea. This didn’t mean just guarding the ships in port – it also meant protecting the navy’s officers from the sailors. Ships would go to sea for a long time, and when morale dropped, sailors would sometimes become disobedient or resist the commands of the officers above them. So, the Marines were the cops – they ensured the enlisted sailors followed orders. The Marines also served as snipers when the ship would engage in combat, and when there were local disturbances that affected American trade, they would occasionally go ashore with the sailors on punitive expeditions against pirates or

others who threatened or attacked American citizens who were trying to do business abroad.

The story I'm telling you today – of the Boxer Rebellion – is just one of those moments when troops had to go ashore to protect American businessmen.

Slide 4: Causes of the Boxer Rebellion

So, what caused this rebellion in the first place? Why were Chinese nationals attacking the businessmen?

The key issue leading to the Boxer Rebellion was much bigger than just the Americans; it was the role of all foreigners in China. Even though foreigners had traded in China for many years, by the middle of the 19th century, there were many more European businessmen that want to trade in China than the Emperor of China felt was appropriate. Most of the trade was legitimate – the Americans and Europeans want to buy silk and tea and porcelain, but they had very little of value to trade in return that the Chinese wanted.

The British solved this problem when they started bringing in opium to trade – most of it coming from Pakistan and Afghanistan – and when the Chinese resisted the importation of drugs into their land, the British fought two “opium wars” over the issue. After the Opium Wars, China fell into a huge Civil War – The Taiping Rebellion, which kills 30 million people – and just like the Boxer Rebellion that would follow it, the major issue of the Taiping Rebellion was the role of foreigners in China.

In 1860 – almost at the end of the Taiping Rebellion – the issue of how many foreigners can come into China and for what purposes was settled diplomatically. All the Western powers signed a treaty with China called the “Treaty of Tientsin.” This treaty gave the Westerners permission to station foreign businessmen in the capitol of China – Peking, which is now called Beijing – and to send warships up China's rivers. The businessmen and missionaries could travel freely throughout China and trade in specific trading ports. From that point on, the American businessmen – bankers, manufacturers and energy companies like Texaco and Standard Oil – came to China in larger numbers and started setting up businesses so that they could sell goods to the country with the largest population in the world.

Slide 5: The Peking (Beijing) Legation Quarter

Where did all these foreign businessmen live? All of the businesses operated out of the “Legation Quarter” inside Peking. These legation quarters were basically Western cities operating inside China. The Emperor and government of China didn't like that there were Westerners running all over the country – particularly because there were also a lot of foreign Christian missionaries, who caused friction with some of the rural Buddhists in China. Of course, there was nothing the Chinese

government could do about it. It had signed the Treaty of Tientsin in 1861 and so the Chinese had to let all of the Westerners operate without restrictions. Things were peaceful for a few years, but as rural resentment against the foreigners grew, the Chinese government got increasingly unstable and couldn't effectively control its own rural population.

[Note to instructor: In the discussion, you may want to come back to this slide to point out the parallels to Afghanistan. Even though the two wars are very different, in both situations, you find that foreigners stationed in the country provoked rural resentment – often on religious grounds – even when the host-nation government had agreed to admit the foreigners in the first place.]

Slide 6: The Road to Violence

So, who did the Marines end up fighting and why? Remember, in early 1900, there were no American troops in China – just businessmen. But the resentment against the businessmen and against the missionaries in the Chinese countryside was growing steadily, because the rural people felt the Christians were trying to import a foreign religion. One group from Northern China was particularly angry about the foreign influence and they decided to resist it with violence. They were called “The Society of the Righteous and Harmonious Fists” because they practiced martial arts in unison (all together in a group). The Westerners called them “The Boxers.”

It's important to understand that the Chinese Government did not initially support the Boxers – the Empress Dowager Cixi (SEE-She) viewed them as an unauthorized and violent protest movement. However, the Boxers were not insurgents against the Chinese Government – they just wanted the foreigners to leave. The Boxer's slogan was “Support the Ching Dynasty and Exterminate the Foreigners.” But when the Boxers started attacking Christian Missionaries, Chinese Christians, and other Westerners, the Empress found herself in a difficult position. She had to recognize how strong the Boxers were becoming and she knew that if she continued to oppose them, it was possible that the Boxers might turn against the Chinese government itself. So, in early 1900, the Chinese government tries to strike a middle ground. The Empress stops opposing the boxers, but also tells the businessmen in the Legation Quarter that they are welcome to stay. This makes the businessmen rather nervous -- after all, the Boxers are attacking foreigners in the countryside -- and so all the foreign diplomats ask their home governments to send in some security forces to protect them in the Legation Quarter and to enforce the provisions of the Treaty of Tientsin. In May 1900, about 300 foreign troops arrive in China from nearby Navy ships – all with the permission of the Chinese Government.

Slide 7: The First to Fight in the Boxer Rebellion

Who came to China and how did they get there? The closest American and European military forces were all about 115 miles away at the Port of Taku, aboard Navy ships in the harbor. Each country had at least one warship there, and each ship had Marines stationed aboard as ships' guards. So, the Boxer Rebellion is a strange moment in history when you have Marines from all over the world cooperating with each other on a common mission, even when they can't speak the same language. Royal Marines from Great Britain landed, and naturally, the Americans worked well with them, because they all spoke English. But there were also quite a few Japanese Marines – whom the Americans couldn't communicate with at all. Germany, Italy and Austria all sent their sailors and Marines as well.

The Americans that landed were from the Marine Detachment from two ships: the *USS Oregon* and the *USS Newark*. The Commander of the detachment was Captain John T. Myers whose nickname was “Handsome Jack Myers.” (You can see why too – good mustache.) Captain Myers arrived with just 50 Marines, 5 sailors, and a navy doctor. All together Americans made up about 15 percent of the forces in the Legation Quarter.

One of the troops that arrived with him was a 26-year old Private named Dan Daly, who had joined the Marine Corps just one year before. Daly, Captain Myers, and the rest of the international protection force would stay in Peking for 55 days.

Slide 8: Defending the Quarter: 1-20 June 1900

Here's the military problem the Marines found upon their arrival: The Legation Quarter held houses for all of the international businessmen operating in China. (You can see the American Legation in the bottom left in yellow.) Besides the Americans, there were also British, Russians, Japanese, French, Germans, Italians businessmen in the Legation Quarter, and also a large number of pro-western Chinese that worked inside the Legation Quarter and provided contracted services (laundry, cooking, cleaning, etc.) to the internationals. When the Boxers started attacking Chinese Christians in Peking – whom the boxers blamed for following foreign ways – the Internationals agreed to let some of them come into the Legation Quarter, so by 1900, there were even houses “for Chinese Christian Refugees” as well. (This map was actually drawn by the U.S. Marine who was in charge of the detachment – Captain Myers.) To defend all of this, the Marines had rifles, pistols, and a single Colt machine gun. As soon as they arrived, they called for more troops, but it would take the US more than a month to get a proper expedition together to make it to Peking.

Slide 9: The Siege of Peking

The first thing Captain Myers had to do while he waited for the relief to arrive was to reinforce the defenses. When he first arrived, the Boxers were mostly concerned with attacking Christian Chinese and foreigners outside of the legation quarter; they weren't yet attacking the Legation directly, because the Chinese Government was still trying to walk a fine line between managing the Boxers and trying to obey the Treaty Commitments it had made in the Treaty of Tientsin. So at this stage, the Marines weren't yet fighting for their lives. Instead, they patrolled the Legation Quarter, occasionally rescued missionaries and other westerners caught outside in the fighting, and tried to work together with the other foreign troops to establish shared tasks, SOPs, and to tie their defenses together. This was not an easy task, because so few of the other non-American Marines spoke any English.

On 20 June 1900, things went from bad to worse. After a German diplomat was killed by a Boxer, the U.S. and European naval forces on the coast seized the Forts at Taku so that they could land more troops without the permission of the Chinese Government. At that point, the Chinese government broke diplomatic relations with all of the Western powers and the Empress Dowager Cixi (SEE-She) -- the head of the Chinese government -- told the Chinese Army to side with the Boxers and join them in a military mission to eject the foreigners with force. Together, the Boxers and the Army launched a full-scale attack on the Legation Quarter with small arms, automatic weapons, and artillery.

This began the Second Phase of the operation -- the 55-day Siege of Peking. You can see the challenges they faced if you look closely at the map on the screen. The weakest points in the defenses were the "Tartar Wall," (the southernmost wall, which is called the "City Wall" on this map). That's what the Marines had to defend. This would have been hard enough with just American troops, but the Marines had to do it with Chinese guards on their right sides and German guards on the left -- neither of whom spoke much English.

Luckily, the Marines had the advantage of the high ground while stationed on the wall, but this soon changed. To get over the wall, the Chinese built siege towers and barricades, which, once they were high enough, would allow them to get over the wall or just get into a superior position and fire directly into the Legation Quarter.

During the worst days of the fighting, the Chinese towers were just a few feet away from the top of the gate and snipers were the main threat. In fact, the first four Marines to die in the Boxer Rebellion were all shot through the head by snipers firing from nearby rooftops and from the Chinese towers that could fire over the Tartar Wall. (You can see the Chinese tower depicted on the map at the bottom.)

Slide 10: Who Was Attacking?

Who were the Marines Fighting? A mix of regular and irregular forces attacked the Internationals. To the west were the “Gangsu Braves” – Chinese Muslim boxers whom the British called the “10,000 Islamic Rabble.” To the East and South – including where the Marines were defending – were the Peking Field Army (regular troops with artillery). For several days at the beginning of the siege, the Chinese set fires in the buildings around the British Legation. They also started digging tunnels under the walls into the Legation Quarter. When that didn’t work, they started attacking the Legation directly.

To hold the Quarter, the U.S. Marines, the Germans, and some pro-Western Chinese had to hold the Tartar Wall. Even though the wall was 45 feet high, the Chinese kept increasing the heights of the barricades and towers they were building just on the other side, and if they could build those higher than 45 feet, they would be able to shoot directly into the Legation Quarters and storm over the wall. From 20 June until early July, they attacked almost every night.

Slide 11: Defending the Tartar Wall

During the first two weeks, the Marines were exposed to enemy fire night and day. In order to even get onto the wall – which allowed them to fire outside of the Quarter – they had to mount a ramp (see above left), which was totally exposed to fire coming from the West. Once atop the wall, they faced Chinese firing from the hand-made barricades and siege towers, which were getting closer to the wall every day. The worst night the fighting was in early July. On 30 June the fire was so heavy that the Germans and the Americans retreated from the Tartar Wall (without orders to retreat). The Chinese continued to build their barricades and towers closer and closer to the wall and by 1 July, it became clear that unless drastic action was taken, the Legation would fall.

The internationals decided to go on the offensive on 3 July. A platoon-sized force of Americans, British and Russians all attacked the Chinese barricades together under the leadership of Capt. Myers. Luckily, they caught the Chinese sleeping. The internationals killed about two dozen Chinese, and expelled the rest from the barricades. Two Marines were killed and Myers was wounded, but after capturing the Chinese position, the Legation was no longer at risk of being overrun. However, the Chinese continued to fire into the Legation and attack with artillery and automatic weapons fire for several more weeks.

Slide 12: The Seymour Expedition: The Rescuers Need Rescuing

While the Marines were desperately defending the Quarter, the Governments of all the various nations stuck inside assembled a relief force to sail to China and rescue the besieged diplomats. This was the so-called "Seymour Expedition," which included 900 British troops, 450 Germans, 300 Russians, 200 French, 50 Japanese, 50 Italians and 25 Austrians and about 100 more U.S. Marines and soldiers.

These troops landed at Taku via ship, took trains to Tientsin, and then tried to use the rail lines to move all the way into Peking to save the day. Sadly, it didn't go too well. After leaving Tientsin, the Expedition was attacked by Boxers, suffered 20 percent casualties and had to turn back. But with so few supplies and fierce resistance along the way, they couldn't even make it back to Tientsin. Luckily, the retreating forces found an unguarded Chinese fort just North of Tientsin and occupied it, which kept them safe and provisioned while they waited for help.

The U.S. Government then landed more Marines at Taku (bottom right of the map) under Major Littleton W. T. Waller, but he had only 130 men, one machine gun, and one very old field gun. He and 400 Russians tried to link up with Seymour, but they fell into an all-day battle with the Boxers instead. In this battle, Waller lost 13 men, had to retreat, and later wrote back to the ships at Taku requesting even more men.

So, now, everyone needed rescuing. The diplomats and troops in Peking were still stuck, under constant attack, and were almost out of food. (In fact, they were mostly subsisting on horsemeat.) The Seymour Expedition that was supposed to rescue the diplomats was stuck in a Chinese fort North of Tientsin and was surrounded by Boxers. The Waller Battalion that had landed to rescue Seymour's rescuers was stuck to the South of Tientsin, and they needed rescuing themselves. It was, to put it mildly, a goat-rope.

Slide 13: The Seizure of Tientsin

Marines always like to joke that they are always rescuing the Army, but in the Boxer Rebellion, it was the Army that rescued the Marines.

General Arthur MacArthur Jr – who was the father of the General Douglas MacArthur we all know from World War II– was the commander of all forces in the nearby American colony of the Philippines during the Rebellion, and when he got the order, he sent two Army infantry regiments and an artillery battery to China to rescue both the Seymour Expedition and the diplomats in the Legation Quarter. The 1st and 2d Battalions of the Army's 9th Infantry Regiment landed on 6 July, and along with other international troops, they attacked and seized Tientsin on 13 July. Shortly thereafter, the 14th Infantry Regiment and an artillery battery landed as well, as did more Marines.

Even though most of the US forces participating in the attack on Tientsin were Army, there were some Marines -- 22 Marine officers and over 300 enlisted Marines. One of the officers was a young, eighteen-year-old 1st Lieutenant named Smedley

Darlington Butler. Lt. Butler participated in the attack on Tientsin, and rescued a man under fire (which caused Butler to be wounded as well.) For this bravery, he was later promoted to Captain by “brevet,” which was similar to a battlefield promotion. He would later go on to earn two separate Medals of Honor – the only Marine officer to ever receive the Medal twice.

Once Tientsin was secured, the Internationals could secure and supply themselves on the march to Peking. They rescued Seymour’s Expedition and all set out together. All told, the Americans contributed a force of 2,500 men – most of whom were Army – and, when added to the forces of the other countries involved, a Relief Expedition of 20,000 men set out for Peking.

Slide 14: The March to Peking

As the International Relief Expedition marched towards Peking, the Marines had their share of troubles. The weather was hot and many of them had been sitting on ships for weeks. They were not prepared for the long distances and difficult conditions. Fully 1/3 of the Marines participating in the International Relief Expedition fell out as heat casualties – a much higher percentage than the army soldiers in the expedition or indeed, any of the foreign units on the mission. In one battle on the road to Peking, the Marines suffered so many heat casualties that they became combat ineffective.

Making things worse, whenever a Marines fell out from heat exhaustion, healthy Marines had to be left behind to help him or protect him from any marauders or Boxers. Of the original 482 Marines or so that left Tientsin, only 267 made it to Peking – almost all of the others were heat casualties. And because the Marines weren’t very effective on the march, they weren’t in the front lines. By the end, the Marines’ job was guarding the wagon train at the end of the line.

The whole force arrived at the outskirts of the city on 13 August, and entered the City on 15 August.

[Note to Instructor: For more on the heat casualties, see Alan Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the U.S. Marine Corps*, p. 161.]

Slide 15: How did it all End? The Legation Quarter is relieved

Once in Peking, the Internationals had two tasks: to fight the Boxers that surrounded the Legation Quarter, and to get inside the high-walled Legation to rescue the diplomats. At this point, all of the different countries did their own thing – there was truly no command and control. Some countries fought their way to the gates, but the U.S. Army simply scaled the wall while receiving covering fire from their men on the ground. (That’s what you see in this picture.)

During the fight to relieve the Garrison, the Chinese mounted their largest offensive – probably because they knew the end was near -- and it was in this battle that Dan Daly received his first of two Medals of Honor for particularly accurate and lethal gunfire during the battle that left approximately 200 boxers dead.

Once inside the Legation, the diplomats were very pleased and safe, and the Boxers soon abandoned the city, or were caught and executed by foreign forces. The Empress Dowager Cixi – the head of the Chinese government -- fled Peking and went into exile for 18 months.

This marked the end of the Boxer Rebellion.

Slide 16: Discussion: So What? Why does this matter today?

What do you imagine was the worst part of the Boxer Rebellion for the Marines inside the Legation quarter in Peking?

[Instructor notes: Obviously, there's no right answer for this. This is meant to be a "softball" question just to get the Marines talking. And obviously, someone is going to mention that the Marines had to eat horsemeat. But you should also ask them to imagine what it was like for the Relief Expedition, particularly when everything went so badly. And, it's worth asking what it was like to be Chinese in Peking in 1900.

Are there any lessons from this event that are important for Junior Marines?

[Instructor notes: Here, you could note that the Marines on the march to Peking couldn't deal with the heat and fell out in large numbers. You could specify how important it is to stay fit even on ship, and question if the officers had planned properly and provided their men with the proper gear and water.

You could also note the importance of marksmanship – Dan Daly gets his first Medal of Honor specifically because he can shoot well. He also was enormously brave – he was exposed to enemy fire but kept his cool and kept hitting his targets.]

Are there any lessons from these events that are important for officers and NCOs?

[Instructor notes: Here, you could note that there were a number of serious mistakes made by officers during the rescue attempts:

- There was a failure of proper planning, poor intelligence that led to an underestimation of the enemy, and poor route reconnaissance.

- The Seymour Expedition was badly undermanned and no one had checked if the railway was usable all the way to Peking. (It wasn't – they had to stop and fix the tracks.) Once they encountered stiff resistance, they couldn't even make it back to Peking. Only luck saved them when they found an abandoned Chinese fort.
- Once Major Littleton WT Waller's "battalion" (130 men) set off to rescue the Seymour Expedition, they too couldn't break through, and couldn't get back to the ships.

You could also note the importance of logistics. Even though the Marines inside the Legation Quarter were brave and fought well, they needed food, ammunition, and basic supplies. No matter how capable the fighting force is, it must have logistics.

Are there any lessons from this conflict that help us understand the fighting in Iraq or Afghanistan?

Here, you might talk about how foreigners often provoke violent backlashes. In this way, the rural Chinese aren't too different from the rural Taliban in Afghanistan. People don't like foreign troops in their countries, and when those troops are there – even when the host-nation government invites them – it sometimes causes revolutions and insurgencies.

There's also a religious element to the Boxer Rebellion. The rural Chinese were angry with foreigners partly because there were so many Christian missionaries in China. The Chinese worried the foreigners were trying to import a new religion. This caused a powerful backlash that started as early as the Taiping Rebellion of 1850-1864 (**See Slide 3**) and continued all the way into the Boxer Rebellion

[Instructor note on casualties: If you get asked about the total casualties of the Boxer Rebellion, the correct answer is that we don't really know. The Marines lost only a handful of killed and wounded, but the total losses of all international troops was probably around 2,000 killed or wounded. There are no detailed statistics for the number of Chinese killed, but most scholars estimate that the Boxers may have killed as many as 100,000 civilians and the international troops may have killed as many as 5,000 civilians.]

Slide 17: Conclusion: China After the Boxer Rebellion

The Boxer Rebellion had long-standing consequences for the U.S. and for China. After the battle, China signed a new treaty – The Boxer Protocol – that allowed all of the nations of the International Relief Expedition to permanently station troops in China. (The U.S. stationed the 4th Marines in China until 1941.) The treaty also required the Chinese to pay reparations for the Boxer Rebellion and the amount they

owed was excessive – in fact, it exceeded the annual budget of the whole government of China.

The new Chinese Government – still led by the Empress Dowager Cixi – tries to establish positive relations with the Western businessmen in China, but resentment in the rural areas continues, both because of the humiliation of the Boxers' defeat, and because the government of China is signing more unequal treaties with the Westerners. In 1912, the Qing (pronounced Ching) Empire collapses, ending 2,000 years of imperial rule in China. China becomes a Republic under the leadership of Sun-Yat-Sen, but that only lasts until 1927, when a civil war breaks out between the urban Nationalists (led by Sun Yat Sen) and the rural Communists, led by Mao Zedong.

So, in a way, the fight over the role of foreigners led to the collapse of the Chinese Government. And once that government collapsed, it was an ideal time to attack and seize all of its land and resources, and that's exactly what Japan does.

In 1937, Japan invades China and starts the Second Sino-Japanese War. The U.S.A. protests Japan's war of aggression, and starts negotiating with Japan to try to encourage them to end their war. First, we try to talk them out of it, and later, in 1940, we start imposing sanctions. In 1941, we refuse to sell them oil any more, specifically because they continue to fight a war in China that we oppose. Japan is totally dependent on oil imports from the United States, and after this oil embargo, they realize there is no way to negotiate a solution with the United States.

In December 1941, even while it continues to negotiate with the United States over the war in China, Japan attacks the United States at Pearl Harbor and this brings the US into WWII.

END

Further Reading:

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