

The main body of the forces and wounded crossed the river at 3 p.m., and occupied quarters in the armoury. Conditions and prospects were now somewhat better than they had been, as the place could be defended by the captured guns, but as provisions for only three days at half-allowance remained we were still in a somewhat precarious position.

The importance of communicating our position to our forces in Tientsin was urgent, as to proceed by water was impossible, and to carry our wounded would take nearly all our force and leave no one to protect them. I had sent various messengers without success, and therefore on the evening of the 22nd, ordered Captains Richard O. M. Doig and Henry T. R. Lloyd, R.M.L.I., with 100 marines to start after dark and try to make their way into the foreign Settlement by a detour to the northward and along the railway. This was the route recommended by Mr. A. Currie, C.E., of the Imperial Chinese Railway, who accompanied our force for the repair of the line. Mr. Currie now gave his services as guide. The party reached the railway and at once encountered active resistance, the alarm bugles sounded in various places, and having lost four of their number they had no option but to return to us.

At daylight (June 23rd) the Chinese made another unsuccessful attempt to retake the armoury which was continued until nearly 8 a.m. Captain Beyts, R.M.A. ("Centurion"), was killed while defending the east front, and there were several other casualties.

When everything was quiet and only a desultory shell fire kept up, a thorough search of the contents of the various buildings was made, about fifteen tons of rice being found. In the "armoury" we discovered immense supplies of guns, arms, ammunition, and war material of latest pattern. Their discovery gave us what we most needed, viz., food and ammunition, and enabled us, if need be, to hold out here for several days. The necessity of carrying our wounded—now 230 in number—prevented our forcing our way down to Tientsin. Efforts were made to convey there information of our position and condition, but the couriers were at first killed or stopped.

Several guns were mounted on the various fronts, and in the afternoon we assumed the aggressive by bombarding a Boxer stronghold near the armoury and a Chinese fort lower down the river. This seemed to have an excellent effect, as we were afterwards but little troubled by the enemy.

A native courier sent out this day managed to get through to Tientsin and give an account of our condition. He had been captured by Boxers and tied to a tree, but, having destroyed his message before being taken, nothing incriminating was found upon him, and he was eventually released; his life was for some time in danger, and after escaping from the Boxers he had some difficulty in getting safely inside the lines round Tientsin Settlement. None of the couriers previously sent had got through, the surrounding country being so closely watched.

A Chinese soldier, wounded and captured while trying to enter the armoury (June 24th), stated that General Nieh's army were much discouraged at their want of success, and that the attempts to retake the armoury were made with twenty-five battalions (nominally, of 500 men each, but probably of not more than 300 to 400 men). During the day the Chinese fort was again bombarded.

Early in the morning (June 25th) one of the guns in the fort below the armoury was observed to be

firing towards Tientsin, and to create a diversion two of our guns were got into position and bombarded it. The gun then turned its fire towards the armoury.

About 6 a.m. European troops were reported to be in sight, and at 7 a.m. a relief column under the Russian Colonel Shirinsky, composed of forces of the various nations, arrived outside the armoury.

Preparations were then made—

1. For the evacuation of the armoury; the wounded were transported across the river in the afternoon, the whole force following later and bivouacked on the river bank for the night.

2. To set on fire and destroy this very important arsenal, said, by some who should know, to contain 3,000,000*l.* worth of warlike stores.

At 3 a.m. on 26th the return march with the relieving column commenced, and the combined forces arrived at Tientsin about 9 a.m. without further incident. The wounded were immediately placed in the hospitals, and the various detachments joined their respective forces in Tientsin.

After the return march had commenced, Lieutenant Edward G. Lowther-Crofton and Mr. Charles Davidge, Acting Gunner of H.M.S. "Centurion," remained behind to set fire to the ammunition and other storehouses in the armoury. Fires were lit in five separate places, and judging by the great volume of smoke continually rising, with occasional explosions, the destruction must have been fairly complete. After doing their work these officers crossed the river, mounted ponies which were waiting for them, and rejoined the main body.

During the expedition the hostile villages, which afforded shelter to the enemy from which to attack the force, had to be burnt and destroyed as a matter of military necessity.

The number of enemy engaged against us in the march from Yungtsun to the armoury, near Hsiku, cannot be even estimated; the country alongside the river banks is quite flat, and consisted of a succession of villages of mud huts, those on the outskirts having enclosures made of dried reeds; outside, high reeds were generally growing in patches near the villages, and although trees are very scarce away from the river, alongside it they are very numerous; these, with the graves, embankments for irrigation and against flood, afforded cover to the enemy, from which they seldom exposed themselves, withdrawing on our near approach. Had their fire not been generally high it would have been much more destructive than it was. The number of the enemy certainly increased gradually until the armoury, near Hsiku, was reached, when General Nieh's troops and the Boxers both joined in the attack.

In the early part of the expedition the Boxers were mostly armed with swords and spears, and not with many firearms; at the engagement at Langfang, on 18th June, and afterwards, they were armed with rifles of late pattern; this, together with banners captured and uniform worn, shows that they had either the active or covert support of the Chinese Government, or some of its high officials.

The primary object of the expedition, viz., to reach Peking and succour the Foreign Legations has failed. Success was only possible on the assumption that the Imperial troops, with whose Government we were not at war, would at least be neutral; their turning their arms against us, and certainly conniving in the destruction of the railway (probably actually joining in it), made failure inevitable.