

The First Opium War

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Background

Between 1821 and 1837 the Chinese government had made strenuous efforts to halt the illegal opium smuggling conducted by foreign, mainly British ships at Canton. Quite apart from the physical dangers to native Chinese of opium smoking there was, particularly since 1830 or thereabouts, the considerable damage caused by the drainage of cash silver from the country to pay illegal imports.

Although the British government connived at the trade by allowing imports of the drug from the East India Company's distribution centre at Bengal in India, the British naval officer, Captain Charles Elliot, then supervising the legal trade at Canton, incurred the ire of his countrymen when he posted a public notice citing the danger to the regular trade of illegal trafficking by British merchants which was rapidly staining the British character with deep disgrace.

The entire situation was transformed, however, with the arrival of the special Imperial Commissioner, Lin Tse-hsu at Canton on the 10th March 1839, the signal that the Chinese government meant to deal the death-blow to the trade by finally attacking the evil at its root-the foreign ships in the harbour. One week later the first of Lin's edicts was issued both to the co-Hong and foreign merchants; all opium cargoes in foreign store ships in the harbour were to be handed over and bonds given that, on the penalty of death, no more would be brought in. Lin eventually forced Captain Elliott to hand over all remaining stocks of opium consisting of 20,000 chests with each chest holding about 20 pounds

for destruction in May 1839.

However; in July 1839 rioting British sailors destroyed a temple near Kowloon and murdered a Chinese man Lin Weixi who tried to stop them. Because China did not have a jury trial system or even a evidenciary process, the magistrate was the prosecutor, judge, jury and would be executioner. The Chinese authorities demanded the guilty sailors be handed over for trial, the British government refused. Six sailors went to trial by the British authorities in Canton, but as the court had no legal authority they were immediately released.

The Chinese authorities then insisted that British merchants would not be allowed to trade unless they signed a bond promising not to: smuggle opium, to agree to follow Chinese laws and acknowledged Qing (Manchu) legal jurisdiction. Refusing to hand over any suspects or agree to the bonds, Captain Charles Elliott ordered all the British community to withdraw from Canton and prohibited trading with the Chinese.

The War

Preparing for war, the British seized Hong Kong (a minor outpost) on the 23d August 1839 to be used as a base. Fighting began on the 3rd November 1839 when the British and Chinese navies engaged each other at the mouth of the Pearl River. The Royal naval vessels outclassed the Chinese and many Chinese vessels were sunk. During 1840 the British increased the number of troops and naval vessels for the expeditionary forces in the area. The 18th (The Royal Irish) Regiment of Foot had six companies in Ceylon, three companies in England and one Depot company in

Ireland. Logistically the companies in Ceylon were the most likely to be deployed to China. The 26th (The Cameronian) Regiment of Foot was stationed in India, as was the 49th (Princess Charlotte of Wales) Regiment of Foot, and the 55th (Westmoreland) Regiment of Foot. The 98th (The Prince of Wales) Regiment of Foot was later deployed from England. The 37th Madras Native Infantry was also mobilized from India combining with the other regiments to bolster contingents of Royal Marines deployed aboard the many ships. The regiments were in a different tactical warfare situation as they had constant naval support shelling of the respective Tartar forts. On the morning of 7th January 1841, about 1400 Royal Marines and troops including artillery under command of Major Pratt of the 26th attacked the approaches to Canton. The British force had already captured the Bogue Forts which guarded the mouth of the Pearl River. By the end of January 1841, the British forces commanded the high ground around

the Chinese endeavoured to get the upper hand. By the middle of 1842, the British had defeated the Chinese at the mouth of the Yangtze River, occupied Shanghai which had the main trading route with the capital Nanjing. However; Shanghai was evacuated on the 23rd June 1842 for the purposes of mounting an offensive into the Yangtze River Delta SW of Shanghai. The main objective however; was Nanjing. The British forces were the 18th, 26th, 49th, 55th and 98th Regiments of Foot with some Royal Artillery and engineers. The entire fighting force included about 9000 troops and Marines and 3000 seamen. Battles raged to and fro from the 6th July 1842 with the main battle taking place at the city of Chingiang (now Zhenjiang). Even after the gates of Chingiang fell there was still considerable amount of fighting. When further resistance was hopeless many of the Tartar defenders slew their wives and children and committed suicide. The material and moral effects of the blow, dealt at a spot 150 miles from



Canton defeated the Chinese at Ningbo, Amoy, Tinghai and the military post at Chinhai. Minor skirmishes continued during 1841 as

the sea, against the best of the Tartar troops, upon the important waterways of China, and within a short distance of a major provincial capital of China had a devastating effect on the Chinese leadership. Before the British could mobilize to Nanjing, a Chinese Imperial High Commissioner was on his way to seek a peace treaty.

Settlement

On the 29th August 1842, the British and Qing negotiators signed the Treaty of Nanjing on board HMS *Cornwallis*. The Treaty

included the following Clauses:

Hong Kong Island to be ceded to Britain in perpetuity;

China to pay an indemnity of 21 million silver dollars to pay for the confiscated opium and the cost of the war,

five ports to be opened to foreign trade

a tariff agreement entailing China's loss of tariff autonomy;

right of extraterritoriality (loss of Chinese jurisdiction over foreigners in China) and;

Britain to enjoy most favoured-nation status.

The 18th Regiment of Foot was deployed to Bengal, India in 1848, the 26th to Scotland in 1842, the 49th to India 1843, the 55th to England in 1844 and the 98th was deployed to Dinapore, India in 1846.

Conclusion

The Opium War initiated a process of fundamental change in China's foreign relations with further acts of foreign aggression and the imposition of subsequent "unequal treaties" accelerating the process of dynastic decline which eventually led to the collapse of the Qing Empire in 1911. In the twentieth century, the Chinese have embarked on a long and arduous struggle to expunge the humiliation which they suffered during and since the Opium War. When Hong Kong ceased to be a British colony in 1997, the last reminder of that unpleasant encounter with Britain was over. British troops received the China Medal 1840-1842 for serving in the 1st Opium War and participating Regiments of Foot received in 1843 the Battle honour in the form of the China Dragon

Battle Badge subscribed "China".

Enrolled Pensioner Guards

The Enrolled Pensioner Guards currently being researched and related to the regiments that served in China are: Edward Green and Timothy McCarthy of the 18th both served in the Crimea but not China. John McKay of the 26th served in China and noted as receiving the China Medal 1840-42. James Doran of the 26th has no military history. John Flynn of the 49th served in the Crimea but not China. There are no military histories for Brian Doran or Michael Walsh of the 49th. Thomas Bandy of the 98th also has no military history. Can you help?