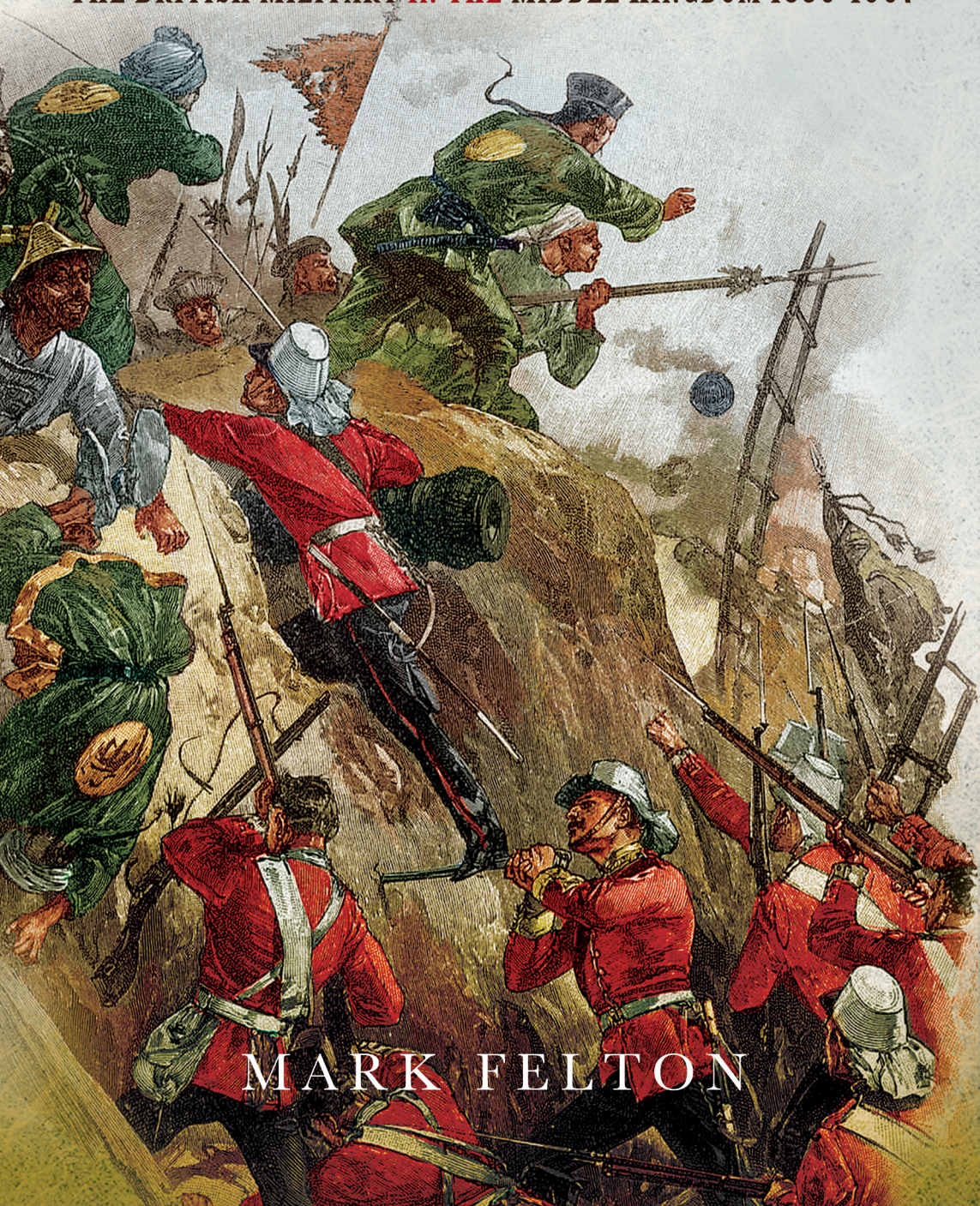


CHINA STATION

THE BRITISH MILITARY **IN THE** MIDDLE KINGDOM 1839-1997



MARK FELTON

CHINA STATION

To Fang Fang

CHINA STATION

*The British Military in the
Middle Kingdom 1839–1997*

Mark Felton



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MILITARY

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Introduction

One hot and humid summer's evening in 2010, I was attending a function at the 'Seed Cathedral', Britain's extraordinary contribution to the Shanghai World Expo. The vast expo site was crowded with hundreds of thousands of people, all enjoying the fascinating exhibits and the air of international friendship and cooperation. A large Union Jack flew proudly above Britain's landmark building, itself an award-winning and dazzling profusion of light and colour. The special guests then marched in. To everyone's amazement in came the Band of the Royal Marines, immaculately turned out in white tropical service tunics, medals proudly pinned to their chests. It was not lost on me the significance of this event – for the first time since 1949, uniformed British soldiers stood under their own flag on Communist Chinese soil.

The Royal Marines, probably more than any other British military unit, had played an integral role in Britain's military campaigns in China, from the First Opium War in 1839 to the Yangtze Incident in 1949. I wondered as I stood listening to the music whether the other guests realised how significant a moment this was in Anglo-Chinese relations – such a thing would have been unthinkable even ten years before. And I wondered how many guests considered the enormous impact that had been made on modern China by not just the Royal Marines, but by the Royal Navy and British Army. Shanghai itself was a product of British military adventurism, and it seemed rather poetic to me that it should have been the Royal Marines, whose unofficial motto is 'The First to Land', were representing Britain before the Chinese public one last time.

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Britain's involvement with China is truly epic. We launched huge naval and military campaigns on three occasions during the 19th and early 20th centuries, invaded Tibet, patrolled China's rivers for over four decades, fought a glorious last stand battle in Hong Kong, helped China to fight Japanese aggression, and got caught up in the Chinese Civil War. We gave millions of Chinese a fresh start in Hong Kong while defending the territory during the Cold War, and, although not part of this book, we fought the Chinese in set piece battles in Korea. For over 150 years Britain maintained a military presence in China, in both peace and war, and millions of British service personnel passed through our barracks, cantonments and campaigns. The bones of many of these soldiers and sailors lie buried today beneath Chinese soil.

As I listened to the Royal Marines playing 'God Save the Queen' at the Shanghai Expo in 2010, I couldn't help but wonder how it came about that Britain became a military force in China. This book attempts, in a necessarily limited way, to shine a little historical light onto this incredible story that began with an illicit drugs trade in 1839 and ended with the skyscrapers and financial markets of Hong Kong in 1997.

Chapter 1

Foreign Mud

If you will not surrender, we shall be obliged to use warlike measures for obtaining possession.

Commodore Sir James Bremer,
Chusan Islands, China, 1840

The first shots in Britain's most infamous conflict, the First Opium War, were not fired by a British warship at the Chinese but somewhat ironically by the Royal Navy warship at a British merchant vessel. On 27 October 1839 a British merchant ship named *Royal Saxon* attempted to run a Royal Navy blockade into what was then Britain's biggest trading post in China, Canton, located nearly a hundred miles up the Pearl River in the south of the country. HMS *Volage*, a fully rigged frigate, fired a warning shot across *Royal Saxon's* bows, a shot that was to bring out a large Chinese fleet under orders to protect the British merchantman. That this confused situation even occurred had its roots in a pernicious drug that the British were then in the process of foisting upon the Chinese literally by the ton. The British government, in a move of breathtaking immorality, launched the nation into a war against China to protect ruthless drug traffickers and in so doing ushered in over a hundred years of British military activity in China and dragged China unwillingly from feudalism into the modern world.

The Opium Wars are generally agreed by historians to have been one of the less proud chapters in the history of Britain's ascent

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to world hegemony. For the first and only time in history one nation used narcotics to dominate another, and for good reason today the Opium Wars are remembered in China as a national humiliation. Although morally difficult to justify, Britain's success in the First Opium War would eventually lead to China becoming a modern power in her own right, and it can be argued that China's prosperity today has its roots in its forcible opening to the world economic system in the 1840s, forced by the sort of gunboat diplomacy that the British used so successfully to usher in the first globalisation of trade and finance.

Although Britain's relationship with China had always been firmly rooted in trade and profit, it actually began quite differently. China, a vast underdeveloped empire and the oldest nation-state on earth with its teeming hundreds of millions, and self-satisfied contempt for all things 'foreign', was about to collide with a grasping, heavily-armed and belligerent nation of free-trading buccaneers busily adding ports and territories to its ever expanding empire with a determination unmatched even by the Romans.

The first ship from the British Isles had visited the south China coast in 1635. They were relative latecomers, for the Portuguese had already established a small colony at Macau a century before. Soon there were British traders in small communities at Zhoushan and Xiamen, but the most important trading town was Canton (now Guangzhou) at the mouth of the mighty Pearl River. A city of over a million souls, it was ringed, as was the Chinese style, by a massive town wall to protect it from the depredations of pirates and was at the time one of the largest cities in the world.

Between 1700 and 1842 Canton dominated the China trade, and it was the British who quickly became the masters of that trade. The British and other foreigners traded in China with the permission of the seldom seen divine emperor in Peking (now Beijing), under Chinese laws and at the behest of Chinese officials known collectively as mandarins. The ruling Qing dynasty, themselves foreigners from Manchuria who had seized power from the elegant Ming Dynasty in 1644, held an ambivalent attitude towards overseas trade and a Confucian disdain for merchants and traders. Chinese officials believed that trade incited unrest and disorder in the empire, caused piracy and compromised the nation's defences. In the case of the British they were to be proved

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right on all of these scores. The Chinese were not particularly interested in foreign manufactures and technologies, seeing no practical use for them, and they erected high tariffs and created rigid laws governing such imports, also inadvertently fostering widespread corruption among junior officials and provincial governors.

The Chinese trading system with foreigners had operated for centuries on an elaborate system of tribute. The Chinese emperor was 'The Son of Heaven', mandated ruler of the entire Earth, so all foreign rulers were expected to present tribute to him and acknowledge his superiority. Western nations were happy to play along, as the emperor's gifts, in order to demonstrate his munificence, were superior to the tribute given, and the emperor bestowed titles upon foreign emissaries and permitted them to trade. Trade for the foreigners was always lucrative but by the early nineteenth century European traders demanded more access to Chinese markets as their trade and wealth grew. At this juncture the emperor tried to turn back the clock, with disastrous results. The history of China in the mid- to late-nineteenth century is of successive leaders trying vainly to close the door to the foreigners, but finding that their former guests were not averse to kicking in the door to get what they wanted.

The Honourable East India Company, 'John Company', carried out British Far East trade under royal charter. It was a vast firm with a huge private army and navy that had conquered and administered great swathes of India. There was low demand among the Chinese for European goods but huge demand in Europe for Chinese tea, silk and porcelain. The problem for the Europeans was the Chinese demand to be paid in hard currency – and the only currency that they accepted was silver. The figures were astounding. For example, from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries the Chinese received 28 million kilograms of silver from Europe and America. The British especially did not like this arrangement because since the mid-eighteenth century they had used the gold standard, and in order to obtain the required silver they were forced to purchase it from other European nations and Mexico, thereby incurring fees that lowered their profits.

The East India Company first imported small quantities of the Indian narcotic opium, derisively called 'foreign mud' by the

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Chinese, following the annexation of Bengal by Robert Clive in 1757. The Company needed a product that they could trade with the Chinese in return for tea. Initially they tried European clothes, but the Chinese preferred homespun silk. Then, despite moral objections raised at the time, the British chose to fix the trade imbalance by means of Indian opium. Widespread addiction among all classes of Chinese soon reversed the flow of silver back into British coffers.

The Chinese government banned the importation of opium when they realised the damage the drug was inflicting on their society and perhaps, more importantly, on their silver reserves. The East India Company circumvented the ban by establishing an elaborate trading system using both legal and illegal markets in China. British merchants would buy tea on credit at Canton. They would then buy opium at auction in Calcutta. The chests of opium would be sent on British merchant ships to the China coast, smuggled inland by local Chinese merchants, and the debts would be settled.

Then as now, the profits from drug smuggling were enormous, and the trade boomed. In 1730, the British sold 15 tons of opium in China, by 1773 this figure was up to 75 tons, by the 1820s it had reached 900 tons annually. At the same time the British government attempted to persuade the emperor to ease the ban on opium imports in return for certain concessions. In 1793 Earl Macartney was granted an audience with the Qianlong Emperor in the yellow-roofed Forbidden City, but he was soon politely shown the door. In 1799 and 1810 the emperor issued imperial edicts forbidding opium importation or smoking. But because of endemic corruption, the emperor was unable to effectively govern his southern provinces and between 1821 and 1837 there was a five-fold increase in opium sales in China, vastly increasing British traders' power over the region and its population.

The turning point came in 1834 when free trade reform in Britain ended the East India Company's monopoly in the Far East, ushering in hundreds of piratical and independent operators and freebooters. The Americans also began importing cheaper lower quality Turkish opium into China.

In 1839 the 56-year-old Daoguang Emperor, who had reigned for nineteen years, appointed a Manchu nobleman named Lin

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Zexu as Governor of Canton with orders to stop the opium trade. Commissioner Lin banned the sale of opium, ordered all opium stocks to be surrendered and destroyed, and required foreign traders to sign a 'no opium bond' before they could moor their ships in the city. Any foreigner found with opium in his holds was to be put to death. Lin also closed the sea channel into Canton up a myriad of tributaries and creeks off the Pearl River, in effect holding the city's British traders hostage.

The man who was responsible for opening up China to foreign trade, at the point of a gun, was 37-year-old Royal Navy Captain Charles Elliot, British Superintendent of Trade. Elliot had joined the navy in 1815 and had served in the East and West Indies and West Africa before being sent to Canton in 1833. Importantly, he was firmly and vocally against the opium trade, though he followed his orders to the letter. Elliot held a meeting with the angry British traders. He managed to persuade them to hand over their opium stocks to Lin, in return for the British government promising to compensate them for their losses. However, the government had no intention of honouring this agreement because it rightly feared a backlash from the British public if it became known that Her Majesty's Government was protecting drug traffickers. The delighted Chinese commenced burning 20,000 chests of opium (each packed with 55kg of the drug) on 3 June 1839. There was so much 'foreign mud' that it took over twenty days to destroy. Lin wrote a 'memorial' to Queen Victoria, asking her to stop the opium trade, but this letter never reached Buckingham Palace and was conveniently ignored by the hawkish Foreign Secretary, Viscount Palmerston. The atmosphere all along the Chinese coast was tense during the summer of 1839.

The spark that opened general hostilities between Britain and China was an incident that occurred in the small fishing village of Tsim Sha Tsui (part of today's Kowloon, Hong Kong) in July 1839. At the end of June the skipper of the British tea clipper *Carnatic* had been arrested by the Chinese coast guard in Kowloon. On 7 July a large group of British and American sailors, many off the *Carnatic*, had gone ashore in Kowloon and discovered a supply of locally produced rice wine. Sufficiently liquored up, the mob of sailors had started a small riot in Tsim Sha Tsui, vandalised a local temple and murdered a Chinese man.

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At the time, China lacked a jury trial system or evidentiary process. Britons were horrified at the mediaeval punishments that were dispensed by Chinese magistrates. The British government and Commissioner Elliot demanded that British subjects be granted 'extraterritoriality' for crimes committed in China, meaning that Britons would be tried by their own consular authorities and not subjected to local justice. Commissioner Lin demanded that the sailors suspected of murder be handed over, but Elliot refused. Instead, a British court in Canton tried them, found them guilty and transported them back to Britain, where they were promptly released.

On the issue of the 'no opium bond' that the Chinese demanded all foreign skippers sign, Elliot refused to agree and instead ordered that the British withdraw from Canton and cease trading with the Chinese. In order to enforce this order Elliot ordered two Royal Navy sloops, HMS *Volage* and *Hyacinth*, to lie off the Bocca Tigris, a narrow channel that runs between islands in the Pearl River Delta, to prevent British ships reaching Canton. The Chinese called the channel the *Humen* or 'Tiger Gate' and it was well named for the Chinese had fitted the islands with 'claws' – multiple forts well supplied with cannon.

Not all of the British were drug smugglers. Some ship owners refused to allow their vessels to carry opium for religious or moral reasons, and they saw no reason why their own profits should be damaged by Elliot's drastic measures to protect the drug traffickers. These owners and captains even agreed to sign the 'no opium bond' that the Chinese authorities demanded.

On 3 November 1839 the *Royal Saxon*, whose Quaker owners refused to take part in the opium trade, attempted to enter the Bocca Tigris and make her way upriver to Canton. Elliot ordered Captain Henry Smith aboard the *Volage* to stop the ship. The *Volage* fired a shot across the *Royal Saxon's* bows. Shortly afterwards a small fleet of Chinese war junks and other craft emerged from the mouth of the river under the command of 58-year-old Admiral Guan Tianpei, who was later admiringly described by the British as 'an altogether fine specimen of a gallant soldier'.¹ The Chinese naval commander moved out to protect the *Royal Saxon* from further illegal interference from the Royal Navy, triggering a full-scale naval battle between Britain and the Celestial Empire.

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The *Volage* and *Hyacinth*, the latter a 106-foot long 18-gun Favourite-class sloop constructed in 1829, that had previously surveyed the northeast coast of Australia, went line ahead in battle formation and opened tremendous broadsides from starboard on the Chinese vessels. Gun ports stood open as British cannons mouthed great iron balls at the Chinese ships, or loosed off grapeshot that peppered the junks' sails and crew. The British ships were well armed and manoeuvrable and they completely outclassed and outgunned Admiral Guan's junks.

The Chinese were facing the world's most technologically advanced and best disciplined navy, its ships officered by men who had fought under Admiral Nelson at Trafalgar or in a myriad other battles and landings from the West Indies to the Mediterranean, from the cold North Sea to the Cape of Good Hope. The Royal Navy bestrode the globe like a massive octopus; its men-of-war, frigates and gunboats protecting the sea-lanes for free trade, inserting military forces like projectiles onto hostile shores when required, and also mapping and exploring from Australia to the Arctic. Chinese naval warfare had scarcely evolved since the fifteenth century. It was the equivalent today of an F-15 supersonic jetfighter going head-to-head with a Sopwith Camel.

Within minutes one Chinese fire raft had sunk and a war junk blew up in a great cloud of fire and black smoke after a British shell tore into its magazine. It was a complete turkey shoot and a shocking display of British naval might. The action took place off Chuenpee Island, which was heavily defended by dug-in Chinese artillery and infantry in small forts and gun emplacements.

After an initial pass with all guns blazing, the two British warships came about and made a second pass firing port broadsides. Massive clouds of gunsmoke obscured the carnage as each deafening broadside did its grim work. Another huge junk blew up, three more sank, their hulls torn to pieces by solid shot, and several others were badly damaged and on fire. What was left of the Chinese fleet wisely retired upriver except for Admiral Guan's flagship, which bravely remained stationary and continued firing. Realising that the small Chinese guns were ineffective, Captain Elliot ordered Captain Smith to cease firing and Guan's damaged vessel retreated to safety. There was no honour in continuing to

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hit an opponent when he was already on the canvas, and the Royal Navy was nothing if not honourable.

HMS *Volage* had suffered some slight damage to her sails and rigging and the *Hyacinth's* mizzenmast had been holed by a Chinese cannon ball. One British sailor was wounded, while fifteen Chinese had been killed and four of their war junks sunk.

The *Royal Saxon*, the original catalyst of this ugly little battle, brazenly continued on her way to Canton while Elliot withdrew his ships to the nearby Portuguese colony of Macau as he knew that the Chinese would send fire boats down the river. This was the only real threat to the British wooden sailing vessels, tied as they were to the vagaries of wind and tide.

The first round of the First Opium War had decisively gone to Britain. China had revealed itself to be militarily obsolete and fundamentally weak – what some were already calling the ‘sick man of Asia’. Such an easy victory only encouraged the British to press the Chinese further with the eventual goal of securing ports for their exclusive use. The seventeen battles that followed were as one-sided as those of the first. The British would manage to defeat the massive Chinese Empire for the loss of just seventy-four men. Chinese casualties were to be conservatively estimated in the tens of thousands and the ramifications of defeat were to be long and deep.

Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston began hostilities to obtain compensation for the opium smugglers whose stocks had been burned by Commissioner Lin in Canton the year before. Opinion in Britain was deeply divided concerning the morality of such a war. The future prime minister William Gladstone denounced the war in the House of Commons as ‘unjust and iniquitous’, adding that Palmerston was too willing ‘to protect an infamous centralised traffic’. There was also outrage in the British and American press, but regardless of public opinion the government was determined to press ahead with its punitive campaign against China and protect the drug trade. For it saw that as well as keeping the traders happy, land could be added to the growing empire. Niall Ferguson notes in *Empire* that ‘whenever the British were behaving despotically, there was almost always a liberal critique of that behaviour from within British society.’² This is what set the British Empire apart from its European rivals, and such criticism

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was both consistent and loud in Britain against the Opium War, an important point that is often ignored today.

The twenty-nine British merchant ships that had evacuated Canton decided not to follow Captain Elliot's two warships to Macau, preferring the shelter of Hong Kong Harbour, then a largely uninhabited Chinese appendage. In early 1840, Elliot asked the Governor of Macau for permission for British ships to load and unload their cargoes in the Portuguese colony, offering to pay rents and duties. The governor sensibly refused, afraid that the emperor would cut off food supplies and other necessities to the enclave. Portugal had no desire to be dragged into a war with China.

On 14 January 1840 the emperor asked all foreigners to stop material aid to the British in China. The British government and the East India Company decided to take fast action by attacking the coast of Guangdong Province, the ultimate target being the capture of its capital city, Canton.

In June 1840, an expedition was outfitted in Singapore and sailed north for China. It consisted of fifteen warships carrying 4,000 Royal Marines and soldiers, four brand-new steam-powered gunboats and twenty-five smaller craft. A portion of this force first struck at Chusan (now Zhoushan) Island off Zhejiang Province in the middle of China on 5 July. In 1793 Lord Macartney had asked the Qianlong Emperor for 'a small unfortified island near Zhoushan for the residence of English traders, storage of goods, and outfitting of ships'.³ The emperor had frostily refused, so now the British decided to take it anyway, and by force if necessary.

Four British warships arrived in the anchorage off Chusan Harbour on 4 July. The largest vessel was HMS *Wellesley*, a 1,745-ton 74-gun third-rate ship-of-the-line built in 1813. Aboard her was the expedition commander, Captain John Fletcher. Accompanying the *Wellesley* was HMS *Conway*, a 651-ton sixth-rate armed with twenty 32-pounders and six 18-pounder carronades (referring to the weight of the shells these guns fired), and two Atholl-class 28-gun sixth-rates, the appropriately named *Alligator* and *Rattlesnake*.

Negotiations were attempted on 4 July when Captain Fletcher boarded a Chinese war junk accompanied by Viscount Jocelyn,

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secretary to Major General Lord Saltoun, and a Prussian missionary interpreter named Karl Gutzlaff. Fletcher delivered a written message from Commodore Sir James Bremer, 53-year-old Naval Commander-in-Chief and Brigadier General George Burrell, who commanded the landing troops. Bremer was to figure prominently in the coming war.

A Napoleonic Wars veteran, Bremer had seen extensive service in English, Canadian, Mediterranean and East Indies waters and had been involved in the colonisation of Australia. In 1836, Bremer had been made a Knight Commander of the Royal Hanoverian Guelphic Order and after the original naval commander in China, Rear Admiral Sir Frederick Maitland, had died, he had succeeded him to the post. Bremer alternated this position with Captain Elliot.

The local Chinese governor of the Chusan Islands, Admiral Chang, was requested to surrender immediately. 'If the inhabitants of the said islands do not oppose and resist our forces, it is not the intention of the British Government to do injury to their persons and property'. The message further stated: 'If you will not surrender, we, the Commodore and Commander, shall be obliged to use warlike measures for obtaining possession.'⁴ The Royal Navy, scourge of pirates all over the world, was now applying piratical methods with shameless alacrity.

After an hour of largely fruitless discussions, Admiral Chang and some local officials from the capital city Ting-hai (now Dinghai) were invited aboard the *Wellesley*. Chang and the others told Bremer and Burrell that they were extremely annoyed with being held responsible for the actions of Commissioner Lin in Canton, stating 'those are the people you should make war upon, and not upon us who never injured you; we see your strength, and know that opposition will be madness, but we must perform our duty if we fall in so doing.' Unimpressed, Bremer gave Chang until daybreak on 5 July to surrender or military action would follow.

On the appointed day there was no sign of a Chinese surrender, indeed lookouts reported over 1,000 Chinese troops manning prepared positions on the beaches, surrounding hills and Ting-hai city walls located one mile from the sea. At 2pm the brigs HMS *Cruizer* and *Algerine* moved into position off Chusan Island and the scarlet-coated landing troops began embarking in cutters. The

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first division consisted of the 18th Royal Irish Regiment, Royal Marines, 26th Regiment of Foot and two 9-pounder guns. The second division comprised the 49th Regiment of Foot, Madras Sappers & Miners and a unit of Bengal Volunteers.

At 2.30pm the *Wellesley* suddenly opened fire on the Chinese beach defences as the landing boats were rowed towards the shore, the two gun decks blasting out broadsides for seven or eight minutes of concentrated firing. The effect on the Chinese was devastating – after firing a few desultory shots in reply the Chinese troops simply abandoned their positions and fled back towards the protection of the city walls. Judging by Admiral Chang's words spoken aboard the *Wellesley* the day before, he had probably given orders for a token defence only for the sake of his honour (and his head), and wished to save his men's lives. At any rate the British troops landed unopposed and discovered an empty beach with abandoned gun pits littered with dead bodies and discarded weapons and equipment. The British captured ninety-one Chinese cannon.

Next, the British rolled their two 9-pounder naval guns to within 400 yards of the Ting-hai city walls, later adding another brace of 9-pounders, two howitzers and two mortars. But Bremer told the ad hoc battery to hold fire until the following day. The damage that these guns could have done to a crowded city was not lost on the Chinese: they quietly retired and when a British reconnaissance party approached a city gate they found it barricaded with sandbags, though undefended. There was no desire among the British to inflict unnecessary casualties on the Chinese. A company of the 49th Regiment captured the gate and hoisted the Union Jack above it. 'The main street was nearly deserted, except here and there, where the frightened people were performing the kow-tow as we passed,' recalled Viscount Jocelyn. 'On most of the houses was placarded "Spare our lives" and on entering the jos-houses [temples] were seen men, women, and children, on their knees, burning incense to the gods.'⁵ Total British casualties amounted to one man wounded.

On 7 July the recently promoted Rear Admiral Elliot aboard HMS *Melville* issued a proclamation that stated that the Chinese on Chusan would continue to be administered under Chinese laws, with ultimate executive authority invested in the British

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commander-in-chief. Elliot appointed Brigadier General Burrell governor, and interpreter Gutzlaff chief magistrate. Britain now had a safe anchorage off the Chinese mainland for the forthcoming campaign to capture Canton.

Canton was located some miles up the Pearl River, the passage well protected by a series of heavily fortified islands, as well as a myriad of waterways, sand bars and other obstacles to navigation. The British were forced to conduct over a dozen operations to capture or destroy emplaced Chinese forces before they could invest Canton, as well as striking at other places along the Chinese coast. One of the most invaluable weapons at the disposal of the British was the steam-driven warship, which enabled the Royal Navy to operate in Chinese rivers and to manoeuvre at will, free of the wind. The Chinese had not seen anything like it before and it was truly a turning point in the history of naval warfare.

The first of these operations came to be called the Battle of the Barrier, and it occurred on the boundary between Portuguese Macau and mainland China on 19 August 1840. A narrow, sandy isthmus separated Macau from the mainland. Facing the border and defending the eastern side of the isthmus were Chinese breastworks that contained about 1,500 troops with emplaced artillery. British warships moved into the shoalwater on the eastern side of the isthmus. The Chinese had positioned eight war junks along the western flank of the isthmus to provide covering fire.

At noon on 19 August, Captain Henry Smith aboard HMS *Hyacinth* prepared to attack. Alongside the *Hyacinth* was HMS *Larne*, a cutter named *Louisa* and the steamboat HMS *Enterprise*. The vessels opened fire at the Chinese positions onshore, which promptly returned that fire, and the junks attempted to join in. 'The junks, which were aground in the inner harbour, were utterly useless, for none of their guns could be brought to bear, though several of the thirty-two pound shots of the ships found their way over the bank, much to the consternation of the occupants of the junks,'⁶ recalled Lieutenant John Bingham.

Once the bombardment had done its work, Captain Smith ordered his landing force into action. This consisted of 110 Royal Marines, ninety armed seamen from HMS *Druid* and 180 Bengal Volunteers. Little fighting was encountered and the British suffered

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only four men wounded. Between 100 and 180 Chinese were killed or injured during this short battle and many cannon captured.

The British now believed that they had some leverage with which to negotiate concessions from the Chinese and perhaps avoid further costly naval operations. In October 1840, the Daoguang Emperor dismissed Commissioner Lin and replaced him with Qi Shan, a 54-year-old Manchu nobleman and former provincial viceroy. Lord Palmerston instructed Elliot to have the ports of Canton, Amoy, Foochow (now Fuzhou), Ningpo (now Ningbo) and Shanghai opened to British trade. London also instructed Elliot to acquire the cession of an island off the Chinese coast, and obtain financial compensation for destroyed opium and attendant naval and military costs. Elliot initially demanded seven million Chinese dollars in compensation to be paid over six years and the surrender of Canton and Amoy as permanent British possessions. Commissioner Qi refused, offering five million over twelve years – the two men eventually agreed upon six million Chinese dollars. Qi refused, however, to countenance any territorial concessions, as the emperor would not stand for it.

Elliot offered to abandon recently captured Chusan Island for another port to be decided later. Again, Qi refused. Exasperated, Elliot warned Qi directly: 'There are very large forces collected here,' he said, referring to the large numbers of British warships and troops at the mouth of the Bocca Tigris. 'Delays must breed amongst them a very great impatience.'

No settlement could be reached for months as the Chinese determined not to permit a permanent British presence in their country. Rumours circulated among the foreigners that the emperor meant for war. Finally, on 5 January 1841, Elliot told Commodore Bremer to prepare for an attack on Canton. He informed Commissioner Qi that unless British demands were met a general assault would be launched in two days time.

When no reply was forthcoming from the Chinese, Elliot gave orders to Bremer to begin the assault. At 9am on 7 January, a large force of British Indian troops (504 Royal Marines, 33 Royal Artillery, 104 men from the 26th and 49th Foot, 76 Bengal Volunteers, 607 of the 37th Madras Native Infantry and 137 sailors) landed from the warships *Wellesley*, *Blenheim* and *Melville* two miles below the Chuenpee batteries. In command ashore was Major Simson Pratt,

CHINA STATION

26th Foot. The landing was unopposed by some 2,000 Chinese defenders. Accompanying the infantry force was another thirty seamen manhandling a 24-pounder howitzer and two 6-pounder field guns.

The British force advanced two miles inland until they came upon a strong Chinese defensive position: two forts with many dug-in cannon surrounded by a protective ditch and breastworks. When the British approached, Chinese soldiers started cheering and yelling, waving flags and then opening fire with their cannon. The naval artillery had been established on a nearby hill and the seamen opened fire on the forts, the two sides trading shot for perhaps twenty minutes. In the meantime Bremer ordered his ships to move in and bombard the two Chinese forts. A squadron consisting of HMS *Queen* and HMS *Nemesis* under the command of Captain Edward Belcher, poured fire onto the upper fort. He would be the first person to survey Hong Kong Harbour in 1841.

Commanding the second squadron to bombard the lower Chinese fort was Captain Sir Thomas Herbert, a veteran of both the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 and the War of 1812. Herbert's division consisted of HMS *Calliope*, *Hyacinth* and *Larne*.

The effect of the naval bombardment was devastating and both Chinese forts were silenced in less than an hour. By 10am the upper fort was in British hands while the Royal Marines stormed the lower fort at the point of the bayonet.

In Anson's Bay, fifteen Chinese war junks under Admiral Guan Tianpei attempted to disrupt the British operations. HMS *Nemesis*, a 660-ton iron paddle frigate known to the Chinese as 'the Devil ship' fired a single rocket at one large junk, causing a catastrophic explosion that completely demolished the vessel. 'It blew up with a terrific explosion,' recalled a British witness, 'launching into eternity every soul on board, and pouring forth its blaze like the mighty rush of fire from a volcano.'⁷ Dismembered bodies rained down along with masses of debris. In a short space of time, another ten junks were destroyed by accurate British gunnery. The other junks struck their colours by about 11.30am after witnessing this horrifying spectacle.

The next phase of the operation was by this stage fully underway, commanded by 50-year-old Napoleonic Wars and War of 1812-veteran, Captain James Scott, aboard HMS *Samarang*. Scott attacked

FOREIGN MUD

Tycocktow Island to the west of Chuenpee Island, aiming to knock out the forts that were armed with 191 cannon. The forts opened fire at 10.20am. The *Samarang* manoeuvred to a position just 200 yards from the main fort, dropped anchor and proceeded to unleash repeated deadly broadsides against the Chinese positions. The *Samarang* was joined by *Modeste*, *Druid* and *Columbine*, and together they unleashed hell. Within ten minutes the British ships had silenced the Chinese guns, with the exception of one or two, and Scott ordered cutters containing his landing parties to row for the shore and storm the forts. The Chinese remained inside the forts surrounded by smashed cannons and equipment and the British marines and blue-jacketed sailors fought their way in. After taking the forts and 100 prisoners, the Chinese guns were spiked and thrown into the river.

The battle ended with a complete British victory. Between 500 and 600 Chinese had been killed along with 200–300 wounded. The British suffered just thirty-eight men wounded. The forts that defended the entrance to the Bocca Tigris had been captured and the way was open for the next phase of the campaign to capture Canton.

For the Chinese, the battle was an unmitigated disaster with serious political consequences. Why had the British been so easily able to defeat them? The answer may lie in the Chinese administrative system, which was riddled with corruption and self-interest that led to military paralysis when decisive action was called for. Officials have always been masters of self-protection and, in the case of a well armed and aggressive adversary like the British hammering on the national door, Chinese officials fretted about the 'correct' response, hence the token resistance put up by various Chinese admirals and generals during the First Opium War. Chinese officials would order a half-hearted defence largely so that when they lost the battle they could claim that it was not their fault but due to outside factors, notably their opponent's technological advantages. In this way, the officials generally kept their positions and sinecures, and most vitally, their heads. Officials always looked to their superiors for orders, orders that were often not forthcoming or vague when given – the result was passivity when firm action was required. Chinese mandarins, military officers and local officials simply hunkered down and