



H. CHARLES McBARROW II

The American Soldier, 1900

The proposed partition of China in the late 1890s by Germany, France, Russia, Japan, Austria, and Italy was viewed by the Chinese as a threat to the integrity of their country. This partition of China into foreign spheres of influence for trade purposes was so strongly opposed by Britain and the United States that the other powers finally agreed to an Open Door Policy. However, the younger Chinese strongly resented western exploitation of their country. They formed a secret society known as the Boxers which was sworn to annihilate foreign influence. By early 1900, Boxers in the northern provinces had killed hundreds of foreigners and Chinese Christians. They then besieged the foreign legations in Peking, guarded by a military and civilian force. In June 1900, a large international relief force of about nineteen thousand troops was formed from contingents provided by Germany, France, Britain, Austria, Russia, Italy, Japan, and the United States to free the legations. The American force under Maj. Gen. Adna R. Chaffee, called the China Relief Expedition, had a strength of about twenty-five hundred men. The relief expedition, including troops from the Philippines as well as the 1st and 3d Squadrons, 6th U. S. Cavalry (shipped directly from the United States), participated in the seizure of Tientsin on 13 July 1900.

By early August most of the allied relief force was committed from Tientsin to relieve the Peking legations, leaving behind, among others, the 6th Cavalry and also some men of the British 1st Bengal Lancers. The troops remaining in Tientsin were to secure the lines of communication and obtain information on Boxer or Chinese Imperial troops in the vicinity. Troop A, 6th Cavalry, under 1st Lt. E. R. Heiberg, "armed with carbines and pistols" was ordered to join a detachment of the 1st Bengal Lancers under Lt. J. R. Gaussen on 15 August for a reconnaissance. The allies were to locate, but not engage, a force of Chinese Imperial troops reported west of Tientsin.

The next morning the combined group left early and, after an uneventful ride of about eight miles, seeing nothing but "undestroyed villages, cornfields, and plowed fields," they came across a village flying red flags, usually a sign of enemy troops. Led by Heiberg and Gaussen, the group moved at a trot in a line of skirmishers with a reserve towards the village. Heiberg then saw what seemed to be two rows of trenches, dismounted carefully to scan them, but again nothing unusual could be seen. The force then advanced to within two hundred yards of the trenches when it came under fire from the front and the right and left flanks. In the confusion the skirmishers retired on the reserve and one of them, Cpl. Rasmus Rasmussen, was thrown from his horse at the point of farthest advance. Heiberg and Gaussen saw Rasmussen lying on the ground near the Chinese trenches. Heiberg's horse became unmanageable, so Gaussen rode on. The Chinese, who had also seen Rasmussen, emerged from their trenches to take him prisoner. The race was on. Lieutenant Gaussen reached Rasmussen first. In Heiberg's words, "Lieutenant Gaussen succeeded in mounting Corporal Rasmussen behind him and rode to the rear. But for the gallant lieutenant, I am quite sure that Rasmussen would have been captured, as he was perhaps less than 250 yards from the trenches, and the enemy had left their trenches after him."

The allied contingent fired dismounted for a short time and then withdrew. They returned home at about 1:00 p.m. "without the loss of a single man or horse." For his bravery during the operations in China, Lieutenant, later Brigadier General, J. R. Gaussen was awarded the China medal with clasp and named Companion of the distinguished Service Order.

The painting shows the moment of Corporal Rasmussen's rescue by Lieutenant Gaussen. Both men are in the khaki uniforms preferred for the relief expedition.