

The Siege of Tsingtao by David Gray

The **Siege of Tsingtao** (27 August – 7 November 1914) was the only major land engagement of World War I in the Asian and Pacific theatre. It was fought between the German Empire and the Allied forces of Japan and the United Kingdom for control of the German-leased port city of Tsingtao (now Qingdao, China).

A Peterborough man named Private James Whyle, 2nd South Wales Borderers, was present during the siege and two of his letters home (*below*), were reproduced in the Peterborough Advertiser. [Some place names are spelled differently]:

'More Letters Home

In a short letter from a distant land, Private J. Whyle, son of Mr. James Whyle, formerly Dean's Verger at Peterborough Cathedral, writing from



2nd Battalion The South Wales Borderers embarking on the SS 'Shuntien' for Tsingtao, 19 September 1914.

Tsientsin on 18th September, gives a view of the fighting from a lesser-known battlefield on the other side of the world. He said: "We have been packed up since the war started, and we are off at last to Tsingtau. We are glad to go and have a go at it. The place is all under water so I expect we shall have it a bit thick. The Japs are knee deep and only going nine miles a day, so you can tell what it is like. We go to Wei-Hai-Wei and march to Tsingtau...We have not heard much of the war – only the cablegrams they send us from the War Office. We are the only British battalion going there and the Japs are going to storm the forts."

'Private Whyle Safe

Mr. J. Whyle, formerly Dean's Verger at Peterborough Cathedral received the good news on



2nd Battalion The South Wales Borderers bivouacking at Lao Shan Bay, 23 September 1914.

Wednesday 16th [December] that his son, Private James Whyle, of the South Wales Borderers, who took part in the attack on Tsing-Tau, was safe and well. Tsing-Tau was part of a German protectorate in China, and on the outbreak of war, Japan ordered the Germans to pull out, partly because of her fears of German expansion in that area. The Germans in Tsing-Tau led by the Naval Governor Captain Meyer-Waldeck refused and blockaded the town. There had been a great deal of flooding in the area which made the advance of the Japanese forces on the town extremely difficult. The Welsh battalion was the only British unit to



Allied troops inside one of the forts

take part in the attack, which finally ended with the Germans raising the white flag. Private Whyle wrote: "Just a few lines to let you know I am still alive. We have had a hard time of it, and a lot of narrow escapes. We lost several men on the same day that the Germans gave in. We were surprised to see the white flag up. After very heavy firing on the 5th, 6th and 7th, it was all over at seven o'clock. We marched into Tsing-Tau about ten, and the fields we passed through were covered with dead and wounded. We got all our stores in, and then had a bit of a rest, for which we were very thankful."

Private James Whyle, 2nd battalion, South Wales Borderers, would have little over seven more months to live. He was to die later on the 24th July, 1915, on board the hospital ship NEURALIA from wounds received in action fighting in the Dardanelles, (Gallipoli). He must have been buried at sea as he has no grave and is commemorated on the Helles Memorial, Turkey. Aged 29 when he died, he was the son of James and Martha Ann Whyle and lived at 7, Field Street, Peterborough.

Key Aspects of the Siege:

- **German Colony:** Germany held the Chinese port of Tsingtao as a 99-year lease, a strategic foothold for its empire in Asia.
- **Anglo-Japanese Alliance:** Japan, bound by its alliance with Britain, declared war on Germany in August 1914, aiming to seize German territories.
- **Combatants:** A Japanese-led force of roughly 50,000 soldiers supported by 1,500 British troops (including the South Wales Borderers and the 36th Sikhs) faced a German garrison of approximately 4,000–4,500 men.
- **Military "Firsts":** The battle saw the first major encounter between Japanese and German forces, the first Anglo-Japanese operation of the war, and the **world's first air-sea battle**, featuring Japanese seaplanes conducting reconnaissance and bombing raids from the carrier *Wakamiya*.
- **German Surrender:** The Germans, heavily outnumbered and lacking reinforcements, surrendered in November 1914 after heavy bombardment.
- **Consequences:** Japan gained control of Tsingtao, furthering its ambitions in China, and the port eventually returned to Chinese rule in 1922.
- **Cultural Legacy:** The German presence in Tsingtao left a lasting cultural impact, most notably the establishment of the **Tsingtao Brewery** in 1903, which remains one of China's largest beer producers today.



Imperial Japanese sailors coming ashore at the edge of Tsingtao

Even before the commencement of hostilities, the Japanese had made preparations for the siege of the port. On 15 August 1914, they issued an ultimatum to Germany, demanding it withdraw its warships from Chinese and Japanese waters and hand over Tsingtao. This was refused and on 23 August 1914 Japan declared war on Germany. Eight days later 20,000 Japanese troops, armed with over 140 artillery pieces, were landed and, in tandem with their supporting warships, began a bombardment of the port.

Britain, suspicious of its ally's intentions in the region, decided to send a naval force and 1,500 soldiers under the command of Major-General Nathaniel Barnardiston to support the operation and keep an eye on proceedings. The bulk of the troops consisted of 2nd Battalion The South Wales Borderers and a detachment of the 36th Sikhs. Both units were then garrisoning Tientsin (Tianjin) in northern China and on arrival joined the Japanese in the siege lines around the port. The latter was well defended by a network of trenches, batteries and fortifications.

The 18th Infantry Division was the primary Japanese Army formation that took part in the initial landings, numbering some 23,000 soldiers with support from 142 artillery pieces. They began to land on 2 September at Lungkow, which was experiencing heavy floods at the time, and later at Lau Schan Bay on 18 September, about 29 km (18 mi) east of Tsingtao. China protested against the Japanese violation of her neutrality but did not interfere in the operations.



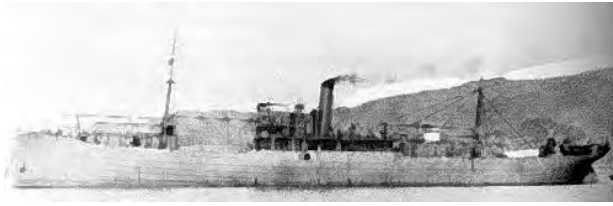
Japanese heavy battery.

The Japanese started shelling the fort and the city on 31 October and began digging parallel lines of trenches, just as they had done at the siege of Port Arthur nine years earlier. Very large 11-inch howitzers from land, in addition to the firing of the Japanese naval guns, brought the German defences under constant bombardment during the night, the Japanese moving their own trenches further forward under the cover of their artillery. The bombardment continued for seven days, employing around 100 siege guns with 1,200

shells each on the Japanese side. While the Germans were initially able to use the heavy guns of the port fortifications to bombard the landward positions of the Allies, they soon ran out of ammunition. When the artillery ran out of ammunition on 6 November, surrender was inevitable.

The German garrison, despite being heavily outnumbered, held out for over two months before finally surrendering on 7 November and handing over the port three days later. With the port's capture

British forces were withdrawn, having sustained 12 killed and 53 wounded. Occupied by the Japanese, Tsingtao eventually reverted to Chinese control in 1922.



Japanese aircraft carrier *Wakamiya*

Although largely forgotten today, the campaign was important in many ways. It saw the first air attack launched from a ship, the first night-time air raid, and the use of tactics which anticipated those used later in the War.

The Japanese siege methods, a repeat of those used at Port Arthur during the Russo-Japan War (1904-05), were much admired by the British. The Japanese commander, General Kamio Mitsuomi, had undertaken night raids and avoided the costly frontal attacks of the type seen in the early battles on the Western Front. Rather than waste men, he used his heavy howitzers to soften up the enemy while gradually advancing his trenches, hence Private Whyte's remarks alluding to the slow progress of the Japanese forces.

This conflict marked a key moment, demonstrating Japan's rising power and shaping the geopolitical landscape in Asia during the Great War.

Aftermath



German prisoners.

Though the German garrison was able to hold out for nearly two months despite the naval blockade with sustained artillery bombardment and being outnumbered 6 to 1, the defeat nevertheless temporarily served as a morale booster. The German defenders watched the Japanese with curiosity as they marched into Tsingtao but turned their backs on the British when they entered into town. So deep was their anger that some German officers spat in the faces of their British counterparts.

Japanese casualties numbered 733 killed and 1,282 wounded; the British had 12 killed and 53 wounded. The German defenders lost 199 dead and 504 wounded. The German dead were buried at Tsingtao, while the remaining soldiers were transported to prisoner of war camps in Japan. During the march to Tsingtao and the subsequent siege.

Admiral Alfred Meyer-Waldeck later accused the Japanese military of holding German and Austro-Hungarian POWs in inhumane conditions. The Admiral later alleged that POWs held in Japanese custody "were subjected to the arbitrariness of subordinate authorities in various camps for five long years. Only the German newspapers knew how to talk about 'chivalrous treatment'."



Admiral Alfred Meyer-Waldeck

The German troops were interned in Japan until the formal signature of the Versailles peace treaty in 1919, but due to technical questions, the troops were not repatriated before 1920. 170 prisoners chose to remain in Japan after the end of the war.

The British troops of the 2nd Battalion South Wales Borderers were embarked aboard the P&O vessel *Delta* on 18 November 1914. They were disembarked at Avonmouth on 12 January 1915, and moved to Warwickshire on 15 January 1915, to join other battalions, returning from overseas garrison peacetime duties, to form the 29th Division (United Kingdom), that disembarked at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915.