

WALKING WITH HISTORY:



THE BATTLE OF TAMSUI

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A walk along Tamsui's Shalun Beach offers some beautiful views. There's a reef where kids scoop for tiny creatures in tidal pools, and a wide swath of golden sand. Sometimes, people riding horses or getting their wedding pictures taken can also be seen. All this is framed by lines of surf and that powerful ocean horizon line. It's a peaceful scene.

However, if you stood on this beach on October 2nd, 1884, you would have seen war. Just offshore, a line of French warships fired cannons at a fearsome rate. In the early morning mist, you would have seen the flash and smoke of the cannons, and heard their deafening booms.

Six days later, on October 8th, you would have seen French marine riflemen land, form up, and advance over the dunes. Their mission was to march inland to defeat the Qing defenses. A few hours later, however, desperate marines emerged from the brush, waded out to boats, and rowed back to their ships in rough seas, the cries of the wounded audible. Soon thereafter, triumphant Qing soldiers flooded the beach.

The Battle of Tamsui, part of the Keelung Campaign of the Sino-French

War, was an interesting piece of history, one that we can walk alongside in modern Tamsui and remember. But first let's put those events into a broader context.

In the 1880s, Qing dynasty China was a wealthy and powerful country, but was like a tired old dragon being attacked by an encircling pride of lions. Still recovering from the momentous Taiping Rebellion, China was humiliated by two Opium Wars and the forced treaty port concessions to countries like the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany, and France. Imperial Japan was fast becoming its deadliest threat.

Under France's Prime Minister Jules Ferry, the 3rd Republic of France was eager to expand its colonial influence. In 1883, France began the Tonkin Campaign, moving from their colony in southern Vietnam – Cochinchina – to challenge China in an undeclared war for control over Tonkin – the northern region of Vietnam, with its Red River trade route to Yunnan, China.

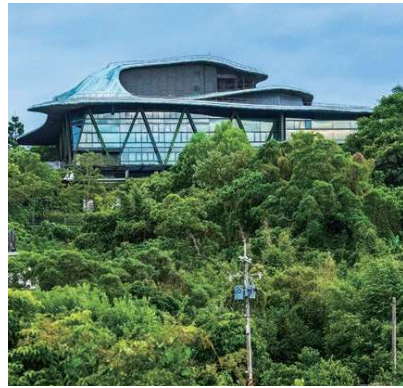
At first, the French had mixed results, but eventually scored several victories, forcing the Chinese to sign the Tientsin Accord of May 11, 1884. In it, China recognized France's protectorate over Tonkin, but failed to give a firm timeline for withdrawal of Chinese troops. This

was just asking for trouble. On June 23, 1884, a French column of soldiers moving to take control of some Tonkin settlements encountered a group of Chinese forces near Bắc Lệ that had not been ordered to leave the area. Despite being asked to stop by the Chinese, the French pushed on. They were then ambushed by the Chinese troops. Furious at this "treachery", the French government demanded an indemnity, which the Chinese refused. So began the Sino-French War of August 22, 1884 – April 4, 1885.

On August 23rd, 1884, French Admiral Courbet's Far East Squadron annihilated China's Fujian Fleet in Fuzhou, badly damaging the nearby Foochow Navy Yards as well.

Next, it was Taiwan's turn to feel French wrath. On October 1st, Lieutenant-Colonel Bertaux-Lévillain landed in Keelung with a force of 1,800 marines, forcing the Qing to retreat to defensive positions in the hills.

And on October 2nd, a small fleet under the command of Admiral Sébastien Lespès began the bombardment of Tamsui. Defending Tamsui for the Qing was General Sun Kaihua, a brilliant soldier from Hunan Province and a veteran of the Taiping Rebellion.



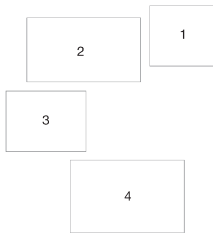
North Formosa" (1888), Dodd writes: "The peculiar sound made by the shot and shells when passing overhead will never be forgotten...It was now about noon, the first gun having been fired at 20 minutes to 7. It seemed like an age and as if the sun had stood still."

The area that most foreign traders, missionaries, and officials lived in at that time is now a major tourist area. Part of this district is the "second tiger hill" of Tamsui, on top of which sits present-day Alethia University, next to the old Oxford College built by Canadian Presbyterian missionary George Leslie Mackay and the Tamsui Girl's School. Both buildings were slightly damaged in the shelling. There's also a big bomb crater in the lawn of the Custom's Officer's Residence on what is now Zhenli Street.

The hilltop Red Fort – Fort San Domingo – was built by the Spanish and

French fire quickly knocked out the two main batteries of Qing artillery. One was near the unfinished New Fort, which stood on "the first tiger hill" of Tamsui, with a wide view of the area. It is now known for the Tamsui Golf and Country Club and the Cloud Gate Theater. The other was the White Fort, located on the coast near the current Marine Patrol Directorate General of the ROC coast guard, just south of Fisherman's Wharf.

The French continued their bombardment, which included the main town of Tamsui itself. One of the best witnesses to these events was British tea-merchant John Dodd. In his "Journal of a Blockaded Resident of



1. Cloud Gate Theater, near the location of the New Fort
2. Qingshui Temple, temple to the protective god Qingshui Zushi, believed by some to have intervened in the Battle of Tamsui to defeat the French
3. Monument near the site of the submerged sea mines, Tamkang Bridge construction in background
4. Tamsui Presbyterian Church (left) built in 1933, and the old Mackay Clinic (right), built in 1880



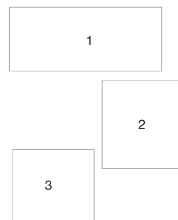
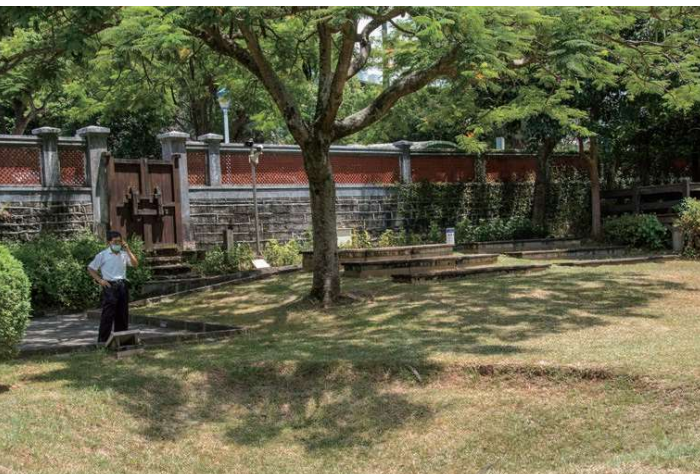


rebuilt by the Dutch. It was repaired by the Qing in 1724, and leased to the British as their consulate in 1868. British Consul Alexander Frater and his staff were there during the battle. According to Dodd, many foreigners would have sheltered from the cannon fire a bit south of the city, while others met at “the rendezvous”, Messrs. D. Lapraik and Co.’s commercial premises, now a museum on Zhongzheng Road, near the police station. Doctors from the British consulate and the British gunship Cockchafer provided treatment to injured Qing soldiers at the Mackay Clinic.

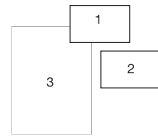
At 10 a.m. on the 8th, under the command of Frigate Captain Boulineau,

600 marines set off from Shalun Beach. Their objective was the sea mine camp behind the White Fort, which controlled by cables a group of submerged mines at the mouth of the river, right where today’s Tamkang Bridge is being built. The marines were to detonate the mines, allowing warships to sail into Tamsui. With French naval artillery superiority and boots on the ground, the Qing soldiers would have been forced to retreat.

However, things soon started to go wrong. Instead of the expected open terrain, the marines encountered thick brush, spiny plants, and uneven ground. Qing soldiers fired on them from well-chosen ambush positions. Around



1. Commemorative wall frieze outside Huwei Fortress Park
2. Former Site of the White Fort, now the Maritime Patrol Directorate General (Guanyinshan visible at left)
3. Shell crater in the lawn of the Tamsui Customs Officers' Residence



1. Interior wall carving honoring the Qing victory, Qingshui Temple
2. Former Site of the White Fort, now the Maritime Patrol Directorate General
3. Interactive installation on Shalun Beach depicting a French marine signaling to the ships that their forces were retreating

11:30 a.m. they made contact with the main body of the Qing, hidden in bushes and trenches, and a firefight ensued.

The French, who should have fired in controlled volleys, shot into the bushes at will. Boulineau ordered them to cease fire, but only a few could hear him. No bugle signals could be sent, as Boulineau's bugler had been shot dead. They were under heavy fire, unable to advance, low on ammunition, and taking casualties.

After the wounding of two lieutenants in quick order, Fontaine and Dehorter, Boulineau gave the order to retreat back to the beach. Fontaine, injured, lagged behind, and he and two marines who went to help him were quickly captured and beheaded. The rest of the French got to the beach, finally making it to their ships around

1:30 p.m.

As they sailed away, Qing soldiers raucously celebrated in downtown Tamsui and their military camp, while displaying French heads.

In total, 17 French marines died and another 49 were wounded. Qing casualties included 80 killed and 200 wounded. Was it worth it? The French got Vietnam anyway, and Formosa became a Japanese colony a few years later. Perhaps the whole thing was – quite literally – a bloody waste of time.

Traces and memories of history are all around us, especially in places like Tamsui. We just need to open our eyes and imaginations. So, the next time you are enjoying one of those famous Tamsui sunsets, make a connection with the past by imagining a Qing soldier doing the same thing on October 8th, 1884.

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Kenneth Dickson lives and works in Taiwan these days. He enjoys photographing landscape and city streets. Working on this project has been a great way to share a story that few visitors actually know about! Visit: <https://www.lookthroughthelens.com/>

