

## OVERLOOKED ORLEANS

# Shelby native's distinguished service during Boxer Rebellion

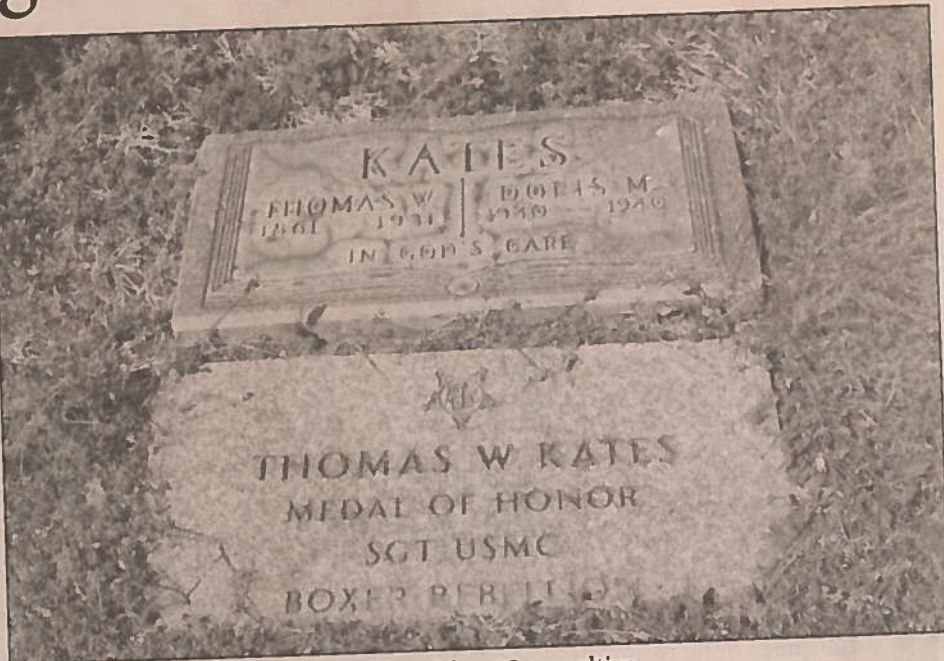
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According to the Congressional Medal of Honor Society, nearly 3,500 soldiers have received the Medal of Honor since its inception in 1862. Of those medals awarded, nearly half served with the Union Army during the Civil War. Between the conclusion of the American Civil War and World War I, 765 men received the medal, the largest number serving during the Indian Campaigns (426) and the smallest number serving in the Dominican Campaign (3) during the U.S. occupation of the Dominican Republic from 1916 to 1924. Of those 756 medals, 33 were awarded to Marines serving during the Boxer Rebellion, a nearly two-year uprising led by the Yihetuan (or Boxers) against foreign imperialists in China. Thomas Wilbur Kates, a native of Orleans County, was one of those men who received the Medal of Honor for his actions during this uprising.

Born on May 7, 1865, in Shelby, Thomas was the son of English immigrants Charles and Mariah Caple Kates. Charles worked as a currier (tanner) at Le Roy in the 1850s and later relocated his family to Orleans County before the birth of their youngest son, Thomas. The family remained in the area for a short period of time before relocating to Buffalo before 1870. At that time, the family was enumerated in the 1870 U.S. Federal Census in Buffalo's Third Ward with his parents, his brothers, Charles and Walter, and sister, Lottie. Tom Taber's "The Orleans Battery: A History of the 17th New York Light Artillery in the War of Rebellion" confirms that the elder Charles Kates enlisted with the Orleans Battery on Aug. 22, 1862, at Medina, N.Y.; he was 38 years old.

On July 21, 1899, Thomas Kates accepted enlistment with the U.S. Marine Corps at New York City. Nearly 6 feet tall with blue eyes, brown hair and ruddy complexion, Kates was stationed in the Philippine Islands from Sept. 15, 1899, to June 17, 1900 for the initial part of his enlistment. As the result of the United States' Open Door Policy in China combined with the ongoing influence of Christian missionaries in the region, the Boxers began to resist against imperialist and foreign influences, culminating in Empress Dowager Cixi's declaration of war against all foreign influences.

Thomas Kates and other Marines were dispatched to China on June 18, 1900, where they remained through Oct. 10, 1900. According to his citation, Kates was awarded the Medal of Honor "...for



extraordinary heroism while serving with the 1st Regiment (Marines), in action in the presence of the enemy during the advance on Tientsin, China, 21 June 1900. Private Kates distinguished himself by meritorious conduct."

With a little digging, more information about Kates' meritorious conduct came to light. The Boxers believed that they were invulnerable to foreign weapons and laid siege to the "Legation Quarter" where United States, British, French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Russian troops were stationed at Tientsin (Tianjin). The location became a refuge for foreigners and Chinese Christians amidst the threat of violence. As legation forces defended the compound with small arms fire, three machine guns, and one muzzle-loaded cannon, a contingent of U.S. Marines under the command of Major Littleton Waller marched toward Tientsin as reinforcements. With eight officers and 132 men, accompanied by 400 Russians, the group marched unopposed until 7 o'clock in the morning when the unit was hit with small arms fire from the flank. U.S. sharpshooters quickly quelled the attack.

Within minutes, 1,500 to 2,000 entrenched Boxers commenced firing from the front and flanks. As fighting continued the Russian retreated and formed a line approximately a half-mile behind the Marines, exposing the men to fire from all sides. As the Russians continued to retreat, the Marines followed suit while suffering the continued onslaught of the Boxers; the entire retreat lasted four hours. By 2 o'clock in the afternoon, the Marines had returned to bivouac having marched a total of 30 miles and suffering

13 casualties.

Waller wrote in a letter dated July 6, 1900, that "...of the men I wish to say, while all in the engagements we participated in, behaved in such a manner as to bring forth the highest praise from the foreign officers...Cpl. Thomas W. Kates." He continued, "...the specifically distinguished of these being Corporal Kates and Privates Campbell and Francis, with the Colt gun." According to the report of the commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps dated Sept. 29, 1900, these three men remained with Powell, holding a position with an M1895 Colt-Browning Machine Gun, until all but Campbell and Powell were gunned down. They destroyed the gun to prevent it from entering enemy hands before they commenced their retreat. Although it does not show up on his service record, Waller noted that Kates was slightly wounded, and Francis was wounded in the hand. All three were later awarded the Medal of Honor for their actions during this advance.

Kates' record does show that he was present for the Battle of Tientsin on July 13 and 14, 1900, the Battle of Yangun on Aug. 6, 1900, and the Battle of Peking on Aug. 14 and 15, 1900. This record indicates that Kates was wounded on July 13, 1900, but makes no mention of the slight wound received on June 21. The record concludes with Kates' desertion at New York City on May 19, 1903 after his return from the Philippine Islands in June 1902. This desertion is likely why no newspaper articles mentioned this important award at the time of his death on May 6, 1931. Kates was buried at Flushing Cemetery in Queens County, N.Y.