

The tribulations of a Messinian in China: Captain Charles de Lardemelle in the Boxer War (1900)

Among the many officers to whom Metz gave birth was General Charles de Lardemelle, future Governor of Metz (1922-1929). ^eBorn on 5 May 1867 in Place Saint-Martin to a father who was a tax collector in Saint-Julien, he came from two illustrious families who had lived in Metz since the mid-1800s: the de Lardemelle and de Turmel families¹. On graduating from Saint-Cyr in October 1887, he was posted as a second lieutenant to the 1^{er} foot chasseur battalion in Verdun, where he stood out for his authority and aptitude for command. He was promoted to lieutenant on 15 May 1891 and entered the Ecole Supérieure de Guerre on 15 April 1892, graduating two years later. A trainee at the Algiers divisional headquarters, de Lardemelle was appointed captain on 30 December 1895, before joining the 6^e corps in Châlons in October 1896, where he became General Hervé's orderly. In May 1898, he underwent training at the Central Aerostation Establishment in Chalais-Meudon. His superiors already saw in him an officer with a great future: it was in China that his career took its first turn and he showed himself to be a promising chief of staff...

On 29 December 1899, Captain de Lardemelle was placed at the disposal of the Minister of Colonies to be assistant to Colonel Joffre, who had just been appointed commander of the troops sent to Diego-Suarez in Madagascar. For a month, at the Pavillon de Flore in Paris, he took part in the preparation of the personnel and equipment transport plan, confirming his great qualities of dedication and intelligence in this mission. On 10 February 1900, the government changed its plans for Madagascar, and he left his post to join the Indochina troop headquarters under the command of General Borgnis-Desbordes. 25 February in Marseille bound for Haïphong. In a letter to the Commander-in-Chief of the Indochina troops on 22 February 1900, General Jamont recommended the young captain:

"You can use him wherever you see fit, for he is active, zealous, intelligent and resolute. On top of that, he is a cheerful and amiable companion with an easy and loyal character, who has found kind sympathy everywhere"... qualities that de Lardemelle was soon to demonstrate once again during the China campaign.

This war, better known as the *Boxer War*, was immortalised in the film *The 55 Days of Peking*². Charles de Lardemelle took part in the expedition between early July and autumn 1900, both as chief of staff and as a combatant. Found in the family archives in Nancy, he left two precious memoirs, written on his return to France, which shed light on both his role in various circumstances and his rather conflictual relationship with General de Lardemelle.

¹ The two families married in 1827. Charles was the great-grandson of Joseph de Turmel, mayor of Metz under the Restoration, and the grandson of Anne de Turmel, whose name the people of Metz gave to the little bell in the cathedral - *Mademoiselle de Turmel*.

² See the excellent work by Bourgerie (R.) and Lesouef (P.), *La guerre des Boxers (1900-1901)*. Tseu Hi évite le pire Editions Economica, Paris, 1998, 222 pages.

Frey³. Let's be clear from the outset: this campaign will leave him with bitter and disenchanted memories, both in terms of his physical health and his material and, above all, career ambitions.

On 24 June 1900, with the situation in China worsening (the siege of the Peking legations by Chinese regulars and Boxers had begun on the 19th, and the Seymour column, the first international force, had had to retreat to Tien-Tsin), General Borgnis-Desbordes decided to send a force from Hanoi, known as the *Petchili* force, under the command of Colonel de Pélacot, commander of the 9^e Marine regiment, and appointed Captain de Lardemelle as his chief of staff. The next day, at the head of the 1^{er} battalion of his regiment (the Tonkin battalion), de Pélacot left Hanoi for Haïphong and boarded the *Eridan*, with orders to join the two units coming from Saïgon at Amoy, the 2^e battalion of the 11^e RIMA (the Cochinchine battalion) and the 13^e mountain battery, making a total force of around 2,000 men. As soon as he landed at Takou on 7 July, he met Rear Admiral Courrejoles, commander-in-chief of the naval division, accompanied by de Lardemelle. Courrejoles ordered him to leave the next day for Tien-Tsin with the Tonkin battalion, up the Peï-Ho river. His arrival in the city on the 9th did not augur well:

As soon as we docked," wrote Colonel de Pélacot, "I jumped ashore followed by Captain de Lardemelle. But no sooner had we set foot on the ground than a shell fell beside us and cut a sailor's arm off. Fortunately, Captain de Lardemelle and I were unhurt.⁴ The battalion was immediately involved in the defence of the Concessions and then, on the 11th, in the bloody fighting at the

The Chinese attacked violently. Colonel de Pélacot instructed de Lardemelle and Major Vidal (the military attaché in China) to negotiate with the allied leaders to attack the Chinese positions. The battle of Tien-Tsin had just begun and would last until 14 July. What role did Lardemelle play?

His role was sufficiently active and courageous that, on the 20th, Colonel de Pélacot proposed him for the rank of battalion commander (a proposal already made on the 25th May when de Lardemelle was in Indochina⁵): "Displayed the greatest activity during the battle of the 11th July and during the battle of the 13th, and on several occasions carried the orders of the commander of the expeditionary corps across terrain riddled with projectiles. Showed the greatest bravery and in the battle of the 13th had the right sleeve of his jacket pierced by a bullet which slightly bruised him. In one of the two accounts he wrote a few months later about the China campaign, de Lardemelle recounted this famous day: "On 13th July 1900, the allies carried out a strong attack on the Chinese city of Tien-Tsin. It was I who reconnoitred the position under a hail of bullets, and it was on my report and according to my indications that the French troops were engaged... The French and Japanese soon penetrated the suburbs, flanked at a distance and to the rear by the British and Americans. But the forward movement through the houses was quickly halted; the losses were considerable, and it was clear that, deprived of the means to breach the Chinese city, we could no longer hope to see the attack succeed by force. The English general advised us to withdraw. I had nothing to say, but who can criticise me?"

³ *Mon rôle dans trois circonstances graves de la campagne de Chine and Mes rapports avec le général Frey pendant la campagne de Chine*, from which the various passages quoted in the following pages are taken.

⁴ *Expédition de Chine de 1900 jusqu'à l'arrivée du général Voyron*, Paris, Ch. Lavauzelle, 1901, 285 pages, page 60.

⁵ "He has an excellent military spirit and is gifted with a keen understanding and a great capacity for assimilation. He has initiative and a great desire to distinguish himself and to take part in war actions. (Major Leblois)

... I shouted that we had to stay put, whatever the cost, and that the Chinese would be defeated, not by fire and bayonets, but by our tenacity. My tone and my assurance won over any hesitancy: we stayed. The troops stood for ten hours during the day under a hail of bullets without responding, covering themselves as best they could and simply standing ready to repel any Chinese counter-attack. Then came night, when it was safe to withdraw. It was the Chinese who withdrew: the city of Tien-Tsin was evacuated during the night, and we entered at dawn the next day.

Ten days later, on 25 July, General Frey, who had just been appointed new commander-in-chief of the French expeditionary corps, arrived in Tien-Tsin. de Lardemelle joined his general staff, which included another man from Metz, Captain Jean Paul Sicre, whom he had met at Saint-Cyr⁶. From then on, the French corps formed a brigade, made up of a three-battalion marine infantry regiment under the command of Colonel de Pélocot, and a marine artillery group. But the relationship between de Lardemelle and Frey was not a good one, and from the outset it was a bad one:

"On 4 August, the day before the battle of Peï-Tsang, the French troops bivouacked with the Russian troops on the banks of the Lutaï canal. Russian General Stessel provided General Frey with a large conical tent. General Frey entered the tent with the two naval infantry captains who, with me, made up his entire staff, and left me at the door. I lay down on the ground and spent the night in the rain.

What role did de Lardemelle play in the battles of Peï-Tsang and Yang-Tsoun, and in the Battle of Peking? Which

What was his assessment of the way in which the operations were carried out? The movement towards Peï-Tsang, around ten kilometres from Tien-Tsin, began on 3 August along both banks of the Peï-Ho, with a force of around 18,000 men, including 1,000 French under General Frey. It was planned that the latter would march in concert with General Linévitch's Russians, Germans, Austrians and Italians along the left bank of the river, and would be divided into two columns: one under the command of Pélocot, the other under the orders of General Frey himself. Captain de Lardemelle was not kind to the latter, whose role he reduced to its simplest expression: "On 5 August, the day of the battle of Peï-Tsang, (he) disappeared at dawn with a company and a battery with the aim of attempting a diversion in the rear of the Chinese, which he did not do. He was not seen again until the following day. He left the bulk of the French troops, six companies and a battery, with Colonel de Pélocot, to whom he added me, with orders to follow the Russian troops who were to move from the left bank to the right bank to support the Japanese attack... After a very arduous march in scorching heat, the Russian and French troops, very tired, camped in the evening in front of Peï-Tsang".

The Russian General Linévitch then asked to speak, in General Frey's absence, with Colonel de Pélocot. He announced that the following day he would continue to pursue the Chinese forces, and hoped that the French troops would support his movement. Pélocot, who had not received any orders from his superior (and did not even know where he was), felt that, given their tiredness and lack of food, his men should turn back towards Tien-Tsin. It was at this point that de Lardemelle intervened to persuade Pélocot to do what the

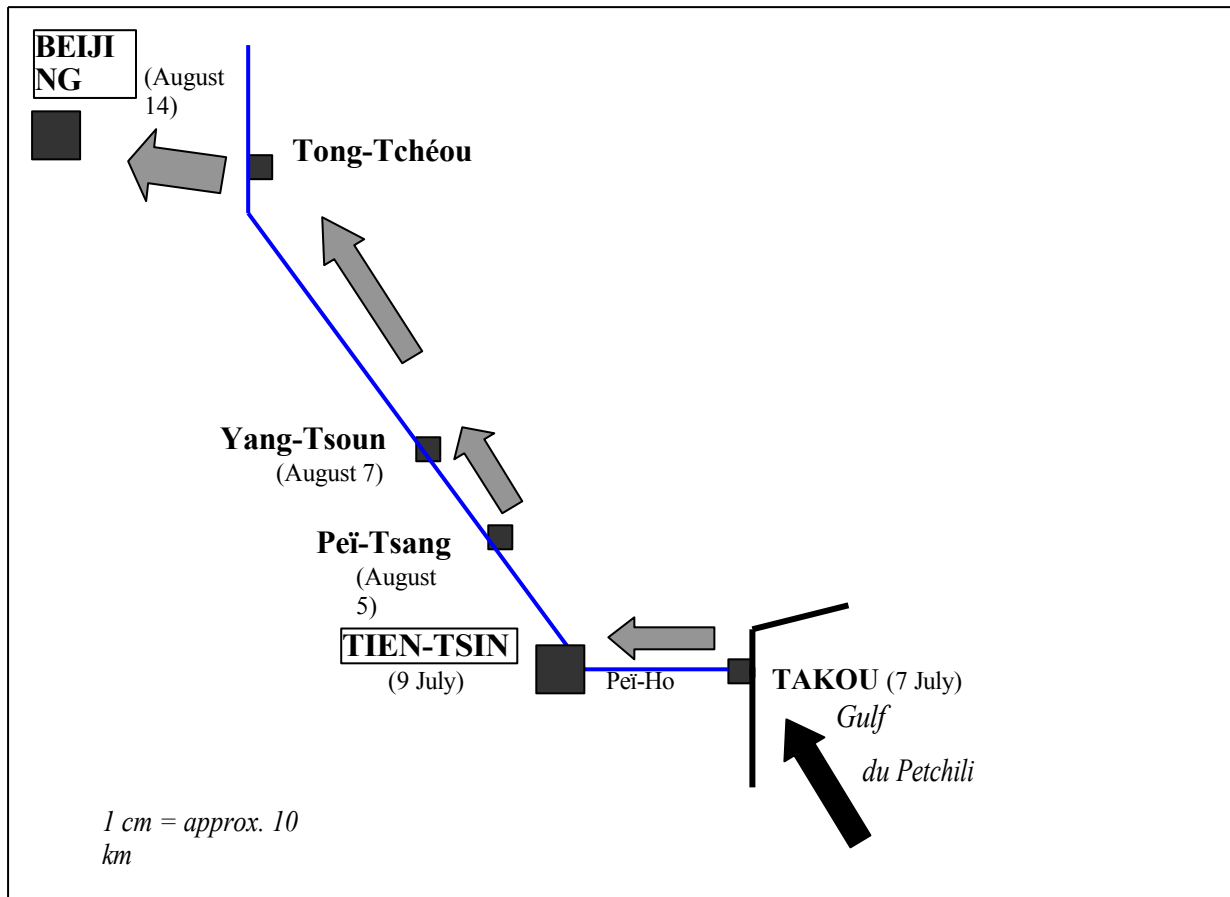
⁶ Another Lorraine native took part in the Chinese campaign, Captain (and future Major General) Camille Benoît, born in Lorquin in 1871, who was part of the marine artillery brigade.

Russians: I am taking Colonel de Pélacot aside," he wrote, "and I beg him to give in to General Limevitch's entreaties and to march with the Russians on Peking the next day.... We must take the best elements, form four companies with six tonight, send the casualties back to Tien-Tsin and give General Limevitch the support of a good battalion and two batteries... I say that no government will forgive us for not having left for Peking with the others, and for having resisted General Limevitch's entreaties. Even if only four men and one corporal arrive at Peking, the French flag must be represented on the day the allies enter. General Linévitch, calling on all his knowledge of the French language, advanced towards Colonel de Pélacot, his hands outstretched, and said to him: *Come on, Russians-French, French-Russians, Peking!* and the colonel simply replied: *General, tomorrow you will have with you a battalion and two batteries of French troops.* De Lardemelle, who took no credit for his intervention, simply felt that he had played his role as chief of staff, "In 1914, he would have the opportunity to apply this concept on a different scale and in different circumstances!

On 6 August, the allied forces set off towards Yang-Tsoun. On this day, although the French artillery once again stood out for its effectiveness, the assault was mainly led by the Russians, the British, the Americans and the Japanese. But there was a new incident between de Lardemelle and General Frey, who was no doubt irritated by the decisions taken during the night in his absence: while he had ordered a turning movement that de Lardemelle considered pointless ("I repeatedly pointed out to him the futility of this effort"), Frey publicly humiliated the young captain, who noted: "Furious at having missed his day, he poured out his bile by shouting at me with the

violence in front of the troops. This altercation lasted a few minutes, so that it did not go unnoticed"... Did Frey hate de Lardemelle that much?

One might think so from reading his notes on subsequent events. On 7 August, a council of war held at Yang-Tsoun between the allied generals decided to continue the march on Peking immediately, with the temporary exception of the French, who would hold Yang-Tsoun pending the arrival of their reinforcements from Indochina and France. General Frey, who had returned to Tien-Tsin to prepare his units while Pélacot remained in Yang-Tsoun, joined the allied forces in front of Tong-Tchéou on 12 August, before marching with them to Peking, where he arrived the following day. These days did not leave de Lardemelle with the best of memories: "After General Frey had stopped the French troops at Yang-Tsoun for a few days," he wrote, "they were obliged to make forced marches to catch up with the allies who had continued on to Peking. During these long marches, which often took place at night, (he) always had me march to the most exposed spot, in the lead with two cavalymen to provide direction. I am very proud of this mark of confidence, but I note that there was never any rotation between me and my comrades to carry out this mission at first, and later to carry out all the missions presenting a real or supposed danger. On the day when the allies were to make the last march from Tong-Tchéou to Peking, the general decided that there was no danger, and that I would leave with the camp (six men) at 12.30 a.m. to go and find a bivouac site two or three kilometres from Peking. The French column is to follow, leaving at half past one. Needless to say, my camp detachment was transformed into a reconnaissance detachment, complete with rifle fire.



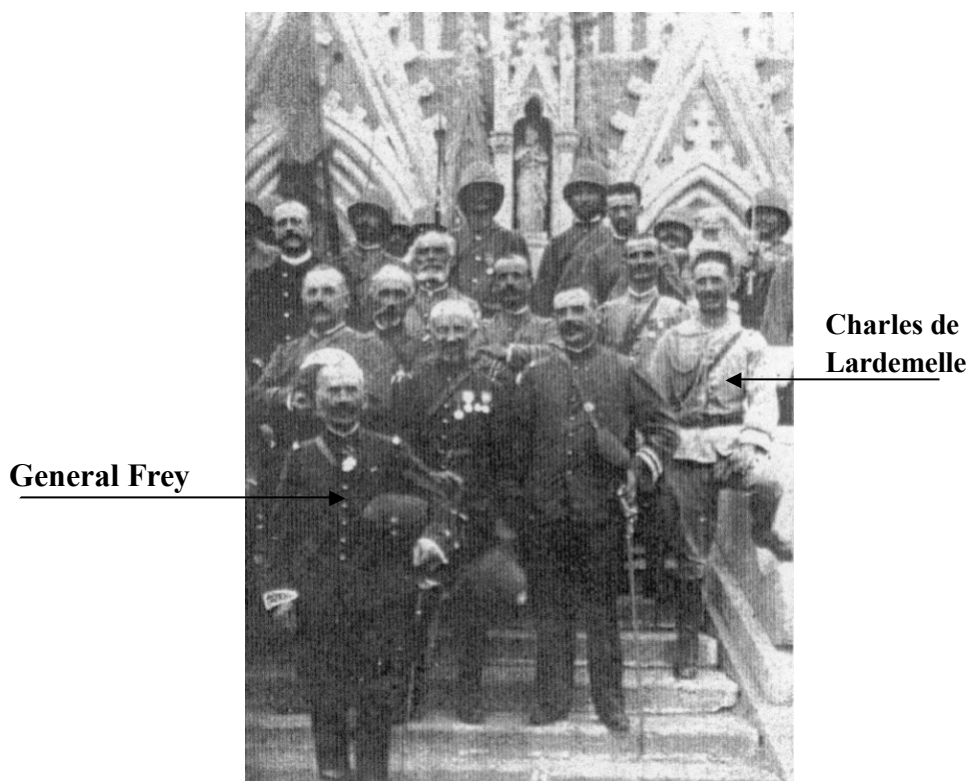
The China expedition (July - August 1900)

The French arrived in Peking on 14 August 1900, the last to follow the other allies. Proof of the disorganised nature of the international force's entry into the imperial capital and the lack of communication within it, the

At around 6 p.m. on the 15th, French guns were preparing to bomb the Tartar city, while the Americans were already there and the Japanese were approaching the imperial palace; the last-minute intervention of American General Chaffee prevented what could have turned into a diplomatic incident! More urgent was the liberation of Pe-Tang, where^{gr} Favier, Bishop of Peking, had been besieged since 16 June with 14 European priests, 8 Chinese priests, 111 Chinese seminarians and more than 300 Christians. General Frey took command of the operation, for which he received help from a Russian battalion.

and half a British battalion. Captain de Lardemelle took part in the assault on 16 August, which Bishop Favier described in his diary: "A new troop, dressed in blue, was seen advancing rapidly with artillery. - *This time,*" someone shouted at me, "*there's no doubt about it, it's the French...* The marine infantry soldiers who had entered Pé-Tang had had time to cross our settlement and take the large barricade from the rear, after having climbed over and burnt the crenellated houses and knifed their defenders. The battle was over; more than 800 corpses of Boxers and Chinese regulars lay on the ground; we had to deplore only two men killed and three wounded... We had been delivered, and delivered by French soldiers!⁷

⁷ Quoted in BOURGERIE (R.) and ESOUÉF (P.), *La guerre des Boxers, o.c.*, page 202.



Captain de Lardemelle with General Frey and the French officers in front of Peking Cathedral (Coll. de Lardemelle)

On the same day, the allies finished clearing various districts of the Forbidden City still held by the Chinese. On General Frey's orders, de Lardemelle took possession of Mé-Chan (the artificial hill built of coal to the north of the imperial palace) with the remains of a company of twelve men and a captain: "To give an idea of the impression that such an order could produce at the time," wrote Lardemelle, "here is how the captain addressed me when I asked him to follow me: '*But you're mad! We're all staying here!*' I replied: '*I'm not asking for your opinion. I've got orders to take you away, I'm taking you away!*' And I went to take possession of the Me-Chan and the Ancestors' Palace.

Between the capture of Beijing and his repatriation to France in early

November 1900⁸, Captain de Lardemelle continued to play an active role, but more of a political and diplomatic nature than a strictly military one, which he explains in his two memoirs. A new factor had intervened in the meantime, with the arrival in Tien-Tsin on 22 September of Major General Voyron, appointed on 11 July as commander-in-chief of a reorganised expeditionary corps, now 17,000 strong and essentially made up of two infantry brigades. General Frey remained in charge of 1^{ère} of these brigades, made up of the 16^e, 17^e and 18^e colonial infantry regiments. Tired and ill, he had to leave Peking and return to Tien-Tsin, where he received the new troops. As for de Lardemelle, he remained in the Chinese capital where, at the end of September, he was entrusted with an important mission by Pichon, the French ambassador in Peking:

⁸ Was he able to meet Lieutenant-Colonel Franchet d'Espérey, his future superior in 1914-1915, who had arrived in Peking at the end of October 1900 and was a member of the International Commission responsible for administering the city of Peking? See on this subject: AZAN (General Paul), *Franchet d'Espérey*, Paris, Flammarion, 1949, pages 35-37.

to help him delay the evacuation of the town by the French, an evacuation which the Quai d'Orsay wanted and which General Frey was in favour of. However, Pichon and de Lardemelle were opposed, believing that this would serve Russian interests in the Far East to the detriment of those of France. While the French minister tried to get Paris to reverse its decision, de Lardemelle went to Tien-Tsin bearing a letter from Pichon to General Voyron, but not without informing General Frey, who deferred to the decision of his successor, who had just landed. Some time later, the latter received new instructions from Paris: to maintain a French military presence in Peking during the diplomatic talks, to provide assistance to certain Catholic missions, to occupy the tombs of the imperial dynasties for symbolic purposes and, last but not least, to ensure the protection of the Peking-Hankéou railway: De Lardemelle writes: "Pao-Ting-Fou and the imperial tombs were seized, a few military marches were carried out to clear the way for the Christians, and from then on talks could begin with some chance of success. If Peking had been evacuated at the end of September 1900, the peace treaty would still not have been signed".

When the allies made their demands to the imperial government on 22 December 1900 (they were accepted and signed on 16 January 1901), Charles de Lardemelle had barely returned to France, exhausted by dysentery and morally embittered. Already weakened by a lesion on his right lung contracted in Algeria, and very anaemic from his stay in Tonkin, he suffered a serious bout of dysentery shortly after the fighting at Tien-Tsin. But he refused to be evacuated and did his best to take care of himself, to the point where by early autumn 1900 he weighed just 54 kilos. In September, the senior naval physician Philip, the expeditionary force's chief of health, decided that he should be repatriated quickly. But General Frey

did not seem determined to see de Lardemelle leave, and during the month of October he entrusted him with two more missions, one to Admiral Courrejoles on the subject of catch shares, the second to M^{gr} Favier in Peking; in addition, he ordered him to apply for the command of a company in one of the regiments of the expeditionary corps. De Lardemelle explained to him that he was in a state of exhaustion that would not allow him to endure a harsh winter, but he was told: "You are not here to argue. If I don't get your request in an hour, you'll be given a fortnight's compulsory leave". The young captain complied and submitted his application, but as there were no vacancies in the regiments and the staffs were all filled, General Frey asked for him to be repatriated... while again proposing de Lardemelle for the rank of battalion commander ("You've earned it," he told him). On 27 October, Lardemelle was ordered to embark at Takou for Nagasaki, where he was to take the first Messageries maritimes courier to Marseille. He disembarked in France in December.

Physically weakened, Charles de Lardemelle was full of disillusionment. He wrote a few months later: "This campaign has given me nothing but trouble of all kinds in terms of health, money and ambition". As we have seen, his health had deteriorated considerably, and he would continue to suffer the after-effects of his dysentery for a long time to come. His stay in China and the services he rendered did not give him any career advantages, since despite two offers of the rank of commander, he had to wait another six years to attain it! The only consolation: he was made a knight of the Legion of Honour on 12 July 1901, with a laconic citation:

"He stood out for his bravery in the events of 11 and 13 July 1900 in Tien-Tsin (China)". Financially too, de Lardemelle was disappointed by the way the officers of the expeditionary corps were treated.

Thanks to the system of "prises shares", he had been allocated the sum of 4,000 francs, an income that had enabled him to live quite comfortably in Paris (he lived in the hotel at the Palais d'Orsay) at the beginning of 1901. However, in April of that year, the government declared these shares illegal and decided that officers who had benefited from them would have to repay the amount, either in full or by deducting 1/5 from their pay. Our captain, having already

He spent his share and did not want to see his pay reduced, so he repaid it from his own savings. Completing his memoir on his role during the Chinese campaign, he wrote, not without a certain philosophy: "Fortune is a pretty woman who is willing to be abused, but with some consideration. She is angry, she will calm down. And then I will resume the conversation, I hope with some chance of success"...

The page was turned, and Charles de Lardemelle could now think about the rest of his career, a career that would lead him to head the staff of the 5^e army (Franchet d'Espérey) in 1914, and to successive command of the 122^e (1915) and 74^e infantry divisions (1916-1918)... and finally, between 1922 and 1929, to the post of military governor of Metz.

Pierre BRASME



**Captain Charles de Lardemelle after
his return from China**
(Coll. de Lardemelle)