

Higginson's first report; the unedited version

Be the first known report of Lieutenant Walter Robert Higginson, No6 Company, 1st Battalion, 3rd Regiment, Natal Native Contingent in relation to the Battle of Isandlwana 22 January, 1879

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Whilst pursuing details of Colonial Officers who served in the Anglo-Zulu War for a thesis I'm writing, I made a routine visit to the Cape Archives Repository in Cape Town early in September, 2015. Every visit I make a habit of picking material from the Archives Packing Lists that I know are yet to be fully explored and catalogue the contents for future reference. There's very little on the Anglo-Zulu War and most material I find is usually relating to the either the Ninth Eastern Cape Frontier War, Moorosi's campaign of the Gun War.

This time, I targeted the Government House records and was searching through GH36-18, when I came across a folio (No18 of 1880) simply titled in blue pencil *'Isandlwana'*. The first item within the folio was an extract from the Royal Engineers Journal of an article about Isandlwana from a Zulu's perspective. The second one, I first thought was a copy of Lieutenant Walter Higginson's Isandlwana report that was published in the National Archives document, WO33/34 as an enclosure. After a quick read through I noticed that it was similar, but I then started to read references for the first time; I began to ponder, was it different?

After a very brisk walk home I grabbed hold of a copy of WO33/34 and confirmed that the Cape Archives report was dated 17 February and the WO33/34 report was dated 18 February; thus the War Office version was somewhat sanitized although in places the two versions complement each other. The assumption must be that Higginson himself submitted his first report and was requested to make changes and resubmit the following day. It would seem unlikely that these changes were made for him.

People, general movements and occurrences:

- Captain W.B. Erskine and No4 Company, 1/1NNC isn't mentioned in this report.
- In this report he quotes Colonel A.W. Durnford's orders that he needed to pass onto Captain G.J.P. Shepstone; Shepstone is not mentioned in the War Office report.
- In this report after leaving Sergeant Major Williams with Captain A.J. Barry (No5 Coy, 2/3NNC), Higginson states he was riding back to the camp on horseback when he passed two officers; one being Captain G.J.P. Shepstone who gave him specific orders: "*Oh! I will make a Report to Col Pulleine, as I am going in, will you please ride back and tell my men not to be outflanked*". This whole event has been omitted from the War Office report.
- The movements of the companies of the 24th are more specific in this report.
- The distances of the 24th opening fire differs from 600 to 800 yards between reports.
- This report places Captain R.H. Krohn (No6 Coy, 1/3NNC) and Lieutenant G.W. Ardendorff (No6 Coy, 1/3NNC) as being with Higginson up until he left the

camp; thus Krohn must have been killed between the camp and the trail and Ardendorff suspected early departure now close to 1.40 when the 24th retired.

- This report makes no mention of the following men referred to in the War Office report; Captain W. Stevenson (2/3NNC), Lieutenant T. Purvis (1/3NNC), Lieutenant C. Raw (No1 Troop, NNH) or Lieutenant H.L. Smith-Dorrien (95th Regiment).
- This report offers an explanation albeit brief as to reasons the camp tents were not struck.

Timings:

- Lieutenant G.W. Ardendorff's task to visit Captain A.J. Barry's Company and report back is measured in this report as being 30 minutes in duration; so a hasty ride to and fro for Ardendorff.
- Higginson and Sergeant Major Williams visit to Barry's Company was measured in this report at 45 Minutes and 30 Minutes in the War Office Report.
- In this report, the posting of the picket on Isandlwana is omitted whereas in the War Office report 10am is the affixed time.

Zulu's numbers and movements:

- In his visit to Captain A.J. Barry's Company, Higginson states in this report some 5,000 Zulus had moved behind Isandlwana but in the War Office report 'large bodies' is being referred to and nothing is mentioned about them (the Right Horn) working behind Isandlwana.
- He claims 1,000 Zulu's confronted the Mounted Contingent where as in the War Office report 'large number' is once again used.

Copy

*The Officer Commanding
The forces in South Africa*

*Rorkes' Drift
Feb' 17 / 79*

Sir,

I have the honor to hand you the particulars of the Battle of Isandhlwana as I saw it on the 22nd Jan 1879.

The first information that we received about the Zulus was at 6.am., when Lieut Hon Standish Vereker came into Camp, and said that the Zulus were appearing on the extreme left & nearly opposite his outlying picket. At the same time an Officer of the 24th Regt rode down to my tent and ordered Capt Krohn to fall in his Company (No6) for outlying picket, to relieve Capt Lonsdale (No9) 1st Battalion, who had been on duty 36 hours. Just as we were going, orders came to stay in camp, as the Zulus were seen on extreme left of the Camp. Soon afterwards Lieut Ardendorff of my Company (No6) was ordered to ride out to the outlying picket on the left, formed by the 2nd Batt, 3rd Regt N.N.C, and bring in a report of what he saw, he returned in

about half an our & made his report. Soon afterwards Col Pulleine sent me out & Serjeant Major Williams came with me. We found Capt Barry & Lieut Vereker watching a large force of about 5,000 had gone on around behind the Isandhlwana hill. I remained about three quarters of an hour & then returned to Camp. I found that Col Durnford had arrived and on my going to Col Pulleine to report he refered me to him. Col Durnford then ordered me to send men to the top of the Isandhlwana to keep a look out. In about an hour one came down and reported the Zulus retreating. I then rode up to Col Durnford & told him; he said "Ah! Is that so; well – we will follow them up. He then turned to Colonel Pulleine and said, "Can you spare this Officer?" He said "Yes, certainly". He then turned to me & said "Lieut Higginson, ride out at once to the mounted Contingent & Carbineers, and tell Capt Shepstone to work round to the right of the Koppia that is on the extreme left, & then we will follow them up". I did so, and on the way out Sergt Major Williams came up to me and asked permission to come with me. When we got over the hill I found Capt Barry with half of the outlying picket advanced about 2 miles into the plain, and about ½ a mile in rear of the Carbineers & Mounted Contingent. As I came up to him the first shots were fired by the Mounted Contingent at what they thought to be a small body of Zulus, but just as they were getting into Skirmishing Order, about 1,000 men came around the hill and engaged them; they slowly fell back, and as they came up to Capt Barry I left Serjeant Major Williams with him and turned about to ride into Camp to make my Report. I was going along pretty fast, and soon overtook two Officers riding into Camp. One of them was Capt Shepstone; he asked me where I was going and when I told him he said "Oh! I will make a Report to Col Pulleine, as I am going in, will you please ride back and tell my men not to be outflanked". Before I could say a word he was gone: So I turned round and rode back, but, as I came up I found that they were outflanked, so I ordered them to retire on the Camp. When I got into Camp I found three Companies of the 24th Regt marching out to take up a position on the left, and as I came amongst the tents I met two more Companies and two guns coming out. I made my Report to Col Pulleine, and returned to my Company. The guns were then first getting into action; the first four shells were thrown over the hill on the left o check the Zulus, who were coming over; as it had no effect the others were fired point blank at them, while the 24th men opened fire at about 800 yards. My Company were extended along the front of our line of tents. As the Zulus came over the hill in front, the mounted Contingent & Carbineers came round the side, bringing in Capt Barry, and the outlying picket. The Zulus rapidly extended along the whole of the front of the Camp, and soon the Battle was general. They came on in Columns of Skirmishers, and when the front rank was shot down the rear rank filled their places. They very soon came to close quarters, and the bullets came dropping amongst my men; they stood it very well for a short time, till at last one man had a bullet through his shield. He jumped up and tried to run away, and it was with the greatest difficulty we could get the others to stand. Up to the present time no attempt has been made to strike the Camp. In fact there were no men to do it except the natives, as Col Pulleine had ordered all men out of the Camp who could carry arms. Shortly after this a Carbineer rode into Camp and said Col Durnford was shot; and at the same time two 24th men and one Sergt of Capt Lonsdales Company came in for ammunition. They took two boxes out with them, but that was soon fired away for very soon afterwards the soldiers began to fall back on the centre. Some Zulus by this time had forced their way on the right of the Camp, and getting amongst our men commenced assegaing them. The 24th men then made a sudden retreat on the Camp, but the Zulus ran past them, and cut them off. Capt Krohn, Lieut Ardendorff

and myself had been firing for some time on the right of the Companies tents, and when we saw the soldiers retreating we went for our horses, which we had fastened close to us to be ready for anything. I put my arm through the reins of my horse and fired one or two shots more; and as, by this time, we were quite surrounded, I mounted my horse and made a dash for it; I managed to get through with Lieut Cochrane 32nd Regt, & we both rode for the river about four miles from us. How the horses managed to get along is more than I can tell; we rode over ground covered with rocks and stones, and then over a cliff something like this: (see below) and then up the other side it was the same; Many horses threw their riders coming down to the river, and many, as well as myself were thrown in it. Lieutenants Melville & Coghill were with me as I just put my horse in the river, and poor Melville was also thrown, he held on tightly to the Queens Colours which he had taken from the Battle field when all was over, and as he came down towards me he called out to me to catch hold of the pole; I did so, and the force with which the current was running dragged me off the rock, but fortunately into still water. Coghill, who had got his horse over all right, came riding down the bank to help Melville. As he put his horse in close to us, the Zulus, who were about 25 yards from us on the other bank, commenced firing at us in the water. Almost the first shot killed Coghill's horse, and on his getting clear of him we started for the bank; we managed to get out all right, and when we had got about 100 yards up the bank two Zulus came after us; when they were within 30 yards Melville & Coghill fired and killed them both. I was without arms of any kind having lost my rifle and ammunition in the river, and I had no revolver. When we had gone a few yards further, Melville said he could go no further, and Coghill said the same (I don't think they imagined at this time there was anyone following us). When they stopped I pushed on, and on reaching the top of the hill I found four Basutos with whom I escaped by holding on to the horses tail. I never saw either of those ill fated Officers again until we went down to bury them four days afterwards, and the same day we found the Color where Melville and I had dropped it. I got into Helpmakaar as soon as possible. As I got there early in the morning I at once proceeded to Rorke's Drift, and reported myself to Comd't Lonsdale.

The above account is, as far as I saw, a correct one of the Battle of Isandhlwana.

I have the honor to be, Sir,
Your obed't Servant

(Signed)

Walter Higginson – Lieut:
1/3 Regt N.N.C.

