

‘The Most Horrid Sight That Was Ever Seen; One Soldier’s Story

By Ian Knight

Although the spotlight of history inevitably falls upon great events and great men and women – or even, sometimes, ordinary men and women, thrust by circumstance into greatness – it generally only sweeps briefly across the great masses of the ordinary beyond, that dense anonymous press of people who have left little across the ages to remember them by, but who make up the very fabric of humanity’s story nonetheless.

One such is George Albert Baker, about whose life only a little is known, but whose experience typifies that of the thousands of men in the ranks of the British Army in the mid-Victorian period, and in particular those who fought in Zululand in 1879.

George was born on 9 July 1854 in Ticehurst, East Sussex, and the bare records of his arrival suggest it was not a happy one. His mother was one Mary Baker, and his place of birth is listed as Ticehurst Union – a Workhouse. George was listed as illegitimate and when he was baptised on 8 August 1854 at the nearby St. Augustine’s Church, Flimwell he took his mother’s surname, with no mention of his father. One can only speculate on the circumstances of that small catastrophe that had seen Mary Baker – who already had a daughter, Eleanor - cut off from the support of family and friends, arriving pregnant to seek the cold charity of the Workhouse. Victorian Workhouses may have provided the poor and unemployed with shelter, with basic food and a strict regime of discipline and dull and repetitive work, but their atmosphere was deliberately harsh and unsympathetic. The emphasis was upon moral regeneration through hard work, and inmates were encouraged to seek work elsewhere and leave the Workhouse as soon as possible, not so much for their personal rehabilitation but to spare the parish the financial burden of their keep. Perhaps it worked for Mary Baker – by 1861 she was living in Burwash with both her children and working as a housekeeper to a John Relf. She clearly had something to recommend her for in due course John Relf and Mary Baker married.

As to her son George, he was largely grown-up by 1870, when the first law was passed directing that all children between the age of 5 and 10 should attend weekday schooling. He was probably poorly educated as most of the rural poor were even a couple of decades into Queen Victoria’s reign, and had probably paid for his keep running errands, helping around the house, or taking casual work now and then in the fields. Perhaps there was nothing to keep him in Burwash, or perhaps his mother’s new situation encouraged him to fly the nest - in any case, work was thin on the ground as for nearly thirty years, from the 1860s to the 1890s, the British economy was depressed. The outbreak of the American Civil War in 1861 had hit cotton production and impacted badly upon the cotton mills which had been an engine of the economic growth of the Industrial Revolution. In the countryside the introduction of mechanical farming methods in the 1830s had drastically reduced the demand for unskilled seasonal workers and by the late 1860s the rural economy was poised to dip again. In 1871 George – who was then sixteen, and by the norms of Victorian society considered an adult – is recorded as boarding in Chipstead, Surrey, and his occupation is given as farm labourer. Perhaps he had left home looking for work, but if so he did not find it for long – on 14 May 1872 he joined the Army.

It is certainly true that many men joined the Army to escape the claustrophobic nature of Victorian Society which offered almost no hope of social mobility and – even for the lucky ones – little more than a lifetime of drudgery and poor pay. Life in the Army could offer an opportunity to escape civilian entanglements – difficult family relationships or awkward romantic liaisons – but on the whole service in the ranks was held in such low esteem by civilian society across the Victorian period that only the desperate were keen to enlist. Whilst the British public were increasingly encouraged by the burgeoning press to admire the expansion of their Empire overseas, and to acknowledge the role of the Army in spearheading that, they continued to despise soldiers when they most commonly encountered them – drinking, whoring and brawling in the low canteens of the garrison towns. Perhaps young George decided to enlist in the hope of adventure overseas – more likely he was driven to it by necessity, as it was ruefully acknowledged that ‘Jack Frost and unemployment were the best recruiting sergeants’.

When he attested in 1872 George gave his age as 20 years and two months and in that, like many men in similar circumstances, he lied – he was actually not yet eighteen years old. His family still has a small *carte-des-visite* photograph which seems to show him about that time, and was probably taken to celebrate his new career; he certainly looks young for his alleged age, although it is doubtful that his recruiting sergeant asked too many questions. The Victorian Army had a perennial shortage of manpower, and indeed had recently altered the terms of enlistment in an attempt to encourage more and better recruits. Until 1870 recruits signed up for a minimum of twelve years' service, with an opportunity to re-enlist for a further twelve; given the harsh conditions of military life in the 1850s and 60s, this amounted almost to a life-time's service, since many men were either too institutionalised or too physically worn out to seek a new employment on their discharge. In that year, however, the Government passed the Army Enlistment Act, which required a man to enlist for a minimum of just six years and then to re-enlist for a further six or to pass over to the Army Reserve. Although this system attracted some criticism from conservative elements within the Army establishment, who complained that it shifted the balance within the ranks from seasoned 'old salts' to young inexperienced men, it certainly made service more attractive to those who did not wish to commit themselves for life. It was also a crucial step in creating a body of trained reservists, a move which bore dividends during the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) when large numbers of reservists were mobilised for overseas service.

The Enlistment Act was part of a range of wide-sweeping reforms instituted by the Secretary of State for War, Edward Cardwell. In 1872 – about the time George Baker enlisted – the Government also passed the Army Localisation Act which divided the country up into 66 districts, each with an appointed battalion headquarters and recruiting depot. Hitherto all Army recruitment had been accomplished on a universal basis, a recruit being allocated to whichever regiment was then in need regardless of any local affiliations, but the new system hoped to encourage recruitment by fostering local ties. Many infantry regiments already had titles which linked them nominally to some part of the UK but these largely reflected a historic association with very little practical connections, and the logical consequence of Cardwell's reforms was that regiments would eventually receive new county titles which reflected their links to the new district depots. This would prove a slow process, however, and the depots seldom produced enough recruits locally so that throughout the Victorian era a majority of recruits were drawn from areas outside their designated counties, and it remained unusual for any infantry battalion to contain more than a small minority of men from its appointed local area.

It was not unusual then that George Baker, born and bred in Sussex, was placed with the 2nd Battalion 24th Regiment, whose territorial title at that time was 2nd Warwickshires. It seems likely he was sent to the depot detachments, then at Warley in Essex, for his training as the battalion itself was then coming to the end of a protracted period of overseas service. This had begun when they were despatched to Rangoon, in British Burma, in 1865, and had seen them transferred to Secunderbad in India a few years later. In November 1872, however, the battalion returned to England and in January 1873 moved to Warley to join its depot companies. A number of men whose service had expired had left the battalion whilst it was still in India to volunteer for local units, and no doubt George and his fellow recruits were much needed to make up the numbers. The first few years of George's service were spent at home – in December the battalion was transferred to the camps at Aldershot and it would move to Dover in 1875 and Chatham in 1877 – and in November 1873 it was issued the Martini-Henry rifle as a replacement for the old Snider. By the time George was first called upon to use the new weapon in anger, five years later, he would have been completely familiar with it – although in fact it is likely that he would only have fired a few rounds each year on the range; whilst the 2/24th were regarded as a conscientious and professional battalion most commanding officers were made only too aware of the unnecessary expense of firing live rounds in training!

On 28 January 1878 the battalion received a telegraph ordering it to make ready for overseas service. In 1877 a clash between rival African groups on the Eastern Cape Frontier in southern Africa had flared into a full-scale Frontier War (the 9th) as the Xhosa people had taken up arms against British authority. Colonial troops had initially tried to contain the situation but were unsuccessful and the recently-arrived High Commissioner, Sir Bartle Frere, had sanctioned the use of regular troops. Among these, ironically, were the 1st Battalion 24th Regiment. It was, in fact, highly unusual for those regiments which boasted more than one battalion to find them deployed together on active service; the usual procedure was rather to have one battalion overseas and one on garrison duty at home, and to

rotate them. On this occasion, however, the Frontier outbreak had been so serious that Frere had requested reinforcements from home and the 2nd battalion (together with the 90th L.I. and an Artillery battery) were the most readily available. On 2 February 1878 the 2/24th, with Private George Baker among them, embarked on the transport *Himalaya* at Portsmouth. They arrived at Simon's Bay after 'a fine passage' on 28 February and, after stopping to refuel, reached East London on 9 March. Here bad weather and heavy surf delayed disembarkation but by the 14th the battalion had been marched to the posts appointed to them.

By that time the nature of the war had already changed. The Xhosa had mounted a number of mass attacks in the open – particularly at the battle of Centane on 7 February – but had suffered heavily in the face of concentrated British rifle fire. Instead, they had abandoned these tactics in favour of a guerrilla warfare waged from their traditional strongholds, rugged bush-covered amaThole mountains. With the arrival of a new British commander in March – Lt. Gen. Sir Frederic Thesiger, later Lord Chelmsford – the British, too, changed strategy. Thesiger's plan was to surround the Xhosa strongholds with small columns, each one consisting of between one and three companies of regular infantry supported by an Artillery detachment and local amaMfengu auxiliaries. Thesiger then began to sweep through the Xhosa strongholds hoping to catch them between his converging columns. For newly arrived troops such as George Baker, still adjusting to the exotic and alien sights and sounds of Africa, it would have been hard work, clambering up steep rocky hillsides or tipping down sudden ravines and through dense, thorny bush that snatched at clothing and equipment, and all of it in weather that varied between baking heat and sudden torrential downpours. It was frustrating, too, as the Xhosa often slipped through even the most careful nets, passing across ground that was almost impossible for British troops, and exploiting every confusion in the British movements. When contacts did take place they were often short, sharp and dangerous, sudden rushes by a cornered enemy or ambushes fought out in the smoky gloom of the bush. Nevertheless, the 2/24th – almost all of them in action for the first time – excelled themselves, the Regimental history commenting that 'the cheerful spirit in which the men, mostly young soldiers, bore the hardships they had to endure was most creditable, and elicited the warm commendation of the general' (1).

Throughout April and May the ability of the Xhosa to resist was steadily reduced and on 29 May Chief Sandile, the leader of the western branch of the Xhosa people, the amaNgqika, was shot in a skirmish with amaMfengu auxiliaries. With his passing the spirit went out of the Xhosa and the fighting spluttered to an end. By July the battalion had been gathered together again and at the beginning of August they sailed from East London up the coast to Durban further north, where a much bigger conflict was brewing.

The suppression of African resistance had been a central plank of Sir Bartle Frere's programme to 'confederate' the disparate states of southern Africa under overall British control and throughout the second half of 1878 Frere worked towards a confrontation with the most powerful African group left in the region, the Zulu kingdom of King Cetshwayo. On 11 December 1878 Frere's representatives presented an ultimatum to Cetshwayo's envoys, and on 11 January 1879 the Anglo-Zulu War began.

Both battalions of the 24th were attached to General Thesiger's – now Lord Chelmsford – No. 3 (Centre) Column which assembled at the Helpmekaar cross-roads on the Biggarsberg heights overlooking the Zulu border at Rorke's Drift throughout December 1878. Despite having both been through the Cape Frontier campaign, the two battalions had seldom been deployed in the same area, and it was at Helpmekaar that they met in southern Africa for the first time. The 1st Battalion were already encamped there when the 2nd Battalion arrived after a difficult march at the end of December; according to a Corporal H. Brown of the battalion,

We got to Helpmekaar about five o'clock in the evening, and was played into camp by the band of the 1/24th Regiment who were there before us. They had a nice bit of dinner ready for us, and did all our work for us when we got in; it was very good of them for doing it for we were all tired. (2)

In the first week of January the Column descended from Helpmekaar to the banks of the Mzinyathi River at Rorke's Drift, and on 11 January – the day Frere's ultimatum expired – they crossed the border before dawn and established their first camp on Zulu territory. One company – B Company, 2/24th – was left to guard the supply depot and field hospital at Rorke's Drift but Pte.

George Baker was not among them, and no doubt looked forward to the coming campaign with a mixture of excitement, confidence and trepidation. The crossing into Zululand had been unopposed but Lord Chelmsford was determined to demonstrate his earnestness as early on the morning of the 12th. He marched a large portion of the column out to attack the followers of the Zulu border chieftain, Sihayo kaXongo. These included most of the men of both battalions of the 24th, with George Baker among them. It must have seemed a familiar experience after the recent Cape Frontier campaign for Lord Chelmsford approached the action in the same way, dividing his men up into detachments and encircling the positions where he expected the Zulus to be. Ironically, on this occasion the Zulus – Sihayo's personal followers, led by his son Mkhumbikazulu, who had been left behind to guard homes and crops – fought much as the Xhosa had done, making a stand among the boulders at the foot of a line of cliffs. The Zulus fought well but were overwhelmed; although much of the fighting had fallen to Chelmsford's auxiliaries there was little in the outcome to trouble either the general or the men under his command.

On 20 January Chelmsford moved his column forward to Isandlwana, and the following day sent a strong reconnaissance into the hills on his left front. Late that evening his scouts encountered a large Zulu presence in the hills at the head of the Mangeni River, twelve miles away, and when the news reached him about 2.30 a.m. on the morning of the 22nd Chelmsford decided on a bold move – he would take half his troops out before dawn to surprise the Zulus. He decided to leave the 1/24th to guard the camp and, apart from one company on overnight picquet duty, to take the 2nd Battalion with him. It was a lucky choice for men like George Baker – although they were destined for a long hot day of marching and desultory skirmishing, the fate of the men left behind was much worse. Lord Chelmsford had been out-generalled – the main Zulu army had slipped across his front, and whilst he was away it fell on the camp at Isandlwana, and over-ran it.

That something had gone dreadfully wrong at Isandlwana had become apparent to Chelmsford's command by late on the afternoon of the 22nd. Even so, Chelmsford had to gather in his scattered parties of troops then march the same twelve miles back to camp along the road they had walked only that morning. By the time they arrived at the camp the battle was over; it was getting dark, and fires burned among the looted tents. Off to the right Chelmsford's men could see masses of Zulus retiring over the hills, carrying their wounded. Although Pte. Baker left no written account of his experiences, it's likely he felt much the same as another man from his battalion, Patrick Farrell;

About six o'clock we came back towards the camp, and it was dark, so we had to take the camp ground at any price, but the rascals fled when they heard the main body coming; so we slept that night amongst dead bodies (black and white), so you might know what it was; and, in the morning, to look at the camp; what a state! 1,000 white men, and 5,000 black men killed! Waggons broke! Bullocks killed! Tents all gone! It was the most horrid sight that was ever seen by a soldier, dear brother. We were all jovial in camp together before this sad affair. It was enough to make your blood run cold to see the white men cut open, worst than was ever done in the Indian Mutiny. (3)

In fact, Chelmsford did not linger at Isandlwana, keen to spare his men the sight of the battlefield in daylight, and moved off at dawn on the 23rd back towards Rorke's Drift. For much of the way a dense pall of smoke could be seen hanging over the mission station which B Company had been left to guard, and at the river a pile of abandoned and bloody Zulu shields suggested heavy fighting. Famously, however, as Chelmsford's men moved up from the river to the post they were greeted by a cheer from the exhausted garrison – Rorke's Drift had been attacked but B Company had held their ground. Hundreds of dead Zulus lay around the post, with many wounded lying among the bushes; Chelmsford's men had no medical facilities to treat wounded enemy, and in any case after a night spent at Isandlwana his men were in no mood to be merciful. They spread over the field – Private George Baker among them – bayonetting the Zulu wounded, or killing them with their rifle-butts.

Isandlwana had completely changed the nature of the war, and whilst Lord Chelmsford and his staff rode off to the Colonial capital at Pietermaritzburg to report the news and manage the fall-out, the remainder of his column were left at Rorke's Drift. Among them were the 2/24th, of whom the Regimental history notes –

The 2nd battalion remained at Rorke's Drift from its arrival there on 23rd January, 1879, until the middle of April. The privations to which the officers and men were subject were at first very great. The battalion had nothing but what it stood in. There were no tents, no covering of any sort; all they had to shelter from the cold sleet and rain that fell nightly, converting the enclosed space into a slough of mud, was their thin kersey frocks. The sick list increased alarmingly, and to make matters worse, the medicines having been burnt with the hospital, all that remained at the disposal of the medical officers, then and for some time afterwards, was contained in the small field companions they carried with them. It speaks volumes for the healthiness of the Natal climate, that during these three months the battalion only lost one officer, Lieutenant Reginald Franklin, and twelve men by death, and two officers and thirteen men invalided. (4).

George Baker survived this, too. In April – when the tide of war had at last begun to swing against the Zulus, the 2/24th were finally moved from Rorke's Drift to join one of the columns assembling for a new invasion. During the final advance, however, which culminated in the British victory at Ulundi on 4 July the battalion was largely left to guard the forts scattered along the lines of communication. What George Baker thought of this is not recorded; no doubt many of his comrades thought themselves lucky enough to be out of the way of further fighting. After Ulundi two companies of the battalion were employed burying the last of the dead at Isandlwana, and one can only wonder if George Baker was among them.

By September the fighting in Zululand was over and the 2/24th marched back into Natal and at the beginning of 1880 it shipped out to Gibraltar. It was destined to return to India but in 1881 George Baker's period of service was up. He had the opportunity to enlist for a further six years but perhaps a glimpse of the field of Isandlwana had cured him of soldiering; on 2 September 1881 he transferred to the Army reserve and effectively returned to civilian life. He was discharged from the Army on the completion of his obligations on 8 May 1884. For his service in Zululand he received the South Africa General Service medal with bar '1877-8-9'.

George Baker returned to England and settled near the village of Brightling and lived out the rest of his life as a farm labourer. On 6 September 1886 he married a widow, Mary Kemp, but Mary died just eighteen months later of tuberculosis. On 26 November 1889 George married again, this time one Philadelphia Fuller. As was common in those days they had a large family – ten boys and three girls. Five of George's sons served in the First World War, a sixth in the Navy in both Wars, and a seventh in the Second World War – all of them survived. Clearly George's Army service had made an impression on him as one son was named Redvers Buller Colenso and another Evelyn Gordon.

George Albert Baker died on 1 March 1920 and is buried at St. Thomas á Beckett Church, Brightling, a long way from Isandlwana – his grave is a white marble curb on which his name can clearly be read. Philadelphia survived him for over twenty years and died on 26 August 1944. She is buried in the same grave.

NOTES;

- 1). *Historical Records of the 24th Regiment* by Cols, Paton, Glennie and Penn Symons, 1892.
- 2). Letter quoted in Frank Emery, *The Red Soldier*, 1978.
- 3). Letter quoted in Frank Emery, *The Red Soldier*, 1978.
- 4). *Historical Records of the 24th Regiment* by Cols, Paton, Glennie and Penn Symons, 1892.