

## Tales and woes of an Anglo-Zulu War public speaker.

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Over the last 20 years or so I have given about 1,000 talks, lectures and presentations, mostly about the AZW, across the UK and in South Africa. My audiences have been at charity events, schools and bodies such as Rotary, Probus and historical societies and, in the main, they have been presented in a trouble-free style and most have run without any mishap. The key to this article is the word 'most' and I will share with the reader those events that didn't quite fit the normal pattern.

In the early days the presenter's most reliable means of portraying pictures and slides was the utterly reliable 'Carousel' projector with its reassuring 'clunk click' as the machine churned to the next slide. The only two problems I ever experienced with my Carousel was when I arrived at a venue and on getting the equipment out of my car I dropped the tray of slides I was intending to use and, yes, they all fell out. There followed a frantic rush to gather them up and replace them in the correct order before being introduced to the audience as their guest speaker; the talk went well, apart from a few slides that had somehow been replaced back-to-front. On another occasion, and it must have been one of my earliest talks, I arrived at a remote village hall to find the venue was still using round three-pin sockets. There followed a quick change to my extension lead by rewiring it from the 'new' system back to the 'old' – and all went well. Yes, I had the occasional bulb failure but it was a relatively simple matter to change the bulb so long as one carried a spare bulb. Being naturally cautious, I always carried several spares.

Then, in 2001 came the new computer-generated presentation system which was far superior to the Carousel because computer pictures didn't degrade with use whereas slides invariably suffered from minor scratching each time they were used. But I soon learned that computers brought their own problems; the biggest was the technical expertise needed to 'set up' for a presentation with special cables for each piece of equipment and yet more wires to link the devices together – and how to manage the electronic wizardry when something failed to work – as sometimes happened. I soon devised my own system of colour-coding each lead and numbering it so that before setting off to a presentation I knew I had all the necessary cables.

The time soon came for my first presentation with my brand new computer; I had rehearsed at home during the preceding days and everything had worked perfectly. I arrived at the venue in good time and after setting up and switching on before my gathering audience inevitably something in my system failed. All I had on the screen were the words '**re-boot system, go to menu**'. 'Thanks' was my thought as I had no idea what this involved. I decided to switch everything off and start again. Of course the same message eventually came on the screen so I abandoned the equipment and hurriedly went to my car and brought in my old trusted Carousel – and the talk went off perfectly well in the old-fashioned way. Over the next couple of days I spent time getting to know my computer better and discovered what had gone wrong – very little in fact, just one essential button had not been pressed in the correct order and thereafter I had no problems. On the other hand, before subsequent talks, some people did notice my

inevitable use of a card of do's and don'ts – rather like the pilot following his check list before take off.

On another occasion I was just starting my talk when the building suffered a power surge and then we were all plunged into darkness and, of course, my computer went into defensive mode and shut down. Although power was restored within moments, both my computer and projector had to be re-booted while the audience fidgeted and made polite conversation until all the 'go' buttons illuminated, and off we went.

Perhaps the most annoying mishap occurred just as I was about to start a presentation to a large Women's Institute group, the audience had settled down to hear about Rorke's Drift and a late-comer decided to squeeze past my equipment and knocked the computer stand. There were lots of OOOs, ARHs and 'Oh No's from the ladies as the computer fell off the stand but to my astonishment the computer, now suspended by its various cables, somehow remained attached to the projector and, after carefully replacing it back on the stand, I was relieved that everything was still working normally.

One fear that all presenters have with computer presentations is the possibility of some mysterious electrical failure or of pressing the wrong button which can commit a presentation to some unknown part of the computer. But then, this mild anxiety is also a nice way of being sharpened ready for the talk – which is usually followed by relief once the presentation gets under way. To be fair to my now trusty computer, I see that the projection menu tells me that I have given some 800 such presentations and that I have used 940 hours of the projector's 1,000 hours 'illuminating system'. I presume this means the bulb, but this is buried somewhere in the bowels of the projector and is completely inaccessible to anyone other than an expensive computer engineer.

So, assuming you have complete confidence in your equipment, you load everything in your car and arrive in good time at the venue. And no, never ever consider using the venue's own system; the man who knows how to use it will be on holiday and no one else knows how to use it.

I have a repertoire of six different presentations and on several occasions I have arrived in anticipation of giving a talk about the Eiger North Wall or the Inventions of Professor Porsche and instead, I have been asked to talk about Rorke's Drift. With a computer this is a simple matter to 'click on' to the appropriate presentation and off one goes. After setting up and waiting to be introduced, and mainly to amuse myself, I usually display a picture on the screen unrelated to what the audience is expecting. I frequently give a talk on 'Artefacts of the Anglo Zulu War' but before starting my talk the screen displays a picture of T.E. Lawrence in full flight across the desert on his camel. It invariably creates a gentle 'buzz' in the hall and amusement when the audience realises my small joke. Recently I gave a talk that focused on Charlie Harford, the beetle collector of Rorke's Drift fame, and prior to the presentation I displayed a picture of a Sainsbury supermarket. The audience was later amused to learn that the store in question was originally the Officers Mess at Hythe in Kent where the then Captain Harford was once stationed.

As a public speaker one must know what to expect and expect the unexpected. Three years ago I was asked to talk about Rorke's Drift to an audience of retired military people and their wives. Having given numerous such talks, usually to an audience of about 40 or 50 people, I should have noticed something different. I was asked by a formal invitation to attend as the 'after dinner' speaker and my wife was also invited. On arriving at the

venue we quickly discovered it was a gala evening of the 'good and the great' with one cabinet minister attending as their VIP guest along with several MPs and an audience of some 200 guests. Fortunately I always wore a suit to any talk and my wife always looks glamorous so we quickly assumed the role of 'top table' guests and the talk went off as expected.

More recently I was asked to give a presentation at a London school to an audience of girls about nursing in the AZW. I arrived in good time and was taken to a massive school hall with some 30 chairs on each side of the raised stage. I was soon 'ready to go'. As the time approached I asked the accompanying member of staff if we should re-position the chairs in front of the screen – only to be told that the chairs were for the staff and that the girls would all sit on the floor. Minutes later the doors were opened and in streamed about 1,000 girls who took their appointed places sitting on the floor in neat rows and I was then introduced. Actually, I find a sea of faces much easier to talk to than a small group and, again, the talk went down very well followed by questions that had been pre-approved by the head teacher.

One amusing situation, amusing to me anyway, arose when I was staying at Fugitives' Drift Lodge as a guest of David and Nicky Rattray. I was there to research a forthcoming book which enabled me to potter about on the battlefields and browse David's awesome library while he was out with his guests on the battlefields. On this particular day I arrived for pre-lunch drinks just before the Lodge guests arrived. David and Nicky were in a serious conversation and the gathering guides were unusually quiet. As we all settled down to lunch I found myself opposite David and sensing a problem I asked if there was something I ought to know. David took a deep breath and said that Nicky had booked in a group of 20 guests for that night who expected to have the Rorke's Drift lecture that evening followed by Isandlwana the next day, both on the battlefields. He then said that the group consisted of non-English speaking Germans – that Nicky had not told him – and now, how was he to give lectures to people who couldn't speak English?

Sensing some fun to be had, I suggested he use a German interpreter. By now everyone was listening wondering what was going to happen next. David leaned towards me with '*Greavesy, here we are, in the middle of nowhere - how do I get an interpreter in the next couple of hours?*' to which I replied '*You are looking at him!*' Everybody burst out laughing, including David, who had no idea that German was my second language – my grandparents were German and I had lived there for eight years. Having heard David's lectures many times I was easily able to give the presentation at Rorke's Drift in German although at Isandlwana I took all the non-English speakers 'walkabout' while David adopted his customary style of sitting down on the side of Isandlwana with the five guests with a smattering of English. David frequently recounted this tale until his murder in 2007.

I have now retired from public speaking, but with fond memories of presentations across the UK and South Africa.