

Letter from Capt. Claude Arthur Bettington to his father.
(Unabridged)

5th February 1879

Conference Hill

My Dearest Father,

I did not think when I started my letter to the Missis that I should have had more than an hour to myself but I find I have the whole afternoon so I'd like to write a decent letter to you after that scrawl in pencil I sent you last week. You will have seen most of the news in the papers by now, but still they will not understand sufficiently what a business (we all at least think) this is going to be, as I mentioned in my letter to the Missis. There are several tribes, or more properly Nations, ready to rise up against us as well. First there are the Ponsos whose territory lies due South of Natal cutting us off from British Kaffraria. Their land is between the Kai and St Olnus Rivers. Rowe told me when I left him that if we met with a reverse they would rise and we are daily expecting to get news of it. On our left, that is to the west we have the Basutos all mounted and good men, we got news today that they were going to declare against us. Then there is Sekukani in the Transvaal who has, in his stronghold, baffled our troops all last winter, and then between Zululand on the North and the Zambezi are the savegies (sic) who, originally enemies of the Zulus, are we hear going to join them. Of course we shall lick them but even if we have the Zulus alone, it will be a grand war. If the news we have just received is true that Col. Pearson's column has been defeated that will be serious. No. 2 for us, our Column is the only one they have not attacked as yet as a column, though in small parties we have lost a good many officers and men. We expect to be attacked before the next full moon. News has reached us that the Zulu king has ordered the attack. Our column consists now solely of native troops as the Rocket Battery with poor Russell, a gunner, has been exterminated.

We are very much scattered, our battalion consisting of 510 natives and 79 whites, is by itself. Our natives are thoroughly demoralised, over 600 deserted from our battalion alone. We have, however, a very splendid position on a low hill, very steep, about 70 feet high about 400 yards circumference at the top. The sides are rough broken stones. We have built a breastwork about 4ft 6 inches high all round the top with flanking entrance and thorn abates around it, in the centre we have a redoubt about 50 yards long and by 25 wide with strong stone walls 5 ft high flanking entrance for the white men to rally in should the natives desert us, the remainder of the fort would be too large for us to hold. We have 24,000 rounds of Martini-Henry ammunition and sufficient water in barrels to last for some days. As every gun counts with us, the officers numbering 23 at present, are provided with a short Swinburne-Henry carbine and a short dagger bayonet with a blade about 9 inches long, the blade is carried in the leg of the boot & our servants carry the carbines until they are required – I have the sword the Missis gave me, I had it sharpened by a native and a revolver Rowe lent me. The only revolvers of use just now are those that carry 250 cartridge the Govt. size.

Our fort is like this from a bird's eye view.

1. Outer wall
2. sectional inner wall
3. walls of redoubt
4. Flag staff, water barrels and spare ammunition
5. Breastworks covering entrance
6. entrance
7. Abatis (thorns)

and from the attacking point, say, from the front, there is not a hill within rifle range covering us.

Our walls are loop holed on top and sand and earth bags in all the weakest and assailable points so with ordinary fortune we sought to hold it if necessary. The Govt. and the general are, I think, very pig headed, many of us have offered to raise bodies of irregular Cavalry from the old Colony, armed by the Govt. and fed and finding their own horses and able to work without cumbrance of commissariate wagons (which are the curse of the country) but they have set their faces against it as yet though whether they are not sorry now remains to be seen. My idea is that a couple of thousand irregular cavalry carrying say tens days biscuit and tea per man at a time & driving their own meat should be kept going all along the enemy's side of the border, harrassing them and driving away their cattle, destroying their crops, burning their villages & falling on the flanks of any large body. Not to act en mass but in bodies of fifty and a hundred, by that means we should keep our own border safe which is by no means so at present. Cavalry could act well all along the border – especially irregulars. At present there is not a town in Natal that is safe though it is 100 miles from the Border. Goodbye dear father, I look forward to many a good pipe with you over this in the work room when it is over. I am always thinking of you and what a kind good father you are to me. Write to me and to Rowe too as often as you can. Ever yr loving son,

Claude.

Bettington's Zulu War experience.

BETTINGTON Claude Arthur: Born India 1842; Major H.M. Bengough recorded that he was a former Infantry Drummer of the British Army; Resided at Cheltenham, London; Trooper, Armed Constabulary Reserve Force at Peverty Bay during the Maori Wars, two yeas service; Detective of Canterbury, New Zealand; On 25.6.77 the Magistrates Courts published under the heading 'Discharging Firearms': '*Claude Arthur Bettington, charged with having discharged a pistol at the rear of Dr. Townsend's premises, in Colombo Street, contrary to the city by-laws, was fined 10s*'; Resigned from the police and returned to England 1877; Resided in Bath, Somerset and married in England 1878; Sailed from England to the Cape Colony; On 20.11.78 his name was submitted by Commandant W. von Linisigen as a candidate for service as a Lieutenant in a Native Contingent for Zululand; He was recruited by Commandant W.J. Nettleton in King Williamstown as a Lieutenant for the intended 'Second Division Natal Native Levy' in November, 1878; Lieutenant, 2/1st, Natal Native Contingent 25.11.78; Adjutant, 2/1st, Natal Native Contingent 14.12.78; Anglo-Zulu War 1879; Captain,

1/1st, N.N.C. 3.2.79; Captain and C.O. No 3 Troop, (Bettington's) Natal Horse 1.4.79; Operations in Zululand including the action at Ulundi; Mentioned-in-despatches (L.G. 21.8.79 Chelmsford's despatches); Awarded the Companion of St Michael and St George (C.M.G.) *for services in command of "Bettington's Horse" during the late Zulu War* (L.G. 2.11.80); In 1879 he applied to join the Natal Mounted Police however General Sir. Garnet Wolseley secured a position for him in West Africa; Assistant Inspector, Gold Coast Police; Died from fever at Elmina on the Gold Coast 29.12.1880; His father was Albemarle Bettington late of the Indian Civil Service who resided at Holsey House, Cheltenham; His son was Captain, D.R.A. Bettington; He was described as being a New Zealander.



Bettington's campaign medal was recently discovered along with a collection of his letters and personal effects. The journal front cover depicts his original medal package. He was just 38 when he died of fever.

I am grateful to Cameron Simpson for Bettington's Service Record.