

BAKER OF BAKER'S HORSE

By Cam Simpson

There were many soldiers during the Anglo-Zulu War whose names became well-known for a variety of reasons. Not necessarily because their name was attached to a specific battle, action, act of gallantry, military blunder or historical event, but some simply because they were steady personalities or leaders. One of these soldiers, Commandant Francis James Baker who commanded Baker's Horse, became well known not just for his good service during the so-called gun war, but because he had raised and commanded a regiment bearing his name on three occasions between 1878-1880.

Baker of Baker's Horse, commanded his regiment during the Ninth Eastern Cape Frontier War (Gaika and Gcaleka) 1878, the Anglo-Zulu War 1879 and lastly during the 'Gun War' of 1880-81 when the Basuto, Thembu and Pandomosi rebelled over the implementation of the Disarmament Act. Prior to this, Baker had served as an Ensign with the Ceylon Rifles and at home as a Captain in the West Anglesey Artillery Militia before sailing for South Africa in early 1878 to raise a Mounted Corps.

His brief service during the Ninth Frontier War concluded well for Baker, so much so, that Baker's Horse along with the Frontier Light Horse remained on the establishment long after the war ended in June 1878 - both regiments, however, were paid by the Imperial Government. At the time of the Anglo-Zulu War breaking out, he was in Pietermaritzburg disbanding his regiment of which many of his men immediately joined the Frontier Light Horse.

In January 1879 he was requested by Lord Chelmsford to re-raise Baker's Horse and it was an opportunity that he threw himself into. He joined No.4 Column at Khambula Camp on 21 April. However, as his horses were not in good condition he was sent away but returned soon after and joined the Mounted Troops then commanded by Brevet Lieutenant Colonel Redvers H. Buller C.B. Whilst on operations in Zululand, Baker led his men on several long and exhausting patrols, many of which have been forgotten due to the passage of time. Of the principal actions of the war, he fought and led his men at Zungeni Mountain on 5 June, during the reconnaissance at the White Mfolozi River on 3 July and the following day during the battle of Ulundi.

His service during the Anglo-Zulu War was officially recognized in the London Gazette on 21 February 1879 as follows: '*Commandant Baker, Baker's Horse, though not strong in health, is singularly happy in his power of leading men in action and of controlling them in camp*'. This Gazette entry aside, he received three very good testimonials from Chelmsford, Buller and Wood. However, he pursued the approval of an honorary rank of Lieutenant Colonel immediately after the war of which the authorities would not approve. Interestingly, at the end of the Gun War, he made the same request for the honorary rank of Colonel.

Whilst researching the careers of the Colonial Officers who served during the Gun War, I quickly realized that an alarming number were Anglo-Zulu War veterans. For the student of the Anglo-Zulu War, their names are only too familiar: Cochrane, Hamilton-

Browne, Shervington, Vetch, Parminter, Stafford, Raw, Barker, the two Frontier Light Horse V.C's, D'Arcy and O'Toole; and of course there was Commandant Francis James Baker. In October 1880, as Baker was recruiting for Baker's Horse for the third time, he realized the abundance of colonial veteran talent available and of the nineteen officers who joined him, fourteen were recent Anglo-Zulu War veterans.

Interestingly, and despite a plethora of experienced Cape Colonial officers who could have been appointed to senior command, Baker was appointed over these men as the Officer Commanding in East Griqualand and led a column against the Pondomisi and Basuto rebels operating in the region. This appointment should not be understated, as the situation was severe in the extreme, with the frontier in rebellion from Kokstad, on to Umtata and right up through the western border of Basutoland to the Free State. Considering that he had arrived in South Africa two years earlier as a relatively unknown quantity, it was quite an achievement. The Cape Colonial Government required steady hands in command positions during this period and Baker was believed to be one such man.

It could be assumed that Brigadier General Charles Mansfield Clarke, the Officer Commanding during the war and himself an Anglo-Zulu War veteran appointed Baker, not only because of his organizational skills, but because he had proven himself as a steady leader in Zululand during trying times. He also had some frontier experience, albeit limited. Baker found himself commanding a column in East Griqualand during the Gun War until he was transferred to Basutoland where he saw his last active service.

He returned home to England in 1881, became a Magistrate in Ireland, and following a long illness died a financially destitute man in 1889 – he was only 47. By the time he was 39-years of age, he had achieved quite a name for himself as a commander of irregulars, yet, we really don't know that much about his military service apart from the enduring story of him raising three regiments, in three wars. Even his obituary, just a few lines, only focused on the fact that he was the founder and commander of Baker's Horse.

The following potted biography was prepared to assist the author in building-up the facts about Baker's life when compiling a *Who's Who of Officers in the Anglo-Zulu War 1879*.

BAKER Francis James: Born Ballinvoher, Co Waterford, Ireland 1842; Second Lieutenant, Waterford Artillery Militia 30.6.59 (Aged 17 years); Ensign, Ceylon Rifles (By Purchase) 19.12.60; Operations in Burma and allegedly also in Borneo; Freemason of *The Sphinx* Lodge, Colombo Ceylon 6.3.63; Lieutenant, Ceylon Rifle Regiment (Without Purchase) 13.6.68; He was the senior Ensign in the regiment when he resigned on 3.5.71; On 7.11.71, Colonel William Twisleton Laylard, Ceylon Rifles wrote of Baker's tenure with the regiment:

I have much pleasure in certifying that Mr. F.J. Baker, late a Lieutenant in the Ceylon Rifle Regiment, who served the whole of that time he was associated with that Corps (upwards of 10 years, viz, from December, 1860, to May, 1870) under my command, afforded me every satisfaction in the performance of his military duties, which he executed with zeal, energy and efficiency, while he always bore a high reputation as much for the integrity as for the

gentlemanly and officer like demeanor which characterized his conduct throughout his military career.

Appointed Captain, Royal Anglesey Artillery Militia 7.2.73 (Aged 31): On 27.2.74, at St Clement's Dane Church, London, he married Mrs. Marianne Meyer, who had inherited £5,000 from her late husband and they both resided at Stondon Place, Stondon Massey, Essex of which she was the registered land owner; He resigned his commission with the Militia on 25.4.77; On 15.11.77, he was involved in an incident on his estate with an alleged poacher named De Winter. F.J. Baker and his brother, Captain William Beresford Baker, both attempted to seize De Winter's shotgun and an altercation then took place. During the subsequent Court hearing when De Winter was defending the charge of assault, he described F.J. Baker as a madman, leading the case against De Winter to be dismissed; In January 1878, Major General Jasper Byng Creagh wrote from Hanover Square, London to Baker upon his departure to the Cape Colony:

Hearing that you are going to South Africa for the purpose of raising a Mounted Corps, I wish to bear testimony to your merits both as an officer and a gentleman in every sense of the words. Should you survive the war, and think of remaining out there, I am of opinion you will do credit to any appointment, either civil or military, which may be given you. Wishing every success...

Sailed to the Cape Colony 1878; Captain and Commandant, Baker's Horse 4.5.78 (Aged 36 years); Ninth Eastern Cape Frontier War (Ngqika and Gcaleka) 1878; Posted to Kokstad during a perceived Pondomosi rebellion in 1878; In December 1878, he marched Baker's Horse from Kokstad Pietermaritzburg, Natal for disbandment; In relation to the disbandment of Baker's Horse, Captain George Paton, (1/24th Foot) the Colonial Military Secretary wrote from King William's Town in January, 1879:

It gives me great pleasure in stating the accounts and returns from your Regiment have been rendered in a most satisfactory manner, and had the other Volunteer Corps settled up in the same way my duties would have been considerably lessened.

Commandant, Baker's Horse 1.2.79; Appointed a Justice of the Peace in Natal on 24.3.79 having requested the appointment from Port Elizabeth on 30.1.79:

'I am coming up with a Troop of 200 men please gazette me a JP for colony of Natal as it will be most useful to me'.

Anglo-Zulu War 1879 including the actions at Zungeni (5 June), the reconnaissance across the White Mfolozi (3 July) and the battle of Ulundi (4 July); Mentioned-in-Dispatches (L.G. 21.8.79.): *'Commandant Baker, Baker's Horse, though not strong in health, is singularly happy in his power of leading men in action and of controlling them in camp'.*

On 3.9.79, he requested to be granted the honorary rank of Lieutenant Colonel of which Major-General Henry Hugh Clifford replied that *'I do not know what the General will say to the application for honorary rank'*, whilst on 5.9.79, Brigadier General George Pomeroy Colley wrote to Baker, *'The General Commanding has no power to grant honorary rank. He has heard with great satisfaction of the admirable manner in which Major Baker's accounts were left'*; The Lieutenant Governor also did not have the powers to approve such a request; On 4.9.79, Major William Liston Dalrymple wrote from Durban an additional testimonial for Baker:

Having been asked by Captain Baker, late Commandant of Baker's Horse, for a testimonial, it affords me great pleasure to bear testimony to his merit. Whilst employed as Assistant Adjutant General of the Colonial Forces in the Old Colony during the latter half of the year 78, I had many opportunities of judging of Captain Baker's ability as a commander. I inspected his Corps in the month of July, at Kabousie Bridge, before they marched into the Transkei, and found them in a most serviceable condition; and I cannot speak in too high terms of the untiring energy and ceaseless perseverance with which he engaged for several months in pursuit of King Kreli. The fact that when that pursuit was abandoned Lord Chelmsford asked Captain Baker to march his Corps into Natal for service in Zululand, speaks for itself, and though not connected officially with Captain Baker in the recent operations in Zululand, I had several opportunities of seeing him command his Corps under fire, and can bear witness to his coolness and judgement in difficult situations.

On 19.11.79, he wrote to the Cape Government from *'The Natal Club'* in Durban requesting to be employed with the Cape Colonial Government; Appointed as the acting Resident Magistrate of Alexandria County, Natal; Lord Chelmsford from London on 12.3.80, wrote to Baker in relation to his request for honorary rank that read as follows:

My dear Baker – I have sent forward your application to the Duke and backed it up. I am afraid however that you have not much chance of obtaining what you want, as I am inclined to think that there is no precedent for giving an extra step up of honorary rank consequently the authorities will not like to make one – nothing could be more satisfactory than the several reports which have been sent in regarding your services, and I am sure if there should be a precedent for such a grant that these out to obtain it for you.

From Downes, Crediton, Colonel Redvers Buller, a man who knew Baker extremely well whilst on campaign wrote to him:

My dear Baker – I count the greatest pleasure in certifying that you commanded a corps under me in the war and that you individually and your corps did very good service – It did not please the powers that be to publish a letter I wrote months before I left Natal in which it was to bring to official

notice those who had done such good work for me & indeed for the state. In my mentioning you I said you 'possessed the knack of controlling men & [unreadable] of leading men in action' and I still think that the sentence expresses my opinion of you as accurately words can give.

Further to Lord Chelmsford and Colonel Buller's testimonials, Brigadier General E.H. Wood also wrote to Baker late in 1880:

My dear Commandant, I have much pleasure in stating that during the time you served under my command you did very good service – your horses were not in a satisfactory condition when you joined me and the fact of them having improved so much for the care and attention you accorded to your corps in camp while your leading of your men left nothing to be denied.

Appointed Lieutenant Colonel and C.O., Baker's Horse 1.10.80 (Aged 39 years) with pay and allowances of a Commandant; Gun War 1880-81 including operations in East Griqualand and Basutoland as a column commander; He served initially with Baker's Horse before being appointed as the Officer Commanding, East Griqualand on 25.10.80 whilst Captain William George Parminter assumed command of Baker's Horse; Baker's column moved through Komgha (25 November 1880), Ibeka (4 December), Mgwali (11 December), Bashee Valley (18 December) and Gqaga (25 December); On 21.12.80, from Baker's Horse Camp, Lieutenant Colonel F.J. Baker wrote to Brigadier General C.M. Clarke at Umtata in relation to the three-day operation towards Tsitsa Poort and the action of 18 December at Tsitsa Gorge where 300 Pandomisi were killed. His report read in part as follows:

I beg to bring to your favourable notice the names of the following officers from whom I received advice and assistance – Major W.G. Parminter, Commanding Baker's Horse. Sub Commandant Leary, Commanding Baca Contingent, whose knowledge of the language & country has been of the greatest assistance to me. Sub Commandant Usher commanding column of natives who carried out my instructions to the letter over a very rough & broken country & thus rendered my success so complete. I would further mention Captain A.D. Martin, who led the charge of Baker's Horse under Major Parminter & Captain Macdowal, Willoughby's Horse who behaved with great coolness under fire, and Lieut Wainwright, Willoughby's Horse who acted as my Aide-de-camp during the day.

Baker, with a mixed force travelled from the Transkei via Ongeluk's Nek to Palmeitfontein on the Basutoland border having handed over command of the troops in East Griqualand to Charles Brownlee on 22.2.81; On 13.4.81, as operations were concluding in Basutoland, he formally relinquished command of Baker's Horse to Major Richard Francis Vetch of which the regiment remained on establishment until May 1882; Resigned 13.4.81; On 19.5.81, in a letter to the Colonial Secretary in Cape Town, he stated that having resigned his commission he requested that he could be '*Gazetted a full Colonel on retirement and Honorary Colonel of my Regt, which is at present at the Front*'.

In 1882, he received his share of the Cattle Prize money realized from the rebel stock captured in East Griqualand during the Gun War; Resided at Ballinvoher, Co Waterford, Ireland c. 1882 when he was appointed a Magistrate of Waterford; By 1887 he had drawn heavily on his wife's estate and had run-up enough debt to result in a court case that ruled against him; Died in Waterford, Ireland on 22.1.89 after a long illness of which his estate in England was only worth £29; Several obituaries, namely the *Graphic* and *Illustrated London News* briefly commented that he was '*the founder and Commander of Baker's Horse*'.

His father was Mr. William Baker of which not much is known and his brother, Captain William Beresford Baker (1847-1933) served with the 2/1st Battalion, Royal Scots and was a noted cricketer of Dover.

Footnotes

1. Cape Archives Repository., DD1-21 Baker's Horse correspondence 1881 including F.J. Baker's testimonials.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. Colonial Force Order No196, dated 22 November 1880; this was the first time Baker was appointed a Lieutenant Colonel of which he for the remainder of his life styled himself Colonel.

Specific reference books

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