

Celebrated Indeed, Mr Dalton.

By John Urquart

One of the most well deserved Victoria Crosses for the defence of Rorke's Drift was given as an afterthought and remains one of the least well known. Perhaps that is because the recipient was neither an officer, a gentleman, nor in a front line regiment of corps?

If you have heard that great narrator David Rattray tell the story of Rorke's Drift, perhaps at The Royal Geographical Society or, better, at the Mission Station itself on an African evening, you will know that it is one of the most moving ever: simply bursting with heroes acting out their desperate drama in a small stage not much larger than the size of a tennis court. Quite naturally, the Royal Regiment of Wales, the successors of the 24th Regiment, is the principal military custodian of the legend of the defence of Rorke's Drift. It is one of the high points of the regiment's proud history; that unsurpassed occasion when the regiment won seven Victoria Crosses in one night.

There were of course others: and it is heart-warmingly good to know that one of the supporting actors is properly remembered every year. Towards the end of January each year the Commanding Officer of 19 Regiment, The Royal Logistic Corps (RLC), invites his Officers, Warrant Officers and Sergeants as well as a few fortunate outside guests to his Officers' Mess in Cirencester for The Rorke's Drift Dinner. The evening celebrates the award of the Victoria Cross to Acting Assistant James Langley Dalton. The occasion is a heady mixture of music, theatre, entertainment and education and if you are ever fortunate enough to be invited you should move heaven and earth to accept.

Dalton was a logistics officer on the supply route of Lord Chelmsford's Central Column and was stationed at Rorke's Drift on 22 January 1879 as part of the logistics team supporting the Central Column's advance. As such he was a forerunner of the uniformed men and women who are seated round the table on this night: - the transporters and movers, the air dispatchers, the posties, the chefs and the ordnance specialists, without whom the famous fighting regiments could do nothing.

Dalton would have been an outstandingly good man to have on your side at that moment. That would have been especially so if you were Lieutenant Chard or Lieutenant Bromhead, and facing the character-building situation confronting them. Some readers may have shared the privilege of commanding fighting troops when about their age. How much did we rely on the experience and wisdom of the Senior Non - Commissioned Officers! These men are indispensable and in truth the backbone of an army. To have Dalton there at the Mission Station: - 49 years old, Long Service and Good Conduct medal, Mentioned in Despatches the previous year for defending a beleaguered depot in similar circumstances, a veteran of the 8th Frontier war and with 22 year of service, culminating as a Staff Sergeant in the 85th Regiment - would have been profoundly reassuring. Who better?

Private Hook's account of the battle leaves us in no doubt whatever of Dalton's influence and role.

Lt Chard rushed up from the river about a quarter of a mile away and saw Lt Bromhead. Orders were given to strike the camp and make ready to go and we actually loaded up two wagons. Then Mr Dalton of the Commissariat Department came up and said that if we left the drift every man was certain to be killed. He had formerly been a Sergeant Major in a line regiment and was one of the bravest men that ever lived. Lts Chard and Bromhead held a consultation, short and earnest, and orders were given that we were to get the hospital and storehouse ready for defence, and that we were never to say die or surrender.

Back to Cirencester. The evening begins with drinks in the ante-room around a large model of Rorke's Drift in the centre of the room. The members of the Sergeants' mess are there in strength. Tonight many of them have come back from the Balkans, the Falklands, and Afghanistan and wherever British troops are stationed to hear the story of their gallant predecessor and his effect on the result of the battle. It is a feature of this Regiment that some 25% of the officers rise through the ranks to gain their commissions. This enlightened and agreeable way of entertaining many potential future officers and passing on the regimental history was thought of in 1997 by a former Adjutant of the Regiment, Captain Andy Firth, who also happened to be the model maker. His Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Tony Sutherland saw an opportunity to cement the affinity between the recently amalgamated 23 Pioneer and 29 Transport and Movement Regiments. His successor Lieutenant Colonel Martin Lilley took the bonding process further, from a dinner night with 6 readings in the fashion of a traditional Carol Service, to what could now be described as a multi-media event. Let me take you through it.

Dinner is announced with a fanfare and everyone moves to the dining room. Guests may include representatives of the South African Defence Attaché's staff, the Royal Navy and the RAF. Tonight there are people from the Museum at Brecon where so many of the relics of the battle are housed, officers from the Royal Regiment of Wales, as well as senior RLC officers and others connected to the life and work of

the regiment. The arrangements, made by the President of the Mess Committee (PMC) and the resourceful and energetic Quartermaster, Lieutenant Colonel Phil Williams, are immaculate. Place cards and seating plans ensure speedy deployment around the room.

The Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Mike Hickson, calls for Grace to be said, following which a hundred people take their seats at the candle-lit tables. All are dressed formally or in Mess Kit and the variety of uniforms of the guests adds colour to the already splendid occasion. The Victoria Cross of Acting Assistant Commissary Dalton sits proudly in front of the Commanding Officer, who now invites guests to pay tribute to those defenders of Rorke's Drift who belonged to the predecessors of this Corps: Dunne, Dalton, Byrne and Attwood.

Suddenly the main lights go out. The Corps of Drums of 157 (Wales and Midlands) Logistic Support Regiment enter to perform a breathtaking precision drum call routine, their fluorescent batons accentuated in the candlelight. Dinner then continues until the PMC bangs his gavel on the table and all are called to silence. The first of six readings is then performed, each by a different voice from within the regiments, starting with the most junior sergeants and ending with the senior major: Isandlwana, Rorke's Drift, The Break In, The Fight Through, The Reorganisation, and finally Dalton's Citation. Most of the texts are from Donald Morris's classic book, *The Washing of the Spears*. A map of the campaign is printed helpfully on the menu card, with a summary of the action at Rorke's Drift in the centre pages and the words of 'The March of the Men of Harlech' on the back. We will need those later.

The wines are of course South African and the chef has indulged himself in naming the dishes: Avocado Khambula and Terrine Isandlwana seem straightforward enough. Black humour creeps in with the arrival of Assegaied Seafood, skewered on kebab sticks. Tournedos Harlech naturally represents Welsh beef at its best while Sorbet Mfolozi adds atmosphere and leads to the final triumph – Soufflé Dalton.

As the evening builds to a climax, the band plays the regimental marches from a balcony overlooking the dining room. The trumpeters are next to claim the spotlight, including a virtuoso exponent of the post-horn gallop, who readily draws enthusiastic applause from the mellowing audience. A short pause and then 30 grey-blazered Welshmen enter, short and stocky, with gnarled, lived-in faces. They come from the Mountain Ash Male Voice Choir, at the head of those same valleys from which so many Williams's and Joneses came to earn their shillings and fight the Queen's enemies. A moment of silence and then their conductor drops his hands and they begin to sing...and how they sing! They love it and it is infectious. Soon everyone is caught up in the atmosphere: listening spellbound to those strong baritones and rich harmonies and feeling the stirring deep inside. When they sing *The March of the Men of Harlech* everyone joins in.

The choir leaves after many encores and the Colonel finally rises. It is not to mark the end of the evening: merely a change of venue from the formality of the dining room to the bonhomie of the bar. The choir has beaten the diners to the draw and the Welshmen are already established with pints in hand. Ready to sing and sing: just amongst themselves or with anyone who will sing with them. It lasts until far into the small hours.

Surely Dalton would approve. Surely too it is fitting that such a well-staged evening continues to recognise the contribution of the man who almost certainly tipped the scales in the decision to stay and defend Rorke's Drift. Of course Chard was responsible for the decision but, thank goodness, he had listened to the experience and wisdom of the former Sergeant Major of the 85th Regiment, precursors of The King's Shropshire Light Infantry incidentally. It was the tall, bearded Dalton who had seen the possibilities of the position, who had organised the layout of the defensive perimeters using the biscuit boxes and mealie sacks from his stores. There is credible evidence that Dalton was already doing this while the officers were conferring. Dalton certainly saved the life of a soldier in the heat of the battle and is reported to have fired coolly and accurately at the enemy until he took a bullet through the shoulder and handed his rifle to Chard. Thereafter he directed the fire of the young defenders and oversaw the distribution of the ammunition, aided by the giant, bearded padre Smith. What a marvellous and steady presence the two of them must have been.

And yet, almost incredibly to us in a much more egalitarian age, Dalton's was one of three Victoria Crosses not gazetted until ten months after the battle and the award of the original eight. All of these were given to officers and men from the fighting arms. The three recipients of the VCs awarded subsequently were Corporal Schiess who was a foreign national, Commissary Dalton and Surgeon Major Reynolds. This oversight or prejudice had required the pressure of public opinion and a further report by Chard underlining the importance of the roles played by these men to overcome. Well done the public; well done Lieutenant Chard. Hook wrote,

One of the bravest men that ever lived.

Over a hundred and twenty years later the officers and senior ranks of 29 Regiment Royal Logistic Corps, put it very simply. "He was one of us," they say.