

At 3 a.m. in the early morning of 5 July 1879, Major Richard James Combe Marter, who was in charge of a detached squadron of the 1st Dragoon Guards employed on convoy escort duty in Zululand, wrote to his commanding officer.

One would have thought that Marter would have been in a good humour as the victory at Ulundi, in which the Zulus had been soundly defeated, had occurred less than twenty-four hours before on 4 July. But Marter did not know about this victory--no word of it had reached the Fort Itelezi camp some 85 miles from Ulundi. Archibald Forbes, the correspondent, had not yet arrived on his 'Ride of Death' with the great news. So there had to be another reason that he took pen to hand at the unlikely hour of 3 a.m. Was he frustrated at having been left behind the advancing forces thus missing the opportunity for glory on the battlefield? For weeks he had been detailed to escort convoys of supplies from Koppie Allein to Forts Itelezi, Newdigate, and Marshall and to guard the lines of communication. These were mundane duties, indeed, for an ambitious cavalry officer whose present position made it unlikely he would be a participant in the coming climactic battle with the Zulu.

Certainly there had been rumours and expectations that a major battle was to take place. Montague reports in his book, *CAMPAIGNING IN SOUTH AFRICA*

In every post we had established in our way, it was known that something was happening at the front. All day long on the memorable 4th of July, the air was full of rumours.....So some big event was soon going to take place.

Being left behind for the final confrontation, which ultimately broke the Zulus' power, was not the reason Marter was up at 3 a.m. composing the letter that accompanies this article. His missive was directed to Major General Frederick Marshall, commander of the Cavalry Brigade and lines of communication on the advance into Zululand, and was the result of a breakdown in discipline involving members of his own detachment. Some of his men had been derelict in their duties. They had been found drunk and others absent from bivouac and sentry duty, not a pleasant occurrence for the officer in charge.

Marter writes that he was shocked by his troops' behaviour, as his men had performed their duties well since crossing the Blood River into hostile Zululand on the 1st of June. The completed memo, after having been signed by Major Marter, was passed on the same day 5 July 1879 to Brigade Major Captain Herbert Stewart who added a note ordering Court Martial proceedings for the men drunk on duty and the commanding officers' digression on punishment for the other offences. On 6 July, the next day, Major C.J. Bromhead (the brother of Gonville Bromhead of Rorke's Drift fame), who was commandant of the post at Koppie Allein, also inserted an addendum indicating Marter was to escort the prisoners to Fort Newdigate for disposition.

One wonders at the fate of the prisoners. Courts Martial and punishments resulting in reduction in rank and flogging were most likely carried out. Patience has its reward, and Major Marter, later in the campaign, was to gain recognition and promotion to Brevet Lieutenant Colonel for leading the patrol that captured the Zulu king, Cetshwayo.

Note: This Marter document and other papers relating to the Anglo Zulu War of 1879 were acquired from a private source in Worcester in May 1999. They were the correspondence of Lieutenant Colonel Henry Fanshawe Davies, Grenadier Guards (1837-1914) whose ancestral estate, Elmley Castle, was located in Worcestershire. Davies was a veteran of the Crimean War and Indian Mutiny, and was an experienced officer when he requested to the War Office in February 1879, that he be allowed to go to South Africa. This request was accepted and Davies was put in charge of the draft of troops to the 24th sent out as replacements for the casualties incurred at Isandlwana. During the Second Invasion, he was posted at various times as officer commanding posts at Landman's Drift, Conference Hill, and Fort Newdigate. In these positions he was ideally situated to receive and dispense relevant correspondence that gives some interesting and unique insight into the campaign. The Marter document, which is the subject of this article, undoubtedly came into Davies' possession, as he was commandant at Fort Newdigate where the KDG prisoners were taken for disposition.

Future articles based on the Davies collection of correspondence will appear in coming issues of the AZWHS Journal.

Below is a transcription of the entire communication and, additionally, the original document is reproduced at the end of the article.

Original transcript.

Fort Itelezi--3a.m. 5 July79

Sir,

I much regret to have to report for the information of the Major General Com.Frontier District that I have been obliged to make Prisoners this morning of 1 Troop Sergeant Major, 1 Sergeant & 4 Privates of the Squadron under my command for being drunk-- 1 Troop Sergeant Major for being absent from bivouac between 11 & 12 o'clock (midnight) and 2 Sergeants & 1 Private (Sentry) for not stopping a disturbance in the Squadron lines at the same hour. The disturbance alluded to was singing & loud talking, on the part of the men in bivouac.

Pending the Major General's orders, I leave the whole of these men in charge of the officer Com the detachment-- 24 Regt at this post, & will bring a summary of evidence back with me tomorrow. Captain Thompson is the chief witness.

I am quite unable to ascertain how liquor was procured in excess of the allowance of such issued to the men in bivouac. A good deal of the rum appears to have been upset on the ground at the place of issue.

Previous to these irregularities coming to notice, I had the Traders waggons with the convoy searched by an officer, but no liquor was found in them.

The Medical comforts were also checked & found correct. I placed a Sentry over these. On leaving Koppie Allein I left in charge of the officer Com. 1 Private for being absent from his (reverse) post when on Sentry & found drunk, another for being drunk when on parade, & a Corporal & 2 men of the Post detachment were reported absent. I have since heard from Major Bromhead that the Corporal was found drunk.

I cannot close this report without saying how shocked & disgusted I am at these disgraceful irregularities in a detachment which has behaved remarkably well since entering Zululand on the 1st June, until yesterday.

I trust that I may be favoured with the Major General's instructions regarding the trial of the Prisoners.

The Convoy under my charge moved off punctually according to order.

I have the honor to be,

Sir,

Yr. Obedient Servant

M.Marter Major

Com. Detacht. King's Dr. Guards

The Bde. Major
Frontier District,
P.S. The officer Com. detachment 2/24th Regt.
here reports his men as all correct.

M.M.

Frontier District Officer

Any Commissioned Officer or men drunk on duty will be tried by Court Martial under arrangements made by the Officers Commanding Posts--The other prisoners will be disposed of by Officers Commanding
By order

5/7/79

Herbert Stewart, Capt.
Bn.

O.f. Fort Itelezi

Hand over all prisoners KDG to Major Marter on arrival. These men are to be taken to Fort Newdigate & disposed of there.

C J Bromhead
Koppie Allein

6 July 79

Comg. Koppie Allein