

## Zulu War Colours Saved – Again.

Lieutenant Colonel Rodney Ashwood

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It was 123 years ago that the Queen's Colour of the 1<sup>st</sup>/24<sup>th</sup> Regiment was saved from the raging torrents of the Buffalo River in South Africa during the Zulu Wars of 1879. Now, the Colours of that Battalion, currently laid up in Brecon Cathedral, have been saved again – this time for posterity.

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1879, during the Battle of Isandhlwana, the British Army suffered one of its heaviest defeats, inflicted upon it by the Zulu impi of King Cetshwayo. Lieutenants Melvill and Coghill then tried to save the Queen's Colour of the 1<sup>st</sup>/24<sup>th</sup> Regiment from being taken by the enemy, the Regimental Colour having been left behind in the reserve base at Helpmekaar. They managed to make the banks of the River Buffalo, but there they lost their lives at the hands of the Zulus in their heroic attempt, and the Colour was washed away down river. Two weeks later it was recovered and returned to the Regiment who proudly carried it in its battered form for another 54 years.

The Zulu War Colours of the 1<sup>st</sup>/24<sup>th</sup> Regiment – later to become the South Wales Borderers and now the Royal Regiment of Wales – were laid up in the Regimental Chapel in Brecon Cathedral in 1934 and are beginning to show signs of decay. Such is the unique nature of these precious Colours that the Colonel of the Regiment, Major General Christopher Elliott CBE decided to launch an Appeal to raise funds for their conservation. Being a very expensive project, it was thought that this would take some time to achieve, until an anonymous benefactor offered to meet the costs outright. As a result of such outstanding generosity, this work could begin straight away and was carried out by the specialist firm Framework Enterprises Ltd. from Carmarthen under the expert guidance of their Managing Director, Mr John Butler.

Work began on Monday 29<sup>th</sup> April 2002 on site in Brecon Cathedral and was completed within a week. The Colours were hermetically sealed in a high-grade anti-static filmed acrylic material with the temperature controlled by an in-built silica gel tray. The Colours still hang from their pikes in their former locations, but have been elevated slightly so as not to obscure some of the Chapel windows. This has had the added bonus of replacing the original nylon supporting wires, which were beginning to stretch and may well have collapsed before too long. The result will preserve these unique Colours for the Regiment, Wales and the Nation for a very long time to come.

As an interesting aside, there is an ageing silver plaque secured to the pike of the Queen's Colour, which few people will have had the opportunity to see. When the Colour was taken down by the contractor, Martin Everett, the Museum Curator, was able to record the inscription which read, in its original text, as follows:

This Colour was presented to the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment at Carragh camp June 21<sup>st</sup>, 1866. Carried at Isandhlwana where Lieutenants Melvill and Coghill rescued it January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1879. Subsequently found by Lieutenant Colonel Black in the Buffalo River on February 4, 1879 at a short distance from their bodies. These officers whose devoted gallantry is commemorated by the wreath on this Colour placed on the Colour by Her Majesty Queen Victoria July 31, 1880.

There is no mention of the Victoria Cross, because posthumous awards had not been authorised at that stage and it was not until 1907 that Lieutenants Melvill and Coghill were bestowed with the honour and accolade they so richly deserved.

The Colour pole of the 2/24<sup>th</sup> Foot – all that survived after the battle of Isandhlwana, and the Zulu War Colours of the 1/24<sup>th</sup> Foot, now hang in Brecon Cathedral in their new sealed cases.

This article originally appeared in *The Three Feathers*, the newsletter of the Society of Friends of the Museum of The Royal Regiment of Wales, in June 2002. I acknowledge their kind permission to quote the above extract.