

Private Snook and Total War.

By Stephen Manning

I first became aware of the account of Private John Snook from reading Fred Emery's 1973 title *The Red Soldier*. In this work the author clearly shows how Snook's claims of a massacre of Zulu warriors after the battle of Kambula was reported in the English press and became, eventually, an issue discussed in the House of Commons and a subject of embarrassment for the Army. Since then, my PhD research at Exeter University into press reporting of the Anglo Zulu War has brought me into contact with Private Snook's account again and again. From my research I have developed my own thinking as to the accuracy and credibility of Snook's account, which I outline in this article.

I thought it important to find out as much information on the career of Private Snook as possible and I was greatly assisted in this by the tireless, and comprehensive, research of J C Kenworthy and his work *The 13th Regiment in South Africa 1874-79*. Mr Kenworthy has, through great efforts, been able to bring together the service records of all men serving in the 13th Regiment during this period and from this we have a sketch of Snook's life and career. John Snook, Private 347, was baptised John Hungerford Snook in Tiverton, Devon in 1838. As a Devon man Snook can be considered a 'local' in terms of his regiment, the 13th, based in Taunton, Somerset. As a 'local', and even an Englishman, he was in the minority, as the majority of those serving in the 13th at that time were Irishmen. Snook's records show his trade as a baker and that he was not married. Whilst in Number Four Column, under Colonel Wood's command, Snook may well have pursued his previous career of a baker as Wood prided himself on having fresh supplies of bread for his men.

The service records show that Snook had a rather ordinary, or even mundane, army career until 1878. He attested to the 13th Regiment, aged 20 years, at Exeter, Devon, on 12 April 1858. Snook's total service was 21 years and 1 month with the Colours, in the 1st Battalion of the 13th Regiment, in the rank of Private. His foreign service was in the East Indies, including India, 1859-1864, Gibraltar 1867-1872, Malta, 1872-1874, and South Africa, including Natal, Transvaal and Zululand, 1877-1879. His campaigns with the 13th were the Sekhukhune Campaign of 1878 and the Anglo Zulu War of 1879.

Snook was awarded the South Africa General Service Medal, 1877-1879, with the 1878-1879 clasp. The Regimental Medal Roll has no trace of the issue of his medal. Despite further research at the National Army Museum and the Somerset Light Infantry Regimental Museum in Taunton, the author has been unable to find any indication that Snook received his medal. I understand that this is not unusual and does not imply that the medal was not issued, or that it was withheld due to the embarrassment Snook caused to the Regiment by his recollections. Private Snook was discharged to pension at the age of 41 years, on termination of the second period of his Limited Engagement, at Devonport, on 6 January 1880. At the time of his discharge his character was rated as 'Good', and he was entitled to two Good Conduct Badges. Snook's pension of 12d per day was sent to his intended address of The Royal Oak, Newport Street, Tiverton, Devon.

Colonel Evelyn Wood VC, CB, was in command of Number Four column, of which Private Snook in the 13th Regiment was a member. News of the disaster inflicted upon Number Three Column at the Battle of Isandlwana on 22 January 1879, reached Wood late on the evening of 23 January. Wood and most of his command were patrolling the region of the Zunguin Mountain and were fifteen miles from the fortified position of Tinta's Kop, and less than fifty miles from Isandlwana. On receiving the terrible news, Wood recognised his vulnerable position and retired to Tinta's Kop.

With Number Three Column now so depleted of men and supplies, and Pearson's Command of Number One column effectively besieged in Eshowe, Lord Chelmsford, overall commander of British forces in Natal, looked to Wood's column to maintain some sort of pressure on the Zulu forces until reinforcements arrived. Wood's first priority was to establish a more secure and fortified base than Tinta's Kop. He found it ten miles due west on a gentle sloping ridge called Kambula. Here was found a site that commanded the surrounding area, where water was plentiful and firewood could be obtained. A stone redoubt was built and the wagons were laagered so as to accommodate his forces and animals if they were attacked. It is easy to imagine Private Snook and his colleagues encamped here with time aplenty to discuss the events of Isandlwana and to dwell on the stories and myths of the ritual disembowelling and decapitation of the dead of the 24th Regiment. There was also time to think of revenge.

The strength of the men's feelings were clearly demonstrated on 24 February with the arrival in camp of a Boer named Calverley. This man was an emissary sent by Hamu, a brother of the Zulu king, Cetshwayo, to negotiate terms for the possible surrender of Hamu and his people. Calverley was known to the colonists amongst the column as a man of dubious reputation, which he seemed to confirm when he rode into the camp, under a white flag of truce, yet carrying a rifle and water bottle which had clearly been looted from the dead of the 24th Regiment at Isandlwana. To make matters worse Calverley was believed to have been riding the horse of Lieutenant Coghill, who had been killed attempting to save the Regimental colours at Isandlwana. The soldiers, perhaps even Private Snook, saw this as a clear indication that Calverley must have participated in the looting of the battlefield or was even involved in some way in the battle. Many were all for lynching him on the spot. Ron Lock, in his book *Blood on the Painted Mountain*, believes that it was only Wood's personal intervention that saved Calverley. If the soldiers behaved in this way towards an emissary, how would Snook and his colleagues react towards the Zulus on the battlefield? There is evidence that after Isandlwana it was not just the men of Number Four Column who were considering revenge against the Zulus. The mood was highlighted by the correspondent of *The Daily News* who wrote:

a desire for extermination is, I must confess, one of the most painful peculiarities of the present time....If the ideas at present prevailing in some circles were allowed to have free play, I do not think there would be many Zulus of any age or of either sex alive this day twelvemonth.

Michael Lieven, in a 1999 article for the journal *History*, tells us of events following the relief of Rorke's Drift, by the remains of Number Three column. Colonel Hamilton-Browne, a colonial officer, told of his arrival at Rorke's Drift with Chelmsford's relieving column:

During the afternoon (presumably of the 23rd January-author's note) it was discovered that a large number of wounded and worn-out Zulus had taken refuge or hidden in the mealie fields near the laager. My two companies of (Natal) Zulus with some of my non-coms, and a few of the 24th quickly drew these fields and killed them with bayonet, butt and assegai. It was beastly but there was nothing else to do. War is war and savage war the worst of the lot.

An anonymous member of Number Three Column was quoted in *The London Standard* in late March 1879.

We have much to avenge and please God we will do it. I pity the Zulus that fall into our hands. You would feel as I do if you had seen the awful scenes I did on the night of 22nd January.

Similarly, *The North Devon Herald* of 27 March 1879 quotes a letter from an Arthur J Secretan, written on 3 February from Helpmakaar, and sent to his father. Secretan, who must have been with the remains of Chelmsford's Number Three column, describes the scenes when he awoke on the morning of 23 January on the battlefield of Isandlwana:

Morning at length came to our weary bodies, and we saw the scene of the battle. All the white men, with their entrails, noses, ears, and other parts of their bodies cut off, and thrust in their poor dead mouths; sides slit-up and arms thrust in; horses and oxen all lying about, stabbed and ripped up.

We found a few wounded Zulus and stragglers who were promptly despatched by us without mercy; our men are mad with revenge, and can you expect one to have the slightest piece of feeling for these wretches?

News of further setbacks to the British forces reached Snook and his colleagues. Firstly, part of a convoy of wagons, escorted by the 80th Regiment, which were transferring supplies for the 80th from the depot at Lydenburg to a new base at Luneburg, was attacked at dawn on 12 March at Myer's Drift, on the Ntombe River. Of the 106 soldiers in the convoy, 62 were killed, together with 17 civilian waggoners. This setback was followed on 28 March with a defeat much closer to home, and much more personal for the men, of Number Four column.

To maintain the pressure on the Zulus, and to assist Lord Chelmsford in his attempts to relieve Pearson's troops besieged in Eshowe, Wood's command had been very busy in their efforts to harass the Zulus. Lieutenant Colonel Redvers Buller was particularly active in command of an assortment of mainly colonial troops, patrolling, skirmishing, burning kraals and driving off cattle. After the defeat on the banks of the Ntombe River, Buller and his men raided the Ntombe valley as a reprisal but failed to catch

the chief who had led the Zulu warriors, Mbilini. Wood was convinced that to continue with his initiative his forces would have to deprive Mbilini of his mountain retreats. One of these, an irregularly shaped flat-topped plateau, close to Kambula was called Hlobane.

Wood had received reports from Hamu that the main Zulu army was to combine with Mbelini's warriors on Hlobane and use it as a base from which to wipe out Wood's column. So despite misgivings Wood sanctioned Buller and his men to attack at dawn on 28 March, and two parties of mounted troops left Kambula on 27 March. Presumably Private Snook and his colleagues must have seen these mounted men leave and perhaps cheered them off as they left. A combination of factors combined to turn the assault into a disaster, the main one being the arrival of the main Zulu impi on the scene, just as Buller and his force were on the top of the plateau. Only a descent down 'Devil's Pass', allowed any men to escape from encirclement. When Buller returned to Kambula with the remains of his force Private Snook would have been able to see that the force was much depleted from that which had left the day before. The bodies of fifteen officers and seventy-nine other men, including the Boer Calverley, were left on the slopes of Hlobane. The Zulus had won another decisive victory. The mood in the camp that night must have been fearful and black, with great apprehension for what the next day would bring.

The battle of Kambula, which took place on 29 March 1879, was one of the hardest fought and bloodiest of the campaign. Despite instructions from Cetshwayo that his impis were not to attack entrenched positions, approximately 20,000 Zulu warriors did just that. Between 1.30pm to 5.30pm the Zulu army tried to penetrate Wood's defences and almost succeeded. Wood's skilful construction of the entrenchment and the bravery of officers such as Lieutenant Nicholson, RA, and Major Hackett won the day. Yet it is clear from Private Snook's letter, which first appeared in *The North Devon Herald* on 29 May 1879, that all the defenders played an important part. The letter, dated the 3 April, was sent from Kambula to a Mr Warren, landlord of The Royal Oak, Tiverton (interestingly, it is to this address that Snook's pension is sent after he leaves the service). In the letter Snook describes the battle and first gives an indication that there may have been atrocities carried out after the battle.

The letter is headed... A TIVERTON SOLDIER UNDER FIRE AT THE ZULU WARS.

I must tell you of our glorious victory at Kambula Hill on March 29. The enemy comprising some 25,000 to 30,000 armed men, advanced on our camp. We opened fire on them about 1pm., and kept up a tremendous fire with our four guns of artillery, and our infantry, composed of the 1-13th Light Infantry and 90th Light Infantry, and some colonial volunteers, making our force up to about 4,000 all told. We kept up the fire until 6.20pm, when it was commencing to get dark, and the black fellows commenced to retire. We are the only column that has given them "a proper lamb-basting" as yet. We lost on our side 3 officers, 1 non-commission officer and 23 privates killed; and wounded, 4 officers, 2 non-commissioned officers, 1 bugler, and 12 privates. I think we got pretty well considering the number against us, and that we were fighting against our own rifles and ammunition, which they captured from the poor 24th regiment at Isandula. We took a great number of the rifles back again. It was a narrow escape with me. The captain of my company on my right and a man from Taunton on my left, both got wounded in the leg.

When the defeated Zulus commenced their retreat at about 5.30pm, they were pursued by Buller and his men. Once again, Snook graphically describes this act in his letter:

Then we let our mounted men out of the laager wagons, and I can tell you some murdering went on. They followed them up for about nine miles, and killed about 700. I only wish it had been a cavalry regiment from home, in which case not one would have got away. As it was, some escaped into the night, it being too dark to follow them further.

Similarly Lieutenant Alfred Blaine wrote in a letter to his cousin, living in Port Elizabeth.

As soon as the kafirs retreated we cheered tremendously. Buller led us out to shoot them down as they retreated. The soldiers cheered as we went out, and we all declared that now we would pay them out for the day before. "Remember yesterday", we all shouted out, and I can assure you we did, and had our revenge. We shot two or three hundred. The guns did great service. (1)

Another officer of Wood's Irregulars wrote:

Towards the end of the pursuit, they were so tired and exhausted that they couldn't move out of a walk, some scarcely looked round and seemed to wish to die without seeing the shot fired. Some turned around and walked to meet their death without offering resistance, some threw themselves down on their faces and waited for their despatch by assegai or bullet, some got into antbear holes, reeds, or long grass and tried to evade detection, but very few succeeded in this. It was indeed a slaughter. (2)

Yet it was not Snook's description of the pursuit of the fleeing Zulus, and the "murdering", which caused controversy. It was these words written by Snook in the same letter:

On March 30th, about eight miles from camp, we found about 500 wounded, most of them mortally, and begging us for mercy's sake not to kill them; but they got no chance after what they had done to our comrades at Isandula.

Snook's letter was read with mounting anger by the Reverend J. Mugford, a parson in north Cornwall. (3) He decided to send a copy of the paper to Frank Chesson, head of The Aborigine Protection Society (APS) in London. Immediately upon receipt Chesson asked the War Office to investigate. (4)

The reply from the War Office was printed in *The Times* on 11 June 1879:

Central Department, War Office June 9, 1879- Sir,- I am directed by the Secretary of State for War to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 4th inst., containing an extract from the North Devon Herald of the 29th May in which it is asserted that after the battle of Kambula Hill a number of wounded Zulus were killed by the British forces, and to acquaint you that the General Officer commanding Her Majesty's forces in Natal has been called upon to inquire into the circumstances and to report whether there is any truth in the statement in question.

The debate in the House of Commons on 12 June 1879 was reported in *The Times* of 13 June, and in this debate the Colonial Secretary, Sir Michael Hicks-Beach, was asked by Mr O'Donnell, MP, whether his attention had been drawn to the extract that appeared in *The North Devon Herald* of the letter from Private Snook? Also Mr O'Donnell asked the Colonial Secretary "whether operations in South Africa are being conducted by the British troops according to the usages of civilisation". Sir Michael's reply referred Mr O'Donnell to the War Office letter, which appeared in *The Times* of 11 June. By this time Lord Chelmsford had been replaced as overall commander of the British forces by Sir Garnet Wolseley, who, on receipt of the directive from the War Office to investigate the claims, passed the matter to the commander on the spot, Colonel Wood. Wood reported to Wolseley, and all the English newspapers printed the response on 1 September. It was viewed at the time as an official denial from Wolseley, and hence the army. Wood stated:

The whole of the infantry were employed all day on the 30th except when at divine service, in burying 785 dead Zulus close to camp. No infantry were outside our pickets. The horses being exhausted by six days hard work, only one patrol of the men was out. They saw no Zulus; and I, passing over the ground covered by the patrol two days later, did not see a body. I believe no Zulus have been killed by white men except in action, and as I rewarded Wood's Irregulars for every live Zulu brought in, I had many saved.

So was this official denial the truth? Certainly many papers accepted it as such. In Exeter, *The Flying Post* on 3 September printed the denial without question, as did *The Times* on 1 September. Was Snook exaggerating his claims, lying, or had he simply made a mistake with the date? This last argument is the one most favoured by Fred Emery in his book *The Red Soldier*, but even accepting that Snook meant 29 March, when he wrote the 30th March, could he have physically witnessed, or taken part in, a massacre of wounded Zulus?

Well, it is clear from his letter that Snook watched the mounted men leave the laager in pursuit and he certainly does not imply that he was riding with them. Why should he have been? He was an infantry private and a baker by trade. So if he was not on horseback could he have marched the reported eight miles to the supposed massacre site on 29th? In Snook's account the pursuit by the mounted men of the Zulus took place from 6.20pm. Wood stated that the Zulus began their retreat at 5.30pm. Assuming that Wood was right about the time, which is much more likely, Snook, on foot, would have had less than two hours of daylight to march the eight miles to the site. Physically possible, perhaps, but likely, I think not. After an intense fire fight of four hours, in the heat of the day, surely the men of the 13th Regiment were

much more likely to have been securing the perimeter of the camp, tending to their wounds and resting from the rigours of the battle. So what might have been the story behind Snook's account? Perhaps we can get one clue from a letter in *The Times* of 19 June 1879, from a Captain R.A.J.C. Robinson:

Letters home from irresponsible young men should be taken cum grano salis, for I remember in 1878 receiving a letter from a clergyman in the north of England, relative to a paragraph written by a young man at the seat of war which stated- "I enjoy this campaign;(Galekas) shooting down niggers is great fun, and beats rabbit shooting into fits". On inquiry I learnt that the youth was employed with the Commissariat at Ibeka and hardly ever seen a shot fired.

If Snook could not have physically been at the site of a massacre eight miles from camp on either 29 March, or, if Wood's account is to be believed, 30 March, could he have been lying, or perhaps simply reporting what he had been told by those that might have participated in an atrocity, and exaggerating his own involvement. I believe that it is the latter. Certainly, there is evidence that although Wolseley's denial was accepted, there was also a belief at the time that some atrocity did indeed take place. In *The Broad Arrow*, a weekly paper devoted to the interests of all the services, on the 13th September, an article appeared entitled "The Apology of Snook".(5) This article, although focusing on Snook's allegations, also acknowledged other reports of atrocities, such as Sergeant Jarvis at Kambula and James Foxwell at the battle of Gingindhlovu. From these reports the article makes some interesting conclusions.

These seem to be the candid statements of men of untutored minds, unconscious of self-condemnation. They may be exaggerated in order to present a picture of the terrible to relatives brought up in sylvan seclusion, who had been trained to respect David more than Saul, in as much as he had slain his "tens of thousands". There may also have been a laudable desire on the part of the writers to magnify the importance of the actions in which they had been engaged. We cannot suppose that British soldiers are utterly callous; but on the other hand, the humanitarianism which expects in all alike, on the battlefield a tender consideration for the feelings of the vanquished, overlooks the fact that pictures of horror are often more attractive to the refined and delicate who are removed from the experience of such realities of life. War cannot be made "pleasant" to all. We cannot, in reason, require the exhibition of a high chivalrous feeling in savage warfare. Men act upon the impulse of their individual natures, and from lack of consideration, at a critical moment, rather than from ingrained brutality...If therefore, rudely nurtured soldiers occasionally in the heat of blood commit an action which humanity regrets, we must bear in mind that it is not due to the influence of the profession of arms, but to human nature, and to the social condition of the masses of the general population from which are drawn the defenders of their country.

Thus *The Broad Arrow* does offer up the suggestion that Snook, and others, might have exaggerated their accounts. However, the article certainly does not dismiss the possibility that atrocities could have happened and even suggests that such action could be understood. In the concluding paragraph *The Broad Arrow* even has a swipe at the official denial from Wood and Wolseley, expressing a certain scepticism:

..it is not difficult to imagine a certain frame of mind in which, under the influence of a retributive Providence, a still superior race might consider the "nigger" as an animal of the chase, and therefore, in the order of nature, liable to afford sport to the still more highly developed anthropoid. Be this, however, as it may, the following extracts go far to prove that where no moral offence is recognised, such actions as those described by Private Snook are not beyond the possibility of belief, especially on occasions when good soldiers are not actually "engaged in Divine service", or competent to prove an equally creditable alibi.

Thus there was an awareness, even in a paper such as *The Broad Arrow* with its strong support of the military that atrocities did occur in the Zulu War. Does this make Snook's account accurate? My view is no. I believe that the event he described was a description of a number of actions that took place on the evening of 29 March when Wood's Irregulars pursued the fleeing Zulu warriors. Snook wrote from accounts that he had heard around the camp in the days following the pursuit and exaggerated them into a single event of the killing of wounded Zulus. This was done to magnify his own importance in the conflict and was brought on by the general desire for revenge that seemed to pervade the British forces after Isandlwana. This desire for revenge does appear to have been evident in a number of accounts of

atrocities whether they occurred at Kambula, Gingindhlovu or Ulundi. After the defeat of Isandlwana the brutality of the war, driven by this lust for revenge, brought the conflict in a new area of “total war”, where Zulu warrior and Zulu property became “liable to afford sport”. This, however, could be the subject matter for a future article.

What is the importance of the Snook account? Well, even though I believe the account to be exaggerated it did show to Britons, for the first time, the brutality of the war. Further accounts from serving men highlighted still further cases of atrocity and for many Britons the war was seen as unjust and uncivilised. This point was used by Gladstone as part of his condemnation of ‘Beaconsfieldism’, during his Midlothian speeches, in late 1879, and may have had an impact on the election result of 1880, when Lord Beaconsfield and the Conservatives were swept from power by the Liberals. Snook concluded his letter by hoping that the war would be over as soon as the reinforcements arrived, because “I am getting tired of it”. Snook served his country well.

Let us hope that he had a restful and enjoyable retirement in The Royal Oak.

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2. Lock, Ron. *Blood on the Painted Mountain*, London, 1995, p199-200
3. Rev J.Mugford-Chesson 3, June 1879. ASC 143/95
4. Chesson- W.O. 4 June 1879, AF June 1879, p162
5. *The Broad Arrow* Vol XX111 No 585 September 13th 1879

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