

The Cochrane Accounts of Isandlwana
Lieutenant William Francis Dundonald Cochrane 32nd Foot (Cornwall Light
Infantry),
Transport Officer, No. 2 Column
By Julian Whybra B.A. (Hons)

William Francis Dundonald Cochrane was born at Corsham in Wiltshire on 7 August 1847, the son of Colonel W. M. Cochrane and his wife Mary (née Hussey). He was the great-grandson of the 9th Earl of Dundonald and great-nephew of the 10th Earl, a daring and ingenious naval officer celebrated as Lord Cochrane for his part in the Napoleonic Wars and the independence struggles of Chile and Brazil.⁽¹⁾ The 12th Earl, who led the relief column into Ladysmith in 1900, was a second cousin.

Educated at Kensington School, William Cochrane received a direct commission as ensign from Sandhurst on 31st August 1866, being posted to the 32nd Light Infantry. He became Lieutenant by purchase on 2nd December 1868 and was appointed Adjutant on 20th July 1870, holding that position up until 1878. In the mid-1870s the 32nd was stationed in the Cape Colony, but it returned home just before the outbreak of the Cape Frontier War of 1877-78 (in which Cochrane's younger brother, John Palmer Cochrane, served as Inspector in the Frontier Armed and Mounted Police).

In November 1878, with a group of young officers from different regiments, Cochrane embarked for Natal on Special Service aboard the *Edinburgh Castle*. According to Lieutenant Harford, Cochrane "was simply the life and soul of the ship, always ready to sit down at the piano and sing a good song, or get up concerts, theatricals and other amusements."

Cochrane's role up to the battle of Isandhlwana is explained in his narrative. As transport officer under Colonel Durnford he accompanied him to Isandhlwana. He escaped from there to Helpmakaar, where, on Lord Chelmsford's arrival, he made a verbal report to him and later gave evidence at the Court of Inquiry. On 8th February 1879, from Pietermaritzburg, he completed a long written statement, evidently begun in January (2), for the Assistant Adjutant-General (Colonel Bellairs), giving "the account of the Battle of Sandhlana from my own personal observation & from the information which I have received from reliable sources." Lord Chelmsford's staff officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Crealock, noted that Cochrane's statement of 8 February said nothing about a heated argument between Durnford and Pulleine on the question as to whether the 24th Regiment should support Durnford's mounted reconnaissance - an argument which Cochrane was supposed to have mentioned in his verbal report to Chelmsford.

On 4 March, therefore, Cochrane made a supplementary written statement on the conversation between Durnford and Pulleine, emphasizing,

the manner of the officers to one another was perfectly genial.

This agrees fully with what is known of Pulleine's temperament, if rather less with Durnford's.

By this time, Cochrane was with Colonel Wood's No. 4 Column, commanding the reorganized Native Horse with the rank of captain. In this role he fought up to Hlobane and Kambula and with the Flying Column at Ulundi. After the war, he was appointed Assistant Adjutant-General of the Colonial Forces of the Cape Colony and took part in the Basuto Disarmament War (the 'Gun War') of 1880-81. He was promoted captain on 14 June 1881 and brevet major on 16 February 1882. This last promotion gave belated recognition of his part in the Zulu War, brevet rank being denied to regimental officers below the rank of captain.

In 1882, he took part in the Egyptian Expedition and in the following year he started on a succession of regular staff appointments with the Imperial Forces - as Deputy Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster-General in Hong Kong and the Straits Settlements, on the Headquarters Staff in Ireland, and then (from 1890-92) as Assistant Military Secretary to the General Officer Commanding in South Africa, Sir W. G. Cameron. He was promoted major, Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, on 29 June 1886.

In 1893, Cochrane married Miss Maria Carola, daughter of Enrique Teodoro Möller of Valparaíso, Chile, by whom he had a daughter, Carola Maria Rosita Isabel. In the same year, he obtained by brevet his lieutenant-colonelcy (5 April) and he was given command of a brigade in the Egyptian Army, holding it for three years and then serving on the lines of communication in Kitchener's expedition to Khartoum. As was normal, he obtained his colonelcy on the fourth anniversary of his previous promotion (5 April 1897). After his service in the Sudan, for which he received the C.B., he was placed on half-pay. On 21 April 1900, he was made (Temporary) Assistant Adjutant-General

Belfast District, becoming also Assistant Quartermaster-General Belfast District at a subsequent date. He went on half-pay again on 1 May 1903 and retired by September. In retirement, he held the honorary rank of brigadier-general. He settled in England, his outdoor pursuits being shown in Who's Who as 'shooting, hunting, fishing, golf.' Several contemporaries mention his skill as a singer. Cochrane died on 23 October 1927. The narrative that follows is from his written report (WO32/7726/079/1472) of 8 February 1879, with insertions in parentheses from other sources, identified as follows:

- a) A statement attributed to Cochrane in Edward Durnford's *A Soldier's Life and Work in South Africa, 1872 to 1879, A Memoir of the Late Colonel A. W. Durnford*, Royal Engineers, (London, 1882). Another passage in this book relating to Cochrane and the artillery is given in a footnote (pages 226 & 230).
- b) Cochrane's evidence at the Court of Inquiry (Blue Books C2260, p. 87) 27 January 1879.
- c) His supplementary statement of 4 March 1879 (WO32/7726/079/1596).
- d) A letter published in *The Hereford Times* 29 March 1879
- e) A passage attributable to Cochrane in *Historical Records of the 24th Regiment* from its formation in 1689 by G. Paton, F. Glennie and W. P. Symons (London, 1905) p. 240 is also given in a footnote.

One other slightly differently worded account also exists but does not add substantially to the composite account created below. (3)

Lieutenant Cochrane's Narrative (unabridged with original spelling)

'On the morning of the 20th Jany. 1879, No. 2 Column, to which I had been appointed Transport Officer, was stationed as follows. Nos. 1 & 3 Battalions of the 1st Regt. Native Contingent and one Mounted troop under Captain Cherry 32nd L.I. at Kranz Kop; No. 2 Battalion of the same Regiment, under Major Bengough 77th Regt., near Sands (sic) Spruit; five Troops mounted men, Russell's Rocket Battery and two Companies of the 1st Battalion 1st Regiment N.N.C. at Helpmakaar. Colonel Durnford was commanding the latter portion in person, Captain Shepstone and I were with Colonel Durnford.

Early on the 20th Colonel Durnford marched to Rorke's Drift, crossing the river by means of the Pont, & establishing himself in a camp about half a mile from the river. Here we remained during the 21st; Captn. George Shepstone rode to Sandhlana* Camp & returned same day. Lieut. Smith-Dorrien rode also to the Camp, & returned with a dispatch on the morning of the 22nd Instant. Colonel Durnford was on the road to the Dutch Farms on the Biggarsberg for the purpose of commandeering the Dutchmen's wagons when the dispatch reached him. I was with Colonel Durnford & he remarked to me "Just what I thought, we are to proceed at once to Sandlwana.* There is an Impi about 8 miles from the Camp, which the Colonel moves out to attack at daybreak."

Colonel Durnford returned to Rorke's Drift Camp at once, and marched for Sandlwana at about 7.30 or 8 a.m. My orders were to see all the wagons inspanned, start them all off, and hand them over to Conductor McCarthy & then join Colonel Durnford. I complied with these instructions, and arrived at the Sandlwana Camp, with Colonel Durnford, about 10 or 10.30 a.m. Having made all the necessary arrangements for his Column Col. Durnford took over the command from Colonel Pulleine 1/24th Regt. [When Colonel Durnford reached the camp, he received from Colonel Pulleine all the information he could give, when Colonel Pulleine said, "I'm sorry you have come, as you are senior to me, and will of course take command." Colonel Durnford replied, "I'm not going to interfere with you. I'm not going to remain in camp," or words to that effect.](a)

[Colonel Pulleine gave over to Colonel Durnford, a verbal state of the troops in camp at the time, and stated the orders he had received, viz., to defend the camp; these words were repeated two or three times in the conversation.](b)

The news was that a number of Zulus had been seen since an early hour on the top of the adjacent hills, and that an attack had been expected; and in consequence the following disposition of the troops had been made. [The Natives of Lonsdale's Contingent were on outpost duty on the hills to the left]

(d) of the Camp, [the guns were in position on the left of the Camp](d), the Infantry were turned out and formed in Column in the open space in front of the General's tent. The Waggon &c were inspanned. Constant reports came in from the Scouts on the hills to the left, but never anything from the men on the top of the Sandlwana hill that I heard. (4) Some of the reports were: "The Enemy are in force behind the hills on the left" - "The Enemy are in three Columns" - "The Columns are separating, one moving to the left rear & one towards the General" - "The Enemy are retiring in every direction." [The bearer of this was not dressed in any uniform](b)

Upon this latter report Colonel Durnford said he would go out and prevent the one column from joining the Impi, which was supposed at that time to be engaged with the troops under the General. Colonel Durnford on hearing that one Column of the Enemy was moving towards the left rear, had reinforced the Baggage Guard (which at that time consisted of one Company, Native Contingent) with one troop of mounted Natives; and I understand that Captain George Shepstone was sent back with this part. (5)

[Lt. Col. Durnford having decided to take out a force to attack the Zulus who were reported to be retiring in every direction said to Lieut. Col. Pulleine (6) "I will take out some of my own men if you will let me have a couple of Companies of Infantry to support them." Lt. Col. Pulleine replied "I think I can hardly do that. My orders are to defend the Camp and we couldn't spare the men."](c). [Colonel Durnford said, "Very well; perhaps I had better not take them. I will go with my own men."](d) Lt. Col. Durnford (said) that the Zulus were retiring and urged in favour of taking the men so that after a while Lt. Col. Pulleine said "Oh very well of course if you order them I'll give you them." Lt. Col. Durnford said "That's all right."

Lt. Col. Pulleine consulted with his Officers and in a few minutes, Lieut. Melville (sic) came up and said "Colonel I really don't think Col. Pulleine would be doing right to send any men out of Camp when his orders are to 'defend the Camp.'" Lt. Col. Durnford replied - "Very well it doesn't much matter we won't take them." His manner was persuasive not peremptory. There were no high words passed. Moreover the manner of the officers to one another was perfectly genial, and the conversation took place over some lunch which Lieut. Col. Pulleine was taking with Lieut. Col. Durnford.](c) Colonel Durnford now sent two troops on the hills to the left under Captain Barton N.N.C. and took with him to the front the remaining two troops, and Russell's Rocket Battery with a Company of the N.N.C. under Captain Nourse as Escort to the Battery. (7) [On leaving the camp (he) said to Lt. Col. Pulleine "If you see us in difficulties you must send and support us."(8)](e)

Going at a canter the Rocket Battery & Escort were soon left behind. Having proceeded between 5 and 6 miles, a mounted man came down from the hills on the left, and reported that there was an immense "Impi" behind the hills to our left, and he had scarcely made the report when the Zulus appeared in force in front of us & to our left. They were in skirmishing order but 10 or 12 deep, with supports close behind. They opened fire at us at about 800 yards & advanced very rapidly. We retired some little way, taking up a position in a "Donga" or water course, of which there are several across the plain in front of Sandlwana.

We retired steadily in skirmishing order, keeping up a steady fire for about 2 miles, when we came upon the remains of the Rocket Battery, which had been cut off & broken up. There was a hand to hand engagement going on with those that remained.

The left wing while returning was wheeled up to the right & drove the Zulus back who were not in very large numbers just there at that time. It appears that Captain Russell whilst following up with the Battery, perceived some of the Enemy on his left, he fired three Rockets with some effect; this was followed by a volley from the Zulus, the Native Contingent retired, the mules were frightened & disorder was caused. The Enemy seeing this ran down the hill and attacked the Battery. Captain Russell was killed. As the mounted men retired towards them, the Zulus ran back to their Cover. The retreat was continued until we arrived at a "Donga" about half a mile in front of the Camp.(9) Here a few mounted men, Carbineers, Natal Mounted Police &c - reinforced our right. A stand was made here, but we were eventually driven in, & the Camp was taken from the left. It appears that the mounted men on the left became engaged on the hills about the same time as we were engaged on the flat, and I was informed that they held the Zulus back; but my opinion is that the right of the Enemy were only engaging the troops, and did not intend to advance until their left had worked round; and I believe that Capt. Shepstone (who after the arrival of the baggage, took the troop of mounted natives

he had used as escort on the hills to the left) (10) rode down to the Camp & asked in the name of Colonel Durnford for assistance.

This Colonel Pulleine gave him by detaching two Companies of the 24th a little to the left front. These together with the mounted men & Lonsdale's Contingent, fell back into the Camp, & in spite of the Artillery fire and the steady musketry of the Infantry, who were in good position amongst the Stones & Boulders to the left & left centre of the Camp, and who stood their ground most gallantly the Enemy steadily advanced. (11) A general move was made towards the mountain to take up a last position, but it was too late. The Zulus were too quick & fleet of foot, they caught up the men on foot before they could reach the new position, completely overpowering them by numbers & assegaing right and left.

The Guns moved from left to right across the Camp and endeavoured to take the road to Rorke's Drift, but finding this in the hands of the Enemy, turned off to the left, came to grief in a "Donga" & had to be abandoned. There was not time to spike them. Major Smith was wounded, but managed to get down to the Buffalo where I understand he was then shot. A few mounted men, and a good many natives managed to escape from the Camp, but had to ride hard over very rough country to the Buffalo River, a distance of about 5 miles, under fire from the enemy the whole way. The ground was so bad for horses that the Zulus on foot were able to run as fast as the horses could travel. I should judge that more than half the number that left the Camp were killed before they arrived at the Buffalo, and many were drowned, there being no drift, the water running rapidly with large boulders & deep water alternating. The officers who escaped consulted together on the road & decided to form a Laager at Helpmakaar. The fighting lasted from about 11.30 am till 1 pm, as near as I can judge. There must have been at least 15,000 Zulus, besides the reserves, and I should compute the numbers killed at from 2000 to 2500.

The Zulu system of attack, as represented in the Zulu pamphlet (12) is easily traceable. The main body being opposite the left centre of the Camp, the horns thrown out to the left rear & right front. Had the Zulus completed their scheme by sending a column to the Buffalo River to cut off the retreat not a man would have escaped to tell the tale.

As far as I am personally concerned, when I got back to the Camp with the mounted men who had now been driven out of the "Donga" (13), I found that the Enemy had rushed the Camp from the left and were engaged hand to hand with the Infantry who were completely overpowered with overwhelming numbers.

I saw that "all was over". I made in the direction which I had seen taken by the mounted men, guns R.A. & the natives on foot. I was cut off by the Enemy who had now reached the line of retreat, but with a good horse, hard riding & good luck I managed to reach the Buffalo River. The Zulus seemed perfectly fearless, they followed alongside having desperate hand to hand fighting with those retreating, mostly our natives on foot. Many of the enemy were killed between the Camp & the River. On several occasions they were quite close to me but I was fortunate enough to escape whilst others dropped at my side; they fired at us the whole way from the Camp to the river, but having mounted the bank on the opposite side we were safe. I made for Helpmakaar by order of Captains Essex & Gardner & assisted in forming a laager'.

* Note different spellings. Other variations appear in military documents and especially writings of that time.

References.

1. See Thomas, Donald, Cochrane: Britannia's Sea Wolf, (London, 1978) and Harvey, Robert, Cochrane: The Life and Exploits of a Fighting Captain, (London, 2000).
2. Inferred from his use of "the 22nd Instant" in this long report.
3. A letter published in The Times 22.3.1879

4. Cf. Lieut. Higginson's account.
5. Cochrane is wrong about Shepstone, who rode out with the two troops mentioned below as being under Captain Barton.
6. Cochrane is trying to be as precise as possible in this supplementary statement, giving the two officers their formal rank, instead of the informal 'colonel'. He is (incidentally) incorrect in Durnford's case, as that officer had been promoted to brevet colonel in the previous month, although it seems that this was not known in South Africa.
7. According to the report of Lieut. Davies, who commanded one of the two troops accompanying Durnford, Durnford with Russell and Nourse left the camp half an hour after Barton.
8. Cf. the following passage attributable to Cochrane: [According to the testimony of a special-service officer who was present, and afterwards escaped from the camp, Col. Pulleine went into his tent and brought out his written orders, to which Col. Durnford demurred, so far as to say, "Well, my idea is, that wherever Zulus appear, we ought to attack. I will go alone, but remember, if I get into difficulties I shall rely on you to support me.")(e). The "special-service officer" is almost certainly Cochrane.
9. In fact a mile
10. See fn. 5 re Shepstone. He picked up Vause's baggage escort on returning to camp to ask for reinforcements.
11. [Up to this time there had been no communication with the camp force, which was about 1000 yards to the left rear, holding the rising ground. Lieutenant Cochrane, observing the Zulus massing at a kraal to the left front, pointed it out to Colonel Durnford, and asked if he should send an orderly to call the attention of the artillery to it. The Colonel said, 'No, they may not attend to him; you had better go yourself.' Cochrane at once rode back to the camp force, but could not find his chief again.](a). One gun was in fact moved in the desired direction, and after firing some shells returned to its previous position.
12. Cochrane is referring to the account of the Zulu army, etc., which was prepared by Chelmsford's staff before the campaign began and distributed to all regimental officers.
13. See fn. 11. It is not clear what Cochrane did after riding over to the camp force to ask for artillery support. Durnford was still with his mounted men when they started their retreat from the donga, but he then left them in order to co-ordinate the defence of the camp (see the statements of Essex and Gardner). Perhaps Cochrane returned to the donga just as the mounted men began their retreat and, in the confusion, was able to locate Durnford neither there nor subsequently.

Author's Notes.

1. This article forms part of the writer's doctoral thesis currently being undertaken at Birkbeck College, University of London, and, as such, copyright, for thesis purposes, resides with the author, Julian Whybra.
2. As is correct historical practice I have retained throughout the contemporary spelling of place names except where they appear otherwise in quotations.
3. I am grateful to F.W.D. Jackson for his assistance and helpful comments.