

125th Anniversary of Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift.

Compiled by Major Martin Everett

Isandlwana battlefield, 22nd January 2004.

Address from David Rattray.

“On this day, 125 years ago, a great Zulu impi under the command of Ntshingwayo ka Mahole Khoza overran Lord Chelmsford's camp at Isandlwana.

This superbly disciplined and motivated Zulu force, armed for the most part with sticks and spears, defeated an army of well trained and equipped British soldiers, on ground of its choosing. It was all over in a couple of hours. As the British fought their last stand high up on the hill shaped ominously like the sphinx on the cap badge of the 24th Regiment of Foot, there was an eclipse of the sun.

Part of the Zulu force that had been held in reserve then went on to ford the Buffalo River into Natal and attacked the Mission Station at Rorke's Drift. The tiny British garrison held out all night, winning 11 Victoria Crosses.

There is indeed little wonder that the Zulu War of 1879 attracts so much attention. The British Colony of Natal was stunned and the British Empire incredulous and dumbfounded.

The British press painted the Zulu warrior as larger than life – the noble savage personified – and today one shudders at the less than subtle intimations that the Zulu was almost an Englishman clad in a black skin. After all, how else could he have been responsible for inflicting such a calamitous defeat?

Historians have mumbled away for 125 years trying to explain why the British lost the battle. The ground was poor for defence, they say; foolish quartermasters refused to hand over ammunition to soldiers from units other than their own; someone forgot to bring along the screwdrivers needed to free the copper strapping from the ammo boxes – and, of course, untrained black soldiers, fighting for the British, broke and fled, leaving brave Tommy Atkins out on the line to face the Zulu music, which he did with his famous courage and resolve.

While these factors might have influenced the battle, it is difficult to believe that a modern British force such as this one, could be wiped out in a couple of hours because someone forgot the screwdrivers!

The reality is that Isandlwana was not a British defeat. It was a great Zulu victory and all credit to King Cetshwayo, the commander Ntshingwayo and his fine warriors for that.

The saga of Isandlwana is still shrouded in mystery. The accounts of the few British soldiers who escaped are often confused, contradictory and possibly self-serving. The great repositories of Zulu oral tradition were often ignored and the maelstrom of events in South Africa post 1879 often caused the links that ensured the fireside transfer of information between generations to be threatened or destroyed.

There can be no doubt that in smashing the British at Isandlwana, the Zulu carved for themselves a place in history, and it is appropriate that this nation be treated with the respect that it deserves. The Zulus are famous throughout the world. In every cockpit of every aircraft flying the world today the phonetic letter 'Z' is 'Zulu'. All because of Isandlwana.

It is sad and ironic that in the moment of their great victory, the Zulus sowed the seed of their own demise. The great regiments that had done so much damage to the British had themselves been so decimated in the fight, that the Zulus would never achieve anything like this on the battlefield again. King Cetshwayo said that there were not enough tears to mourn the dead.

Reinforcement and reinvasion were tactics available to the British and not to the Zulus. After other defeats and disasters including the Siege of Eshowe and the death of the Prince Imperial of France, Lord Chelmsford inevitably defeated the Zulus in that last, awful, ritual battle of Ulundi in July 1879.

Sadly, the drama of the first battles of the Zulu War have stolen the limelight. The real tragedy is to be found in the second invasion of Zululand and the subsequent events. The discerning readers will find here a story so powerful and moving.

They will find here a tale not of 'romantic history' and *Boys Own* 'daring do' but of a nation unwillingly pressed into war, now suing for peace and being told that peace would only come from the barrel of the gun.

They will read of the bravery of that prince of a man, Bishop Colenso. They might stumble upon the sermon that he preached from the pulpit of St Peter's in Pietermaritzburg to a congregation of bereaved white people who had lost their boys at Isandlwana: "are there no griefs – no relatives that mourn their dead – in Zululand?" and "wherein in our invasion of Zululand, have we shown that we are men who love mercy?"

They will read too of the terrible consequences of this war – of the Zulu Civil War that followed and of more than a century of hardship and indignity. They will, I hope reflect on the consequences still being felt by these fine people today. And yet there is much that is good that can come from such a tragic episode.

Large numbers of people from all over the world visit these famous battlefields. Isandlwana is one of the most atmospheric and unspoiled battlefields in the world. Every effort must be made to keep it that way, because apart from the obvious economic benefits this tourism is to this impoverished area, relationships are developing between black and white people; between traveller and local inhabitant.

There is a new and enlightened attitude here. There is a friendliness and an openness in the hearts of the great-great grandchildren of King Cetshwayo's warriors towards those who pass by. Visitors from abroad exhibit a warmth and a willingness to help in our new age of reconciliation.

Money raised in Britain is being spent today to raise the level of education in the area under the able leadership of Chief Mazibuko. More is needed, and I am sure more will come. There can be no greater act of reconciliation than to contribute to the education of these people.

Never should we forget that moment in the little church which stands on the battlefield at Rorke's Drift when, five years ago, the Zulu community and 125 soldiers of the Royal Regiment of Wales met in a service of reconciliation. The Zulu congregation sang to these representatives of the military machine that had ultimately come back and smashed them, and the men from Wales sang "Men of Harlech" back to them. We all wept.

The mountain of Isandlwana must be allowed to stand not just as a monument to the brave men on both sides who fought and fell there, but as a monument to the relationship of affection and respect that exists between two fine nations, despite the folly of war".

RORKE'S DRIFT SERVICE BRECON CATHEDRAL Sunday 18 January 2004

The first event of this year's 125th anniversary commemorations was the now traditional 'Rorke's Drift' service in Brecon Cathedral organised by the Brecon Branch of the Regimental Association of The Royal Regiment of Wales, which this year was held on Sunday 18 January. The Dean, the Very Reverend John Davies, welcomed a full congregation consisting of representatives of other Branches of the Association, Civic leaders, serving and former members of the Regiment and many families and friends. After the Regimental Branch Standards were received at the Altar, the Regimental Band of the Royal Welsh Regiment provided the musical accompaniment to the first hymn *All people that on earth to dwell*. There followed a moving tribute by the Colonel of the Regiment, Major General Christopher Elliott, covering the 24th Regiment's involvement in the campaign in 1879.

There then came the most poignant moment of the service, the two Bible readings; the first by Douglas Bourne, grandson of Colour Sergeant Frank Bourne who fought at Rorke's Drift; the second by Richard Heaton, grandson of Lieutenant Wilfred Heaton, who served with the Regiment throughout the campaign and was present at the final battle of Ulundi. It was a privilege to have both descendants present.

This led to the address, which was given by the Reverend Roger Taylor, the Honorary Chaplain to the Brecon Branch of the Association, his theme being appropriately 'remembrance'. During the final Hymn *O Worship the King*, a collection was taken and the Standards were recovered from the Altar. Part of the collection was donated to the Rorke's Drift Appeal, which assists in the development of facilities for the community at Rorke's Drift, KwaZulu Natal. The service ended with the Regimental Collect of the Royal Regiment of Wales and singing of the National Anthems. It was a most moving and special service for all those attending.

SERVICE OF RECONCILIATION
ST. AUGUSTINE'S CHURCH, NQUTU, Near ISANDLWANA
Sunday 25th January 2004

This was a most uplifting service on the theme of reconciliation conducted both in English and Zulu by the Bishop of Zululand, the Right Reverend A T Mdletshe. The Bishop was splendidly attired in a cope and mitre of bright colours to remind us that we were in Zululand. For those of us who had been in Brecon Cathedral the previous Sunday, this service in the homeland of Zulus was extraordinarily special and unforgettable. When the hymns finished then the Zulu chants and harmonies took over. Its impact will remain with us for a very long time.

The service was held at the church of St Augustine's Mission near Nqutu some ten kilometres from Isandlwana. The mission was an early outpost of the Anglican Church and its first church was actually destroyed during the Zulu war. However, it was rebuilt afterwards at a cost of £7,000 thanks to the extraordinary vision of Archdeacon Charles Johnson. The present Church holds 2,000 being one of the largest in Southern Africa and is celebrating its Centenary this year.

RORKE'S DRIFT
Sunday 25th January 2004

After the service the various parties moved on to Rorke's Drift where a hymn was sung in the little walled cemetery containing the 24th memorial. Historian David Rattray gave a short but stirring address about the immortal defence of Rorke's Drift. Wreaths were then laid at the 24th Memorial by Andy Sparks (Deputy High Commissioner) on behalf of the Queen, the people of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; Rhodri Morgan (First Minister) on behalf of the people of Wales; Brigadier Keenan (Defence Attaché) on behalf the Chief of Defence Staff and British Army; Major General Elliott on behalf of The Royal Regiment of Wales; and Brigadier Innes (Engineer-in-Chief) on behalf of the Corps of Royal Engineers.

Everyone then moved to the main Zulu memorial at Rorke's Drift to witness a wreath being laid by Dr Lionel Mtshali (Premier, KwaZulu Natal) on behalf of the people of the Province. All the British officers in uniform then saluted the Zulu memorial. It was a short but poignant ceremony; the bravery and courage by both sides had been remembered. Shortly afterwards, the British party returned to Fugitives' Drift where wreaths were laid to remember the valour of Lieutenants Melvill and Coghill in saving the Queen's Colour of the 1/24th. The official events surrounding the commemoration of 125th anniversary were now over. None of these would have been possible without the hospitality and generosity of spirit of David and Nicky Rattray, Pat Stubbs, Brigadier David Keenan and Arthur Konigkramer and the dedicated teams that support each of them.