

Barker – nearly a VC.

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Without previously intending to do so, I find I have become the Society's regular contributor on the Zulu War and its sometimes controversial Victoria Cross recipients. I am moved to write this piece as a consequence of a typical generous gesture by member Adrian Greaves, the founder of the Anglo Zulu War Historical Society.

He recently acquired one of the rarest books on the subject. For many years, it was thought that just one copy existed of Reverend Stalker's history *Natal Carbineers 1855-1911* and that its owner jealously guarded its contents. Upon reading his own copy, Adrian has come upon an incident that is of interest to those students of the VC and has kindly offered it for publication in our Journal.

The way that events moved in the shameful invasion of Zululand in January 1879, in which the British Government was forced to go along with the independent actions and decisions of Sir Bartle Frere, the Governor, and Lord Chelmsford, the Military Commander, meant that a great reliance was placed on colonial volunteers. Without regular cavalry, Chelmsford had to rely on locally raised regiments such as the Durban Mounted Rifles, Victoria Mounted Rifles and Natal Hussars, which were largely social clubs rather than trained fighting units. More prepared for the rigours of campaigning were the Frontier Light Horse, Natal Mounted Police and Natal Carbineers.

In order to augment the lack of sufficient Imperial units, large numbers of local volunteers were recruited. The military quality of these colonial volunteers varied considerably from good to very poor. Unfortunately for good relationships, the Imperial officers regarded all colonials as un-military and, more importantly to them, un-gentlemanly. As a consequence, there was little fraternisation between them. An exception was Colonel Evelyn Wood VC and his second in command, Major Redvers Buller. Both saw the value of local knowledge and the flexibility that volunteer cavalry gave to scouting and cattle rustling. The latter was a lucrative sideline and one that attracted recruits.

ISANDLWANA

When the invasion was turned into an ignominious retreat with the stunning Zulu victory at Isandlwana on 22 January, the bitter taste of defeat was sweetened by the lavish distribution of Britain's highest gallantry award to the defenders of Rorke's Drift. Another disaster at Hlobane led to another flurry of VCs being awarded. Despite the high proportion of colonial participants, no Crosses were even considered being offered to the local forces and it was not because there was no precedent, for the Cross had been awarded to local volunteers during the Maori Wars of the 1860s.

It took the efforts of the local government and press to have this injustice reversed and, although some of the Crosses took a good while to be awarded, several colonial soldiers were thus recognised.

In chronological terms, the first VCs of the Zulu War were the last recipients, namely Lieutenants Nevill Coghill and Teignmouth Melvill. They both died on the banks of the Buffalo River and did not receive their Crosses until 1907. There is, however, a case for suggesting that there could have been another candidate for first Zulu War VC.

We should pick up the story earlier that morning at the camp before the rocky outcrop called Isandlwana. Videttes of local horsemen had patrolled the hills some three to four miles away and, as early as sunrise, had spotted a heavy concentration of Zulus. Despite frequent messages being sent back to camp, there was little consternation and no thought of pulling back the thinly stretched line of the companies of the 24th Regiment into a stronger defensive position.

One of the volunteer horsemen was Trooper William Barker of the Natal Carbineers, who was one of the first to spot the huge Zulu build up. After a series of fighting retreats during the morning, Barker found himself back in the camp where he intended to change his tired horse, for even at this time, he still thought he needed a fresh horse in order to pursue the Zulus when they were bound to break. He later recalled,

few at that time had any idea that the camp was practically surrounded and that there was any chance of defeat.

Leaving his horses, Barker ran to his immediate front to join his comrades as they faced the advancing Zulus. After firing about a dozen rounds, Barker heard a rushing sound behind and on looking round saw that the Zulus had penetrated the camp from the rear. Pressed from the front, the

soldiers were forced back amongst the tents, where the Zulus were slaughtering the disorganised soldiers and natives.

Barker found his still-saddled horse, his fresh horse was writhing in its death throes, and joined a couple of comrades in riding to where they thought there would be a rallying point on the Nek. Here they were met by an overwhelming force of Zulus. Turning back into the camp, Barker and a companion followed the direction that they had seen an artillery carriage go. This was the only point that the Zulus had not yet closed and led to what later became known as the Fugitive's Trail.

Chased for six miles over extremely rugged terrain, the mounted survivors, for those on foot were soon overtaken and killed, reached the Buffalo River. This fast moving river was in full spate and many who had survived the dangers of the trail, perished beneath the swirling waters.

Barker managed to cross safely and began to climb the steep slopes on the Natal bank. Here he joined Lieutenant Charlie Raw's Mounted Basutos, who were giving covering fire. The group then moved out of range of the Zulus on the far bank. The danger, however, was not passed, for discontented relatives of the Zulus, who lived in the vicinity, attacked the survivors as they reached the Natal bank.

Looking back, Barton saw a distant figure scrambling on foot towards them. Thinking it was a friend; Barker left his companions and rode back down the hill. The struggling figure was not his friend but Lieutenant W.C.R. Higginson, the Adjutant of 2/3rd Natal Native Contingent. He had just left Lieutenants Melvill and Coghill on the shore with a promise that he would return with horses. With the hostile natives closing, Barker insisted the officer took his exhausted horse, as it was incapable of carrying them both up the steep slope. He obtained Higginson's promise that he would wait for him at the top of the hill. Higginson dug in his spurs and rode off to safety, while Barker struggled up the slope pursued by the same natives who had just killed Melvill and Coghill.

Meanwhile, Higginson had reached Charlie Raw and his group, who recognised Barker's horse. Certain that Barker was now dead, Higginson told them that he had found the horse down by the river. The horse was relinquished in exchange for a spare Basuto pony and Higginson rode off to the safety of Helpmakaar, where he made his report.

Raw and his companions rode back towards the river to check for any survivors and came upon Trooper Barker still running for his life. He had been pursued for about three miles, managing to fire the occasional round to keep natives at a distance.

Within a few days the truth of Higginson's escape and his supposedly humane gesture in searching for horses for Melvill and Coghill became well known. To avoid the shame and ignominy of his action, Higginson left Helpmakaar, complete with a black eye, and quietly disappeared into obscurity.

And there it would have ended but for a visit paid on 17 December 1881 to the Natal Carbineers by the outgoing Military Commander, Sir Evelyn Wood. During his speech to the officers he mentioned,

I have only now heard of a gallant act performed by a straggler, whose late arrival is well explained by his having, during the retreat, given up his horse to an officer, who was exhausted. Into this matter, it will be my pleasure to enquire more.

Thus Trooper, now Sergeant William Barker was recommended by Wood for the Victoria Cross.

There had already been a reaction in Whitehall over the seemingly lavish dispensing of the Cross and it could not have been such a surprise for Wood to receive the following reply,

Major General Sir Evelyn Wood VC

Sir

I am directed by the Field Marshal Commanding in Chief to acknowledge your letter of the 6th instant, and to acquaint you in reply, that statements re: Trooper Barker, Natal Carbineers, at the battle of Isandlwana, on 22 January 1879, having carefully been considered, His Royal Highness desires me to state that, while Trooper Barker's conduct on the occasion referred to is deserving of every commendation, there does not appear to be sufficient ground, according to the terms of the statute, for recommending him for the distinction of the Victoria Cross.

References.

All quotations are from *The Natal Carbineers 1855-1911* Rev. J. Stalker 1912