

HEATON'S DIARY – fresh evidence concerning events on the 22nd January 1879
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Wilfred Heaton was an army officer who served with the 24th Regiment of Foot (later to become the South Wales Borderers and now the Royal Regiment of Wales) between 1874 and 1896. For most of his adult life he kept a series of annual diaries and on his death in 1921 at the age of 67, these were deposited in the library of the family home at *Plas Heaton* at Henllan in Denbighshire. There the diaries remained undisturbed for the next 45 years until 1966 when his grand-son and the present owner of *Plas Heaton*, Mr Richard Heaton, donated the diary covering the year of 1879 to the South Wales Borderers Museum in Brecon. Once again the diary was to remain virtually unopened, apart from the occasional enquiry by an author or historian for a further 37 years until it was eventually transcribed in 2003.

This diary gives an account of the young Lieutenant Wilfred Heaton's personal experiences and activities during the Anglo-Zulu wars in South Africa at that time. Rather than an overview or commentary on the conduct of the war, the diary is an interesting insight into the personal experiences of a young Regimental officer who was on the fringe of the major events taking place at the time. He was, of course, only a junior subaltern officer for most of the Anglo-Zulu war, so he would not have been privy to the higher level decisions or actions being taken at that time, but his own recollections serve to confirm some of the events which have already been documented by professional historians. For this reason it is hoped that the Heaton diary will make a useful addition to the wealth of material published already on one of the most dramatic colonial wars to have taken place in British military history. In particular his entry for the 22nd January 1879 prompts a fresh look at the events surrounding the saving of the Colour by Lieutenants Melvill and Coghill. It is intended that this diary will be published in full as a book in due course, illustrated with the magnificent original watercolours painted by his brother officer Lieutenant William Whitelocke Lloyd, many of which have never been released before.

Henllan is a small village near Denbigh in the quiet, unspoilt countryside of North Wales and while pleasant and well kept, it would be unremarkable save for the large attractive country estate just on its outskirts. Here lies *Plas Heaton*, the seat of the Heaton family, who have been associated with the county of Denbighshire for the last 700 years. Although the Heaton family tree can be traced back in outline to circa 1475, the most verifiable records are to be found in the front pages of a magnificent leather bound family bible, published in 1727 during the reign of King George II, which is kept in the library at *Plas Heaton*. Here, generations of the family have recorded their lineage in great detail since 1736 when John Heaton married Martha Adamson in that year. Of particular interest is the entry for Wednesday 7 June 1854, when Wilfred Heaton was born at *Plas Uchaf*, the vicarage in the village of Llangedwyn, Montgomeryshire, where his father was the parish priest. In August 1868 at the age of 14, Wilfred went away to boarding school at Marlborough College in Wiltshire, one of England's premier public schools. Tall, slim and naturally fit, Wilfred made the College rugby team in his final term, and he also showed an inclination towards soldiering, joining the College Rifle Volunteer Corps, where he became a member of the Corps Shooting XI. Within three months of leaving school in the summer of 1873 the army had become his chosen profession and he was about to embark upon a long and distinguished period of service.

When Wilfred Heaton decided upon a military career he chose well and he was commissioned into the 24th Regiment of Foot on 28 February 1874. The next 20 years of his life were to be inextricably linked with one of the most famous and distinguished Welsh regiments as fate was soon to determine. After a period of training at the Regimental Depot in Brecon, he reported for duty with the 1st Battalion in Gibraltar on the 2nd June 1874, one week before his 20th birthday, along with Lieutenants Anstey, Daley, Coghill, Spring, Hodson and Atkinson. Little did they realise that less than 5 years later only two of them would still be alive. The next few months were spent preparing the Battalion for its forthcoming move to South Africa and at the end of November 1874 they set sail in the troopships *Simoon* and *Himalaya* arriving in Cape Town on New Year's Day 1875.

As the ninth frontier war in the Cape Colony came to an end in 1878, the 24th Foot was ordered to move north to the colony of Natal where General Lord Chelmsford was gathering his forces for the inevitable invasion of Zululand. Both battalions of the 24th Foot were to serve together in the central column and by September of 1878 the 1st Battalion was ready to move north from the Cape Colony to Natal. One of the first companies to move was D Company, in which Wilfred Heaton was a subaltern officer, with Major Upcher as his company commander, and on the 25th September they moved on foot from King William's Town to East London on the coast and then by sea northwards to Durban. By mid December 1878, Colonel Richard Glyn, formerly commanding officer the 1st/24th Foot, had taken over the central column and both battalions were assembling in Natal. As the new year of 1879 dawned over the colony, the 2nd/24th Foot was ready to join the central column while the 1st/24th Foot was at, or moving towards, Rorke's Drift, with the exception of two of its companies. Of these, G Company was in the process of moving from Pietermaritzburg to Helpmakaar, while Lieutenant Wilfred Heaton was still on the coast at Durban with D Company.

At this point that we pick up Heaton's diary, with entries being transcribed verbatim. While the arrival of a new year is usually a time for celebration, the Regiment was far too busy for such festivities at the start of 1879. Most of the 1st and 2nd battalions 24th Foot were gathering on the borders of Zululand for the impending invasion and this particular new year saw Lieutenant Heaton at Durban, immersed in the daily routine of his company and receiving drafts for the invasion columns. As his diary for the day records:

Wednesday 1 January

Upcher away at Binns for some shooting. Did Orderly Room for him. Kept in the District Office a long time arranging about tents for the troops to land. Went to the Club and saw about the Governor's horse and started a parcel to Major Black. Went to a picnic in the Botanical Gardens and got nicely wet coming home. Dried at Philips. Letter to Melville this morning about Sergt Bradbury's character.

By the end of the week, orders had come through for D and G Companies to move up the line of communication to Helpmakaar. As the column moved off, so the weather changed and it became a hard muddy journey. By 18 January, they had passed through Pietermaritzburg and Greytown and were at the Mooi River. As Lieutenant Heaton recalls:

Saturday 18 January

Left 4.45 for Moir River 12 miles where we had to camp as the coy waggon got off the pont and upset which made us too late to start off again. Thunderstorm passed over grog ration bathing parade. Lucky Lloyd to dive for lost articles in the river did not recover any. One sheep drowned in crossing and one lost. Found a letter at the Hotel for Smith Dorrien took charge of it.

The invasion of Zululand had begun a week earlier on 11 January, but such was the passage of information, that the event went un-remarked further down the line of communication and by the time that Lieutenant Heaton arrived at Helpmakaar on the 21st January, the central column was camped at Isandlwana. Lieutenant Heaton's D Company arrived to find G Company already set up. Upcher had shot some pigeons at Sand Spruit on the way, but Company administration was such that the evening meal took some time to prepare. Lieutenant Heaton however did not go hungry:

Tuesday 21 January

Left about 5 to Sand Spruit where we breakfasted. Got some mess stores from the shop at tremendous prices. Went on 3pm to Helpmakaar got in at 6. Upcher shot 4 pigeons at Sand Spruit in three shots. Found Rainforth, Palmer and Clements at Helpmakaar men ordered to leave all behind except Blankets waterproofs and field kit. Found the conductor asleep on the waggon coming up the hill and had to shout him out. Dined with Rainforth ie eat his Dinner as mine was not ready.

As dawn broke on 22 January, D and G Companies were ordered to move forward to join the central column, but they were blissfully unaware of the dramatic events unfolding 20 miles away at Isandlwana when the full force of King Cetshwayo's army fell upon that unsuspecting camp. That afternoon, the reserve force of the Zulu army swept on to Rorke's Drift. In overall command at the mission station was Major Henry Spalding of the 104th Foot, but earlier in the day he had returned to Helpmakaar, apparently to chase up the move of the two Companies. Little did he know that one of the most heroic defensive actions in British military history was about to take place and Lieutenant Heaton records this fateful day as follows:

Wednesday 22 January

Orders came in for Rainforth's Coy to leave as well as ours. Col Hassard and Baxter came in for breakfast. All goods bar light field kit and one blanket gone with stores. A lot of canteen stores for both Batts came in made arrangements to forward them to the drift. Rainforth's Coy left at 2.30 ours just after 3. Met Spalding outside, after him any number of mounted men flying from the camp at Col Glyn's column which the Zulus had cut up. 5 Coys of ours killed Col Puelleine Wardell Anstey Daly Dyson White Pullen. Coghill and Melville escaped with Queens Colour. Hospital at the Drift and detachment 2/24th cut up. Got orders to retire on Helpmakaar got in about 11. and made Laager there put on outpost duty 12.30 to 3am.

Let us examine this entry in more detail. Having arrived at Helpmakaar only the night before, both D and G Coys were ordered to move forward to Rorke's Drift the next day, so Lieutenant Heaton would have had little or no time to become acquainted with the current situation. Once all the stores had been prepared, the two Coys moved off at 30 minute intervals and Lieutenant Heaton is quite specific about this. He then states "met Spalding outside, after him any number of mounted men flying from the camp at Col Glyn's column." Outside

where? Does he mean the Mess or outside Helpmakaar on the way to Rorke's Drift? In his own report, submitted after the battle, Major Spalding states that he arrived at Helpmakaar at 3.45pm where he met both Coys. There would seem to be a discrepancy here; the two Coys were not under any orders to wait for Spalding, so they had no reason to delay. If Lieutenant Heaton left at the time that he states in his diary, then he would have been about 3 miles from Helpmakaar on the track to Rorke's Drift when he met Major Spalding at 3.45pm. Spalding, however, reports that he met the Coys at Helpmakaar at that time. Accusations of ignorance, incompetence and even cowardice have since been levelled at Spalding, so it could be argued that it was in his own interests for the time to be as late as possible in support of his decision not to engage with the enemy at Rorke's Drift. By this stage he would have been aware of the disaster at Isandlwana and it would have been a logical assumption that a similar fate awaited the mission station at Rorke's Drift. Given the timings in both Heaton's diary and Spalding's report, by the time that he had the two Coys under his command and had moved some of the way back to Rorke's Drift, the battle there had clearly begun. Whether his surprise intervention from an unexpected direction with two infantry companies might have influenced the battle at that time is a matter for debate. Major Spalding however seemed to decide that discretion was the better part of valour and he withdrew to Helpmakaar, getting in, according to Lieutenant Heaton, at about 11pm. Allowing about 3 to 4 hours to march the distance between the two locations, they would have left the Rorke's Drift locality at about last light - say 7pm. Therefore it is consistent with Heaton's timings rather than Spalding's, which the companies set out from Helpmakaar in the first place at the time stated in his diary.

He then records that "- Coghill and Melville escaped with Queens Colour" which seems to throw fresh light on the events surrounding this emotive and heroic incident. Flags, banners and standards have long been rallying points on the field of battle and over the centuries they have come to embody the honour, pride and spirit of a regiment. Each infantry battalion would have 2 such flags, or Colours as they are correctly called; one being the Queen's (or King's) Colour bearing the Union Flag, the other being the Regimental Colour which is unique to that battalion. Battle Honours awarded by the Sovereign would be emblazoned on the Colours and until the time of the Boer War they were carried into battle, fiercely guarded by officers and senior NCOs as it was a disgrace for the Colours to fall into the hands of the enemy. On 22 January, both battalions of the 24th had their Colours at Isandlwana, but for some unexplained reason, the 1st/24th had the Queen's Colour only with them, the Regimental Colour having been left under guard at Helpmakaar. When it was apparent that the camp was about to be overwhelmed by the Zulus, it is alleged that Lieutenant Colonel Pulleine directed the Adjutant, Lieutenant Teignmouth Melvill to take the Queen's Colour of the 1st/24th to a place of safety.

With the Colour apparently furled in its leather case, Lieutenant Melvill rode off the field of battle and fought his way along the only escape route until he made the banks of the Buffalo River, which was in full spate from recent heavy rain. Still pursued by Zulus, he plunged his horse into the raging torrent only to become unseated, but he managed to make the comparative safety of a large rock protruding from the water. As we know from Lieutenant Higginson's report, Lieutenant Neville Coghill had already reached the safety of the far river bank, but on seeing Lieutenant Melvill in trouble and though injured himself, he immediately turned back into the water to assist him. As Melvill and Coghill struggled back to dry land on the Natal side of the river, they lost their grip on the Colour, which was carried away down river in the fast moving water. As they made their way up the river bank they were confronted by Zulus who were already on that side of the river and killed. Several authors report that Lieutenant Melvill's watch must have stopped at the time that he entered the Buffalo River. While this cannot be accurately corroborated, it is safe to assume that watches in 1879 were not properly waterproof and the time of 2.20pm fits well with the eyewitness accounts of events on that day.

At this stage, the tragic truth of the events surrounding the Queen's Colour had not yet reached Helpmakaar, so Heaton recorded only that the two officers had escaped, hopefully to turn up soon. We must assume that this information came from eye witness accounts on the battlefield itself, because had it come from witnesses on the banks of the Buffalo River then Heaton would have been told that both officers had already been killed and the Colour lost. It is significant that Heaton tells us that Melvill and Coghill escaped with the Colour, rather than the fact that they were killed in their attempt, so it is argued that they left the battlefield together, rather than separately as some historical accounts indicate. This does not have to mean that they rode off side by side, as depicted by Alphonse de Neuville in his dramatic painting, but it does imply that it was their joint endeavour to prevent the Colour falling into enemy hands and as Regimental officers they would have considered this to be their bounden duty.

Coghill had injured his leg the previous day in an accident, so he was left behind with the 1st Battalion, rather than join Colonel Glyn when Lord Chelmsford split his column earlier that day. There is no clear record of what tasks he was given, but it is reasonable to assume that he was attached to Lieutenant Colonel Pulleine's headquarters. Some authors assert that Coghill may have been despatched, or decided on his own initiative, to ride to Rorke's Drift or Helpmakaar to give warning of the Zulu advance, or perhaps to call for reinforcements but it would have been impossible for them to arrive in time to be of any value, given the speed and ferocity of the Zulu assault. There is also an inference that Coghill left the battlefield early to save his own skin, but this is entirely without foundation. Had desertion been on his mind, he would have fled before the right horn of the Zulu army moved round behind Isandlwana, thus blocking the track which led back to Rorke's Drift and the fact that he was forced to use the fugitives trail can only mean that he was still at Isandlwana in the closing stages of the battle, when any attempt on his part to call for reinforcements would have been entirely

superfluous. Great significance also seems to be made of the fact that Coghill was on the home bank of the Buffalo River when Melvill was in difficulty in the water, implying therefore that he had left sometime earlier. We can only imagine the confusion, chaos and terror experienced by those attempting to escape along that rocky and treacherous route and the fact that Coghill was ahead of Melvill, who would have been moving more slowly with the Colour in hand, is perfectly reasonable in the circumstances, despite the fact that Coghill's horse had been struck by Zulu assegais on several occasions. If Melvill was visible to Coghill when he was struggling in the river, then it is logical to assume that Coghill was no distance at all from the river bank, which suggests that he was only minutes ahead of his brother officer, as Donald Morris also describes in his book *The Washing of the Spears*. This scenario is supported by Lieutenant Heaton's diary entry that Melvill and Coghill escaped together with the Colour.

There has been considerable debate about whether Lieutenant Colonel Pulleine gave Lieutenant Melvill specific orders to save the Queen's Colour, or if this was his own decision in the absence of his commanding officer, who may well have been killed by this stage. It has also been suggested that Melvill was attempting to rally the troops with the presence of the Colour, but this is highly unlikely. In the early stages of the battle this would have been neither necessary nor practical as the Companies were too far forward and once the withdrawal turned into whole sale slaughter, Melvill would never have risked the Colour falling into enemy hands. For this reason alone, his intention would have been one of saving the Colour. There are also aspersions cast in some quarters about his leaving the field of battle in the face of the enemy. In his report after the war, General Wolseley unkindly remarked that he would have preferred these two officers to have died closer to the scene of battle in the company of the men under their command. In fact, neither was in a command appointment at the time, so there is no question of them abandoning soldiers to their fate.

Thankfully, history is more generous and understands the significance of the price they paid for their Regimental pride and loyalty, for which they were subsequently awarded posthumous VCs. What is quite clear is that Lieutenant Melvill would have known full well the intrinsic value and significance of the Colours and it is suggested that there would not be any regimental officer, then or since, who would have questioned for a moment the action that he took, whether or not he was ordered to do so by his commanding officer. The Colours of the 2nd/24th Foot were lost completely, because it would seem there was no one from that battalion in the camp headquarters at the time who was in a position to make any kind of decision in the heat of the Zulu assault. That said, it is inconceivable that the 2nd/24th would have left the camp with Lord Chelmsford on the morning of 22 January without making some contingency plan for the safekeeping of their Colours by their sister battalion. We will probably never know what those arrangements were but it is hard to imagine that the 2nd/24th Colours would have been consciously abandoned, adding weight to the supposition that when Melvill and Coghill escaped with their Colour it was a final, almost spontaneous act of desperation when all about them was lost.

There is an associated mystery surrounding the Colour and its case during its immersion in the Buffalo River. We are told that the Colour was furled in its leather sleeve (akin to a close fitting umbrella cover, with a brass hood and draw strings at the bottom) when Melvill left Isandlwana, but when the Colour was found in the river about 10 days later the case was not there. As most regimental officers will agree, it is exceedingly difficult to insert or remove a Colour from its case single-handed, and it usually takes two people to roll the Colour around the pike and slide it in or out of the case. Clearly Melvill would not have been able to enjoy such luxury during the battle, so if the Colour was cased initially then there could have been no question of him removing the case, by accident or design, while in flight along the fugitives trail to the river. By the same token, if the raging river was strong enough to pull the Colour out of its tight fitting leather case then the Colour itself, made of fragile silk embroidered with gold and silver thread, would have been torn to shreds and probably never found. This leads to the possibility that perhaps the Colour was not cased after all and maybe de Neuville's painting of an uncased Colour (albeit the wrong one) leaving Isandlwana is more accurate than we think.

Lieutenant Heaton's entry for this day is also interesting for a number of other reasons. He had received a good public school education and had been tutored by a master of classics, yet his entry for the day in no way captures the high drama of the events that had just taken place. His own company might easily have been at Isandlwana, in which case Lieutenant Heaton would have been slaughtered along with the rest of his comrades of the 1st/24th, yet the loss of his commanding officer and many of his personal friends seems to have had little impact upon him. Likewise, the survivors fleeing from Isandlwana would have painted graphic details of untold horror, but all of this passes without comment. No doubt the nature of the Victorian army officer demanded a stiff upper lip and no display of emotion, but it is difficult to comprehend that his only remark in the whole of his diary on the defence of Rorke's Drift was to be " - Hospital at the Drift and detachment 2/24th cut up. " One could argue from this that, perhaps, the action was not as dramatic and significant as historians have since recorded it to be, but even the most dispassionate analysis would refute this view, given what is now known about the events which took place that night. A more reasonable explanation is that, with poor lines of communication and slow passage of information, the full impact of what had happened was not immediately apparent especially to a junior officer some distance from the battle and it was probably not being discussed openly by senior officers anyway, to obfuscate an unmitigated disaster by Lord Chelmsford and his staff.

In his entry for 22 January, Lieutenant Heaton thought that Melvill and Coghill had escaped with the Queen's Colour, but when Lieutenant Higginson of the Natal Native Contingent who had witnessed the events

at the Fugitives Drift made his report, a search party led by Major Black was sent out to see if the Colour could be recovered. The bodies of Melvill and Coghill were soon found as was the Colour, which was wedged against a rock and protruding above the water level now that the flooding had receded. The news soon made its way to Helpmakaar:

Tuesday 4 February

Clements had a fatigue party of mounted men cleared out the sacks except one row from the stores we occupy and built up a couple of covers for the men inside the fort. Some letters at last from Mother, Kit and Wolfe also receipt for the rebate of income tax from V. Holt and Co. Reports in that Zulus to assemble at full noon at Kings Kraal and advance to the attack of this and other forts. Upcher heard from Colonel Queens Colour recovered by Major Black and Melville and Coghill buried. Parcel of clothing from drift for men 2/24th in hosp etc.

The Colour was taken first of all to Rorke's Drift, where amongst emotional scenes it was handed over to Colonel Richard Glyn who had first received the Colour on parade at the Curragh in Northern Ireland in 1866. It was then brought up to the base at Helpmakaar where Lieutenant Heaton had the great distinction of taking it into safe custody once more:

Wednesday 5 February

Lots of letters in for sorting etc. First 24th prisoner for some days. Major Black brought back the Queens Colour from the drift. The Col came up with him and the colour escort. I received the Colour. Col and Black made speeches about finding it in the river and Melville and Coghill's bodies and their burial. Reports of Zulus crossing and advancing on Fort Pine and Utrecht also below and a reverse to Col Pearson's Column from Bengough's Camp. Williams Policeman came in for Drinks. All our rations for day and part for tomorrow run out by Contingent at lunch. Issue of rum.

The Colours of the 2nd/24th Foot were lost completely during the battle, but the pike staff and crown of one was eventually recovered. This and the Colours of the 1st/24th Foot now reside in the Regimental Chapel in Brecon Cathedral. The Battle Honour awarded for this campaign and which is carried on the Colours today reads South Africa 1877-8-9 and the question is often asked why is there no mention of either Isandlwana or Rorke's Drift as the Regiment fought with great honour on both occasions, even though the outcome was different in each case. Battle Honours are not given lightly and are usually awarded only when the whole battalion has been involved and where the action played a significant part in the outcome of the campaign. At Rorke's Drift only one infantry company was involved, so the action did not meet the prime criterion for such an award, despite the heroism that took place that night. Isandlwana was a defeat and while the Regiment remembers it with honour and pride, it was considered more appropriate that the whole period of service in South Africa including the ninth frontier war should be a collective honour.

Queen Victoria bestowed a unique privilege upon the Regiment by placing a wreath of immortelles upon the Queen's Colour which recognised not only the immortal defence of Rorke's Drift but which also paid tribute to those who gave their lives at Isandlwana and during the whole campaign. No other regiment has ever received such an accolade. There was a South African campaign medal with a bar upon the ribbon to denote the actual years of service in that country and Lieutenant Heaton was awarded his to cover the ninth frontier war, as well as the Zulu Wars, between 1877 and 1879. He was also mentioned in despatches for his attempt to save the life of a brother officer who drowned during a swimming accident while in the Cape Colony in 1877.

Lieutenant Heaton was far removed from the politics which had been employed by the British Government and its representatives in South Africa to prosecute this war and he would have seen the year from an entirely different perspective. Starting on the sun drenched beaches of Durban and finishing at home on the rain swept hills of the Brecon Beacons, the year of 1879 was one of the most dramatic in Lieutenant Wilfred Heaton's life. In later years he was to see active service in Burma with the 2nd Bn South Wales Borderers (as the 24th Foot became in 1881), get married in India, and then return to South Africa at the end of the Boer War as a Colonel on the Reserve in command of one of the newly formed Garrison Regiments. He was also to provide valuable reserve service during the First World War, but the experiences of the Zulu Wars left an indelible impression upon him, being a year he would not forget for the rest of his life.

He died on 29 September 1921 at the age of 67 and he was buried in a simple grave in the cemetery at Henllan. So passed away one of the Regiment's most loyal and hardworking officers who had always held true to the ideals and standards upon which the reputation of the 24th Regiment of Foot and the South Wales Borderers was built. He had been present during the most momentous year in the Regiment's illustrious history and his diary of 1879 is a valuable record for posterity in that respect.