

COLONEL DESMOND O'CALLAGHAN, R.A. IN NATAL

Extracted from "Guns, Gunners and Others", CHAPMAN AND HALL 1925

By Sir Desmond O'Callaghan

O'Callaghan, after considerable involvement in the work of the Ordnance Committee was posted to South Africa in April 1891 as Commander Royal Artillery.

Casting around for adventures he found, by accident, that there were two machine guns as Eshowe. These, though they belonged to a detachment of mounted infantry there, obviously ought to be inspected. His General saw through the excuse, since he could obviously send an artificer to check them, but he agreed he could go to Zululand on the condition that he wrote a full report on Eshowe and its surroundings as a military station. Orders also came from England that he was to inspect No. 10 Mountain Battery which, although quartered in Pietermaritzburg, were really outside his command.

After several weeks on manoeuvres his time was his own and he started for Eshowe with two staff officers. At the Drift across the Tugela, which they crossed in a small boat, was a very clean little hotel in which they each got a room but there were only two baths. Giving the baths to the other two he elected to swim in the river instead and boasted afterwards that it was superior to an inadequate bath in a small washtub. Some weeks later on his return trip he asked the landlord if there was anything to shoot, meaning ducks or pigeon, and the landlord looking at his watch said "you're a bit too late for the crocs"... "why didn't you tell me last time there were crocs"... "Oh, they hardly ever take a white man." With mixed feelings he walked down to the river to find a five-foot baby croc sitting on the rock he had previously used to undress and the parents in the pool below. The next morning he bathed in the washtub.

His time in Zululand was full of interest. In 1892 Eshowe was a camp with the Governor and Headquarters in permanent buildings but the mounted infantry, a detachment of the 84th were in kraals, one of which he shared with a subaltern.

Making Eshowe his headquarter he rode to most of the battlefields of the Zulu and the First Boer War. And for the first he was lucky to find an Induna, who had won his head ring bleeding his spear there, through the magistrate putting him up, he had the battle of Isandlwana described by a participant. Asked if he thought the British fought bravely, he said "Yes, your people fought bravely but I thought it unchivalrous (but putting it more politely) to shoot us down at seven and eight hundred yards instead of meeting us hand to hand."....

That night after dinner he asked if he might check his pony. "By all means and if you care to see a Zulu Dance there is to be one tonight to celebrate the arrival of some beer from another Kraal". After some consultation between the Induna of the morning and the Magistrate, the Ringmen went through a war dance, striking their shields with sticks (assegais being illegal, sticks were carried instead, but the real thing, concealed in the thatch of the kraals was always hand in case it was wanted) advancing and retiring with the high prancing step which goes with wondrous vigour and rhythm; while each warrior with his feathered head thrown back, sending his body this way and that, and shouting his war cry, was a very picturesque and imposing figure.

After much applause and the passing round of the gift beer the Induna took the Magistrate to one side and there was long conversation which O'Callaghan could see had something to do with himself. "Queer people", said the Magistrate, "the next Dance is for you and I will try to give you an idea of its meaning as it goes along a dance quite unlike the last. I have only seen it once" The Zulus then formed three ranks, the women in front, the boys next and then the warriors, all ringmen. Slowly and in perfect step the women advanced singing a strange and mournful dirge, swaying their bodies, drooping their heads and occasionally throwing their arms up, with a momentary gesture of despair. "This said the Magistrate" is the Lament of Rorke's Drift, I will try to translate. The women's dirge was given out in short sentences;

Ah, you have fought enough! Let us have no more strive. We who have lost husbands, sons we mothers cry from our hearts. "Enough." The Braves have fought well, but many have died, Enough! Enough!.

The women then went slowly back, opening out their ranks as they retreated, and through the intervals came the younger men who had not bloodied their spears to win the head ring. With them it appeared that every moment every gesture was restrained. It seemed that intense vitality was curbed for the occasion and that a stern sense of discipline held in check the inborn warlike spirit. They too sung of losses, of the death of fathers and brothers, the sacred memories of those who had paid the forfeit in setting them a noble example. Through the retreating line of boys came the ringmen, warriors who had survived Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift. The words and spirit of their song were much the

same as the others had sung but the striking part of their advance was the contrast between their former warlike dance and the low and dignified step with which they now marched. A stamp on the ground at the end of each stride punctuated, as it were, the end of the brief sentences of the lament, and as they halted. Their pose as they tossed their arms aloft – a salute to those they had survived was superb! It was a sight he would never forget.

From Eshowe he visited John Dunn. A shrewd man, he had taught Ketchwayo some little nuances in hand to hand fighting, which helped him much in quarrels with other tribes, such as Swazis, Basutos etc. The triple line in which the front rank carried double barrel shot guns loaded with slugs; the second stabbing assegais; and the rear rank the long throwing assegai, was entirely his idea. O'Callaghan had a long talk with him especially as to his three line attack, and the difficulty he had with the Zulu "War Office" in getting them even to entertain or adopt new ideas!

On his return to Cape Town he wrote and sent in his report to reside in its appointed pigeon hole in the War Office and naturally expected to hear no more. Nor did he till eight or nine years later after the second Boer War when a gunner chatting about his share of the fighting revealed that the report was the only thing they had to rely on along the east side of the Zulu border.

Surgeon Major Reynolds – His 'later life' view on world politics .

Lee Stevenson.

"December 1921, Friday 9th

There seems to be an agreement quite settled at last between England & Ireland but I don't think it has any serious foundation. I don't like from whatever view it is taken.

Neither of the People seem quite satisfied & I think the North positively disliked it.

The Sein Feiners are not likely to cast solid foundations. They are nearly all a lot of corner boys; but England wants to cut off Ireland even more than Ireland does England as former has too much on hands even without Ireland, besides the settlement makes America friendly which is a great asset for us. It may last for 2 years not longer in my opinion.

The future Evil is Egypt; now made raging for her complete independence & will equal England's own policy of self determination of all countrys (sic) in strong support: I don't know where this policy is going to end for England as it can't suit her."

Reynolds was staying in Cairo with his daughter. (His son in law was an Engineer working on the Aswan Dam at the time)