

The Natal Colonial Telegraph, 1879

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Author's Introduction

A number of readers have been in contact with me following the publication of Part 1 of the article *Signalling in the Anglo Zulu War* in the December 2003 issue of the Journal, and interest has been expressed in the part played by the Natal Colonial Telegraph system at the time of the war. I was aware when I wrote the article, which was principally about the army signalling operations, that the army's communications within Zululand depended vitally for their lines of communication rearwards on the colonial telegraph system and its civilian operators, and that this was a gap in the story. However, my earlier research, conducted mostly in England, was insufficient to include it, and a visit to the Natal archives in Pietermaritzburg was on the future agenda.

One of those to contact me was Mr John Dickson, Chairman of the Natal Study Group, who has conducted research into the post and telegraph history of Natal, although his interest lies mainly in the postal aspects. He has generously lent me copies of some documents pertaining to the colonial telegraph system which he has obtained from various archives and other sources in Natal. As a result mostly of his spadework I have been able to write a little bit about the development of the Natal Telegraph system up to and during the war. Like army communications at the time, it was in its infancy.

I apologise to any reader of the Journal who may justifiably feel that he has already had a surfeit, both on the topic of communications during the war and the output of this particular author's word-processor, but it may be of interest to some in rounding off the story.

The Telegraph Line between Durban and Pietermaritzburg

The introduction of the electric telegraph to Natal was planned in about 1863. The first route to be completed was a short one, between Durban and The Point (where ships were unloaded), just a couple of miles, but the first route of strategic significance was between Durban and Pietermaritzburg. This latter route, just over seventy miles, was constructed by Siemens and Halske, a company which had previously built some routes in the Cape Colony. It was opened for traffic on 24 June 1864, and the Natal Electric Telegraph Company, a private company set up for the purpose, operated the new system.

Discussions also took place to link up with the Cape Colony telegraph system for commercial, political, and military reasons, although the Governor (Wodehouse) and the Natal Legislative Assembly were of the opinion that it did not warrant the expense of construction and maintenance, so that idea suffered from more talk than action for quite some years.

The Government takes over

On 1 September 1873 the Natal Government took over the telegraph system from the Natal Electric Telegraph Company, paying £224 for the route from Durban to The Point and £650 for the route from Durban to Pietermaritzburg – apparently disproportionate amounts considering the distances. Private enterprise had introduced the Natal system but the Government took over when it was established and commercially viable (as also happened in the Cape in the same year, 1873). To some extent this mirrored what had happened in Britain when the Post Office took over all the numerous competing, inefficient, and technically incompatible private telegraph companies in 1869. Generally, in the rest of Europe, governments had controlled their telegraph systems from inception, while in the United States private companies continued to provide the service.

In the two Dutch republics of South Africa development of the telegraph in the 1860s and 1870s, like other infrastructure, lagged the two British colonies due to such factors as lack of money, a widely scattered population, a pastoral economy, and in the case of the Transvaal, an incapacity to organise. There was little stimulus to communicate with anybody – until, that is, diamonds and gold were discovered.

The Telegraph Line between Natal and Cape Colony

The Cape's telegraph system was progressing well since their first telegraph line had been opened between Cape Town and Simonstown in April 1860. They were better able to fund development, and they had more expertise than Natal. The line to Kimberley, to serve the diamond mining industry, had been completed by Siemens Brothers in January 1876. Although a section of it passed through the Orange Free State (from just north of Colesberg almost to Kimberley), it was paid for and operated by the Cape government. The Cape telegraph line eastwards reached Kokstad in 1878. In contrast, all that Natal had at this time was the route between Durban and Pietermaritzburg. Twenty years later, after the

development of railways and the discovery of gold, and as the Anglo-Boer war approached, the map of the South African telegraphs was to be quite different, but that is another story.

In Natal the telegraph link to the Cape Colony continued to be discussed, and the possible route was debated at length, coloured somewhat by partisan interests. The debate was about whether Natal should connect with it through the eastern Cape (the Transkei) or through the Orange Free State. The former, although the more direct route, ran through troublesome native territory, and so was considered to be susceptible to damage and difficult to maintain; the latter route, it was argued by some, would promote trade with the interior and be more commercially successful.

In October 1876, thirteen years after it began to be discussed, the Cape Government offered terms to build the route in Natal from Kokstad to Pietermaritzburg but there was continued vacillation by the Natal government, the detail of the rather tiresome wrangling of no interest here. Late in 1877, the High Commissioner (Frere), based in Cape Town and no doubt with an eye on impending strategic requirements, decided it was time to intervene. He and the Lieutenant-Governor of Natal (Bulwer) agreed that the Cape's offer to build a route from Kokstad to Pietermaritzburg would be accepted.

The big decision having been taken, lesser arguments followed, for example whether wooden poles (cheaper), or iron poles (more expensive, but much more durable, and the Colonial Engineer's preferred option) should be used. Inevitably, wooden poles were used! They were made of 'sneezewood' – so called because its irritating sawdust had the same nasal effect as snuff.

The mundane subject of telegraph poles is almost certainly one which the readers of this Journal will never have spent any time thinking about whatsoever. Yet to those in the late nineteenth century who constructed civil or military telegraph lines, often of considerable length through relatively undeveloped country with poor transport, and to those who had to pay for them, it was an important issue. The poles formed a costly part of a new route. The enduring debate revolved around such factors as the characteristics of the wood, particularly strength, longevity, and freedom from warping or twisting, the local availability of different types, survivability against the effects of fire, decay or being eaten by insects, cost including transport to site, maintenance requirement, and the likelihood of theft.

Telegraph poles erected in unwooded areas were liable to be cut down for firewood, particularly if the line ran near a recognised laagering site where fires were lit after outspanning. Iron poles had many advantages but were initially expensive and, if the line was not very well insulated from the pole, tended to leak current to earth. Sneezewood, also locally known as *umtatie*, was chosen for the Cape - Natal route because of its availability in the eastern Cape (the township of Sneezewood will be found on a map between Kokstad and Umzimkulu), its resinous heartwood which gave long life, and its suitable size and girth - sixty year old trees produced poles of about twenty-one feet in height and twenty inches in circumference (poles were slimmer in those days) and a pole of this size weighed about 225 pounds (100 kg). One unlikely advantage of sneezewood poles was that they were rather crooked and unsightly, making them less likely than other types to be stolen as a replacement for broken disselbooms (shafts) on ox wagons.

All having now been decided, the route from Kokstad to Umzimkulu was completed in January 1878 and the route onwards from Umzimkulu reached Pietermaritzburg on 12 April 1878. Captain Fraser, the head of the Cape Telegraph Department's construction party, was congratulated on his work, successfully completed in the face of many difficulties. The telegraph line between Umzimkulu and Pietermaritzburg was at last opened on 23 April 1878, and soon afterwards the telegraph service was established between

Cape Town and Pietermaritzburg.

Also in April 1878 a second telegraph route was built between Durban and Pietermaritzburg, this one beside the new railway.

That, then, was the situation that existed in Natal some months before the start of the Zulu war – two telegraph routes between Durban and Pietermaritzburg, and at last a route to Cape Colony. The Natal Telegraph Department, although responsible for the telegraph from the time the Natal government took it over in 1873, still did not have its own telegraph construction party, nor for that matter any great expertise in running a telegraph system, and were assisted by the Cape Telegraph Department. A number of key staff were seconded from the Cape to help Natal over this period, in particular Mr (later Sir) James Sivewright, since 1877 the General Manager of the Cape Colony telegraph system.

The Telegraph Line to the Tugela River

In late 1878, a new telegraph route was built from Durban to Verulam, about twenty miles north of Durban, following the line of the railway which was being built. The telegraph line was built by the Natal Public Works Department.

By now, the Zulu war was looming and military planning was beginning to influence development of the telegraph. The then Major John Crealock, Lord Chelmsford's Military Secretary, was based in Pietermaritzburg, and letters between him and the government authorities, beginning in early November 1878, show how Chelmsford was anxious to extend the newly-built Verulam telegraph line on to Stanger,

nearer to the Zululand border at the Tugela river, and that it was agreed that this would be done, the cost to be paid “from the military chest”. Then a further request was made by Crealock on 28 November, the minute to the Colonial Secretary headed “Pressing” (*i.e.* Urgent). In it he states that “the Lieut.-General [Chelmsford] is very anxious that an extension of the proposed line of telegraph on the coast should be made from Stanger to the Lower Tugela Drift, and he trusts that H.E. the Lieut-Governor [Bulwer] will sanction this arrangement.”

While time was rapidly running out and nobody questioned the need, much space in the correspondence between Crealock, Mr C. B. H. Mitchell, the Colonial Secretary, Captain A. Hime, the Colonial Engineer, and Mr James Sivewright (mentioned above), was taken up by the question of cost and who should pay. The extension was eventually sanctioned on 10 December as an “Imperial charge, pending adjustment when affairs in the Colony become settled”. The cost for the section from Stanger to the Lower Tugela Drift was £1260, calculated at the rate of 14 miles at £90 per mile – a price confirmed by Sivewright, when he was consulted, as “having regard to the price which at present has to be paid for both transport and labour, I consider ... to be a very reasonable rate indeed for this work.”

Captain Fraser of the Cape Telegraph Department, assisted by Inspector Bayly and his Cape construction party who were preparing to start work on a long telegraph line to the Transvaal (see below), were called to undertake the new requirement. With deadlines imminent (the Ultimatum was delivered on 11 December 1878, and the Zulu war started on 11 January 1879), the extension to the Lower Tugela Drift became so rushed that, to speed up construction, they only erected every third telegraph pole. Once the line was up and working, they went back and erected the missing poles. They later extended this line across the Tugela to Fort Tenedos, and this became the first telegraph office to operate in Zululand.

This telegraph line provided the communications with Fort Pearson and the operations of the Eastern Column, firstly concerned with their initial advance, then the relief of Eshowe, and later the torpid operations of the 1st Division under the command of General Henry Crealock, John Crealock’s elder brother. The extension of that line into Zululand by a 123-mile tactical telegraph line built by the Army Telegraph Troop, initially to Port Durnford and later towards Mtonjaneni, was described in *Signalling in the Anglo Zulu War, Part 1*.

The Telegraph Line to the Transvaal

The Transvaal had been annexed on 12 April 1877 - the first phase of Lord Carnarvon’s ill-conceived plan, when he was Secretary of State for the Colonies, for the confederation of South African states. But things there were not going well and better communications were needed between the High Commissioner in Cape Town and the Transvaal capital, Pretoria. To achieve this it was decided to extend the telegraph from Pietermaritzburg. In August 1878 a new telegraph route was authorised to be built from Natal to the Transvaal, running from Pietermaritzburg *via* Estcourt, Ladysmith, and Newcastle, to its eventual destination, Pretoria, a distance of nearly 400 miles. This was all by cross-country route as the railway had not then even reached Pietermaritzburg, making construction, maintenance and fault repair of the telegraph line more difficult. The cost of construction was calculated at £16,353 for the length from Pietermaritzburg to Newcastle (£100 per mile) and £26,580 from Newcastle to Pretoria (£120 per mile). That was big money for a colonial budget, and in November it was agreed to defray the cost from Imperial funds due to the military nature of the requirement.

In December 1878 tenders were put out for the supply of wooden poles, and the work was to be undertaken by a construction party of the Cape Telegraph Department under Captain Fraser and Assistant-Inspector Bayly, consisting of nine whites and 236 unskilled native labourers. However, just before starting the construction, they were diverted for a short period to the extension of the telegraph line to the Lower Tugela Drift, as described above, before returning to build the line to Newcastle. It was originally planned that the route from Pietermaritzburg to Newcastle, about 150 miles, would be constructed in fifteen working days – surely, at best, a hopelessly over-optimistic estimate - but war conditions and lack of transport caused this to overrun and costs to increase. When the route was completed to Newcastle, on 1 May 1879, it was found that costs had increased to £28,000 – a 46% overspend. As a result the unfortunate Captain Fraser, who had been congratulated for his work on the Natal - Cape route, was removed from his post and his assistant, Inspector Blackenbury Bayly, was placed in charge from 27 June 1879.

Following the early defeats in the Zulu war, reinforcements arrived from England. These included the army Telegraph Troop (“C” Troop, Royal Engineers), formed in 1870 and now participating in their first operation. In early June, having marched up from Durban, they tapped into the newly constructed line at Quaggas Kraal, between Ladysmith and Newcastle, extending it through Dundee to Landman’s Drift on the Zululand border to provide the telegraph terminal there for Lord Chelmsford’s headquarters and the 2nd Division, in support of the main advance into Zululand which started in mid-June. This work was described in *Signalling in the Zulu War, Part 1*. Thus it was by good luck rather than good judgement that the line, which carried heavy traffic, was able to serve the needs of the Zulu war rather than the purpose intended.

To complete the story of that line, the Transvaal portion from Newcastle through Standerton and Heidelberg to Pretoria was completed on 19 September 1879 - the first telegraph line in the Transvaal. It was later destroyed by the Boers in 1880 during the first Anglo-Boer War, but in 1882 was replaced, temporarily by a chain of heliograph stations (it took about a day to get a message from one end of the chain to the other), and then by a rebuilt telegraph line constructed by a detachment of "C" Troop under Lieutenant Arthur Bagnold sent from England for the purpose - the Troop back in South Africa rather sooner than they might have foreseen when they left in November 1879 on the successful conclusion of the Zulu war. The rebuilt line was used in telegraphic negotiations between London and Pretoria (the submarine cable to Durban, giving international telegraph access had opened in December 1879) leading to the restoration of independence to the Transvaal.

A Close Run Thing

It was all a close run thing; although such phrases would be overtaken these days by something like 'just-in-time'. Natal's civil telegraph communications for the Zulu war were mostly only implemented in the months immediately before it or during the war itself, and that only with the help of the Cape Colony Telegraph Department. It was only eight months after it came into service, following fifteen years of procrastination, that the telegraph line between Natal and Cape Town was to carry the news of the defeat at Isandlwana in the early stage of its twenty day transmission to London *via* ship from Cape Town to Madeira, and thence again by telegraph to London.

It was only immediately before the war, by dint of special effort and the fortuitous availability of the Cape construction party, that the telegraph line was completed from Verulam to the Lower Tugela Drift. And it was only by chance that the telegraph line in the process of being built from Pietermaritzburg to Pretoria for an entirely different reason was able to be diverted to Landman's Drift and used by Lord Chelmsford's staff for their rearwards communication in the Zulu war.

The Use of the Colonial Telegraph

The amount of traffic generated by the Zulu war placed great strain on the limited capacity of this immature telegraph system and the limited number of telegraph operators, both in Natal and in the Cape, where all traffic for England had to be sent.

While military staff were encouraged to keep their messages short, press correspondents, despite having to pay, were notoriously prolix, and after newsworthy incidents sent messages (if that is the right word) of great length to London. This often blocked the line from Pietermaritzburg to Cape Town, where their telegrams had to be put aboard the next ship for retransmission from Madeira. The line was also congested when ships arrived at Cape Town, and the mass of incoming telegrams were rushed *en bloc* from the ship to the Cape Town telegraph office, taking a long time to clear along the single line to Pietermaritzburg.

An extract from the journal of the Superintendent at the Central Telegraph Office in Cape Town on 7 June 1879 refers to the Zulu war:

5.0 p.m. Main line blocked. PE [telegraphic address for the Port Elizabeth office] reports great quantity of press coming through. This turned out to be owing to failure of attack on Morosi's Mountain [the concurrent Basuto conflict] and ... Prince Napoleon's death, ... By High Commissioner's wish [Frere], office kept open all night.

The Port Elizabeth office also described their work during the Zulu war:

During the Zulu war period Port Elizabeth, being on the highway, was kept busy with the transmission of lengthy press messages addressed to London newspapers. These were signalled to Cape Town, from which port they were sent forward by mail steamer.

After the battle of Isandlwana (22nd January 1879) Port Elizabeth was called upon to transmit 15,000 words, the *Cape Argus* report of a monster demonstration held in Durban. Operations commenced at 8 a.m., and the message was completed at 10 p.m., an excellent performance when the prevailing conditions are considered. Mr. H. Twycross has ample cause to remember this particularly lengthy 'press', as he was engaged upon its receipt at the Cape Town end of the line.

The death of Prince Napoleon in June of the same year brought tremendous pressure on the Port Elizabeth staff, and the reporting efforts of Philip Robinson, Archibald Forbes, Paul Delage (attached to the Paris *Figaro*) and others kept the office open day and night, and the telegraphist had to keep his shoulder to the wheel with a vengeance.

Conclusion

In concluding this description of the Natal Telegraph system up to the time of the Zulu war in 1879 (and, where appropriate, a little extension into the first Anglo-Boer war the following year), the table below summarises the situation.

| Date opened | Telegraph Line | Remarks |
|----------------|--|--|
| June 1864 | Durban – Pietermaritzburg | Operated by Natal Electric Telegraph Company. |
| September 1873 | | Natal government takes over responsibility for telegraph, under Postmaster-General. |
| April 1878 | Durban - Pietermaritzburg | Second route, alongside new railway. |
| April 1878 | Pietermaritzburg - Umzimkulu | Linking Natal to the Cape Colony telegraph system, <i>via</i> Kokstad and Eastern Cape to Cape Town. Built by Cape Colony Telegraph Department. |
| Late 1878 | Pietermaritzburg - Verulam | Built by PWD along railway line to meet planned colonial development. |
| December 1878 | Verulam – Stanger – Fort Pearson - Fort Tenedos | Military requirement. Paid for by Imperial funds. Built by Cape construction party. Fort Tenedos the first telegraph office in Zululand. |
| May 1879 | Pietermaritzburg – Estcourt – Ladysmith – Newcastle. | Built by Cape construction party. Cost defrayed from Imperial funds. Extended by Army Telegraph Troop from Quaggas Kraal to Landman's Drift in early June 1879, during the latter part of the Zulu war. Line continued later <i>via</i> Standerton to Pretoria, and completed in September 1879, becoming the first telegraph line in the Transvaal. Destroyed by Boers in 1880. Rebuilt 1882 by Army Telegraph Troop. |
| December 1879 | Durban - Delagoa Bay – Mozambique – Zanzibar - Aden | First submarine cable to S Africa, providing international telegraph facilities. Too late for the Zulu war. This cable carried all international traffic until the cable laid along the west coast of Africa reached Cape Town and opened for traffic on 13 June 1889. |