

Part II Sister Janet - To Rorke's Drift and Isandlwana

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Abridged from the book *Sister Janet, Zulu War Nurse* by Brian Best and Katie Stossel.

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Nurse Janet Wells aged 18 years.



Supported by some 40 previously unpublished contemporary photographs and paintings, this is the account of a 19-year-old English nurse, already decorated by the Russian government for her services in the Russo-Turkish war of 1878, who was sent from the recently opened Newcastle-upon Tyne Hospital where she was the Senior Nurse, to the Northern Column hospital at Utrecht in Zululand. In support of Dr Fitzmaurice, she treated the seriously wounded from Hlobane and Khambula before moving on to Rorke's Drift. In recognition of her determination and skill she was decorated by Queen Victoria with the Royal Red Cross, the second recipient of the decoration after Florence Nightingale. At the time, the Royal Red Cross was considered to be the nursing equivalent of the Victoria Cross. Although the hospital at Utrecht was being closed down, Sister Janet's work was not yet complete. Rorke's Drift was on her route back to Durban and because no doctor had visited the reduced British garrison for many weeks, she volunteered to visit the outpost, scene of the now famous battle. Once a suitable horse drawn cart could be found Janet set off on the sixty-five mile journey to Rorke's Drift. Janet considered taking a direct line south and then following the course of the Buffalo River to Rorke's Drift – until she learned that no such route existed, and worse, the area was uninhabited and would be unprotected by the army. Janet changed her mind and agreed to make the longer journey via Dundee and Helpmakaar; it would be safer with other travellers occasionally using the marked route and accommodation could be found at both settlements. Having made her farewells, she retraced her journey to Dundee and on her arrival, her reputation having preceded her, she quickly found

accommodation for the night and a fresh horse was made available for the onward journey to Helpmakaar.

By 6 a.m. the following morning Janet was ready to leave. The previous day had been uncomfortably hot and she wanted to make the most of the cool morning before the temperature rose; she was also entering new territory, which always excited her adventurous nature. Her track took her southwards out of the hamlet of Dundee and then climbed onto the top of the long ridge that formed the edge of the Biggarsberg plateau which follows the course of the Buffalo River. The route was uninspiring; long hill after long monotonous hill, except where, to the east, Janet was delighted with an occasional glimpse of the five-mile distant Buffalo River that formed the border between Natal and Zululand. Her journey took the best part of the day and she arrived at Helpmakaar during the mid afternoon. This former tiny hamlet was now a British army supply depot and with the war now over, its facility was no longer required by the army and was in the process of being closed. She was made very welcome and those present were, as ever, keen to accommodate her as an unexpected guest; all were hungry for any news she could bring.

Refreshed after a good night's sleep, she set off for the Rorke's Drift mission station. By now Janet was fully aware of the importance and growing fame of the outpost and her anticipation grew as her journey progressed – after only three miles from Helpmakaar, the track suddenly came to the edge of a precipice before winding its way down the steep rocky face. The guide was worried how to get his wagon safely down the twisting and steep track, both could clearly see the shattered remains of at least five army wagons that had been lost before crashing onto the rocks below. There was no other route so, encouraged by Janet, they slowly and cautiously descended the 600 ft escarpment in a series of sharp hairpin bends. Where it was especially steep, the wagon driver placed rocks in front of the wheels to prevent the wagon running away from them while Janet held the horse's head and reins and made soothing noises.

After a nerve-wracking hour they gained the safety of level ground. Janet was very relieved to have negotiated the precipitous bends and she now marvelled at the crystal-clear views into Zululand. It was even possible to see the outline of Hlobane Mountain, some sixty miles away, where Trooper Peterson had been injured. Once on the level they made swift progress. The route was well-worn by the to-ing and fro-ing of army wagons and the thousands of troops who had marched along this very route in order to invade Zululand. Janet reflected that many had not made the return journey. Three hours later they arrived at the isolated mission station.

The location was picturesque, sited on a rock outcrop under the lea of the Oskarsberg hill and facing the Buffalo River. The camp perimeter was guarded by two British soldiers – who were astonished by the arrival of the young English nurse. They directed her to the nearby replacement Fort Melvill where Janet was introduced to the officer in charge of the rear-guard, Lieutenant Rowden of the 99th Regiment. Following refreshments of tea and army biscuits, he led her a short walk from the fort towards the river and her new accommodation. On receiving the news of her pending visit, Lieutenant Rowden had thoughtfully arranged to have a Zulu hut constructed for her use. It was sited just a few hundred yards out of sight of the military accommodation.

This was to be her home for the next three weeks and Janet was delighted. Since entering Zululand she had been intrigued by Zulu huts and wrote that she was very surprised how comfortable these primitive buildings were. A small fireplace had also been built next to her hut to supply hot water for her domestic use. A slatted bed and chair were her only comforts. She was so impressed by her new home, which she called 'our Mess hut', that she decided to paint the scene with the famous battleground of Rorke's Drift as the painting's backdrop. Perhaps she had been inspired to paint by Trooper Petersen because she eventually produced a remarkably accurate watercolour depicting her Zulu 'bee-hive' mess hut. In the picture, the battlefield of Rorke's Drift is clearly seen in the background. This rare and remarkable painting survives in her scrapbook.

With the war now over, the garrison had been reduced to a small rear-guard that was in the process of preparing to re-join their regiment at Pinetown near Durban. The area was to be looked after by a retired trader, Mr Croft, until the eventual return of the Rev. Witt who was busy trying to make money in London suing (unsuccessfully) the British government for the destruction of his house and by lecturing on the battle (although he had not been present).

Soon Janet was busy and within a few days of arriving at Rorke's Drift she had managed to examine all the 35 British soldiers still stationed at the outpost. Most were in rude health, though the majority were suffering from abrasions and sores. The ubiquitous stomach problems that had bugged the whole invasion force from its outset was still the main medical problem. One of her first acts was to demand that the fort's daily drinking water was collected up-stream from the river and then boiled. Under her direction, the camp's cooking utensils and cutlery were sterilized by boiling after each meal and within days the men's' health improved.

A laundry was also set up to wash the soldiers' bed linen, under-clothing and shirts. Eight sick men suffering from 'fever' were confined to two tents outside the small fort so as not to spread infection further. As she fully expected, her arrival had a noticeable effect on the men that included a daily queue of curious soldiers suddenly possessed of a variety of non-life-threatening complaints that included septic blisters, and incomprehensible 'headaches and sprains'. The young nurse's 'no nonsense' approach was noticeably effective as, within days, she managed to get most of the sick men on their feet and fit enough to resume their duties. The sight of the pretty young English nurse flitting between her hut and the fort worked wonders for the men's morale. Even the two remaining fever cases responded well to her treatment and both were soon able to eat solid food and gain their feet. Janet also demanded a complete 'tidy up' of the fort area and all litter was burned. With the fort now less of a health hazard and with the men taking a modicum of pride in their appearance, Janet turned her attention to the immediate area around the fort. The war was now over and the local Zulu people, like those at Utrecht, were reputed to be non-threatening.

She was fully aware of the battles that had recently taken place at Rorke's Drift and nearby Isandlwana, and with the health of the small garrison now under control, she requested an escort to visit the nearby battle locations. During her first day at Rorke's Drift she had been shown over the battlefield by Lieutenant Rowden who had pointed out the notable locations to her. She was especially interested in the ruin that had been Surgeon Reynolds's makeshift hospital and both fell silent before the neat row of graves at the rear of the building. The pair then walked the 100 yards to the site of James Rorke's grave. James shot himself in 1875 after his supply of gin ran out, leaving his wife destitute. His will demanded his being buried under solid concrete one yard deep to prevent the Zulus exhuming his body for use in their manufacture of *muti* or medicine. James Rorke knew only too well that body parts of well-known and respected white people were in great demand by the Zulus for *muti*.

Janet began to collect souvenirs of her time in South Africa. There seemed to be an endless supply of Zulu weapons and shields available around the camp and she gathered a small collection. Like many young Victorian women her interest was not militaria; she picked and pressed local flowers, ferns and grasses into an impressive album that survives to this day.

Janet was also taken on for an hour's ride on horseback to the top of the Oskarsberg, the hill which dominated the fort and river crossing, from where she marvelled at the panorama of the Buffalo River far below. Across the valley she could see Isandlwana Mountain just ten miles to the East. Her guide then took her down the far side of the Oskarsberg, She was pleased to be guided through the mass of boulders to join the old wagon trail that led from Rorke's Drift to Sotondose's Drift, recently renamed Fugitives' Drift, where the few Isandlwana survivors crossed back into Natal. It had been the only crossing point where the survivors could attempt to cross the river in their flight from the battle. The purpose behind her guide's detour was to show Janet the caves and Bushmen paintings on the east side of the Oskarsberg, which had been discovered by the fort's soldiers a few weeks earlier.

The paintings had been drawn in prehistoric times, which indicated how long the area had been settled. Janet was fascinated by the skilful drawings and the vivid colours of the animals portrayed, which included deer, buffalo, lion and elephant, mostly being hunted by the dwarf-like figures of the Bushmen. Her guide then took her to the bank of the Buffalo River, and by hitching up her long skirt, she was able to wade across the fast-flowing river to the far bank. The site of her crossing was, of course, the very point which gave the location its name, the only point for twenty or so miles in each direction where the river runs shallowly across an outcrop of submerged rocks. On the far side she was taken to see the neat and recently constructed second British cemetery just 100 yards from the river. The cemetery was the final resting place of those soldiers who had died of fever during the invasion of Zululand, and who, according to the wisdom of the time, had to be buried well away from the fort itself.

The following day, a horse was found for Janet and she was taken to Fugitives' Drift, about six miles from Rorke's Drift, where Lieutenants Melvill and Coghill were buried in rough graves high on the steep slope above the now gently flowing Buffalo River. During Janet's stay at Rorke's Drift she was asked to go to the nearby homestead of a local Zulu chief in an endeavour to help some of the village children who were suffering eye infections. Having strapped her medical kit to her horse she was escorted some five miles beyond the river to the homestead of Chief Sihayo, which had been attacked by the British invasion force following the invasion of Zululand earlier in the year. On arriving at the homestead, the Zulus were surprised to see Janet, in her nurse's uniform, on horseback and with only two riders as escort.

She was taken to Chief Sihayo who, following the usual protracted ritual of a Zulu greeting, clapped his hands loudly; the afflicted children, who had been peering from behind a row of huts, reluctantly came forward. Janet noted that very few had any semblance of clothing. During the next two hours she treated them by bathing their eyes with a Boracic solution and instructed the Zulu

mothers how to bathe their children's eyes properly without constantly reinfecting them. Janet recalled seeing several men with recent wounds and noted that there was no sign of any infection. It was clear from their shy demeanour that they were reluctant to allow her to approach them. She respected their attitude by concentrating her attention on the children.

At dawn two days later, accompanied by an escort rider and a guide, Janet left Rorke's Drift to ride to the Isandlwana battlefield. They breakfasted on the gentle rise of land between the Isandlwana hill and Black's Koppie. From their picnic spot they had a clear view of the ten miles back to Rorke's Drift and, in the other direction, they could see over the whole devastated campsite area. Beyond the obvious cairns that marked the graves, they could see for some fifteen miles along the uninhabited three-mile wide grassy valley towards the waterfall at the Mangeni homestead that lay in the direction of Ulundi. The camp area presented a forlorn and woeful sight. All the 1,400 bodies on the British side had only recently been buried under some 300 large stone cairns, some ten feet high, but the ground was still scattered with the whitening bones of slain horses and oxen. During the next hour she came across a variety of relics including pieces of wood and metal that had clearly belonged to pieces of military equipment, muddled up with Zulu spearheads and sticks. There were tent pegs, cartridge cases, broken glass, meat and sardine tins, horse bones and, to her horror, the occasional half-buried skeleton. Janet noticed that there were pieces of paper that had been caught in bushes or which lay among the rock outcrops that littered the area. She collected a number of these papers as souvenirs including a page ripped from a soldier's pay-book which had belonged to Private Thomas Vedler of 'C Company' 2/24th Regiment, who had perished there.

After picking their way through the natural jumble of rocks that were a feature of the area, the party then rode up onto the Nqutu Ridge that overlooks the whole Isandlwana plain. From her viewing point, where King Cetshwayo's generals had exhorted their regiments into battle, she had a clear overview of the wrecked British campsite that had been so unsuspecting beneath the strangely shaped peak of Isandlwana mountain. By mid-morning her party continued the ride for a further twelve miles to Mangeni Falls where Lord Chelmsford had taken lunch while, unbeknown to him, his camp was being destroyed. The group then rode on for a further half-mile round the rim of the gorge where they intended to stop for the night. Her two escorting soldiers produced a small bivouac tent for Janet and set about making a comfortable campsite.

The following morning she was pleased to get going and they were well on their way by 8 a.m. The next location on her route was the Ngwebeni Valley that lay hidden from the British camp at Isandlwana and which had been the secret assembly point for the Zulu army before it attacked the unsuspecting British position. No one knew how the Zulu army had managed to get some 30,000 warriors accompanied by some 5,000 Zulu women and youths to within four miles of the British camp without the British scouts being aware of their presence; Janet thought it was a tall story and wanted to see the location for herself.

The fifteen-mile route from Mangeni took them through a series of low rocky hills along a well-worn Zulu track. They passed a handful of Zulu homesteads and, apart from the ubiquitous inquisitive children, Janet saw few adults. They reached the Ngwebeni Valley at midday and Janet recalled that she was surprised to ride up a gently inclined rocky hillside and then, at the top, find that it dropped sharply away for several hundred feet to a beautiful river valley far below. It was certainly a very secret place and totally unseen from Isandlwana. She was intrigued by the meandering river beneath her and immediately requested to ride down to the river itself. The journey down, over tightly packed boulders, took another half-hour. At the bottom it became just another river in Zululand with water running over rocks and boulders and small children seeming to appear from nowhere to view the visitors.

One thing did, however, catch her attention: piles of empty and abandoned British cartridge cases were strewn along the riverbank. She later learned that the returning Zulu army paused at Mangeni where the Zulus rested for the night following the battle. The following day, many hours had been spent pulling the bullets from the cartridges and then pouring the powder into Zulu powder horns for subsequent use in their antiquated but cherished muskets. Janet's group then followed the river upstream towards the ridge that led onto the grassy plateau overlooking Isandlwana. The group stayed on the high ground until they could see Rorke's Drift in the distance. It was then just a steady ride back to camp which they reached at dusk. Janet later estimated that she had ridden eighty miles in two days.