

The Connaught Rangers.
We had a deal of hard work, but no fighting

By Graham Alexander

Many people believe that the South African campaign medal was instituted exclusively for the Zulu war. Although this particular war was hard fought and its disasters brought the campaign to the public's attention, it was at the time in Britain, regarded as only part of the general fighting which had taken place between 1877 and 1879 with the various tribes of Southern Africa.

Royal sanction had been given in 1845 for a medal to be awarded to all of the survivors of British regular troops, who had served in any of the three campaigns of 1835-6, 1846-7 and 1850-3, on the Eastern frontier of Cape Province. The medal was designed by W and L.C. Wyon, and bore on the obverse a portrayal of the young Queen Victoria wearing a coronet. The reverse showed a Lion, crouching by a Protea bush and the date '1853' in the exergue.

In 1880, the decision was made that the same medal should be awarded to all personnel who had served in any of the campaigns in South Africa between September 1877 and December 1879. These campaigns included engagements against the Gcalekas and Ngqika tribes, two wars against Chief Sekukuni, the Moirosi mountain campaign in Basutoland and also the war against the Zulus. The Army Order number 103 in August 1880 had originally made no mention that any changes should be made in the design of the earlier version. Naturally, the date '1853' was completely inappropriate, so it was decided to replace it on the reverse exergue with a military trophy consisting of four assegais and a Zulu ox hide shield. A clasp was to be attached to the suspender of the medal, which would indicate the years in which the recipient had actually served, during any of these campaigns.

One of only six regular infantry battalions, who could claim the clasp 1877-8-9, was the 88th foot (Connaught Rangers). This battalion had not taken part in any of the hard fighting against the Zulus, but the award of the medal and clasp to them was certainly justified, for all the hardships which they had endured during three long years of campaigning.

They had arrived at Capetown on the 24 July 1877, aboard the troopship *Orontes*, which had also carried a draft of 68 men intended for the 1/24th regiment. The troops were recruited mainly from the wild and remote country of western Ireland, and many spoke only Gaelic. The regiment had the unfortunate reputation for hard drinking and always being ready for a fight. This reputation preceded them and their arrival was not welcomed by all.

The 88th would become the garrison of the Cape and replace the 1/24th, who sailed to East London on the 3 August. The battalion received an addition to their compliment of officers with the arrival of 20 year old Charles Edward Wyncoll, who had only received his commission on the 15 August 1877. He had boarded the Donald Currie mail steamer *Walmer Castle* and dashed to join his new battalion. Within three weeks of his arrival, the battalion found itself at War.

The borderland between Cape Colony and the Transkai had long been an area of conflict between the Xhosa nation and its neighbours, both black and white. Eight previous frontier wars had been fought, which had gradually reduced the territorial claims of the Xhosa people, but an atmosphere of mistrust and resentment still prevailed. Trouble erupted when the aggressive Gcaleka tribe attacked the Mfengu, who had been settled on land previously claimed by the Gcaleka. Both sides then started launching raids upon each other. This was a situation which had to be quickly stopped and the British High Commissioner, Sir Henry Bartle Frere, decided to reduce the power of the Gcaleka. The 1/24th regiment was already on hand, but additional troops would be needed. Two hundred men of the 88th were ordered to leave Capetown and move to the Transkai. They boarded H.M.S. *Active* on the 28 September 1877.

When a rising of the Ngqika tribe also occurred in the Transkai, it became apparent to General Sir Arthur Augustus Thurlow Cunynghame, the Commander in Chief in South Africa, that he now had a full scale war on his hands and that even more Imperial troops would be required. He ordered that the remaining companies of the 88th still in Capetown should move at once to the eastern frontier. They embarked on H.M.S. *Active* and the coastal steamer S.S. *Florence* on the 10 December 1877.

When they arrived at East London, fifty of the Connaught Rangers were kept on board ship to supplement over 200 sailors and marines being formed into a Naval brigade for an attempted landing on the shore of Gcalekland. As there was no harbour at East London at this time and a difficult sand bar prevented ships approaching the coast too closely, the rest of the battalion were loaded into surf boats in preparation for a landing. No sooner had the boats started for the shore than a strong wind blew up, which forced the hatches to be battened down, in order for the boats to ride out the storm. The storm did not relent for 24 hours, by which time the men were on the point of exhaustion. Due to the

difficulties involved in landing men through heavy surf, the decision was made not to send the Naval Brigade further up the coast and they also landed at East London.

From here the 88th marched up country to King Williams Town, where some of troops garrisoned a trading post at Ibeka, while the remainder was stationed at Fort Cunynghame and Komgha. Fort Cunynghame was in the Ciskei and controlled the Ngqika reservation. Komgha was a border town, now filled with refugees from the fighting taking place in the Transkai. Second Lieutenant Wyncoll was with "A" company, commanded by Sir G.A. De Hochepped-Larpent and was part of the Komgha garrison. On the 29 December 1877, after a skirmish with the Gcaleka at Draibosch, near Komgha, Major Hans Garrett Moore of the 88th regiment was awarded the Victoria Cross. He had seen a private in the Frontier armed and mounted police unable to mount his horse and was in danger of being left to the mercy of Gcaleka warriors. The 43-year-old officer rode back to where the policeman was surrounded and attempted to save his life, receiving a spear wound in his arm during the process. Unfortunately, the man was killed whilst Major Moore was in the process of shooting two of his assailants.

It was the first ever Victoria Cross awarded to the regiment and also the first one ever given whilst on service in South Africa.

An offensive against the Ngqika was scheduled to begin on the 14 January 1878. It was the intention to use both the 1/24th and the 88th in a drive designed to force the tribesmen into battle. The troops stationed at Ibeka left there on the 13 January and after a morning's march, suddenly encountered a large force gathering against them at the Nyumaga River. The troops were formed into a single line, 88th on the left, 1/24th on the right with artillery in the centre. The terrain which faced them consisted of deep valleys and dense scrub. The order was given for the men to advance against the enemy, and as the 88th moved forward, they quickly became engaged against warriors armed with an array of firearms and well hidden in the dense scrub. The men of the 88th began to suffer casualties but were soon reinforced by the arrival of mounted infantry. The fierce fighting continued long into the afternoon, until eventually the effects of the recently introduced Martini Henry rifle took their toll. The Xhosa warriors had remained elusively hidden in the undergrowth, refusing to be drawn into a full-scale battle. The troops eventually discovered about fifty enemy dead, which they considered to be a disappointing total for such a hard fought battle.

Following a further battle against the combined forces of Ngqika and Gcaleka at Centane, the war degenerated into a guerrilla campaign. Frederick Augustus Thesiger replaced Cunynghame and set about bringing the war to a conclusion. Some men of the 88th were formed into a mounted infantry unit, in order that they could match the speed of their fast moving opponents. Second Lieutenant Wyncoll described the route taken by the battalion in its attempt to subdue the uprising: -

We went up country through King Williams Town, Komgah, through the Chichaba bush to Ibeka and borders of Pondoland. We had plenty of skirmishes and a bit of sickness, but nothing very serious.

As the campaign slowly settled down to its inevitable conclusion, the 88th were withdrawn to King Williams Town, in order to become its garrison. They eventually returned to Capetown in July, aboard the *Laplant* which was pounded by "a real Cape storm" during its voyage.

The Xhosa warriors gradually realized that their continued resistance was futile and the final frontier war was declared over in August.

The decision was then taken to divide the battalion up into companies and to use them to provide colonial garrisons. The battalion's Headquarters would remain at Capetown, whilst "A" company would sail for St. Helena. "B" "E" and "H" companies, commanded by Major A.A. Owen would relieve the 3rd regiment (The Buffs) based at Mauritius. On the 9 August "A" company boarded the Union Company's mail steamer *Anglian* to sail for the island of St. Helena.

Honours for the final frontier war were soon announced. The battalion's commanding Officer Lieutenant Colonel W. Lambert received a C.B., whilst Major Sir Edward Hopton and Major Owen received their brevet Lieutenant Colonels.

Within two months it became apparent that war with the Zulus would soon become inevitable. In October 1878, the four companies of the 88th based in Capetown were ordered back to King Williams Town, in order to protect the frontier. The more genteel of the population were glad to see the wild Irishmen depart. They thought that the troops behaviour was disorderly and a danger to the town's respectable citizens.

All remained quiet until the news of Isandlwana was known. Any available troops were now immediately required to replace the losses incurred and the 88th were instructed to move to Natal with immediate effect. They were still a dispersed battalion, but Headquarters and one company commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Lambert moved to Fort Napier, which overlooked Pietermaritzburg, while the remaining three companies commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Hopton moved up country towards the

Zulu border. Two of these companies relieved troops of the 99th based at Stanger, a well-fortified town on the coast road. A further half company of 50 men, protected a base auxiliary hospital close by. The mail ship *Natal* brought a small draft of men intended as reinforcements for the 88th, up from Capetown.

The companies were then ordered to proceed to Fort Tenedos, which was on the Zulu side of the Lower Thukela River. Here they would remain in reserve until their remaining companies could join them.

At St. Helena, the frigate H.M.S. *Shah*, commanded by Captain R. Bradshaw, was at her moorings. The vessel was returning home from a long voyage in the Pacific, when the news arrived of the disaster at Isandlwana. Without receiving any orders, Captain Bradshaw consulted the Governor of the Island and then made an inspired decision to embark its tiny garrison and sail for South Africa. "A" company, comprising of just over 100 officers and men of the 88th, and number 8 Battery 7th Brigade Royal Artillery were loaded aboard the vessel and arrived at Durban on the 6 March 1879. They were the first of Lord Chelmsford's much needed reinforcements to arrive

Two companies remained at Mauritius for garrison duties, but "B" company under the command of Captain H.G. Bowen was recalled and left the island aboard the sailing ship *Umvoti* on the 12 March, docking in Durban on the 26 March. They quickly proceeded to the area of the Lower Thukela to join up with the other five companies who had assembled there.



Back Row - Left to Right

Quartermaster S. Cousins, Captain H.G. Bowen, Surg. Captain Harding, Lt C.F. Wyncoll
2nd Lt F.S.H. Rickards, Lt.M.G. Moore

Centre Row

Captain John Philpot Curran, Lt E.H.V. Haldane, Captain E.A. Brind

Front Row

Captain Chevenix Baldwin, Lt & Adj. D.T. Hammond, Lt Col E. Hopton, 2nd Lt N.A.D. Barton,
Captain C.T.W. Penton

The 88th were to become part of the coastal column, commanded by Major General Henry Hope Crealock and formed in April 1879. Designated the 1st Division, it also included the 2/3rd, 3/60th, 57th, 91st and 99th regiments, a naval brigade, mounted volunteers and artillery. Headquarters was at Fort Pearson, close to the lower drift on the Thukela River. Crealock was ordered to advance into Zululand and establish a base with supplies to last for two months. The area was most unhealthy and disease soon began to affect the troops. The 88th had been campaigning for two years and although its 640 officers and men were tougher than most of the newly arrived regiments, they still lost Lieutenant John Thirkill and four men to fever.

Charles Wyncoll, who had been transferred to "F" company under the command of Captain F.C. Baldwin, received promotion to Lieutenant on the 17 May 1879. He was disappointed by the unattractive role allotted to his battalion and later wrote:-

We had a deal of hard work but no fighting, having the misfortune to be in Crealock's division.

These duties consisted of providing escorts to the ox wagon convoys, very slowly moving supplies into Zululand. Their path was marked by the bodies of dead oxen, often left by the side of the road to rot. The remaining oxen were in a state of complete exhaustion and progress became steadily harder to maintain. The column soon began to be called “Crealock’s crawlers”, which was perhaps somewhat unfair given the conditions. With the ever-present stench of the dead oxen and unhealthy climate, disease continued to plague the troops as they advanced and constructed forts along the way.

Provisions were moved to these forts which were named Tenedos, Crealock, Chelmsford and Napoleon. The oxen were barely able to pull the wagons and could only manage an advance of about five miles a day. Numerous rivers to cross made progress even slower, which meant that Crealock’s column ceased to be a direct threat to the Zulus, and they virtually ignored it. The 88th reached Fort Chelmsford on the 19 June, where four companies were ordered to remain behind to guard the precious supplies. By the 22 June, the remaining two companies of the 88th had reached Fort Napoleon.

It was apparent to all that satisfactory progress could not be maintained by the use of ox wagons. The only alternative was to reach the coast and have supplies for the column landed from ships. The main body of the division marched five miles to the northeast and reached Port Durnford on the 29 June. The area consisted of just a surf battered beach, on which the naval brigade managed to construct some hawsers to assist the arrival of small boats delivering their supplies. While at Port Durnford, Lieutenant Wyncoll contracted Typhoid fever and had to be evacuated to a hospital in Durban.

The slow pace set by the division had excluded it from participating in the final battle at oNdini, and it remained spread out along its route of march until hostilities had ceased. The Connaught Rangers at Fort Chelmsford were ordered to meet a portion of the retiring troops at St. Paul’s mission station and supply them with provisions. After this, companies of the 88th provided garrisons for Forts Chelmsford and Crealock and also the mission station at Eshowe during July.

By August, the companies began returning to Natal, and by the end of the month had assembled at Pinetown. It was here that the now recovered Lieutenant Wyncoll rejoined his company, just in time to accompany the battalion to Capetown, where they refitted for further overseas service. The battalion boarded H.M.S. *Crocodile* at Simonstown on 1 October 1879 to sail for their new station in India.



The campaign medal which was awarded to Sergeant J Connors of the Connaught Rangers. Sergeant Connors was a fluent Gaelic speaker and was responsible for the non English speaking members of the regiment (who came mostly from the Connemara region) He served with the regiment throughout the three years of 1877-1879 and remained with it until after the Boer war of 1899-1902.

Bibliography: -

- | | | |
|---|----------------------|----------------|
| The unpublished autobiography of Colonel Charles Edward Wyncoll 1857-1943 | | |
| <i>The Road to Isandlwana</i> | Philip Gon | published 1979 |
| <i>The South African Campaign of 1879</i> | Mackinnon & Shadbolt | published 1882 |
| <i>British Battles and Medals</i> | Major L.L. Gordon | published 1947 |

I would like to thank Peter Power-Hynes for his assistance during the preparation of this article.