

Saving the Colour

An account of events surrounding the deaths of Lts. Coghill and Melvill - as seen through history, and a reasoned consideration of what might have happened.

Adrian Greaves

Generally speaking, Victorian military campaigns have attracted varying degrees of historical study or research, with the exception of the Anglo Zulu War of 1879 which has not been analysed in any great detail until recent times. Over the years, students, readers and researchers invariably had to rely on the contemporary official War Office *Narrative of Field Operations Connected with the Zulu War*. Sir Reginald Coupland, an eminent historian of the 1930s and 40s, wrote *Zulu Battle Piece* in 1948, inspired by a single visit to Isandlwana.

This booklet became the most authoritative work on the campaign even though it relied heavily on the above *Narrative*. It also contained a number of faults which, coming from such an eminent historian, understandably lodged themselves in the minds of many subsequent writers. For example, Coupland wrote that Capt. Essex, Pulleine's Director of Transport, was an officer of the 24th whereas he came from the 75th Regiment. Chard and Bromhead were described as "scarcely out of their teens" and further, and perhaps his most serious contention, the battle of Isandlwana was "lost due to the ammunition failure and desertion of the NNC". After Coupland, little original research was undertaken until Donald Morris's classic *Washing of the Spears* was published in 1966.

Of the many famous incidents which occurred during this war, several have escaped the scrutiny of an in-depth investigation. Perhaps the most valiant of these relates to the events and circumstances leading to the deaths of Lieutenants Coghill and Melvill and the subsequent award of their posthumous Victoria Crosses in 1907. How did history actually record the event?

Coupland wrote of Lieutenants Coghill and Melvill, (always as Melville) that these two officers "had charged themselves with saving the colours of the 24th" and then, after their six-mile flight on horseback across impossibly rocky terrain, "they reached the river together and plunged straight into it". It is highly probable that Coupland had studied and then relied on the original report written by Lt. Col. Richard Glyn from Rorke's Drift in his capacity as the officer commanding the 3rd Column and dated the 21st February 1879. (Coupland even copied Glyn's incorrect spelling of Melvill's name). This highly emotive but fascinating report, the earliest record relating to the fate of these two officers, was written by Glyn after the enquiry into the disaster of Isandlwana and, no doubt, after much personal reflection on his part.

The following is a faithful reproduction of the original handwritten document signed by Col. Glyn using his spellings, grammar and punctuation. It reads as follows,

The Deputy Adjutant General
South Africa.

Rorke's Drift,
Buffalo River.
February, 21st 1879.

Sir,

I have the honor (sic) to report that on the 22nd January last, when the camp of Isandlwana was attacked by the enemy, the Queen's Color (sic) of 1st Battalion 24th Regiment was in the camp - the Headquarters and five companies of the regiment being there also.

From all the information I have been since able to obtain, it would appear that when the enemy had got into the camp, and when there was no longer any hope left of saving it, the Adjutant of the 1/24th Regiment, Lt. Teignmouth Melville, departed from the camp on horseback carrying the Color with him in hope of being able to save it.

The only road to Rorke's Drift being already in possession of the enemy, Lt. Melville and the few others who still remained alive, struck across country for the Buffalo River, which it was necessary to cross to reach a point of safety. In taking this line, the only one possible ground had to be gone over, which, from its ruggedness and precipitous nature, would, under ordinary circumstances, it is reported, be deemed almost utterly impassable for mounted men.

During a distance of about six (6) miles, Lt. Melville and his companions were closely pursued or more properly speaking, accompanied, by a large number of the enemy, who, from their well-known agility in getting over rough ground, were able to keep up with our people though the latter were mounted. So that the enemy kept up a constant fire on them, and sometimes even got close enough to assegai the men and horses.

Lt. Melville reached the bank of the Buffalo and at once plunged in, horse and all. But being encumbered with the Color, which is an awkward thing to carry even on foot, and the river being full and running rapidly, he appears to have got separated from his horse, when he was about half way across. He still however held on resolutely to the Color, and was being carried down stream when he was washed against a large rock in the middle of the river. Lt. Higginson of the Natal Native Contingent, who had also lost his horse in the river, was clinging to this rock, and Lt. Melville called to him to lay hold of the Color. This Lt. Higginson did, but the current was so strong that both officers, with the Color, were again washed away into still water.

In the meantime Lt. Coghill 1/24th Regiment, my Orderly Officer who had been left in camp that morning when the main body of the force moved out, on account of a severe injury to his knee which rendered him unable to move without assistance, had also succeeded in gaining the river's bank in company with Lt. Melville. He too had plunged at once into the river, his horse had carried him safely across but on looking round for Lt. Melville and seeing him struggling to save the Color in the river, he at once turned his horse and rode back into the stream again to Lt. Melville's assistance.

It would appear that now the enemy had assembled in considerable force along their own bank, and had opened a heavy fire on our people directing it more especially on Lt. Melville who wore a red patrol jacket, so that when Lt. Coghill got into the river again his horse was almost immediately killed by a bullet. Lt. Coghill was thus cast loose in the stream also, and notwithstanding the exertions of both these gallant officers, the Color was carried off from them, and they themselves gained the bank in a state of extreme exhaustion.

It would appear that they now attempted to move up the hill from the river bank towards Helpmakaar, but must have been too much exhausted to go on, as they were seen to sit down to rest again. This, I sorely regret to say, was the last time these two most gallant officers were seen alive.

It was not for some days after the 22nd that I could gather any information as to the probable fate of these officers. But immediately I discovered in what direction those who had escaped from Isandlwana had crossed the Buffalo I sent, under Major Black 2/24 Regt. a mounted party who volunteered for this service, to search for any trace that could be found of them. This search was successful and both bodies were found where they were last seen, as above illustrated. Several dead bodies of the enemy were found about there, so that they must have sold their lives dearly at the last.

As it was considered that the dead weight of the Color would cause it to sink in the river, it was hoped that a diligent search in the locality where the bodies of these officers were found might lead to its recovery. So Major Black again proceeded on the 4th inst. to prosecute this search. His energetic efforts were, I am glad to say, crowned with success, and the Color with the ornaments, case & (sic) belonging to it, were found, though in a different place, in the river bed.

I cannot conclude this report without drawing the attention of H.E., the Lt. General Commanding, in the most impressive manner which words can command, to the noble and heroic conduct of Lt. Adjutant Melville, who did not hesitate to encumber himself with the Color of the Regiment, in his resolve to save it, at a time when the camp was in the hands of the enemy, and its gallant defenders rallied to the last man in its defence, and when there appeared but little prospect that any exertions Lt. Melville would make would enable him to save even his own life. Also later on to the noble perseverance with which when struggling between life and death in the river, his chief thoughts to the last were bent on the saving of the Color.

Similarly would I draw His Excellency's attention to the equally noble and gallant conduct of Lt. Coghill, who did not hesitate for an instant to return, unsolicited, and ride again into the river, under a heavy fire of the enemy, to the assistance of his friend; though at the time he was wholly incapacitated from walking and but too well aware that any accident that might separate him from his horse must be fatal to him.

In conclusion, I would add that both these officers gave up their lives in the truly noble task of endeavouring to save from the enemy's hands the Queen's Color of their Regiment, and greatly though their sad end is to be deplored, their deaths could not have been more noble or more full of honor.

I have the honor to be
Sir

Your obedient Servant

signed 'R.Glyn Colonel'
Commanding 3 Column

The official history of the 24th similarly records the event as follows,

On the fateful 22nd January, 1879, when it was evident that all was lost in Isandhlwana camp, Lieutenant and Adjutant Melvill, 1st battalion 24th, received special orders from Lieutenant Colonel Pulleine, to endeavour to save the colour. "You, as senior subaltern", that officer is reported to have said, "will take the colour, and make your way from here." Accompanied by Lt. A.J.A. Coghill, 1st battalion 24th, who was orderly officer to Colonel Glyn, but had remained in camp on account of a severe injury to his knee, Melvill rode off with the colour, taking the same direction as the other fugitives. Both officers reached the Buffalo (river) although, owing to the badness of the track, the Zulus kept up with them and continued throwing their spears at them. The river was in flood, and at any other time would have been considered impassable.

They plunged their horses in, but whilst Coghill got across and reached the opposite bank, Melvill, encumbered by the colour, got separated from his horse and was washed against a large rock in mid-stream, to which Lieutenant Higginson, of the Native Contingent, who afterwards escaped, was clinging. Melvill called to him to lay hold of the colour, which Higginson did, but so strong was the current that both men were washed away. Coghill, still on his horse and in comparative safety, at once rode back into the stream to their aid. The Zulus by this time had gathered thick on the bank of the river and opened fire, making a special target of Melvill, who wore his red patrol jacket. Coghill's horse was killed and his rider cast adrift in the stream. Notwithstanding the exertions made to save it, the colour had to be abandoned, and the two officers themselves only succeeded in reaching the opposite bank with great difficulty, and in a most exhausted state. Those only who know the precipitous character of the Natal side at the spot, can fully realise how great must have been the sufferings of both in climbing it, especially of Coghill with his wounded knee. They appear to have kept together, and to have got to within twenty yards of the summit when they were overtaken by their foes and fell. On 3rd February, a search party found the bodies of Melvill and Coghill covered with assegai wounds and with several dead Zulus around them. Next day the flood, having subsided, the Colour, on its pole, was recovered further downstream. For their gallantry in the saving of the Colour, Lieutenants Melvill and Coghill were later each awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross.

This official history tallies almost exactly with the contemporary (but based on hearsay) report of Capt. Penn Symons, 2nd 24th, who wrote,

They (Coghill and Melvill) were greatly exhausted, partly from the quantity of water they had swallowed, and partly from their struggle in the river. For a moment they laid down on the water's edge, and then getting over the first 200 yards of the bank which is flat, they began to climb the side of the ravine which was exceedingly steep. Lieut. Coghill was lame from an old injury to his knee, and on this account had been left in camp on this day. They had gone but a little way up when they saw that the Zulus were crossing after them. They scrambled on until Lieut. Coghill said "I am done, I can go no further". Lieut. Melvill said, "Neither can I". Lieut. Higginson begged of them to shoot as they still had their revolvers, he, having lost his rifle in the river, went on, and at the top of the bank found some Basutos who were keeping up a fire on the advancing Zulus.

It would appear that Captain Penn Symon's report was based largely on comments made by Lt. Higginson of the Natal Native Contingent when he arrived at Helpmakaar after fleeing from Isandhlwana with his native command. (1) Higginson stated that he had left Coghill and Melvill after the three of them had safely reached the Natal bank. It is probable that all three believed they were then safe as Higginson related how he, being the fittest, then left the two Imperial officers in order to find some horses. Higginson did find three horses and there are two tales as to how he came by them. He maintained that after going to some nearby huts he initially found a saddled horse tied to a rail. He then caught two more horses and returned to the ridge. The second tale reports that, on the ridge, Higginson accepted a horse offered by Troopers Barker and Tarboton of the Carbineers who recognised the exhausted officer.

Higginson then saw the bodies of Coghill and Melvill surrounded by Zulus before he rode off to Helpmakaar. His report is considered truthful, if one ignores the uncertainty of how he obtained the horses, as he gave a detailed description of the exact location of Coghill and Melvill's bodies.

Over the years, writers have invariably accepted that the original accounts relating to Coghill and Melvill riding together to save the colour were correct and little additional comment was added to the contemporary reports of the day. Donald Morris went somewhat further and described how, at the height of the battle, Melvill had ridden with Col. Pulleine to his tent which housed the Queen's Colour of the 1st 24th. (The regimental colour was at Helpmakaar, the two colours of the 2nd 24th were in Col. Glyn's tent which was quickly engulfed by Zulus). According to Morris, Pulleine apparently emerged from his tent and handed the cased colour to Melvill and, "ordered him to take it to a place of safety". Melvill then apparently "placed the staff across the saddlebow, saluted, wheeled his horse and plunged into the stream of refugees who were fleeing the camp". Morris is, though, in accord with contemporary writers of the time and makes no mention of Coghill being with Melvill. (2)

The popular press perpetuated many of these stories, although on the 1st March 1879, the highly respected 'Illustrated London News' drew its own rational conclusion for Coghill leaving the battlefield. It wrote that a Mr. Young, a surviving officer of the NNC who fled early in the battle alongside his natives, saw Coghill leave Isandlwana and commented, "It appears that Lieutenant Coghill was dispatched for assistance, as he was acting that day as staff officer to Colonel Pulleine".

How did Lt. Melvill come by the colour?

There is no actual evidence, either primary or secondary, that Lt. Col. Pulleine ever dispatched Melvill with the colour; likewise, there is nothing to substantiate the classic words attributed to Pulleine in a variety of films and books which implore Melvill "You, as senior subaltern, will take the colour, and make your way from here." This story is one of the legends of Isandlwana and originated in a report in an obscure local Natal newspaper which is signed by "A gentleman whose testimony may be relied upon". As to its author's identity and truthfulness, we will probably never know but it certainly joined the growing collection of heroic scenes adored by the Victorians. Even in his latest excellent book (3) Ron Lock perpetuates this unsubstantiated occurrence, "At the height of the battle, Colonel Pulleine had handed to him (Melvill) the cased Queen's colour of the 1st 24th with an order to take it to a place of safety".

Survivors' reports indicate that Coghill left Isandlwana before Melvill took charge of the colour yet, curiously, Coghill specifically informed another survivor, Lt. H. Curling R.A., as he and Coghill approached the river together (some five miles from the camp), that Pulleine had already been killed. Lt. Smith-Dorrien was near Melvill as the two officers were jointly negotiating a marshy patch. Smith-Dorrien looked ahead and recognised Coghill "at least half a mile ahead". It might just be possible that Melvill, an officer with a fine reputation, seized the initiative from the inexperienced Pulleine who, before that fateful day, had never heard a shot fired in anger.

There is bountiful evidence that, once the Zulus entered the camp, terror and panic took an immediate hold and that resistance lasted for minutes only. Did Melvill take the one artefact which could restore order, the colour, in a brave attempt to rally the 24th as they were being progressively overwhelmed by the Zulus? After all, the primary role of the colour was to rally friendly troops in the noisy confusion and smoke of battle and Melvill would have been only too aware of its purpose. (4) Did Melvill then realise his task was impossible and did he only then seek to save the colour? In any event, Melvill managed to leave Isandlwana in relatively good order, he had the colour, he rode his own horse and he still possessed his revolver and sword. We know that he lost his sword during the flight to the river as Chelmsford's interpreter, Brickhill, remembered being asked by Melvill if he had seen his lost sword. Had Melvill departed the scene before the camp was overrun, it is unlikely that he would have arrived at the river so long after the other fugitives, and he would have been seen by more of the survivors.

The question posed has to remain unanswered. What is clear is that Melvill reached the river with the colour, lost it mid-stream and then, having been saved by Coghill, lost his life trying to save Coghill. There is little doubt that Melvill could have escaped on foot with Higginson but chose instead to assist Coghill. The only Imperial officers to escape were Smith-Dorrien, Essex, Cochrane, Curling and Gardner. The colour was later discovered on the 5th February by Lt. Harford and Capt. Harber. They first found the colour case and further down the river saw the colour pole protruding out of the water. Capt. Harber waded into the river and pulled the pole, still attached to the colour, out of the water. As he recovered the colour, the gold-embroidered centre scroll fell back into the water.

Why did Lt. Coghill leave his regiment fighting for their lives on the battlefield?

Although an officer of the 24th, on the day of the battle, Lt. Coghill was Staff Officer to Col. Glyn, commander of No. 3 Column. He did not, however, accompany Glyn, due to an "old injury to his knee" (5) and accordingly stayed at Isandlwana camp. As the Zulu attack pressed home, several staff officers rendered valuable assistance to the failing British line. Capt. Essex, who survived, subsequently reported that he had spent some time supervising the flow of additional ammunition to the front line before the Zulus broke into the camp. Coghill was probably unable to assist anyone due to his injured knee.

As yet, there is no known evidence, oral or written, official or unofficial, to indicate that Coghill was with Melvill when Melvill departed from the battlefield at Isandlwana with the colour. There are eyewitness reports of both officers being seen at different points along the Fugitives' trail, but never together. It is probable that Coghill left the camp at an early stage of the battle, on a strange horse and considerably incapacitated by his injury. Had he left later with Melvill, it is unlikely that he could have maintained the same pace as Melvill who was riding his own horse. In any event, Lt. Curling RA saw Coghill on the track to Rorke's Drift at an early stage of the rout and later wrote,

I was with Maj. Smith at this time, he told me he had been wounded in the arm. We saw Lt. Coghill, the A.D.C., and asked him if we could not rally some men and make a stand, he said he did not think it could be done. We crossed the road with the crowd, principally consisting of natives, men left in camp, and civilians, and went down a steep ravine leading towards the river.

It is most unlikely that Curling would have considered offering Coghill the opportunity of making a stand once the British position had been completely routed by the Zulus. Numerous records indicate that this large group of escapees departed from the battlefield some time prior to the camp being overrun and at a point which coincides in the battle with the Zulus almost completing their encirclement of the British position. Maj. F. Russell, in a private letter to Maj. Gen. Allison, wrote that "the Natal natives bolted three quarters of an hour before the general flight".

It is also probable that Coghill's departure from Isandlwana was marginally less well organised than Melvill's. He certainly did not manage to collect his own horse which would indicate a degree of chaos in the headquarters area. Instead, he seized another horse and thus made his escape, but only just, as several survivors saw some Zulus attempt to assegai Coghill but settle instead for spearing and injuring his horse. This fact can be verified by a curious event which occurred a month later. On the 24th February, a white trader, John Calverley, rode into Col. Wood's main camp at Kambula some forty miles north of Isandlwana. A local Zulu chief, Hamu, brother of Cetshweyo, sought to negotiate an independent peace with Wood and decided to send one of two trusted white traders to arrange terms. The other trader patronised by Hamu was James Rorke, son of the trader who gave his name to the famous Rorke's Drift. Unfortunately, Calverley was immediately detained by the troops who saw Calverley carrying a looted Martini Henry rifle from Isandlwana and, worse, he was riding Coghill's personal horse which was well known to the soldiers. Wood had to intervene before Calverley had been too severely handled because Wood was intent on drawing Hamu's people away from Cetshweyo and Wood needed Calverley to carry his reply to Hamu. At the battle of Hlobane, Calverley served under Wood and was killed by the Zulus.

In any event, Coghill and Melvill reached the river independently and at different locations with Coghill successfully crossing the river upstream of Melvill. Lt. Higginson first mentions Coghill when he comes to their rescue after he and Melvill were swept from the now famous 'coffin rock', and not before. Donald Morris, a meticulous researcher, also makes no mention of the two officers being together until Melvill is actually in the river with Higginson, and after they had been clinging to the rock for some time. Morris continues, "Lieutenant Coghill, in a blue patrol jacket had reached the Natal shore in safety a few minutes before". (6) In a recent article on Melvill's flight by a Zulu War historian John Young, no mention is made of Coghill until Melvill floundered in the Buffalo River and Coghill went to his rescue. Obviously no one knows why Coghill departed the battlefield. He was an ambitious officer who was highly regarded by the officers of the 24th, Col. Glyn and Lord Chelmsford. Coghill would have been fully aware that considerable reserves, consisting of two companies of the 1st 24th, were already on route from Helpmakaar to Rorke's Drift. He could not have known that those reserves, on learning the unbelievable news of the British defeat, would turn back to Helpmakaar when only three miles from Rorke's Drift; news later confirmed by the sight of the distant camp at Rorke's Drift ablaze. Did Coghill leave Isandlwana early in the battle intending to summon help from these reserves which he would have believed were either at Rorke's Drift or even closer to Isandlwana?

In any event, the combination of his incapacity, the rough terrain and riding an unfamiliar assegai horse collectively and progressively conspired to slow his progress to the place of the fateful and fatal incident about to unfurl. Coghill was recovering from his ordeal on the Natal side of the riverbank just as Melvill was swept into view clutching the colour.

Who killed Coghill and Melvill?

Following the initial British attack on Sihayo's Krall, a number of surviving Zulus were detained for questioning, invariably a rough and horrid process. These captives were released during the following day or so and a number of them took refuge with relatives living in the vicinity of Fugitives' Drift on the Natal bank of the Buffalo River, then known as Sothondose's Drift. These natives, aggrieved by their detention and having lost their chief's son and friends in the attack, were not necessarily well disposed towards the British. As the British survivors fled Isandlwana, those survivors that managed to cross the river were observed by these same natives who were soon called upon by the Zulus to kill the survivors or themselves be killed. Local Zulu folklore holds that Coghill and Melvill were both killed by these local and otherwise friendly natives and not by Cetshwayo's Zulus. It was well known that the Zulus were reluctant to cross the fast flowing river. Apart from disobeying Cetshwayo's order not to invade Natal, they could not swim and, even today, they avoid deep water. (7)

Ron Lock wrote that many of the fugitives, including, perhaps Melvill and Coghill, were killed by the prisoners released by Chelmsford the previous day, a fact which was kept secret, but it was well known to Chelmsford's staff. One member of Lord Chelmsford's staff actually wrote that,

Some of them got right down to the river six miles off and were killed by a lot of scoundrels whom the General had taken prisoner a few days before. (8)

What is not disputed is that three officers, Coghill, Melvill and Higginson, all ended up in the Buffalo River. All of them could have survived but a combination of circumstances proved fatal to two of them. Higginson escaped following his mission to find some horses. It is apparent that Melvill refused to leave Coghill and they were both killed just below the crest of the ridge overlooking the river. Amazingly, Coghill still had his sword and revolver, Melvill had drawn his revolver but it was useless. (9) The cylinder had fallen out at Isandlwana and was subsequently found by Fynn, a member of a later burial party. It is evident that Coghill, being mounted and having safely reached the Natal riverbank, could easily have escaped had he left Melvill to his fate in the river. Likewise, once Melvill was on the Natal bank, he could have easily reached safety had he accompanied Higginson to search for horses instead of remaining with lame Coghill.

Chelmsford's and Wolseley's view of events

Lord Chelmsford was clearly unhappy about the circumstances surrounding the deaths of Coghill and Melvill. Chelmsford was already aware of a number of desertions from the field by officers of the invasion force. Most notable was the desertion of two officers who were part of Maj. Dartnell's force sent to scout ahead of Isandlwana.

The circumstances of Adendorff's departure from Isandlwana, where he was on picket duty, and his arrival at Rorke's Drift are also uncertain. There is even the possibility that he deserted Rorke's Drift moments before the Zulu attack. Zulu war author, Michael Glover, states,

Chard did not notice Adendorff's defection and reported that 'he stayed to assist in the defence'. Nevertheless, the evidence is overwhelming that he decamped. He was later arrested in Pietermaritzburg. (10)

More seriously, on the afternoon of the battle at Isandlwana, Capt. Stevenson deserted from Rorke's Drift leaving Lieutenants Chard and Bromhead to face the attacking Zulus. (11)

Lord Chelmsford wrote to the War Office,

It is most probable that Melvill lost his life endeavouring to save Coghill rather than vice versa. He (Coghill) could hardly walk and any exertion such as walking or riding would have been likely to render him almost helpless. He could not have assisted, therefore, in saving the colours of the 1st 24th, and as I have already said I fear he was a drag on poor Melvill. As regards the latter (Melvill) I am again puzzled how to reply to your question. I feel sure that Melvill left camp with the colours under orders received. He was too good a soldier to have left without. In being ordered to leave, however, he no doubt was given the best chance of saving his life which must have been lost had he remained in camp. His ride was not more daring than that of those who escaped. The question, therefore, remains had he succeeded in saving the colours and his own life, would he have been considered to have deserved the Victoria Cross?

Sir Garnet Wolseley was to write even more strongly on the issue,

I am sorry that both of these officers were not killed with their men at Isandlwana instead of where they were. I don't like the idea of officers escaping on horseback when their men on foot are killed. Heroes have been made of men like Melvill and Coghill, who, taking advantage of their having horses, bolted from the scene of the action to save their lives, it is monstrous making heroes of those who saved or attempted to save their lives by bolting or of those who, shut up in buildings at Rorke's Drift, could not bolt, and fought like rats for their lives which they could not otherwise save.

Why were Coghill and Melvill awarded the Victoria Cross?

The criteria for the award of a posthumous Victoria Cross prior to 1879 are confusing. The main factors causing this confusion arose regarding men who died during the Indian Mutiny before the Victoria Cross could be conferred. Due to the long delays in the transmission of news between India and London, one GOC, Lord Clyde, had even requested that a supply of Victoria Crosses should be dispatched to him. His request was considered but refused by the War Office. Even after 1879, General Harman, Military Secretary at the War Office, wrote to the Foreign Secretary in 1888 concerning a request for a Victoria Cross for a deceased ensign,

Ensign Phillipps would have been recommended for the VC had he survived, but he was not recommended prior to his decease and, there are only precedents for the issue of the Cross to the relatives of persons upon whom it had been provisionally conferred, who had been recommended for it whilst alive.

This doctrine prevailed until the end of the 19th century, though Sir Evelyn Wood recommended that Capt. Ronald Campbell would have received the Cross had he survived. Wood's relevant War Office file contains a pencilled note, "*Gen W (presumably Wolseley) does not wish this question raised*".

With regard to Coghill and Melvill, no recommendation was submitted from the commander in the field. Col. Glyn's emotive dispatch praised their conduct but made no specific recommendation. The Duke of Cambridge suggested to the Secretary of State for War that the terms of the dispatch merited the issue of memoranda to the effect that they would have been recommended to the Queen for the award of the Victoria Cross had they survived. Exactly the same situation applied to the recommendation made by the Indian Government on the 15th May 1879 for the Victoria Cross to be awarded to Lt. Walter Hamilton for his action at Futtahabad in India. This attempt to bend the rules, as in the case of Coghill and Melvill, also failed.

There can be no doubt that Melvill richly deserved his award on at least two counts, firstly, for denying the colour to the enemy and, secondly, for remaining to assist the injured Coghill. The case of Coghill is only marginally less clear although, sadly, the awkward question concerning the authority for his flight from the battlefield remains unanswered. He probably left Isandlwana, under orders, early in the battle to summon help from the reserves he fully expected to be at nearby Rorke's Drift or even closer to Isandlwana. He also surrendered his only chance of escape by plunging back into the river, under heavy enemy fire, to assist Melvill and Higginson who were floundering mid-stream.

Melvill's wife, Sara, was notified by the Prime Minister on the 19th May 1879 that Queen Victoria had awarded her a pension of £100 a year "in recognition of the heroic conduct of your late husband in saving the Colours of the 24th Regt. on the field of Isandlwana" (Sic). Melvill's father received the following letter from Major General M.A. Dillon, War Office, dated 21st April 1879.

Sir,

I am directed by the Field Marshal Commanding in Chief to inform you that his Royal Highness perused with melancholy interest the report forwarded to him by Lord Chelmsford from Colonel Glyn, shewing how the Queen's Color (Sic) of the 1st Battalion 24th Foot would have fallen into the hands of the enemy on the 22nd January but for the gallant behaviour of your son Lieutenant & Adjutant Melvill and Lieutenant Coghill of that Regiment. His Royal Highness in communicating this dispatch to you desires me to assure you, of his sincere sympathy with you in the loss of your son, whose gallant death in the successful endeavour to save the Colour of this regiment, has gained the admiration of the army.

It is gratifying to His Royal Highness to inform you that, if your son had survived his noble effort, it was Her Majesty's intention to confer upon him the Victoria Cross, and a notification to that effect will be made in the London Gazette.

In 1907 the rules for the award of a posthumous Victoria Cross were changed; perhaps the continuous pressure on King Edward VII from Coghill's father, Sir Jocelyn Coghill, and Melvill's wife, influenced the change. On the 15th January 1907, the London Gazette published the names of a number of families who were to receive a posthumous Victoria Cross, including those of Melvill and Coghill, Melvill for attempting to save the colour, Coghill, for attempting to save Melvill and the colour. Sadly, Sir Jocelyn Coghill died just before the awards were announced.

References.

1. Walter Robert Higginson, formally a Lieutenant in the Dublin City Militia, served through the Cape War of 1877-8 before becoming a Lieutenant and adjutant of the 3rd Regiment NNC in November 1878. Was present at the attack of Sihayo's kraal and the battle of Isandlwana. Was mentioned in dispatches for his part in trying to save the colour of the 1st 24th Regiment and then took part in the battle of Ulundi and the siege of Pretoria. He later became the Government Secretary and Superintendent of the Gambia Police. See Journal 15 for the most recent research on Higginson.
2. Donald Morris *Washing of the Spears* Pimlico Books 2nd Edition 1994
3. *Blood on the Painted Mountain* Ron Lock 1995 Greenhill
4. At Maiwand in the 2nd Afgan War (1880) Col. Galbraith tried to rally the 66th with the Colours.
5. Numerous references. Coghill wrote that he injured his knee chasing some chickens during the reconnaissance of the Mangeni Falls on the 20th January. Why a staff officer would chase a chicken, even for his Commander's supper, has long stretched many a military man's imagination. What is not generally known is that Coghill suffered from a previous assegai wound to his knee sustained during high spirits in the officers' mess. Lt. Daly 1st 24th had been demonstrating his dubious skills of assegai throwing and speared Coghill in the knee. Perhaps this accounts for the several descriptions of Coghill's knee injury being 'old'?
6. There is no special significance in Coghill's jacket being blue, other than the fact that it may have saved his life on the ride along the fugitives' trail. 24th Officers had a choice of regimental jackets to wear in the field, so just as many could have been wearing blue as those who were wearing red. King Cetshwayo had ordered the Zulus to concentrate on red jacketed personnel in the belief that only they were the Imperial troops.
7. Two interesting letters were recently published in the Sunday Telegraph which might throw a little light on this matter. Firstly, "the Negro has a shorter Achilles tendon than the white, which makes swimming harder, but the reverse is true in running because it gives him greater leverage". Secondly, "As a lifelong teacher of physical education, my greatest delight has always been in persuading youngsters that if they relax in water they will not sink. Then the West Indian lads arrived in London disproving all my assurances. They took a deep breath, hugged their knees and sank to the bottom while the rest of the class bobbed on the surface". Letters to *The Sunday Telegraph* 10th August 1997.
8. Maj. Grenville - letter to his father, dated the 3rd February 1879
9. It is not clear how Fynn found one small pistol chamber in all the chaos and debris at Isandlwana or how he recognised the particular chamber as Melvill's
10. *Rorke's Drift* Michael Glover Wordsworth Military Library 1997 (if Adendorff fought at Rorke's Drift, he was the only person to see action at both Isandlwana on the 22nd and Rorke's Drift on the 22nd and 23rd).
11. This little known desertion will be fully considered in a forthcoming Journal which will review the whole action at Rorke's Drift.