

The Affair at the Ntombe River.  
12 March 1879.

The Vilification of Lieutenant Harward and the Lionisation of Sergeant Booth.

By Dr Jonathan P. Hicks

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By the beginning of March 1879, Lord Chelmsford's Central Column had retreated to Natal after the setback at Isandlwana, and the Right Flank Column, under the command of Colonel Charles Pearson, was besieged in Eshowe, leaving only the Left Flank Column, under Colonel Evelyn Wood, as an active force. On the morning of the 12th March 1879 the British Army suffered its second defeat of the war. It is an often-overlooked disaster, coming so close to the major defeat at Isandlwana and the defence at Rorke's Drift, but given that Chelmsford was engaged in withdrawing his forces and consolidating his position of re-supply of men and materials ready for a second invasion, another humiliating defeat was a most unwelcome occurrence.

Nearly a year later, on the 20th February 1880, a Court-Martial began at Pietermaritzburg, which resulted in the acquittal of the officer concerned, but which was followed by an extraordinary censure of his conduct being read out at the head of every regiment in the British Army at the insistence of its Commander-in-Chief. Three days later, a notification appeared in the 'London Gazette' that a non-commissioned officer was to receive the Victoria Cross. These two men had both been present at the battle, which had resulted in the third highest British casualties of the Anglo-Zulu War, yet their fortunes had travelled in opposite directions.

In March 1879 five companies of the 80th Regiment of Foot (Staffordshire Volunteers) were stationed at Luneburg in the Transvaal. They served a dual purpose: to prevent incursions into Zululand by both the Boers and the Swazis. The soldiers of the 80th were supplied with food and ammunition by wagons in convoy from Lydenburg, the regiment's old quarters, in the north, but the route ran through Zulu territory over a distance of more than 160 miles. The convoy route passed through the Ntombe Valley which was three miles from the Tafelberg, one of the strongholds of Mbilini kaMswati, a renegade Swazi freebooter.

An eighteen wagon convoy (1) of ammunition and rations had left Lydenburg in late February, but by the second week of March was overdue, owing to the heavy rain which severely affected the roads and flooded the rivers. It had been unescorted through the Transvaal, as this area was believed to be safe, but on the 7th March Major Charles Tucker, Commander at Luneburg, sent out H Company, under the command of Captain David Barry Moriarty to bring it in. The strength of the company was 103 non-commissioned officers and men. Riding out to Myer's Drift the morning after his birthday, Moriarty found that seven (2) wagons were unable to cross from the far side, owing to the river being in flood. The river was now some forty-five metres across, and although the immediate area around the drift was open, it was surrounded by high ground.

Moriarty had a wagon full of materials for building a raft to assist the convoy in crossing the Ntombe. He crossed the river by the raft on the 8 March, ferrying seventy of his men across, and set out to find the missing wagons, leaving Lieutenant Lindop in command of thirty-three men on the Luneburg side of the river. Moriarty and Lieutenant Johnson found the wagons three miles away, halted after being attacked by marauders and having lost forty-six of their oxen. The drivers reported that Mbilini and his ally, Manyonyoba and his men, had attacked them.

Moriarty used the remaining oxen in relays to bring these wagons to the Derby side of the river by the 11th. The men had worked hard but it had been wet for days and difficult to cook food in the conditions. The river, with a seven-knot current, became impassable before all the wagons were safely transported to the other side. Moriarty called a halt, forming a V-shaped laager on the far bank with the sixteen or seventeen wagons remaining. The left leg of the V ended in a row of four tents. These were erected as the river retreated and served mainly to keep the cattle inside the laager but even at this stage the wagons on the other leg did not reach down to the river.

Two sentries were posted just outside the laager, which was inadequate as there was thick bush surrounding the area, and no outlying pickets were posted as custom and practice demanded. Moriarty had become complacent; being so close to Luneburg must have affected his thinking. But this was in direct contradiction to Chelmsford's general orders that a camp should be properly guarded: an order that he himself had ironically ignored at Isandlwana.

Lieutenants Lindop and Johnson were relieved on the evening of the 11th by Lieutenant Henry Hollingworth Harward, who had accompanied Tucker on a visit to the drift. As night was falling, Moriarty camped on the far side of the river with seventy men and the majority of the wagons. On the near side were thirty-three men (3) and the remainder of the wagons under the command of Harward. Moriarty's own tent was pitched outside the V at the apex as if to show how confident he was in the safety of his camp. His men had survived four previous nights without forming an entrenched laager, so perhaps he and they assumed that such a defensive formation would be overcautious.

Harward's platoon's three bell tents were pitched on the southern side, with their two wagons beside them. He followed Moriarty's lead in not entrenching his wagons, as Lindop had also done. That evening, Harward crossed the river and went off in pursuit of some stray cattle. His men killed two Zulus, captured some rifles and goats, and returned to the laager. Harward was tired when he reached the camp. His blankets were in Moriarty's tent so he lay down to sleep there, but Moriarty pointed out that only Sergeant Booth was in command of the men on the other side and sent Harward across.

During the night the rain began again. At around 4.00 a.m. one of the sentries on Harward's side thought he heard a shot but he could not see any Zulus, owing to the thick mist which now covered the river. Harward was also awakened by the shot, ordered his men to stand to and told Booth to shout across the river to warn the camp. Booth called to a Private Tucker to wake Moriarty. Moriarty said he would order his men to fall in, instead of which he went back to sleep and the order was never given. Unbeknown to him, a large party of Zulus (4) was approaching under the leadership of Mbilini.

After being roused, Booth had dressed himself and sat in the commissariat wagon smoking his pipe. He and a companion talked for thirty minutes or so until they heard another shot from the other side of the river. At approximately 5.00 a.m. the rain stopped and the fog and mist lifted. The sentry on the south bank, seeing the Zulus approaching, fired a shot and raised the alarm. The sentries on the north bank had not seen the Zulus because there was small rise in front of them that prevented them from seeing more than 50 yards even on a clear day - another reason to have ensured outlying pickets.

The Zulus first fired a volley from about 100 yards and then dropped their guns and charged the laager. The men in the camp were alerted, but before they could respond the Zulus attacked and penetrated the defences. As Moriarty emerged from his tent, Josiah Sussens, a Dutch wagon driver, reported that he shouted, '*Guards out!*' (5) It was too late though and the Zulus assailed the sleepy men as they emerged from their tents.

Moriarty apparently made a courageous stand. He shot three Zulus with his pistol before being assailed and then shot in the chest. His last words, according to Sussens, were, '*Fire away, men, I am done.*' (6) Other sources add the heroic words, '*Death and glory*'. (7) He was then assailed a second time. Zulus and red-coated soldiers fought in the water and within a few minutes a large number of soldiers and wagoners were dead; only fifteen managed to swim to the other side of the river. (8)

On the other bank, Harward and Booth's men were organised into a defensive group. A party of 200 Zulus (9) crossed the river upstream and fell on this second group. Harward ordered Booth to fall back to a farmhouse. Booth seems initially to have been confused by the order, as there was a mission station 400-500 yards away and Peach Farm 3 miles away. The ambiguity of this order could have been disastrous, but Booth, being a well-trained N.C.O., did not question his officer's orders and made for the farmhouse, as instructed. Harward saddled a pony and said, '*Fire away, lads, I shall be ready in a minute.*' (10) When Booth looked around, Harward was gone. Booth rallied his men and the survivors with the help of Lance Corporal Burgess. Initially, he had ten men with him; more survivors later joined him, but four men who broke away from his group were killed. Each of the soldiers had the standard seventy rounds of ammunition and this, in well-sustained volley fire, it seems, was sufficient to hold back the Zulus on this occasion.

At 6.30 a.m. Harward reached Tucker at Fort Clery in Luneburg. He then fell on Tucker's bed and fainted. Tucker revived him with water and extracted the full story. Tucker, Lieutenants Johnson, Ussher and Sherrard, Dr Wardrop and two mounted orderlies rode to Myer's Drift where a scene of devastation awaited them.

The British had lost one officer, sixty men, a civil surgeon, two white wagon conductors and fifteen black drivers. It was the third highest loss of the war after Isandlwana and Hlobane. The Zulus had taken 250 cattle, 80 Martini-Henry rifles and 90,000 rounds of ammunition. Booth's fighting retreat was almost beyond belief. With a small group of men, swollen by wounded and frightened men from across the river, he organised a withdrawal over a distance of approximately three miles in the face of a group of Zulu

warriors, several hundred strong and flushed with the success of their initial assault.

Quite how Booth managed this though is uncertain. It may be that faced with a determined resistance the Zulus who crossed the river, and not all did, were unwilling to risk their lives after one successful attack. The further they pursued Booth and his men, the longer they left their comrades to loot the camp.

Harward's choice in leaving the field in order to alert the attackers to the possibility of reinforcements was supported by two wounded Zulus who told their captors that they had

'... fled so quickly (because) they said they dreaded the other red-coats coming down on them.' (11)

Official opinion regarding Harward's flight quickly altered. Tucker, in his report to Crealock, had written on the 12th March:

The small party under Lieut. Harward... rendered to a hopeless cause valuable assistance... and I am of the opinion that but for those on this side of the Intombi River, not one man would have escaped.' (12)

But by the 19th March Tucker's view on Harward's conduct had changed. He now retracted his praise of Harward's conduct and wrote:

The moment Harward saw the Zulus coming across the river he saddled up the horse of another man and galloped into the camp. (13)

The change took place because a scapegoat was needed. Moriarty was dead and Tucker no doubt saw his failure in not ordering Moriarty to properly laager the camp as a mistake he was keen to have overlooked.

Booth's own account was written in a letter to his wife Lucy who was living in Cape Town with their children dated 14th March 1879. In it he stated:

I commanded the party on this side as Lieutenant Harward saddled his horse and galloped away leaving us to do the best we could. (14)

Booth's pragmatic approach cannot disguise his feelings towards an officer who was deserting his men. This is in direct contrast to Wolseley's later comments on the reliance of soldiers on their officers in times of crisis. As at Isandlwana, the rank and file had fought to rescue themselves while an officer had left the field.

Whatever Chelmsford's private thoughts, his official line was to support Harward's conduct at first. As in Durnford's case at Isandlwana, he was reluctant to criticise a dead man for his failings (in this case Moriarty) but he appears to have decided to make someone culpable for a second blow to his prestige. Chelmsford sent his dispatch to the War Office:

The Officer in command of the detachment on the right bank, Lieutenant Harward, 80th Regiment, appears to have done his utmost to assist his comrades in their unequal struggle, as soon as he was aware of what was occurring.' (15)

Yet soon afterwards he ordered Harward to be court-martialled and on the 17th of March a Court of Enquiry was held at which it was decided to arrest Harward and to arraign him before a court martial. However, the medical officer at Luneburg advised against it owing to the parlous state of Harward's health, brought on by the disaster. Harward was hospitalised and, after appearing before a Medical Board at Pietermaritzburg, he was invalided home to England. On the 28th November 1879 he was offered the chance to resign his commission but refused. He returned to Durban in January 1880, and was arrested and charged the following month. Offering Harward the opportunity to resign after the war had ceased was a clear sign that the authorities wished the matter to be terminated. Harward, however, was determined in his attempt to clear his name.

At his court martial at Fort Napier, Pietermaritzburg, on 20th February 1880, nearly a year after the battle, Harward was charged with the following:

1. Having misbehaved before the enemy, in shamefully abandoning a party of the Regiment under his command when attacked by the enemy, and in riding off at speed from his men.
2. Conduct prejudicial to good order and military discipline in having, at the place and time mentioned in the first charge, neglected to take proper precautions for the safety of a party of the Regiment under his command when attacked.' (16)

The Prosecutor, Captain Howard of the 80th, said that the delay in bringing Harward to trial was owing to Harward's ill health since Ntombe. Harward's defence was that he had endeavoured to rally his men but they were too scattered and he had found re-formation impossible. He consequently sought to alert the Zulus to the fact that he was riding for reinforcements by making his action highly visible in the hope that they would withdraw.

Tucker was the first witness called. He stated that a Zulu prisoner told him that the wounded were not carried away because the Zulus feared the arrival of reinforcements from Luneburg, and he found no cartridge cases on the Luneburg side of the riverbank, which directly contradicts Booth's claim to have advanced his men to the river to cover the men who were swimming across.

Booth was the second witness called. He stated that there were forty men with him on the Luneburg side of the river. He was joined at the wagon by a group of only nine, so it appears entirely probable that the others left the area as the fighting began. Booth stated that he heard Harward give-  
*some word of command about retiring on the farm house...* (17)

Yet in his interview in 1898, he said to a journalist that he did not. He expanded upon this when questioned by Harward:

Yes, I heard you say "Fire away, lads"...you were cool and collected and not flurried.' (18)

He saw only two men cross the river. During the initial action he fired twenty-five rounds from his position at the wagon, but in the whole of his three-mile retreat he fired only a further five or six shots. When pressed as to the conduct of the other men under his command, he stated that only his nine were '...cool and collected...' (19) and that the others  
... had gone away...' (20)

Booth admitted that on the retreat to Luneburg:  
I think we should have been cut off then if the Zulus had not retired.' (21)

Thirty-one soldiers had fled the field from Harward's side of the river, and this before the Zulus had crossed, yet the authorities overlooked this desertion from the field. Private Peter Lewis, the next witness, was the sentry who had first raised the alarm and he stated under cross-examination that no hand-to-hand fighting took place on the Luneburg side of the river. The Zulus kept their distance and it appears they were merely content to drive the small group of soldiers away from the commissariat wagon so they could loot it. Even Howard admitted that the Zulus:  
.. could never summon up courage to attack them at close quarters, and allowed them to retreat... they had never been closely pressed.' (22)

In his summing up, Harward pointed out that he did not leave until after the men had retired, and he stated that Booth had been fortunate to survive:

It were idle to suppose that the result was achieved against the united efforts of four thousand Zulus. Sergt. Booth and the other survivors escaped because the Zulus retired.' (23)

And they did this because they saw that Harward had ridden for reinforcements. He also cited a precedent for his action in that at the Battle of the Redan during the Crimean War, a Colonel Windham had left the field to seek reinforcements. (24)

When Howard cross-examined him, Booth stated that two or three minutes elapsed between the alarm being raised and his seeing Harward with his saddle in his hands, preparing his horse. According to him, the Zulus had not crossed the river when Harward rode away. He stated that the retreat would not have been more orderly or soldier-like if Harward had remained, but perhaps that just showed his general lack of confidence in the officers who had been present at the river. Booth said that he had been unwell on the night in question, yet he was well enough to organise a fighting retreat over three miles, but he did admit that if the Zulus had not retired they could have cut the road and then:

I don't think we could have held our own. (25)

Even Howard said that if the Zulus had pressed the attack with any vigour, the soldiers had:  
... four miles to go, and weighed down with their arms and accoutrements would have been run down by the Zulus in the first half mile and assagaied. (26)

When cross-examined, Harward tried to point out that the Zulus would have seen him riding for help

and would have signalled by fires to the main body of the impi to retire. He claimed that Wood had prejudiced his case by criticising him in front of all the officers and men of the 80th on the 22nd of March at Luneburg, also that the press, the satirical magazines and questions by Sir Robert Peel in the House of Commons had all done the same. Harward reminded the court that in 1878 he had had the sole charge of the retreat of Colonel Rowlands' column from Sekhukhune's country. He further insisted he could not have laagered with the two wagons he had available to him; that he had only arrived at the camp the night before; that he had given a warning to Moriarty of the Zulu approach and that as he was the only soldier who could ride he was the best man to summon help, and finally Booth had done everything he would have done so nothing was lost through his leaving.

The court acquitted Harward on the charges of abandoning his men in the face of the enemy and failing to ensure the safety of the camp. The second charge should have been levelled at Tucker and Moriarty anyway, not Harward.

Wolseley was now in command of British forces in South Africa and, given his comments on the behaviour of the officers at Isandlwana, it was no surprise that he refused to confirm the findings of the court. The Duke of Cambridge, Commander-in-Chief of the Army, agreed with Wolseley and ordered that the following be read out at the head of every regiment in service in the British Army:

Had I released this officer without making any remarks upon the verdict in question, it would have been a tacit acknowledgement that I concurred in what appears to me a monstrous theory, viz., that a regimental officer who is the only officer present with a party of soldiers actually and seriously engaged with the enemy, can, under any pretext whatever, be justified in deserting them and abandoning them to their fate. The more helpless the position in which an officer finds his men, the more it is his bounden duty to stay and share in their fortune, whether for good or ill. It is because the British officer has always done so that he occupies the position in which he is held in the estimation of the world, and that he possesses the influence he does in the ranks of our army. The soldier has learned to feel that, come what may, he can in the direst moment of danger look with implicit faith to his officer, knowing that he will never desert him under any possible circumstances. It is to this faith of the British soldier in his officers that we owe most of the gallant deeds recorded in our military annals; and it is because the verdict of this Court-Martial strikes at the root of this faith, that I feel it is necessary to mark officially my emphatic dissent from the theory upon which the verdict has been founded. (27)

Harward was released and returned to duty but his career was obviously finished. By 1898 Harward's conduct was firmly vilified and his behaviour was described as:

.. leaving his command at the moment of extreme peril - an act positively incredible in a British officer.' (28) and ... shamefully abandoning a party of his regiment under his command when attacked.' (29)

This mistaken belief, that Harward deserted his men, was not substantiated by the findings of the court martial and was only instigated by a vindictive commander-in-chief. Harward seems to have genuinely believed in the rightness of what he was doing, and, given, the mass desertions that were already taking place amongst his men, his action could be seen as having saved the lives of Booth and the others.

Booth was created Pay Sergeant after the battle, but was ambitious enough to write in a letter: *'I may get Frederick's Colours'* (30) as Colour Sergeant Fredericks was missing. It is possible therefore that Booth was a willing accomplice in the embellishing of his actions. Chelmsford, and later Wolseley, was happy to foster the idea of a hero from amongst the ranks, as well as a living scapegoat officer, and Booth was alert to the possibilities of his own advancement. In keeping with his erratic career to date, he was made Colour Sergeant again on 13th March and was later reverted to Sergeant on 19th October 1881, gaining the rank yet again on 15th March 1884. He was mentioned in dispatches and initially recommended for the award of the Distinguished Conduct Medal but Sir Garnet Wolseley was determined to honour Booth publicly in order to highlight Harward's conduct. He ordered a special parade in Pretoria and on 2 December 1879 Booth was presented with a belt, knife, a nickel plated revolver, pouch and ammunition, the gift of the grateful European wagon drivers. The opportunity for propaganda at home was too good to miss though, and the decoration was upped to the Victoria Cross. The 'London Gazette' published this notification on 23rd February 1880. He was awarded the Victoria Cross at Windsor Castle by Queen Victoria on 26th June 1880.

Booth was interviewed in 1898 regarding his part in the action. He was noticeably reluctant to talk about the battle and had to be pressed for an account of his retreat. In it he stated that he did not see Harward leave the battlefield and did not receive any order to retire. Booth ordered his men, eight in number, to stop firing and to advance to the river's edge, which does not indicate that they were being attacked by large

numbers of Zulus. Booth admitted that 200 Zulus crossed the river but

When they found the commissariat wagon a good few of them stopped. (31)

Harward had been presented with the opportunity of achieving glory for himself but chose, in a moment of rashness, to take a different option. Chard and Bromhead had taken their opportunity and had been publicly rewarded and revered for it. Harward's action had saved the lives of many of his men and although a court martial was instigated, its verdict of not guilty was not allowed to stand. Harward was held accountable for what were really the deficiencies in both Moriarty's and Tucker's conduct. On the 14th March 1880 he was released and returned to duty with his regiment. The impact of Wolseley and Cambridge's public shaming was too much for him though, and on May 11th he resigned his commission. He seems to have settled into obscurity after this and there is little information on the latter part of his life.

Booth was seen as the one true hero of the event. In the official version of the battle, words such as 'little band', 'showing a bold front' and 'determination' all highlight the laudable conduct he and his men exhibited. (32) He died of rheumatic fever and jaundice at Brierley Hill, near Dudley in the West Midlands on December 8th, 1899, aged 53.

Tucker survived the furore surrounding the conduct of the officers at Ntombe and prospered. By June 1880 he was writing letters to the War Office forwarding his case for promotion to the rank of colonel. He rose to become a Knight Grand Cross of the Royal Victorian Order in June 1912 and Colonel of the South Staffordshire Regiment from 1911 until his death at his home in Biarritz in 1935. Both Tucker's and Booth's medals and awards are on display in the Staffordshire Regimental Museum. Harward's, needless to say, are not. As for Mbilini, he soon left his stronghold at Tafelberg for a more impressive camp at Hlobane and another victory over the 'Red Soldiers'. He was wounded by a patrol of men from the 80<sup>th</sup> Regiment, which included Second Lieutenant Ussher, during a skirmish on 5<sup>th</sup> April near Luneburg and died a few days later.

## References.

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4. Booth, letter to his wife, op. cit.
5. Major Ashe and Cpt. Wyatt-Edgell, *The Story of the Zulu Campaign*, (London, 1880), p. 105 state 4,000 to 5,000. D. C. F. Moodie, *History of the Battles and Adventures of the British, the Boers and the Zulus*, (Adelaide, 1879), p. 103 quotes a Zulu source saying 9,000
- 6/7. Josiah Sussens, article in the *Transvaal Argus*, (21st April 1879)
8. e. g. J. P. Mackinnon & S. H. Shadbolt *The South African Campaign of 1879*, p. 230, and M. Barthorp, *The Zulu War – a Pictorial History*, (London, 1980), p. 104
9. Booth, letter to wife, op. cit.
10. Tucker, letter to father, Tucker Papers, op. cit.
11. Interview with Booth in *The County Express*, (9th April 1898)
12. Moodie, op. cit., p.103
13. Tucker, letter to Crealock 12th March 1879, Tucker Papers in the Museum of the South Staffordshire Regiment, op. cit.
14. Tucker, letter to father, op. cit.
15. Booth, letter to wife, op. cit.
16. In R. Hope, *The Zulu War and the 80th Regiment of Foot*, 1997, p. 74
- 17-24. *The Times of Natal*, (8th March 1880)
- At the Battle of the Redan in 1855, Windham left the field to seek reinforcements, but told every officer he could find before leaving that he was not running away. Rather than being court-martialled, Windham was promoted to the rank of Major-General for his actions. Yet the Commanding Royal Engineer in his journal called it 'most injudicious'. Windham had lost control of his men and they had refused to advance: when he left, they retreated.
- 25/26. *The Times of Natal*, op. cit.
27. Zulu War Papers in the Museum of the South Staffordshire Regiment
- 28/29 *The County Express*, op. cit.
30. Booth, letter to wife op. cit.
31. *The County Express*, op. cit.
32. War Office, op. cit p. 71