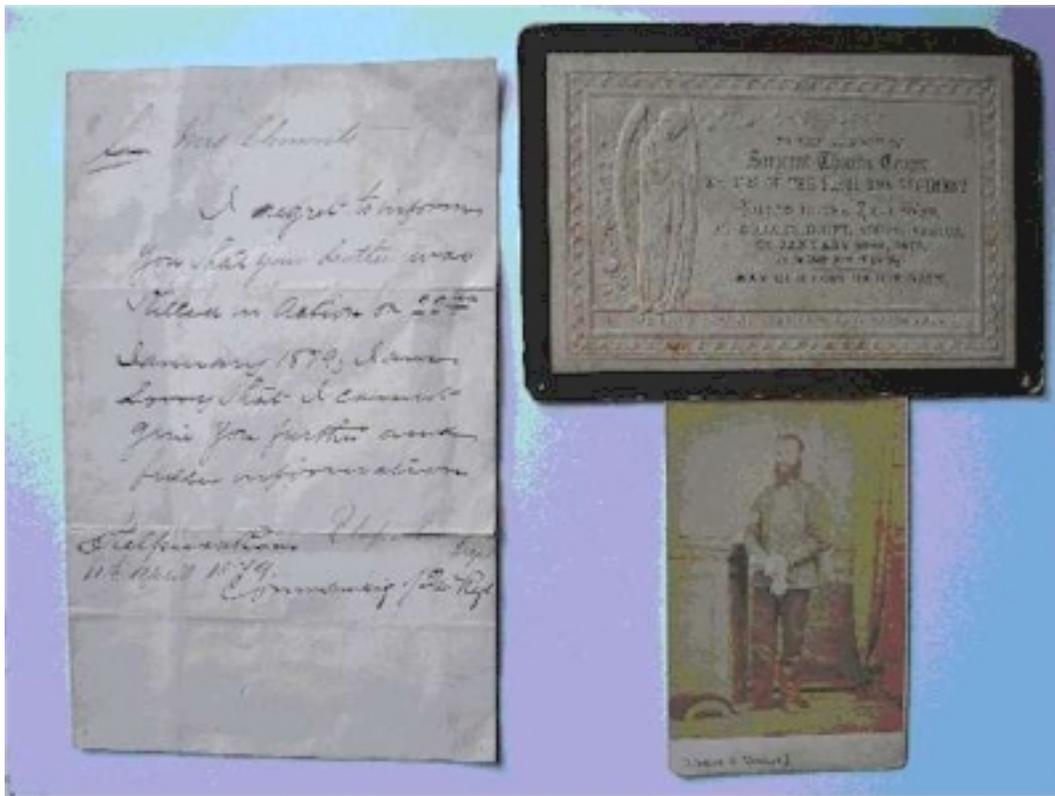


Sergeant 1313 Thomas Cooper, F Company, 1st Battalion, 24th Regiment
Killed in action at Isandlwana or a Rorke's Drift casualty?

By Mark Maplesden

1. Letter from Major Upcher at Helpmekaar to Sgt. Cooper's sister, dated 11 April 1879
2. Sgt. Cooper's Rorke's Drift Memorial Service card (embossed family version).
3. Sergeant Thomas Cooper photographed in 1878, at some time between the conclusion of the Ninth Cape Frontier War in June 1878 and the invasion of Zululand in January 1879.



The biographical records of those soldiers that had fought in the South Africa campaign of 1877-1879 record that Thomas Cooper attested to the 24th Regiment of Foot on 7 November 1866. At a time when attestation forms merely requested a recruit's age, not his date of birth, and the accuracy of any information only assessed by the recruiter, Cooper had been liberal with the truth. Born in 1850 he swore his age at 18 years. Having completed his first term Cooper re-enlisted as a corporal on 23 December 1873 and was promoted to the rank of Sergeant on 13 August 1874. Before his posting to southern Africa, Cooper had served with the 1st Battalion on garrison duty in Malta and then Gibraltar

Serving with F Company since its arrival at the Cape of Good Hope on 2 January 1875, Cooper was to become well acquainted with the South African landscape and one of the battalion's most seasoned campaigners. In May 1875 Cooper was included in the expeditionary force despatched to quell a possible republican rising amongst prospectors in the diamond fields of Kimberley. Although the revolt never materialised Cooper participated in the 350 mile march from Cape Town, in the Cape Colony, to the north-east of Griqualand West. Subsequently garrisoned at King Williams Town, Cooper saw active service against the Gcaleka and Ngqika Xhosa tribes during the Ninth Cape Frontier War between December 1877 and June 1878. Significantly, F Company was the only unit which participated in both set piece battles of a war which mostly involved prolonged skirmishing in dense bush. Cooper was present not only at the victory at Nyumaga on 13 January 1878 but also at Centane, the largest engagement of the war on 7 February 1878, against 6,000 Xhosa warriors.

With the successful conclusion to the Frontier War and the impending threat of a conflict with the independent Zulu kingdom, the 1st Battalion was relieved from its duties along the Kei River and ordered to march to the British colony of Natal. Whilst the remainder of the battalion continued to Helpmekaar in readiness for the planned invasion, F Company having arrived in Natal on 19 November 1878, was detached to garrison Fort Napier, Pietermaritzburg, the headquarters of the British army in Natal. Cooper, and F Company, did not leave Fort Napier until 9 January 1879 and marched for twelve consecutive days in an attempt to catch up with the battalion, which had already crossed into Zululand on 12 January 1879. F Company arrived at Isandlwana on the night of the 20 January camping with the rearguard of the Centre Column at the Manzimyama River on the wagon track that approached Isandlwana from the rear. Cooper eventually marched into camp the following morning.

When Lord Chelmsford marched out of camp in the early hours of 22 January to reinforce Major Dartnell's reconnaissance of the Mangeni Valley, the 1st Battalion, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Pulleine, was left to defend the camp and await further orders from Chelmsford.

It was breakfast time when Cooper and the men of the 1st Battalion were initially called to arms, at approximately 7.45am, in response to the first sightings of Zulus along the Itusi and Nqutu Ridge to the north of the camp. The men fell in on the slope in front of the 2/24th and Natal Native Contingent tents and remained there until they were eventually stood down at approximately 10.45am. Cooper and F Company returned to their own battalion tents to commence lunch but were ordered to keep their valise equipment on. At about 11am the 'alarm' and 'fall in' was again sounded, this time in response to the sighting of the main Zulu advance from the north. Around 11.45am F Company was sent to reinforce the earlier deployment of E Company, about 1,000 yards to the north of the camp, on the Tahelane Ridge. After the twenty minute march out of camp and the ascent of the spur, Cooper and his comrades came into action at a position between the main section of E Company and a small detachment to its extreme left, against the uNokhenke and uKhandempemvu Regiments of the Zulu right horn.

According to the testimony of Captain Essex of the 75th Regiment, present on the ridge, it would appear that after little more than five minutes, at approximately 12.15pm, both companies received orders from Pulleine to withdraw as their position was in danger of being outflanked. With the route of their original ascent in danger of being cut off by the main Zulu advance, both companies retired, in some disorder, descending

the rocky incline and reformed in extended line on what was the left of the British line. Captain Younghusband's C Company supported this deployment on the left of F Company. For the best part of an hour Cooper and the 1st Battalion stalled the Zulu attack but at just after 1.00pm the order to retire on the camp was given. As Cooper and F Company fell back through the tents they came under increasing pressure from the uKhandempemvu Regiment. 'As we rushed, on the soldiers retired on the camp, fighting all the way, and as they got into camp we were intermingled with them'.¹

It was at this stage that F Company started to suffer serious casualties. Lieutenant Charles Raw noted how the Zulus 'cut them up before they could rally, killing them close in to the tents'.² Cooper, probably with bayonet fixed, would no doubt have been engaged in hand-to-hand fighting, back-to-back with fellow soldiers and witnessing comrades being killed around him. Surviving groups were pushed over the Nek and through the wagon park, towards the Manzimyama River. Here, amongst the banks of the dried river, the last stands were made by anybody without a horse.

Like the fate of so many on that day, no accurate record exists of Cooper's death and it is assumed he perished somewhere between the northern base of Isandlwana hill and the Manzimyama River. Given the length of time that the fallen soldiers' bodies lay in the open it was impossible to identify all but a few, where personal items were found. One of these few was Lieutenant Edgar Oliphant Anstey. His remains were recognised by burial parties amongst the last clumps of dead along the Manzimyama River, two miles from the site of the British camp. Anstey had served with Cooper and the discovery of his body so far from the tented area gives credence to the possibility that more men from F Company could have made it as far, and perhaps even further if they were able to catch a loose horse.

Cooper is included in the Casualty Roll of the 1st Battalion for Isandlwana and the regimental records state that his personal effects were claimed by his father. However, at a subsequent memorial service held for Cooper by his family, the memorial cards issued suggested that Cooper's death occurred, not at Isandlwana, but at Rorke's Drift.

Intriguingly, Cooper's sister, for he had not married, also received a letter of condolence from Brevet-Major Russell Upcher, by then commanding the 1st Battalion at Helpmekaar. The usual manner by which most relatives discovered the death of a soldier was from newspaper articles and, as far as is known, Upcher's letter to Miss Clements appears to be unique.

If Cooper had been killed in the camp at Isandlwana or on what is today known as the Fugitive's Trail it is unlikely that his plight would have been drawn to the attention of Upcher. Further, if Cooper had been killed during the defence of Rorke's Drift he would undoubtedly have been buried with the other fatalities from that engagement and memorialised with them, which did not happen.

But could Cooper make it beyond Sothondose's Drift and closer to Rorke's Drift before being killed? If his body had been discovered and buried where it fell in the vicinity of Rorke's Drift then notification of Cooper's death may have been passed to Upcher and caused the generation of the letter to Miss Clements.

As with most things concerned with the battle of Isandlwana, the demise of Cooper remains shrouded in uncertainty and so the question remains, was Sergeant Cooper killed at Isandlwana, or nearer to Rorke's Drift than Isandlwana or was his body

¹ Knight, Zulu p85

² Lock *Zulu Victory* p209

actually discovered on the outskirts of Rorke's Drift? And what caused Upcher to specially write to the family on 11 April 1879 when the first serious attempt to tidy the Isandlwana battlefield didn't take place until 21 May of that year? And why did his family believe he had been killed at Rorke's Drift?

Bibliography

AZWHS, *Journal 2*, December 1997.

Greaves, Adrian, *Crossing the Buffalo*, (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2005).

Greaves, Adrian & Knight, Ian, *A Review of The South African Campaign of 1879*, (Debinair Publishing, 2000).

Holme, Norman, *The Noble 24th*, (Savannah Publication, 1999).

Knight, Ian, *Zulu*, (Windrow & Greene, 1994).

Lock, Ron & Quantrill, Peter, *Zulu Victory*, (Greenhill Books, 2002).

Editor's comment.

Sgt Cooper neither married nor had children. As with a number of deceased Zulu War participants, alleged descendants occasionally appear to claim part of the family history, and this has happened in the case of Sgt. Cooper. Clearly, no one can justifiably claim to be a direct descendant of Sgt. Cooper. There are, of course, descendants from the Cooper family and this family line is well documented.