

HUMOURS OF THE ZULU WAR

That the Zulu War was the most deadly, dull and uninteresting time of his life, is the frank admission of Mr B C Shooter, who served with the Alexander Mounted Rifles

When the preparations for the Zulu War of 1879 were made, he said,

“I was away from home in Maritzburg, and as the Corps I belonged to was already on the march to Maritzburg, I did not get a chance of returning home to say goodbye, so everything I required was forwarded to the city for me. I rode out to Thornville to meet our troop, the Alexander Mounted Rifles and returned to Maritzburg with them, then a few days later rode out of the city for the front.

The first night was wet and misty, and we ‘turned in’ on the grass with our saddles for pillows and the sky for a roof, our destination (pending a reply from Cetewayo), Potspruit. During the time we were there I rode with the dispatches from Potspruit to Greytown, having taken over from Sergeant Major Bru-de-wold, who had ridden from Balcombe, a homestead between Potspruit and Thring’s Post. My tent companions were Messrs C P Reynolds, G & H Bazley, Jim and John Pennington, S W Reynolds and myself, seven of us, and so we remained till the end of the war.

I think the majority of our Corps would agree with me that the period of the Zulu War was the most useless and uninteresting time of our lives. When the column crossed the Tugela and subsequently had a brush with the enemy, we were left at the Drift, in fact, the Alexander Mounted Rifles seemed to be kept out of everything and I fail to see the reason as all our men (with the exception, perhaps of S W Reynolds and myself), were hardy and seasoned ‘game for anything’ sort of men

However, the fact remains that the only time we were under fire was after our return to the neighbourhood of Potspruit (Nel’s farm). We were taken down the mountain, via Krantz Kop on a raiding expedition, and the first night we camped in the thorns near the river (the column was composed of the Durban Mounted Rifles, the Imperial Mounted Rifles, Natal Hussars and the Alexander Mounted Rifles). We also had a Native Contingent with us. After an early breakfast we rode down to the river and a few Zulus started potting away at us and our natives started blazing away for all they were worth, regardless of orders.

When the fight was over, we pitched the dead or dying into the river, and then part of the column crossed over and did some burning of huts and provisions; during the afternoon we returned to a small stream somewhat further from the Tugela. Here we stayed a second night; thorn bush all round, stones and rough country. This may have been done to notify our occupation of the border or to justify our existence, and a kind Providence had a hand to see that we didn’t lose it. During this war the angels, no doubt, often looked down and thought, ‘Fools rush in where we fear to tread’. A

hundred Zulus would have been quite safe in attacking us, either then or the night before. During the evening Corporal H Bazley was sent down to the stream to the junction with the Tugela, with two men and a native guide, the native deserted and how the white men got back in safely is astonishing.

During the time we were at Nel's farm we had a day's horse racing with several hurdle races; a great day and a bright spot in our dull camp life, but marred by the sad accident to young Green, who was killed in one of the hurdle races.

We were told that we were each to be given a farm in Zululand when the war was over, but I have not gotten mine yet, and now I come to think of it they didn't say which war. There are very few amusing incidents to relate. On one occasion C P Reynolds and I were out on the right flank vedette, and as the column was halted we linked horses and swarmed up an Umdoni tree and were having a feast of nice ripe black ones, when an officer came tearing down and in a bloodcurdling voice said 'What are you doing up there?' and CPR who wasn't shy to be noticeable, said 'eating Umdonis'.

This was in the enemy's country near the Amatikulu river. On another occasion our officer galloped us up to surround a deserted homestead, and after we got there it struck someone that it might be as well to un-sling arms. When the welcome news came that we were to be dismissed, a sigh of relief must have been unanimous. Doing border guard over a beaten enemy is a bit uninteresting, so we broke up camp and started for home, via Maritzburg. We had been told that when on active we were to get double pay, but as soon as the war was over the extra pay went after the farms, and went to pay for the food we had consumed. The experience of the Zulu War caused me to resign from the volunteers with no intention of joining any other force, but subsequently the late Colonel Bru-de-wold, who was then Captain, persuaded me to join "a force he had raised" as Regimental Sergeant Major. They were the Border Mounted Rifles raised in Alfred County, and I stayed with them for eight years".