

## ANTHONY BOOTH VC HERO OF INTOMBI DRIFT

By Ron Booth



While researching my Family History, I came across Anthony Clarke Booth, who was awarded the Victoria Cross for gallantry during the Anglo Zulu War of 1879. Anthony's Grandfather, Ferdinand, was the brother of my Great Great Grandfather, Abraham. All the Booth families seemed to have worked in the lace industry centred in and around Nottingham.

### HARD EARLY YEARS

Anthony Booth was born on 21 April 1846 at Club Row, Bulwell Lane (now called Hucknall Road), Carrington, a village about two miles from the centre of Nottingham. He was the younger son of William and Sarah (nee Clarke), who also had a son named Herbert and three sisters, Mary, Lucy and Emily.

Club Row was a large three story building that housed a floor of lace machines which meant that the whole family lived and worked in their workplace. Conditions were unhealthy, the pay minimal and the hours long. Anthony did receive an education at the National School, but like other children employed in the lace trade, attendance was sporadic at best, depending on the lace work completed.

For many young men brought up in similar conditions, the army offered an escape from the remorseless misery of Victorian industry. When he was eighteen, Anthony received his father's consent and enlisted in the Royal Marines at Nottingham and was sent to Derby for a medical examination. Much to his

disappointment, he was rejected due to palpitations. As he thought that he was perfectly fit, he tried again a few months later and, when he was visiting Sheffield, enlisted in the 80th Staffordshire Volunteers. He passed fit and was sent to join the regiment at Cork on 10 November 1864.

### ARMY RECRUIT

In an interview given to *The County Express* on 9 April 1898, Sergeant Instructor Anthony Booth VC related his life and adventures in the Army.

*I was eighteen years and six months old. I remained there (Cork) for only about three months and from there to Tregantle Fort, Devonshire, to await the arrival of the Regiment that was coming from India. While I was at Chatham I was promoted to Corporal on 1 July 1865. This promotion was short lived as Booth was confined to the cells awaiting trial and on 1 September, he was reduced back to Private. The charge was 'Improper Conduct when on Guard Duty'. This was only a slight blemish on what was to be an excellent service record which showed that his Conduct and Character were 'Exemplary'*

*After the arrival home from India, there were several vacancies on the married establishment, and Colonel Hawkes gave me permission to get married. I did so in (18th) September 1866, and Lucy (nee O'Brien) and I remained in England in various places until I returned to Ireland in 1869.*

On 20 April 1869, he was promoted to Corporal and on 1 January 1872 raised to Sergeant. Eleven days later, he and the Regiment embarked on the troopship *Orantes* for overseas duty at the Straits Settlement, Malaya.

### PERAK

A further promotion later in the year found him Acting Barrack-Sergeant in the Commissariat Department on Hong Kong Island before returning to Singapore on 15 February 1876. In November 1875, part of the 80th Regiment was ordered to Perak, where there was an outbreak of violence from native tribesmen. When the remainder of his regiment were ordered to Perak, Booth resigned from the Commissariat and joined his company in sailing for Malacca on HM gunboat *Ringdove*.

A brief campaign followed in which a unit of the 80th Regiment rowed upstream through a steaming jungle under a broiling sun. Although elements of the 80th were involved in attacking and capturing an enemy stockade, Booth was not involved in any fighting. He was entitled to wear the Indian Service Medal with the 'Perak' clasp but he never applied for it as he felt that he had not earned it.

The Regiment returned to Malacca and Booth was promoted to Colour Sergeant on 3 April 1876. Leaving Singapore for a new station at Mauritius Booth learned that they had been diverted to the Cape. In 1877, they sailed for Natal and marched to their new station at Pietermaritzburg.

When the Pedi tribe began raiding the newly British annexed Boer territory of the Transvaal, the Commandant of the Transvaal, Colonel Hugh Rowlands VC was ordered to lead a punitive expedition against their recalcitrant chief,

Sekhukhune. The 80th marched to Pretoria, where they formed part of Rowland's 1800-strong force. This force was considerably reduced as many of the 600 volunteer horsemen exercised their right not to go. The expedition was an expensive failure. Hard marching and drought conditions took their toll until Rowlands ordered a return to Pretoria, even though they were in sight of the enemy's stronghold. Although there was only one fatality, the effect on the mens' morale was considerable. This abortive expedition was a taste of what was soon to follow.

### ZULU WAR

When the invasion of Zululand began on 12 January 1879, the 80th were stationed at Derby still under the command of Colonel Rowland. Their orders were to protect the settlements around Luneburg. The *County Express* interview continued; *when they heard the news about the 24th Regiment being cut up at Isandlwana, they didn't believe the news at first. Afterwards, they got us together, and informed us that it was true. They shifted into a smaller laager and waited there for a few days.*

*Anthony remembers the day very well, for there was an eclipse of the sun. We got orders to march to Luneburg, and convoy all stores from Derby to Luneburg.*

*After the Isandlwana massacre, Colonel Rowlands went to Pretoria to keep an eye on the Boers, and his force came under direct control of Colonel (Evelyn) Wood. Wood moved the bulk of his troops to Khambula, sending a detachment of the 80th Regiment under Major Charles Tucker to garrison Luneburg. Colour Sergeant Booth was with his section when it arrived on the 9 February. Two days later, he reverted to Sergeant.*

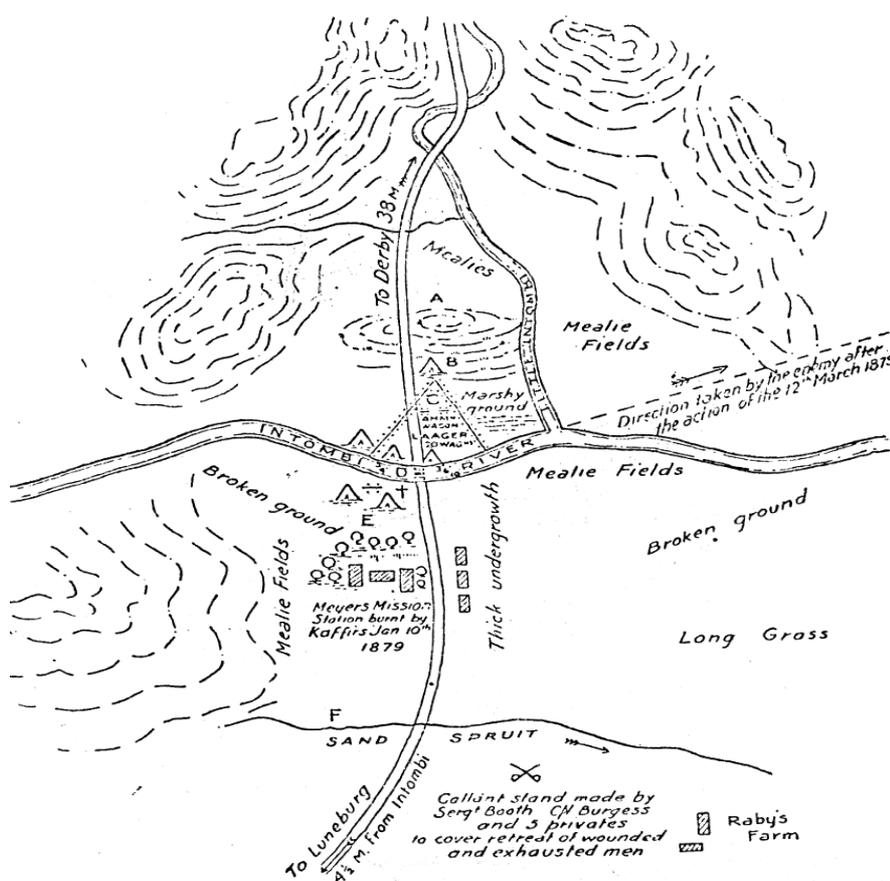
### INTOMBI DRIFT

In March, Luneburg was occupied by five companies of the 80th Regiment. Supplies for this garrison were sent from Derby, the road from which crossed the Intombi River. On 7 March, a company of the regiment under the command of Captain David Harry Moriarty left Luneburg to meet the Derby convoy and to bring it in. On reaching the drift, or ford, on the Intombi, it was found impossible for the convoy to cross as heavy rain had swollen the river. For two days, the escort and waggoners laboured and managed to get two of the wagons across the river to the south bank, but the continuous heavy rain meant that there was no alternative than to wait for the river to subside.

On 11 March, Major Tucker accompanied by Lieutenant Henry Harward rode to the drift to assess the situation. He saw that there were still sixteen wagons on the north bank and he expressed his concern that they were not laagered correctly. They were formed into an inverted 'V' from the river and the gap between the wagons was too far apart. Moriarty acknowledged this but the adverse conditions dictated the formation and nothing was done to improve the defence of the encampment. Tucker returned to Luneburg, leaving Lt. Harward to assist Moriarty.

Sergeant Booth said in an interview about the battle that on the previous night, Moriarty had told him that the inhabitants in this part of the country were all friendly. In fact, Mblini, the Swazi leader and Zulu ally had his stronghold in the caves of the nearby Tafelberg hills. He was spotted by Booth entering the camp to sell mealies with several local natives. When asked by the interviewer why Mblini had come into the camp, Booth replied, *I suppose he came to the camp to see how he was going to attack us in the morning. I could have collared this man when he was in camp. Captain Moriarty assured me a second time that all the people around were friendly and he jocularly remarked to me,*

INTOMBI RIVER DRIFT, MARCH, 1879



**A** Rising ground behind which the enemy to the number of 4,000 collected at 5 a.m. 12th March, during a thick misty rain, when with a simultaneous volley, followed by a charge, they attacked the Laager defended by only 60 men of the 80th Regt.  
**B** Tent occupied by Capt. Moriarty and Dr. Cobbin.  
**C** Spot where Capt. Moriarty fell after killing three of Manyeola's sons.

**D** Drift 10 feet deep owing to five days' incessant rain; it is to be feared that some of our men must have been lost therein.  
**E** Camp commanded by Lieut. Harward. The 30 Non-Commissioned Officers and men here gallantly secured the retreat of some of our men from the other side.

**F** At this spot one wounded man and in the spruit four of our men were found dead. These men were brought into Luneburg and buried that night by torchlight.  
 † 39 Non-Commissioned Officers and men buried here three hours after the engagement.

*"You are as bad as your pals said of you. You would shoot your own brother"*. Booth was not reassured and was under no illusion but that Mblini was there to spy out the defences.

Moriarty's men, who were tired and wet, stripped off their wet clothes and fell into a deep sleep under shelter for the first time in days. At about 4 a.m. Harward was awakened by the sound of a distant shot. He ordered Booth to alert the other bank, as no one had stirred, not even the sentries. After some yelling, Booth managed to arouse someone, who spread the warning, but it was too little effect as the camp continued to sleep.

### MASSACRE

Booth, however, felt uneasy and remembered Mblini's visit. Dressing and buckling on his ammunition belt, he climbed into one of the wagons for a smoke. Unbeknown to the sleeping soldiers, Mblini and about 800 warriors were closing in on the laager through the early morning mist. They were stripped naked, each carrying only a stabbing spear and a knobkerrie. A few were armed with pillaged Martini-Henry rifles. Expecting little resistance, they had left their shields behind.

At about 4-45 a.m. another shot rang out close by. Booth jumped from the wagon to see the Zulus emerge from the mist and fire a volley into Moriarty's tent before rushing in with a chilling cry of "Usutho!" In seconds they overwhelmed the sleeping camp. Moriarty dashed from his tent firing his revolver before an assegai was plunged into his back and he was shot in the chest. As naked and partially clothed soldiers struggled from their tents, they were clubbed and stabbed to death in the hellish melee of frightened cattle and terrified men. Some men plunged into the river but few reached the safety of the far bank. Those that did took shelter behind the flimsy barrier of the two wagons.

### COMMAND ABANDONED

Booth and his comrades scrambled beneath the wagons and started firing at the mass of Zulus. In jostling to take cover, Booth had his helmet knocked off, which rolled towards the river. He put his arm on the rear wheel to steady his aim and fired as fast as he could. He noticed that he was next to Lt. Harward's pony, which was tied to the wagon. Harward emerged from his tent and saw that the Zulus, attracted by the fire from Booth and his men, were crossing the river further upstream. Maybe gripped by a vision of another Isandlwana, Harward blurted out, *"Fire away, lads. I'll be ready in a minute"*. He then pulled himself onto his unsaddled pony and rode off up the track to Luneburg, followed by most of his men and a few escapees.

Booth was shocked by this behaviour. *..leaving his command at the moment of extreme peril, an act positively incredible in a British officer.*

Booth later wrote that there were only eight of his company who remained. They were joined by some of the men who crossed the river, donned whatever clothing was available and armed themselves. Seeing his position was hopeless, Sergeant Booth, assisted by Lance Corporal Burgess, formed the remaining men into a square and began to retire towards Luneburg.

Booth was later complimented for choosing this formation instead of an extended line. Each time the Zulus threatened the small band, they were kept at a distance by the group's volley fire.

### STEADINESS UNDER FIRE

Most of the Zulus were more interested in plundering the two wagons than pursuing Booth's men so that, by the time they reached a deserted farmhouse a mile short of Luneburg, the attacks had ceased. Apart from the loss of four men who decided to break away only to run into the Zulus, Booth managed to bring his men to safety.



While Sergeant Booth was calmly extricating his men from almost certain death, Lt. Harward, had galloped to Luneburg, arriving at 6-30 a.m. He roused Major Tucker with the words, *"The camp is in the hands of the enemy; they are all slaughtered and I have galloped in for my life"*. According to Tucker, Harward then fell on the bed in a dead faint. After being revived, Harward told the story of the attack on the camp. Tucker ordered 150 men to march to the drift. *About a mile from the scene we were on high ground and could see from there and from miles away to our right, dense masses of Zulus extending for at least two miles under the hills, and the last Zulus were then leaving the laager for the hills eastward.*

Tucker wrote a long and detailed letter to his father, including the fact that they found one survivor in the river. Inexplicably, he made no mention of Sergeant Booth's commendable exploit even though he came upon the group at the farmhouse. Booth volunteered to accompany Tucker's command, but was told that he had done enough.

### COVER UP

In the aftermath of the disaster, there was a considerable amount of covering up of what was an embarrassing episode for the Regiment. Backed by Major Tucker, Lieutenant Harward's report stated that: *The enemy were now assegaiing our men in the water, and also ascending the banks of the river close to us;*

*for fear therefore, of my men being stabbed under the wagons, and to enable them to retire before their ammunition should be exhausted, I ordered them to retire steadily, and only just in time to avoid a rush of Zulus to our late position. The Zulus came on in dense masses and fell upon our men, who being already broken, gave way, and a hand to hand fight ensued. I endeavoured to rally my men, but they were too much scattered, and finding re-formation impossible, I mounted my horse and galloped into Luneburg at utmost speed, and reported all that had taken place.*

Inaccurate as his account was, Harward did have the good grace to acknowledge his sergeant's sterling behaviour.

In his report, Major Tucker made no mention that he felt that the camp had been inadequately laagered. Furthermore, he praised Harward's efforts in giving covering fire to enable some men to escape across the river. These two reports were the basis of Lord Chelmsford's report to the War Office, which was not received in London until 21 April. As reports from NCOs were not required, the truth would appear to have been contained within the Regiment.

### ULUNDI

As Colour Sergeant Fredericks had perished in the camp, Booth was again promoted to Colour Sergeant on 13 March. Over the following weeks, the Regiment moved to Utrecht and joined Wood's Flying Column in its advance on the Zulu capital at Ulundi. Significantly, Lt. Harward was left behind.

The 80th formed part of the massive square that finally broke the Zulu fighting machine. The regiment sustained two dead and five wounded. Sergeant Booth, himself, was slightly wounded in a freakish way. While instructing a soldier building an entrenchment, a bullet struck his mess tin and he received some metal splinters to his face, his only wound in a long military career.

With the Zulus defeated, the 80th were involved in the mopping-up operations under the new commander in chief, General Sir Garnet Wolseley. In November, they took part in the attack on Sekhukune's stronghold and were the first troops to reach the summit, gaining high praise from Wolseley. Indeed, the 80th had been closely associated with the Commander since his arrival, as they supplied his personal escort.

By the middle of December, the Regiment was concentrated at Pretoria and it was here that months of resentment and shame came to the boil. Three survivors of the Intombi River massacre wrote to Wolseley on 20 December 1879 to set the record straight and 'to be of good service to Colour Sergeant Booth'. This was followed by a belated recommendation from the newly-promoted Lieutenant-Colonel Tucker for the Distinguished Conduct Medal to be awarded to Booth. As this was the result of Wolseley's enquiry in response to the three survivor's testimony, Tucker was asked why he had not previously recommended his sergeant for a medal. Tucker was then forced to explain that to do so would have brought to light the 'far different conduct of Lieutenant Harward'.

### RECOGNITION

On 26 December, the whole regiment was paraded prior to leaving for England. Sir Garnet Wolseley took the salute and, in a most unusual ceremony, presented Colour Sergeant Booth with a revolver, holster, belt and a knife, which were donated by European settlers. On the same day, Wolseley forwarded his personal recommendation that Booth should be awarded the Victoria Cross.

On 14 February 1880, as a result of Wolseley's investigations, Lieutenant Harward was arrested and taken to Pietermaritzburg where he was charged with misbehaviour before the enemy. Much to Wolseley's disgust, the court-martial accepted Harward's version of events and he was acquitted and allowed to return to his regiment.

Wolseley could not alter the verdict of the Court but he did add his own trenchant view. When the finding and Wolseley's comments reached London, the Duke of Cambridge, the Commander in Chief of the Army, instructed them to be read out as a General Order to every regiment. With his army career in tatters, Harward had little option but to resign his commission.

Colour Sergeant Anthony Booth was summoned from his station in Ireland to Windsor Castle, where Queen Victoria presented him with the Victoria Cross on 26 June 1880. His citation reads:

*For his gallant conduct on 12th March 1879, during the Zulu attack on the Intombi River, in having when considerably outnumbered by the enemy, rallied a few men on the south bank of the river, and covered the retreat of fifty soldiers and others for a distance of three miles. The officer commanding the 80th Regiment reports that, had it not been for the coolness displayed by this non-commissioned officer, not one man would have escaped.*

### LAST YEARS

Curiously, Booth reverted to Sergeant on 19 October 1880 and was again elevated to Colour Sergeant on 15 March 1884. On 1 October 1883, he gave notice of his desire to continue in service. By 1885, he had served over 23 years. His health was also reflecting his age and from 1885 to 1888 he suffered from pneumonia, dyspepsia and bronchitis.

He and Lucy produced eight children in sixteen years and their places of birth trace the many postings in which Booth served; Dorset, Fleetwood, Belfast, Hong Kong, Natal, Dublin and Tralee.

On 7 May 1888, Anthony Booth was posted to 1st Volunteer Battalion South Staffordshire Regiment as Sergeant Instructor until his retirement on 30 April 1898. His total service was an astonishing 33 years and 182 days. Sadly his retirement did not last long for he died eighteen months later on 8 December 1899. He was given a full military funeral and many thousands lined the route to his final resting place at St Michael's Church, Brierly Hill – a truly great and gallant soldier.

Acknowledgements

*The Zulu War and the 80th Regiment* by Robert Hope

The Staffordshire Regimental Museum

*Blood on the Mountain* by Ron Lock

*Great Zulu Commanders* by Ian Knight

The Journals of the Anglo Zulu War Historical Society