

**‘NOT A HOPE!’**  
**The incidence of suicide in the Anglo-Zulu War**

**By Ian Knight**

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On 21 February, just under a month after Colonel Pearson's column had occupied the old Norwegian mission station at Eshowe, Private W. Knee of the 99<sup>th</sup> Regiment slipped out of his bed in the hospital quarters, set up in the mission church, and made his way through the perimeter lines. Pearson's column was, at that time, isolated from the outside world, the mission heavily fortified and the surrounding countryside full of parties of Zulus who had cut the lines of communication to Natal. Private Knee, however, had been ill for some time, and the doctors had come increasingly to think him unstable - and certainly on this occasion he did not behave like a rational man. After dark he managed to slip past the sentries guarding the outer lines, and disappear unnoticed into the night; his comrades were astonished to find his body lying face down in a nearby stream the following morning. His death was officially listed as suicide, as it almost certainly was; there was nothing in the condition of the body to suggest that the Zulus had killed him.

Quite why Private Knee behaved as he did remains a mystery, as is the case with many of the suicides which took place in Zululand in 1879. Suicide was not a common occurrence - on either side - but when it happened to the men in the ranks the causes which drove them to such despair were seldom recorded. Mostly, like Knee, they were probably the result of depression or temporary instability brought on by the effects of fever; sometimes they were rather more rational, the result of a letter from home with bad news - a 'dear John' or a report of some family disaster or financial catastrophe - but even then the reasons usually went unrecorded.

Quite why a Sergeant Stratton, of the 2/24<sup>th</sup>, had killed himself during a skirmish on the Cape Frontier, six months before the battalion marched to Zululand, is, for example, unknown; Stratton had appeared cheerful to his men, but in the midst of a desultory fire-fight with the Xhosa - in which he was at little obvious risk - he had suddenly called out a brief farewell, then blown out his brains with his own rifle. The strangeness of his death had been underlined the following morning when he was found sitting bolt-upright in his grave, as if he had changed his mind; on close examination, it turned out that someone had disturbed the body while trying to deprive Stratton of his boots.

Strange, too, was the death of a private of the 99<sup>th</sup> regiment during the Zulu campaign. He was in the hospital tents at Fort Pearson, suffering from fever, when on 13 March he suddenly dragged himself out of his sick-bed, ran down the hill-top towards a steep cliff which dropped down into the Thukela river - and threw himself off.

Less bizarre, but no less mysterious, was the death of Lt Robert D'Ombraïn of the 1/1<sup>st</sup> NNC on 8 April 1879 near Fort Cherry at Kranskop, above the Middle Drift. D'Ombraïn had arrived in Natal from Kent in July 1877, and had accepted the hospitality of a family friend, a former regular officer who had become one of the settler gentry, Alexander Montgomery. Later, when the Natal Native Contingent was raised in late 1878, Montgomery offered his services and was given command of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of Durnford's own 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment. D'Ombraïn himself volunteered and was accepted as a lieutenant in the same unit. Montgomery's role in what followed is not clear; he was a strong-willed and rather restless officer whose personal life after the war the subject of a later scandal. Although he was married - his wife bore him nine children - Montgomery on that occasion was alleged to have had an affair with a young house-guest who later bore him a child. The child later died and Montgomery was implicated in an investigation of infanticide.

Montgomery's men were stationed at Fort Cherry, on the escarpment above the Thukela at Middle Drift. This was an important strategic position - there was considerable Zulu activity at the drift throughout the war - but it was a dull duty, and many of Montgomery's officers apparently alleviated their boredom in drink. What impressions D'Ombraïn had formed of Montgomery's character during those months of ennui above the

Thukela border is not at all clear - except that a woman played on D'Ombraïn's mind somewhere along the line. At the beginning of April life was enlivened by the visit to the post of Montgomery's 16 year-old daughter, who was apparently accompanied by a local admirer. Miss Montgomery was still in the area when, on the afternoon of 6 April, Lt. D'Ombraïn apparently reported to the fort's medical officer suffering from a hangover. He was duly prescribed an appropriate remedy, and D'Ombraïn retired to his tent. Over the following two days, however, he complained of feeling ill, and friends who visited him said that he spent most of his time on his bed, smoking. He could not stomach solid foods, and under the doctor's guidance D'Ombraïn's servant fed him on beef tea. He seemed restless and fretful, and told a fellow officer that he was concerned lest the nature of his illness became common knowledge. He seemed verging on paranoia, becoming convinced that the men of the regiment were talking about him in isiZulu, a language he could not understand. He warned one visitor that 'they are coming', and to another confided that 'there was only one woman who had threatened him'; both comments were regarded as being the product of an insipient fever. Early that afternoon D'Ombraïn was in his tent when a shot rang out; Montgomery and his officers rushed over to find that D'Ombraïn had shot himself with a Martini-Henry rifle. He had placed the barrel in his mouth, wedged a riding crop across the trigger, then pulled it with his foot. He had died instantly from massive head injuries, and the bullet had afterwards torn a great split in the canvas of the tent.

D'Ombraïn was buried nearby - undoubtedly one of the most remote and poignant of the lonely graves relating to the war of 1879. Montgomery held an inquiry into the cause of his death, but no evidence emerged of what had been troubling D'Ombraïn, and his suicide was put down to the effects of his fever. Years later, the local story had it that D'Ombraïn had received a note shortly before his death from a woman breaking off her relationship with him; whether that was connected with the visit of Miss Montgomery is not at all clear.

Rather more common was an attitude among many serving soldiers that suicide offered a means of escape from the threat of worse horrors should a battle go badly wrong. The war correspondent Melton Prior was riding one day with the Reverend George Smith, of Rorke's Drift fame;

... when he asked me, 'Why do you carry a revolver, Prior?'

'Well,' said I, 'for a very good reason. If I unfortunately get into a tight corner I intend five shots for the enemy and the last one for myself, for I am never going to be taken alive by a Zulu'.

'Oh, do you think that very brave?' he smilingly asked in reply. 'Do you really mean that? Would you really wantonly and with premeditation take a life that had been given you? Would it not be better to suffer a little agony, that you might have to bear if you fell into the hands of the enemy, than to take the life which God gave you?'

I had never looked at it in that light before, but so much was I impressed with his seriousness and the nice way in which he put the matter, that I in turn looked at him and said, 'Smith, you are right, and I promise you that I will never take my own life.'<sup>1</sup>

Yet the idea of 'saving the last bullet for yourself' was quite a common one. It had little basis in rational fears - there is no evidence that the Zulus ever tortured to death anyone during the battles of 1879 - but it was perhaps the inevitable result of a mind-set in which British and Colonial troops saw themselves engaged in a war of civilisation against savagery. Suicide in the last moment of defeat, when death is anyway inevitable, offers a last desperate trace of comfort, a sense of retaining control even *in extremis*, and of a last gesture of defiance, of depriving the enemy of the satisfaction of your death. It is something which has often occurred in battles across the ages, and it occurred in Zululand in 1879. Psychologically, it is a product of isolation, despair and terror, and it tends to occur more among troops whose *esprit de corps* has either been badly shaken during an action, or was never highly developed to start with. Suicide in battle, in other words, is a symptom of men and their units falling

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<sup>1</sup> Melton Prior, *Campaigns of a War Correspondent*, London 1912.

apart, and it is no coincidence that at the battle of the Little Big Horn in America in 1876, when George Custer's command was famously overwhelmed - an action which had much in common with some of the Zulu War engagements - American Indian eyewitnesses commented on a high number of suicides among the men of the 7<sup>th</sup> cavalry, a unit which had a high proportion of new and foreign recruits.

There are remarkably few references from Zulu sources of British troops at iSandlwana killing themselves under similar circumstances. There are two possible reasons for this. Firstly, the infantry of the 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment (both battalions) were experienced men who had served together, under officers they knew intimately, for a long time before-hand, and who had developed a strong sense of the regimental family. Such a feeling, even under such drastic conditions, tends to draw men together for psychological comfort and the hope of survival rather than causing them to break down into panic-stricken individuals. The second reason is rather more pragmatic; as Lieutenant D'Ombra would discover, it is a difficult thing to kill yourself with a long Martini-Henry rifle.

Of course, it may well be that a number of men did commit suicide at iSandlwana, and their stories are simply not recorded. By contrast, however, there were a significant number of self-inflicted deaths among the Irregular corps during the battle of Hlobane on 28 March. The Irregulars were by their nature largely anonymous; they were raised for temporary service in the campaign, had no long history of traditions to sustain a sense of belonging and identity, and were recruited from men who were often rootless in their civilian lives. And, of course, the carbines they were armed with were a much handier weapon.

The Irregulars had performed well enough during the battle, but once the British attempted to retire off the mountain, under pressure from the abaQulusi on the summit and threatened by a large army coming from oNdini in the valley below, a sense of panic set in. A detachment of the Frontier Light Horse under Captain Barton and Border Horse under Col. Weatherley descended at the eastern end of the mountain but ran into the vanguard of the uKhandempemvu *ibutho* coming in the opposite direction. There was a brief fight and several of the Irregulars were killed before they were forced to turn about; at this point Trumpeter Reilly of the Border Horse - an Irishman - dismounted from his exhausted horse, fired several shots at the enemy at close range, then killed himself. Later, when the survivors of the same party had crossed the precipitous Ityenka Nek, still under pursuit, the Zulu *induna* Sitshitshili kaMnqandi, saw one man 'as he approached, turning his carbine and shooting himself'<sup>2</sup>. Perhaps the most graphic account of a suicide at the battle, however, was given by George Mossop;

Many glancing sights had I seen that day of the Zulus with some of our men, who had fallen into their hands - whether dead or alive, I do not know! It is not good to write about such sights; all I can say is that it was a horror! Perhaps the man at my side had seen that which induced him to act the way he did.

I knew him well, but will not mention his name.

'Do you think there is any chance of pushing through?' I asked him. I was obliged to shout to make myself heard. The din was terrific.

'Not a hope!' he replied, and placing the muzzle of his carbine in his mouth he pulled the trigger. A lot of his brain or other soft stuff splashed on my neck.

It was the last straw! I gave one yell, let go the bride of my pony, and bounded down into the pass.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, the damaging effects of exposure to the horror and violence of the war continued to afflict the participants for decades afterwards. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder was certainly not recognised in 1879, but its effects were real enough, and many of those who played a prominent part in the war were troubled for years with flash-backs, nightmares and

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<sup>2</sup> Account recorded by Evelyn Wood in *From Midshipman to Field Marshal*, London 1907.

<sup>3</sup> George Mossop, *Running the Gauntlet*, London 1937.

feelings of guilt. That was, perhaps, why Cecil D'Arcy of the Frontier Light Horse - who survived Hlobane and earned the VC for the skirmish on 3 July before oNdini - acted as he did. D'Arcy had continued to serve with colonial forces after the Zulu campaign, and had seen action in the BaSotho 'Gun War', but by early 1881, although still a young man, his health was suffering from the rigours of his active life. He was a life-long asthma sufferer and had contracted both malaria and bilharzia. In August 1881 he went to stay with friends on the Eastern Cape, hoping the bracing winter air would help him. His friends found him tense and depressed, however, and on the morning of 7 August his room was found to be empty and his bed not slept in. Despite a search over the following days, no trace of him was found until 28 December when the skeleton of a man was found in the hills nearby. The remains were identified as those of Cecil D'Arcy; he had apparently wandered off alone, quite deliberately, and died of exposure.<sup>4</sup>

There were strong psychological reasons, of course, why the British invaders were more likely to suffer self-inflicted deaths than the Zulus. The Zulus were fighting for the defence of their way of life in their own country - their sense of belonging and purpose could not have been greater. Nevertheless, as individuals they were subject to the same stresses in battle as the invaders, and there are suggestions that numbers of their men, too, killed themselves rather than face capture by the British. At least one man was seen clearly to stab himself with his own spear rather than fall to a British sortie in the closing stages of the battle of Khambula, and Mossop certainly noticed a degree of resignation - even defiance - in the face of inevitable death;

When we overtook small bodies they made no attempt to resist; they were beaten, and that was the end. Many a man just turned, exposing his broad chest, saying 'Dubula M'lungu' ('Shoot, white man') - and the white man shot. The Zulu gave no quarter, and expected none.<sup>5</sup>

There is very little surviving evidence, of course, to determine whether Zulu veterans of the war suffered long-term psychological damage. In some respects the attitudes and beliefs of traditional society as a whole may have mitigated against the sense of isolation and taint which characterises post-traumatic stress. In their belief that the shedding of blood causes supernatural damage, and in their willingness to acknowledge the role of veterans within the community, Zulu life offered a framework of understanding which may have explained and eased the sense of recurring horror brought about by the visceral nature of Zulu combat. Nevertheless, here and there the odd snippet has surfaced to suggest that the events of 1879 left their mark, too, upon the soul of the Zulus who took part. A noted warrior named Muthi Ntshangase, who killed at least one white man at iSandlwana, is said to have been troubled by the spirits afterwards, and

.. went mad soon after. Cetewayo was told of this incident. Muti was taken down to Ulundi from iSandlwana under control at Cetewayo, who thought a lot of him, sent for some Shangane Doctors, to try to make him right again, and they succeeded.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Or had he? Oddly, in 1925 a Mr V.G. Sparks was captaining a cricket match in Newcastle, Natal, when he claimed to recognise a dishevelled bystander as D'Arcy. Confronted, the man admitted his identity and claimed that he had stumbled across a body in the hills that night and had changed clothes with him and had lived anonymously ever since; he begged Sparks not to disclose his identity as 'he wished to remain dead to the world'. How Sparks was so confident of his identification after forty years is not certain; probably the bystander told Sparks what he wanted to hear.

<sup>5</sup> Mossop, *Running the Gauntlet*.

<sup>6</sup> Account of Mangwanana Mchunu, Bowden Papers, KZN Museum, Pietermaritzburg, reproduced in Ian Knight (ed.), *Kill Me In The Shadows*, Soldiers of the Queen, no. 74.