

‘The Dogs of War’

By Ian Knight

Soldiers, it seems, love a pet, and certainly the British Army in the 1870s was no different. In a male dominated environment, pets offer a reminder of finer feelings not often displayed in an often harsh existence, reflecting a touch of humanity in contrast to the stresses of campaign life. Hounds were, of course, a feature of the life of the gentry in Victorian times, particularly those with country houses who indulged an interest in field sports, and many officers kept dogs of one sort or another, and often took them to war with them. The Other Ranks were seldom in a position to enjoy such luxuries, but often accumulated strays who were attracted by the smells of the cook-house and who were then seduced away by proffered scraps of food. Certainly the 2/24th had found its fair share of pets during its time on the Eastern Cape Frontier, but to the men’s disappointment they were ordered to leave them behind when moving to Natal. Only Col. H.J. Degacher’s dog, a Dalmation named Flip, was excepted ;

Orders were issued that no dogs could be taken, because by this time many had been collected by the men as pets.

We entrained and left for East London on the new railway, with perhaps forty dogs of all breeds, sizes and colours galloping alongside the train, encouraged by the men shouting, calling and cheering them on, and the dogs all barking and whining at being left behind. The dogs gradually fell out or they became tired, until after a few miles the only one left was Kreli the yellow dog, who continued to keep up with the train ‘midst the cheers of the men, the barking of his chum Flip, who was on the train.

At last the Colonel ordered the train to be stopped for Kreli, and he was helped on to rejoin Flip. The Colonel’s kind act was loudly cheered by everyone.¹

Both Flip and Kreli remained with the battalion as it marched to join the Centre Column at Helpmekaar, and no doubt a few others were picked up along the way; and there is no reason to suppose that the 2nd 24th were any different to any other unit about to go to war. Certainly, Surgeon Reynolds, of Rorke’s Drift fame, had his terrier Dick² with him, and by the time the Centre Column crossed into Zululand there were many other dogs with it.

The events of 22 January fell harshly on animals as well as men. In the fury of the close-quarter fighting at iSandlwana, the Zulus stabbed at anything that moved and men, oxen, horses, mules and dogs were all killed. At Rorke’s Drift later that day, Surgeon Reynolds tended the wounded with Jack barking at his side.

After the fighting, some of the dogs who had been in the camp at iSandlwana managed to make their way back to Rorke’s Drift;

A few hours later Flip came into camp with a rope tied to his neck, and a severe spear wound in the shoulder. Everyone crowded to see and to cheer Flip, the only living thing [sic] to survive the battle where we lost a thousand killed that day.

Apparently after being wounded a Zulu led Flip off, and the dog broke away and returned to his master. The yellow dog Kreli was not seen again. In the regiment Kreli was not forgotten, we spoke of him affectionately for many years, this kindly common Kaffir dog that we found in one war and lost in another.³

Flip was not the only canine survivor of the battle. The Graphic published a picture of....

¹ Account by Private Buckley of B Co 2/24th c. 1930, *Events Remembered*, Lugg Papers, Killie Campbell Library, KwaZulu-Natal.

² There is no doubt that the dog present in the battle at Rorke’s Drift was Reynolds’, although some confusion remains about his name which is given variously as Dick or Jack. Since he seems to have been a Jack Russell terrier - which may have confused the matter - I have preferred Jack.

³ *Ibid.*

a splendid animal, who was in the thick of the fight on January 22, and was fortunate enough to escape from the carnage [and] belonged to the late Lieutenant Daly of the 24th Regiment, who was one of the victims of that disaster. 'Don' is still suffering from two large assegai wounds inflicted by the Zulus, and he will probably carry his honorable scars to the end of his life.⁴

There is a distinct possibility that 'Don' is a mis-transcription of 'Lion', the 1/24th's dog, a known survivor of iSandlwana who today has an impressive memorial in County Kilkenny in Ireland⁵.

Other survivors were not so lucky. Many ran away, terrified no doubt by the sound of battle, and returned to iSandlwana to find their masters dead. With no one to feed them, they survived by eating the carrion left on the field. According to Lt. Maxwell of the NNC, their end was a sorry one;

About half a mile from the camp [Rorke's Drift] I was attacked by a pack of dogs about 20, consisting of various breeds. Newfoundlands, pointers, Setters, terriers etc a few with collars. These were the dogs that had belonged to the camp at Isandhlwana and having lost their masters, and been in the fighting, had become wild and although I tried, by calling them and whistling, could not quiet them, they followed still barking and howling some 3 or 400 yards, when they left me. These were shot at different times with very few exceptions afterwards.⁶

Indeed, the luckless Army dogs were destined to share their masters' fortunes throughout the war. Arriving at the site of the Ntombe disaster on 12 March, Major Tucker of the 80th Regiment noted that in addition to the soldiers the Zulus had 'killed all the dogs save one, and that we found with an assegai wound right through its neck.'⁷ When the Prince Imperial rode out on his last fatal patrol from the Thelezeni camp on 1 June the party was accompanied by a pet belonging to Bettington's Horse; the dog, too, was killed alongside the Prince in the skirmish later that day. At the battle of Ulundi on 4 July the regimental mascot of the 17th Lancers, a big cross-breed, distinguished itself at the end of the battle by running around in the long grass, sniffing out wounded Zulus and barking at them, drawing them to the attention of parties of auxiliaries who were killing any who showed signs of life.

Dogs appear in many of the photos of British troops taken on campaign, particularly officer groups. An unnamed dog sits at the feet of a study of officers of HMS *Active*, another beside officers of the 91st Regiment, another nestles on the lap of an officer of the 90th, while no less than three appear in a photograph of D Company of the 1/13th Regiment. Commandant Pieter Raaff was photographed standing beside his horse - and two impressive hounds.

One question about the 'dogs of war' in Zululand remains; who is the dog in the famous photograph of B Company, 2/24th, taken at Pinetown at the end of the war? It has often been identified as Pip, a terrier belonging to Lt. Bromhead's senior officer in B Company, Captain A.G. Godwin-Austen. Godwin-Austen was wounded on the Cape Frontier and when he returned to England apparently left Pip with Bromhead. Yet the dog in the photo appears to be a spaniel, not a terrier, and he sits beside a private soldier, not Bromhead. Pip, indeed, was probably left at the Eastern Cape, when only Flip and the ill-fated Kreli were allowed to accompany the battalion to Natal. Whoever the dog in the photo is, he was probably picked up by the company along the way of its travels after Rorke's Drift.

Note; This article is extracted from the author's *A Companion to the Anglo-Zulu War*, recently published by Pen and Sword Books.

⁴ *The Graphic*, 17 May 1879.

⁵ My thanks to Ian Woodason for drawing attention to this point.

⁶ *Reminiscences of the Zulu War* by John Maxwell, *University of Cape Town*, 1979.

⁷ Major Charles Tucker, letter to his father dated Luneburg 19 March 1879, reproduced in Frank Emery's *The Red Soldier*, London 1977.