

Few historians or Zulu War commentators have given credit for any preparations for the defence of Rorke's Drift prior to the invasion of Zululand. I believe that, based on accounts by a number of well-placed individuals present at Rorke's Drift before the battle, the mission station was reasonably well prepared for defence, even as early as the date of the British invasion of Zululand.

Likewise, historians and film makers have preferred to exaggerate the effort taken at Rorke's Drift in the hour or so before the Zulu attack and, concomitantly, they heighten the perceived predicament of soldiers defending an unprepared position. Lieutenant Charlie Harford clearly saw otherwise and had already written a diary note,

On the 11th January the 3rd Column crossed the Buffalo into Zululand, the troops making their way over at different points. The Artillery and the 24th Regiment went over by degrees in the pontoon, a little above the main drift, (a shallow crossing point) known as Rorke's Drift after the Dutchman Jim Rorke, whose house and farm buildings were occupied by us as a Fort, after being entrenched.

Harford was an experienced officer who understood that the words 'Fort' and 'entrenched' would have only been used in the correct military context and, having been present at Rorke's Drift prior to the Zulu attack, is unlikely to have made a mistake. He clearly observed some form of defensive measures sufficient to describe the result as a 'fort'. Furthermore, the official Army Field Exercise Guide of 1870, still current in 1879, specifically defines 'entrench' as follows;

'to increase the power of defence of a position by the use of field-works, defensible posts, or even shelter trenches'.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> January, just a week prior to the invasion, the press reporter accompanying Lord Chelmsford, Norris-Newman, was fully aware of intelligence reaching Chelmsford, who was *en route* to Helpmakaar from Mooi River, to the effect that large numbers of Zulus were assembling to oppose the Centre Column. He wrote:

A mounted orderly arrived just after midnight (6<sup>th</sup> January) with important despatches from Helpmakaar, and the General was roused in consequence. The intelligence was connected with the presence of several thousand Zulus near Rorke's Drift. Similar intelligence reached Chelmsford in the following days.

Such intelligence would have become widely known throughout the invasion column and according to Norris-Newman, there was already a 'temporary fortification of mealie-sacks, biscuit-boxes, etc., etc. constructed at Helpmakaar', itself some six miles inland from the British camp at the Zululand border at Rorke's Drift. Not to have constructed any form of defence at the border crossing point would have been inconceivable. Norris-Newman's statement is supported by the recently discovered paintings of Helpmakaar by Lt. Lloyd of the 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment, which show that Helpmakaar had already been prepared for defence prior to the Zulu attack into Natal. (See *A Soldier-Artist in Zululand* by David Rattray 2007)

Furthermore, the written account of Lieutenant Colonel F. Whitton CMG, contemporarily acknowledged as the most factual and authoritative of its time, supports Harford's statement. The account was published in 1934 by *Blackwood's Magazine*. It states;

The instructions to strengthen and hold the post at Rorke's Drift had been given before the force at Isandlwana was attacked, and when it was even believed that the Zulus might pass by that place in their eagerness – as Chard himself surmised – "to have a dash at the drift".

Lee Stevenson in *The Rorke's Drift Doctor* (2001) writes,

In a very short space of time all vestiges of his (Rev. Otto Witt) mission station had disappeared beneath a pile of mealie bags and supplies as the British army arrived to take control. B Company 2<sup>nd</sup>/24<sup>th</sup> under the command of Lt. Bromhead took up positions at Rorke's Drift to protect both the crossing and the stores.

Finally, August Hammar, a twenty-two year old Swedish family friend of Otto Witt, had temporarily been resident at Rorke's Drift during the two weeks leading up to the British invasion of Zululand. As a young surveyor unable to find work in Sweden, Hammar had set out for South Africa to stay with Witt before searching for suitable work. When Witt departed from Rorke's Drift prior to the Zulu attack, he left Hammar to oversee the mission station. Hammar wrote that he had to sleep outside Witt's house because the British had knocked the walls into defensive positions. This is an impartial eye-witness account recently translated from one of Hammar's original letters, in Swedish, to his family back in Sweden\*1.

So, both Helpmakaar and Rorke's Drift appear to have been prepared and defended prior to the Zulu attack on Rorke's Drift.

\*1. The original diaries, letters and South Africa Campaign Medal of August Hammar came into the author's possession in early 2008 and make for very interesting reading. I propose publishing an article about Hammar, probably in the June 2009 Journal. He witnessed the Zulu attack on the mission station from a nearby hill and then walked back to Durban where he joined Baker's Horse and then saw out the Zulu War with this unit. After the Zulu War he became a noted surveyor and made the first full survey of the Victoria Falls area and, later, the Indian Ocean coastline of South Africa. He later became an internationally recognized painter of South African landscape scenes.