

The sad tale of Trooper Parson's Isandlwana Casualty medal.

By Adrian Greaves

This unusual casualty medal will be one of the medals on display at the 2009 Society exhibition at the RLC Headquarters. The report of the incident is taken from a contemporary document.

Taking fifteen days' supplies on ox wagons, the column moved on to Isandlwana on the 20th January. A month's supplies were left behind at Rorke's Drift, where a number of sick and wounded remained in hospital. The men paraded at 4 a.m. and the police acted as advance-guard. Some of them had to scout the country, keeping at least a mile from the road. They climbed up and down stony hills for miles, coming out on the plain where the Isandlwana church now stands, the troops being halted on the nek below Isandlwana Hill. The police had had a hard task, and were anticipating rest and food for themselves and their beasts when a Staff officer rode up and ordered Inspector Mansel to place out-posts on all the commanding hills on the east. Colonel Clarke recalls the fact that his troop was sent to an outlying ridge, and it was left there until long after dark, when a non-commissioned officer rode out and explained apologetically to the ravenous men that they had been forgotten by the Staff officer. It was then 8 p.m., and they did not reach camp until an hour later, when dinner (which consisted of biscuits and bully beef) was over.

At 9.30 p.m. '*Fall in for orders*' was sounded, and the police were informed that they had to parade at 3 a.m. with the volunteers to reconnoitre in the direction of Matyana's stronghold. The news that Major Dartnell was to be in command was received with cheers. The police, having only a few hours in which to rest, did not trouble to find their kits, and they never saw them again. All but thirty-four members of the police went off before dawn. They took no rations, being informed that they would be back at noon, when a hot meal would be provided for them. There was many a man wished, sorrowfully, afterwards, that he had put something to eat in his pocket.

They covered a considerable extent of the country during the morning without getting a glimpse of the enemy, and after midday met the Native Contingent, under Colonel Lonsdale. The troopers off-saddled for a while, and then received sudden orders to move in an easterly direction, away from the main camp, where small bodies of the enemy had been reported. On a ridge near the Isipezi Mountain, a few Zulus were seen, whereupon the force dismounted, while Inspector Mansel, with a small number of police, Sergeant-Major Royston, and a few of the Carbineers, galloped out to reconnoitre. It was soon seen that the enemy were there in large numbers, for they opened out until they covered the whole ridge, and dashed down the hill in an attempt to surround Inspector Mansel's party, who, however, wheeled back and escaped the impi.

A trooper named Parsons, in attempting to load his revolver, accidentally discharged the weapon, the horse shied and he fell off. As a reward he was sent back to camp in disgrace, the incident causing a good deal of merriment. Parsons was killed during the attack on the camp the next day.