

The remarkable story of August Hammar at Rorke's Drift.

By Adrian Greaves

August Hammar was born in 1856 in the small Swedish town of Lund. His father, also August Hammar, was the local parson and rector of the university town of nearby Hälsingborg, a noted seaport. Brought up in a family with a strong academic background, the young August grew up with a love of art, music and history. He studied mathematics and engineering and graduated from university in 1877 as a civil engineer. While a student, he had also spent many hours viewing and noting the work of artists such as Rembrandt, Tintoretto, Van Dyke, Canaletto and Rubens – all represented in the art museum at Göteborg. Like many young graduates fresh from his studies, he knew only too well there was little suitable work in his native Sweden, and August was encouraged to seek employment abroad. He focused his attention on South Africa where Otto Witt, a family friend and the resident pastor at Rorke's Drift, lived. After discussing the matter with his father, August wrote a letter to the Witts stating he was setting out for Africa.

In 1985 Mr C.J. Fourie of the Natal Library and Museum Service organised an exhibition of August Hammar's oil paintings depicting scenes of South Africa's landscapes. In the glossy Exhibition prospectus he described Hammar thus;

He landed at Durban and made his way to the mission station at Rorke's Drift. On his way he witnessed various incidents in the progress of the Zulu war. Engravings based on two sketches he made – British forces crossing the Buffalo River and Chelmsford's forces burning Sirayo's Kraal – appeared in *The Graphic* in London. He had observed the activity of the battle of Isandlwana at a distance of five to six miles. Returning to the mission he was cut off by a Zulu impi and spent the night in the hills watching the epic resistance at Rorke's Drift. Thus, Hammar on arrival in Natal, was unexpectedly connected with major events in history.

This is a remarkable story and although there have been occasional vague references that Otto Witt had a visitor at the time of the Zulu War, it seems no actual accounts or evidence of Hammar have survived and Witt never made any mention of this friend. The whole tale about Hammar had seemed to fade into obscurity until, in 2008, by sheer coincidence I met a direct family descendent of August Hammar following a Society presentation about the battle of Rorke's Drift. I was then and there generously offered access to the family's folder of correspondence from Hammar which, I was informed, included original letters from Hammar relating to his time at Rorke's Drift. In due course I was invited by the family to view a selection of Hammar's famous oil paintings and then presented with the original translations from Swedish into English of Hammar's letters to his family in Sweden, together with details of his subsequent military service with Baker's Horse and, to crown the occasion, I received Hammar's South Africa Campaign medal for his service during the Zulu War. Time was then spent verifying the papers and medal – which all passed muster.

There are numerous letters written by Hammar to his family but the two in question relating to Rorke's Drift are reproduced here, they read...

First letter ... Oskarsburg 26th December 1878.

...I am staying at Oskarsburg with Otto Witt.

...Arriving in Natal, conditions were not as described by Ohlsson, concerning the Zulus, their invasion was just a fright, a few hundred Zulus had crossed the Buffalo river in order to chase some escapees who had hidden in a kaffir Kraal, the Zulus behaved somewhat violently.

...Otto Witt had told a story of 30,000 murderous Zulus, however, the attitudes of the Zulus and the whites are very war-like. Southern Transvaal is disputed; the part which were Transvaal, Natal and UZulu all join. The Zulus have plundered southern Transvaal.

When I came to Durban I found the situation was very bad. The cost of sea freight had increased 14 times. because of the long drought and therefore no grass, it would cost between 15 to 20 pounds to go to Potchefstroom by post cart, carrying just a night bag. Even by an ox wagon would be beyond my means because of the presence of troops and the drought.

...I couldn't stay in Port Natal as I had not a penny, fortunately I met the Swiss missionary Flygera with whom I conferred. After much discussion I decided to go first to Oskarsburg and then exchange letters with Mr Persson and await a suitable occasion to go to Potchefstroom.

...By chance an ox wagon belonging to a friend of Mr Witt leaves any day now, 14 oxen hitched to a wagon. Mr Flygera presented me to the family driving on the wagon, Mt Dohne, his wife, two grown up daughters and a younger son and I got permission to follow the wagon, ie I would walk, but leave my luggage on the wagon. The rest of my luggage I left with a merchant known to Mr Witt.

...Thus began my first journey in Africa, splendid and wild views, the local flora and fauna...what troubled me most was cutting my leg under the knee while preparing the wood for the fire. I walked 270 kilometres with my stiff knee, through rain, and sleeping rough. We started at 3 am to 4 am, a pause at 6 am, coffee was cooked which was delicious, mid day and afternoon another pause, and after dark a cup of tea and an interesting talk, the good night. I slept under the wagon.

...After 11 days we arrived at Dohne's farm. I met Otto Witt and he said 'greetings August'. He had received notification of my arrival. We mounted horses and immediately galloped to Oskarsberg. We made 20 kilometres in 1½ hours. As soon as we arrived Otto's youngest daughter was baptised ' Ida Wilhelmina'. I carried her to the baptism.

P.S. New Year's Day. The situation is getting critical, all the white people have left, tonight if shots are heard Elin and the children and other women will leave by ox wagon for safety. Otto follows so then I will be alone for a few days on the station until Otto returns.

2nd Letter... Oskarsberg 6 January 1879:

...I am with the Witts.

...British officers call today... they want the house and store and tell Rev Witt to leave. We are very worried about events... we have put rocks round the outside of the house. Mr Witt and I are the only people left, and he prepares to follow his family tomorrow to safety. I will care after the property.

...many troops arrive over three days and Otto has left very angry at the damage to his house. There is no more space for tents between the house and the river, it is full of troops, artillery and horses...and much noise. There are troop tents next to the Witt's store and the troops cook next to the house... I get nothing from them ... Otto left me some food.

...I sleep outside under an oilcloth as troops have smashed the Witt house doors for firewood and prepared the house and store if the Zulu attack... British troops believe the Zulu will attack the river crossing soon... the house is now a British hospital and will be busy if things go bad...no sign of the Zulu army but everybody is ready.

...Otto Witt will return when his family are safe.

...I am well and I will write again soon.

This second letter, especially the comment about the house and store prepared for attack, is particularly relevant and it ties in with Captain Charles Harford's diary note of the 11th January...

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.(1)

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'.

After watching events on the night of the 22 January, August Hammar then walked back to Durban looking for the Witts, but never saw them again. Out of work, hungry and with no immediate prospect of employment, Hammar joined Baker's Horse as a trooper. His unit duly joined Redvers Buller's scouting forays and on one occasion they were accompanied by the Prince Imperial. O.G. Reitz wrote about Hammar in *The South African Survey Journal* (December 1968) saying that 'Hammar made a painting of the

spot where the prince met his death and that in due course the work was sent to the Empress Eugenie’.

After the war Hammar was articled to a land surveyor at Verulam and was finally admitted into practice in Natal in 1881. He purchased a small farm near Rorke’s Drift and combined surveying with farming.

In January 1884 he completed plans for a visit to the Victoria Falls and Okavango swamps with Dr Aurel Schulz, a Natal doctor of German descent who lived near Dundee. This was to be an adventure and Hammar took basic surveying equipment while the doctor took appropriate medical supplies. The pair left Natal on foot in 1884 and travelled north through Pretoria and Rustenburg. They reached the falls on 27th May 1884 some twenty five years after David Livingstone and so became among the first recorded visitors to the area. They explored the countryside along the route and Hammar made the first accurate survey of the Victoria Falls covering nearly 3,000 miles on foot in just under one year. On returning to Natal the pair wrote a detailed book of their experiences *The New Africa*, (the family copy now resides with me). Illustrative engravings in the book are by Hammar who also made numerous sketches of special views which he later painted in oils, (all in the family or museum possession).

In 1886 Hammar married the daughter of a Yorkshire man who had settled in Natal and in 1887 their first child was born followed by a second in 1889 just as the family moved to Pietermaritzburg; the family were to have two further children.

After the Zulu War tribal strife and the formation of the new republic at Vryheid it was deemed necessary by the government to have a systematic survey of Natal. Geodetic triangulations were undertaken by Hammar between the years 1883 and 1905. During this period, in 1890, Hammar was appointed Government Surveyor to the Colony of Natal and he continued to work in this capacity for the next twenty-five years. It was a time of war and great upheaval but his work, of necessity sporadic, was of such a high standard that after 1922 all Hammar’s stations were included in the national trigmetrical survey.

In 1893 he was commissioned to survey the Zululand / Transvaal border and in 1910 he was tasked with surveying the whole length of the Natal and Zululand coast starting at Durban and moving north to St. Lucia and south to the Bashee River. It is the countryside of these locations that form the subject of his paintings.

In the course of his surveying in the Camperdown area of Natal, an area was named after Hammar and is today known as Hammarsdale.

He died in Empangeni Hospital on October 16th 1931.

References.

1. *Harford* David and Emma Payne 2009

Bibliography.

- August Hammar* Natal Arts Trust Durban 1985
Field Exercise and Evolutions of Infantry HMSO London 1870
The New Africa Hammar and Schultz 1897

Kwahumbei Valley by August Hammar



13. KWAHUMBI VALLEY (EVENING AFTER STORM)/KWAHUMBIVALLEI (AAND NA STORM)



August Hammar 1856 - 1931