

The injury to Commandant Lonsdale of the NNC.

By Adrian Greaves

Much has been written about Commandant Lonsdale on the day of the battle of Isandlwana. It is a well established myth, perpetuated by battlefield guides and frequently written that on the day of the British defeat he was sent back to the camp at Isandlwana suffering, variously, from sunstroke or debility. Author Michael Barthop wrote,

Feeling unwell, he (Lonsdale) had started riding slowly back to Isandlwana on his own during the morning of the 22nd. In his feverish condition and part stupefied by the sun....(1)

Donald Morris, in his remarkable book *The Washing of the Spears* wrote...

He (Lonsdale) was a fat man and far from well; he was barely over his concussion and had been nagged by fever for weeks. The preceding day's scouting, the sleepless bivouac and the morning's skirmish, coming on top of weeks of grinding labour, had brought him to the verge of breakdown. (2)

Lonsdale then had an adventure approaching the camp to find it taken by the Zulus who then fired at him before he made good his escape. For many years historians have accepted this tale relating to Lonsdale's sunstroke and physical condition. As is so often the case, reality is often much more interesting than the fiction of such incidents and all was revealed when Harford's diaries and journals were recently discovered.

The following is an excerpt from Harford's diary which deals with Lonsdale's physical condition. There is no mention of Lonsdale being anything other than his usual cheery self. Clearly, before Harford's papers were discovered, someone, a long time ago, had tried to reason why Lonsdale was so incapacitated on the 23rd January and the resulting deduction passed into folklore.

Harford was Lonsdale's adjutant and was therefore in the right place to see exactly what happened. He wrote;

It was now nearing the 11th January, the date fixed for the troops to move across the border. Lord Chelmsford had arrived at Rorke's Drift and Lonsdale rode over to have an interview with him but received no definite orders with regard to the movements of the Contingent. However, one morning I had occasion to go to Rorke's Drift myself, to see the Adjutant-General, Major Clery. Luckily, arriving at a very early hour, and having completed my work with him, I was on the point of mounting my pony to ride back to camp, when Major Clery said, "You will have everything ready, Harford, won't you, for the General today?" "Good Heavens, Major", I said, "This is the first I've heard about his coming!" "You don't mean to say that Lonsdale never told you about it?" he replied, "He is going to inspect you at twelve o'clock. The General gave Lonsdale his orders days ago."

Well, I rode off as hard as I could go to Camp. I found Lonsdale sitting in his tent, looking over his Masonic orders and paraphernalia, and, on my breaking the news to him as quickly as I could, he said, "Good God! I forgot all about it. Shout for my pony, like a good chap."

I also got a change of ponies. Kaffirs were sent out in all directions to call in the men who were drilling, many of them miles away. As soon as the ponies were ready, we jumped on, Lonsdale saying, "You take that way; I'll take this", and we went off at a gallop. We had scarcely parted company when Lonsdale's pony shied at something and threw him off. I saw the fall. He appeared to have struck his head and then, rolling over on his back, lay quite still with one of his arms projecting in the air at right angles to his body. I got off at once and ran to his assistance, only to find that he was unconscious, and rigidly stiff. I shouted for the Doctor, and as soon as he had come up with some Natives and a stretcher, I galloped off again to collect the men. Eventually, after a real race for it, everybody was got in; but Hamilton-Browne and Cooper were still getting their Battalions formed up on parade when the General and staff made their appearance.

I had, of course, to ride out and tell the General what had happened. So we first went to Lonsdale's tent, and finding that he was still unconscious, orders were given for his removal to Helpmekaar hospital. It was found afterwards that he had received concussion of the brain, (he rejoined the contingent the day we went into camp at Isandlwana, being received with a loud *Bayete*).

The above excerpt is from the recently published Harford book and is just one of many accounts that reveal the truth behind many myths surrounding, in particular, the battle at Isandlwana. Another myth, surrounding the alleged panic by the NNC at Mangeni during the night before the battle at Isandlwana, will feature in the next issue of the Journal.

In the meantime, the remaining copies of the Harford book are still available by contacting the Society.

References.

1. *The Zulu War* Michael Barthop, Blanford Press 1989
2. *The Washing of the Spears*, Donald Morris, Jonathan Cape 1966