Officer desertions from the field of battle during the Anglo-Zulu War were too numerous for comfort.

By Dr Andres Traverse

The British Army in South Africa on campaign against the Zulu Nation in 1879 was beset with a series of problems beginning significantly with the catastrophe at Isandlwana on 22 January. This was followed by further defeats or losses and other difficulties involving intelligence, supply, transport, a protracted siege, medical issues and unfavourable weather conditions. In the midst of all these headaches, the issue of desertion became an unexpected and serious concern to many serving in the campaign.

Desertion is defined as the *act of deserting or forsaking; abandonment of a service, a cause, a party, a friend or a post of duty; the quitting of one's duties willfully and without right.* An act of desertion during the Anglo-Zulu War in 1879 was a chargeable offence under Article 42 of War according to British army regulations.

This problem did not simply restrict itself to the common soldier but more embarrassingly, it very much affected the officer classes both commissioned and non-commissioned (NCO). Incidents involving commissioned officer desertion or abscondment whether directly in the face of the enemy or not, became unpredictable, unacceptable and too numerous.

Officers in the British Army in the nineteenth century were recruited almost entirely from the upper and middle classes of society. They were considered to have the right character and credentials to lead men whether or not they were in fact truly competent enough to do so. The Cardwell Reforms had effectively abolished the system of commission purchase in 1871 to give the opportunity for officers to be selected based on merit rather than heritage or social background. Therefore as most officers in 1879 had been commissioned before the changes had taken place, the calibre and attitudes of these men had not changed. However, privilege of the right breeding and rank came at a price as it carried responsibilities which governed conduct especially during a conflict. British officers were never expected to desert as they were not only considered braver than their men but braver than any officer in any other army. The code of honour as gentlemen forbade them from committing an act that would be considered desertion or dereliction of duty. It was an unforgivable sin to dishonour one's family name and regiment. All officers knew what was expected of them especially since the class system dominated Victorian society. Often, in battle, casualty figures clearly showed a disproportionate number of officers killed and wounded.

Such were the expectations of officers that Lord Wolseley summarized attitudes and beliefs well when he wrote:

> I do not know, I cannot tell from experience, whether courage or cowardice is the more quickly contagious. But this I do know, that of all the horrible sights, that of a man in action who exhibits a want of nerve and daring is the worst. Thank heaven, it is a disease from the effects of which the British gentleman does not require a thought of inoculation.

Whether or not in the heat of battle, desertion or cowardice can have a profound adverse effect on individuals and units, morale may easily be shaken and such conduct may negatively influence the outcome of an engagement. Lives and battles are easily lost when men lose their nerve and run to save themselves or simply quit their post. The common soldier in the British Army was not taught to use initiative or question his superior. His job was to obey orders and respect authority. Desertion among common soldiers has been a bane in all armies since ancient times and it was considered very often as a capital offence. The problem of unit desertion in the 1879 campaign became a reality when native units literally ran away *en masse* at Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift. Unfortunately, officers and NCOs were also involved in these incidents. Flogging for such conduct was a common punishment for both white and native troops. During the war this was meted out at an alarming rate, enough to cause concern by many observers and public opinion in Britain upon hearing of such reports expressed well founded consternation. With Chelmsford's army on almost constant high alert in the months following the defeat at Isandlwana, any dereliction of duty was considered serious with the result that there were five hundred and forty-five flogging cases during the war. However, this liberal use of the punishment caused enough consternation and protests in the British press that it was banned by the end of 1879. (1)

Corporal punishment sentences did not apply to officers though NCOs would be treated in the same fashion as the privates and native volunteers. Because officers were supposed to be a cut above the rest owing to their social background, they were punished by being forced to resign from the service and the stigma attached to their dishonourable conduct would carry over to society back home. Those guilty individuals not court-martialled and convicted as deserters could find themselves treated as pariahs and ostracized by their fellow officers in the regiment. Life would likely become intolerable and eventually they would be encouraged to resign. While the number of incidents involving officer desertions in South Africa was a predicament for the British Army, there were other cases where officer conduct was questionable and controversy would ensue with much debate in the years after the end of the war.

The preparations for the invasion of Zululand in January 1879 involved the organization of a strong and versatile army to engage Cetshwayo's impis. The British were limited by the number of regular British regiments available in South Africa and many irregular units were formed from the pool of white colonial volunteers available in the colony. In addition, many local natives were recruited to fight against the Zulus despite the questionable quality of a significant number of the units raised and this would prove significant early in the war. The officers available for the campaign not only consisted those imperial officers already serving with their regiments in South Africa, but also included a significant number who had obtained leave from their own units in Britain. These volunteer or special duty regular officers offered their services in order to take part after news of a planned invasion was made known by Lord Chelmsford who issued a request for assistance. The Anglo-Zulu War was no exception in so far as having officers volunteer to take part. An ambitious imperial officer would seek permission from his regiment for a leave of absence often accepting a reduction in rank to take part in the action. Each officer had his reasons for volunteering and some saw the opportunity as a chance for advancement or even an award. Such was their enthusiasm that they would accept any position that was available. Major Redvers Buller, Lieutenants Horace Smith-

Dorrien, Henry Harford and Edward Essex all volunteered upon learning that Lord Chelmsford had appealed for officers to fill special duty posts in the preparation for the forthcoming invasion of Zululand. They obtained permission to leave their regular regiments temporarily and made their way to South Africa.

Other officers were recruited within the colonies in South Africa from the colonists; some had held commissions in the British Army while others had skills such as knowledge of the Zulu language or the ability to raise small mounted units. The Natal Native Contingent (NNC) was officered by both imperial and colonial volunteers. Experience in campaign or the army was an asset but as there was a shortage of preferred volunteers, many officers in the colonial units were recruited from the settler gentry and so called adventurers from the Eastern Cape Frontier. Captain William Stephenson together with Lieutenants Gert Ardendorff, Walter Higginson and Alfred Henderson were all classified as colonial volunteers.

A problem lay in recruiting NCOs where the number of available volunteers was also less than expected. On the whole, they were a mixed lot ranging from redundant irregular troops to unemployed labourers. Quality was generally poor and this was obviously reflected in events throughout the campaign. Strictly speaking, regular army officers were governed by a different set of rules compared to their colonial counterparts. The latter group was supposed to be gentlemen but could not be court martialled for desertion or conduct unbecoming of an officer.

In dealing with the issue of the numerous desertions amongst all ranks, those in command during the Anglo-Zulu War were aware of the potential repercussions from the press, public and politicians back in Britain should this problem continue to affect the results of the campaign. The newspapers were in need of information and so a horde of reporters quickly descended on Natal soon after the battle at Isandlwana. Very significantly, not only was this campaign the largest since the Crimean War, but never during the sixty-four year reign of Queen Victoria, of all the conflicts, it was the fight against the Zulus that seized the attention and imagination of the British Public. Chelmsford resented the presence of numerous correspondents attached to the army in South Africa. However, by the 1879 war they had become a fact of life during campaigns.

One must consider the motive for desertion or leaving one’s post without permission whether in battle or during a period of inactivity. Poor morale, stress and a hopeless position are usually the reasons for desertion, especially in the face of the enemy. There are three basic human reactions to stress: fight, flight or fright. In battle every man experiences the stress of combat. His actions and decisions are influenced by how he is able to handle that stress. The common soldier is expected to follow orders but he is also sensitive to the manner in which his superior is able to handle himself. In battle the bond between officers and disciplined men, especially experienced soldiers, becomes strong and this attachment is the very fibre that holds a unit together. Comradeship results in men seeking the protection of one another in times of danger. However, in contrast, poorly integrated soldiers such as volunteer colonial troops including officers during the Zulu War, were more likely to desert or become absent without leave and too often when success in battle seemed very less likely. Colonial officers were not quite bound by the rules and regulations that regular army officers were obliged to adhere to. Most officers in the British Army knew what their duty was and proudly fought to the bitter end with the comfort that they would die with their men. Although many officers in the British Army were optimistic and considered the forthcoming campaign as a relatively simple task with a set piece battle as the climax, it was well known how the Zulu military system worked.

Within days of invading Zululand, Chelmsford's Central or 3rd Column was decisively defeated at Isandlwana. Chelmsford had divided his force, and based on inaccurate intelligence, sought to catch the Zulu army to deal a quick and decisive blow. He was outclassed and quickly outmaneuvered with the exposed position of the British at Isandlwana subject to a surprise attack even though the assault was not planned for that day. The classic Zulu tactic of envelopment quickly resulted in the greatest defeat of the British Army at the hands of a native force. It was that day on 22nd day of January 1879 that noted desertions first occurred.

In reality, a group of colonial soldiers had left their post the previous day after they had enough of their scouting mission and disobeyed orders from Major Dartnell who commanded the colonial troops in No 3 Column. Lieutenants Avery and Holcroft together with NCOs and natives under their command, deserted as they simply lost enthusiasm and motivation to follow orders and made their way back to the camp at Isandlwana. The next day these two officers met the same fate as most of the men in camp. Of course they were never held to account for their desertion and had they performed their duty as ordered, fate would have dealt them a different hand at least for the time being.

At the battle of Isandlwana the natives in the 3rd Regiment, NNC lost their nerve and attempted to run away as soon as the Zulu warriors seemed to be closing in. They were followed by officers and NCOs. The entire front line fell fighting the Zulus; anyone wearing a red jacket stood little chance of surviving the battle. Of the fifty-five survivors, there was a disproportionately high number of officers made up of colonials together with special duty or volunteer regular army officers who were able to flee on horses. Only one officer from the frontline, Lieutenant Curling, escaped the massacre. The fugitives managed to slip through a gap along a rough trail as the horns of the Zulu impi met but before they securely closed off any escape route for what was left of the troops in the camp. The scene was chaotic since it was every man for himself as the disorganized troops made their way towards Fugitives Drift. In the midst of the confusion and desperation that day there were many accounts of bravery and clear acts of desertion. Controversy would also result from the actions of some officers as it has become unclear whether or not they intentionally left their post and fled with the rest of the survivors.

Much has been written about the flight of Lieutenants Teignmouth Melvill and Neville Coghill who managed to reach the Buffalo River before being killed. Melvill was adjutant of the 1st Battalion, 24th Foot and Coghill was staff officer to Colonel Glyn, Commander of No 3 Centre Column. The issue raised regarding their actions on the 22 January centers around their respective orders. It is clear that both officers departed from the battlefield separately and finally linked up at the Buffalo River. Coghill's injured knee had held him back at Isandlwana when Glyn left with Chelmsford to seek out the Zulu Army early on 22 January. It is unknown why Coghill actually took flight from the battlefield but it was during a scene of chaos in the headquarters area that he took leave and departed on a horse not belonging to him. It has been speculated that he intended to make contact with expected reserve troops close to Rorke's Drift. It is not known whether Colonel Pulleine actually ordered Melvill to take the Queen's Colour and ride from Isandlwana to safety and it is supposed that he initially thought to attempt the impossible task of rallying the British troops and restore some semblance of order. This hopeless situation may have prompted Melvill to make a dash and save the Colour. His departure took place just before the camp was overrun by Zulus.

Both officers independently reached the Buffalo River which was high and moving too fast to be crossed with ease. They linked up only after Coghill had crossed the swollen river and reached the relative safety of Natal only to go back to assist his fellow officers, Melvill and Lieutenant Higginson of the 3rd Regiment, NNC who were clinging to a rock in midstream. During the struggle to extricate themselves from their predicament the Colour was lost and Coghill's horse was shot dead during the rescue attempt but, finally, all three exhausted men reached the bank. Coghill was incapacitated by his knee and could not move much further without a horse. Melvill remained with him while Higginson sought to find horses. With hostile local natives seeking out any Isandlwana survivors, the two tired officers were killed in the ensuing struggle that followed.

Chelmsford cautiously demonstrated his concern in his comments when he wrote to the War Office on 14 May 1879. However, Chelmsford's successor, Sir Garnet Wolseley made his feelings on the issue more strongly felt when he wrote:

> *I am sorry that both of these officers were not killed with their men at Isandlwana instead of where they were. I don't like the idea of officers escaping on horseback when their men on foot are killed. Heroes have been made of men like Melvill and Coghill, who, taking advantage of their having horses, bolted from the scene of the action to save their lives, it is monstrous making heroes of those who saved or attempted to save their lives by bolting or of those who, shut up in buildings at Rorke's Drift, could not bolt, and fought like rats for their lives which they could not otherwise save.*

While there was no clear act of desertion committed by either officer, Wolseley felt that both men should have stayed with their men to the bitter end as was the case with all the other frontline imperial infantry officers at Isandlwana. That would have been the most honourable and acceptable conduct. The British press made much of the gallant bid to save the Queen's Colour that both Melvill and Coghill were indeed lauded as heroes and finally, on 15 January 1907 *The London Gazette* published the award of posthumous Victoria Crosses to the two officers. In his 1879 letter to the War Office, Chelmsford wrote:

> *The question, therefore remains had he (Melvill) succeeded in saving the colours and his own life, would he have been considered to deserve the Victoria Cross?*

As a witness to the actions by Melvill and Coghill, Lieutenant Higginson certainly merited recognition and his actions may even have landed him with an award for his efforts that day at the Buffalo River. However, his reputation was soured by his conduct during events immediately after the demise of his regular army colleagues. During Higginson's escape, he was assisted by a trooper of the Natal Carbineers by the name of Barker. Under the covering fire from the Natal bank by Lieutenants Raw and Henderson together with their mounted native troops, Barker and a fellow trooper by the name of

Tarboton had managed to successfully negotiate the flooded Buffalo River. They made their way up the steep Natal side of the river gorge and while Tarboton proceeded to join Raw's group, Barker turned back after it became obvious that a soldier was in need of help while scrambling up the hill on foot. It was then that Barker came across an exhausted Higginson who was willing to accept the assistance. He surrendered his horse to the Lieutenant but requested that Higginson wait for Barker at the top of the hill. Even on the Natal side of the Buffalo River the Zulus were determined to hunt fugitives down and with the warriors getting too close, Barker made a determined effort to reach the summit alone completing his task in an exhausted condition. Upon reaching this point he discovered that he had been deserted by the very man he had assisted and therefore saving the officer's life. Barker made a dash for two miles pursued by Zulus who finally gave up the chase.

In fact Barker had been expected to join Lieutenants Raw and Henderson together with Tarboton and some Basuto scouts who had waited on the Helpmekaar track. Instead of meeting Barker, it was Higginson who appeared. Tarboton recognized the horse as Barker's and upon questioning, Higginson firmly stated that he had found the horse at the Buffalo River. He was forced to give up his mount in exchange for a spare Basuto pony. While Higginson made his way to Helpmekaar to make his report, the group headed by Raw decided to check the ground they had just covered towards the escarpment overlooking the river. Fortunately, they came across Barker who despite his obvious exhaustion was still running from his pursuers. Higginson's official account of his actions stated that he had left Coghill and Melvill after the three of them had reached the Natal bank and then sought to find horses for the exhausted officers as he had the most strength to do so. From a vantage point he witnessed the Zulus surrounding the bodies of the two officers and as further assistance was hopeless so he decided to ride off to Helpmekaar. Higginson's detailed after the battle report described the circumstances concerning his departure from the Isandlwana battlefield. He wrote:

> *The Zulus extended all round the front of the camp and drove back the few men that opposed them, when my company saw them coming on nothing could stop them, they all jumped up and ran, and though I knocked one man down with my rifle it was no use, I then saw the men of the 2nd Batt. NNC running and looking for the 24th men, I saw that they were retreating also, but very slowly, all the mounted men were riding past as fast as they could, and I then thought it time to go too, so, firing one last shot, I mounted my horse…and rode off.*

As a volunteer he felt no compulsion to stay with the regular troops and decided to leave the battlefield. As for his conduct concerning Trooper Barker, Higginson's lack of proper duty to his fellow soldier was a clear demonstration of abandonment and this dereliction of duty was met with the contempt it deserved. On 23 January orders were given for his arrest and while Higginson received nothing for his endeavours concerning Coghill and Melvill's plight, Trooper Barker was later recommended for a Victoria Cross by Brigadier Wood who became aware of the incident with Higginson. While on a visit to Pietermaritzburg to distribute campaign medals to Barker's regiment on 17 December 1881, Wood spoke to the troops after the ceremony in the town's market square and concluded his speech with the following words:

> *I have only now heard of a gallant act performed by a straggler (Barker) whose late arrival (at Helpmekaar) is well explained by his having, during the retreat, given up his horse to an officer who was exhausted. Into this matter it will be my pleasure to enquire more.*

Wood's response from the War Office regarding Barker's recommendation for the Victoria Cross was disappointing. The War Office replied on 10 March 1882:

> *Major General Sir Evelyn Wood VC*
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> *Sir,*
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> *I am directed by the Field Marshal Commanding in Chief to acknowledge your letter of 6th instant, and to acquaint you in reply, that statements re Trooper Barker, Natal Carbineers, at the battle of Isandhlwana, on 22nd January, 1879, have carefully been considered. His Royal Highness desires me to state that while trooper Barker's conduct on the occasion referred to is deserving of every commendation, there does not appear to be sufficient ground, according to the terms of the statute, for recommending him for the distinction of the Victoria Cross.*

Of fifty five European survivors from Isandlwana at least sixteen were officers which in effect represented a truly uncomfortably high proportion inconsistent with what would be expected by any commander particularly in this case Chelmsford and Wolseley. All officers managed to escape by horse as the four mile run through the Zulu gauntlet to the Natal border was practically impossible by foot. As the fugitives from Isandlwana fled to safety in Natal, Captains Gardner and Essex, Lieutenants Cochrane, Curling and Smith-Dorrien safely made their way to Helpmekaar and avoided involvement in any further conflict that day. Of the colonial officers, Lieutenants Henderson, Adendorff, Vane, Raw and Vause escaped by making their way towards the camp at Rorke's Drift mission station guarded by B Company 2/24th (2nd Warwickshire Regiment) where another battle was yet to take place. The commanding officer at Rorke's Drift, Major Spalding, left for Helpmekaar early that afternoon leaving Lieutenant Chard of the Royal Engineers in charge of the camp though Lieutenant Bromhead was the senior officer of the fighting troops present. Chard had seen Zulus earlier while he was at Isandlwana and once it became obvious that an attack at Rorke's Drift by a sizeable Zulu force was very likely despite orders by King Cetshwayo that his warriors were not cross onto Natal, preparations were made for a fighting stand. At 3.30pm Chard met Lieutenants Vane and Adendorff of the Natal Native Horse who had survived the disaster at Isandlwana. At about the same time a native horseman of the Edendale Contingent had just delivered a note to Bromhead from Captain Essex, warning Company B of the disaster at the British camp. Vane and Adendorff were dispatched by Chard to confer with Bromhead who was discussing the situation with Commissary Dalton. The colonial officers' advice was for a quick withdrawal to Helpmakaar as the best option. Bromhead ordered Vane to ride to

Helpmekaar and warn the garrison there. Although Bromhead was indecisive as to the preferred course of action, it was Dalton who made a strong case for the defence of Rorke's Drift and immediately began supervising the construction of the defences and supply of ammunition. His quick thinking and efficient use of the abundant supply of labor consisting of approximately 100 regular troops and 300 natives from Captain Stevenson's NNC present at the camp effectively made the mission station ready for the defence and just in time.

A mystery has shrouded the actual activities of Adendorff since 1879 with conflicting and confusing accounts as to his whereabouts on the 22-23 January. The controversy has lasted for well over a century and it is likely that we will never truly know whether he was a deserter or hero. Adendorff was attached to Captain Krohn's No 6 Company of the 1st Battalion, 3rd Regiment; NNC commanded by Commandant Lonsdale and was present at the Battle of Isandlwana. It was claimed that he deserted from both Isandlwana while on vedette duty before the main battle was underway, and later at Rorke's Drift during the preparation of the defences by quietly slipping away. However, a totally conflicting view actually places Adendorff at Rorke's Drift during the entire defence and if so, this would make the lieutenant the only soldier to have fought at both battles on the 22 January. This feat alone would have given him great distinction and honour.

It has been suggested that Adendorff was among the officers headed by Avery and Holcroft who simply left their post during the evening of 21 January when Lonsdale made his way to join Dartnell after the detection of a Zulu impi. At Isandlwana, the next morning he was sent out on vedette duty and is confirmed as having brought a report from the piquet on the iNyoni escarpment regarding Zulu movements on the plateau. Lt Higginson was sent to confirm the oral report as the details were somewhat confusing possibly due to Adendorff's poor command of English, being of German descent. After he was sent back to his unit, Krohn's company played no significant role in the battle at Isandlwana as it was held back from the actual fight. Before the Zulus could rush into the camp once the British line collapsed, Krohn's native troops broke and fled, obviously attempting to leave the battlefield early before any avenue of escape was closed by the Zulu encirclement of the camp. It is assumed by some writers that Adendorff made his way to Fugitives' Drift several miles from Rorke's Drift and crossed the Buffalo River at this point. However, an account written in 1939 by another survivor, Captain Stafford of E Company, 1st Battalion 1st NNC, states that his group of three including Adendorff and an unnamed soldier who can be assumed to be Lt Vane, made their way up to Rorke's Drift by hugging the Buffalo river and crossed by ferry. To add further confusion, upon encountering Lieutenant Chard at Rorke's Drift after crossing the Buffalo River, Adendorff stated that he had escaped by making his way along the Rorke's Drift road which in effect was not possible as the Zulus had completely blocked it before the attack on the camp at Isandlwana took place.

The real mystery begins with confirming Adendorff's participation in the defence of Rorke's Drift. As he left Chard to give Bromhead the news of the British defeat, Adendorff called back to the officer that he would remain at the mission and fight. Despite this, it is believed by many that he quietly slipped away unnoticed. His motive for doing so may lie in the fact that as a survivor of the earlier engagement, he felt no real compulsion to participate in another fight against the same enemy. Even so, Chard believed that Adendorff actually remained at Rorke's Drift throughout the entire defence and this was affirmed by the two official reports that he wrote after the battle. Although Chard was not certain of Adendorff's role, he presumed his position had been in the defence of the hospital. It is believed that the solution of the misidentification is in Chard's own report and nominal roll of the survivors; both of which were presented to Queen Victoria. He described certain actions during the battle in his report involving Adendorff by writing:

> *As far as I know, but one of the fugitives remained with us- Lieut Adendorff, whom I have before mentioned. He remained to assist in the defence, and from a loophole in the store building, flanking the wall and Hospital, his rifle did good service.*

In a case of straightforward mistaken identity, Adendorff was erroneously taken for another man whose actions and conduct were well known by many present at the mission. One of the five soldiers who received the Distinguished Conduct Medal at Rorke's Drift for bravery was Corporal Francis Attwood of the Army Service Corps who received his award at Pietermaritzburg on 15 November 1879. Soon after Isandlwana, news circulated in Natal of Adendorff's arrest at Pietermaritzburg along with that of Vane for desertion and although both officers were to face a Board of Enquiry no such trial took place. Perhaps this was on account of Chard's reports that would have been submitted as evidence of Adendorff's participation in the defence at Rorke's Drift throughout the action and the possibility of Chard's own retraction in court. In any case his reports had already been submitted to his superiors.

Conversely, there are a growing number of historians that clearly believe Adendorff did stay at Rorke's Drift and fight until relieved by Chelmsford's relief force on the morning of 23 January. It is plausible to assume that both Attwood and Adendorff did defend the building together and that Chard was correct in his report without becoming confused with identities. It is thought that because Adendorff was an unfamiliar figure among the soldiers and at Rorkes Drift, he largely went unnoticed during the heat of the action. Furthermore, since he had arrived at the last moment during a time of confusion and activity, it would have been easy to be obscure especially to the officers. In addition, being stationed in the storehouse would add credence to his isolation and the lack of notice by those fighting outside the building. Stafford's 1939 account in which details of their escape from Isandlwana was described related some details that Adendorff had recounted to him during a meeting. He wrote:

> *I met Odendorff in 1883 and he told me that Rorke's Drift was saved through two Godsends. The first was that the Zulus retired in the middle of the night, apparently to hold a little consultation and that gave the garrison time to strengthen the weak parts of the little fort, and the Martini Henry carbines time to cool off. The other was the Zulus setting fire to the thatch building which gave a bright light round the little fort and when the Zulus came volley after volley was poured into them. He also told me that Rev. W. Smith was a great help. You will always find that in a tight corner there is a hard case and that there was one at Rorke's Drift. This man was cussing all the time. The Rev. Smith went up to him and said "Please, my good man stop that cussing. We may shortly have to answer for our sins". The reply he got was "All right Mister, you do the praying and I will send the black B's to Hell as fast as I can".*

In addition to Stafford's account, a member of Chelmsford's force, Trooper Fred Symons of the Natal Carbineers confirms the presence of Adendorff at Rorke's Drift on the morning of the 23rd. Lieutenant Charles Harford's almanac also records that Adendorff was in fact present. In weighing the evidence, a case for both sides of the argument can be made. Adendorff has evoked much attention amongst writers beginning with Donald Morris in his book *The Washing of the Spears* in which the author contends that Adendorff did indeed desert and had not been part of the action at Rorke's Drift. He alluded to some available evidence to support his position but which was not forthcoming at the time. Such is the interest in Adendorff that other modern writers have taken totally opposite views to one another. Moreover however, one would think it unusual for such controversy to revolve around an unassuming volunteer junior colonial officer of the NNC who for the most part did not influence events nor contribute significantly to any extent and certainly played a very minor role during the Zulu War. Somehow, he has been picked out for special consideration from among the fugitives fleeing the battlefield at Isandlwana notwithstanding the fact that a number of regular army officers fled too and contributed very little else after crossing into Natal. His treatment has been unfair especially in light of the fact that the conduct of those other officers has not been shown much attention except for the disdain shown by Chelmsford and Wolseley who felt that they should have stayed with their men since it was their duty to do so. Adendorff did in fact make his way to Rorke's Drift and with others, raised the alarm. For this he must be given some credit. Adendorff gave up military service when the 3rd NNC was disbanded on account of their very poor performance on 22 January when they deserted both at Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift. Due to the lingering debate on the officer's conduct amongst leading historians on the subject, the question still remains, was Adendorff a coward or a hero?

Another fugitive from Isandlwana, Lieutenant Henderson of the Natal Native Horse fled from Rorke's Drift with his mounted natives after delivering a few volleys of fire and expending the last of their ammunition once the Zulu vanguard was close to the mission. His conduct was never in question and his actions were viewed sympathetically. Henderson saw action with Durnford's men at Isandlwana and afterwards sought to alert the garrison at Rorke's Drift and it is believed that he joined a relief force on its way to the mission sometime during the night. By doing so he did not arrive in Helpmekaar until the following day. Henderson saw further action during the war performing his duties well and was present at the Battle of Ulundi.

It was at about the same time as Henderson's departure with his mounted troops that a mass desertion from Rorke's Drift occurred which could have had catastrophic results for the remaining defenders. Captain Stephenson of the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Regiment NNC commanded a sizeable company of native troops with only three corporals to assist him instead of the usual two lieutenants and six NCOs. These men were stationed at the mission and several sources conflict as to their strength ranging from 100 to as much as 2000 though a figure of 200 to 300 is more likely. This confusion probably arises from the fact that the regular troops really paid little attention to the native auxiliaries even though that they had been present at Rorke's Drift since arriving on 14 January. Although they were part of the 3rd Regiment NNC, these men had received little of the training the rest of the natives were given which in effect influenced their subsequent conduct in the face of the enemy. Without proper basic training and the apparent hasty formation of the unit from the Klip River County near Ladysmith problems might easily arise. The general order authorizing the raising of the NNC was issued on 23 November 1878 which in effect only allowed six weeks to raise, organize officer, equip and train the Contingent. Despite the fact that Stephenson spoke their language well, his unit along with the rest of the NNC, were given little time to familiarize themselves with their officers who in many cases failed to gain their trust. The NCOs failed to show respect to the native representatives or headmen, gave orders that were difficult to understand and used force to enforce discipline. Only a few officers saw the need to capitalize on traditional African fighting skills and develop proper tactics which would have definitely benefited the British. Also, the natives were not properly supplied with uniforms and the only way to distinguish them was by a red rag worn around their head. Furthermore, for reasons of economy, only one in ten black troops were issued with firearms and these were the designated NCOs with the rest of the men carrying traditional weapons. The result was little camaraderie with questionable morale and military effectiveness should the test be given.

When the news reached Rorke’s Drift that there had been a disaster at Isandlwana and an impending attack on the mission was anticipated, the natives reacted with a jovial but traditional manner singing and preparing themselves for battle. Their assistance was needed in building the wall of mealie bags as a defensive structure. A post-battle report recorded that Stephenson did “good service in getting his men to work” At about 3.30, a group of survivors from Isandlwana, including mounted black auxiliaries of the Natal Native Horse commanded by Lieutenant Henderson arrived. They had been part of Colonel Durnford’s command consisting mostly followers of the Basuto Chief, Hlubi. Chard asked Henderson to deploy his men beyond Shiyane hill, in the direction of the Zulu advance, to delay the enemy attack for as long as possible. They positioned themselves and waited for the Zulus to appear and after firing off the rest of the ammunition, turned and retreated in the direction of Helpmekaar.

The men of Stephenson’s company were clearly alarmed at the sight of the retreating mounted troops and immediately reacted with consternation and in showing no stomach for a fight, they deserted. The men threw down the mealie bags, biscuit boxes together with any weapons they had and simply fled the scene by jumping over the barricades and headed in the direction of Helpmekaar. Stephenson himself and his NCOs disgraced themselves by fleeing too which was not expected at all. Colour-Sergeant Bourne commented by writing:

> *The desertion of these detachments of 200 men appeared to be a great loss, with only a hundred of us left, but the feeling afterwards was that we could not have trusted them, and also our defences were too small to accommodate them anyhow.*

As the NNC auxiliaries and officers fled the remaining defenders were not impressed and shots were fired at the deserters with the result that an NCO by the name of Corporal Anderson was shot in the back while running away and dropped dead. No questions were asked and anyway the men were preparing to fight for their survival. The desertion obviously reduced the number of defenders available at the mission so a second line of defence was constructed within the perimeter using biscuit boxes should the need arise to fall back and make a final stand. This would prove crucial for Chard and his men later that evening.

The disappointing performance by the NNC caused Chelmsford concern, enough to order that the 3rd Regiment be disbanded within days of Isandlwana. The unit's officers and NCOs were found other posts but certain individuals were not treated lightly. Orders were promptly given for the arrest of Lieutenants Higginson and Stephenson on the charge of desertion. They were placed in the custody of Lieutenant Harford who felt uncomfortable with his new responsibility and wrote a dispatch:

> *NNC*
> *Rorke's Drift*
> *From the Officer Comd. 3rd Regt*
> *To the Officer Comd. Troops*
> *Jan 31st 1879*
>
> *Sir,*
> *I have the honour to state that two officers viz Captain Stephenson and Lieutenant Higginson lately reported missing after a fight at Isandlwana, and supposed to have escaped to PM Berg (Pietermaritzberg) have rejoined their Corps, and having been place under arrest in accordance with orders from Commandant Lonsdale, for absenting themselves since 22nd inst from their Corps without cause and permission.*
>
> *I have the honour to request that in the absence of Com Lonsdale that I may be informed of what steps to take in the matter.*
>
> *H.C.H*

Neither officer could be court martialled as they were colonial volunteers. However, the only action that was taken by way of General Order no. 37 of 19 February 1879 which stated that the services of Captain Stephenson of 2/3rd NNC were no longer required with immediate dismissal from the service. Lieutenant Higginson was not dismissed but was given the opportunity to continue serving in another unit after the 3rd Regiment NNC was disbanded.

Although not present at Rorke's Drift during the Zulu attack, questions have been raised as to the conduct of the commanding officer, Major Spalding, who was expected back on the 22nd after leaving the mission to seek out an overdue supply column and reinforcements. Notwithstanding the fact that he was aware of Zulus in the area and that a junior officer could easily have been delegated the task, Spalding chose to go anyway. Close to Helpmekaar he met up with two companies of the 24th on their way to Rorke's Drift and together they headed in that direction. He soon encountered survivors from Isandlwana all telling the same story and expecting the imminent demise of the troops at the mission station. Unsure of the best course of action, the officer rode on with Mr Dickson of the Buffalo Border Guard and witnessed that there were flames at the mission. However, their route to Rorke's Drift was blocked by a large group of Zulus who were threatening to attack by attempting to encircle the two horsemen. Spalding turned back and upon reaching the column a mile away, ordered a retreat back to Helpmekaar reaching the settlement at about 9.00 p.m. There, the troops set about organizing a defence against an expected Zulu attack that never happened. Although not a deserter in the normal sense of the word, it was generally believed that Spalding could have easily pressed on to relieve if not assist the desperate defenders at Rorke's Drift, having reached a point less than three miles from the engagement. Had he remained at his post instead of riding off to Helpmekaar, Spalding would have likely received a Victoria Cross. However, his actions caused concern enough for some of his fellow officers to comment privately as there was no official statement made. Major Cleary stating in a letter home after the action that 'Spalding is utterly worthless' reflecting the contempt felt.

In one day, Chelmsford's Central Column had been severely mauled rendering the planned strategy to conclude the war quickly as inconceivable. Added to this was the embarrassment of the mass desertion of troops in the NNC together with too many officers either deserting their positions or failing to assist their fellow soldiers where desperately needed. A poorly planned defence at Isandlwana set the stage for the Zulus to easily break through the British line and envelop the camp. Chaos and confusion reigned in the camp as the frontline collapsed but many acts of bravery by Chelmsford's men were witnessed and recorded by accounts given by the Zulus. Among the clusters of redcoats and last stands, even though there was no option, officers clearly did their duty and stayed with their men. The regulars at Rorke's Drift stayed, fought and did not flinch with their successful defence hailed as a great victory. Accordingly, they received an unusually high number of awards partly as a way to deflect attention from the Isandlwana disaster. Chelmsford himself would have to account for his decisions and actions so he set about protecting himself by making sure blame was placed where it was convenient. He retreated across the Buffalo River and back into Natal to deal with the matters at hand and to plan a reinvasion of Zululand. To make matters worse, news of Pearson's 1st or Coastal Columns problems reached Chelmsford. An easy victory at Nyezane on 22 January was followed an advance to the objective at Eshowe where a drawn-out siege quickly commenced. Added to this problem, the weather conditions caused difficulties and morale among the troops began to sink. Worse still was news of further tragedies and questionable officer conduct where the issue of desertion would once again torment those in command.

Early in the morning of 12 March a surprise Zulu attack on a sleeping company of the 80th Regiment at Intombe River resulted in the loss of most of the troops. Acts of bravery were marred by the desertion of Lieutenant Henry Harward leaving a small unit of survivors to fight their way to safety. The seed was sown days before when on 1 March, Captain W.T. Anderson and men of 'D' Company marched out from Lunenburg to meet a twenty strong wagon train carrying supplies. Continuous rain caused difficulties making progress painfully slow. On 5 March Anderson left the struggling convoy without an escort and headed back to Lunenburg after he had received a vague message which he misinterpreted. The commanding officer of the 80th Regiment, Major Charles Tucker was horrified to see Anderson return without the wagons and immediately ordered a fresh company of 106 men under the command of Captain David Moriarty to complete the task. When he reached the Ntombe River at Meyers Drift, he found that not only had just two wagons been brought up to the river by the wagoners, but an attack by a small force of Mblini's warriors had resulted in the loss of some supplies and oxen. A camp had to be set up on the Lunenburg side of the river which was swollen by the rain. After constructing an improvised raft, Moriarty took most of his men across the river to recover the remaining wagons leaving 35 soldiers in the camp. By the early afternoon of 11 March, Moriarty's men managed to finally bring the looted wagons to Meyer's Drift and with a temporary lowering of the river, Lieutenant Lindop's men succeeded in pulling two wagons across the river to the Lunenburg side. Moriarty decided to stay where he was and construct a V shaped laager with the remaining wagons. Major Tucker eventually arrived on the scene accompanied by Lieutenant Harward and Sergeant Booth together with thirty two men. Tucker did not order the proper laagering of the wagons to reduce the gap created by the receding water as the men had laboured under difficult conditions for four days and were too tired. As the convoy was only four miles from its objective, he probably did not think that a Zulu attack was likely. He returned to Lunenburg with Lindop after having ordered Harward to relieve the Lieutenant and his men.

That night Moriarty and Harward slept on opposite sides of the river. At about 4.00am Harward was awakened by a distant shot and ordered Booth to alert the men on the other bank which he did with difficulty as there was no response initially. Meanwhile, a force of one thousand Zulus led by Mbelini was preparing to attack the camp. Another shot rang out at about 4.45 a.m. and within seconds Moriarty's group was overwhelmed by the Zulus who set about killing the soldiers including their commander. Some British troops managed to escape and swim across the river where Booth and his men were firing at the Zulus. Harward appeared from his tent, saw that the Zulus were crossing the river upstream and was heard to say, ‘ Fire away, lads, I'll be ready in a minute" before he mounted his unsaddled pony and rode off towards Lunenburg followed by most of his men and a few escapees from the opposite bank. Booth was left with only eight men and was joined by some soldiers who had crossed the river. As his position was hopeless, the sergeant organized a square and began a retreat. Booth's quick thinking and composure saved his men, though some broke away and made a run to safety but were cut down by Zulus. Each time they felt threatened by the natives, Booth's men fired a volley thereby allowing the small group to make their way to a deserted farmhouse a mile from Lunenburg.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Harward had galloped to Lunenburg arriving there 6.30 a.m. He reported to Major Tucker and told him that the camp was in the hands of the enemy following the slaughter of all the soldiers and that he had galloped for his life. Tucker organized a relief force which marched out and came across Booth with his men. Following the tragedy which cost the lives of seventy nine men, Tucker and Harward covered up the truth with a falsified account of the events which became the basis of Chelmsford's report to the War Office which was not received in London until 21 April. The truth would be kept in the regiment as NCOs were not required to make official submissions. By the middle of December while stationed at Pretoria, the truth about Harward's escape became known following months of harboured resentment by many serving in the regiment. Three survivors of the Intombe incident wrote to Wolseley on 20 December to set the record straight and ‘to be of service to Colour Sergeant Booth'. The result of the General's enquiry was that the newly appointed Lieutenant Colonel Tucker made a belated recommendation for the Distinguished Conduct Medal to be awarded to

Booth. Inquisitively, Wolseley asked Tucker why the Colour Sergeant had not previously been given proper recognition for his conduct. The response given was that to do so would have brought to light the ‘far different conduct of Lieutenant Harward’.
On 26 December Booth was honoured by Wolseley who forwarded his personal recommendation for the award of a Victoria Cross. Lieutenant Harward was arrested and taken to Pietermaritzberg where he was charged with:

1. *Having misbehaved before the enemy, in shamefully abandoning a party under his command when attacked by the enemy, and in riding off at speed from his men.*

2. *Conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline in having at the place and time mentioned in the first charge, neglected to take proper precautions for the safety of a party of a Regiment under his command when attacked.*

At the court-martial held at Fort Napier, Pietermaritzberg held between 20-27 February 1880, Harward’s defence was that he had only joined the convoy escort the night before and that proper laagering with only two wagons was impossible. When his command began to crumble, he had decided to ride for help. Much to the surprise of many especially Wolseley, Wood and Buller, Harward was acquitted of all charges and was allowed to return to his regiment. Although Wolseley could not alter the verdict, he refused to confirm the Court’s findings, adding his own view:

> *Had I released this officer without making any remarks upon the verdict in question, it would have been a tacit acknowledgement that I had concurred in what appears to me a monstrous theory, viz. that a Regimental officer who is the only Officer present with a party of men actually and seriously engaged with the enemy, can, under any pretext whatever, be justified in deserting them, and by doing so, abandoning them to their fate. The more helpless a position in which an officer finds his men, the more it is his bounden duty to stay and share their fortune, whether good or ill. It is because the British Officer has always done so that he possesses the influence he does in the ranks of our army. The soldier has learned to feel, that come what may, he can in the direst movement of danger look with implicit faith to his officer, knowing he will never desert him under any possible circumstances.*

In London, the Duke of Cambridge, Commander in Chief of the British Army, upon receipt of the findings and Wolseley’s comments, instructed them to be read out as a General Order to every regiment. A disgraced Harward had little option but to resign his commission, which he did so on arriving at Kings Town on 11 May 1880. For his gallant conduct, Colour Sergeant Booth was presented by the Queen with a Victoria Cross at Windsor Castle on 26 June 1880. Tucker’s lack of insistence regarding the need to properly laager the wagons at Meyers Drift together with his attempt to cover up Harward’s cowardice at the expense of acknowledging Booth’s role caused resentment within the regiment. Even when he admitted the truth to Wolseley, he was economical with his admission that he had concealed the facts in order to protect Harward and the reputation of the Regiment. As for Harward, had he acted as would be expected of an officer, morale would have been maintained and more men would have rallied with a better chance of a stronger defensive retreat probably resulting in more lives saved. However, once again, his conduct was typical of the increasing number of incidents of officers deserting their men especially when they were needed most.

Chelmsford's renewed effort to conquer Zululand began with a second invasion on 31 May 1879. Two days later another tragedy occurred which stunned Chelmsford and sent shockwaves throughout the colony due to the embarrassment it caused. The incident which caused so much distress was the death of an important figure by the name of Louis Napoleon, Prince Imperial of France who was killed while out with a sketching party headed by Lieutenant Jahleel Carey of the 98th Regiment, whose own conduct would result in a much publicised court-martial. Louis Napoleon arrived in South Africa after the disaster at Isandlwana and in his eagerness to take part in the action was finally allowed on 1 June to accompany the small sketching party sent on a routine mission to roughly map out the territory ahead of Chelmsford's further advance into Zulu territory. Carey had specifically requested to accompany the patrol and although no proper command structure was appointed for the mission, he should have taken control instead of allowing the Prince Imperial to dominate since he was being treated as an officer. In any case the risks were considered very minimal as the territory to be mapped was reported as not occupied by hostile Zulus. The group failed to meet another patrol in the area in order to increase the strength as Carey's party consisted of a total of only eight men. They pushed on towards the Itshotshosi River and finally halted at an apparently abandoned homestead but which showed evidence of recent occupation, at the bottom of a slope which overlooked the river. After a rest and a brew up at this spot, at about 3.30 p.m. Carey proposed that the group should immediately prepare to return to Chelmsford's headquarters though he relented when the Prince replied that there was no hurry to leave. Within minutes, a Zulu guide with the party reported seeing a Zulu on the shoulder of the hill and upon hearing this news, Louis in his role as token commander gave the order to saddle up which took a few minutes to organize. At the moment that he gave the order to prepare to mount, a volley of fire burst from the mealies a few yards away and was immediately followed by a group of thirty to forty charging Zulus. They had earlier seen the patrol dismount and made their way towards the party undetected along a donga. The surprise attack startled the men and their horses resulting in confusion and desperation with the Zulus able to quickly kill two troopers along with the Zulu guide. The panic-stricken group managed to escape and reach a relatively safe point about a half mile from the homestead where they halted as the Zulus had given up the chase. They immediately discovered that the Prince was not present. Louis Napoleon lay dead back at the Zulu homestead.

He was trying to mount his horse when the Zulus opened fire on the patrol but failed to complete the task as the beast reared up. It galloped in the direction of the other horses with the Prince desperately hanging on to the flimsy holster strap attached to the saddle which finally gave way under the strain. He fell and injured himself though he quickly managed to turn to face the Zulus with a revolver in his left hand. Shots rang out before the Prince was overwhelmed and stabbed repeatedly. Carey and his patrol had been caught by surprise and everyone attempted to simply run in the face of overwhelming numbers. From his position Carey assumed the worst as he could see Zulus running in the vicinity of the donga. So he made his way back to Chelmsford to report the tragedy and on the way encountered Buller who was stunned at the news. The Prince Imperial's death was a shock which was felt heavily in Britain and France as the news ended up overshadowing the defeat at Isandlwana. Chelmsford and his commanders had had enough of officers abandoning their men which had been a common occurrence during the first invasion of Zululand and someone had to take responsibility for this most unfortunate event. The blame would be placed squarely on Lieutenant Carey's shoulders as he was aware of the muted accusations of cowardice from among his fellow officers especially those in Wood's Flying Column. A Court of Inquiry was assembled on 4 June at Carey's request in the hope that it would clear him of any misconduct but it recommended a trial by court-martial on a charge of deserting the Prince in the face of the enemy. The court convened on 12 June with Carey defending himself and calling the survivors as witnesses. In his defence he pointed out that it was the Prince who had issued the orders. Although this was corroborated by the survivors who also asserted that nothing could be done to save the Prince, the problem was that Louis Napoleon did not hold an official rank and this counted against the Lieutenant. Another dilemma for Carey was that the man he deserted was a member of the French monarchy. He was found guilty and sent home to await the decision by his superiors there as neither the Court nor Chelmsford would decide on a suitable punishment.

Upon arrival in England, the newly promoted Captain Carey discovered that his fortunes changed as the press felt that he had been unfairly treated by being made a scapegoat. The blame was aimed at Carey's commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Richard Harrison for his failure to organize the patrol properly. Also, Chelmsford was accused of unnecessarily allowing the Prince too close to the front. Following a request by Louis Napoleon's mother, the Empress Eugenie to Queen Victoria to intervene, the findings of the Court were overturned. The Judge Advocate General made it known that the proceedings had been rushed and the officers of the court-martial had not been sworn in properly and accordingly could not ratify the verdict. Carey was free to return to his regiment and assume his normal duties. However, for the Captain the matter did not end there as he eagerly sought an audience with Eugenie who was not receptive to the idea as she blamed him for the death of her son. Finally the Queen intervened and Carey's requests were denied. His actions did not help his promising career which was all but ruined.

Too many officers and other ranks deserted their fellow soldiers during the Anglo-Zulu War thereby disgracing themselves and embarrassing the British commanders. Even before the Battle of Isandlwana, officers intentionally left their post hailing the first of a long list of desertions or questionable conduct. Among the European survivors from the catastrophe on 22 January, almost thirty per cent were officers having the advantage of escaping on horseback. At the Buffalo River and Rorke's Drift Mission Station further desertions occurred and it appeared that the Central Column was plagued with such incidents. These were followed by later desertions involving other tragic events during the campaign. To those in command in the British army on campaign in 1879, it did not matter why desertions took place among officers. More importantly it was the very act of this conduct and the consequences of such action that caused concern in addition to the high occurrence rate. Very early on during the Zululand campaign Chelmsford expressed his dissatisfaction at the display of desertion among officers who abandoned their men to the enemy. His successor, Lord Wolseley felt the need to comment publicly regarding court martial verdicts involving officer desertion. He was clearly appalled by the conduct of too many of his subordinates and it seemed that some officers were treated too lightly in his opinion. Without a doubt, these men of rank deserted to save themselves in situations where other soldiers remained at their posts to fight bravely with many dying for their Queen and country.

Reference

1. Editor's note. But not in the British army in India where Capt. Charles Harford witnessed a number of officially sanctioned floggings in the 1880s.

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