

### **Zulu War artefacts - and their role in the writing of history.**

Mr President, professors, doctors, honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen of the International Guild of Battlefield Guides, thank you for your kind invitation to speak to you today on the subject of Zulu War artefacts and their role in the writing of history.

Over the last twenty years I have had the privilege of taking well over one thousand British and European visitors around the battlefields of Zululand – not as a battlefield guide, but as a guest speaker. The significance of this remark will become clear later in my presentation.

I would like to begin by saying that I have time only to touch on the artefacts from Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift - being the Zulu War battles best known to this audience. To put them in context, both battles were fought on the same day, within sight of each other, and both were attacked by the same force of Zulus, albeit Rorke's Drift was attacked by the Isandlwana reserve force which, at the peak of the fight at Rorke's Drift, amounted to some 4,000 Zulu warriors. To put the combined size of the two battlefields in context, taking into consideration Chelmsford's position away from Isandlwana some twelve miles to the east, is about two hundred square miles – or half the size of Dartmoor. Imagine what that was like for the British foot soldiers in full uniform carrying ten-pound Martini-Henry rifles in nearly forty degrees of heat.

And so to the artefacts from these two battles. Because their combined battlefield is so large and situated in desolate, thinly populated countryside, there is a common belief among British tourists visiting the battlefields that they will be able to 'pick up' souvenirs of the battles – they will be wrong. Likewise I am occasionally asked, have the official archaeologists who conducted relatively recent scientific surveys on the battlefields ever found artefacts that help explain what happened? The answer to both is broadly 'no' and for an interesting reason. During the twelve months following the war, the British systematically cleansed the two battlefields of debris at the same time that they buried the bodies of the fallen – which itself took three major attempts before all were permanently buried. What is not widely known is that, at the same time, debris left on the battlefield was collected into carts and buried at a spot near to Rorke's Drift – a spot known today to very few people, for obvious reasons. Six years ago Isandlwana was surveyed by a team of archaeologists from Glasgow and Oxford universities and the results confirmed the location of the British front line but revealed no significant artefactual finds. Likewise, Dr Lita Webley, a noted South African archaeologist, who carried out excavations at Rorke's Drift in the 1970s, stated in her report that 'Very few military items were recovered which support the historical accounts'.

So, where do the five hundred or so 1879 Zulu war artefacts held by the Anglo Zulu War Historical Society come from? As you can see from the following pictures, the Society has been obliged to build a purpose built annex to house them – from where they go out each year to be displayed at mainly military museums located around the country. We currently hold a collection of 15 original Zulu war shields, 10 battle axes, 60 stabbing assegais and throwing spears, 38 British swords and bayonets, and some 200

battlefield artefacts collected by participants of the battles and brought home as souvenirs. We also have a large collection of military debris, again collected as souvenirs in 1879 by members of the official burial parties, including coins, bullet cases, and parts of ammunition boxes, remnants of uniforms and personal papers recovered from soldiers' bodies or official files that had been abandoned to the elements.

I hasten to add that, in the unlikely event that a tourist finds an artefact, the Society has never accepted anything taken off the battlefields as souvenirs; it has to be pointed out that it is highly illegal to remove any item from the battlefields.

We also have a considerable collection of rare Zulu carved sticks, snuff paraphernalia, exquisite beadwork and a magnificent collection of necklaces from the Zulu Royal family and various Sangomas or medicine men. Each of these beautiful artefacts is a treasure in their own right.

Of great interest to Zulu War enthusiasts is the collection of South Africa campaign medals held by the Society, frequently described as 'Zulu War' medals. We now have a collection of 135 which range from a medal to a soldier sent to Zululand who did not take part in any military action to the more precious medals such as those that belonged to Isandlwana participants and casualties – and three awarded to Rorke's Drift participants. We also hold the Royal Red Cross awarded to Nurse Janet Wells for her service in Zululand, this rare and unique decoration is circulating among you as I speak.

But the best artefacts that we hold have been presented to the Society by, invariably, people I have taken to the battlefields of Zululand and who no longer have an interest in keeping them, or by descendants who no longer have the space to care for them. Who here, for example, has the capacity to care for just one piece we look after – a reconstituted Gatling gun? So to illustrate this connection between the Society's collection and people taken to the battlefields, or the descendants of the war's participants, I will give you some examples;

**Lieutenant Charles Harford.** The beetle collector who led the very first British attack of the Zulu War against Chief Sihayo's homestead. Three years ago Harford's granddaughter offered the Society his letters, manuscripts, diaries and journals, plus two car loads of artefacts he had sent home to England from Zululand following the war. Harford had also been put in charge of escorting the captured King Cetshwayo from Zululand to Cape Town – during which Harford managed to 'acquire' a number of fine pieces from the Zulu king. I have brought some of them here today and you will be welcome to view them shortly.

**Lieutenant Henry Curling RA.** Curling was the senior officer on the extremity of the British front line and witnessed the Zulus overrun his position and kill his 90 gunners. He tried to save the guns by riding them from the battlefield but ran into the packed ranks of Zulus advancing into the British camp, the Zulus pulled the men from the guns and horses when the guns overturned. Curling escaped to Natal by riding his horse through the Zulus and lived to tell the tale – but the only memento he kept from the Zulu War was his binoculars used at Isandlwana.

**Nurse Janet Wells.** This 19 year-old nurse was sent out from England to take part in the second British invasion of Zululand. On arrival at Durban she was sent by post cart 250

miles across wild countryside to take over the running of the army's hospital at Utrecht in northern Zululand where she worked with Dr Fitzmaurice. During her three months of duty there she treated over 3,000 soldiers before being sent to finish her service at Rorke's Drift where she was instructed to get the remaining garrison fit for the 200 mile march back to Durban. Whilst at Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift she collected flowers and papers found on the battlefields and put them into scrap books. These books have also been given to the Society and are here today for you to see. When she arrived at Cape Town to catch her ship home she was first requested to treat King Cetshwayo, who was suffering from serious constipation – he did not trust British doctors but consented to see this young nurse. Following her successful treatment, the king presented her with the beaded bracelets he was wearing on the day – they are also here today for you to view.

**August Hammar.** He was a young 20 year-old Swede who had come to Durban to find work – finding none he set off on foot to visit some family friends, the Witts, at Rorke's Drift, arriving there just days before the Zulu attack. Otto Witt was the local representative of the Swedish Lutheran mission station and with the build-up of British troops around his two isolated buildings he feared a Zulu attack. Days later he left with his family leaving the young Hammar to look after the Witts' interests. From a convenient hillside, Hammar witnessed the Zulu army's attack on the British at nearby Isandlwana and then Rorke's Drift after which, unnoticed by the Zulus, he walked back to Durban where he joined Baker's Horse. At the conclusion of the war he participated in the battle of Ulundi and received the South Africa campaign medal for his service, the only Zulu War artefact we have from him. Hammar went on to walk from Pietermaritzburg to the Victoria Falls where he conducted the first complete survey of the falls before walking home, a 2,500 mile journey on foot that took nearly two years. He later became the first Surveyor General of Natal and a noted painter of South African landscapes.

All these pieces are magnificent artefacts, but, and it's a big but, all these artefacts have one thing in common – they are silent.

They tell us nothing about the war's events, although they are marvellous for illustrating lectures such as this, or the Zulu War books written by noted authors.

Conversely, the artefacts that do speak to us and tell us what happened are the written accounts by participants, especially those written at the time or shortly after the war. These are the primary sources that are essential to enable historians and researchers to get the story right, and new material pops up all the time. Let me briefly give you some examples. Ten years ago I was researching an article about Colonel Durnford, the officer blamed by Lord Chelmsford for losing the battle of Isandlwana. I visited Durnford's regimental museum and whilst there I was shown a metal box containing letters and documents – mostly unseen. One of the letters was one that had subsequently been recovered from Durnford's body. The frail and torn envelope was endorsed 'Recovered from the body of Colonel Durnford' Isandlwana 21<sup>st</sup> May 1879. This was rather like finding the Holy Grail as it contained Lord Chelmsford's handwritten orders to Durnford detailing his actions if confronted by the Zulus. Suddenly, this one document explained why the British at Isandlwana behaved as they did in the face of the approaching Zulu

army – they obeyed orders, orders which were faulty and left no room for interpretation or common sense. What a wonderful artefact!

I will now use the same four characters already mentioned to illustrate similar artefacts

**Charles Harford** was an educated officer who wrote copious letters, diaries and journals. Some of his letters, now in the Society's collection, were written home from Rorke's Drift and include details of his arrival there, his appointment to Commandant Lonsdale's Natal Native Contingent (Harford was a fluent Zulu speaker having been brought up in Natal as a child – his regular playmate was the young Cecil Rhodes); other letters detail his leading the British attack on Chief Sihayo's homestead and finally, there is the letter detailing his custody of two officer deserters – Captain Stephenson who fled Rorke's Drift before the Zulu attack and of Captain Higginson who stole a trooper's horse to escape the Zulus, leaving the trooper to his fate. Incidentally, the trooper survived hence Higginson's arrest.

During the Zulu War a well known journalist accompanied the British invasion force into Zululand; his name was Norris-Newman. As soon as the war was over, Norris-Newman rushed back to England to present his papers to his publisher – the result was the famous *With the British in Zululand*. Harford is featured throughout this weighty book and the very first copy off the press was presented to Harford. This is the copy that I am now holding. Helpfully, Harford has carefully gone through the book and made corrections where he felt the author had got things wrong. For example, here on page 52, Harford strongly disagrees with the author about the desertion by the NNC before Isandlwana and, in his own handwriting, has added three pages of explanation in great detail. So we have an artefact, Harford's notes, within an artefact – the original 1879 book.

**Henry Curling** tried to save the guns at Isandlwana and survived to tell the tale. He wrote numerous letters to his mother in England. These letters have survived and I have brought them here today for you to see. My favourite, dated just 3 days after the disaster at Isandlwana begins... 'My dearest Mama, Just a line to say I am alive after a most wonderful escape... all my men were killed except me.' It is a remarkable letter as he witnessed the whole battle and lived to tell the tale.

**Sister Janet** not only brought home unique artefacts but this girl had the presence of mind to keep diaries and made scrapbooks containing photographs, and numerous paper souvenirs. The books include original photographs of the Utrecht garrison, her hospital, and sketches drawn by her grateful patients. The finest piece is, I believe, the nurse's own colour painting of her hut at Rorke's Drift where she was accommodated just 100 yards from the British camp. Who else but a nineteen-year-old British nurse would have had the presence of mind to collect these things – and they are here today for you to see.

**August Hammar** was the young Swede who watched the battles of both Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift. Until three years ago the sole artefact that we had from him was his campaign medal, a unique artefact in itself. Then, when I had just given an after-dinner presentation on the story of Sister Janet to the doctors and surgeons of a large hospital

one of the doctors introduced himself to me with the words ‘I am August Hammar’s grandson’. The eventual result was that the society received Hammar’s Campaign medal and then learned that Hammar had written two letters from Rorke’s Drift to his family in Sweden. Understandably the original letters, in Swedish, remain with the family but they did offer the Society the first translations into English made by his niece in 1926. The letters are stunning in their content because they confirm that the mission station was defended days before the Zulu attack and not just during the hour prior to the battle. Secondly, Hammar strongly suggests that Otto Witt had departed the mission station at least a week before the attack. I contend that the British at Rorke’s Drift presumed that the non-English speaking Swede was Otto Witt; after all, Hammar spoke no English and the British spoke no Swedish. So I suggest we can all forget about the figure of Otto Witt being at Rorke’s Drift during the battle, the figure portrayed so strikingly in the film *ZULU* by Jack Hawkins.

So, in conclusion, whilst the physical artefacts we hold are wonderful items to have and to view, it is the written word, the participants’ letters, diaries, notes and journals which are vital to the historian; it is these primary sources that enable us to learn more about the campaign and battles of the Anglo Zulu War.

Thank you.

Royal Red Cross (RRC) Class II  
Major John Clark QARANC, ARRC

By Adrian Greaves

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Members will be familiar with the Royal Red decoration following the various articles involving the Zulu War nurse, Janet Wells RRC. The decoration was first issued in 1883 and back-dated to include a presentation to Florence Nightingale and to nurses who served in the Anglo Zulu War. It later became known as the RRC Class 1.

The Royal Red Cross Class II, also known as the ARRC, is an award given to nurses who display extreme courage or devotion to the military as they fulfil their duties as military nurses.

The ARRC was created in 1917 during World War I for nurses that deserved distinction for courageous or long service that was not at the same level of those who receive the Royal Red Cross Class 1. It is more common to hear the Royal Red Cross Class II referred to as the associate level with those who receive it eligible to be given the Royal Red Cross again, at which point they are awarded the Class 1 distinction.

The ARRC badge is very similar to the RRC Class 1 badge with the a medallion that has the crown of the monarchy as well as the words “Faith, Hope, and Charity” embossed on the corners of the cross along with the year “1883” regardless of when it was received.

The only distinction in the appearance of the ARRC badge is that it is a silver cross while those who receive the Class 1 distinction receive a golden cross.

Since 1976 it is open to males as well as females and is given regardless of rank level as a nurse in the military. Major Clarke received his decoration earlier this year for service in Afghanistan.

Major John Clark QARANC, ARRC received his decoration earlier this year as a result of his service in Afghanistan.