

1st King's Dragoon Guards – The other regiment.

By Graham Alexander

When the 17th Lancers left the shelter of Lord Chelmsford's square at Ulundi, to drive the wavering Zulus back at the point of their lowered lancers, they reinforced their reputation of being the *Death or Glory Boys*. Riding right behind them was a troop of just 24 men, led by Lieutenant Robert Abraham Brewster French-Brewster and representing the other cavalry regiment on campaign who had received little of the acclaim. Did the Lancers receive preferential treatment during the course of the campaign? Many people had already accused Lord Chelmsford of not using the King's Dragoon Guards as effectively as he might have, but was this criticism justified?

Following the disaster at Isandlwana, Lord Chelmsford again appealed to the War Office for the urgent dispatch of two cavalry regiments, who he wished to act as mounted infantry when a new invasion of Zululand was prepared. Although the War Office had originally dragged their feet when Imperial cavalry was first requested in 1878, they now wasted no time in ordering two regiments to prepare to embark to Natal. Their choices were the 17th Lancers and also the 1st King's Dragoon Guards, who were currently based at Aldershot. The regiment received notice on the 12th February for overseas service and preparations were made to bring the regiment up to wartime strength. Volunteers from other corps were accepted and additional horses were eagerly sought. Eventually 622 men and 580 horses were assembled.

A cavalry regiment, like every other regiment, was built up in increasing multiples. The lowest formation was a section of between 6 to 8 men. Four sections made up a troop, four troops made a squadron, whilst four squadrons made a regiment. When two or more cavalry regiments worked together, they became a brigade. Three of the squadrons were service squadrons and contained the fittest horses and the fighting troopers. The fourth squadron was a reserve squadron, which contained the various elements necessary to support a regiment, like bandmen, clerks and untrained recruits. Horses, known as remounts, joined the regiment in the spring of their fifth year. Purchased from the shires of Britain and Ireland and usually a cross between thoroughbreds and hunters, they were imposing animals. The King's Dragoon Guards were a heavy cavalry regiment and this meant that the bigger troopers required a large horse. The horses settled into a well-structured regime, which involved daily watering, feeding, and exercise. They were groomed three times and watered at least four times during the day. Their food consisted of 10lb of oats during the course of the day supplemented with hay. They received any attention necessary before their rider could think of attending to himself. After a year with the regiment, the horse was considered suitable for manoeuvres of all arms.

By the 27th February, the regiment had reached Southampton, ready to board their troopships to South Africa. It was decided to divide the regiment in half, with the left wing under the command of Major Richard James Combe Marter, boarding the hired transport *Spain*. This vessel was owned by the National line and commanded by Captain Robert Wilkinson Grace. 286 horses were loaded on board by means of slings and stabled on the steerage deck in hastily built stalls. The men occupied the forlop deck, whilst officers were provided with their own berths.

The right wing and headquarters of the regiment, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Henry Alexander, boarded the *Egypt*, which was also a hired transport belonging to the National line. Captain L. Grogan commanded the vessel, which sailed a day later on the 28th February. This vessel carried 20 officers on board as well as 300 men and their mounts.

On receiving notification that the cavalry, which he had urgently requested, were on their way, Lord Chelmsford made arrangements to accommodate them. He wrote to Brigadier-General Sir Henry Evelyn Wood on the 6th March to state that,

The cavalry commanders will want someone to coach them in the ways of the country – I will attach a body of mounted natives to each regiment, to assist them, when marching

up-country, in looking after the horses, who will be inclined to take too much advantage of their liberty when out grazing.

It is not hard to image what the commanding officers would make of this well-meant advice. The officers and men's lives revolved around their horses and they would naturally resent being told by anybody how to care for them. Despite the fact that the King's Dragoon Guards had not seen active service since 1860, when they served in China, they fully expected to cope with the prevailing conditions.

By the 16th March, *Spain* reached St. Vincent to take on coal. On the same day Lord Chelmsford confirmed in a letter that on the arrival of the cavalry, he would be induced to send them up country, as he considered the risk on the lower line is too great for English horses.

This was because horse sickness had shown itself in the lower Tugela valley. This dreadful disease was a viral infection spread by nocturnal midges and could kill a healthy animal in less than two days. Its symptoms included staggering and frothing at the mouth until the affected horse finally collapsed on the ground. Some locally bred horses had developed a natural immunity, but because of this they commanded a very high purchase price. As the disease was normally confined to the eastern side of the country and would not disappear until the end of June, Lord Chelmsford was severely restricted in the areas in which he could operate with his cavalry.

On the 8th April, both transports docked at Durban and unloaded their cargoes. The journey had been uneventful and the horses had traveled well. The Dragoons marched to Berea and Cato Manor where they shared encampments with the 17th Lancers. Lord Chelmsford arrived with his staff to carry out an inspection and commented that he was highly pleased with the appearance of the troops and the condition of the horses. After a full dress parade through Durban, the cavalry began its march northwards in wings. As they began to move up country it soon became apparent that the horses were not adapting to the abundance of grazing which Lord Chelmsford had commented upon. They simply refused to eat the local grasses. Accustomed to regular feeds being brought to them and with officers who were reluctant to let them loose to graze when the situation arose, they rapidly began to loose condition.

On the 16th May both Lancers and Dragoons were formed into a brigade and paraded through the town of Dundee at 7am. The following day saw them working together, practicing dismounted firing and performing covering charges. Both regiments now seemed ready for action in the second invasion of Zululand.

On the 19th May, the brigade under the command of Major-General Frederick Marshall marched to the Zulu border at Rorke's Drift. Here they could expect to find plenty of grain with which to feed the hungry horses. They were not to remain at the drift for long however. It was the intention for the brigade to rapidly advance to Isandlwana, carry out burial duties and try to recover some of the abandoned wagons, which were so desperately needed for transport duties.

On the 21st May the cavalry brigade and some infantry crossed the Buffalo River at daybreak and proceeded to Isandlwana. After burying some of the numerous dead, they began their return, bringing with them 39 wagons, 2 water carts, 3 Scotch carts and a rocket cart. Any abandoned Zulu homesteads that they encountered were burnt on the journey back.

The men and horses were given a day's rest and then the headquarters wing set out to Koppie Allein, where the stores and troops of the 2nd division were being gathered in preparation for the imminent advance. Lord Chelmsford had made his mind up about how he would use his cavalry brigade and his decision caused great resentment amongst the King's Dragoon Guards. Their regiment would be fragmented and used for patrol and escort duties. He rode to Conference Hill to talk to Colonel Henry Fanshawe Davies who commanded the garrisons both there and at Landsman's drift and told him that,

'With a wing of the K.D.G.s he ought to detect any big force coming upon us from the north'.

On the 1st June Headquarters and four troops marched to Conference Hill, whilst two troops commanded by Captain Douglas-Willan returned to Rorke's Drift to hold the post there against any possible Zulu incursions. Only 174 men of the regiment, commanded by Major Marter, were left to advance as part of the 2nd division, forming two field squadrons in single rank. When Fort Newdigate was built on the line of advance, a further squadron of the King's Dragoons Guards was left behind to garrison it and guard the lines of communication.

The handling of the Dragoons was commented upon by several of Natal's leading newspapers. They queried the distribution of the cavalry brigade and suggested that Lord Chelmsford was acting under orders from Horse Guards and not making his own decisions. Was this a legitimate cause for comment?

The newspapers' suggestions about specified orders had clearly annoyed Lord Chelmsford. He explained in a memorandum dated the 31st May to Colonel F. Stanley, the Secretary of State for War, the various reasons why he had positioned his cavalry on the south-west border of Zululand. The explanation of horse sickness and unsuitability of the ground near the Lower Tugela made perfect sense. Indeed he stated that,

'Serious loss was therefore to be anticipated had a cavalry regiment been placed on that line'.

He continued the memorandum with the statement that,

The country in which the cavalry brigade has been acting, and in which it would be called upon to act, is specially adapted for that arm of the service. It has plenty of open ground in every direction and can consequently work to the greatest advantage, and with the smallest amount of risk.

This too was a sensible explanation and he categorically stated that the decisions made were entirely his own, uninfluenced by any orders or suggestions from Horse Guards. This now left the reason why the Lancers had been chosen in preference to the K.D.G.s as the regiment to accompany the 2nd division in force. Lord Chelmsford continued,

It may be as well that I should also explain why, having brought both cavalry regiments so far, I have decided to leave the largest part of one of them behind.....As the 2nd division and flying column have only transport sufficient to carry one months supplies, an entrenched post will be formed near the Babanango, our wagons will be emptied of their contents and sent back to Landsman's drift and Conference hill for a further supply, under strong escort, and the larger portion of the mounted force which will remain at Babanango, will be occupied during this enforced halt in patrolling and reconnoitering the country towards Ulundi, Kwamagwasa and the Inkandla bush.

Were the Lancers more suited to this task being a light cavalry regiment? Superficially, Dragoons and Lancers played separate roles on the battlefield. Whilst Dragoons with their bigger horses were intended to disrupt enemy cavalry, Lancers had the role of routing enemy infantry. However, the roles of all cavalry were beginning to merge and their uses not so clearly defined. By 1879 all cavalry horses carried the same equipment – a universal wood arch saddle and the universal pattern bridle of 1860, which replaced the previous light and heavy cavalry patterns. Every trooper carried a Martini-Henry carbine in a bucket at the rear of his saddle. Light cavalry were light in name only. An average weight rider carrying a lance, 1864 pattern sword and carbine, plus rations, blanket and other essential impedimenta put about 20 stone on his horse's back. Clearly there was now little difference between the two regiments when in action.

Could the irregular cavalry being used by Brigadier-General Sir H.E. Wood so effectively, have carried out the roles of reconnaissance and escort duties?

The colonial cavalry were usually mounted on tough Basuto ponies, smaller than Imperial remounts, but bred for the task. Their riders knew the area well and would have been able to scout very effectively. However, their numbers were severely limited. There were only about 200

mounted colonial volunteers, 250 native cavalry and about 75 Natal mounted police available for use. They only carried a rifle for protection and had never been trained to work together as a cohesive unit. As protection for a precious transport convoy against a Zulu attack, they simply lacked the necessary firepower and the threat posed by a cavalry counter attack. It was obvious that one of the Imperial cavalry regiments would have to be used in this unglamorous duty.

Lord Chelmsford made his choice about who would carry out that role. It would be a hard choice and it was certain that there was going to be disappointment. He wrote,

In order to afford additional security to the advancing columns and to the convoys going and returning, I have placed two squadrons of the King's Dragoon Guards at Conference hill post, which is on the Blood river, close to the road leading from Utrecht to Ulundi by the Inhlazatye mountain, with orders to patrol constantly in a North Easterly, Easterly, and South Easterly direction. They will thus cover the left flanks of the columns moving towards Babanango, or the right flank of the convoy returning, and they will moreover watch a portion of Zululand in which large bodies of the enemy have been always in the habit of collecting- and from which the most daring raids into the Transvaal have been made.

The Dragoons may not have received the opportunity to earn glory on the battlefield but their role was every bit as important. They spent days constantly patrolling, leaving Conference Hill before dawn and returning after sunset. It was a task not very popular amongst the troopers. These exertions, together with short rations, quickly took their toll on the horses. Lord Chelmsford commented on the 16th June that the English horses were just not thriving. In order to keep the Lancers in the saddle, up to 70 horses were taken from the K.D.G s and sent on for use by the 17th Lancers. This order practically disbanded the Dragoons. Captain Charles Adrian Gough Beecher and Veterinary Surgeon Longhurst were sent urgently to the Orange Free State, in order to buy more remounts for the regiment. When another burial party was sent to Isandlwana on the 28th June, it is interesting to note that while only 30 mounted Dragoons were attached, another 50 K.D.G s on foot accompanied it.

The troopship *Egypt* arrived in early July with an additional 150 horse's intended for the 17th Lancers to make up for their losses. When the cavalry finally charged at Ulundi, not many people would have recognized the skeletal creatures as the magnificent animals, which had arrived just three months previously. The losses continued in July as late rains soaked the horses and many died as a result of overwork and exposure.

By the 26th July the cavalry brigade was broken up and the regiments posted to new duties. The 17th Lancers were to return home after giving their horses to the King's Dragoon Guards. Many in the regiment saw this as just compensation for their original losses. One squadron of K.D.G s was sent to Lieutenant-Colonel Baker Creed Russell who was operating in the North West of Zululand, forcing the submission of the remaining chiefs. Headquarters and one squadron would move to Utrecht. One squadron was ordered to Pretoria in anticipation of possible disturbances by the Boer population. One squadron would remain at Rorke's Drift, while a troop commanded by Captain H.P. Douglas-Willan was selected as a personal escort for General Sir Garnet Wolseley.

The entire regiment was eventually posted to the Transvaal where it remained until October 1880, when embarkation orders were received for India. Within two months of their departure, war broke out between the Boers and British.

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