

Diary of Richard Wyatt Vause

Annotated by Stephen Hayes

Biographical information

Born: 1854 02 10 Pietermaritzburg, Natal

Died: 1926 05 28 Durban, Natal

mar : 1881 02 03 St Paul's Church, Durban to Margaret Ellen COTTAM eldest daughter of John Bagot COTTAM and Adelaide HERBERT, his wife.

Father: Richard VAUSE

Mother: Matilda Park

Richard Wyatt Vause, generally known as Wyatt to his friends, was the eldest son of Richard VAUSE, born two years after his father's arrival in Natal from England. He was educated at Durban High School, and spent some time on the Kimberley Diamond Fields. In 1874 he started a printing, bookselling and stationers business in Pietermaritzburg, known as Vause, Slatter & Co. In the Anglo-Zulu War he fought as a Lieutenant in the Natal Native Horse under Colonel Durnford, and was one of the few survivors on the British side of the Battle of Isandlawana (22 Jan 1879).

After the war he married Margaret Ellen COTTAM, and they had a son and three daughters. By 1889 he was operating as a share broker as well, with offices in Pietermaritzburg and Johannesburg, the name of the firm being Vause and Nourse. In 1891 his wife died, and he moved to Johannesburg. His bookselling and printing business in Pietermaritzburg was taken over by Daniel Saunders and W.J. Slatter. It later expanded into music and musical instrument sales, and was a theatrical agency as well.

During the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) he was in the Army Service Corps. After the war he was in business in Johannesburg as an accountant, probably in the firm of his brother-in-law, Charles Henry Matterson. He later appears to have returned to the diamond fields, and then to have farmed in Natal for a while before retiring to Durban.

His hobby was horse racing and breeding.

His only son, Dick Vause, died two years before him. Of his three daughters, Ruby married Jack Stayt, and had two sons and a daughter; Lily married Percy Hayes, and had two daughters and a son; Gladys married Gilbert Wilkinson of Ottawa. They had two daughters, and were later divorced, and Gladys then married Arthur "Dave" Nourse, the well-known cricketer.

The Diary

The diary of Richard Wyatt Vause was written in pencil in a small notebook, and transcribed by his Grandson Donald Kenneth Stayt, a Durban journalist. The original was faded and hard to read, and in some places illegible, so the transcription is not complete.

It begins with an account of the battle of Isandlwana, and it appears that Vause decided soon after the battle to write an account of his experiences on that day, and to continue if for the rest of the war.

The first day seems to have been written up some time after the battle, as it seems to have used other reports of the battle, for example of what had happened at Rorke's Drift.

Sources

Twentieth Century Impressions of Natal Published 1906

Obituary in *Natal Mercury* 1926 06 02

South African Who's Who 1908

Unpublished Diary kept by R.W. Vause during the Anglo-Zulu war, in possession of his grandson, Mr Don Stayt.

Unabridged Extract from Diary of Richard Wyatt Vause during the Anglo-Zulu War.

22 Jan 1879

At break of day we all turned out and stood under arms for an hour as we thought that if the Zulus did attack they would choose that hour for it. As soon as it was quite light we took our men out for footdrill as we expected stiff work for our horses and wished to save them as much as possible. On returning to camp we found that a dispatch has been received from the General ordering us to join the column at Isandlwana as he was about to attack the stronghold of a chief called Matyana and he required all the mounted men available.

Col. Durnford had just started with 50 of the Edendale men to see if he could procure wagons from the farmers living along the frontier. We at once sent a messenger after him and set to work with a will to strike tents and get everything ready to move on his return. All were in high spirits at the thought of a fight at last and we little thought what a terrible and miserable ending that day would have.

About 7.30 all was ready and the order to march was given. We had a smart ride of about 12 miles, arriving at Isandlwana between 10 and 11 am. After riding through the camp we halted a few minutes to give the men their biscuits. Col. Durnford sent for me and ordered me to ride back and meet our wagons as the Zulus were seen in our rear, and he expected they would try and cut them off.

My orders were to see the wagons safely into camp and then join him about 12. I got back with the wagons and hearing firing about 2 miles to the front of the camp at once gave the order to trot, and started off to find Col. Durnford. I came across Capt. Shepstone, and as he asked me to stay with him I dismounted the men and extended them in skirmishing order. We were soon under hot fire, but continued to advance very slowly as the Zulus were under good cover, and we had to expose ourselves every time we advanced. On arriving at the top of the hill we perceived the enemy in overwhelming force coming up from behind and fearing our ammunition would be expended before we could reach the camp Capt. Shepstone gave the order to retire back to our horses.

Fortunately the Zulus were shooting very badly, and as yet very few casualties had occurred on our side. As soon as the Zulus perceived that we were in retreat they came on with a shout and were rapidly gaining on us when we regained our horses.

As soon as the men were mounted we retired slowly to the camp, dismounting every few yards and firing a volley, but without holding the enemy in check as they did not seem to mind our fire at all.

After regaining the camp it was found to our dismay that the ammunition boxes had not been opened and as the Zulus were close on our heels we had no time to look for screwdrivers. Fortunately one of my kaffirs came across a box with a few in which I distributed amongst the men.

By this time the soldiers had expended their ammunition and the Zulus had cut through them and were in amongst the tents and we were obliged to retire again. On reaching the road we found it occupied by Zulus and our only way of escape lay over a very rough strip of country. One or two of my older kaffirs advised me to try it, as it was impossible to get out by the road.

So we started off, but soon got scattered, a lot of the horses falling over and throwing their riders, who were immediately killed by the Zulus in pursuit.

I managed to reach the Buffalo River with about six kaffirs but my horse not being able to swim was washed down and I lost him. After a great deal of difficulty I managed to reach the opposite bank but being thoroughly exhausted I had to sit down and rest and had it not been for a little kaffir boy giving me a seat behind him on his horse I am quite sure the Zulus would have been upon me before I had gone many yards further.

However we soon got out of range of the Zulus' fire and as I found the boy could not manage his horse, jumped off and walked a short distance, and came across Edwards of the Carbineers and he kindly took me up behind him.

We reached Helpmekaar thoroughly exhausted and formed a laager of the wagons and sacks of mealies but as there were only 38 of us to defend it we quite expected that it would be our last night. Fortunately the Zulus were repulsed at Rorke's Drift and did not get as far as Helpmekaar.

I lost 30 men and 10 wounded, so have not many left of my original 50.

Sat 8 Feb 1879

Left Pietermaritzburg 6 pm. Had tea with Mr (Barnes ?) and started off again at 9 pm. Arrived Kerkspruit half past 12, very tired. Slept on the veld 2 hours and started again about half past 2.

Monday 10 February 1879

Rode over very rough and lonely country, arriving at Sandspruit 4 (9 ?) pm. I found the houseveld. Not very easy being so near the Zulus, but made the best of it.

Tues 11th Feb

(arrived at) camp about 6 am (spent) the rest of the day feeling very tired.

Wed 12

Started off for a week's patrol with 15 Basutos. Rode about 16 miles but saw nothing to speak of. Slept in the veld about 6 miles from the border.

Thurs. 13th

Started off on patrol. Came across about half a dozen dead Zulus and got a bullet out of one of the corpses.

Friday 14th

Saw a Zulu across the river, but he kept out of range, much to the regret of the Basutos..... (it was his 25th birthday)

Sat 15th

Stopped there all day.

Sun 16th Feb 1879

Sent (the kaffirs) out on patrol and spent most of the day writing letters. This is about the most miserable week I have spent for years and if we do not move into Zululand soon will be glad to get out of it hardly seen a white man since I came here.

Monday 17th

Rained nearly all of last night and continued nearly all day. Not a drop of spirits to be got. Rode about 12 miles, but saw nothing. Returned to camp very cold and hungry and made a good meal of biscuit and tea. Wish the Zulus would attack the fort and give us something to do.

Tues 18th

Started off on patrol after breakfast, returning again abt. 2 o'clock. All quiet along the border and nothing to be seen. Spent the rest of the afternoon in the ... Smiths ... Started off to look at ... place... the .. hill... first in... patrol... I return to camp for one week at least.

The Basutos are a fine lot of fellows and I never heard a grumble from one of them tho' they have ample grounds to complain.

Wednesday 19th February 1879

Returned to Rorke's Drift and stopped there till 3 pm when I started back to our camp near Helpmekaar getting there just in time for tea.

Thurs. 20th

Rode over to the laager at Helpmekaar. All quiet there so returned to camp and spent the rest of the day writing letters.

Friday 21st

Rode over to Sandspruit about 6 miles from here. Found all quiet, so returned to camp.

Saturday 22nd

Feeling seedy. Spent the day in camp. All the hope to have an occasional skirmish when we get there.

Sunday 23rd February

Rainy day. Writing letters all day. In the evening received orders to join Colonel Wood's column.

Monday 24th

Marched about 8 miles and pitched camp as it looked like rain.

Tuesday 25th

Rode to Fort Pine and from there to Dundee, where we joined the mounted infantry under Colonel Russell. Dine at the officers mess and spent a very pleasant evening.

Wednesday 26th

Spent the morning in camp and started on the march again about 2pm. Marched to the other side of the Buffalo, and slept there without pitching tents.

Thurs 27th

Received orders to return to Olivier's Hoek and collect the Sekali horse. Rode about halfway to Ladysmith and off-saddled for the night in the veldt. Friday 28th

Started very early in the morning and arrived at Ladysmith in time for breakfast. Started off again about 4pm and arrived at Dewdrop where I slept.

Sat 1st March 1879

Started off early and rode to Mr Coventry's who very kindly gave us a good breakfast. Started off again and arrived at Olivier's Hoek just at dark.

Sunday 2nd March

Left Olivier's Hoek abt. 9am and rode abt. 25 miles, sleeping in the veldt.

Monday 3rd

Started very early and rode for 2 hours when we off-saddled to give the horses a feed and started again about 10 am arriving at Estcourt about half past 12, very tired and hungry, having eaten nothing since breakfast the previous day. Left Estcourt abt. 4 pm and arrived at Weston abt. half past 9 pm. Found half a dozen sick carbineers at the hotel on their way to Pmb so had to lie on the floor with only one blanket for bed.

Tues 4th

Started very early and rode into Pmb. arriving there about 5 pm.
Spent a fortnight in Pmb. and Durban and started on my return trip.

Wednesday 19th March

Left Pmb. about 4 pm and arrived at Garbutt's about half past 9pm where I slept that night.

Thursday 20th March

Started off early and arrived in Greytown about half past 2 pm after a very hot ride. Spent the evening at Mr Stickland's and enjoyed myself very much. Slept in the churchyard as I wanted to start early next morning and thought if I turned in to a comfortable bed I might oversleep myself.

Friday 21st

Started off early and had breakfast at which we left about 11 am. Arrived at Mooi River about 2pm and after our horses had fed and rested started off again and arrived at Tugela just before dark. Intended to ride to Sandspruit but the night was so dark and misty that I could not see the road, so had to sleep at Ferry Hotel.

Saturday 22nd March

On going to saddle up in the morning found my horse standing in a pool of blood, caused from kicking against the head of a nail. Fortunately Capt. Barton had two horses and kindly lent me one of his, on which I rode to Fort, where we were very hospitably entertained by Capt. Bettington and Lieut. (Wrench ?)

Sunday 23rd March 1879

Started off about 10 am and arrived at Helpmekaar where we expected to find 150 of the Sekali men who were to accompany me to join Col. Wood's column but as they had not arrived I took advantage of the kind hospitality shown us by Lieut. Royston of the Natal Carbineers and made up my mind to stay at his camp until the men arrived. Having ridden over 360 miles since leaving Helpmekaar my horse walked quietly along the next ridge. The Colonel on seeing them ordered us to retire as we had not got sufficient men to make a stand and thought they were trying to cut us off from the drift. In arriving in the open country we rode very leisurely hoping they would come at us and we could have a few shots without fear of being surrounded. To our disgust not a kaffir showed out.

Monday 24th

Spent at camp in Helpmekaar talking to Carbineer friends.

Tuesday 25th

The Carbineers and N.M. Police recd. orders to move their camp to a spot abt. 5 miles off overlooking a large tract of Zulu country. .CP3 Wednesday 25th March

Lt. Col. Black 10 of Landsdale's men and 35 of the N.M. Police started off for a patrol into Zululand and as I had nothing to do I volunteered to go with them. We crossed the pont at Rorke's Drift and rode around's stronghold, a distance of about 10 miles without seeing a kaffir or any signs of stock, and were just thinking of returning when I caught

sight of a Zulu walking along the ridge of a hill about a mile off. On calling the attention of the others to it they saw a large

Thurs 27th

Spent in camp, nothing doing.

Friday 4th April

Went out shooting and bagged a fine big

Saturday 5th April 1879

Went out looking for horses and came across a purse containing 9 sovereigns.

Sunday 6th April 1879

Rode over to Ladysmith to see what had become of the Sekali men.

Wednesday 9th

Three idle days in camp.

Thurs 10th April

Rode back to Helpmekaar.

Sunday 13th April 1879

Left for Colonel Wood's via Newcastle and Utrecht. Rode about 30 miles and slept in the veldt. Nothing to eat since breakfast.

Monday 14th

Woke up at 2. Bitterly cold so I thought I would ride on, but the horses had strayed to I had to walk about till daylight when I found them and started off at 6.30 am arriving at Newcastle about 12. Put up atHotel for the day.

Tues. 15th

Spent in Newcastle waiting for mounted Basutos to take with me.

Weds. 16th

Started off early and arrived at Utrecht abt. noon. The Basutos not having turned up go on without them. .CP3 Thursday 17th April

Left at 6 am and rode for an hour and a half. Off-saddled for breakfast and started again about 9am. Reached Bath Spruit about half past ten and got a feed of oats for the horses. Left there 12.30 and reached Col. Wood's camp at about 4 pm.

Fri. 18th

Spent in camp resting myself and our horses after our long ride.

Saturday 19th

Started off with 15 mounted infantry and 15 Basutos to escort 2 ambulance wagons. Met them abt. 12 miles from camp. Pelting rain nearly all the way. Got back to camp abt. 2pm and spent the afternoon writing letters.

Sunday 20th April

Spent a miserable cold day in camp.

Monday 21st April 1879

Took charge of a woodcutting party and passed the day in the bush.

Tuesday 22nd April

Spent the morning writing letters. In the afternoon Capt. Cochrane, Charley Raw and myself went for a ride along the line of the Zulus' retreat after the attack on Khambula. We found a large number of dead bodies, from one of which I took two fine assegais, a shield and a lot of bullets. The rifle we broke up. On the way home we all came to grief. I got a nasty tumble trying to catch Charley's horse. Cochrane got bogged and rolled off and Charley rolled over in a sluit. Not bad for three duffers.

Weds. 23rd

Nothing to do as the horses required a rest.

Friday 25th

Went out for a patrol to the hill abt. 12 miles from Kambula camp. Arrived at the top

abt. 10.30 am and off-saddled. A splendid view for miles around in the Zulu country. While cooking lunch four Zulus walked along the top of a hill close by and hid among the rocks.

We watched them carefully for some time when two more joined them. The first four were dressed in clothes taken from our men at the storming of Hlabana. After watching them for about 2 hours, we saddled up and rode off, when they coolly followed us but did not come within range, and the country was far too rough for us to chase them. On the way home I shot a very large puff adder.

Weds. 30th

Out on patrol after Zulus seen the day before - had a few shots and we lost no men.

Sunday 4th May

Alfred Henderson, C. Raw and R.W. Vause agree that the first of them married will give a champagne supper.

Monday 5th May

Reveille at 4 am as we were to move on about 10 miles that day. I started off on patrol and stayed out all day. Saw a few Zulus.

Tuesday 6th May

Started off at 7 for a long day's patrol. Destroyed about 60 huts and returned to camp about

6 pm. .CP3

Weds. 7th May 1879

In camp.

Thurs. 8th

Shooting

Friday 9th

Patrolled to (Balte ?) spruit getting back to camp about 8 am.

Saturday 10th May

In camp.

Sunday 11th

Patrol.

Monday 12th

Moved camp about 6 miles.

Tuesday 13th

Out on patrol all day. Saw a few kaffirs and burnt a few huts.

Wednesday 14th May 1879

Stopped in camp all morning preparing for journey down as my six months would expire on the 20th. Started from camp about 2 miles Natal side of Sandman's (?) drift on the Buffalo river at 11 o'clock that night.

Thursday 15th May

Started off again as soon as we could see and reached Sandspruit at 7 o'clock that evening.

Friday 16th

Off again 5.30 arriving at Greytown 6.30.

Saturday 17th

Took Post Cart and arrived Pmb. abt. 6 pm.