

‘Killed By a Bullet from Birmingham’ⁱ
‘Friendly Fire’ Incidents on the Anglo-Zulu War Battlefields

By Ian Knight

Early on the morning of 22 January 1879 - the day of iSandlwana - Col. Pearson’s Right Flank Column blundered into a Zulu force lying concealed in the hills above the Nyezane River. The resulting battle was the first major engagement between a British column and Zulu royal *amabutho*, and it offered a number of interesting pointers to the future. The Zulu force - particularly the left ‘horn’ - had made a rapid and determined advance and, making good use of the ground, had almost swept round Pearson’s flank, threatening his convoy of supply wagons in his rear. In the event, however, the attack had failed, largely because the effect from the opening shots the British fired had come quickly to dominate the battlefield and the Zulus lacked sufficient numbers to endure the casualties necessary to push forward through it; the Zulu commander, Godide kaNdlela, had enjoyed no great numerical advantageⁱⁱ. The Zulu left had been checked, and their centre and right driven back with relative ease. Nevertheless, the battle had been a hot one while it lasted, and it cost the lives of over 600 Zulus and eleven officers and men of Pearson’s auxiliaries. For the first time, too, it had suggested that the coming campaign might not be the walk-over many on the British side had expected. ‘Fighting with them is terribly earnest work’, mused Col. Sgt. Burnett of the 99th Regiment afterwards, ‘and not child’s play.’ⁱⁱⁱ After the battle, correspondence alludes mysteriously to an aspect of warfare common to most conflicts, but one which has hitherto received scant notice in connection with the Anglo-Zulu War. In a letter written to Lord Chelmsford on the 24th, referring to a narrow escape of Col. Parnell of the 3rd Regiment, Pearson wrote,

Col. Parnell’s horse was shot with a Martini Henry bullet, but I forgot to have the bullet taken out of mine. He was struck twice.^{iv}

If Pearson felt this fact worthy of comment, he does not, however, dwell on its significance, perhaps leaving Chelmsford to ponder it for himself. The fact is, of course, that while the Martini-Henry rifle was the standard firearm issued to British infantry battalions, and the Zulus possessed a large number of guns at the beginning of the war, it is unlikely, to say the least, that there were many Martini-Henrys in Zulu hands as early as the battle of Nyezane. One British estimate from the before the war - by its nature unverifiable - suggested that there were no more than 500 modern breach-loading firearms in the whole of Zululand at the end of 1878. The coastal districts, where Pearson was operating, had historically been exposed to European traders for longer than any other district in the country, and indeed the homestead of the famous ‘white Zulu chief’, John Dunn, lay not many miles from the Nyezane battlefield. Dunn himself was known to have imported many thousands of guns into Zululand before the war on King Cetshwayo’s behalf, but the evidence suggests that these were overwhelming obsolete patterns. True, Dunn had taught a few influential Zulus locally to shoot - his friend Prince Dabulamanzi was a noted shot, and had posed for photographers at Cetshwayo’s coronation in 1874 surrounded by retainers holding a variety of impressive sporting guns. Yet the Martini-Henry was a state-of-the-art weapon, and would have been very expensive to buy in Zululand; there are suggestions that many traders from Natal not only preferred the greater profits to be made from older weapons - which could be bought very cheaply and sold on easily, since they were within the price range afforded by most family-heads in Zululand - but were reluctant in any case to undermine the technological superiority in weapons

enjoyed by whites. It is significant that after the battle at Nyezane, Pearson's men collected up the firearms abandoned by the Zulus and found that few were more modern than the Enfield rifled muzzle-loader of the 1850s, while the majority were much older smooth-bore flintlock muskets. After the battle of iSandlwana, which took place elsewhere in Zululand that same day, the situation would change dramatically with the capture by the Zulus of over 800 Martini-Henry rifles, dozens of carbines and thousands of rounds of ammunition; yet the fact remains that at Nyezane it is highly unlikely, to say the least, that Parnell's horse was killed by a bullet fired by a Zulu marksman.

The term 'friendly fire' is, of course, not only an oxymoron but a very modern one; incidents of troops being struck accidentally by fire from their own men, however, are not. Whereas many of today's incidents can be traced to the unpredictable human factor which still lies at the heart of modern hi-tech weapon systems, in the past such accidents were often regarded rather more philosophically as an inevitable danger arising from 'the fog of war'. For most of the nineteenth century, despite improvements in firearms across the period, most battles continued to be fought out at close range between combatants using black-powder weapons which produced great quantities of smoke which obscured friend and foe alike. As a result such incidents seldom achieved the degree of scrutiny they do today, and many observers simply felt it preferable not to draw attention to them. That does not, however, mean that they did not occur - and there are tantalising suggestions that in that regard the Zulu campaign was no different.

If they did, it was those whose duties took them to the forefront of British firing positions - including officers like Col. Parnell - who would inevitably find themselves at the greatest risk. And while Parnell was lucky - it was his horse rather than himself who was the casualty - there are suggestions that at least three officers might have died during the course of the war as a result of 'friendly fire' incidents.

At iSandlwana it seems that the two-gun section from N/5 Battery left behind as part of the garrison at the camp were the principle culprits - although the real danger lay in the spontaneous nature of the battle. The British garrison had failed to detect the Zulu army during its move close to the camp on 21 January, and as a result the British forces were widely dispersed when the fighting began. Most obviously this was true of Col. Durnford's detachments, some of whom had blundered into the Zulu army along the banks of the Ngwebeni stream some five miles from the camp while others, led by Durnford himself, were isolated in the valley of the Nxibongo stream a few miles further east. Both of these units were compelled to retire rapidly on the camp with the Zulus in close pursuit whilst behind them, at the same time, infantry from the camp had occupied forward positions without a clear understanding of the developing Zulu threat. Once the Zulus began to descend over the skyline of the iNyoni ridge and appear within plain sight of the camp, the true nature of the attack became more apparent and the British forces attempted to draw together. The two guns from N/5, placed in the centre of the British position, tried to provide close support to the outlying units as they retired - not always successfully. As a tactical doctrine the concept of firing over the heads of friendly troops upon an enemy beyond was in its infancy, largely because the technical limitations of the guns themselves meant that indirect fire was inevitably hazardous. Guns were commonly fired over direct sights at a target within clear view; and even then imperfections in the timed fuses of the shells - imperfections which were sometimes exaggerated by the poor storage conditions which often prevailed in the field in southern Africa - meant that there was an outside chance that shells might explode prematurely. Certainly James Brickhill, the civilian interpreter with the Column, who survived the battle, was under the impression that this had occurred at iSandlwana;

The Artillery threw about 25 shots from different parts of the field during the battle. Four of these were very effective, each tearing up what appeared to be about an acre of ground in the enemy's masses. One of the guns however always appeared to shoot high, whilst one shot burst half way, nearly over our foot Native Contingent.^v

It is not clear which 'Native Contingent' Brickhill was referring to; certainly one company (Captain J.F. Lonsdale's no. 9 company, 1/3rd NNC) was quite close to the guns during the battle, but while it is conceivable that shots were fired over them by one of the guns - which moved position briefly to provide support for Durnford's men defending the iNyogane donga - it is more likely Brickhill was referring to either Captain Barry's No. 5 Co., 2/3rd NNC, who had been on piquet duty at the Mkwene high-point on the west of the iNyoni ridge, or Captain Stafford's E Company, 1/1st NNC who had been sent out to support them. The NNC on the iNyoni ridge had been driven off in some confusion, mixed up at times with the men of Lt. Raw and Roberts troops of mounted amaNgwane. With the Zulus following them closely behind, the Artillery had attempted to cover them, and it is quite possible that Brickhill is referring to the same incident mentioned by Stafford himself;

Lieut. Roberts of Pinetown ... had managed to get his men into a cattle kraal on the ledge of the ridge. I heard subsequently that this officer and his men had been shelled by our artillery, and that Roberts had met his death as a result of this blunder.^{vi}

It is not clear from whom Stafford heard this story, since apparently he did not witness it himself. A number of the amaNgwane who survived the battle might have seen Roberts' death but there are few accounts from any of the rank and file of the mounted auxiliaries, and none of those which survive mentions it. If, in the absence of further corroborative testimony, the incident must be taken as unproven, the references from both Brickhill and Stafford nonetheless suggest that something of the sort might indeed have occurred.

The evidence for the other two possible victims of 'friendly fire' is equally tantalising. On 29 March, at the height of the battle of Khambula, two companies of the 90th Regiment were sent out from the relative safety of the entrenched British laager to take up a position at the head of a slope which had provided shelter for the left 'horn' of the attacking Zulu forces. These companies were commanded by Major Robert Hackett, and from his position Hackett's men could fire directly into concentrations of Zulus at little more than 100 yards down the slope, who had nonetheless been protected hitherto by the lie of the land from fire from the main British positions. Hackett's fire proved devastatingly effective, and the British commander, Evelyn Wood, considered the incident a turning point in the battle. Nevertheless, the price paid by Hackett's men was a high one, for they were extended in line across open ground, and enfiladed, moreover, by Zulu marksmen already positioned on their flanks. Hackett's left lay close to the British cattle-laager which the Zulus had temporarily over-run, and from where Zulu riflemen could fire obliquely down the length of his line. To Hackett's right, 400 meters away, lay the camp dung-heap, which, after weeks of intermittent heavy rain, had sprouted a tall crop of mealies and grass, and among which dozens of Zulu marksmen had nestled, opening a telling fire from a slightly elevated position which also raked the length of Hackett's line.

There can be no doubt that this cross-fire was more than averagely effective, since, as Wood himself put it, 'the Zulus firing from the refuse heap were fair shots. A few had been employed as hunters, and understood the use of the Martini rifles taken at Isandhlwana.'^{vii}

Hackett himself was badly wounded, struck by a bullet which passed clean through his head at the temples - he was thought to be dead and was carried inside the wagon laager and laid alongside the other corpses until someone saw him stir - while Colour-Sergeant Allen was shot dead. Hackett's subaltern, Lt. Arthur Bright, was also severely wounded. And it is Wood's description of Bright's injuries which offer up the first hint as to the nature of the fire that injured him. According to Wood,

When in the Hospital at the close of the action, I did not speak to Arthur Bright, who was dozing, but after we had something to eat I sent Maude over to see how he was going on. Maude came back saying that he was sensible, but very depressed, although the doctors said a bullet which had passed through his thigh had not touched any artery or bone. The two doctors had more than they could do, and may therefore be readily excused for not having noticed that the other thigh bone had been shattered; and Bright died, happily without pain, before morning.^{viii}

What intrigues about this description of Bright's injuries is their similarity to those suffered by another casualty, Lt. George Pardoe of the 1/13th, who was mortally wounded at Ulundi on 4 July. A rather more detailed description of Pardoe's injuries has survived from one of the surgeons who treated him;

The bullet entered the right thigh about its middle, passing through in a direct line without injuring vessel or bone, and entered the thigh of the opposite limb about its upper third, causing sever comminution of the femur, and then escaped on the other side. The wound in the right thigh healed, without a drop of pus coming from it, in a few days. The wounds were small, clean and round, and no difference was perceptible between the entrance and the exit. Those in the left thigh were different, the wound of entrance being twice the size of that of the other limb, and that of the exit being large, deep and gaping, and there was considerable heamorrhage present ... Ten days after the injury the wound began to bleed alarmingly and all efforts failed to check it. The limb was then amputated ... but the patient died upon the table.^{ix}

In neither case is any opinion offered as to the nature of the bullet which caused the injury, but in both cases it produced small neat injuries when passing through soft tissue but extensive splintering damage on striking bone. These injuries are very typical of those inflicted by the Martini-Henry, and markedly different to those caused by balls fired with a much lower velocity by the muzzle-loaders with which the Zulu army typically began the war. It is of course perfectly possible that both Bright and Pardoe were wounded by Martini-Henry bullets fired by Zulu marksmen - yet the similarity of their injuries suggests another possibility. Wounds inflicted through both thighs are broadly consistent with the type of injury that might be caused by a man firing at close range from a kneeling position. Little is known of the exact circumstances in which Pardoe suffered his wound, except that it was near the beginning of the battle of Ulundi; Bright's eulogy, however, is rather more suggestive;

... two companies were ordered to advance, and at the point of the bayonet force back the threatening impi. One of these two was G Company, and those who knew Arthur Tyndall Bright can realize with what pride he placed himself in front of the advancing line. It was in this position, while gallantly leading and

cheering on his men, that he received his death wound.^x

In the excitement and confusion of the moment, is it possible that both Bright and Pardoe - both noted as keen young officers - had accidentally strayed too far in front of their own positions, and been stuck by the volleys laid down by their own men?

The answer can never be known for sure, of course. The tragedy which lies behind every individual death in battle can all too often be lost amidst the broader picture, the statistics of losses inflicted and endured, obscured and sanitised by a spurious sense of glamour which attaches to historical conflicts after the passage of more than a century. And if the fate of Lts. Roberts, Bright and Pardoe seems particularly poignant it can only be because losses inflicted then - as they do today - seem all the more futile when inflicted by 'friendly fire'. Yet in a broader sense they offer a chance to re-evaluate the true cost of the battles of 1879, the more so because the contemporary understanding - that there was a degree of inevitable risk inherent in the smoky confusion which characterised the contemporary battlefield - was of course largely correct. Young men entering into battle, whichever side they were on, were, and are, at risk from injury, mutilation and death from a myriad of sources.

What matters is not who exactly killed Roberts, Bright and Pardoe, but that they died along with thousands of others, and any reassessment of their deaths should serve as a reminder of the true human cost of the 1879 invasion of Zululand.

ⁱ With apologies to *Zulu Dawn*. Note that injuries inflicted during the many false alarms which characterised the later stages of the campaign fall outside the scope of this article.

ⁱⁱ Pearson's column consisted of 4271 combat troops, including two battalions of regular infantry, the 1/3rd and 99th, and the 2nd Regiment NNC. Of these nearly 2,800 actually took part in the battle, nearly half of these being NNC. Godide's force consisted of between 4000 and 6000 men - giving him a numerical superiority of no more than 2:1 at best, an advantage more than cancelled out by the greater British firepower. At iSandlwana later that same day some 20,000 Zulus attacked a British garrison of 1700 men

ⁱⁱⁱ Letter in *The Dover Express*, 14 March 1879, reproduced in Fran Emery's *The Red Soldier*, London, 1977.

^{iv} Private letter written from Eshowe on 24 January 1879, reproduced in Major the Hon. Gerald French, *Lord Chelmsford and the Zulu War*, London, 1939.

^v Account in *The Natal Magazine* September 1879.

^{vi} Account in *The Natal Mercury*, 12 March 1924.

^{vii} Sir Evelyn Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal*, London, 1906.

^{viii} *Ibid.*

^{ix} D. Blair Brown, *Surgical Experiences of the Zulu and Transvaal Wars*, Edinburgh, 1883.

^x J.P. Mackinnon and S.H. Shadbolt, *The South Africa Campaign of 1879*, London, 1880.