

‘To Keep Out All Cetywayo’s Army’;
The Defences of Msinga and the Biggarsberg after iSandlwana

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On 21 January, 1879, William Beaumont, the civilian magistrate in the town of Newcastle in northern Natal, found himself at the magistracy at Msinga, close to the Zulu border - and here he received an interesting and disturbing message. At the end of 1878, with military operations against the Zulu imminent, Beaumont had been appointed Commandant of one of the newly-designated defensive districts organised within the colony for the defence of the white settler population. Beaumont’s District No. 1 extended from Newcastle in the north to Ladysmith in the south-west and Msinga in the south-east. It was a large swathe of difficult, broken country which straddled the Biggarsberg ridge, the high upland feature which formed the western edge of the Mzinyathi valley.

The Mzinyathi, of course, was the designated boundary with the Zulu kingdom, and Beaumont’s responsibilities had included watching over a number of remote drifts where, once hostilities had officially broken out, the Zulu might attempt to cross into Natal. The Natal government had made a belated attempt to mobilise the African population of the border areas in the colony’s defence, and detachments of Border Guards were posted to guard the most vulnerable crossings, whilst the local *amakhosi* - chiefs - were required to supply a Border Levy to mobilise in support of the Border Guards should they be attacked. White Levy Leaders were appointed to officer them, and all of these men came under the ultimate command of their District Commandant - in this case, Beaumont.

District No. 1 had found itself very much in the frontline of the coming campaign. Lord Chelmsford had appointed a spot known as Helpmekeer on the Biggarsberg heights as the assembly point for one of his columns. Designated the No. 3 Column, this was to form the central thrust of his three-pronged invasion plan, and, although nominally commanded by Col. Richard Glyn of the 1/24th Regiment, it was accompanied by Lord Chelmsford himself. Helpmekeer was little more than a hamlet - a stone church and, half a mile away, two lonely stores, which between them catered for the physical and spiritual needs of the white farming community - but it lay close to a strategic intersection on Natal’s road-system. A single wagon track, winding precariously through the steep valleys of the Mooi and Thukela river-valleys and climbing doggedly up onto the Biggarsberg, connected the colonial capital of Pietermaritzburg in the south to Newcastle in the north; at Helpmekeer a side-road forked off and dropped down into the Mzinyathi valley towards the well-known trader’s crossing at Rorke’s Drift - and it was by the Rorke’s Drift line that Lord Chelmsford had intended to invade Zululand. Throughout December 1878 the column had assembled at Helpmekeer, the sudden onset of the summer rains transforming the tracks into a mud-slide under the wheels of over three hundred wagons and carts. Then, during the first week of January, the column had moved down into the Mzinyathi valley - and on the 11th, the day the British ultimatum had expired, Lord Chelmsford had crossed into Zululand.

His passing left the defence of the border behind him in the hands of two small garrisons of regular troops guarding the supply depots at Rorke’s Drift and Helpmekeer - and William Beaumont. When the resident magistrate at Msinga, Henry Francis Fynn Jnr - whose father had been one of the first British pioneers to establish contact with the Zulu - had been asked to join Chelmsford’s headquarters staff,

Beaumont had travelled down from Newcastle to base himself in Fynn's place at Msinga, closer to the theatre of operations. Meanwhile, after a forced delay on the Zulu bank at Rorke's Drift due to the wet weather, Chelmsford had advanced the Centre Column to iSandlwana, further down the road into Zululand.

The following morning Beaumont had received a message from Edward Woodroffe, who commanded a detachment of Border Guards watching a drift opposite the point where the Mangeni River flowed into the Mzinyathi on the Zulu bank. Woodroffe was a local settler who had volunteered for service, and like many of those who lived remote and lonely lives on the scattered border farms, his personal life straddled cultural divides in a way which would not have been possible closer to the centres of settler society: Woodroffe had taken a number of Zulu wives, followers of the *inkosi* Matshana kaMondise, whose territory lay along the slopes of the Qhudeni mountain across the Mzinyathi. From his wives' relations Woodroffe had heard a disturbing rumour - that a large Zulu army was en route towards Lord Chelmsford's command, and that Matshana had been ordered to mobilise to support it. As soon as he received this message Beaumont sent it forward to Lord Chelmsford - whether he received it or not is unknown - and decided to abandon the Msinga magistracy and ride out to Woodroffe's post on the border. Beaumont increased the patrols along the drifts and settled down with his men to see if Matshana would try to strike into Natal. But no attack came that afternoon, or through the following night, and by daybreak on the 22nd it looked as if Woodroffe's information had been a false alarm.

Not long after daybreak that morning, however, Beaumont was surprised to see a battalion of the NNC wending its way down towards his position from the direction of Msinga. These were men of the 1st Regiment NNC under the command of Major Harcourt Bengough; part of Col. Durnford's No. 2 Column, they had been left at Msinga when Durnford passed through on the 20th on his way to Rorke's Drift, and they had just received orders to cross into Zululand opposite the Mangeni in support of operations Lord Chelmsford had planned against Matshana. Beaumont was happy to point out the best crossings, and, despite the height of the river, Bengough's men crossed safely into Zululand. It was now early afternoon, and as they rested on the far bank both they and Beaumont's Border Guards heard the sound of artillery firing beyond the Malakatha and Hlazakazi hills which lay between them and Lord Chelmsford's column. Beaumont was not unduly concerned; he knew of Chelmsford's planned attack on Matshana, and simply assumed that the gun-fire was a result of it. With Bengough's men now on the far side of the river, Beaumont felt more secure, and decided to ride back to Msinga.

It was late afternoon by the time he arrived, and he was in for a shock. As he rode up he saw a bedraggled and exhausted man on horseback talking to Fynn's wife, who had remained at the magistracy when her husband went off to join Lord Chelmsford. Beaumont recognised the man as James Brickhill, who lived with his brother at a store nearby, and who had taken a post with the Centre Column as interpreter. Brickhill had a shocking story to tell; before dawn that morning Lord Chelmsford had marched out with part of his column to sweep through the Mangeni valley; while he was away, a Zulu army had launched a surprise attack on the camp at iSandlwana and over-run it. Brickhill himself, armed with no more than a riding crop, had had a terrifying escape, and had ridden directly across country from the Mzinyathi to warn Fynn's family.

The implication was not lost upon Beaumont; iSandlwana lay scarcely twenty miles away as the crow flies, and with the fate of Lord Chelmsford himself unknown,

only the small garrisons at Helpmekaar and Rorke's Drift lay between the border community and any possible Zulu counter-attack. Beaumont sent an urgent message summoning his Border Guards to his aid, and set about putting the magistracy in a state of defence. He had no one with him but Mrs. Fynn, her sister, the magistracy's gaoler and his wife, and 'two or three others who were unknown to me'(1). Beaumont sent someone across to bring food from an abandoned store nearby and organised the barricading of the windows and doors; by late evening, as it grew dark, he became aware of a glow on the horizon which suggested that the mission at Rorke's Drift was on fire. As night fell, he and his party waited anxiously for the Zulu attack they were sure was coming.

It was not long, however, before they were disturbed by sounds coming from the opposite direction - from further down the road into Natal. A convoy of twenty-eight supply and ammunition wagons was on its way up to the front escorted by Colonel Bray and twenty-two men of the 4th Regiment; Bray had already heard of the disaster from terrified survivors and refugees fleeing down the road towards him, and he had made for the magistracy as the nearest defensible position. Bray's men hastily laagered the wagons close to the buildings and joined Beaumont, and together they passed the tense night.

No attack came. In the morning, at first light, Beaumont rode out to find out what he could. There was no sign of the Zulus - nor his own men, nor Bengough's NNC - but all along the border through his binoculars he 'could see men, women and children streaming inland'(2), settlers from the border community who had heard the news of the disaster and were flocking to the nearest place of refuge.

For most that refuge was a purpose-built stone bastion known as Fort Pine, which stood towards the eastern lip of the Biggarsberg escarpment mid-way between Helpmekaar and the village of Dundee further north, and which had been officially appointed the 'civilian laager' in the event of a Zulu attack.

Fort Pine itself was a recent construction and, indeed, it had not been entirely completed before hostilities had begun. Despite the fact that the Natal government had felt itself vulnerable to attack from the neighbouring Zulu kingdom for much of its history - it is of course one of the ironies of Anglo-Zulu relations that in the end it was Natal which proved a threat to the Zulu kingdom - there had been little will or money over the years to provide places of security for the settler communities living on the borders. It was not until 1873 that the colonial authorities had recognised that standing fortifications - known universally by the Boer word for a defensive wagon-circle, *laager* - be built to protect the inhabitants of both Newcastle and Dundee and the outlying farming districts. Following a petition by the Biggarsberg farmers, a certain 'A.W.D.' - Anthony Durnford, then the Colonial Engineer - had noted a likely spot in 1875, but no work had begun by the end of 1877, against a background of rising tension with the Zulus, the residents had felt compelled to petition again. The government had by this time already decided that a permanent post should be built in the area to house a detachment of the Natal Mounted Police, and in the light of events it was decided to push forward in the expectation that this could also be used as a civilian laager. In January 1878 some 70 labourers were despatched to the site and a Mr John Marshall, of the farm Kelvin, was commissioned to oversee the work.

In the event, the fort was built about a mile from the spot first selected by Durnford. The position finally chosen was criticised by locals as having insufficient water but the Colonial Engineer, Captain A.H. Hime, sent an inspector to investigate who declared it viable and work had begun at the end of May. It was built of stone quarried locally, and proved hard work for those involved, and work on the outlying

walls had not been completed until the middle of September - just four months before the Anglo-Zulu War broke out. The basic structure was an oblong with projection bastion-towers at opposite corners and two entrances. The walls were rough-cut stone work, twelve feet high and loop-holed. To assuage concerns about the water supply a deep well was dug within the perimeter and lined with brick. Inside the walls there were to be stables and barracks for the Mounted Police garrison, but it seems that while the walls for these had been built by the end of 1878, the roofs had not. Even so, the war correspondent of the *London Standard*, Charles Norris-Newman, had been impressed by the structure when he had ridden past on 21 December 1878 -

The walls are of stone, about twelve feet high and broad in proportion, with double-storied towers at two of the opposite corners. There is accommodation for twenty-five officers and men, stabling for thirty horses, storerooms, offices, and magazines, and in fact everything necessary for a permanent station or temporary laager ... The whole place seemed strong enough to keep out all Cetywayo's army, and would stand some knocking about even at more civilised hands.(3)

Once it was serviceable, the position had been appointed the headquarters of the Buffalo Border Guard, the small part-time Volunteer unit drawn largely from the Biggarsberg and Mzinyathi valley farming community. The BBG's earlier headquarters had been known as Fort Pine, after Sir Benjamin Pine, a previous Lieutenant-Governor of Natal, and they seem simply to have transferred the name to the new premises, although it was equally known in official correspondence as the Dundee Laager. In the event, no garrison of Mounted Police had arrived at the Fort by the outbreak of hostilities on 11 January 1879, largely because the Police had been attached to Lord Chelmsford's Centre Column, which had assembled just a few miles away at Helpmekaar, instead. Command of Fort Pine had fallen to John Sutcliffe Robson, a settler who owned the neighbouring farm to James Rorke's old property in the Mzinyathi valley. Robson was the commanding officer of the Buffalo Border Guard, had also been appointed Border Agent for the district, a responsibility which included local defence. With his responsibilities as Border Agent proving demanding, he had passed over field command of the Buffalo Border Guard to Lieutenant Smith, and the unit had been attached to Chelmsford's column. Robson was still trying to operate from his own farm when the invasion had begun; on the 20th he had decided to move his headquarters to Rorke's Drift but he had not yet done so two days later when events overtook him.

As news of the disaster at iSandlwana on the 22nd - and of the Zulu incursion at Rorke's Drift - rippled up and down the border those white civilians who had so far opted to brave out the war at home fled their properties. While most of the settlers living in the village at Dundee were of Scottish or English descent, many of the farmers along the Biggarsberg were Afrikaners - the Boers had settled the area in the immediate aftermath of the battle of Ncome in 1838 - who preferred to place their trust in their own judgement and their wagons rather than in official protection. Some simply retired into the hills to live out of their wagons until the threat had passed; a few, like the Vermaak family at Helpmekaar, simply fortified their own property and prepared to defend themselves. For the rest, however, there was Fort Pine (4). By 25 January some 350 people had gathered at the fort, many of whom were women and children, and only 78 of whom were fit to bear arms. A fortnight later, the *Natal Colonist* noted that

It was entirely filled with Boer wagons and tents; in fact it is a job to get through it from one end to the other, and with such a lot of people, including children of all ages, and every family slaughtering their own meat etc, you can imagine what a place it is. My informant states that unless sanitary precautions are speedily taken, fever, in its worst form will ensue.(5)

John Robson himself had fled to the fort with the others and had tried to establish some authority over the civilians gathered there. This had caused some grumbling among the Afrikaners, many of whom were unused to living in such close proximity with others, and who were used to electing their own commandants. Robson persevered but felt in any case that the number of armed men was insufficient to protect the post against a determined Zulu attack, and on 6 February he rode over to Helpmekaar to request military assistance. Here he found the garrison in equally bad straits, cooped up in a hastily improvised earthwork dug around the iron storage sheds, a prey to fever and false alarms. There were a number of men from the Buffalo Border Guard and Newcastle Mounted Rifles at the post who had survived the iSandlwana campaign, however, and the commander, Col. Glyn of the 1/24th, allowed them to move across to Fort Pine under the command of Lt. Robert Dixon of the BBG.

The arrival of these men on 7 February allowed Robson to establish some semblance of military routine at the Fort. At night Volunteers and civilians alike snatched what sleep they could inside the muddy and smelly confines of the Fort's walls, and at dawn a patrol of Volunteers set out to scour the area for any signs of a Zulu presence. On receiving the all-clear, the civilians were allowed to move their camps outside the walls, where they remained all day. If women needed to venture to a stream nearby to wash clothes they were accompanied by an escort of Volunteers, and they returned to dry the wet clothes on the guy ropes of the tents. At night, everyone retired again within the walls.

In truth, however, as William Beaumont had noted at Msinga, the real crisis had passed within days of the battles at iSandlwana. The exhausted state of the Zulus returning across the drifts downstream from Rorke's Drift after the battle had been noted by some of the settlers at nearby Elandskraal, and while Zulus living on the opposite bank of the Mzinyathi locally had sometimes ventured across the river in small groups to loot abandoned farms or round up stray stock, there had been no sign of a major Zulu counter-attack. Lord Chelmsford and the survivors of the Centre Column had returned across Rorke's Drift on the morning of the 23rd, and, exhausted and dispirited though they were, they provided a formidable presence at the fortified mission post there, while in addition fresh troops moving up the line towards the border had passed through Msinga and on towards Helpmekaar. Although he was perhaps made of sterner stuff than most, Beaumont was already feeling considerably more confident by the evening of the 23rd;

About nine o'clock that morning Major Jones, of the Royal Engineers, with a squad of sappers arrived on the scene. They set to work at once to make the place safe, using ammunition boxes for the purpose and digging a trench all round. After that we felt quite safe. Colonel Bengough and his regiment of Natives arrived about 2 o'clock in the afternoon. I had not heard of them since I had left them on the other side of the drifts. We then rode round the place a selected a place for a 'laager' which was eventually called 'Bengough's Fort'...(6)

For most, however, it would be some months before they felt reassured enough to return to a semblance of ordinary civilian life, and conditions at Fort Pine would remain uncomfortable for weeks to come. When the Volunteers had been sent there from Helpmekaar they had been told they must fend for themselves for food, presumably on the basis that many of the civilians gathered there had brought with them their livestock. Nevertheless, on 8 February Lt. Dixon had complained that his men were hungry and that the countryside across the Biggarsberg was deserted with no opportunity to buy in fresh supplies. Food was sent across from Helpmekaar but Dixon's superior officer, Captain 'Offy' Shepstone of the Natal Carbineers, grumbled that Dixon should have easily been able to buy meat from the refugees at Fort Pine, and indeed why he did not remains something of a mystery. Nevertheless, the Volunteers' material comfort at the Fort improved further when they were allowed to remove corrugated iron from the storage sheds at Helpmekaar and use it to roof over the unfinished stables and barrack-buildings.

Despite the cramped and insanitary conditions inside the Fort life - and death - went on as usual. Dr Prideaux Selby, a Northumbrian from Alnwick who had become the Biggarsberg's first doctor and Justice of the Peace, is said to have delivered three babies during his time at the Fort. Nevertheless, he was so shaken by his experiences - he knew well many of the Volunteers killed at iSandlwana - that his hair turned white and he looked far older than his 57 years. Things fared even worse for the Rev. Jacob Ludwig Dohne. Dohne was a member of the Berlin Mission Society and had first worked among the Xhosa on the Eastern Cape Frontier. Burnt out during the 'War of the Axe' in 1846, he had travelled to Natal to minister to the Voortrekkers but his abrasive personality had earned him few friends. Rejected by his own Mission Society and by the Utrecht Boers he had been taken in by the Vermaaks who had built for him that lonely church at Helpmekaar. Dohne had hurried to Fort Pine after iSandlwana, but he was 65 years old and already tired after long years of wrangling with his colleagues and congregations. His health gave way under pressure of life in the Fort, and he died there on 1 June 1879.

By the end of February, however, it was becoming clear that no Zulu attack was likely, and civilians began to drift away from the post so that by the end of May it was reported that there were almost none left living there. The Volunteers remained there, despite occasional bouts of sickness and complaints that their civilian affairs needed attention, until the end of July when, in the aftermath of the British victory at Ulundi, the Natal Volunteers Corps were stood down. Similarly, the post at Helpmekaar - which had suffered even more from sickness than Fort Pine - was largely broken up by the end of May as Lord Chelmsford began to assemble a new column at Dundee prior to starting again his invasion of Zululand. Only a detachment of the Natal Mounted Police saw out the remainder of the war there.

The magistracy at Msinga had long since returned to a degree of normality. William Beaumont had returned to Newcastle a few days after iSandlwana while Henry Fynn - Msinga's permanent magistrate - had arrived back at the post a day or two later following the return of Lord Chelmsford's staff to Natal. Although Fynn's Border Guards continued to keep a sharp eye on the less well-known drifts across the border into Zululand, the focus for the military defence of the Msinga district had shifted to the neat stone walled-fort constructed by Bengough's NNC beside the road a few miles away.

With the start of the second invasion in June the tide of war passed inexorably away from the Mzinyathi border, and only small garrisons remained where once there had been bustling concentrations or fraught gatherings of tense soldiers and terrified

civilians. With the victory at Ulundi and subsequent pacification operations completed by early September, most of the forts were abandoned altogether leaving only a few ditches, crumbling ramparts and over-grazed veldt as evidence of what had occurred there. The fort at Helpmekaar has now all but disappeared, although the impressive outlines remain of Bengough's fort at Msinga.

Of them all Fort Pine alone retained some relevance in the post-war peace. It finally passed under the official direction of the Natal Mounted Police in early 1880 when a permanent garrison arrived to take charge; the troopers, however, had to live under canvas for several weeks until the roofs to the barracks and stables were properly fixed and the wear and tear of the wartime occupation made good.

The walls of Fort Pine still stand today, and it is a National Monument - although it lies on private ground and permission is necessary before visiting it. Some of the present remains undoubtedly post-date the war - Helpmekaar was the centre of some activity during both the Anglo-Boer War and Bhambatha Rebellion, and it was probably modified over this period. It continued to serve as a Mounted Police outpost until 1924.

FURTHER READING

The most detailed account of life along the Mzinyathi border during the war can be found in *The Buffalo Border 1879* by J.P.C. Laband, P.S. Thompson and Shelia Henderson (University of Natal Press, 1986). Sheila Henderson's article *The Turbulent Frontier; Biggarsberg and the Buffalo at the Crossroads in The Zulu War and the Colony of Natal* (edited by G.A. Chadwick and E.G. Hobson, Mandini, 1979) includes a number of useful family traditions on the subject.

References

- (1) 'Insandhlwana Could Have Been Averted' by Sir William Beaumont, article in the *Natal Mercury*, 22 January 1929.
- (2) Ibid.
- (3) Charles Norris-Newman, *In Zululand With the British Throughout the War of 1879*, London 1880.
- (4) Very few civilians seem to have attempted to join the military post at Helpmekaar. Fort Pine was of course the official civilian assembly point - but while the companies of the 24th Regiment based at Helpmekaar might have seemed to some to offer greater protection, others may well have noted that at Rorke's Drift the presence of a garrison and supplies had in fact attracted a Zulu attack.
- (5) *Natal Colonist*, 12 February 1879.
- (6) *Natal Mercury*, 22 January 1929.

A question – what is the wood used by the Zulus to make their spear shafts?

I put this question to Ian Knight who answered as follows;

Well, I've looked it up - though I'm not sure you will be much the wiser! According to Bryant's 'The Zulu People; As They Were Before the White Man Came', -

'The shaft was made of various soft, but strong, woods, e.g. the iPahla (*Brachylaena discolor*), iLalanyati (*Grewia occidentalis*), iMindza (*Halleria lucida*), unHlwakele (*Cyclostemon argustus*) and iZizimezane.'

So, there you have it.
Adrian Greaves