

Isandlwana: footnotes and incidentals  
What happened to the guns after Isandlwana?

A compilation of letters

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The recently discovered letters of Lt. H.T. Curling RA provide a fascinating insight into what happened at Isandlwana as well as casting some doubt on the previously accepted theories of the RA guns' final position after the British defeat. It is with pleasure that we re-print, unaltered, some of these relevant, very personal and detailed letters sent by Lt. Curling RA to his family after his dramatic escape from Isandlwana. His letters reveal the chilling terror and chaos of Isandlwana as well as the appalling conditions endured by the few survivors. The Society is most grateful to Wing Commander Jack Karran OBE, great nephew of Lt. Curling R.A. for making these letters available and to member Tony Lucking for the use of his excellent draft.

Adrian Greaves  
Editor

*23rd January 1879*

My dear Mama,

Just a line to say I am alive after a most wonderful escape.

In the absence of the General, our camp in Zululand was attacked by overwhelming numbers of Zulus. The camp was taken and out of a force of 700 white men only about 30 escaped. All my men except one were killed and the guns taken. Major Smith who was with me was killed. The whole column has retreated into Natal again and we are expecting hourly to be attacked.

Of course everything has been lost, not a tent or blanket left.

Your aff son  
H T Curling

This is one of the recently discovered letters written by Lieutenant Henry Curling, R.A. following the battle of Isandlwana. It was written the day after the battle, and was entrusted to the officer carrying the official despatch to Pietermaritzburg, but it probably did not arrive at his home in Ramsgate until early March. The official despatch was telegraphed to Cape Town and carried by special steamer to St. Vincent, whence it was telegraphed to London, arriving in the early hours of 11th February 1879. Reuter's despatch arrived slightly earlier, their man in St. Vincent having persuaded the telegraphist to give his message priority, and reached Mr. Dickinson, the night editor, at 1 a.m. He rushed it to the newspapers via a fleet of Hansom cabs, and The Times printed the report in their second edition on the 11th, but probably Ramsgate did not get the news until the 12th, three weeks after the battle. The report included a list of the officers killed, including Major Stuart Smith, who would have been known as a comrade of Lt. Curling, so his parents would have been anxious for many days on his behalf.

Curling's following letter of 2nd Feb. was printed in the Standard on 27th March, and his evidence to the Court of Inquiry was published soon after.

Helpmakar Feb 2nd

Natal

My dear Mama,

Now things have quieted down again a little, I can tell you more about what has happened. I trust you had no false report: I saw the first man who went into Pietermaritzburg with the news and I hope you may have had no anxiety.

On the morning of the fight, the main body left at 3.30 in the morning, a little before daylight, leaving us with two guns and about 70 men. About 7.30 we were turned out as about 1000 Zulus were seen in some hills about 2 miles from the camp. We did not think anything of it and I was congratulating myself on having an independent command. I had out with my guns only 20 men, the remainder 50 in number stayed in the camp. We remained formed up in front of the camp (it was about 1/2 mile long) until 11 o'clock, when the enemy disappeared behind some hills on our left, we returned to camp. We none of us had the least idea that the Zulus contemplated attacking the camp and, having in the last war often seen equally large bodies of the enemy, never dreamed they would come on. Besides, we had about 600 troops (regulars), two guns, about 100 other white men and at least 1000 armed natives.

About 12, as the men were getting their dinner, the alarm was again given and we turned out at once. Maj. Smith came back from the General's force at this time and took command. This of course

relieved me of all responsibility as to the movement of the guns. We, being mounted, moved off before the infantry and took up a position to the left front of the camp where we were able to throw shells into a huge mass of the enemy that remained almost stationary. The 24th Regt. came up and formed in skirmishing order on both our flanks. The Zulus soon split up into a large mass of skirmishers that extended as far round the camp as we would see.

We could form no idea of numbers but the hills were black with them. They advanced steadily in the face of the infantry and our guns but I believe the whole of the natives who defended the rear of the camp soon bolted and left only our side of the camp defended. Very soon bullets began to whistle about our heads and the men to fall.

The Zulus still continued to advance and we began to fire case but the order was given to retire after firing a round or two.

At this time, out of my small detachment, one man had been killed, shot through the head, another wounded, shot through the side and another through the wrist. Maj. Smith was also shot through the arm but was able to do his duty. Of course, no wounded man was attended to, there was no time or men to spare. When we got the order to retire, we limbered up at once but were hardly in time as the Zulus were on us at once and one man was killed (stabbed) as he was mounting in a seat on the gun carriage. Most of the gunners were on foot as there was not time to mount them on the guns.

We trotted off to the camp thinking to take up another position but found it was in possession of the enemy who were killing the men as they ran out of their tents. We went right through them and out the other side, losing nearly all our gunners in doing so and one of the two sergeants. The road to Rorke's Drift that we hoped to retreat by was full of the enemy so, no way being open, we followed a crowd of natives and camp followers who were running down a ravine. The Zulus were all among them, stabbing men as they ran.

The ravine got steeper and steeper and finally the guns stuck and could get no further. In a moment the Zulus closed in and the drivers, who now alone remained, were pulled off their horses and killed. I did not see Maj. Smith at this moment but was with him a minute before.

The guns could not be spiked, there was no time to think of anything and we hoped to save the guns up to the last moment.

As soon as the guns were taken, I galloped off and made off with the crowd. How many of us escaped, I don't know; the Zulus were all around us and I saw men falling all round. We rode for about 5 miles, hotly pursued by the Zulus, when we came to a cliff overhanging the river. We had to climb down the face of the cliff and not more than half those who started from the top got to the bottom. Many fell right down, among other, Maj. Smith and the Zulus caught us here and shot us as we climbed down. I got down safely and came to the river which was very deep and swift. Numbers were swept away as they tried to cross and others shot from above.

My horse, fortunately, swam straight across, though I had three or four men hanging on his tail, stirrup leathers, etc. After crossing the river, we were in comparative safety, though many were killed afterwards who were on foot and unable to keep up. It seems to me like a dream, I cannot realise it at all. The whole affair did not last an hour from beginning to end. Many got away from the camp but were killed in the retreat. No officers or men of the 24th Regt. could escape: they were all on foot and on the other side of the camp. I saw two of them, who were not with their men, near the river but their bodies were found afterwards on our side of the river.

Of the 50 men we left in camp, 8 managed to escape on spare horses we had left in camp. One sergeant only, of my detachment, got away. Altogether, we lost 62 men and 24 horses, just half the battery.

Those who have escaped have not a rag left as they came away in their shirt sleeves. We always sleep at night in the fort or laager, as it is called, and in the open air. It is very unpleasant as it rains nearly every night and is very cold.

We none of us have more than one blanket each, so you can see we are having a rough time. The first few days I was utterly done up but have pulled round all right now.

What is going to happen, no one knows. We have made a strong entrenchment and are pretty safe even should we be attacked. The only thing we are afraid of is sickness. There are 50 sick and wounded already who are all jammed up at night in the fort. The smell is terrible, 800 men cooped up in so small a place. Food, fortunately, is plentiful and we have at least a three months supply. All spys (sic) taken now are shot: we have disposed of three or four already.

Formerly, they were allowed anywhere and our disaster is to a great extent due to their accurate information of the General's movements. What excitement this will cause in England and what indignation.

The troops, of course, were badly placed and the arrangements for defending the camp indifferent but there should have been enough troops and the risk of leaving a small force to be attacked by 10 to

15 times its number should not have been allowed. As you have heard, there were no wounded, all the wounded were killed in a most horrible way. I saw several wounded men during the retreat, all crying out for help, as they knew the terrible fate in store for them. Smith-Dorrien, a young fellow in the 95 Regt., I saw dismount and try to help one. His horse was killed in a minute by a shot and he had to run for his life only escaping by a miracle. You will see all sorts of accounts in the papers and no end of lies. Most of those who escaped were volunteers and native contingent officers who tell any number of lies. We hear the General has telegraphed for 6 Regiments and a cavalry Brigade. Even with these troops, it will take a long time to finish the war. It takes months to accustom troops to the country and in fact they are quite unfit for fighting in the Field as they require such enormous baggage trains. The colonial troops move without anything and always sleep in the open. We shall get no assistance from natives now as they do not believe in us anymore.

Your letters still arrive pretty regularly and are a great treat. I am very sorry to hear about Emmy but trust it is only a mild attack. It is unfortunate, as it will delay your journey very much.

I am very glad Papa continues pretty well. It will be rather a risk crossing the channel and travelling through France if the weather continues so severe. I think I must be promoted by now: I do hope I may get a good fall. It will be depressing indeed if I get out of this safely to be sent to some out of the way part of the world.

All those who escaped have sent in reports, by order, which will probably be published, so you will hear eventually the truth about this sad disaster. The General, poor fellow, seemed quite off his head and so nothing is being done, nor it would seem, has he recovered himself yet.

Give my love to all at home and believe me,

Your most affect Son  
H T Curling

#### **CURLING'S EVIDENCE TO THE COURT OF INQUIRY**

From Lt. Curling to Officer Commanding no 8 (sic - N5?)

Sir,

I have the honour to forward the following report of the circumstances attending the loss of 2 guns of N. Brigade, 5th Battery, Royal Artillery, at the action of Isandala (sic) on January, 22nd.

About 7.30 a.m. on that date, a large body of Zulus being seen on the hills to the left front of the camp, we were ordered to turn out at once, and were formed up in front of the 2nd Battalion 24th Regiment camp, where we remained until 11 o'clock when we returned to camp with order to remain harnessed and ready to turn out at a minutes notice. The Zulus did not come up within range and we did not come into action. The infantry also remained in column of coys (sic - companies). Col. Durnford arrived about 10 a.m. with Basutos and the rocket battery; he left about 11 o'clock with these troops, in the direction of the hills where we had seen the enemy. About 12 o'clock, we turned out, as heavy firing was heard in the direction of Col. Durnford's force. Major Smith arrived as we were turning out, and took command of the guns. We trotted up to a position about 400 yards beyond the left front of the Natal Contingent camp, and came into action at once on a large body of the enemy about 3/4000 yds. off. The 1st. Battn. 24th Regt. soon came up and extended in skirmishing order on the flanks and in line with us.

In about a quarter of an hour, Major Smith took away one of the guns to the right, as the enemy were appearing in large numbers in the direction of the drift, in the stream in front of the camp.

The enemy advanced slowly, without halting; when they were 400 yards off, the 1st/24th advanced about 30 yards. We remained in the same position. Major Smith returned at the time with his gun, and came into action beside me. The enemy advancing still, we began firing case, but almost immediately the infantry were ordered to retire. Before we could get away, the enemy were by the guns, and I saw one gunner stabbed as he was mounting on to an axle-tree box. The limber gunners did not mount but ran after the guns. We went straight through the camp but found the enemy in possession. The gunners were all stabbed going through the camp, with the exception of one or two. One of the two Sergeants was also killed at this time. When we got on to the road to Rorke's Drift, it was completely blocked by Zulus. I was with Major Smith at this time, he told me he had been wounded in the arm. We saw Lt. Coghill, the ADC, and asked him if we could not rally some men and make a stand, he said he did not think it could be done. We crossed the road with the crowd, principally consisting of natives, men left in camp and civilians and went down a steep ravine leading towards the river.

The Zulus were in the middle of the crowd, stabbing the men as they ran. When we had gone about 400 yds., we came to a deep cut in which the guns stuck. There was, as far as I could see, only one gunner with them at this time, but they were covered with men of different corps clinging to them. The Zulus were in them at once and the drivers pulled off their horses. I then left the guns. Shortly after this I saw Lt. Coghill, who told me Col. Pulleine had been killed.

Near the river I saw Lt. Melvill, 1/24th, with a colour, the staff being broken.

I also saw Lt. Smith-Dorrien assisting a wounded man. During the action, cease firing was sounded twice.

I am, etc.,

H.T. Curling, Lt. R.A.

Another (undated) letter from Curling, probably written in mid February 1879, also contains an account of the battle:

I was left in camp alone with my two guns, an order being given at 2 in the morning for all the force, except the 1/24th Regt. and the two guns to start at daylight. I got up about 6 and looked after the horses left in camp. At 7.30 I got a message to turn out at once and we got ready in about 10 minutes, forming up by the 1/24th on their parade ground. The companies were very weak, no more than 50 in each, and there were only 6 of them in all. We congratulated ourselves on the chance of our being attacked and hoped that our small numbers might induce the Zulus to come on. They were then 1000 or 2000 strong on some hills about 2 miles off. I suppose that not more than half the men left in camp took part in its defence as it was not considered necessary and they were left in as cooks etc. We remained outside the 24th camp for 3 hours and all had breakfast together. There must have been twenty of us altogether and not one escaped except myself.

The 1/24th had been in the last war and had often seen large bodies of Caffirs (Sic) before. Not one of us dreamt that there was the least danger and all we hoped for was the fight might come off before the General returned. In the meantime, our dinner had been cooked and as there seemed no chance of our being attacked, we broke off and went to our tents. When we were turned out again, about 12 of the Zulus were only showing on our left and we only prepared to defend the approaches to that side of the camp. All the time that we were idle in camp the Zulus were surrounding us with a huge circle several miles in circumference and hidden by hills from our sight. When the action once began, we saw nothing but what was going on in our immediate front. We none of us felt the least anxious as to the result for although they came on in immense numbers we felt it was impossible they could force a way through us. When the order to retire came and we trotted up to the camp to take up a fresh position we found the camp full of the enemy and you can imagine our horror. There was not time to think and we galloped right through the Zulus losing all the men except the drivers and one or two gunners.

When I shall see you all again, if ever, I have no idea. Even if everything goes on well, not for a year at least. This fighting is not glorious work: it is as dangerous as fighting against Europeans and there is little credit to be got in fighting savages. The whole of Natal is in mourning. Almost all the available young men in the colony are volunteers. They are all in the field now and more than 100 of them were killed in this action. Many of them are Gentlemen and they set an example to regular troops in the way they stand the fatigues and drudgery of camp life. A soldier is individually no use in this warfare. When on sentry, he cannot see a Caffir 10 yards off and he can do nothing until he is ordered to do it. They behaved splendidly, however, in this fight. They were all killed in the ranks as they stood. Not a single man escaped from those companies that were placed to defend the camp. Indeed, they were completely cut off from any retreat and could not do as we did, gallop through the Zulus.

When last I saw them, they were retreating steadily but I believe a rush was made and they were all killed in a few minutes.

Both my servant and groom were in camp and escaped in a wonderful way. They both got horses and got away in their shirt sleeve (sic) and on bare backed horses.

I lost the whole of my division, except 3 men who got away from camp. Many of these have been with me for years and it is terrible to think of their all being gone.

Another thing that strikes me very much, is how little impression the sad affair seems to make on everybody. You hear the men singing just the same as if they had not lost half their number a week ago. The Officers too seem to be just as cheerful and take just as much trouble about their food, etc. as if nothing happened.

I trust you have had no anxiety about me: the Officer who took the official telegram down to Pietermaritzburg had a list of the Officers killed, which list we were told was telegraphed to Cape Town and sent off by the special steamer to St. Vincent where it will be wired to England.

I suppose by this time you are at Cannes so you will not get this until long after you have seen accounts of everything in the Papers. There are two letters from Mama due now and I hope the mail we expect today may bring them. Willy will open this of course and then send it on to you. I hope you are all quite well and that Cannes suits your health. Give my love to Papa and Emmy and believe me still able to thank God to sign myself.

Your most affect Son

H T Curling

The last paragraph shows signs of confusion, in that it is signed *Your most affect Son*, but refers to both his Mother and Father indirectly. Apart from this peculiarity, it appears unlikely that this letter is the one referred to in the following letter written from Ladysmith and dated 18th March:

My dear Mama,

I am afraid I frightened you terribly when I wrote telling you I had got the fever. I foolishly wrote just when I was bad with the fever and must have written terrible nonsense. I never left my tent at Helpmakar for fifteen days. The fever got better but I could eat nothing and was getting weaker every day, so they sent me down here in a ambulance, with a lot of other men and I began to get better from the moment we left Helpmakar and I am allright (sic) now except being a little weak. It is a very bad fever and is accompanied by a violent diarrhea (sic).

Men were dying daily from it at Helpmakar and 60 out of 300 men there were in Hospital.

The Company of Engineers had lost 9 men out of 120 and have half their number ill still.

I am so very sorry I wrote such a stupid letter but I hardly knew what I was doing at the time.

I hope you are still quite well and find the climate agrees with you. I was so pleased to hear you got over the journey so well. Give my love to Papa: I am so ashamed of having written that stupid letter. The church is the Hospital here and I am living with three other sick officers in the vestry. I have not written before as I have not been well enough.

Give my love to Emmy and believe me

Your most affect Son

H T Curling

(This letter is written in a shakier and much larger hand than the others, possibly due to the fever he contracted after the retreat from Isandlwana)).

Before this 18th March letter, there is a gap of around four weeks in the normal weekly pattern, but by the end of March, Curling had resumed his normal duties, and continued to carry them out until he sailed to India early in 1880. The significance of this is that one reason for rejecting his version of events is the allegation that he suffered a nervous breakdown, probably untrue but he did suffer fever, coupled with his Commanding Officer's note that he was badly shaken by the battle. But he admits this in a letter dated 28th Jan. - *I am pretty well done up, and another week of this will be too much*. And with the exceptions noted above, which could be explained by the severe fever, his letters are frequent, coherent and extensive.

The crux of the difference between Curling's version and that accepted by the Natal historians is that they believe that the mules (horses?) and limbers plunged into a transverse donga beside Black's Koppie whereas Curling consistently maintained that the guns ran along the ravine for some 400 yds. and then stuck.

Lieutenant Milne, R.N., Chelmsford's naval liaison officer, recorded in his *Report on Proceedings, 21st - 24th January, 1879*:

There is a report that one gun was seen to tumble into a nullah but whether it was spiked or not is not known.

Lieutenant W.F.D. Cochrane's report, published in the London Gazette on 21st March, can be interpreted either way:

The guns moved from left to right across the camp and endeavoured to take the road to Rorke's Drift: but finding this in the hands of the enemy, turned off to the left, came to grief in a "Donga", and had to be abandoned.

The Court of Inquiry evidence is suspect, because Lt-Col Harness, one of the three members, insisted that it should not express an opinion. He also stated that a lot more evidence was heard, but was ignored in the record as being repetitive or worthless. (Harness had arrived at Helpmakaar on 24th Jan. and doubtless interviewed Curling at length, before his evidence was recorded on the 26th. The Court opened on 27th Jan.). All concerned from Lord Chelmsford downwards had a vested interest in putting the best possible interpretation on the sorry story. Was Curling's evidence too damaging to record in full, knowing that if it was recorded, it would subsequently be thoroughly examined?

Lt. Smith-Dorrien later wrote (Memories of 48 years service)

I came on the two guns which must have been sent out of camp before the Zulus charged home. They appeared to me to be upset in a donga and to be surrounded by Zulus ... I caught up Curling and spoke to him, pointing out that the Zulus were all around, and urging him to push on, which he did.

The strongest support for Curling's version is to be found in Capt. Essex's evidence to the Court of Inquiry, written at Rorke's Drift on 24th January, and handed in on or after the 27th:

The retreat became in a few minutes general, and in a direction towards the road to Rorke's Drift. Before, however, we gained the neck near the Isandula Hill, the enemy had arrived on that portion of the field also, and the large circle he had now formed closed in on us. The only space which appeared opened was down a deep gully running to the South of the road, into which we plunged in great confusion. The enemy followed us closely and kept up with us, at first on both flanks, then on our right flank only, firing occasionally, but chiefly making use of the assegais. It was now about 1.30 p.m.: about this period, 2 guns with which Major Smith and Lt. Curling R.A. were returning with great difficulty, owing to the nature of the ground, and I understood were just a few seconds late. Further on, the ground passed over on our retreat would, at any other time, be looked upon as impractical for horsemen to descend, and many losses occurred, owing to horses falling, and the enemy coming up with the riders: about half a mile from the neck, the retreat had to be carried on in single file, and in this manner, the Buffalo river was gained at a point about 5 miles below Rorke's Drift..."

It is perhaps significant that Curling wrote after his return to the battlefield in May that the gun limber was "just where I left it". Curling was not in command, and wrote on the 2nd February 1879 that Smith's return "...of course relieved me of all responsibility as to the movement of the guns..." Hence, apart from any aspect of loyalty to a dead brother officer, he was almost in the position of an impartial observer. And though Smith was wounded before the retirement, he was still able to do his duty up to the time he was killed near Fugitives' Drift. Lt. Smith-Dorrien recalled that whilst he was tending a wounded man there, there was a shout of

Get on man, the Zulus are on top of you!... I turned round and saw Major Smith R.A., who was commanding the section of guns, as white as a sheet, and bleeding profusely; and in a second we were surrounded, and assegais accounted for poor Smith, my wounded MI (mounted infantry) friend and my horse. With the help of my revolver, and a wild jump down the rocks, I found myself in the Buffalo river.

Apart from the question of the exact point where the guns were abandoned, Curling's report and letters are certainly consistent.

It is not surprising that the enquiry disregarded his evidence, his account confirmed Pulleine's inability, probably a result of his lack of fighting experience, both to prepare for the Zulu attack and then to take appropriate measures to counter it. Curling's account of the chaos during the battle would have made painful reading for the enquiry, the press and public.

#### **Note.**

Lt. Curling's South Africa Campaign medal and letters belong to Dr Adrian Greaves. Members are welcome to see them either by arrangement or when they are on public display. Alternatively, all the letters have been published; see.... *The Curling letters of the Zulu War* by Greaves and Best Pen & Sword.