

In 1878, Lord Chelmsford wrote specific orders that British positions in Zululand must be laagered or entrenched at night. Why were these specific orders for protecting vulnerable positions ignored at Isandlwana? Could one reason be that officers were reluctant to challenge verbal orders to the contrary, namely not to laager?

On 14th January, Maj. W.M Dunbar of the 2/24th was sent on with four companies of his battalion and some native troops to the Ibashe valley, between Rorke's Drift and Isandlwana, to repair the old wagon road and to make a depot for firewood. Dunbar was ordered to pitch his tents beneath a rock outcrop close to Sihayo's homestead and in heavy thorn with no field of fire. He did his best to clear the ground but was obliged to mount strong guards every night with men who had been working all day, and on the 16th when Lord Chelmsford and his staff, with Glyn and other officers and an escort, rode up to inspect the work, he made his fears known to them and asked for permission to move his camp to the other side of the stream. In the discussion that followed, Chelmsford's senior staff officer, Lt. Col. Crealock, seems to have lost his temper and remarked impatiently "if Maj. Dunbar is afraid to stay there, we could send someone who was not". (1) Dunbar, a big imposing man and the most experienced field officer, walked off in a rage and resigned his commission the spot but within the hour he was persuaded by Chelmsford to hold his hand for the time being.

This incident must soon have become known to his fellow officers. Until his promotion in 1874, Dunbar had been the senior captain of the 1/24th. He had the most distinguished war record of any officer in the two battalions. The embarrassment caused to both Chelmsford and Glyn, whose relationship was already difficult, should not be underestimated.

A few days later, on the 21st, according to the *Historical Records of the 24th Regiment*, a field officer of the 2/24th being on duty with the picquets expressed strong misgivings to the staff officer who was showing him the line to occupy, pointing out that the broken ground was no protection and that there was no picquet in the rear. (2) "Well Sir" was the reply, "if you are nervous we will put a picquet of the pioneers there". The field officer was evidently Dunbar. On the same day Lt. Melvill remarked to this same field officer, "I know what you are thinking by your face, Sir, you are abusing this camp and you are quite right!" (3)

Editor's note.

There can be little doubt that, in any event, even battle experienced junior officers would have been reluctant to challenge or query any order from a senior officer. This might also explain why, at the point of the main Zulu attack, all the 24th officers totally obeyed their orders to hold their positions so far out from the main camp at Isandlwana even as the Zulu army closed with them. They would have been fully aware of their vulnerability but clearly they obeyed their orders to remain in extended line, right up to the final bugle call to retreat. As the call sounded, they were overwhelmed. Could this also have been the reason why Lt. Col. Pulleine continued following Chelmsford's last order to prepare to abandon Isandlwana camp even as the Zulus approached? Was the risk of humiliation, if he was proved wrong, greater than the risk of defeat?

References.

1. *There Will be an Awful Row at Home About This*, Ian Knight, 1987
2. *Ibid.*
3. From an unpublished narrative by Capt. (later Lt. General) W Penn Symons in the 24th Regimental Museum at Brecon, Penn Symons, who was killed at Talana in 1899, was asked by the Queen not to publish this account in Chelmsford's lifetime. He was a 2/24th officer.