ISANDLWANA, RORKE'S DRIFT AND THE LIMITATIONS OF MEMORY

By Ian Knight

In his memoir of a long and active military career, General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien recalled a famous incident from the battle of Isandlwana;

I will mention a story which speaks for the coolness and discipline of the regiment. I, having no particular duty to perform in camp, when I saw the whole Zulu army advancing, had collected camp stragglers, such as artillerymen in charge of spare horses, officers' servants, sick, etc, and had taken them to the ammunition-boxes, where we broke them open as fast as we could, and kept sending out the packets to the firing line. In those days the boxes were screwed down and it was a very difficult job to get them open, and it was owing to this battle that the construction of ammunition boxes was changed.

When I had been at this for some time, and the 1/24th had fallen back to where we were, with the Zulus following closely, Bloomfield, the quartermaster of the 2/24th, said to me in regard to the boxes I was then breaking open, 'For heaven's sake, don't do that, man, for it belongs to our battalion.' And I replied, 'Hang it all, you don't want a requisition now, do you?' It was about this time, too, that a Colonial named Du Bois, a wagon-conductor, said to me, 'The game is up. If I had a good horse I would ride straight to Maritzburg.'(1).

It's a powerful image, that glimpse of the meticulous Quartermaster, sticking to his orders at the obvious expense of his duty, and it strikes deep cords with modern preconceptions regarding the apparent lack of flexibility and imagination which prevailed in the British Army of the high-Victorian era. And it offers, what's more, a simple answer to the question which deeply troubled both the military establishment and the British public for half a century after the battle and who, deeply convinced of their moral and military superiority, had struggled to come to terms with what had 'gone wrong' so disastrously at Isandlwana. For Smith-Dorrien himself, that recollected fragment provided a simple and clean solution -

After the war, the Zulus, who were a delightfully naïve and truthful people, told us that the [British] fire was too hot for them and they were on the verge of retreat, when suddenly the fire slackened and on they came again. The reader will ask why the fire slackened, and the answer is, alas! because with thousands of rounds in the wagons 400 yards to the rear, there was none in the firing line; all those had been used up. (2).

If the failure to provide an efficient means of re-supplying the firing companies in the front line represented a logistical collapse of cataclysmic proportions, it did at least explain the magnitude of the defeat in a way which excused the British commanders, and their men, from a more painful analysis of their true failings - of under-estimating their Zulu enemy, of inadequate intelligence, of tactical decisions based on a critical misunderstanding of the unfolding situation, and, perhaps the most heinous sin of all, of denying the skill and courage of their opponents.

Small wonder, then, that Smith-Dorrien's vignette was taken up by a generation of writers, not least Donald R. Morris - for whom it lay at the very heart of his reconstruction of Isandlwana in his *magnum opus, The Washing of the Spears* (1965) - and further enshrined in the popular consciousness by Peter Vaughan's bravura performance as Quartermaster Bloomfield, extolling queuing soldiers to 'Wait your turn, boy, wait your turn!' as the British line collapses all about them, in the 1979 movie epic *Zulu Dawn.*

And yet all is not as it seems with a first glance at Smith-Dorrien's account. A careful examination reveals more to be contested than simply the question of ammunition supply, and raises deeper questions about the process of recalling traumatic events and issues with all eye-witness testimony which every historian must address.

These points emerge because - fortunately for those trying to make sense of the battle at a distance of almost a century and a half - Smith-Dorrien did not write just one account of Isandlwana. In another he wrote,

> At about ten thirty the Zulus were seen coming over the hills in thousands. They were in most perfect order, and seemed to be in about twenty rows of skirmishers one behind the other. They were in a semi-circle round our two flanks and in front of us and must have covered several miles of ground. Nobody knows how many there were of them, but the general idea is at least 20,000. Well, to cut the account short, in half an hour they were right up to the camp. I was out with the front companies of the 24th handing them spare ammunition. Bullets were flying all over the place, but I hardly seemed to notice them. The Zulus nearly all had firearms of some kind and lots of ammunition. Before we knew where we were they came right into the camp, assegaing everybody right and left. (3).

The differences between these two accounts are striking. There is no mention here of the incident with Qm. Bloomfield, no more than a cursory attempt to describe the disaster as a whole, and certainly little attempt to explain or excuse it. Furthermore, there is a significant apparent contradiction between the two; in one account Smith-Dorrien depicts himself at the very height of the battle, struggling - by implication largely without success - to secure a line of re-supply from the reserve ammunition wagons behind the tents. In the other, he simply says 'I was out with the front companies of the 24th handing them spare ammunition'.

Are these discrepancies sufficient to invalidate Smith-Dorrien's testimony - was he really in two places at one time, doing in one account what he specifically says he was unable to do in the other? - or can they be resolved? And if they can, does that resolution suggest anything of the way major traumatic events are recollected by those who took part in them that can be of use to the historian?

In fact, the chief differences between the two accounts are of emphasis and timing, and the clues to unravel them are provided by another survivor, Captain Edward Essex, in a letter written just a few days after the battle;

> … I went to the camp to bring up a fresh supply [of ammunition]. I got such men as were not engaged, bandsmen, cooks etc., to assist me, and sent them up to the line under charge of an officer, and I followed with more ammunition in a mule cart. In loading the latter I helped the Quartermaster of the 2nd Battalion, 24th Regiment, to places the boxes in a cart, and while doing so the poor fellow was shot dead. (4)

Since Essex was the Column's Director of Transport, and Smith-Dorrien a junior transport officer, it is difficult to argue other than that the officer Essex sent out to the line was Smith-Dorrien himself, an impression largely confirmed by both Smith-Dorrien's own accounts. Yet the timing in Essex's account is significant, for he refers to sending those men 'not engaged' to secure more ammunition at about the time when Mostyn and Cavaye's companies retired from the outlying ridges closer to the camp. At that point, the crisis of the battle was some way off, and indeed by his own account Essex had time to despatch his group to the line, and load up a mule wagon and take that out to the line himself, before that crisis occurred. The point is significant because, if Essex had sent Smith-Dorrien to look for the reserve supply when he first became concerned about ammunition, then Smith-Dorrien's encounter took place earlier than Smith-Dorrien's autobiography implies. So far from being on the eve of the British collapse - 'The game is up!' - it must have taken place shortly after the Zulu centre deployed to attack, when the outcome of the battle was still very much to be decided. And, from Essex's description, a new sequence of events emerges in which Smith-Dorrien is sent, with a group of men, to secure ammunition, is initially refused by Bloomfield who then relents under Essex's greater authority. Smith-Dorrien then goes out with his group to the line with an initial supply - and did indeed spend the rest of the battle 'out with the front companies of the 24th'.

As an aside, there is another factor which should excuse Bloomfield from the general charge of obduracy which has frequently been levelled against him. Most of the men in the firing line were members of the 1st 24th but their ammunition reserve lay at the furthest point of the camp. Since the 2nd 24th camp was nearer, it was to their reserve that Smith-Dorrien and his men had naturally reported. Bloomfield, however, had good reasons to object to the haphazard plundering of his battalion's reserve at the hands of a young (Smith-Dorrien was nineteen at the time) unattached officer - Bloomfield had been ordered to keep the 2/24th's reserve ammunition ready to despatch it to Lord Chelmsford should he require it (the 2/24th having marched out with Chelmsford before dawn that morning). Had Bloomfield issued his supply without proper justification there might have been serious repercussions should the Zulu attack on the camp have proved a feint, and Chelmsford himself been heavily engaged.

Why, then, did Smith-Dorrien offer two very different and apparently conflicting accounts of his actions? In the case of the Anglo-Zulu War there are strong suggestions that those who were frequently asked to describe their experiences steadily modified their accounts into forms which not only satisfied the curiosity of others but which also helped the participant better understand their own experiences themselves. In fact, the second of the two narratives given here - in which he refers to being 'out with the front companies' - was Smith-Dorrien's earliest description of Isandlwana, written in a letter to his father from Rorke's Drift just a few days after the battle. Clearly, at that point, what struck him as most memorable about his participation was his forward role. He did not attach the same significance to the Bloomfield anecdote that he would later, and clearly did not think it worth mentioning within the context of a family letter.

Indeed, it is significant that whilst Smith-Dorrien seems to have settled in his own mind the reason for the disaster by about 1900 - and begun to relate the Bloomfield anecdote within that context - the oft-quoted account in his memoirs was actually written much later in his life. The Zulu campaign was his first taste of active service, and he would go on to enjoy a long and very successful military career, and indeed the title of his autobiography suggests something of the distance which had elapsed between his actual experience at Isandlwana and best-known recollection of it - it is called *Memories of Forty-Eight Years' Service.* It is interesting to note, too, that in that intervening half-century Smith-Dorrien had been asked many times about not only his own experiences in the battle, but to offer up some explanation for the defeat. The Smith-Dorrien Papers, in the Imperial War Museum in London, include a scrap-book which contains press clippings of a number of public talks Smith-Dorrien gave over the years in which his account of Isandlwana is mentioned, and the Bloomfield incident is offered up as a means of explaining it to his audience. And there can be little doubt that by that point Smith-Dorrien had genuinely arrived at that conclusion himself.

Another veteran of the war who famously gave an account of his experiences on several occasions - and for whom the same process can be seen to be at work - was Alfred Henry Hook who, as a Private in B Company, 2/24th, had been awarded the Victoria Cross for his gallantry in the defence of the hospital at Rorke's Drift. Hook was not literate himself, and so all his accounts were filtered through the perceptions of his interviewers, and shaped by the questions they chose to ask him - or not to ask. Nevertheless it is interesting to note that in later life Hook became a member of the Corps of Commissionaires and worked as a cloakroom attendant at the British Museum - a position which brought him into contact with many literate and inquiring individuals who were curious about his story. But if, later in life, Hook was able to offer a fluent narrative which apparently seamlessly stitched together the story of the battle with his own personal experiences, his earliest accounts were both more garbled and more intense. In particular, he included a number of shocking details of the horrific fighting in those first accounts which were left out of the later smoother descriptions for wider public consumption. Like many soldiers before and since, he confessed 'I don't like talking of these things' - and he no doubt found, too, that representatives of the British public, used to imagining the battle in the heroic imagery of contemporary illustrated newspapers and battle painters, didn't particularly like to hear about them either. Among the incidents described by Hook in the first few years after the battle were the fact that at one point in the fight for the hospital 'I was fighting "over the soles of my boots in blood"', and that afterwards Sergeant Maxfield's body was so badly burnt that 'there wasn't much left to identify - only a small piece of his shirt as large as a lady's handkerchief, and a small part of his body, all the rest was burnt' (5). In another little-known early account he left little doubt as to the brutal nature of close-quarter combat in the claustrophobic hospital rooms;

…in the hospital I had my top coat and a rug. A young Zulu - he was only about

> twenty - stole this, and was making off with them when he was disabled, and I came and caught him with my things. I clubbed my rifle, brought it down with all my force on his head - and smashed - not the Zulu's skull, but the stock of my rifle all to pieces. He lay quiet for about five minutes, and then began to wink his eyes a bit, so I gave him the contents of the barrel in his head, and finished him off. (6)

It is interesting to note that this jagged and uncomfortable content did not make it into Hook's later, more fluent accounts. Indeed, those which were both the most circulated at the time and are best known now - notably those published in *The Strand Magazine* (1891), *The VC* (1904) and *The Royal Magazine* (1905) - not only lack such grisly details but reveal a narrative similarity that suggest that, by that time, Hook had become considerably more practised at telling his story and comfortable in his own presentation of it.

Another famous voice from Rorke's Drift is that of Frank Bourne who was a young Colour Sergeant with B Company at the time of the battle, but whose accounts were recorded during the 1930s, when he was an elderly Colonel. In one from 1934 he says of the Zulus,

> The main body occupied the cover and rocks on the hillside and kept up a steady fire into our defences. Here let me say they were armed with a number of old smooth-bore guns, and also several Martini Henry rifles which they had taken from our dead at Isandhlwana and with ammunition from the boxes found on the dead mules at that camp, the mules having bolted when the camp was attacked thus preventing anyone from getting at the boxes to open them. (7)

The point is of interest because Bourne is one of the few eyewitnesses to assert that the Zulus deployed captured Martini-Henry rifles at Rorke's Drift. There is no doubt he is a credible witness, yet this reference clearly includes information which could not have been available to him at the time; at Rorke's Drift the garrison knew nothing of the detailed events at Isandlwana. The story of the mules bolting with their supply of ammunition boxes and apparently falling into Zulu hands was, however, included in the Glennie, Paton and Penn-Symons *Historical Records of the 24th Regiment*, published in 1893, and which Bourne might fairly be supposed to have read. Were Bourne's impressions of his own experiences at Rorke's Drift unduly influenced by knowledge acquired after the event? Learning, years later, that the Zulus had captured British rifles at Isandlwana, did he re-interpret his experiences at the time to accommodate that knowledge? Did he, in other words, over the general din and chaos of battle, identify the sound of Martini-Henrys being fired against the defenders at the time - or did he merely think he did afterwards, and was it a 'false memory' implanted by extra information supplied by the Regimental history?

Another questionable area concerns the timing of dramatic events. The experience of combat can distort perception of time, making some incidents seem to pass more quickly than they actually did or stretching others out, giving them an almost dream-like slow-motion quality. Often, a participant will have only the haziest sense of the time when an event began or ended, and that distortion is likely to be exaggerated in the memory with time. Moreover, many ordinary soldiers would not have had watches, and so would only be able to judge time by the passage of the day, and in relation to common military routine. Thus it is not usual for an eyewitness to offer no more detail than that a battle started 'mid-morning', mid-afternoon', or 'in the evening', and to have only a vague sense of when it ended. Officers' accounts might be marginally more reliable, since they probably possessed a time-piece, but there is no guarantee that they thought to check it at crucial moments during the action. We might, for example, take it as fairly reliable that the first British artillery salvoes at the battle of Khambula were fired at 1.45 PM since Evelyn Wood mentions it in his report - and, having watched the Zulu advance for several hours before-hand, and carefully paced his own response to meet it, it is a reasonable assumption that he checked the time when battle actually commenced. Similarly, the fact that Lt. Chard notes rather meticulously that the first shots between Hlubi's horsemen and the advancing Zulus at Rorke's Drift occurred at 4.20 PM and that the first Zulu attack developed at 4.30 suggests that he too, may have checked his watch. Yet Chard's perception was not entirely shared by other members of the garrison.

Trooper Harry Lugg of the Natal Mounted Police, writing shortly after the event, thought the battle began ‘at about three thirty’, Pte. Thomas Stevens thought ‘it begun about three o’clock’, Sgt. George Smith ‘at about 2.30’, whilst Evan Jones, thinking back from the distance of 1931, thought ’they attacked just after mid-day’ (8).

Similar confusion dogs one of the few incidents at Isandlwana which can be timed to any certainty - the arrival at the camp and subsequent departure of Col. Durnford and his column. Lt. William Cochrane, who was on Durnford’s staff, noted with some precision at the Court of Inquiry (held at Helpmekaar on 27 January 1879) that Durnford arrived at Isandlwana ‘at about 10 a.m.’ - a time with which Captain Edward Essex concurred. But whilst Essex thought Durnford left again at ‘about 10.30’, Lt. Henry Curling thought ‘he left about 11 o’clock’. Lt. Harry Davies, who, as the commander of the Edendale troop, was a member of Durnford’s column, estimated in his official report that Durnford arrived at Isandlwana at about 9.45 a.m., and rode out again at about 11.15. In a longer letter Cochrane further muddied the water by hinting at a wider margin of error than was implied in his evidence to the Court of Inquiry, suggesting that Durnford arrived ‘about ten or ten thirty a.m.’ (9). Within the broader context of events, of course, such discrepancies can be minor - but even an acceptable margin of error, of ten minutes either side of an estimated time, can make such a huge difference to theoretical analyses of any battle based on assumptions of distances and the speed at which men moved as to render them little more than wishful thinking.

For the most part, of course, by careful analysis of the various sources it is possible to arrive at a consensus regarding questions of timing, but, unless we are entirely confident of the presence of the man with the watch and a particularly good memory, it must always remain such - a consensus, rather than a fixed and precise point of reference.

An awareness that all sources are, to a greater or lesser degree, subject to the influence of these forces - of memory damaged by trauma or distorted by ‘false memory’, of the natural tendency to smooth impressions into a cohesive narrative, to blot out painful recollections or, conversely, to attribute to them a narrative weight which, in the broader context, they do not deserve, to muddle questions of time, distance and sequence, or simply when remembering long after the event to become less certain of them - is essential to any historian trying to analyse them. It does, however, make reconstruction of large scale dramatic events like the battles of Isandlwana and Rorke’s Drift particularly difficult, the more so with Isandlwana since in fact eyewitness accounts have survived from only a tiny cross-section of those involved.

One last example will illustrate the pitfalls. *The Natal Witness* of 18 February 1879 included a letter by an anonymous survivor of Isandlwana which described his escape with an unsettling degree of honesty. It is not clear whether the *Witness* knew his identity, but if so they chose not to reveal it, since the editor was clearly unimpressed by his actions, and ran the letter under the headline ‘A Poltroon’s Account of Isandhlwana and Rorke’s Drift’. In the letter, the survivor, an officer of the 3rd NNC, described being sent to Captain Barry’s outlying NNC piquet to investigate a report from Barry regarding Zulu movements on the high ground beyond the camp. He returned to camp to find Durnford had arrived, and ‘shortly afterwards these men were put into action’. The narrator describes the broad outline of the subsequent battle before relating his own escape and admitting to a degree of ruthlessness which is usually masked in most survivor‘s accounts;

> The last shot before I mounted my horse was about 30 yards from them. I then mounted and gave my horse the reins, but got only about 300 yards when it was shot under me. Some of Durnford’s men came past on horseback; I caught at the bridle and got firm hold of the reins, it checked the horse and sent the rider to the ground; the poor devil was too frightened to look for the horse but ran for it. I made one jump into the saddle and started again …(10)

Unhorsed twice more during the flight, the narrator eventually secured another after he accosted some men leading spare horses and ‘levelled my gun at one and told him if he didn’t give me a horse I would blow out his brains’. He then ’rode in company with about 150 of Col. Durnford’s men towards Rorke’s Drift … I arrived at this place in time to give them warning'. Staying at Rorke's Drift 'we made some kind of wall, and made several loopholes in the two houses when the savages came down on us but we mowed them down.'

Only one officer of the NNC is known to have carried reports too and from Barry's piquet on the morning of the battle, to have escaped by way of the Rorke's Drift road, and to have claimed to have remained to fight at Rorke's Drift - Lt. Gert Wilhelm Adendorff. With one exception, the account in this letter tallies with other references to Adendorff's movements on the day. Moreover, the letter reveals some occasionally stilted language or phrasing which might, perhaps, be interpreted as a reflection of Adendorff's German ancestry - there are other hints from that day that his command of English might not have been fluent. Since the original addressee of the letter is not noted it is even possible it might have been written to a relative, perhaps in German, and passed on for publication in translation.

It is the one exception regarding corroborating evidence concerning Adendorff's movements, however, that highlights the problematic nature of eyewitness perceptions of traumatic events. In his long official report of the day's events, Lt. Walter Higginson, who was attached to the same NNC company as Adendorff, confirmed that Adendorff had been sent out to Barry's piquet early on the morning of the 22nd. But there is a small but significant difference of timing; in Higginson's version, Adendorff returned with his report and Higginson himself was then sent out to verify it (one might wonder whether this was because Adendorff could not convey the situation clearly enough); only whilst Higginson himself was then out did Durnford's command arrive in the camp. The writer of the *Witness* letter, on the other hand, apparently found Durnford already in camp on his return from Barry's piquet, placing either his own movements later in the morning, or Durnford's arrival earlier than Higginson suggests.

The chief importance of the difference, of course, is that it questions the veracity of the letter-writer in general, and might then cast some doubt upon the remainder of his experiences. Yet that difference is arguably not as great as it first seems. Adendorff was giving a sweeping impression of his own movements, in which he summed up the early comings and goings of various parties in no more than a sentence or two, whilst Higginson was attempting a more detailed account for the official record. Higginson's readers - his military superiors - would expect a degree of precision from his account which modern readers of Adendorff's account might hope for, but which his contemporary readers would probably not expect.

Indeed, taking into account the effect of the features outlined above on the memory of those who took part - and that either Adendorff of Higginson muddled the sequence of events, or that Adendorff simply expressed himself badly - the importance of the contradiction between them shrinks away exponentially.

The alternative, after all, is to suggest that the anonymous letter in the *Witness* was not written by Adendorff at all, but by some other officer of the NNC who shared the same extraordinary and otherwise unique story as Adendorff, who also apparently escaped by way of the road in the company of Hlubi's mounted men, who warned the garrison at Rorke's Drift of their impending attack, and who went on to participate in that second battle - but whose presence otherwise has been mysteriously erased from the pages of history.

NOTES;

(1). Smith-Dorrien, *Memories of Forty-Eight Years' Service*, London, 1925.

(2). Ibid.

(3). Smith-Dorrien, letter written in the last week of January 1879, published in *The Brecon County Times* 15 March 1879, later reprinted in *The Illustrated London News* and Frank Emery's *The Red Soldier*, London 1977.

(4). Essex, letter dated 26 January 1879 published in *The Times, 2 April 1879.*

(5). Hook's first account was published in an unidentified West-country newspaper, 21 May 1881, and is reproduced in Barry C. Johnson's *Hook of Rorke's Drift*, Birmingham, 2004.

(6). Account published in *Rare Bits* c. 1883, quoted in Barry Johnson, *Hook of Rorke's Drift.*

(7). Bourne, account in *The Northern Mail* 17 May 1934, reproduced in Alan Baynham Jones' and Lee Stevenson's *Rorke's Drift, By Those Who Were There*, Brighton, 2003.

(8). These accounts are reproduced in Baynham Jones and Stevenson, *Rorke's Drift, By Those Who Were There.*
(9). Cochrane's evidence to the Court of Inquiry was published in British Parliamentary Papers, and his letter *The Hereford Times*, 29 March 1879 (and reproduced in Frank Emery's *The Red Soldier*). Essex's accounts are in his evidence to the Court of Inquiry and in his letter to *The Times*; Harry Davies' official report is in the National Archives, Kew, London.
(10). The anonymous letter attributable to Adendorff was printed in *The Natal Witness* on 18 February; Higginson's official report is in the National Archives, Kew.