

Lieut. Adendorff – Rorke’s Drift Defender – Fact or Fiction?

By Sam Stopps

It has been debated greatly since Donald Morris published his book, *The Washing of the Spears*, in the 1960s as to whether or not Lieut. Gert Adendorff 1/3rd NNC was a defender at Rorke’s Drift and if he left the Battle of Isandlwana early. In this article I hope to dispel any doubt on this matter and prove once and for all that Gert Adendorff was one of the heroic defenders at the Mission Station at Rorke’s Drift.

When Lord Chelmsford left early on the morning of the 22nd January to assist Major Dartnell, Adendorff remained behind with No. 6 Company NNC under Captain Krohn and Lieut. Higginson.(1) When several reports arrived in from the picquets that a large body of Zulus had been sighted advancing on the camp, all the forces were ordered to stand to, with the NNC companies taking position on their parade ground as the 6 Companies of the 24th stood to on the 2/24th parade ground. At some point that morning Adendorff was sent to the picquets to get a clear report of what was happening. Soon after Adendorff arrived back, Higginson was sent out to the picquets; perhaps Adendorff’s report had been incomprehensible as English was not his first language. By the time Higginson had arrived back, Colonel Durnford and his force had reached the Isandlwana camp and orders were given for the men to fall out. At some point a report was received by Durnford to the effect that the Zulus were retiring in all directions; Durnford decided to leave camp and stop these Zulus from cutting Lord Chelmsford off from the camp. What happened next was one of Britain’s worst military disasters. Durnford’s men discovered the main Zulu Army which proceeded to attack and destroy the camp at Isandlwana. Of over 1,800 people that were in the camp when the battle began, perhaps as few as 87 white men escaped with their lives, with the fate of hundreds of natives who fought for the British unknown. During the battle Adendorff’s company was held in reserve formed up in front of the camp. Perhaps in the rush of what was happening Pulleine simply forgot about them. When Durnford abandoned his stand in the Donga and the Zulus began to advance on the camp from the rear, the main firing line was ordered to fall back. While the 24th Companies closed ranks and began to increase their fire as they retreated slowly on the camp (2), the majority of the native units broke down in a panic. Higginson, still with his Company recorded that

Capt. Krohn, Lieut. Ordendorf and myself had been firing for some time on the right of our companies tents, and when we saw the soldiers retreating we went for our horses which we had fastened close to us to be ready for any emergency.(3)

At this point it would be clear to Adendorff that the battle was lost, and most likely he joined the fleeing crowd fleeing the camp and heading for the Buffalo River, where many of them were caught and killed by the fleet-footed Zulu warriors pursuing them. Four years after the battle Adendorff spoke with Walter Stafford about what happened that day, Stafford recorded

A friend of mine, Lieut. Odendorff, and another man, as both could not swim, hugged the bed of the river up to the punt and were ferried across the river. It was them who gave the alarm at Rorke's Drift(4)

Back at Rorke's Drift John Chard was down at the river crossing writing letters in his tent as follows:-

My attention was called to two horsemen galloping towards us from the direction of Isandlwana. From their gesticulations and their shouts, when they were near enough to be heard, we saw that something was the matter, and on taking them over the river, one of them, Lieut. Adendorff of Lonsdale's Regiment, Natal Native Contingent, asking if I was an officer, jumped off his horse, took me on one side, and told me the camp was in the hands of the Zulus and the army destroyed; that scarcely a man had got away to tell the tale, and that probably Lord Chelmsford and the rest of the column had shared the same fate. His companion, a Carbineer, confirmed his story.(5)

Chard and the others hurried back to the mission station with the news that a large body of Zulus was on the way to attack them. With the assistance of Commissary Dalton the hospital and storehouse were fortified with mealie bags and biscuit boxes, the mission station became a fort and Adendorff's companion was sent to give warning to Helpmekaar. According to Chard, Adendorff himself called out he would stay and help with the defence of the post. Chard also makes comment that Adendorff took up a position in the storehouse and made good use of his rifle through a loophole. The battle of Rorke's Drift became known as one of the most famous stands in British history, the defenders for around 12 hours successfully held back perhaps as many as 4,000 Zulu warriors. By the time dawn came the Zulus withdrew having taken heavy casualties and the British had suffered perhaps 30 men killed or wounded. Soon afterwards, Lord Chelmsford's force arrived and relieved the post after having been made to spend the night among the dead at Isandlwana.

Evidence Gert Adendorff was a defender

John Chard wrote in his report

As far as I know, but one of the fugitives remained with us - Lieut. Adendorff, whom I have before mentioned. He remained to assist in the defence, and from a loophole in the store building, flanking the wall and Hospital, his rifle did good service. (6)

John Chard in both of his reports on the battle makes it clear that he believed Adendorff to be a defender at Rorke's Drift. There is also further evidence that Adendorff fought in the storehouse provided by Trooper Symons of the Natal Carbineers, who was out with Chelmsford's force but undoubtedly spoke to many of the men who fought in the battle, he writes

When the hospital was fired by the Zulus, the men at once set to work to pull off the thatch from the dwelling house. A German or some foreigner who was with the garrison saved that building from fire for he saw a Zulu with a lighted bunch of grass just raising it up to the eaves and promptly shot him.(7)

Although many attribute this act to Corporal Attwood, Symons makes it clear the man was a foreigner and apart from Schiess who was fighting on the barricades before he was injured, Adendorff was the only other man that would have been speaking a foreign language at Rorke's Drift. Also when one considers that over 4,000 Zulus were attacking the post, it is perfectly possible for more than one Zulu to have tried to set light to the storehouse. Private Hook recorded that

One of the horsemen was Lieutenant Adendorff and the other was a Natal Carbineer. The lieutenant stayed behind with us, and the Carbineer, who was in his shirt-sleeves, dashed on to Helpmakaar, twelve miles away to take the news there.

In the weeks following Isandlwana, Charles Harford, an officer of the Natal Native Contingent, created an Almanac with details about officers and men of the NNC, one page has the name of people who deserted, naming Captain Stephenson among them, another has the names of people who fought at Rorke's Drift. Among them is Adendorff's name; the book also contained information on Adendorff's next of kin and where they lived. To gain this information Harford is likely to have spoken to Adendorff in person and been convinced he was a defender. (8) Harford also drew a sketch of Adendorff at Rorke's Drift with some of his men when the NNC was disbanded and the Natives were handing in their weapons and equipment. (9)

Trooper Symons of the Natal Carbineers marched in with Chelmsford's force and recorded Adendorff's presence on that morning. It has been suggested that Adendorff could have deserted and returned to Rorke's Drift at a later date, but given that Symons saw him during the morning it does not seem likely Adendorff would have deserted a post only to return to it alone during the early hours of the morning with the knowledge that thousands of Zulus were in the area. No other defender makes reference to Adendorff turning up at the post during the morning, it therefore makes sense that Adendorff had been there all along and fought in the battle. (10)

Charles Norris-Newman, a war reporter, also marched in with Chelmsford's force and wrote that

The following officers were also present at the post and rendered material aid in the defence:

Dr, Reynolds, 1-24th, Lieutenant Adendorff 1-3rd NCC, Messrs. Dunne, and Dalton, of the Commissariat Department, also the Rev, Mr. Smith, and Protestant Chaplain to no 3 Column.(11)

Norris-Newman had spent several days with the officers of the Natal Native Contingent and would almost certainly have seen/met Adendorff. Being a reporter Norris-Newman would naturally have been interested in what happened and would have wanted to know in great detail what had happened in the battle.

Evaluation

There is no evidence that Gert Adendorff was not a defender at Rorke's Drift and there is plenty of evidence that suggests he was. Adendorff had no men at, and no responsibility to stay and fight at Rorke's Drift and many other people simply rode by the post without even stopping. Donald Morris seemed to be totally against Adendorff as he claims he left Isandlwana before the main battle started, was not a defender at Rorke's Drift, and deserted from Major Dartnell's force the evening before. Again there is no evidence to substantiate any of these comments and we are at a loss to know where Donald Morris got them from. It seems that Adendorff was in fact a very brave man, who can be credited with being the only man to fight at both the battles of Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift.

Sources

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2. Higginson and Mehlokazulu in the RE Journal
3. Higginson, "A report to Lord Chelmsford dated 17th of February 1879."
4. The Mysterious Lieutenant Adendorff of Rorke's Drift; Hero or Coward? By Ian Knight AZWHS
5. Chard, letter to Queen Victoria, 21st February 1880, quoted in Holme, The Noble 24th
6. Chard, letter to Queen Victoria, 21st February 1880, quoted in Holme, The Noble 24th
7. My Reminiscences of the Zulu War by J.P. (Fred) Symons
8. Information provided by John Young on the RDVC forum
9. Henry Charles Harford - 'The Beetle Collector' Hero of the Zulu War, Soldier and Entomologist.
By Dr David Payne and Emma Payne.
10. My Reminiscences of the Zulu war by J.P. (Fred) Symons
11. In Zululand with the British Army by Charles Norris-Newman
12. Pvte. Hook "How they held Rorke's Drift", The Royal Magazine, (February, 1905)

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Lastly I want to thank Stephanie Lett, who has encouraged me to get back into writing after I had given up my interest in the Zulu War.

Editor's note.

It is with pleasure that I include Sam Stopp's article. With others, I have regularly corresponded with Sam, an enthusiastic 15 year old, on a number of issues relating to the Anglo Zulu War and I am pleased that his enthusiasm has resulted in a number of well-presented articles. I accept Sam's hypothesis that Adendorff was present at Rorke's Drift although I have brought some of my doubts to Sam's attention. (See also my accompanying article '*Limitations of Memory*)