

Rorke's Drift

The enigma and analysis of the Chard Report.

By Dr Adrian Greaves

Victories and defeats have long been defining moments in our history and Rorke's Drift and Isandlwana are classic examples. Over the years much has been written about the engagement between the British and Zulus at Rorke's Drift. In terms of military engagements it was a minor event that, nevertheless, has taken full possession of the nation's imagination. At first glance it is difficult to see why it became so important and thereafter celebrated as a great victory in our history. Within days the tale began of a small force with its back to the wall, a scenario beloved by the British that became, myths and all, the epic and the legend. I accept the event is well understood by readers of this Journal; however, I would like to share a further thought to add to the debate by stating my own understanding of the event. I believe that it was not quite as reported by Lieutenant John Chard of the Royal Engineers, the officer-in-charge during the fighting.

The key to most authors' understanding of the event has been a multi-page, beautifully crafted, meticulously detailed account, with only one minor alteration, the Chard Report. The report is especially remarkable, allegedly being prepared and written within hours of the fighting by a junior engineer officer who had no fighting experience. The report was immediately seized upon, by the British military in South Africa and senior politicians at home, to explain the inexplicable. How, just hours after the defeat and annihilation of the greater part of the British force invading Zululand, (ca.1,500 men were killed by the Zulu army at Isandlwana), a small detachment under the command of this junior engineer officer could, within both sight and hours of the appalling loss, snatch an important victory from another certain defeat by the Zulus? The Chard Report was circulated by the world's press who enthusiastically wrote of the engagement, while overnight its participants became household names and national heroes. The report was presented to Queen Victoria who invited Chard, now the holder of the Victoria Cross, and promoted two ranks to Major, to a personal meeting with her at Balmoral.

The Chard Report was poured over by the military and press, it was discussed in parliament, and it remains, indeed, a masterful and significant account of a military engagement. Over the years the Report, dated 25 January 1879, and accompanying Nominal Roll of Defenders, dated 3 February 1879, both allegedly signed by Chard, have been the focus for historians and authors to write their understanding of the event and these two documents have helped form our collective understanding of what happened. As hand-written documents, they are well crafted and precise as to the names and ranks of those involved in the action's many incidents as well as detailing the numerous phases of the battle with precise times.

But then, in the opinion of this author, it all goes wrong.

I will now set out to examine a number of factors which, I believe, have previously been overlooked. As a result of considerable research, there is now serious doubt as to

who wrote the Chard Report; Chard was relatively uneducated and his military and academic skill had hitherto not been apparent - so who wrote the report, and why? In any event, the original report was signed by Chard and so, by association, he clearly allowed himself to be associated with the document. Back in 1979 the military archivist of Carnarvon Castle, Norman Holme, was dubious about the Nominal Roll's authenticity and arranged for its handwriting to be scientifically analysed. Chard was ruled out as a possible signatory (1) and its authorship remained illusive – although my own view, until recently, was that Major Clery, Chelmsford's staff officer, was possibly responsible as he had, rather inexplicably, remained behind at Rorke's Drift after the event. At the end of 2012 the Chard Report was further scientifically analysed by two independent universities in an attempt to establish the Report's author. Their reports negated my 'Clery theory' but without expressing a positive opinion as to the author's true identity. (2)

The quality of the Chard Report is superb, with regard to both its physical condition and content. It was written within two days of the battle under extremely severe weather conditions, with no shelter from the steady torrential wind and rain and with the survivors expecting a renewed Zulu attack at any moment. The only two buildings had been razed to the ground by fire and there was no writing paper left.

To move the question forward, I will momentarily overlook the accepted evidence of those present that no usable writing paper survived the battle and that the Mission Station at Rorke's Drift burned to the ground, and that the survivors suffered torrential rain during the two days the report took to be prepared. Let me charitably assume that Chard was somehow instrumental in the creation of this uniquely detailed, well-crafted and unblemished report. I am then further confronted with two problems, namely, understanding how Chard managed to remember all the details of the 130 soldiers present during the battle, bearing in mind he arrived at the mission station just an hour before the Zulus arrived, and how he could remember the overlapping sequence of events occurring, and of its participants' names and units, in complete darkness (except for the light thrown up from burning thatch), and so accurately. Chard had not previously been noted for his mental acuity or credited with much skill at report writing, neither was he noted for it subsequently. But let us assume that, on this date, this quiet and reserved junior officer rose to the occasion and within hours of the trauma of being attacked for several hours by four thousand Zulus, and with numerous casualties, not only prepared, but wrote this remarkable report. This then poses yet three further fundamental questions;

1. even if Chard had liaised with others after the event, (and no one else mentions this having occurred), why would he have bothered to write this report, and in such detail, and,
2. given the appalling circumstances, how could he have done so? and,
3. why does his report signature differ from his nominal roll of the 3rd February 1879 and his drawings of the layout of Rorke's Drift?

It is odd that Chard even considered writing the report. Initially, the engagement at Rorke's Drift was not perceived as being particularly significant either by the participants or by the army in South Africa. It was one of those events that, a week or so later, would

be used, first by senior officers and then by politicians to cover their backs, yet the report had, apparently, already been written, but why? Who had such foresight?

After all, it was unprecedented for a junior officer to prepare and write the definitive account of any military engagement. Without doubt, the military commanders and politicians involved in the disastrous invasion of Zululand all had well-established reputations at stake and used the survival of the Rorke's Drift defenders and, by implication the Chard Report, to defend the indefensible - to offset the inexplicable military defeat by the Zulus of the invading British army earlier that day at nearby Isandlwana with a 'victory' at Rorke's Drift. This 'use of the event' occurred when it was quickly realised that the defeat at Isandlwana had serious consequences for Lord Chelmsford and many of his senior staff. Using the relatively insignificant success at Rorke's Drift, just a few hours after the significant defeat at Isandlwana, involved someone deliberately determining which events, from a massive inventory of possibilities occurring at different times, would be seen as 'significant' for the purpose of hiding the utter defeat at Isandlwana behind a 'victory' at Rorke's Drift. In effect, the report would be a 'cover up'- for that is what I am suggesting occurred. Chelmsford was clearly familiar with Machiavelli who said, '*A battle that you win cancels all your mistakes*'. (4)

The process of writing the report, by whoever, actually allowed the unravelling and confusing sequence of a hectic 12 hour skirmish, peppered with many life-threatening incidents, to 'morph' into an easily understood, sanitized and succinct event. Such a complicated process, akin to creating propaganda, was unlikely to be one which Chard would have even understood, let alone have the skill or the means to undertake.

Whoever wrote the report of events successfully created a 'shifting baseline' that converted the whole confusing episode into a creditable and plausible explanation, which appears to have become real to Chard, and which would have reinforced and ordered his own memories of the chaotic event into a logical and meaningful sequence. In reality, it is difficult to deduce any interpretation of what participants perceived at Rorke's Drift, especially when they were disorientated by the chaos, noise and fear of hand-to-hand battle. This scenario is fertile ground for a confused person to unwittingly try to make sense of events, especially when, so soon after the event, 'leading questions' are posed to participants still in shock (especially by respected people in authority) as to who did what, and where - or whether someone else was even present, in their attempt to focus participants' attention on what they actually saw - or worse, what the interviewers wanted the witness to remember. It is well known that such questioning can seriously influence an individual's memory - this is one reason why 'leading questions' are inadmissible in a modern court of law.

In any traumatic on-going event, such as is experienced in the heat of battle, with the probability of one's own imminent death, where memories of seeing colleagues being killed and maimed are hard to bear, and where the reality of seeing the dead and injured cannot be altered, the only way to correct the subsequent psychological dissonance is the inadvertent and almost sub-conscious change that can occur of one's perception and interpretation of reality. In the most horrifying situations a person cannot but perceive and interpret events according to their own personal basal orientation - in Chard's case, the military system and his own position in that fixed hierarchy. Chard's interpretations and decisions during the flow of battle would have been made without reference to the 'bigger picture' of the subsequent political whitewashing of Isandlwana. Chard's and the

other defenders' actions, observations and conversations in the battle would, most likely, have focused on their immediate survival, the 'here and now' rather than on how the event would later be portrayed to the press and public. Even as recently as 2004, Johnson Beharry VC wryly commented on the action in Iraq that earned him the Victoria Cross, '*At the time I was just doing my job, I didn't have time for other thoughts*'. (5)

Subsequently, Chard's willing participation of allowing his name to be used for the report can be understood as a result of his cultural ties to the strict military virtue to conform and his perceived responsibilities, as well as the effect of the accolades he received at the time, effectively bribes for complying with his seniors' wishes for a 'suitable' report. These accolades were swiftly converted into considerable rewards. He was suddenly the hero, awarded the coveted Victoria Cross, promoted by two ranks and subjected to intense fame and, finally, was invited to meet with Queen Victoria; all this contributed to and encouraged his confabulation

So, what is Confabulation? It is a substantial memory adjustment, usually subconscious, that is characterized by the effect of subsequent statements from influential 'others' that, wittingly or unwittingly, inaccurately describe a recent event. It is unlikely that it was deliberate on the part of Chard.

Confabulation is generally considered by psychologists as 'honest lying,' but is distinct from purposeful lying because there is typically no deliberate intent to deceive. Individuals so influenced are unaware that their information is likely to mislead. Confabulatory information following stressful events can also be made to make an incident become coherent, internally consistent, and because it is a classic human defence mechanism, to make sense of nonsense and to ameliorate stress. Individuals trying to come to terms with a traumatic event often confabulate about their recollections, as they struggle to justify or explain what has happened, or what they saw, despite evidence contradicting its truthfulness. In the case of someone who 'witnessed' or survived a catastrophic event, there is frequently a strong wish to please or to be overly helpful to an investigator, or place a participant in a favourable light. As any aircraft crash investigator knows, eyewitnesses to an aircraft crash tend to state that they saw the pilot bravely 'trying to avoid houses'.

Research is conclusive that eyewitnesses to any unexpected and dramatic event, such as a traffic accident, air crash or bank robbery, produce conflicting witness accounts – all in good faith and honesty. Likewise witnesses to military disasters can be influenced to confabulate by both the shock of an event and suggestive enquiries. History is littered with examples; the disastrous 'Charge of the Light Brigade' in 1854 is now popularly seen as a great episode. Perhaps the most famous single example of confabulation distorting history relates to the unexpected and sudden sinking of HMS *Hood* by the *Bismark* in the Second World War. The event was witnessed by many hundreds of sailors and officers from accompanying Royal Navy ships escorting HMS *Hood*. Several hundred written 'eye witness' reports were collated, but, on examination by both the two Naval Boards of Enquiry, most accounts were found to be inaccurate, confused, and contradictory. The cause of the loss of HMS *Hood* will probably never be known with complete certainty because of the numerous conflicting reports submitted to the two Boards. Likewise, in the Second World War, more German aircraft were allegedly shot down than had been built and the bombing of Germany by the RAF and USAF was less accurate than originally reported – all the reports were made in the honest belief that they

were correct. Within these examples, it can be seen that perceptions, correct or incorrect, can become reality in the consciousness of the perceiver.

Human memory has always been creative and highly suggestible, and a wide variety of memories can be falsely created by suggestions and praise by others. Such 'over-awing' can be seen in Chard's case, of an unknown and exhausted junior officer by the earnest attention and intense interest in the event by his very focused and respected General, Lord Chelmsford. This questioning of Chard took place in the immediate aftermath of the fighting, in the presence of Chelmsford's senior staff officers, with the two buildings still smoldering and hundreds of bodies littered around. Such intensive and suggestive questioning is especially relevant where an individual, such as Chard, is also then admiringly applauded for his 'actions' by highly regarded and respected figures, actions that may not have quite occurred as Chard might have otherwise remembered, or were not actually witnessed by him, and by the process of confabulation became false memories

There also remain a number of anomalies of perception versus known facts from the action at Rorke's Drift. For example,

1. Chard made no reference to the reason the British were either invading Zululand or defending Rorke's Drift. This has to be a deliberate omission from the report. He may have relied on Chelmsford's well-known guise of invading Zululand to protect Natal, confirming the historical habit of an aggressor nation to claim it is on the defensive.

2. Chard described seeing the ramparts around the mission station still being built immediately prior to the arrival of the Zulus. I would suggest that he saw some last-minute preparations being made by soldiers at their individual posts. The mission station had already been fortified and entrenched as early as the 11th January. This is confirmed in contemporary accounts, written before the incident, by Lt. Harford, 99th Regiment and August Hammar, a Swedish national and family friend of Witt who was caretaking the mission station during Witt's absence. Witt had departed a few days earlier to follow his wife and infant child, but left Hammar in his place. Neither the British nor Hammar could speak the others' language which probably gave rise to Chard's false understanding that Hammar was Witt. Chelmsford also subsequently supported the Harford and Hammar accounts as he confirmed that he had ordered Col. Glyn to organize the defence of the Mission Station prior to the invasion on the 11th January and that he 'understood Glyn had done this'.(6)

3. With regard to certain individuals' presence and actions; was, for example, Adendorff actually present during the incident? It is odd that only Chard mentions Adendorff being at Rorke's Drift during the fighting. We know he was at the nearby river crossing point just before the Zulus attacked, and we know he was at Rorke's Drift two days later when the NNC were disbanded because Lt. Harford's diary confirms this, which includes a sketch drawn by Harford of Adendorff being present. (7) Curiously, various actions performed by Corporal Attwood of the Army Service Corps, for which he received the DCM, were wrongly attributed by Chard to Adendorff. This raises another interesting issue; who nominated Corporal Attwood for his DCM? If it was Bromhead, then this

suggests little liaison between the two officers post-battle. I also worry that there are no specific references to Adendorff by other participants.

Also, Prof. Paul Thompson's detailed and seminal work on the history of the NNC, published under the title *The Natal Native Contingent in the Anglo Zulu War*, makes no reference at all to Adendorff being at Rorke's Drift. He goes further by stating...

Besides the company commander, Captain Stephenson, only three corporals appear to have been with the company. No lieutenants and sergeants are mentioned in the report'. Reference 32 p.65.

I confess to finding it curious that the NNC's only hero at Rorke's Drift, probably their most famous engagement, is so obviously and perhaps deliberately omitted.

4. One dramatic scenario overlooked by Chard in his account was the unprecedented mass killing of several hundred wounded and captured Zulus around the Mission Station in the hours following the event. This killing was wide-scale and took place during the two days while the Report was being written - this is omitted in both of Chard's accounts. Was this a memory lapse or the result of pressure from others? It is a curious fact that, in the history of warfare, the approval of commanders of the killing of prisoners creates a momentum which defies moral sensibility and discernment, and negates the capacity of the individual to distinguish between right and wrong or, as it appears in Chard's case, to ignore such wrong doing. (8) Confabulation would have allowed Chard to 'twilight' between knowing and not knowing what his soldiers had done; such an 'in between' state of mind allowed him either to accept what he saw as being unworthy of comment, or, whoever wrote the report, censored it by ignoring the matter.

5. Throughout history, victories have usually been reported as clinically succinct successes. Essentially the accounts don't reflect all of what really occurred, they are the result of fact blended with imagination, together with its constructs and projections, hiding the fear, terror, indescribable pain of killing and being wounded, all being converted into a sanitised, even fantasized account. How many harrowing scenes does the Chard Report describe? None. Why? Probably to cover the reality of the sheer, if understandable, brutality of what occurred. Interestingly, while the Chard Report omits the unimaginable terror and gore of Rorke's Drift, in the weeks that followed, witnesses of the post battle carnage at Isandlwana vibrantly gave full vent in their uncensored descriptions. But then, witnessing the aftermath of a battle is not going to have the same psychological effects as might be experienced by an actual surviving participant.

Though not all individuals exposed to such pressures will develop inaccurate memories, experiments suggest a significant number of people can be affected, and later, actively defend the existence of events as they subsequently understand them, even if later told they were false and deliberately implanted. An individual's personality structure will naturally play a role in their readiness to confabulate and in Chard's case, his apparent willingness to put his name to the report could be seen as a virtue higher than reflecting on whether his own report of the action tallied with reality. And of considerable importance, in the Victorian army, orders were orders, especially for a junior officer. Chard was later found wanting; just weeks later he was asked to re-write his report for

Queen Victoria but had to decline because he had ‘lost his notes’ – which poses another question, did he ever have any notes? He produced the second more detailed report one year later. It should be no surprise that, after the initial glory, Chard’s career stalled.

In the case of the Chard Report and the story of Rorke’s Drift, the inadvertent mind distortions that Chard, exhausted and under stress, was subjected to by being both questioned and praised by Chelmsford and his staff, together with Chard being made abundantly clear of his seniors’ own presumptions of events over a period of several hours, has resulted in some understandable confusion. In the case of Rorke’s Drift, the confabulated myths appear to have created the lasting memory, rather than Chard’s and others’ actual memories creating the story.

Following the defeat at Isandlwana, a Board of Enquiry was convened to consider what had occurred, but no detailed report was required from actual eyewitnesses. Although long after the event, the jury is still out on the causes of the disaster at Isandlwana. No jury is needed for Rorke’s Drift; based on the Chard Report the magnitude of the ‘victory’ took possession of the nation’s imagination as a great victory. This proves my point that perceptions count for at least as much as realities in both personal and national consciousness.

References.

1. See Norman Holme’s *The Silver Wreath* for the full account. Having completed my own book *Rorke’s Drift* I was awaiting its publication when I received a call from a friend in South Africa informing me that the original handwritten ‘Chard Nominal Roll’ had been traced to the Oppenheimer Library in South Africa. I telephoned the library and within a half-hour I received a copy of the signature by fax. Having committed myself in my book to the statement that the known ‘Chard Rolls’ were not signed by Chard, I was relieved to see the Oppenheimer roll’s handwriting and signature were not his.
2. See Journal 32 for their reports. There are no other known letters from Chard that could be used to compare and contrast his writing style.
- (3) Niccolo Machiavelli, 1469-1527 Italian historian and philosopher.
- (4) Today this can be achieved through counselling for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms.
- (5) As quoted in *British Military Greats Cassell Illustrated* 2008
- (6) Quoted in *Hansard*
- (7) See Dr David Payne’s *Harford*
- (8) Examples are found in the actions of German soldiers in WWII and American soldiers in Vietnam.

Note; The author qualified as a clinical psychologist in 1988 and for 5 years, as a Fellow of the National Council of Psychotherapists, was the Kent Police Psychologist advising their Force Medical Officer, Dr Alan Spicer.

Post Script.

From Prof. John Laband.

I have read your piece on Chard's report with real delight. We are all too often content to take in smooth, well written primary sources at face value and to stop short of proper analysis of the circumstances of their composition. I'm guilty of this, I know only too well, which is why I give my more senior students exercises in document and artefact analysis to alert them to the pitfalls.

Of course, when you look at it, Chard's report was most probably well beyond his capabilities, but there on the spot were Chelmsford (an articulate man who couldn't stop writing if he tried) and Crealock (who knew better than anyone how to spin a situation) and sophisticated Clery too. With all these general and staff officers to help him (and they doubtless had good paper with them still) how could Chard fail to pen a clear, straightforward, effective report? My hunch is that this was a team effort which made all paths straight.