

‘There’s A Lot of People Who Say They Were At Rorke’s Drift’

The problems which beset those trying to compile a definitive list of defenders.

Ian Knight

In his seminal work on the rolls of the 24th Regiment at iSandlwana and Rorke’s Drift, *The Noble 24th* (Savanah Books, 1999), the late Norman Holme observed ruefully that

The defenders of Rorke’s Drift were comparatively few in number, furthermore the garrison mainly consisted of soldiers belonging to one Company of a particular Regiment. On the basis of these facts the accurate identification of the individual men present during the action on 22nd-23rd January 1879 would appear to be a relatively simple task; however, such is not the case.

Indeed, it is not - nor, nearly fifteen years after Holme made that remark, and despite the continuing intense interest in the subject, is the task likely to get any easier.

The fundamental problem lies with the incompleteness of contemporary records. The only valid sources are the rolls compiled by those who were in a position of authority at the time, and, whilst these agree on the majority of those present, there are contradictions, inaccuracies and omissions between them, and the situation is further complicated because it is impossible to arrive at a definitive conclusion on the question of who *ought* to have been there.

The earliest roll of defenders seems to have been compiled by the senior officer at the action, Lieutenant John Chard of the Royal Engineers. As early as 25 January 1879 - two days after the battle - Chard produced an official report of the battle. This was published in the Natal press as early as 8 February, and in the official British Parliamentary Papers (C 2260) the following month. Chard took great pains to identify and acknowledge the role played by numerous individuals during the defence, and the report included a return listing the numbers of men from the various units present who took part. Clearly, this information could not have been arrived at without drawing up a list of the individuals concerned, although no full roll was included with these first publications. Keen to trace that roll, Holme made a diligent search of various official and private archives but the only surviving document purporting to be a full roll, and signed by Chard, could not be traced back before the 1930s. Moreover, Holme came to the conclusion that this document was most likely a copy, and was perhaps influenced by a veteran of the battle, Bombadier John Cantwell RA, whose widow presented it to the then South Wales Borderers in 1935. Holme offered the opinion that no full roll of the battle had been submitted by Chard to any higher authority with his official report in the immediate aftermath of the battle.

In fact, however, it seems that - whether the 1935 Chard roll was or was not an original document - such a roll did exist, and was compiled, at least on Chard’s authority, shortly after the battle. On 1 April 1879 the *Natal Mercury* published an account of the battle by ‘An Eyewitness’ (in fact the vicar of Escourt, the Rev. George Smith) which included as an addendum Chard’s report, and with it a full roll of the defenders. With very few minor amendments, this contains the same information as the Chard roll associated with Gunner Cantwell, suggesting that at the very least they had drawn on the same original document. Quite why the roll was not officially published as part of Chard’s report remains unclear, although perhaps in the hurry to send the good news of the defence back to London an abbreviated return was all that was considered necessary. As Holme also noted, proof that a roll had been compiled at the time of the battle was further afforded by the publication in the *Natal Colonist* of 15 January 1880 of a roll of the members of the 2/24th present at the battle and signed by Lt. Colonel Dunbar, who was a veteran of the campaign and was then commanding the 2nd Battalion 24th Regiment. This roll had been compiled in connection with a presentation to the defenders by the Mayor of Durban; it did, however, only list men of the 2nd Battalion, and no mention was made of members of other units who were present. Even

so, Holme noted that where relevant the information it contained was identical to that in the Chard roll. These two mentions in the Natal press confirm that a roll was in existence and was available to the senior military at the time, regardless of whether the surviving Chard roll is a copy or not.

Of course, Lt. Chard would not have been able to complete such a roll without assistance, although as senior officer it would have been his duty to approve, sign and submit it. Chard himself had not arrived at Rorke's Drift - as the commander of an advanced detachment of No 5 Field Company, RE - until 19 January, and whilst he would undoubtedly have met most of his fellow officers stationed there over the next few days, it is highly unlikely that he would have been familiar with the other ranks. Indeed, since Chard and his men had camped down by the river crossing, in order to affect repairs on the over-worked pont, it's very probable Chard had had very little to do with the ordinary soldiers of the garrison at all prior to the battle. Any roll signed by him must, therefore, have depended heavily on those who did. It's probable that the other officers present - Lt. Bromhead, who commanded B Company of the 2/24th, Acting Assistant Commissary James Dalton and Surgeon James Henry Reynolds - were able to provide some details of the men under their command, but the attempted thoroughness of the roll hints at the participation of a good NCO.

The most obvious candidate in this regard is Col. Sergeant Frank Bourne, the senior NCO of B Company who knew his men well. Holme, however, was of the opinion that Bourne was an unlikely contributor to the Chard roll because in later years he produced a roll of his own - which is, indeed, the second of the only two contemporary rolls in existence. Holme felt that this would have been a pointless duplication of effort on his behalf, and that - given that in some cases he arrived at different conclusions to Chard - it might even have amounted to a contradiction of earlier work. Yet this is not necessarily the case; being asked to provide help as a young sergeant in the immediate aftermath of an engagement is not the same as attempting to provide a considered document under more mature circumstances years later. Nor was the storage and distribution of information the simple matter then that it is now - Bourne apparently did not have access to any surviving copy of the Chard roll in later life, and may simply decided to draw up a new one from scratch. In addition, the Bourne roll - which is dated 4 July 1910 - was apparently compiled 'By Special Request'. By whom it was requested Holme was unable to determine - but that request might in itself have been sufficient to prompt Bourne to revisit the task. Among the sources used by Bourne were the Regimental pay rolls. Intriguingly, Holme noted that Bourne's original roll, while particularly strong, as might be expected, with regard to the men of the 2/24th, whom he knew personally, was less comprehensive otherwise than the Chard roll. In 1937, C.T. Atkinson, however, published his history of *The South Wales Borderers, 24th Foot, 1689-1937*. This included a facsimile of the copy of the Chard roll, then in the Regimental collection. The publication of this roll seems to have prompted Bourne to return to his personal copy of his own roll, marking each of the names where he was in agreement, and adding most - but not all - of the names he had previously omitted. Thus the two authoritative rolls support one another since, as Holme put it, 'the Chard roll had finally been examined by a known and extremely well qualified authority'.

And upon these two rolls all attempts to decide the identities of the men present at Rorke's Drift depend. The problem is, of course, that neither one is flawless, and there remain differences between them. Thus, for example, the Chard roll lists Pte. Charles Bromwich as being present but Bourne replaces him with Pte. 1524 Joseph Bromwich whom, in the light of the pay rolls, Holme agreed was the more likely candidate. Bourne's original roll included three men (Privates W. Buck, P. Caine and T. Williams) who had served with B Company, but in fact these men had been sent to the Depot in Pietermaritzburg at the end of October 1878 and had not rejoined the company - and do not appear on the Chard roll. Private 1374 J. Williams was included on Bourne's original roll but had been imprisoned from 13 October 1878 and not released until 1 February 1879, after the battle was over. As Holme noted, individual soldier's papers were sometimes helpful in resolving these discrepancies, and sometimes not; while some papers mentioned the subject's participation in Rorke's Drift, many more did not, and the absence of specific mention of the battle does not by any means

suggest that the subject did not take part.

It's worth noting that both rolls have an inevitable bias towards the fixed garrison at the post. Chard's limited knowledge of the members of the garrison has been already noted, although by drawing on others he was presumably able to rectify this to some extent. Bourne would have been intimately acquainted with men of his own Regiment and quite probably acquired a working knowledge of the men from other units left or posted there too. Yet the garrison was by no means static, and there is at least a hypothetical chance that men who were passing through on the 22nd January, and who found themselves caught up in the battle, were missed off the roll because they were not personally known to anyone in authority present, and their presence was largely missed in the excitement.

This does not generally apply to survivors from iSandlwana, whose arrival and departure was noted by several observers after the event. Nonetheless, Rorke's Drift was merely a point on the lines of communication, and under normal circumstances any number of men might be expected to be moving forward to join the column, or back down the road to Helpmekaar. Lieutenant Smith-Dorrien, the column's junior transport officer, had arrived from iSandlwana shortly after dawn with orders for Durnford's column - then camped on the Zulu bank of the river - to move forward, and Smith-Dorrien had visited the mission station to chat with Lt. Bromhead before riding back to the column, arriving - famously - shortly before the battle began. Chard himself had gone forward to iSandlwana that morning with the Sappers under his command, only to return again, leaving them there, having reassured himself that his personal duties related to the pont. On hearing of the Zulu movements at iSandlwana, Major Spalding - who was in command of the line of communication - decided to ride to Helpmekaar two hurry up two companies of the 24th who had been due forward, but not yet arrived, but left behind his clerk, Col. Sgt. Mabin, at Rorke's Drift. The civilian vicar of Escourt in Natal, the Rev. George Smith, was on his way forward to join the column but had got no further than Rorke's Drift. There was, in short, a good deal of routine traffic up and down the road that day, and for those moving along it chance alone largely dictated whether they were present at the post when the battle unfolded. It is not inconceivable, therefore, that some individuals found themselves present but slipped through the net when it came to recording their presence.

Is that why, then, so many men claimed to have been at Rorke's Drift when in fact they were not? Even there, the issue is not quite as simple as it may seem.

Some of those - and in fairness, probably just a small minority - who claimed to be there, but who can now be proved conclusively not to have been, were simply liars. In an age when news travelled infinitely more slowly than it does today, and when people travelled slower still, there was very little chance of anyone making false claims being either publicly denounced or being confronted by someone who knew better, and there must have been many old soldiers who succumbed now and then to the comparatively innocent temptation to cadge a few free drinks on the basis that '*I was at Rorke's Drift, you know*'. One or two more extreme cases are on record, such as the soldier in uniform trotted out in 1919 by African Film Productions to endorse their silent epic - the first feature film ever made about the Anglo-Zulu War - *Symbol of Sacrifice*. This man claimed to be a veteran of the battle named Jones who had, no less, won the Victoria Cross at Rorke's Drift - despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that the only two men of that name who did, Robert Jones and William Jones, were both dead by that point. Whether this man had any actual experience of the Anglo-Zulu War is unknown - if he did, as a veteran, it would probably have been quite easy for him to produce convincing stories of the war, and even of the battle - the outline of which was well known, even by that time - for the benefit of audiences who knew no better.

For many of those who claimed to have been at Rorke's Drift, however, the situation was more complex. In an interview given to *The Cape Times* in January 1914, George Mabin - Spalding's clerk, who had been present at the battle as a Colour-Sergeant in the 'Staff of the Army' - observed '*You see, son, there's a lot of people who say they were at Rorke's Drift during the Zulu War. They probably were - months after the battle..*' Indeed, not months but hours after - and many hundreds of men, for of course the remnants of Lord Chelmsford's command had returned to the post from Zululand early on the morning after the battle. While

Chelmsford himself rode on almost immediately to deal with the political and military consequences of the defeat at iSandlwana, his troops were left at Rorke's Drift to provide a bastion against further Zulu attack. Most of them were still there several miserable weeks later, and many indeed remained there for months. They had arrived in the immediate aftermath of the battle, when the ruins of the hospital building were still smoking, and when wounded Zulus still lay scattered around the post. They took part in the grim task of despatching those wounded, burying the dead and clearing away the debris of battle, and they were condemned to sleep out night after night in the confines of what had been the defended perimeter. They would have formed intense and lasting impressions of their own experiences, and they stood the chance of hearing detailed first-hand impressions from the survivors of the garrison. This was probably particularly true of the men of the 2/24th, who formed the bulk of Chelmsford's command, and who were, of course, part of the same battalion as B Company. Many of them would have known the men of B Company well, and it is impossible to think that they did not hear first-hand stories of the fight themselves. Chelmsford's men may not have been at the defence but they were indeed at Rorke's Drift, and they provided a crucial part of the story - of the post's relief. Perhaps a few of them were tempted over the years to embellish their role, but more likely such stories had produced an inevitable confusion in the minds of those who heard them, and had led to the impression that the old soldiers who told them had been present at the battle itself. Today, generations later, this still leads to confusion when the descendants of those who were with Chelmsford's force still cling to the inherited impression that their ancestor had been involved in the battle itself. Yet, if he had not, his experiences were worthy of recognition in themselves, and should not be dismissed lightly.

Finally, there is a small category of individuals for whom there is some circumstantial evidence that they were present at the battle - but who are not mentioned on the surviving rolls. One such is Private 25B/295 David Jenkins of the 1st 24th, whose family are mounting a gallant action to have him confirmed as a defender.

Certainly there was at least one Jenkins at Rorke's Drift - although Holme noted some confusion regarding exactly who he was. The Chard roll lists Pte 1083 Watkin Jenkins of the 1/24th but

... The man is frequently mis-named 'Matthew Jenkins', and in his roll Bourne lists him as 'M. Jenkins - Killed in action'. In actual fact he was killed at Isandhlwana and not at Rorke's Drift. It appears that Bourne confused him with 841 Private James Jenkins, 1/24th, who was killed at Rorke's Drift.

There are, however, anomalies regarding the role of James Jenkins. In his letter to Queen Victoria describing the fight, Chard recalled that,

While I was intently watching to get a fair shot at a Zulu who appeared to be firing rather well, Private Jenkins, 24th, saying look out Sir, gave my head a duck down just as a bullet whizzed over it. He had noticed a Zulu who was quite near in another direction, taking deliberate aim at me. For all the man could have known, the shot might have been directed at himself. I mention these facts to show how well the men behaved and how loyally worked together.

In his account 'By An Eyewitness', however, the Rev. George Smith, described how the defenders of the hospital had knocked holes through the interior partitions to effect an escape and 'one poor fellow, Jenkins, venturing through one of these, was also seized and dragged away'.

It is difficult to reconcile these accounts. If Jenkins was a patient in the hospital, and was killed as he tried to escape - by implication never surviving to fight on the outside barricades - at what point did he 'duck' Chard's head? Chard himself certainly did not fight in the hospital, whilst the anecdote regarding his Jenkins clearly relates to fighting over the open barricade.

One possibility, of course, is that either Chard or Smith was confused in describing the man they referred to as Jenkins - an easy enough mistake in the chaos of battle. Another - and this despite the fact that neither the Chard nor Bourne rolls list any other Jenkins - is that there

was another man of that name present at the fight. A clue as to who this second Jenkins might have been is given in a report published in *The Times* in October 1879 -

The hired transport Egypt ...arrived at Spithead at 8 o'clock yesterday morning, with the 1st Battalion 24th Regiment, invalids and time-expired men from South Africa ... The individual officers who took passage are Major J.R.M. Chard, RE, VC, and Surgeon-Major Reynolds, VC, the heroes of Rorke's Drift... Among the men of the 1st Battalion of the 24th who disembarked were Sergeant Wilson, Lance-Corporal Roy, and Privates Desmond, Payton and Jenkins, who had been to the rear with prisoners, and who returned in time to join with B Company of the 2nd Battalion in the defence of Rorke's Drift.

Furthermore, the Record of Service of the 1st Btn. 24th (now in the Museum, Brecon), lists a number of men of the battalion who were present at Rorke's Drift, including 'Private D. Jenkins'. This is an apparent reference to Private 295 David Jenkins who left a letter, later published in the *Merthyr Express*, in which he refers to both iSandlwana and Rorke's Drift without specifically placing himself at either. Indeed, he merely remarks that '*I am one of the ten that escaped out of the five companies ... Oh I never saw such a sight*'. There is no independent reference to him having been present in the battle at iSandlwana and having escaped, however, nor is this realistically possible since no infantryman of the 24th on foot survived the battle. It is possible to attribute too much weight to phrases such as 'I escaped the battle' because many men considered themselves 'survivors' who should have been in the camp but were lucky enough for some reason to be elsewhere when the attack developed on the grounds that they had 'escaped' a fate which otherwise they would not - similar phrases occur frequently in the accounts of the men of the 2nd Battalion who had marched out that morning with Lord Chelmsford. Moreover, the comment that Jenkins 'never saw such a sight' is worth noting; it, too, is similar to comments from Chelmsford's men, who of course returned to the camp and witnessed the devastation after the event. It is a phrase which certainly implies first-hand experience of the battlefield - an experience Jenkins could not have acquired were he at Rorke's Drift at the time. If, however, Jenkins was present with Chelmsford's force a new mystery arises since the company to which he was attached - Captain Rainforth's G Company, 1/24th - certainly was not.

There was, however, undeniably some movement of small groups of men or individuals between the various elements of the column, much of it unrecorded, and the alternative story offered by *The Times* report - that David Jenkins was part of a party of prisoners under guard - is not inherently implausible. Whilst this report has often been taken as referring to Zulu prisoners it is probable, given that there had been no armed encounters with the Zulus since the attack on Sihayo's homestead eight days earlier - before the column had advanced to iSandlwana - that they were in fact Army defaulters. Indeed, David Jenkins' own military record was by no means unblemished, and it is even possible he was one of those under escort rather than on escort duty. *The Times* report implies, however, that Jenkins was returning to iSandlwana rather than going in the opposite direction but whilst this is consistent with the idea of his returning to the column from some detached duty it conflicts with the fact that Rainforth's company was one of those still at Helpmekaar. It was not, however, unknown for men to be removed from their companies for other duties - Holme points out that four men of B Company, 2/24th, were unfortunate enough to be ahead of their company, and were at iSandlwana whilst their comrades were still at Rorke's Drift - and were killed in the battle there.

Jenkins' Army papers make no mention of his presence at Rorke's Drift - but nor do those of many confirmed participants. As further corroboration of his family's claim, David Jenkins was in possession of the Bible presented by well-wishers to survivors of the battle in Durban, and indeed his copy, with the presentation inscription naming him, is now in the Brecon museum. Since such presentations - including that of the address given by the Mayor of Durban, for which the Dunbar roll was compiled - were given by civilians on the basis of information supplied by the military, there is, of course, a considerable margin for error, especially given the confusion already noted about the identity of the Jenkins (singular or

plural!) present at Rorke's Drift. Holme, for example, points out that Pte. 25B/953 Frederick Evans, who was serving with the Mounted Infantry and was a survivor of iSandlwana, received the Mayoral address despite very clear indications that, although he had ridden past the post at Rorke's Drift and stopped to warn the garrison, he had not stayed to assist in the defence. Nonetheless, if David Jenkins was taking advantage of the confusion to claim credit to which he was not properly entitled, he certainly displayed some nerve, not least in travelling back to England on the same steamer with the very men from Rorke's Drift who were in a position to challenge him. Always assuming, of course, that he did make such a claim - one that he certainly did not make in his letters home just a few days after the event.

Moreover, David Jenkins was apparently among those soldiers who modelled for Lady Butler for her famous painting of the battle, and is identified as 'Jenkins' in one of her preliminary sketches; whilst this might seem an unlikely and vulnerable position for a man perpetuating a lie to willingly place himself in, there is no contemporary confirmation that Jenkins identified himself to the artist as anything other than a soldier of the 24th recently returned from Zululand.

The sad truth is that, whilst David Jenkins' case appears stronger than many others who claimed to be at the defence, it is unlikely ever to be satisfactorily resolved. In the absence of any complete and wholly reliable record, flawed and potentially incomplete as they are, the Chard and Bourne rolls remain the only viable touchstone for confirming an individual's presence at the battle, and there exists ultimately no other way of definitively proving or disproving it - and under the circumstances a modern historian would be wise to resist the urge to shoe-horn such individuals into firm categories. Tempting as it is to mark them up either as 'he was there' or 'he wasn't there', the fact remains some such cases can only accurately be filed under 'maybe he was, and maybe he wasn't'.

Frustrating as it may be, many an attempt to validate an individual's participation at Rorke's Drift is likely to get no further than a brutal truth - that 'he is not on the rolls'.

Notes

Norman Holme's *The Noble 24th* remains an important starting point regarding the records of the men of the 24th who fought at iSandlwana and Rorke's Drift. Julian Whybra's *England's Sons* (GIFT Ltd, 2004) offers a carefully considered and updated roll of the defenders of Rorke's Drift and comments regarding the individuals who survived iSandlwana. *Rorke's Drift, By Those Who Were There*, by Alan Bayham Jones and Lee Stevenson (Lee Stevenson Publishing, 2003) is an invaluable compendium of eye-witness accounts.