

From *The Oldham Chronicle*, 26 April 1879
Letter from an Oldham Soldier in Zululand (unabridged)
Transcribed by M Higgins, Royton Local History Society

The following letter has been received by the father of William Sweeney, Colonel Glyn's column, 24th Regiment. The parents live at Union Street, Royton.

At about 3:45 a.m. on the morning of the 22nd we were awakened by the colour sergeant of our company at a place called Intaman. Our orders were not to make a noise or light a candle. At about 4:30 a.m. we received coffee and preserved meat. We marched out of camp at about 5:10 a.m. to a distance of about 12 miles. We were about to halt for the night on the top of a very high hill, and just as our men got their clothes off the General rode in, and ordered us to dress again as quickly as possible.

Just before that we captured nine prisoners, one of them being a chief's son. One was wounded in the leg, another on the shin.

We dressed at once and marched out about 1,800 strong to meet the enemy; leaving about 500 Europeans in camp to guard it, one company of ours and five companies of our first battalion. Our infantry company was No.7, the officer in charge was Mr. Pope, your master for a short time in Sheffield; and I must mention one man in particular, as you knew him very well indeed. His name was M'Cracken, and he married a Blackpool woman. He was left in camp as he was a servant, while the remainder of our regiment was out looking for the enemy. The Zulus attacked our camp while half of the men were washing their clothes, as any good soldier does whenever he has the chance. The enemy sent 150 in front of our camp in skirmishing order, to attract the attention of all our spies, and, of course, our chaps formed to attack the coming skirmishers, and then the Zulus crept round the back in thousands. There were half our men fighting without any arms at all, on account of having been cooking. The number of our regiment left there was 181 men, captains, and sergeants and five officers, and not one escaped, so far as we know at present. Thanks be to God for being allowed to write, as it were a godsend I was not there.

After we got the order to return to camp to the aid of our poor fellows little we knew of their fate at the time. After we had been moving towards our camp about an hour and a half we were halted by our general, Lord Chelmsford, and he spoke to us in quiet tones, "Now chaps, the Zulus have turned our flank and taken our stores and ammunition, tents, and every other thing. It is commencing to get dark and all we have to do is take our camp to-night." With that, our chaps, all young fellows, gave three cheers, and that was after marching 30 miles that day. On the spot we got in attacking order; our big guns, four in number, six companies to guard the four guns, three companies on each side of the guns, the natives being next to us, and the mounted men on the outside to guard the flank. In this form we marched a mile, when we got the order to halt and load the big guns with case shot and fire. We fired about a dozen rounds and again advanced another half-mile. We then got an order to fire a volley, and we did so; but no-one returned our fire. We next got the order to fix bayonets. It was then dark. About half-past nine we raised a cheer, as the word charge was given us and we charged up the hill but the enemy was gone.

To my sorrow the first dead man I came to I fell over. Of course, I could not see him at the time, but I struck a match, and it was of my own company, named Watkins. He had his brains knocked in with some blunt instrument, and the whole of his bowels ripped open. We kept going on, tumbling over one another till we got the order to halt at the top of the hill, and rest till morning, as the whole of our men were awfully fatigued from their hard marching the day before. When we did lie down there was scarcely any of our chaps could go to sleep, thinking of the poor fellows who were lying dead around. I was laid down alongside of a chap from the 1st battalion, who was dreadfully mutilated.

We marched from that place at daybreak. The number killed was 23 officers, 551 of all ranks, Quartermaster Bloomfield, Lieutenants Pope and Austin, Adjutants Dyer and Griffiths, Quartermaster –sergeant Davis, Sergeant Beavers, Ross, Lines, Carse, Bandmaster Bullard, M’Caffery, Haigh, Cheir, Shaw, two drummers, Anderson and Holmes, and five little boys of the band, 14 years of age. They butchered them most horribly indeed. One little chap, named M’Every, they hung up by a chin to a hook, and then they cut his legs off; and four other little ones they hung up to the waggons. I heard it said the Zulus don’t think a white man is dead until his bowels are ripped open.

Our chaps brought in a wounded Zulu today. They got all out of him they could, and then they hung him up, and all the time I am writing this he is still there.

We can’t go fighting now for a while, as we have lost all our clothing. They took everything they could lay their hands on, and broke all the band instruments. A young officer of ours was making away with our colours, but he was killed on the way. We are expected to be relieved to-day by four companies of the 4th Regiment. I hope it won’t be long before they find us. We have not got a blanket, coat, or even a second shirt or socks. I am commencing to feel very uncomfortable myself, and I can put up with as much as anyone.

On the day after attacking our camp it was garrisoned by 80 men of B Company. About 3,000 Zulus came on our chaps about three on the same evening. Our boys made a fort of all the bags of corn, and bags of flour, meal, and all sorts of stuff. The enemy came on in rushes times out of number and our chaps mowed them down as fast as they came up. Several of the Zulus got over the fort, but our chaps on the inside were waiting for them with the bayonet. You would be surprised to see the horrible murder as ever was committed. Those 80 men kept them off from three o’clock in the afternoon of the 22nd until six a.m. on the 23rd for the loss of 14 men. One of them had a most horrible death. He was assagaid with long knives. His name was Billy Horrigan. He joined the regiment at Cork. Each of the men in the fort that night used 150 rounds. The General said that if he had 1,000 men like that he would face 10,000 Zulus. Our General left us the following morning for a place called Helpmakaar, and he made use of the words before he left us that he would not leave us a minute, but he could rely on us wherever he went; and he told us he would take the two regiments home with him when it was all over – that was with was left of us. There are now only left of the two regiments about 600 men. Major Dunbar was with me on that awful day. I have very hard work to perform now. We are erecting batteries and forts. I made a mistake in the number of men we lost; it is a great deal more - 21 officers, 21 sergeants, 29 corporals, 12 drummers, and 649 other ranks. We must have killed over 3,000 Zulus on that day. After we had re-captured our camp we found two Zulus drunk on our liquor.

Dear Father, now I must tell you how it is I am safe. I was very ill with the dysentery, and, when we had marched two miles, I had to fall out. The regiment would be almost two miles in front when I got up to make the attempt to come with them, but I fell down through fatigue and sickness. They put me in the ambulance to take me back to the camp. The doctor gave me some medicine, which relieved me so much that I got out and ran after my regiment.

The *Oldham Chronicle* may have self-interpreted the soldier’s handwriting, hence the spelling ‘Intaman’. It may not be the whole letter. The place of writing, which would seem to be Rorke’s Drift, is not named in the paragraph recounting the fight there. The letter was published in long column form. Paragraph breaks are mine. Punctuation etc. as published in the newspaper. MH