

CELEBRATING JOHN CHARD WITH THE ROYAL ENGINEERS

By Ian Knight

On 22 January this year David Payne and I had the honour of representing the Society at an event hosted by the Royal Engineers at their barracks on the edge of Salisbury Plain to commemorate the role of Lt. John Chard in the defence of Rorke's Drift.

The Corps, of course, has an enviable service record, having served in all major conflicts involving British troops around the world since its inception, and during the course of those wars no less than thirty-six Royal Engineers have been awarded the Victoria Cross. Even so, it's perhaps true to say that Rorke's Drift is probably one of the most famous actions with which the Corps are associated, and that John Chard is held in particularly high regard, not least because the Company to which he belonged – 5th Field Company – still exists by descent as an RE squadron today. This year the Corps decided to hold a day in his honour, and the programme was designed to appeal to both Officers and ORs, and to be both informative and entertaining. In real terms, for David and myself, this meant my offering a series of lectures throughout the day, and David providing an array of exhibits for some hands-on demonstrations.

We made the trip down the day before and were entertained in the Officers' Mess, which, with its elegant turn-of-the-century façade, certainly added an appropriate ambiance. We kicked off early on the morning of the 22nd – the anniversary of iSandlwana and Rorke's Drift, of course – with a brief presentation to the Squadron who were assembled in fancy dress for a 'Zulu Chase'. The British Army has a taste for the occasional fancy dress event, and the Corps seem particularly proud of their record in that regard – 'when I joined the Corps', one officer told me, 'the CO said to me "you'd better make sure your dressing-up box is up to scratch; we have a strong tradition of fancy dress in the Corps!"' Certainly on this occasion they presented a fearsome array, the officers and NCOs in an approximation of 1879 uniforms (if you have ever wondered who buys those fancy dress Zulu War outfits on ebay, this is clearly the answer!) and the ORs in various faux leopard-skins, loin-coverings and carrying cardboard shields!

The object of the 'Zulu Chase' was to run around the barracks stopping at various points to accomplish set tasks, and the first of these involved them coming up by squads to recreate the famous 'Front rank, fire! Advance!' scene from 'Zulu' using David's Martini-Henrys. Despite the fact that volleying by ranks is no longer at the cutting edge of modern tactical doctrine, they all seemed to get the hang of it quickly enough, and each squad was encouraged to end its turn with a demonstration of their best 'war face' and a fearsome yell - which certainly impressed me as it no doubt did the Zulus at various times at Rorke's Drift. After they had all finished with the rifles the squadron went off at a brisk run to the next station to try such intriguing challenges as seeing who could fix the most pegs to their face; since it was still only 9 o'clock on a rather frosty winter's morning, David and I were rather relieved to find we were not required to take part in that ourselves. The event ended with officers and ORs acting out a notional representation of Rorke's Drift by pelting each other with 'spears' in the form of water-balloons.

Once the 'Zulu Chase' was over and everyone had showered and cleaned up I was asked to give a brief introduction to a screening of 'Zulu'. Most of the soldiers in the squadron were young – in their early twenties – and I was surprised to find that the majority had never seen the film before (what have they been doing at Christmas every year?). I gave a brief talk

outlining the real story of the battle, and under the circumstances felt obliged to offer a few cautionary comments on the film itself which is, after all, over fifty years' old now, and in terms of pacing and its representation of graphic violence was made with rather more restrained audiences in mind; I needn't have worried, however, as it seemed to go down very well, perhaps aided by the issue of two cans of beer per man before-hand. Afterwards there was quite a queue to examine David's collection of weapons, and the Martini-Henrys in particular attracted some renewed professional attention. I even found myself discussing with a Ghurkha member of the squadron the finer points of Ghurkha and Zulu warrior traditions.

This took us through to mid-afternoon, and the end of the events aimed at the whole squadron, allowing David and myself a few hours' grace before the climax of the day, a formal dinner in the Officers' Mess – mess dress or black tie - that evening. Once again David laid out some exhibits as a talking point, and I was asked to give a brief ten-minute introduction, before dinner, and then to speak in five-minute instalments between courses. Pacing such a talk to keep it interesting, and not allow the narrative thread to drift over the starters and main course, is always challenging, the more so on this occasion as the audience comprised a very distinguished assembly of Royal Engineer officers past and present, including a Brigadier, and because Chard himself was looking down on me from a portrait on the walls. It all seemed to be very well received, however, and after dinner there were some fascinating conversations about Rorke's Drift, RE involvement in Zululand, and indeed about their more recent experiences. Among the paintings of distinguished nineteenth-century Corps officers on the Mess walls was a portrait of 27 year-old Captain Ben Babbington-Browne, killed in a helicopter crash in Afghanistan in 2009 – a poignant reminder that the true cost of war is the same now as it ever was.

The Corps were excellent and attentive hosts, and there is talk of holding a similar event again next year. If so, it will certainly help to further enshrine Chard's position in Corps history – and I for one would be honoured to be invited again to contribute.

David Payne explaining the Martini-Henry rifle.

