

The Buffalo Border Guard; A report from Helpmakaar.
January 1879.

Unattributed.

Unabridged.

A small detachment of the Buffalo Border Guard had been left under the command of Captain Robson; based on Fort Pine, it was to patrol the Buffalo up to Rorke's Drift and the heights under Helpmakaar. The rest of the B.B.G under Lieutenant Smith had advanced with the other mounted volunteers across Rorke's Drift and were in camp at Isandlwana.

Troop Dickson knew just so much as he rode on patrol on the afternoon of the 22nd January. Just after four o'clock near Vermaak's below Helpmakaar he met two officers, Major Upcher of the 24th Regt and Major Spalding of the DAAG. Both were shattered – they had just had the ghastly news of Isandlwana. Dickson joined them as they edged cautiously forward to reconnoitre.

As their horses stood on the ledge, the ‘Knostrope’ looking down to the Buffalo and the drift, Dickson saw the road ‘covered with fugitives, mainly Basutos and people in civilian clothes’. Major Spalding ordered these men to support him; one or two stayed, but the rest slipped away when his back was turned.

Trooper Dickson showed more courage. Eager to help Rorke's Drift, he followed Major Spalding, but they were hardly encouraged, for ‘every single white fugitive asserted that the mission house was captured’. Still, Spalding and Dickson made their way downhill against the tide of fugitives.

They were within three miles of the mission when suddenly they ‘came across a body of Zulus in extended order across the road’. They were fifty yards off; a deep ravine (donga) was behind them capable of concealing a large force.

Spalding and Dickson reigned in and as they did so, the Zulus threw out ‘horns’ to surround them. Turning at once and spurring their horses, Spalding and Dickson escaped Dabulamanzi’s impi and made what speed they could up the precipitous track back to Upcher and his men.

By then it was dusk. It was a nerve wracking experience. The heights behind them were said to be lined with Zulus. The oxen with Upcher’s wagons were exhausted. As they crawled with tantalising slowness up the hill towards the Commissariat Store at Helpmakaar, behind them the sky turned to red as the flames shot up from the burning hospital at Rorke’s Drift and the sound of rifle fire reached them. Trooper Dickson, like the rest, had no rest, when the convoy rolled into the store camp. It was already nine o’clock. A wagon laager was hastily thrown round the store sheds and the anxious, sleepless troops flung up earthworks to reinforce the pathetic defences. They ‘stood to’ all night awaiting the Zulu onslaught.

In the eery (sic) silence of an enshrouding mist, the sentries peered over the trenches, as the day lightened on the 23rd. For some hours nothing stirred in the deathly stillness. Suddenly figures emerged from the mist with the news that the band at Rorke’s Drift had held out. Reluctant to denude Helpmakaar of its small garrison, Spalding again took Trooper Dickson forward; with other troopers they probed cautiously down towards the

rim of the berg. Very soon, another pale harassed face appeared through the mist. Henry Francis Fynn was on his way from Rorke's Drift. He confirmed that Chard had survived and told them Lord Chelmsford had relieved the drift. Anxious for the safety of his little settlement at Umsinga, Fynn hurried on. Trooper Dickson spurred towards Fort Pine to bring the news to Captain Robson.

Unrelated to the above....

Lt. Chard receiving his Victoria Cross from Sir Garnet Wolseley.



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