

Who died defending Coghill and Melvill?

By Katie Stossel

It was only following an examination of the report from Captain Higginson, a survivor of Isandlwana and the last man to see the two 24th officers, Lieutenants Coghill and Melvill, that a search for their bodies was undertaken. These two officers had somehow managed to escape from Isandlwana to save their regimental Colour and evaded the chasing Zulus. They then managed to cross the swirling torrent of the Buffalo River to reach what they thought would be safety, but were caught on the Natal side of the river and killed.

On the 4 February, a patrol from Rorke's Drift led by Major Wilson Black discovered their bodies on the upper slope of the Buffalo River gorge at Chief Sotondose's Drift, now known as Fugitives' Drift. According to a regimental ledger at the 24th Regimental Museum at Brecon, the patrol was accompanied by Captain Harford of the 99th Regiment with Captain Greaves and Lieutenant Hillier of the Natal Native Contingent when they found the bodies of Coghill and Melvill on the steep hillside overlooking the river. There were additionally at least two soldiers' bodies discovered alongside Coghill and Melvill, the evidence for which is supplied by the contemporary accounts of two of the officers who accompanied the party. Hillier reported finding four bodies in his letter to the *Telegraph and Eastern Province Standard*, published on 28 February 1879, and this is confirmed by a handwritten entry by Captain Harford in his presentation copy of *In Zululand with the British* by Norris-Newman, presented to him in 1880 by Norris-Newman himself. Harford annotated the book throughout with his own recollections and corrections and with regard to the number of bodies found by the search party he added a handwritten note that the bodies totalled '4'. Reverend Smith accompanied the group and read the burial service as the bodies were buried under a large rock overlooking the Buffalo River in the valley below.

This raises the question of the identity of the two soldiers found with Coghill and Melvill. Certainly, the army of the day would reverently bury their dead soldiers but not have recorded the details, only caring for the bodies of their officers. Post-battle, and in line with military tradition of the time, the fact that two soldiers had died in the presence of two officers would not necessarily have been deemed particularly relevant or significant. In 2009 the area around the graves of Coghill and Melvill was examined by researchers from the AZWHS for evidence of other cairns and, indeed, two unmarked cairns were found nearby. There are no other cairns or graves between these three at Fugitives' Drift and Rorke's Drift. Following further research, it is now believed that one of the soldiers is Sergeant Cooper of the 1st/24th Regiment, who had fought that same morning at Isandlwana and could have made a fighting escape to the river. Three soldiers were confirmed in Lt. Curling's account as having been helped across the fast-flowing flooded river by hanging on to his strong swimmer of a horse.

Cooper is officially recorded as being an Isandlwana casualty, but his family papers and memorial service documents state he was killed at Rorke's Drift. Fugitives' Drift is much closer to Rorke's Drift than Isandlwana. Cooper is not recorded in any of the accounts as having died during the fighting at Rorke's Drift but the logical suggestion is that he died at nearby Fugitives' Drift alongside Coghill and Melvill. This hypothesis arose when a letter was discovered that had been sent from the Officer-in-Command of the Rorke's Drift area at nearby Helpmakaar, Major Upcher, to Cooper's sister, addressed

as Miss (Mrs) Clements, informing her of her brother's death on the 22 January. Had Cooper been killed at Isandlwana or Rorke's Drift no such letter would have been written. So why the letter from Major Upcher to Cooper's sister?

It is possible that Cooper made good his escape along the Fugitives' Trail and across the Buffalo River before being killed alongside Coghill and Melvill. If he had been able to catch or cling to a fleeing horse, the hypothesis has to be reasonable especially as it is accepted that Curling's horse pulled three soldiers across the flooded river. And who were these three? If Cooper's body had been discovered and buried where it fell near those of Coghill and Melvill, notification of Cooper's death, especially having been a sergeant, would have been passed to Major Upcher who later wrote the letter to Miss Clements. No similar letter has ever been seen by Anglo Zulu War researchers or by the curators, former and present, at the Regimental Museum in Brecon; it is unique and reads;

Miss Clements

I regret to inform you that your brother was killed in action on 22nd January 1879, I am sorry that I cannot give you further and fuller information.

Helpmakaar

11th April 1879

Upcher Major

Commanding of 24th Regt.

As with many of the uncertainties from that day, the death of Sgt. Cooper remains shrouded in mystery and several questions remain. How near to Rorke's Drift was Cooper when he was killed and was he the soldier, or one of the two soldiers' bodies actually discovered along with Coghill and Melvill and buried under one of the adjacent cairns? Two soldiers' bodies were seen by Lieutenant Hillier and Captain Harford and this information was important enough to be passed back to Glyn who mentioned the matter in his report to Colonel Crealock, Chelmsford's Military Secretary on 1 Feb 1879.

I sent a party down the river to see if they could discover Melvill's and Coghill's bodies. They found them lying on a path [in a glen about five miles off and about 300 yards from the river on this (Natal) side.] Coghill had been stripped with the exception of his boots and socks, his spurs were lying at his side. Just below him Melvill was lying in his uniform apparently untouched. Below them again was a soldier and a number of the enemy. I think both Melvill and Coghill had been shot as their bodies were not mutilated.

The party collected various personal items such as rings and spurs from the two officers' bodies to return to their families, a normal procedure with officers' bodies. It is unlikely the soldier found with them would have had such items but a quick search of his body would have recovered any letter to identify him before burying him.

The Times of Natal special war correspondent, Charles Norris-Newman, wrote that corresponding with family and friends back in the British Isles was the soldiers' principal recreation. On campaign, soldiers traditionally carried cherished letters in their pockets as they had no other storage facility, so it is perfectly feasible that, if the body of the soldier was Cooper, the jacket contained a letter from his sister, a letter which would positively identify both the soldier's body and the letter writer's address. It is reasonable to expect

that those who found the body would have passed such a letter ‘up the line’ to Major Upcher along with the items recovered from Coghill and Melvill for their respective relatives. Otherwise, what caused Col. Glyn to mention it and for Major Upcher, by then commanding the 1/24th at Helpmakaar and Rorke’s Drift, to write a one-off personal letter to Cooper’s sister on 11 April 1879? This was about the same time that details of the deaths of Coghill and Melvill were sent from Helpmakaar to Horse Guards. Furthermore, the first serious attempt to identify and bury the Isandlwana battlefield bodies did not take place until later, on 21 May of that year and until then, no one knew where the Isandlwana bodies were. This author can find no alternative logical explanation for the Upcher letter to Cooper’s sister other than a letter from her being recovered from Cooper’s body. No similar letter to a dead soldier’s relatives, either from Rorke’s Drift or Isandlwana, has ever been seen.

This author’s presumption for Cooper’s family belief that he had been killed at Rorke’s Drift, and conducting his memorial service accordingly, is certainly based on Upcher’s letter to Cooper’s sister being signed off at Helpmakaar, and any enquiry by the family would reveal that Helpmakaar was the headquarters for Rorke’s Drift. Cooper had previously served with Coghill and Melvill at Gibraltar. This might also explain why he went to the aid of the officers after Higginson left them; Cooper had served with them since 1874.

The usual manner by which relatives discovered the death of a soldier was from other soldiers’ letters, newspaper articles or lists published in major towns. Officers’ deaths in action were formally notified by Horse Guards to the *Times* newspaper and in the case of Isandlwana officer casualties, the *Times* list of those killed was published on 12 February. The time scale of Maj. Upcher sending the Clements’ letter on 11 April roughly coincides with the actual details of the deaths of Coghill and Melvill being sent from Helpmakaar to London. The official notification of the actual circumstances of the deaths of the two officers at Fugitives’ Drift was sent on from Horse Guards to their respective families and is dated 21 April 1879.

This author once searched the route between Fugitives’ Drift and Rorke’s Drift, with David Rattray and accompanied by Adrian Greaves and David Payne. No evidence of any other cairn has ever been found beyond the three where Coghill and Melvill and one or two others (probably Cooper) were buried at Fugitives’ Drift. This ties in neatly with the belief of those who lived in the area, including George Bunting, who lived most of his life at Mzinyathi House at Fugitives’ Drift overlooking the graves of Coghill and Melvill. In the 1930s one of Bunting’s regular visitors was the historian J.L. Smail who recorded the following in his 1965 book *Historical Monuments and Battlefields in Natal and Zululand*. He quotes Bunting;

Lt. Melvill VC and Lt. Coghill VC. The cairns nearby conceal the remains of others. Bodies found on 1/2/1879 and buried under a common cairn by the Rev. Smith on 3/2/1879. At a later date the bodies of the two officers were re interred in two separate graves.

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