

Shedding a little light on the role of the NNC and the Reverend Witt at Rorke's Drift.

Ian Knight

The action at Rorke's Drift on 22/23rd January 1879 is certainly the most studied battle in the Anglo-Zulu War, and indeed arguably one of the most famous in British military history. Yet while the actions and identities of the regular British troops during the fight have been the subject of meticulous scrutiny, some mystery still surrounds the role of auxiliary troops - the Natal Native Contingent.

That there were NNC troops present at Rorke's Drift before the battle is confirmed by several credible observers. Lieutenant Chard himself mentioned the fact in both his official report of the action, and his longer letter to Queen Victoria; so, too, did Colour-Sergeant Bourne, Private Hook, Chaplain Smith, and others. Nevertheless, few of these accounts display any real knowledge of who they were, or what they were doing. Estimates of their strength vary wildly - Bourne put their number at 100, Smith thought there were 350, and Harry Lugg, of the Natal Mounted Police, believed there were 2000! while only Chard gives us the name of their officer, Captain Stephenson. This ignorance is in many ways surprising, since the NNC had been camped near the mission station since 11th January; not only must the men have been conspicuous to the regular troops nearby, but some interaction between their officers, at least, must surely have occurred. Nevertheless, it is typical of the reaction of the regular troops to auxiliary forces, whose professional pride and experience distanced themselves from both colonial-born irregular troops, and in particular from black auxiliaries.

Such attitudes have continued to colour our understanding of the NNC into recent times, and only one scholar - Paul Thompson of the University of Natal - has so far attempted to explore the important part they played in the war. Yet the actions of the NNC at Rorke's Drift deserve to be better understood, if only for the sake of their own reputation.

The NNC were something of an after-thought as far as the British were concerned. Both the British C-in-C, Lt. Gen. Lord Chelmsford, and his political superior, the High Commissioner for Southern Africa, Sir Henry Bartle Frere, had entered the war in the belief that the Zulu would pose no real military threat. They had expected to defeat the Zulu army quickly and easily, and then march on to intimidate republican elements in the Transvaal. Indeed, Frere had gambled that he could out-manoeuvre the opposition of the Colonial Office in London to the war by provoking and bringing hostilities to a successful conclusion before the home government had time to object. Such an approach made it difficult for Chelmsford to accumulate the resources necessary for the campaign, however, and indeed he received minimal regular reinforcements before the war began. Faced with the difficulties of operating across a huge tract of broken country, and the need to "drive the Zulu into a corner and make them fight", Chelmsford admitted the inevitable and authorised the raising of a black levy from Natal's African population.

This should have been a fertile recruiting ground. Many of the African groups within the colony had a history of antagonism towards the Zulu kingdom. Some had resisted the Zulu since the days of Shaka, while others were Zulu who had broken away during various political upheavals within the kingdom itself, and a few were Christians, who had whole-heartedly embraced European beliefs and life-styles. Nevertheless, the colonial authorities were reluctant to mobilise Natal's black population for two reasons. Firstly, there was a general suspicion that once mobilised and armed, the Africans would prove to be a threat to the stability of white supremacy within the colony, and secondly the lieutenant-governor, Sir Henry Bulwer, was worried that any use of Natal blacks against the Zulu would poison post-war relationships for generations to come. To the extent that history played a small part in shaping the patterns of support in conflict between the ANC and Inkatha in the 1980s, he was perhaps right. Nevertheless, the authorities were eventually persuaded, and General Orders authorising the raising of the Natal Native Contingent was published on 23rd November 1878. Since the war began on 11th January 1879, just six weeks were allowed to raise, organise, officer, equip and train the contingent.

Moreover, while the rank and file seem generally to have responded enthusiastically to the call - traditional chiefs were authorised to raise a quota in each administrative district in the colony - there was a shortage of white officers and NCOs. While a number of officers were appointed from regular officers who had volunteered for special service, most were appointed from colonial volunteers. Where possible, senior ranks were filled from men who had both experience in the British army - a number of battalion commandants had once been officers in British regiments - and had served under Lord Chelmsford in the recent Cape Frontier War. There were not enough of such men to go round, however, and nor was it possible to fill all the posts from among white volunteers in Natal. Many Captains and Lieutenants of the NNC were recruited among the settler gentry and adventurers on the Eastern Cape Frontier. While a few spoke some African language - usually Xhosa or the Mpondo dialect - few spoke any Zulu. Moreover, because the Contingent was such a last-minute affair, most of

the better-quality volunteers in Natal had already found posts, and the white NCOs of the NNC were recruited largely from the ranks of the recently-disbanded irregular units on the Frontier, many of whom were drinking away their pay in frontier canteens, or among unemployed labourers. The NCOs were, by all accounts, a rough lot.

The effects of this on the NNC were disastrous. Given the mixed origins of the other ranks, it had always been considered important that the commanders took pains to treat them well, and instil a sense of esprit de corps. Yet the Contingent would be pitched into the war before the men had come to know, or learned to trust, their officers. Many, indeed, complained of being bullied by their NCOs, who issued incomprehensible orders, then used their fists to enforce them. They found European drill confusing, and only the most imaginative commanders made any attempt to harness their traditional military outlook. So far from using African terms of respect when addressing their headmen - as they were urged to do - many officers and NCOs referred to them with utter contempt. Furthermore, early good intentions to encourage the morale of the corps by issuing uniforms and firearms were abandoned for reasons of economy. Only one in ten - usually the designated black NCOs - were issued with firearms, and the rest of the men carried their traditional weapons. Although some commandants attempted to procure old military uniforms from the government stores, most NNC were distinguished by nothing more than a red rag, worn around their heads. Under such circumstances, while the showing of the Contingent in the war was undoubtedly poor, it was perhaps better than the British deserved.

The 3rd Regiment, NNC, was appointed to the British No. 3, or Centre, Column, which was to cross at Rorke's Drift. The Contingent assembled at Sand Spruit, behind the Helpmakaar range, not far from the modern village of Pomeroy, where the groups from the various chiefdoms came together, and were issued with their equipment. The 3rd Regiment consisted mostly of men from the abaThembu, amaChunu and amaBhele chiefdoms, with a contingent of iziGqoza, all of whom were from Weenen county, which lay along the headwaters of the Thukela River. The iziGqoza were Zulu, exiled followers of King Cetshwayo's brothers who had opposed him in the civil war of 1856, and who had fled to Natal. One of Cetshwayo's brothers, Sikhotha kaMpande, actually accompanied the iziGqoza into the field in 1879, and for these men support for the British invasion was less important than the chance to settle old grievances. Nevertheless, there were not enough men from Weenen county to fill the 3rd Regiment, and several hundred were raised from Klip River county, around Ladysmith. These men did not join the Contingent until the war was about to begin.

On 11 January the Centre Column crossed into Zululand at Rorke's Drift, and established a camp on the Zulu bank. On the 12th, it saw its first taste of action when it attacked the followers of Chief Sihayo kaXongo, who lived in the Batshe valley, a few miles further along the track into Zululand. On the 20th, the entire column moved up to Isandlwana.

Who then were the men left at Rorke's Drift? On the 14th, a detachment of the men raised in Klip River county arrived to join the column, and a company was apparently left to guard the ponds at the Drift. These men were officially part of the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Regiment, but it should be noted that they had received little of the training given to the rest of the 3rd Regiment, nor had they had any time to develop a sense of belonging to their unit. Their numbers remain obscure - in theory a company consisted of nine white leaders (a captain, two lieutenants, and six NCOs) and 101 Africans (a black officer, ten NCOs and 90 privates) - but it seems probable that this company was over-strength, due to the casual way the Klip River levy had been deployed. Moreover, they seem to have been lacking in white NCOs, probably as a result of their hasty formation. They were commanded by Captain William Stephenson, "a gentleman from the Cape Colony [who] spoke the language perfectly", but seem to have had no lieutenants or sergeants present, and only three corporals. It seems unlikely, therefore, that their morale and military effectiveness can have been up to much even before news broke mid-afternoon on the 22nd that the Centre Column had been shattered at Isandlwana, and that the Zulu were approaching Rorke's Drift.

When the Contingent first heard the news, they reacted in traditional manner, singing war-songs and probably attempting to complete the necessary ritual preparations. Chard asked them to help build the barricades, and Stephenson did "good service in getting his men to work". At about 3.30, however, a party of mounted auxiliaries rode up from the Drift. These were some of Col. Durnford's command, who had survived Isandlwana; they were mostly followers of the BaSotho chief, Hlubi, and they were under the command of a Lieutenant Henderson. While most of the mounted Native Contingent who had survived the disaster had crossed the Mzinyathi (Buffalo) river downstream, at the place known as Fugitives' Drift, these seem to have cut through the Zulu cordon, and reached Rorke's Drift. Henderson reported to Chard, who asked him to deploy his men beyond Shiyane hill, in the direction of the Zulu advance, to delay the Zulu attack as long as possible. They had been gone perhaps forty-five minutes when the garrison heard a smatter of shots, and they came into sight, riding off towards Helpmekaar.

Henderson had escaped in the company of a civilian meat contractor, R.J. 'Bob' Hall, who had been in the camp discussing business with the army. According to one of the garrison, Harry Lugg, it was Hall who shouted that the Zulu were approaching, "as he described it, 'as black as hell and as thick as grass'". By Hall's account,

he and Henderson lingered in the bush at the front of the post to fire a few shots at the Zulu as they swung into view of the mission, before riding off to Helpmakaar. No one seems to have blamed them; even Chard commented that he saw the same men fight well later in the war, and he seems to have accepted that they were demoralised by Durnford's death. No action was later taken against Henderson.

But the site of the Mounted Contingent in full flight was too much for Stephenson's NNC, whose martial spirit promptly evaporated. The men threw down the mealie bags, biscuit boxes or weapons they had in their hands, and simply jumped over the barricades, heading for Helpmakaar. While the garrison had clearly not expected much from the rank and file, they were infuriated by the sight of the white NCOs in flight, and someone from B Company shot and killed one of the NNC's white NCOs. The dead man is generally accepted as being a Corporal Anderson, the only man of the NNC who was killed in the battle whose death is not accounted for by other evidence.

Colour Sergeant Bourne perhaps summed up the reaction of the garrison to this desertion when he commented "the desertion of these detachments of 200 men appeared at first sight to be a great loss, with only a hundred of us left, but the feeling afterwards was that we could not have trusted them, and also our defences were too small to accommodate them anyhow". Whether he meant that they men could not be relied upon to stand and fight, or whether he suspected the Contingent might desert to the Zulu (which was highly unlikely), he does not say.

With their desertion, the NNC pass out of the Rorke's Drift story, save for a few white NCOs, not from Stephenson's company, who were patients in the makeshift hospital, and who distinguished themselves in the fight.

The desertion of Stephenson's company seems to have rankled more than that of Henderson's men, who had previously fought well at Isandlwana. The 3rd Regiment was in any case disbanded a few days later, and while many of the officers and NCOs were found other posts, General Order no. 37 of 19 February stated that the services of Captain Stephenson, 2/3rd NNC, were no longer required, and he was dismissed from the service.

Finally, before leaving the question of those who abandoned the post just before the battle, it is worth saying a few words about the Reverend Otto Witt. Witt had bought the Rorke's Drift farm on behalf of the Church of Sweden Mission in 1878, and had stayed at the post when the British occupied it on the eve of the war. He was still there on 22nd January, although he abandoned his home just before the battle began. His actions received a good deal of criticism at the time, and his reputation has suffered as a result, however, partly because he was publicly critical of the attitude of white settlers in Natal to the Africans, and partly because his claim to have been present at both Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift was held up to ridicule.

Yet history has not treated Witt fairly. In fact, what he actually said was that he had seen something of the battle of Isandlwana from the top of the Shiyane hill, which overlooks Rorke's Drift, and that, as he was riding away from Rorke's Drift, he witnessed the first Zulu assault on the post.

Were these claims as ridiculous as they have sometimes seemed? Witt climbed the hill in the company of Chaplain Smith and Surgeon Reynolds shortly after noon, when the battle was just beginning at Isandlwana. It takes a fit man a good half-hour to climb to the top, and the party probably took a little longer; by the time they reached the peak of the hill, therefore, the battle would have been well under-way. From the summit of Shiyane, there is a magnificent view of the entire theatre of operations of the Centre Column, from the crossing point at Rorke's Drift on the left towards Isandlwana, and Siphezi Mountain beyond. Only where the river enters the gorges above Fugitives' Drift on the right is the view hemmed in and lost. Isandlwana itself blots out the plain in front of it, where much of the battle took place, but the spurs of the iNyoni ridge, where Mostyn and Cavaye's companies were deployed, are clearly visible. So, too, as the Manzimnyama valley, where the Zulu right horn descended, and the near slope of the nek below Isandlwana itself, where many of the 24th stands were broken up and overwhelmed. Is there anything improbable, then, about Witt's account of what he actually saw that day?

My position was on a hill on the other side of the river from where the fight was raging. I watched the Zulus descend and draw themselves in long lines between the camp and the river. From where I stood I could see the English forces advancing to attack; but I could not see any hand-to-hand fighting. I observed that the Zulus were fighting heavily, and presently I saw that the English were surrounded in a kraal some little distance from the camp ... As the fight progressed, and I saw that the English were beaten ... I noticed that the Zulus were crossing the river ...

In a long, and admittedly rather confused account, Witt went on to add more details to this account, all of them quite plausible. Once he realised he was in danger, however, he "saw there was no time to be lost, and I dashed away on horseback as hard as I could go." There was no reason for him to stay; as a civilian and a missionary, he had no duty to support the British troops, and nor does anyone seem to have expected him to. He claimed that he was "chased by the Zulus, who did their best to catch me, but failed". His account of Rorke's Drift is clearly a mixture of his own observations, and reports published after the events. Like Henderson and

Hall, he probably paused to look back at the battle when he was a safe distance away; moreover, the site of the battle would have been visible for several miles as he rode towards Helpmakaar;

Before I started I saw a Zulu alone at the barricade, kneeling and firing. The whole force drew nearer, and the battle drew on heavier. Soon the hospital was on fire. Our people found it impossible to defend themselves inside the barricade. They must retire within the walls, thus entering the commissariat store. The sick people were brought here, except five who could not be removed, and who were stabbed by the Zulus and burnt. That the hospital was set on fire was certainly a great personal loss for me, as all my property was burnt; but it was of great importance for the whole colony, and especially for the people in the commissariat stores, as the flames of the burning house enabled them to aim properly on the Zulus and thus keep them at a fair distance. If the Zulus had known what they ought they should never have put fire to the house, and the heavy darkness of that dreadful night would have made our troops unable to defend themselves as they did.

There is nothing in this account to cause us to question Witt's veracity. It seems that his marginal role in the eyes of the successive generation of British commentators has caused his reputation to suffer unfairly. Perhaps we should consider, too, whether the NNC at Rorke's Drift have received their just deserts, or whether there is at least a case for excusing their behaviour on the grounds of 'mitigating circumstances'.

Editor's note.

There is a distinct possibility that Witt was not at Rorke's Drift during the period leading up to the Zulu attack. It is possible the British at Rorke's Drift presumed that Witt's friend, August Hammar, a visitor from Sweden, was Otto Witt.

Hammar spoke no English and the soldiers certainly didn't speak Swedish. Other accounts have Witt leaving the Mission Station several days earlier to find his wife, leaving August Hammar to look after his interests. Hammar witnessed the attack on Rorke's Drift from afar and a few days later wrote a letter describing his experience in to his family –the letter survives.

See Journal 24 for the latest research on Witt at Rorke's Drift.