

It is fair to say that most of us who are fascinated by the Anglo Zulu War had their initial interest fired by the film *ZULU*. I would also suggest in most people's opinion, the outstanding character in this milestone of a film was Colour Sergeant Bourne as portrayed by Nigel Green. His powerful ramrod presence, coupled with a rumbling bass voice, was memorable and the lines of dialogue he delivered are still quoted by enthusiasts thirty-five years after they first heard them.

Despite the enjoyment and interest the film created, it was full of errors and false characterisations. Michael Caine's languid and arrogant Bromhead, Jack Hawkin's drunken and raving Otto Witt and, most scurrilously of all, James Booth's interpretation of Private Henry Hook as a malingerer alcoholic Cockney.(1) Colourful though Nigel Green's depiction was, it also bore little true resemblance to Colour Sergeant Frank Bourne.(2)

The real Frank Bourne was born on 27th April 1854 and was, therefore, much younger than Nigel Green's portrayal. His family were farmers at Balcombe, a Sussex village between Haywards Heath and Crawley. Perhaps, because he was the youngest of eight sons and bottom of the pecking order that he felt there was little chance of inheriting the farm. The prospect of spending the rest of his life within the narrow environs of a rural community probably did not appeal to this intelligent and active youth. Despite his father's attempts to prevent his son leaving the farm to join the army, with all the stigma that such service implied, young Bourne travelled to the nearest recruiting centre at Reigate and volunteered on 18th December 1872. He was just eighteen.

His army records describe his physical appearance as being 5'5" tall, dark complexion, grey eyes and brown hair. In his own words, he was painfully thin and hardly an imposing figure. In fact he was like many of the recruits of that time, short and underweight. In January 1873, he was posted to the 2nd Battalion 24th (Warwickshire) Regiment. Bourne thought that the Sergeant Major must have had a sense of humour for he was put in A Company, traditionally the Grenadier Company and manned by the tallest soldiers. The 2/24th had served in India and Burma since 1860 and was due for a spell of home service and it was during this period that Private Bourne learned his new trade. He was keen, abstemious and, rare for that period, literate; then aged twenty-one; he was rewarded with promotion to Corporal in 1875.

Since returning home, the 24th had made the small South Wales town of Brecon their main recruiting depot. As a consequence, the ranks began to take on a Welsh flavour, although the English and Irish still heavily outnumbered them. (3) After years of routine duties in postings such as Dover Castle, it must have been something of a relief for Bourne and his comrades to be posted overseas. The regiment travelled to Portsmouth where they embarked on the troopship *Himalaya* on 1st February 1878 and set sail for South Africa. Their sister battalion, the 1<sup>st</sup> 24<sup>th</sup>, had been there since 1875 and was prominent in the final Frontier War. The Second Battalion was being sent to help stamp out the last resistance in Griqualand.

Upon arrival, Bourne was accelerated up the promotion ladder. Between 7th to 27th April 1878, he was promoted Lance Sergeant, Sergeant and then Colour Sergeant of B Company. Although hostilities had all but ceased, the men of B Company, led by Lieutenant Gonville Bromhead, were involved in the fighting around Mount Kempt and remained there for several weeks until a general amnesty was proclaimed at the end of June.

By the end of the campaign, Bourne, in common with his comrades, now sported a heavy growth of beard and wore a uniform that had seen rough service. White tropical helmets had been dyed with tea or coffee to make them less conspicuous. Bright red tunics had faded to a rust colour and were often patched with leather. They were also tanned and in good physical condition.

In July 1878, the battalion was sent into camp at Pietermaritzberg in Natal. Here they prepared for the war they knew was coming with neighbouring Zululand. After three months, they were sent fifty miles closer to the border, to Greytown. Here they were encouraged to take part in all kinds of athletics including a daily mile run before breakfast. In December, as they prepared to march to Helpmakaar, so the rains came. The seventy-four mile march was one the soldiers would never forget. Incessant rain turned the track into a quagmire. Despite the rain, there was a shortage of drinking water, and the men resorted to drinking from muddy puddles resulting in an increase in stomach disorders. There was no shelter at night and no ground sheets to sleep on. Although they did not know it then, Frank Bourne and his comrades would suffer many such days in the coming weeks.

When, after five days, they finally reached Helpmakaar, they were cheered up by the welcome they received from the First Battalion; dinner had been prepared the band played them into camp. This was one of the rare occasions when both battalions of a regiment served together on the same campaign. Helpmakaar mushroomed into the main assembly point for the Central Column. Troops, stores, livestock, wagons and ordnance covered the desolate plateau.

As the invasion date approached, so the column descended to the crossing point at Rorke's Drift, where an advanced store depot and hospital were established. To their great disappointment, B Company was ordered to remain at Rorke's Drift as guards for the post and the crossing, although there were some who were relieved to have a break from hard marching. (4) The river crossing consisted of the ferry, which was constructed and manned by six men of 5 Company Royal Engineers, under the command of Lieutenant John Chard. There were

two punts or pontoons used, each capable of transporting one ox-wagon or eighty men at a time. By use of rope and tackle, they were pulled from one bank to the other; a long and laborious task. The Engineers had pitched their tents on a rise overlooking the crossing and were left to keep the ferry in working order as a constant stream of transport was planned to keep the column supplied. About half a mile to the south at the base of a hill called Shiyane, (5) was the Reverend Otto Witt's mission station which consisted of his house, now turned into a hospital, and a stone built chapel piled to the rafters with stores. There was also a well-constructed stone cattle kraal as well as an incomplete kraal to the north-east. The buildings sat on a rock ledge that overlooked a strip of brush and an orchard of fruit trees.

The men of B Company pitched their tents to the east of the storehouse, while the three hundred members of the 2nd/3rd Natal Native Contingent under Captain William Stevenson and his white NCOs camped nearby. These NNC were employed primarily as labourers to help the Commissariat load and unload wagons and to help at the ferry.

After the excitement and activity of the invasion on the 11th January, life at Rorke's Drift settled into dull routine. Bromhead was not a demanding officer and, as there was plenty of spare time, the men indulged in one of their favourite pastimes, writing letters home. As one of the few who could read and write, Frank Bourne was in demand by his company. He read their letters from home and wrote their dictated replies. (6)

On the 12<sup>th</sup> January 1879, Bourne, accompanied by Sergeants Galagher, Smith, Windridge and Wilson, climbed to the summit of the Shiyane hill from where they had a magnificent view into Zululand. From here they could spot the distinctive shape of Isandlwana that, in the days to come, was to dominate the rest of their lives. They could also see the Central Column and follow their successful attack on Sihayo's stronghold in the Bashee Valley. Following this attack, the population of the hospital was increased by three to thirty-six. One of the new influx was a Corporal Frederick Schiess of the NNC who was later to feature prominently in coming battle.

The five sergeants had taken to regularly climbing the Shiyane for signs of the column's progress. It was the late morning of the 22nd when they heard the distant sound of artillery fire coming from the direction of Isandlwana. They strained to see the six miles to Isandlwana but could see nothing of note in the damp air; they nevertheless felt it worth reporting to Bromhead. The Chaplain, the Reverend George Smith accompanied by the Surgeon, James Reynolds took a telescope and climbed to the summit. They could hear the rumble of gunfire and saw a haze of smoke floating above the camp on the far side of Isandlwana. It was around 1300 hours that the sun disappeared behind the moon, bathing the midday landscape in an unnatural dusk light. When the eclipse passed, they saw a mass of black moving around the mountain until it disappeared in dead ground. This movement they took to be their native allies, the NNC, chasing the defeated Zulus.

It took another ninety minutes for the first panic-stricken survivors to reach the post and the news they brought was mind numbing. The whole of the British camp was overrun and everyone had been killed. More than that, a Zulu impi was on its way to wipe out the post at Rorke's Drift. It is not this writer's intention to detail the oft-told tale of the preparation and progress of this epic battle; instead, let us concentrate on the known and probable movements of our subject, Frank Bourne.

It would have been Bourne's first duty to supervise the taking down of the Company's bell tents, a recognised military drill, to give a clear field of fire. Rifles were stacked, belts and ammunition placed within the perimeter. Once the decision to remain and hold the mission station had been taken, Lieutenants Chard and Bromhead acted on Acting Assistant Commissary James Dalton's advice to fortify the post by constructing barricades using the 200-pound sacks of mealies and wooden boxes of hardtack biscuits. The hospital walls, being constructed of adobe, were easily loop-holed and Bourne posted a section of six men there. Those sick that were able to fire a weapon, were issued with rifles.

Bourne was further occupied with posting lookouts on the higher ground and organising a skirmishing line. Meanwhile, the rest of the troops were in shirtsleeve order as they helped carry the heavy loads from the storehouse to the quickly growing barricade. Without the large native labour available, the perimeter would have been much weaker. They did, however, begin to melt away as more refugees passed on their way. Just as it was nearing completion, a body of Natal Native Horse, who had been persuaded to observe the approach of the Zulu's from behind the Shiyane hill, called out that the Zulus were approaching. They then galloped off on the road to Helpmakaar. This completely unnerved the remaining NNC, who vaulted the barricades and made off in the same direction led by their mounted officer, Captain Stephenson.(7) A Corporal Michael Anderson of the NNC, who had been in the hospital with a stomach disorder, had volunteered to take a rifle and man the barricades. Seeing the mass desertion, he lost his nerve and took to his heels. The furious soldiers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> 24<sup>th</sup> shouted abuse after him and one took the ultimate action of shooting the fleeing Anderson in the back, thus creating the first fatality on that bloody day.(8)

With the Zulus fast approaching, Chard realised that the perimeter was too long to defend with the men that remained. He ordered another barricade built as a fallback. This ran from the back wall by the store to the front. He also organised the pile of mealie sacks standing in front of the store into a redoubt. This gave the soldiers an elevated view and proved to be most effective during the battle. As the Zulus approached, so the skirmishers and lookouts fell back to the perimeter.

It was now four thirty and B Company rapidly donned their tunics and belts and grabbed their rifles. They took up the positions allocated them by Colour-Sergeant Bourne, fixed their bayonets and slipped in the first

bullet of many that would be fired that day. The line of red was broken here and there by the blue of a gunner and the black of a Natal Mounted Policeman. Non-combatants like the Commissariat, Transport Department and Army Service Corps stood by to supply ammunition or fill in should gaps appear in the line. Surgeon-Major Reynolds and his three staff improvised a field hospital on the veranda of the store and waited for the expected flood of casualties.

There was a short lull and then Private Fred Hitch, who was positioned as lookout on the roof of the store, cried out that he could see the approaching impi as it came around the shoulder of Shiyane. The initial charge against the southern defences was stopped by sustained volley fire. The soldiers were often firing blind through the curtain of acrid smoke made from dozens of rifles but the rush of Zulus was so dense that it was almost impossible to miss. Some warriors got within fifty yards before there was a general movement around the side of the hospital; they then made an effort to penetrate the barricade in front of the hospital veranda. This was the one weak spot in the defences because it could be approached under cover of the thick brush and, with a quick rush onto a rocky step; the barricade could be vaulted as it was only waist-high.

A furious hand-to-hand fight ensued, with Private Hitch prominently engaged. Seeing the gravity of the situation, Bromhead and Bourne led a bayonet charge that drove the Zulus back from the step and into the brush. There would be a further half dozen such charges, as the Zulus sensed this was one area of the British defences that could be breached. Further along the barricade, the Zulus crawled through the undergrowth and sprang forward and attempted to scale the high ledge. There was much stabbing with assegai and bayonet and the aforementioned Corporal Schiess fought like a man possessed. He climbed onto top of the mealie sacks to enable him to shoot, bludgeon and stab the waves of warriors. A chance shot in the foot still did not deter him and he was an inspiration to all those around him.

The Zulus had occupied some of the Shiyane hill terraces and were firing down into the British line and causing casualties to those men whose backs were exposed on the north wall. Bourne organised some sharpshooters to the south wall by the store from where they were able to pick off the odd sniper and to largely neutralise the threat. The Zulus then tried to overrun the post by attacking through the stone kraal to the east but determined fire kept them at bay. Chard finally was forced to withdraw from the hospital area and reduce his perimeter. The heroic exploits of the defenders in the hospital enabled them to bring most of the patients to safety. In their efforts to enter the hospital, the Zulus had set fire to the thatch, which illuminated the surrounding area in the failing light. This enabled the defenders to see any attempt the Zulus made to occupy the abandoned area and to keep them away from the inner barrier. Nightfall brought little respite. The defenders had been firing almost continuously for five hours and they were mentally and physically exhausted. Their Martini-Henry rifles had grown almost too hot to handle and the vicious recoil made firing agony. High nervous tension and the smoke-laden air gave them all a raging thirst. The only water available was in the two-wheeled water cart parked by the hospital. Desperation drove volunteers to risk their lives dragging the cart to the inner barrier, from where bottles and cups could be filled.

As the night passed, so the attacks grew less frequent. The Zulus kept up their chanting and shield banging, which kept the defenders on high alert. Most felt that the coming dawn would be their last as the Zulus would be sure to resume their attacks. Many of the defenders were totally drained and felt they would be unable to summon up any reserves of will to continue fighting. With the dawning of a new day, the soldiers looked over a scene of horror. Hundreds of slain Zulus surrounded them but of the living there was no sign. Slowly they realised that the impi had withdrawn, and the soldiers began to move around the post, collecting and making piles of assegais and shields. About 08.15, a detachment of Lord Chelmsford's mounted troops arrived, soon followed by the commander himself. He was fulsome in his praise of the bravery and determination shown by the defenders but he was too overcome by the events at Isandlwana to offer any promise of relief.

Food was prepared for both defenders and Chelmsford's men. Colour Sergeant Bourne issued a welcome tot of rum and was surprised when the teetotal Henry Hook proffered his tin cup. After what he had gone through, he felt he was entitled to anything that was going. In a moment of reflection, Bourne wondered what the outcome of the battle would have been if the Zulus had thought to slit open the barricade of mealie sacks. The defences would have literally poured away and the defenders made more vulnerable.

The remnants of the Central Column remained at Rorke's Drift and only the wounded were evacuated. All the mounted men and artillery departed with Chelmsford. After the euphoria of victory, B Company was to experience a long and depressing couple of months. Left under the command of their traumatised colonel, Richard Glyn, the post suffered a decline in leadership and morale. Glyn was fearful of an imminent Zulu attack and had the post heavily fortified and named it Fort Bromhead. He also insisted that every one should stay within its walls.

Lacking adequate shelter, change of clothing, sanitation and medicines, the health and morale of the men rapidly declined. The constant cold weather and heavy rain made their lot most wretched. The men of B Company they felt their heroic efforts had passed unrecognised, although back in England the newspapers and magazines were full of their exploits. It was not until May that the first of the eleven Rorke's Drift Victoria Crosses were presented, to be followed several months later by five awards of the Silver Medal for Distinguished Conduct (DCM). One of the latter was Frank Bourne who was also offered a commission, a rare honour in Victoria's Army.<sup>(9)</sup> Having no income other than his sergeant's pay, he was unable to afford the considerable cost of becoming an officer and felt obliged to decline the offer.

Meanwhile the build-up to the second invasion occupied the army during the spring and early summer. It was not until May that the occupants of the hated Fort Bromhead moved the short distance to a larger well built fort, Fort Melvill, which overlooked the ferry. They were hopeful of being part of the invasion force but were incredulous when they were assigned guard duties along the new invasion force's lines of communication. Instead, it was the raw recruits of the First Battalion who marched on Ulundi.

With the ending of the Zulu War, B Company and the rest of the Second Battalion prepared to leave South Africa. They had a most uplifting welcome when they marched through the streets of Pietermaritzberg. The enthusiastic crowd hailed the men of B Company as the men who had saved Natal and presented each man with an inscribed scroll of honour. There followed months of frustrating inactivity as the Battalion waited at their camp near Durban for an available ship. In January 1880 they embarked and sailed for their next posting, Gibraltar. It was here, in 1882, that Frank Bourne married his wife Eliza, who was subsequently to bear him five children. During this time he was promoted to Quartermaster-Sergeant of the battalion.

In 1887, Bourne had one more overseas posting when his regiment was sent to Burma to join the Field Force led by Sir Garnet Wolseley. They spent most of their effort in marching through the jungles of Upper Burma in pursuit of elusive guerrillas without bringing them to battle. By 1890 the region was more or less at peace.

The army seems to have been determined that Bourne's talents should be rewarded and he was appointed Honorary Lieutenant and Quartermaster in May 1890. Eighteen months later, he left his regiment to take up the post of Adjutant at the School of Musketry at Hythe in Kent. Here he remained until his retirement in 1907 with the rank of major. His reputation was such that the legendary Lord Roberts appointed him as an assistant with the Society of Miniature (Small-Bore) Rifle Clubs. (10) This was during the period when quasi-military pastimes like shooting, The Boys' Brigade and The Scouts became very popular with the nation's youth.

With the outbreak of the First World War, the sixty-year-old Bourne volunteered his services once more. He was appointed Adjutant for the School of Musketry, this time in Dublin. When he again retired at the end of the war, he was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and awarded the Order of the British Empire. A photograph shows him wearing his full dress uniform and displaying his South African War Medal (bar 1878-79), Indian General Service (bar Burma 1887-89) and his Distinguished Conduct Medal. He then retired to live in a modest house in the centre of Dorking. Although there was no veteran's association, he was persuaded to attend the Northern Command Military Tattoo at Gateshead in 1934. To a tumultuous ovation, he appeared in the arena with the only other living Rorke's Drift survivors, Alfred Saxby, William Cooper, John Jobbins and Caleb Woods.

In December 1936, he made a BBC radio broadcast for a series entitled "I was there". (See following article). It generated enough interest for three hundred and fifty people to write to Bourne. It says something of the man that he replied to every one of them. (11)

Within sight of the ending of the Second World War, Frank Bourne peacefully passed away on 8th May 1945 aged 91 years and was buried at Elmer's End Cemetery, Thus ended the life of a remarkable and modest man, a true hero.

### **Acknowledgements.**

*The Silver Wreath* by Norman Holme  
*The Red Soldier* by Frank Emery  
*John Williams VC* by W.G. Lloyd  
*Rorke's Drift* by James W. Bancroft  
*Nothing Remains but to Fight* by Ian Knight  
South Wales Borderers Museum, Brecon

### **References.**

1. Bromhead was introspective. Witt was not a secret drinker; neither did he try to persuade the defenders to flee. Henry Hook was a decent upright teetotaler from Gloucestershire.

2. For some reason, the film has the character of Bourne as the only soldier displaying medals, and even these are incorrect. They are the South African War Medal 1877-79 (not awarded until the end of the Zulu War) and, most bizarrely, King Edward VII's Coronation Medal 1902.
3. The First Battalion had been abroad for several years and in fact did not return for home duty until the end of the Zulu War. They only took on the Welsh influence when almost their whole battalion was replaced after the losses at Isandlwana.
4. It has been suggested that B Company was given this thankless duty because their commander, Lieutenant Gonville Bromhead, had impaired hearing or that he was somehow not up to the task of leading men into battle. As we have seen, B Company was fairly active during the previous year's hostilities and earned praise from Lord Chelmsford. It is unlikely that they drew this duty for no other reason than it was their turn to mount guard.
5. Witt renamed this hill *Oscarsberg* in honour of his Swedish monarch.
6. For details of Frank Bourne's experiences, please refer his own account, which follows this article.
7. Captain Stephenson was later apprehended in Pietermaritzberg and dismissed the service at Rorke's Drift.
8. Corporal Anderson is one of the dead interred in the little cemetery at Rorke's Drift under the heading of "Killed".
9. There were several other notable elevations from the ranks including Luke O'Connor who won the VC at the Battle of the Alma as a sergeant and who rose to become a Major General. Major-General Sir Hector MacDonald rose from the rank of sergeant in the Gordon Highlanders. Colonel Philip Eyre commanded the South Staffordshire's which he joined as a private. He was killed leading his Regiment in the Battle of Kirbekan in 1885.
10. This was the brainchild of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, which eventually led to the National Federation of Rifle Clubs.
11. To their eternal shame, the BBC scrapped the recording during the 1950's as being of 'no sufficient interest'!

**After the Zulu War; Colour Sgt Bourne with his family.**

