

An Account by Lieutenant Colonel F. Bourne OBE, DCM

From his radio interview with the BBC in 1936 - From *The Listener*, 30th December 1936.

'In December 1872, when I was 18 years old, I enlisted in the 24th Regiment and received the princely pay of 6d. a day, of which 3½d. was deducted for messing and washing, leaving 1s. 5½d. a week – for luxuries. I went to bed every night hungry but quite happy, and it made a man of me.

The Regiment had just come home from India after fifteen years. Now the 'A' Company of any Regiment in those days was always called the Grenadier Company and was supposed to have the biggest men. I think the Sergeant-Major must have been a wee bit humorous, for he posted me to our 'A' Company although I stood only five foot six inches and was painfully thin.

After five years of home service, in February 1878 the Regiment received sudden orders to proceed to the Cape of Good Hope to take part in the Kaffir War. This was my first experience of active service, and shortly after, my Colonel promoted me Colonel-Sergeant of 'B' Company – 100 strong. I was only twenty-three, very nervous, sensitive, and afraid of my new responsibilities. Several men of the Company were of my own age, other older, and some old enough to be my father, but after a few months I felt more secure and thought I was getting along quite well. I also found myself 'unpaid private secretary' to several men who could barely read and write, and I deciphered and answered their letters home, feeling quite happy in our relations.

One day I heard a man named Wall ask my batman 'if the kid was in', a day or two later I asked Partridge casually who 'the kid' was, and received the answer, 'why, you are, of course.' My stock slumped at once. I think it does us all good to have our swollen heads reduced. But we were a very happy family. You can't live in tents, and on Mother Earth, for two years on Active Service without knowing your men intimately.

The Kaffir War ended in June 1878 and we were moved to Pietermaritzburg, Natal, to assist in raising the curtain on the Zulu drama. On January 11 we crossed the Buffalo River at Rorke's Drift – into the Zulu country. Our Commander-in-Chief was Lord Chelmsford. Our strength was four thousand five hundred men – including thirteen companies of my Regiment, the 24th, now the South Wales Borderers. Our company was left behind at Rorke's Drift, to guard the hospital, stores, and the pontoons at the Drift on the Buffalo River. This was my company, and at the time I was bitterly disappointed. We saw the main column under Lord Chelmsford engaged the enemy at once, and I watched the action, along with my four sergeants, from a little hill by Rorke's Drift. Then we saw them move on again, and they disappeared. And now I must tell you what happened to them during the next ten days.

They made their camp under a hill called Isandhlwana, about ten miles away. Then day later, on the twenty-first, Lord Chelmsford learned that the enemy was in force ahead of the camp, and he moved out on the morning of the twenty-second with nearly half his force to attack them. But as he advanced they disappeared, and in his absence his camp was attacked and overwhelmed by fourteen thousand Zulus. So swift was the disaster that the few survivors who got away could give no reliable account of it, but the evidence of the dead who were afterwards found and buried where they lay told the unvarying tale of groups of men fighting back to back until the last cartridge was fired. After the war, Zulu witnesses all told the same story,

At first we could make no headway against the soldiers, but suddenly they ceased to fire, then we came round them and killed them with our assegais.

According to one account, the last survivor was a drummer boy who flung his sword at a Zulu. This was the last occasion that Band or Drummer Boys were taken on Active Service, as it was also the last occasion that the Colours were carried into action. Lieutenants Melvill and Coghill lost their lives that day trying to save the colours. Fully twelve hundred men were killed. And by half past one no white man was alive in Isandhlwana camp.

Of course, back at Rorke's Drift we knew nothing of this disaster, although my sergeants and I on our hill above it could hear the guns and see the puffs of smoke. But an hour later, at two o'clock, a few refugees arrived and warned us what to expect. One man whispered to me 'Not a fighting chance for you, young feller.' Up to that time we had done nothing to put our small post in a defensive position, as our force in front was nearly five thousand strong and had six guns, and the last thing that we expected

was that we should be the saviours of the remainder of that force. The strength of our small garrison at the Drift was two combatant and six departmental officers, and one hundred and thirty-three non-commissioned officers and men, thirty-six of whom were sick, leaving about one hundred fighting men. Remember that twelve hundred men had just been massacred at Isandlwana.

Can you then be surprised that, flushed with their success, the Zulus were making for our small post confident that we should be easy victims to their savagery? Having had the warning – but only two hours in advance, as it turned out – we set to work to loophole the two buildings and to connect the front of the hospital with a stone cattle kraal by sacks of Indian corn and oats, and to draw up two Boer transport wagons to join the front of the Commissariat Stores with the back of the hospital. These proved excellent barricades, but by no means impregnable.

The native has often been credited with deep cunning, but luckily for us if the Zulu possessed any he did not use it, for as the sacks connecting the hospital had to be laid on a slope of the ground he could safely have crept along, cut the sacks open with his assegais, the corn would have rolled out and he could have walked in and I should not now be telling the story. When Lieutenant Chard of the Royal Engineers joined us he approved of what we had done, but considered that our inner space was too big, and suggested a line of biscuit boxes. This was done and proved of great value when the enemy set the hospital on fire.

I was instructed to post men as look-out, in the hospital, at the most vulnerable points, and to take out and command a line of skirmishers. Shortly after 3.30 an officer commanding a troop of Natal Light Horse arrived, having got away from Isandhlwana, and asked Lieutenant Chard for instructions. He was ordered to send detachments to observe the drift and pontoons, and to place out posts in the direction of the enemy to check his advance. About 4.15 the sound of firing was heard behind the hill on our front; the officer returned and reported the enemy close upon us. He also reported that his 100 men would not obey his orders and had ridden off.

About the same time another detachment of 100 men belonging to the Natal native contingent bolted, including their officer himself. I am glad to say that he was brought back some days later, court-martialled and dismissed from the service. 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 that our defences were too small to accommodate them anyhow.

We knew now that whatever might happen we had to fight it out alone, and about 4.30 the enemy, from 500 to 600 strong, came in sight round the hill to our south, and driving in my thin red line of skirmishers, made a rush at our south wall. They were met, and held, by a steady and deliberate fire for a short time, then, being reinforced by some hundreds, they made desperate and repeated attempts to break through our temporary defences, but were repulsed time and again. To show their fearlessness and their contempt for the red coats and small numbers, they tried to leap the parapet, and at times seized our bayonets, only to be shot down. Looking back, one cannot but admire their fanatical bravery.

About 7 o'clock they succeeded, after many attempts, in setting fire to the hospital. The small numbers we were able to spare defended it room by room, bringing out all the sick who could be moved before they retired. Privates Hook, R. Jones, W. Jones and J. Williams were the last to leave holding the door with the bayonet when all their ammunition was expended. The Victoria Cross was awarded to these men, and they fully deserved it.

The Zulus had collected the rifles from the men they had killed at Isandhlwana, and had captured the ammunition from the mules which had stampeded and threw their loads; so our own arms were used against us. In fact, this was the cause of every one of our casualties, killed and wounded, and we should have suffered many more if the enemy had known how to use a rifle. There was hardly a man even wounded by an assegais – their principal weapon. The attack lasted from 4.30 p.m. on the twenty-second to 4.00 a.m. on the twenty-third – twelve exciting hours – and when daybreak occurred the enemy was out of sight. About 7 o'clock they appeared again to the south-west. But help was at hand; Lord Chelmsford with the other half of his original force was only an hour's march away. On the previous afternoon he had learned of the destruction of his camp at Isandhlwana. A certain Commandant Lonsdale had chanced to ride back to the camp and had been fired at by Zulus wearing our men's uniform. He escaped by a miracle and was able to report the news to Lord Chelmsford.

Lord Chelmsford at once addressed his men and said: 'Whilst we were skirmishing ahead the Zulus have taken our camp; there must be ten thousand in our rear, and twenty thousand in front, we must win back our camp tonight and cut our way back to Rorke's Drift tomorrow.' 'All right, sir, we'll do it.' They got back to camp that night, but they found a grim and silent scene as they cautiously approached. The next day they resumed their march and appeared at Rorke's Drift, and our enemy retired. In his dispatch afterwards, Lord Chelmsford said: 'To our intense relief the waving of hats was seen from the hastily erected entrenchments, and information soon reached me that the garrison... had for twelve hours

made the most gallant resistance I have ever heard of against the determined attack of some 3.000 Zulus, 350 of whose dead bodies surrounded the post.' Our losses were 17 killed and 9 wounded, their 351 killed that we buried. Their wounded must have been between 400 and 500, which they removed under cover of the night.

There are two things which I think have made Rorke's Drift stand out so vividly after all these years. The first, that it took place on the same day as the terrible massacre at Isandlwana, and the second, that Natal was saved from being overrun by a savage and victorious foe.

Seven V.C.s were awarded to this one company of the regiment which is now the South Wales Borderers. I have told you the names of four of the men who won the V.C.; the other three were Lieutenant Bromhead, Corporal Allen and Private F. Hitch. The Victoria Cross was also awarded to Lieutenant Chard, Royal Engineers, Surgeon Reynolds, and Corporal Scheiss, but not one, I regret to say, of those V.C.s is alive today.

Lieutenants Chard and Bromhead and the men received the thanks of Parliament, the officers being promoted to the rank of Major. I was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal with an annuity of £10 – the same as awarded to the Victoria Cross – and awarded a commission, but as I was the youngest of eight sons, and the family exchequer was empty, I had to refuse it that time. Now just one word for the men who fought that night; I was moving about amongst them all the time, and not for one moment did they flinch, their courage and their bravery cannot be expressed in words: for me they were an example all my soldiering days.

The following year, Queen Victoria received at Windsor Castle a Colour Party of the Regiment, and decorated the Queen's Colours with a silver wreath of immortelles in memory of Lieutenants Melvill and Coghill, 'for their devotion in trying to save the Colours of the twenty-second of January (that was at Isandlwana) and for the noble defence of Rorke's Drift.'

So if you ever have the great privilege of seeing the Colours of the South Wales Borderers uncased you will see the wreath. The original wreath presented by Her Majesty is now in the Regimental Chapel of Brecon Cathedral.'

Lt. Col. Frank Bourne.

