

The Mysterious Lieutenant Adendorff of Rorke's Drift; Hero or Coward?

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There is a moment in the film *ZULU*, where, after breaking the news of the disaster at Isandlwana to the devastated Lieutenants Chard and Bromhead, the colonial survivor, Lieutenant Adendorff, turns away. It's a moment of dramatic tension; a testing of character - the first that each of the principals will go through in the course of the movie. "Adendorff", asks Chard behind him, "are you staying?"

Of course, in the film he does, since he fulfils a very specific dramatic purpose, which I'll come back to later. The question, however, has a wider resonance, for nearly 120 years after the events at Rorke's Drift; a question hangs over the actions of the real Lieutenant Adendorff. Everyone knows that he was one of those who brought news to the garrison of the defeat earlier that day, but did he stay and join the defence? If so, his actions surely deserve some recognition, for he would have been the only man on the British side to be present at both Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift. Yet the suspicion lingers that he did not, and as such an air of disapproval hangs round his name, as if he 'let the side down', in a way that other survivors of Isandlwana somehow did not.

Any attempt to rehabilitate Adendorff is hampered by the fact that little is known about him. Even his name is in some doubt - he appears variously as Adendorf - one 'f' - and Adendorff - two 'f's' - and his initial is variously given as 'J' and 'T', though the former somehow seems more likely ('T' could in any case be a misprint for 'J' - though the reverse could equally be true!). There is nothing unusual to Adendorff in this; most of the Volunteers and Irregulars who served with the Imperial forces in Zululand remain shadowy figures, who merit occasional mentions in official records for as long as their service lasted, and then return to obscurity. This is particularly true of the officers and NCOs of the Natal Native Contingent - among whom Adendorff served - whose records are notoriously incomplete.

The case against Adendorff largely rests on a comment by Donald R. Morris in his classic account of the war, *The Washing of the Spears*. Among the notes on his sources, Morris comments,

my suspicion that Adendorff did not stay to aid the defence is based on analysis of all the sources listed for both battles. Space precludes a review of the evidence, which I hope to publish separately.

Morris never did publish that evidence, however, and it is probably fair to say that a good deal more evidence has come to life since the publication of his book which suggests just the opposite. There are two basic charges against Adendorff, which amount to a comprehensive accusation of cowardice. I believe that the evidence supports neither, and that Adendorff is an unfairly maligned man.

The case for the prosecution is as follows. Since Chard was adamant that Adendorff appeared on the Zulu bank of Rorke's Drift while he, Chard, was still at his tent by the ponds, it is argued that Adendorff must have left the camp at Isandlwana rather earlier than he should, because the Zulu right horn, sweeping down the Manzimnyama valley behind Isandlwana, had cut the road to Rorke's Drift long before the majority of the survivors got away. That being the case, those who did manage to escape did so by means of a hair-raising ride across country, crossing the Mzinyathi (Buffalo) several miles downstream from Rorke's Drift, at a rocky crossing known as Sothondose's Drift, and subsequently dubbed Fugitives' Drift.

Secondly, it is argued that since there are few references to Adendorff staying at Rorke's Drift, and since all the other fugitives' from Isandlwana fled, Adendorff must have done the same. Quite why Adendorff should be singled out for disapproval in this regard is not explained; no-one suggests that there was anything shameful in the conduct of - say - Captains Gardner and Essex, or Lieutenants Curling, Cochrane and Smith-Dorrien, all of whom thought it wiser to head straight for Helmekaar. This despite the fact that these officers were all professional soldiers, while Adendorff, as a Lieutenant in the Native Contingent, was a volunteer. Indeed, given that the survivors from Isandlwana were all exhausted, shocked - even traumatised - and in some cases almost hysterical, it seems absurd that anyone would have thought badly of them for avoiding another fight (which under the circumstances must have seemed pretty hopeless). Nor did any one; except in the case of Adendorff.

Curiously, given the prevailing opinion against him, there is sufficient evidence to recreate something of Adendorff's movements on 22/23rd January 1879. Firstly, we know that he was with Captain Robert Krohn's No. 6 Company of the 1st Battalion, 3rd Regiment, NNC, because the Adjutant of the Battalion, Lieutenant Walter Higginson, left a detailed account of the battle which mentions Adendorff in passing. Moreover, the same account tells us exactly what Krohn's company did during the battle, and provides some clue as to what time Adendorff left the camp.

According to Higginson, Krohn's company was ordered to fall in at about 6 am on the morning of the 22nd, and to march out to the plain in front of the camp where another NNC company (No. 9, 1/3rd NNC, under Captain James Faunce Lonsdale), had been on piquet duty over-night. Krohn's company was to relieve Lonsdale's on piquet duty. However, before Krohn's company could march out, the order was

countermanded. Another NNC piquet, this time on the crest of the iNyoni heights to the immediate left of the camp, had reported that Zulus were visible on the heights, and the alarm was sounded. Krohn's men were ordered instead to fall in line in front of their tents, "as the Zulus were reported in sight". As a result, the unfortunate Captain Lonsdale's company remained in front of the camp, and subsequently found themselves incorporated into the front line - but that's another story. It is at this point that Higginson mentions Adendorff (whose name he spells with one 'f'),

Soon afterwards Lieut. Adendorff of my Company (No. 6) was sent out to the 2nd Batt. outlying piquet [i.e. on the lip of the escarpment] to bring in a report from Captain Barry in charge of the Piquet. He came back very soon and made his report and shortly afterwards I was sent out.

It is interesting to speculate, incidentally, why it was felt necessary to send Higginson out when Adendorff had only just returned. Perhaps Adendorff's report was incomplete or unsatisfactory; perhaps his report was considered so unlikely that a more experienced officer (Higginson had served in the Dublin City Militia) was needed to verify it.

Anyway, all this occurred early in the morning, for Higginson remained observing the Zulus for about half an hour, then returned to camp, where Col. Durnford had just arrived. Higginson put the time then at about 10 am. Higginson goes on to describe how reports of the Zulu presence on the iNyoni heights prompted Durnford to make the decision to ride out from the camp to investigate. Durnford asked Pulleine if he might borrow Higginson, presumably because Higginson had recently observed the Zulu movements, and as a result Higginson found himself attached to the party commanded by Captain George Shepstone which rode up onto the iNyoni heights via the spur which runs down to the tail of Isandlwana. It was elements of this party, of course, which discovered the main Zulu army; Higginson says he was about 100 yards behind them when they did so. He rode forward, saw their predicament, and then rode back to the camp. As he descended the escarpment he saw the 24th (Captain Mostyn's company, presumably) taking up their positions on the spur. Having made a report to Pulleine, he returned to his company, which was still in position in front of the NNC tents.

Higginson makes no further mention of Adendorff, but it is important to note that at this stage there was no particular sense of alarm in the camp. The Zulu attack was still not visible from the camp; at best, only Mostyn's and Cavaye's companies were engaged, and no-one on the slope below Isandlwana could see what they were firing at. Even if Lieutenant Adendorff was of a particularly nervous disposition, there is no reason to suppose that he was not still with his company, to whom he had returned earlier that morning. Krohn's company played no great role in the subsequent fight; it was either deliberately held in reserve, or, in the excitement of the moment, it was forgotten about. It remained in front of the tents while the Zulus descended from the escarpment; then, as the British line was outflanked and collapsed, Krohn's company fled before the Zulus could rush in to attack it. It is worth quoting Higginson's account in some detail here, because it gives a firm hint of when those survivors who did get away actually left the camp;

the Zulus extended all round the front of the camp, and drove back the few men that opposed them, when my company saw them coming on nothing could stop them, they all jumped up and ran, and though I knocked one man down with my rifle it was no use, I then saw the men of the 2nd Batt. N.N.C. running and looking for the 24th men, I saw that they were retreating also, but very slowly, all the mounted men were riding past as fast as they could, and I then thought it time to go too, so, firing one last shot, I mounted my horse ... and rode off.

Now this passage is significant in two respects; firstly, because it gives a vivid impression of the suddenness of the British collapse, and secondly because it clearly indicates that most of those who got away - Colonial officers and Natal Volunteers - left while the 24th were still retreating. And so it must have been; this was their only chance, for once the 24th had been driven back onto the nek below Isandlwana, the right horn had rushed up to attack them from the rear, and the avenue of escape was closed. As a digression, the usual assumption is that the regular officers who survived left a few moments after the Colonials. This is consistent in that the regulars would probably have looked to their duty with the infantry until the last moment, and only considered it acceptable to flee once it was clear that the 24th's position was hopeless - a revelation which would, incidentally, have come pretty quickly after the initial collapse. With that in mind, however, it is interesting that Higginson is quite specific that "*as we got to the [Mzinyathi] river I met Lieut. Melville [sic] and Coghill ... [and] I overtook them...*". Higginson, of course, crossed the river with Melvill and Coghill, and was the last British soldier to see them alive.

If one accepts that Adendorff abandoned the camp when Krohn's company fled - along with all its other white NCOs and officers, presumably - how did he manage to escape, not via Fugitives' Drift, but by Rorke's Drift? Adendorff himself seems to have left no account of his movements, but a fellow NNC officer who survived, Captain Walter Stafford of E Company, 1st/1st NNC, has left us some clues. Stafford was a young man at the time of the battle, and lived to a ripe old age; in later years he was frequently asked to tell the story of the fight at each new anniversary. In 1939, Stafford wrote,

a friend of mine, Lieut. Odendorff [sic], and another man, as both could not swim, hugged the bed of the river up to the punt and were ferried across the river. It was them who gave the alarm at Rorke's Drift

Was such an escape feasible? The popular impression of the battle has it that the Manzimnyama valley behind Isandlwana was already full of Zulus when the survivors fled the field, and that the survivors were chased all the way to Sothondose's Drift. This is not quite the case. It is perfectly true that the right horn had already cut the road; that is why the survivors were forced to their left, as they crossed the nek, to try to get round the tip of the horn. As the last survivors fled, elements of the left horn came up behind them, and almost - but not quite - met with the right horn, and sealed the gap. No doubt many who had got that far were caught and killed. However, as the last organised stands of the 24th were pushed over the nek into the Manzimnyama valley, not only did their fire help to prevent the horns meeting, but also their presence distracted the Zulus, who rushed to attack them. In fact, the pursuit was indeed most severe in the Manzimnyama valley, but it dwindled as the survivors climbed Mpethe hill beyond. Very few men on foot had the stamina to climb the hill after struggling down the valley, and the Zulus were distracted killing the men on foot, who floundered on the lower slopes. The last major concentration of graves can be found between the Manzimnyama and the foot of Mpethe.

Those survivors who had horses struggled up Mpethe and across the top. Undoubtedly some Zulus pursued them, but they were probably few in number. It was not until the survivors reached the Drift that they were seriously threatened again. Here they found that the retainers of the local Zulu chief, Gamdana kaXongo, had already rushed to intercept them. Gamdana, incidentally, was a brother of the famous Sihayo. Most of the British troops who were killed at the Drift were done to death by Gamdana's followers. Until, that is, just as the last stragglers were descending Mpethe into the Mzinyathi valley, the iNdluyengwe ibutho - which had formed part of the reserve, and swung round behind Isandlwana - came over the hill, and swept them down towards the river. This was the dramatic moment described so vividly in the famous account by Lieutenant Smith-Dorrien.

It is quite possible, therefore, that individual survivors might have reached the river, and slipped through Gamdana's followers (who were acting under their own initiative, and not under the control of one of the armies appointed izinduna, and therefore less disciplined) without being caught, providing they did so before the iNdluyengwe arrived. By hugging the river, they might have avoided the remainder of the reserve, which struck the river much closer to Rorke's Drift.

Is this a case of special pleading? Are we in danger of bending probability too far to provide Adendorff with an alibi? Is it likely that he was the only one to try to escape by this route? In my view, the answer to all these questions is no; for one thing, it should be remembered that the survivors did not flee along any given track; they simply scattered pell-mell to avoid the Zulus. No doubt many ran in all sorts of strange directions, and most were probably caught, so we know nothing of their last desperate movements. It is quite possible that others attempted to escape along the same route as Adendorff, but didn't make it; certainly bodies turned up in odd places for years afterwards.

Also - and this point is quite crucial - there is some circumstantial evidence that the party of the Natal Native Horse which arrived at the post just before the battle began - that is, after Adendorff but before the Zulus - may have crossed the river, not at Fugitives' Drift, but at Rorke's Drift. That being so, they had clearly been able to find a way through the right horn and reserve, despite having - in all probability - left the camp after Adendorff. No doubt the fact that they retained some cohesion, and enough ammunition to ward off too much Zulu attention, had something to do with this.

Finally, it is interesting to note that Chard himself began by being sceptical of Adendorff's movements, but was clearly fully convinced by his explanations. This is only likely to have been the case if Adendorff were able to supply sufficient details of the fighting at Isandlwana to make his story credible. Moreover, Chard fixed the time of Adendorff's arrival at the Drift at 3.15p.m., which is consistent with him having left Isandlwana between 1 p.m. and 1.30 p.m., when the line collapsed. Indeed, given the extent to which Chard went out of his way to mention Adendorff's support during the battle at Rorke's Drift, it seems odd that his participation is still in doubt! In his official report, Chard said simply but emphatically,

I was informed ... [by] Lieutenant Adendorff of Lonsdale's regiment (who later remained to assist in the defence), of the disaster at Isandlwana camp.

In his later, longer account, written at Queen Victoria's request, he expanded on this point;

my attention was called to two horsemen galloping towards us from the direction of Isandlwana. From their gesticulations and their shouts, when they were near enough to be heard, we saw that something was the matter, and on taking them over the river, one of them, Lieut. Adendorff of Lonsdale's Regiment, Natal Native Contingent, asking if I was an officer, jumped off his horse, took me on one side, and told me the camp was in the hands of the Zulus and the army destroyed; that scarcely a man had got away to tell the tell, and that probably Lord Chelmsford and the rest of the column had shared the same fate. His companion, a Carbineer, confirmed his story - He was naturally very excited and I am afraid I did not, at first, quite believe him, and intimated that he probably had not remained to see

what did occur. I had the saddle put on my horse, and while I was talking to Lieut. Adendorff, a messenger arrived from Lieut. Bromhead, who was with his Company at his little camp near the Commissariat Stores, to ask me to come up at once.

This last comment is significant because, of course, Bromhead had just received the news from other survivors, who had reached the post via Fugitives' Drift at about the same time that Adendorff reached Rorke's Drift. Chard even went on to supply details of Adendorff's role in the battle;

As far as I know, but one of the fugitives remained with us - Lieut. Adendorff, whom I have before mentioned. He remained to assist in the defence, and from a loophole in the store building, flanking the wall and Hospital, his rifle did good service.

This last detail is important, because it helps to explain why participants mention Adendorff in so few other accounts of the action. For one thing, he was unknown to them; while most of the regular soldiers had been stationed at the post for some time, and had become familiar with some of the men from other units who were also based there, Adendorff had arrived at the last moment, during a time of great confusion. Moreover, being stationed inside the storehouse, he would have gone largely unnoticed by the men outside the buildings throughout the battle.

Finally, let us return to Stafford's 1939 account.

I met Adendorff (sic) in 1883 and he told me that Rorke's Drift was saved through two Godsend. The first was that the Zulus retired in the middle of the night, apparently to hold a little consultation and that gave the garrison time to strengthen the weak parts of the little fort, and the Martini Henry carbines time to cool off. The other was the Zulus setting fire to the thatch building which gave a bright light round the little fort and when the Zulus came volley after volley was poured into them. He also told me that Rev. W. Smith was a great help. You will always find that in a tight corner there is a hard case and there was one at Rorke's Drift. This man was cussing all the time. The Rev. Smith went up to him and said "Please, my good man, stop that cussing. We may shortly have to answer for our sins. The reply he got was "All right Mister, you do the praying and I will send the black B's to Hell as fast as I can.

All of these details are revealing. Although, by 1883 the regular troops had long since dispersed to fresh postings elsewhere in the Empire, there were enough men in Natal who knew something of the circumstances of the two battles to make it very difficult for anyone to claim fraudulently to have been at either. Nor did Adendorff need to; there is no evidence whatsoever that at that time anyone had questioned his behaviour. For the most part, none of the survivors of Isandlwana was ever called to account for their survival; the circumstances of the battle were well enough known. Moreover, Stafford himself had gone through the fire at Isandlwana, and would surely have been able to sift the wheat from the chaff when it came to stories of the day's events; he does not strike one as being unduly gullible, and he clearly believed in Adendorff.

With the exception of very minor details (while Adendorff would have carried a Martini-Henry carbine, the men of B Co., 2/24th, would have had rifles, for example; while Chaplain Smith's initial was 'G', not 'W'), all of Adendorff's observations about the fight are confirmed by other participants in accounts which were either unpublished at the time, or unlikely to have been available in northern Natal. The lull between the Zulu attacks after dark, the distant voices of the Zulu commanders (Adendorff's 'little consultation'), the welcome light from the burning hospital, the hot rifle barrels, and even the Rev. Smith's exhortations to the garrison not to swear, are all confirmed in the accounts by one or more of those who were there.

In short, the evidence that Adendorff was present at the defence seems conclusive. It is time he was rehabilitated, and his courage more widely accepted. To have endured the horror of Isandlwana, and voluntarily stayed to risk a repetition again at Rorke's Drift, when he might in all conscience have ridden off with the other survivors, shows remarkable strength of character. Adendorff deserves to be remembered as one of the great heroes of Rorke's Drift.

Finally, a footnote on the role the Adendorff character fulfils in the film *ZULU*. Clearly, script-writers Cy Endfield and John Prebble had no qualms about depicting Adendorff as being prominent in the defence, but it is interesting that his character is the means of expressing a subtle form of propaganda - arguably the only overtly political message in the film. Adendorff is here cast as the experienced frontier veteran, the 'old hand', the local expert who serves as a foil to the inexperienced Brits, Chard and Bromhead, educating them in the ways of warfare against the Zulu. If not exactly a cliché, this is certainly a pretty stock character, familiar in one form or another from countless Westerns and war-films.

What is interesting here, however, is that Adendorff is marked out very specifically as an Afrikaner. In fact, little is known of the real Adendorff's background, but he seems to have been of Scandinavian descent, rather than an Afrikaner. By casting him as such, the film serves to reinforce prevailing (and predominantly British and American) audience preconceptions that the legitimate owners of South Africa at the time that the film was made were not the Africans - and certainly not the British, since the film returns time and again to the folly of Empire - but the Afrikaners. Moreover, the film suggests that violence was an

inevitable part of the Afrikaner's destiny on the continent. "I am a Boer", says the Adendorff character at one point,

...the Zulus are the enemy of my blood. What are you rednecks doing here?

Later, when Adendorff asks what post he should take, Chard replies,

You take your own ground. It's your country, isn't it?

Well, whichever way you look at it, the answer to that question has to be no. Leaving aside the claim of African peoples of one sort or another, which goes back a thousand years, and the immediate claim of the Zulu-speaking peoples, who were around several hundred years before the emergence of the Zulu kingdom in the 1820s, it must be said that the first whites to lay claim to Natal were predominantly British, and that later Afrikaner claims were extremely short-lived.

The prominence given to the Afrikaner claim to Natal in *ZULU* should not be ignored. The film was made, after all, when the Nationalist Government was at the height of its power, when apartheid was not only being entrenched within the legal and administrative system in South Africa, but was also being energetically and forcefully sold to the world's media as a positive programme of racial and cultural integration. *ZULU* could not have been made without the support of the South African authorities, more particularly, the film depended on the co-operation of the South African Defence Force, who provided most of the extras who represented the British soldiers.

Was the subtle re-writing of history implicit in the Adendorff character the price producer and director had to pay to get the film made in South Africa at all? If so, it seems that the reputation of the mysterious Lt. Adendorff has undergone yet another subtle twist.

Acknowledgements.

War Office report W032/7726, Public Records Office.

Typescript copy in the Talana museum. "Lieutenant Henderson I believe escaped by the road to Rorke's Drift, some of my men and his own accompanying him". Account by Lt. H. Davies, NNH, WO 32/7726, Public Records Office.