

The first three months of 1879 were a nightmare for Lord Chelmsford and his command; the disaster at Isandlwana occurred just a few days after invading Zululand, Pearson's Coastal Column was bottled up at Eshowe and political pressures were mounting from both Natal and England. All his efforts to get his invasion plans back on course were hampered by lack of transport and the almost ceaseless rain which turned the roads into quagmires and lowered the morale of his troops still further. (1) Just at the point where he could see some progress in his build-up to re-invasion, Chelmsford received news of another disaster, this time from a totally unexpected quarter.

Following Colonel Hugh Rowland's timid advance against the hostile Sekukini in 1878 and thus losing Chelmsford's confidence in him, No.5 Column had been relegated from an invasion force to one holding the northern border between Zululand and the Transvaal. (2) Gradually, Rowland's command was stripped down as men were transferred to No.4 Column or the Flying Column under the command of Colonel Evelyn Wood. The last regiment to be transferred out was the 80th (South Staffordshire) Regiment under the command of Major Charles Tucker.

In moving from their station at Derby in the Transvaal, they took the most direct route to their new station at Luneburg in Natal. This thirty-eight mile journey took them across a strip of disputed territory that passed the hostile stronghold of the Swazi chief, Mblini, an old friend and ally of Cetshwayo. His stronghold directly overlooked the Intombi River above the ford at Meyer's Drift, which marked the border with Natal.

Starting in mid-February, the 80th gradually moved to their new post, so that by March all that remained to be transported were stores and ammunition. These convoys needed escorts so companies were rotated to march to meet the wagons and to bring them to Luneburg.

On 1st March, Captain W.T. Anderson and men of 'D' Company marched out to meet a 20 strong wagon train carrying mealies, tinned food, biscuits, a rocket battery and 90,000 rounds of Martini-Henry ammunition. The rain had not let up for days and the conditions were appalling. Progress was painfully slow as the wagons sank to their axles in mud and had to be manhandled most of the way. After four days, Anderson received a message from Tucker that seems to have been ambiguous. Anderson interpreted it as a recall to Luneburg and so he took his men and left the floundering convoy without an escort. xx

Tucker was aghast when Anderson appeared without the wagons and immediately ordered out a fresh company of 106 men under Captain David Moriarty to complete the task. (3) In the meantime, the struggling wagon train had been attacked by a small force of Mblini's warriors, who had managed to make off with some stores and oxen. When Moriarty reached Meyer's Drift, he found that the wagoners had tried to bring up the wagons in relays but had succeeded in bringing in only two. The rains had swollen the river to the extent that Moriarty had to camp on the Luneburg side and set about improvising a raft to carry his men to the far bank. Leaving thirty-five men on the Luneburg bank, Moriarty led the rest of the company to recover the remaining wagons. The rain relented as Moriarty's men finally brought the looted wagons to Meyer's Drift by the early afternoon of 11th March. Lieutenant Lindop's men had managed to somehow pull the two wagons across the river to the Luneburg bank during a temporary lowering of the river. As the recent continuous rains had caused the river to burst its banks, Moriarty decided there was no chance of crossing until the level had subsided so he ordered the wagons to be laagered in a 'V' formation, with the two legs reaching the water's edge. (4)

When Major Tucker arrived, accompanied by Lieutenant Henry Hollingworth Harward, Sergeant Anthony Booth and thirty-two other ranks, he found a very bedraggled company of men. (5) They had laboured in continuous rain for four days without cooked food and were utterly exhausted. Perhaps this was the reason why Tucker did not insist on the wagons being laagered correctly, although he noticed that there were gaps between the wagons and, where the water level had receded, growing gaps between the wagons and the river bank. Tucker possibly also presumed that, as they were only four miles from their destination, it seemed unlikely they would be in any danger from attack. Instead, he ordered Harward to relieve Lieutenant Lindop and his men, who had been on duty for six days, and returned to Luneburg.

Harward crossed the river on the raft to help Moriarty. Some cattle had wandered off, so Harward took some men and went to collect them. He found them in the nearby foothills and killed a couple of Zulus in the process. Meanwhile, Sergeant Booth was in the laager talking with one of the European drivers, who drew his attention to a native eating corn and talking with some of the coloured labourers. He was identified as Mblini, whose stronghold was only three miles way. Booth reported this to Moriarty, who assured him that the natives in this area were friendly. Moriarty added with a laugh, "*You're as bad as your pals said of you; you would shoot your own brother*". Booth was not reassured and was under no illusion but that Mblini was there to spy out the defences.

Sergeant Anthony Booth was a thirty-three year 'old sweat' who had joined the 80th in 1864. With his dark complexion and beetling brow, he looked tough enough to carry out Moriarty's prediction. He had been appointed Quartermaster Sergeant for this detail and had spent much of the afternoon butchering a couple of cattle to feed the men the following day. The moment that would test his resilience and leadership qualities was

fast approaching. (6) Meanwhile, Lieutenant Harward, having collected the stray cattle and engaged a small group of Zulus, felt tired enough to stretch out in Captain Moriarty's tent, which was pitched just outside the laager at the apex of the 'V'. Amiable as Moriarty was, he had no intention in sharing his accommodation and sent Harward back across the river to his own command. (7)

Moriarty's men, who were tired and wet, stripped off their wet clothes and fell into deep sleep under shelter for the first time in days. On the other side of the river, Harward's men slept. About 4.00 am, Harward was awakened by the sound of a distant shot. He ordered Booth to alert the other bank, as no one had stirred, not even the sentries. After some yelling, Booth managed to arouse someone, who spread the warning, but it was too little effect as the camp continued to sleep.

Booth, however, felt uneasy and remembered Mblini's visit. Dressing and buckling on his ammunition belt, he climbed into one of the wagons for a smoke. Unbeknown to the sleeping soldiers, Mblini with about one thousand warriors were closing in on the laager through the early morning mist. They were stripped naked, each carrying only a stabbing spear and a knobkerrie. A few were armed with pillaged Martini-Henry rifles. Expecting little resistance, they had left their shields behind.

About 4.45 a.m. another shot rang out close by. Booth jumped from the wagon to see the Zulus emerge from the mist and fire a volley into Moriarty's tents before rushing in with a chilling cry of "*Usutho*". In seconds they were overwhelming the sleeping camp. Captain Moriarty dashed from his tent and fired his revolver killing three warriors before an assegai was plunged into his back and he was shot in the chest. He was reported as yelling, "Fire away boys, death or glory! I'm done". As naked or partially clad soldiers struggled from their tents, they were clubbed or stabbed to death in the hellish melee of frightened cattle and terrified men. Some men managed to plunge into the river but few reached the safety of the far bank. Those that did took shelter behind the flimsy barrier of Booth's two wagons.

Booth and his comrades scrambled beneath the wagons and started firing at the mass of Zulus. In the jostling to take cover, Booth had his helmet knocked off, which rolled towards the river. He put his arm on the rear wheel to steady his aim and fired as fast as he could. He noticed that he was next to Lieutenant Harward's pony, which was tied to the wagon. Harward appeared from his tent and saw that the Zulus, attracted by the fire from Booth and his men, were crossing the river further upstream. Gripped by a vision of another Isandlwana, Harward blurted out; "*Fire away, lads, I'll be ready in a minute!*" He then pulled himself onto his unsaddled pony and rode off up the road to Luneburg, followed by most of his men and a few escapees.

Booth later wrote that there was only eight of his company who remained. Some of the men who crossed the river donned whatever clothing was available and armed themselves. Seeing that his position was hopeless, Booth, assisted by Lance Corporal Burgess, formed the remaining men into a square and began to retire towards Luneburg. He was later complimented for choosing this formation instead of an extended line.

Each time the Zulus threatened the small band, they were kept at a distance by the group's volley fire. Most of the Zulus were more interested in plundering the two wagons than pursuing Booth's men so that, by the time they reached a deserted farmhouse a mile short of Luneburg, the attacks had ceased. Apart from four men who decided to break away and take a short cut only to run into the Zulus, Booth managed to bring his men unscathed to safety.

While Sergeant Booth was calmly extricating his men from almost certain death, his superior officer, Lieutenant Harward had galloped to Luneburg, arriving at 6.30 a.m. He roused Major Tucker with the words; "The camp is in the hands of the enemy; they are all slaughtered, and I have galloped in for my life". He then fell onto the bed in a dead faint. Upon being revived, he told of the attack, no doubt sure that there were no survivors. Tucker immediately ordered his command of 150 men to turn out and march to the Drift. On the way, he came upon Sergeant Booth's party at the farmhouse. Booth volunteered to accompany Tucker's command but was told that he had done enough.

As Tucker reached a rise about a mile distant from the river, he saw hundreds of Zulus moving away from the camp, most carrying plunder to their nearby stronghold. When they reached the wrecked laager, they found all their colleagues naked and mostly disembowelled. Then commenced the harrowing task of collecting the mutilated bodies, ferrying them across the river to be interred together in a large burial pit dug on the slope above the crossing. The bodies of Captain Moriarty and a 28 year old civilian doctor named William Cobbin were taken back to Luneburg for individual burial.

In the aftermath of this disaster, there was a considerable amount of covering up of what was an embarrassing episode for the regiment. Backed by Major Tucker, Lieutenant Harward's report stated that;

The enemy were now assegaiing our men in the water, and also ascending the banks of the river close to us; for fear therefore, of my men being stabbed under the wagons, and to enable them to retire before their ammunition should be exhausted, I ordered them to retire steadily, and only just in time to avoid a rush of Zulus to our late position. The Zulus came on in dense masses and fell upon our men, who being already broken, gave way, and a hand to hand fight ensued. I endeavoured to rally my men, but they were too much scattered, and finding re-formation impossible, I mounted my horse and galloped into Luneburg at utmost speed, and reported all that had taken place.

Inaccurate as his account was, Harward did have the good grace to acknowledge his sergeant's sterling behaviour.

In his report, Major Tucker made no mention that he felt the camp had been inadequately laagered. Furthermore, he praised Harward's efforts in giving covering fire to enable some men to escape across the river. These two reports were the basis of Lord Chelmsford's report to the War Office, which was not received in London until 21st April. As reports from NCOs were not required, the truth would appear to have been contained within the regiment.

The following days were taken up with searches for more bodies and salvaging equipment and stores. The total death toll was put at 79. Anthony Booth was promoted to Colour Sergeant to replace Colour Sergeant Henry Fredericks, who perished in the camp. Over the next few weeks, the regiment moved to Utrecht and joined the Flying Column in its advance on Ulundi. Significantly, Lieutenant Harward was left behind.

The 80th formed part of the massive square that finally broke the Zulu fighting machine. The regiment sustained two dead and five wounded. Sergeant Booth was himself, slightly wounded in a freakish way. While instructing a soldier building an entrenchment, a bullet struck his mess tin and Booth received some metal splinters to the face, his only wound in a long military career.

With the Zulus defeated, the 80th were involved in much of the mopping-up operations under the new commander-in-chief, General Sir Garnet Wolseley. In November they took part in the attack on Sekikuni's stronghold and were the first troops to reach the summit, gaining high praise from Wolseley. Indeed, the 80th had been closely associated with the new commander since his arrival, as they supplied his personal escort.

By the middle of December the regiment was concentrated at Pretoria and it was here that months of resentment and shame came to the boil. Three survivors of the Intombi River massacre wrote to Wolseley on 20th December to set the record straight and 'to be of service to Colour-Sergeant Booth'. This was followed by a belated recommendation from the newly promoted Lieutenant-Colonel Tucker for the Distinguished Conduct Medal to be awarded to Booth. As this was the result of Wolseley's enquiry in response to the survivor's testimony, Tucker was asked why he had not previously recommended his sergeant for a medal. Tucker had to explain that to do so would have brought to light the 'far different conduct of Lieutenant Harward.'

On the 26th December, the whole regiment was paraded prior to leaving for England. Sir Garnet Wolseley took the salute and, in a most unusual ceremony, presented Colour-Sergeant Booth with a revolver, holster, belt and a knife, which were donated by European settlers. On the same day, Wolseley forwarded his personal recommendation that Booth should be awarded the Victoria Cross. This was in itself something exceptional, for Wolseley had been highly critical about many of the recipients of this highest gallantry award.

The 80th then began its long march to Durban, which they reached on 3rd April. (8) On 14th February, as a result of Wolseley's investigations, Lieutenant Harward was arrested and taken to Pietermaritzburg, where he was charged with:

1. Having misbehaved before the enemy, in shamefully abandoning a party of the Regiment under his command when attacked by the enemy, and in riding off at speed from his men.
2. Conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline in having at the place and time mentioned in the first charge, neglected to take proper precautions for the safety of a party of a Regiment under his command when attacked.

The Court-martial was held at Fort Napier, Pietermaritzburg and was in session between 20th and the 27th February. Harward's defence was that he had only joined the convoy escort the night before and could not form a proper laager with just two wagons. When his command began to disintegrate, he had decided to ride to get help. Much to the surprise of many and the fury of Wolseley, the Court acquitted Harward of all charges and he was allowed to return to his regiment.

Wolseley could not alter the verdict but he refused to confirm the Court's findings, adding his own view;

That a Regimental Officer who is the only Officer present with a party of men actually and seriously engaged with the enemy, can, under any pretext whatever, be justified in deserting them, and by so doing, abandoning them to their fate. The more helpless a position in which an officer finds his men, the more it is his bounden duty to stay and share their fortune, whether good or ill.

When the findings and Wolseley's comments reached London, the Duke of Cambridge, the Commander in Chief of the Army, instructed them to be read out as a General Order to every regiment. With his army career in tatters, Harward had little option but to resign his commission, which he did on arriving at Kings Town on 11th May.

Colour-Sergeant Booth was summoned from his station in Ireland to Windsor Castle, where the Queen presented him with the Victoria Cross on 26th June 1880. The citation reads;

For his gallant conduct on the 12th March 1879, during the Zulu attack on the Intombi River, in having when considerably outnumbered by the enemy, rallied a few men on the south bank of the river, and covered the retreat of fifty soldiers and others for a distance of three miles. The officer Commanding 80th Regiment reports that, had it not been for the coolness displayed by this non-commissioned Officer, not one man would have escaped.

Booth's conduct and that of another 80th man, Private Samuel Wassall, who won the VC at Fugitives' Drift, gave the Regiment justifiable pride in what had been a less than glorious campaign. Through the misplaced confidence and casual approach to defending the camp, Captain Moriarty was held to blame for the poorly arranged laager.

His superior, Major Tucker, was deemed at fault for not insisting on the wagons being pushed together when he had voiced his reservations about the laager.

Lieutenant Harward's alleged cowardice in not only abandoning his men but also precipitating the large scale flight of most of his command was an action that did happen all too often during the Zulu War and caused consternation with leaders like Wolseley, Wood and Buller.

The attempt by Tucker to cover up a fellow officer's cowardice at the expense of recognising Sergeant Booth's part obviously caused comment and resentment within the Regiment. When the truth was revealed to Wolseley, Tucker all but admitted that he had concealed the facts in order to protect Harward and the Regiment's reputation.

Tucker's role in this matter did not seem to have affected his career for he ended as a Major General and Colonel of the South Staffordshire Regiment (the amalgamation of the 80th & 38th Regiments) until he died in 1935 at the age of ninety-seven.

Acknowledgements.

The Staffordshire Regimental Museum
The Zulu War and the 80th Regiment of Foot by Robert Hope
Blood on the Painted Mountain by Ron Lock
The Zulu War-Then & Now by Ian Knight & Ian Castle
The Evolution of the Victoria Cross by M.J. Crook
Great Zulu Commanders by Ian Knight

References.

1. South Africa was not the only area to suffer from excessive rainfall. 1879 still holds the record for the greatest annual rainfall in Britain.
2. Hugh Rowlands (1828-1909) won the Victoria Cross at the Battle of Inkerman. He was also nominated for a second VC during the abortive assault on the Redan. There is no doubt he was an exceptionally brave man but his resolve seems to have deserted him by the time he served in South Africa.
3. Captain David Barry Moriarty was born in 1837 in Ireland. He had spent his entirely unspectacular military career in the 6th (Royal Warwickshire) Regiment until transferring to the 80th in 1876. He had the reputation for affability and a relaxed attitude to his duties.
4. The Intombi River is only about 40 feet wide with steep cut banks. The land either side is gently sloping and when the banks burst, the river could easily double its width. When the rains stopped, the water drained quickly as the river became contained within its banks. This was why there was such a gap either side of the laager.
5. Henry Hollingworth Harward was born in 1847 at Sevenoaks, Kent. He was commissioned into the 1st West India Regiment in 1871 and took part in the Ashanti War of 1873-74. At the end of the war, he transferred to the 80th.
6. Anthony Clarke Booth was born in 1846 in a village near Nottingham. He enlisted in the 80th at the age of 18 years. During his army career, he had several promotions and demotions. He had served abroad since 1872 and was entitled to the Indian Service Medal bar 'Perak'. After the Zulu War he became a Sergeant Instructor with the local Rifle Company until his retirement in 1898. His total army service was 33 years 182 days. Sadly he did not live to enjoy a long retirement for he died of rheumatic fever in 1899.
7. The interior of the laager covered little more than half an acre and was filled with other ranks tents and cattle. Moriarty felt safe enough to post just two sentries and to pitch his tent away from the noisome confines of the laager.
8. It was estimated that the 80th had marched some 1,300 miles since arriving in South Africa. On one day's march, they covered 36 miles.