

Archibald Forbes - War Correspondent

By Brian Best

If William Russell was regarded as the pioneer of war reporting, then Archibald Forbes was certainly his natural successor. The celebrated *Times* correspondent had awakened the public to the reality of the war in the Crimea. Nor did he only describe the battles, but he exposed the ineptitude of the commanders and the inefficiency of the commissariat that resulted in the suffering of the ordinary soldier. In so doing, he won the gratitude of the latter and the enmity of the former.

Archibald Forbes took the baton from Russell and became the most successful and best-regarded reporter of the latter part of Victoria's reign. His bravery and ability to put himself in the midst of action, often under great pressure and to write clearly and tellingly, puts Forbes in the forefront of war reporting. All this, however, was after an unpromising start.

Born in 1838 in Morayshire, the son of a minister, Forbes was sent to Aberdeen University. He soon tired of this, dropped out and lived on his inheritance until it ran out. A well-educated man, he put himself beyond the pale by enlisting as a trooper in the Royal Dragoons. (1) Here he learned to become an expert horseman and, because he was literate, rose up the promotion ladder to acting-quartermaster-sergeant. He also absorbed all he could on military history and theory and, writing under a pseudonym, had several pieces published. As interested as he was in military matters, he found the everyday routine of a home posting deadly dull. By 1867 he was in a position to buy himself out of the army in order to pursue a career in journalism.

After a struggling start, Forbes was appointed editor of the *London Scotsman*. Finding this office job unfulfilling, he jumped at the offer from the *Morning Advertiser* to go and report on the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 on a 'pay if used' basis. He was soon 'headhunted' by the *London Daily News*, who paid him £20 per week. The high salary was vindicated as the newspaper's circulation trebled during the war. Forbes soon realised that war reporting was the life for him and this war was to set him on the road to fame and fortune.

Recognising the value of a "good press", the Prussians encouraged reporters by giving them every facility. High-ranking officers were made available for interview and provided advanced notice on bombardments and attacks; the Prussians were soon cannily managing the news. Forbes found that his reports could be on his newspaper's presses within twenty-four hours of being sent. (2) The French, on the other hand, adopted a distinctly hostile attitude and spy mania was rife. Those seen with notebook and sketchpad were assumed to be spies and were either arrested or roughed-up by French mobs.

There was another reason to cover the war from the Prussian side. They were expected to win so food, facilities and communications would be considerably better than the chaos and dislocation that would come with the expected defeat of the French. Forbes must have wondered at first if he had chosen the right side for he had come under heavy French artillery fire while celebrating a wedding at Saarbrücken soon after his arrival. From then, however, it was a relentless Prussian advance right into Paris which was reached on the 1st March 1871.

It was here that Forbes had a narrow escape. He had crossed from the protection of the Prussian Army and was immediately attacked by a mob of angry Parisians for being a German spy. They wrestled him to the ground and dragged him, feet first, towards a fountain where they intended to drown him. At the last moment a detachment of French National Guardsmen rescued him and took him to the police station where he was dismayed to discover that the part of his greatcoat containing his notebook had been torn away. He was more concerned with the loss of all his notes than the predicament in which he found himself. While he was bemoaning his loss, a citizen dashed into the police station waving aloft the notebook and proclaiming that it was evidence that Forbes was a spy. Ignoring the serious allegations levelled at him, Forbes was so relieved to get his precious notes back that he actually tipped the astonished accuser a five-franc piece. He wrote, "The implacable patriot accepted it."

Under escort, Forbes was marched through the mob to appear before a magistrate. Examining his passport and journalistic credentials, the magistrate consulted his sister, who had lived in England, and she confirmed his bona fides. Forbes was released with many apologies and the magistrate's sister volunteered to accompany him back to his hotel. Grateful for her help, Forbes was at a loss to know how to repay her. Swallowing her pride, she asked for food, which was in short supply. Forbes and his fellow journalists filled a large hamper and employed a porter to take it and his saviour back to her house. This was probably the last decent food she enjoyed for the Prussians encircled and blockaded the city and the nightmare of the Commune began. (3)

Forbes chose to leave the city and the war. He was to use a piece of his own advice many times, which he learned from this period;

However interesting a battle may be, you must always get away before your communications are cut, for your material will be held up or never arrive. You must not be taken prisoner, for then you

will be out of business completely. You must not get wounded, for then you will become a useless expense to your paper. And if you get killed, you will be an infernal fool.

Forbes was anxious to return to London to write a book about the war. The *Daily News* was not impressed and urged him to return to Paris to cover the Commune. Writing ten hours a day, Forbes stalled his editor and delivered his manuscript to his publisher within two months. He then returned to France and managed to get back into Paris where he spent a week with the Communards, often under heavy fire and in great danger to himself. With the Commune crumbling, Forbes made several efforts to escape the city. This he finally did on the 24th May. Writing during the entire journey home, he filed his story in London on the 25th. He then returned to Paris by the next day and witnessed the dreadful bloodletting that signalled the end of the Commune.

Forbes' reporting of his week under fire was vivid and moving. Stripped of the Victorians' tendency for verbosity, it reads as if written by a later generation of war correspondent.

Then, as now, there was great competition to beat the other newspapers to a story. Forbes, backed by his paper, paid the nearest telegraph office a handsome retainer and employed couriers to carry his copy. Often, if there were none available, Forbes would mount a horse and ride for hours to reach a telegraph office. Having sent his report, he would pull himself back into the saddle and return to the front.

An example of Forbes' determination to be first was when he was sent to Berlin to cover the Prussian victory parade in June. He wired his office to send over a reliable youngster with a passport valid for France. The young man duly arrived and Forbes confined him to his room away from the view of other reporters. Quickly writing the narrative of the parade, Forbes drove to the railway station and saw his young assistant onto the Brussels train. Meanwhile, the other British reporters had handed their despatches to the post-office van on the same train.

Quickly changing at Brussels, the youngster caught the next train to Calais, hence the French visa, in time to board the Sunday ferry to Dover. He reached the London office in time for the paper to print the story for Monday's edition. All the other reporter's despatches were carried via the Ostend to Dover ferry, which had suspended Sunday sailing. Using this knowledge, Forbes had been able to beat the opposition by twenty-four hours.

Taking a well-earned break, Forbes crossed the Atlantic and claimed the hand of the daughter of General Montgomery Cunningham Meigs, Quartermaster-General of the U.S. Army. He had met the family a couple of years earlier when the general had visited Europe on sick leave. Forbes had a great admiration for Army leaders Grant, Sherman and, in particular, Philip Sheridan, whom he got to know during the recent war. (4) In a tongue-in-cheek remark, Forbes repeated Sherman's opinion of war correspondents: "Were I a general and had an independent Command in war offered me, I should accept it on condition that I should have the charter to shoot every war correspondent found fifty miles of my headquarters." (5)

The next four years were quiet for war reporters. Forbes did go to cover the Carlist War fought over the succession for the Spanish throne, but there was little to get his teeth into and the British public was not interested.

If this was a quiet period for him, then the following four were crammed with incidents. In 1876, Serbia helped by Russian volunteers, rose up against Turkish rule. The *Daily News* despatched Archibald Forbes to report on this obscure campaign. As he sat in his hotel dining-room in Belgrade, Forbes wondered how he was going to cope, as he could not speak Serbian or Turkish. He was quite impressed by his waiter and, upon questioning him, found that he was fluent in English, Serbian, Turkish and Russian. Forbes employed Andreas as his servant on the spot.

He proved to be quite a character. Whenever they came under fire, Andreas would grab a rifle and go off and fight, reappearing later, once minus an earlobe. He was a good rider and Forbes would send him off with his reports on round trips of a hundred miles or more. He was a great scrounger and cook and always seemed to produce a chicken at the last moment.

During confused and scattered fighting in some woodland, Forbes rode straight into a Turkish patrol. Pulling him from his saddle, the Turks prepared to mutilate him. Quickly, Andreas donned a fez he carried "in case of accidents" and broke into fluent Turkish; waving a piece of parchment, he explained that it gave them safe passage from the Turkish commander. The ruse worked and Forbes was released.

The campaign ended with the Serbians defeated and Forbes returned to England. Hostilities had merely been suspended and within a few months the Russians declared war on Turkey and Forbes was back in Belgrade with Andreas again. Very soon they moved to Bucharest in neighbouring Bulgaria where the main fighting was taking place. A reciprocal alliance was formed between the *Daily News* and the *New York Herald* and Forbes found himself working with two great journalists, J.A. MacGahan and Frank Millet and the artist Frederick Villiers. (6) By pooling their resources, they were able to give their readers a wider perspective of the fighting in this particularly nasty war. Their reports of appalling atrocities committed by the Turks horrified the British public and mentally scarred those who reported them. (7)

After the Russian defeat at Plevna in September, Forbes left the seat of the war and accompanied Tsar Alexander back to St. Petersburg. From there he returned to London only to be sent to the next theatre of conflict, the Afghan War of 1878-79.

He was present at the British storming of the fortress of Ali Musjid in the Khyber Pass. During an advance in the winter, the column in which Forbes was marching was ambushed by tribesmen. A nearby soldier was hit in the thigh and bled copiously. Unable to administer a tourniquet, Forbes pressed his thumbs either side of the wound and stopped the flow. He remained under fire until a detachment managed to drive the Afghans away. When the doctors examined the private's wound, they stated that Forbes had prevented bleeding and had saved his life. He was also gratified to learn that he was mentioned in despatches.

During a lull in the campaign, Forbes travelled to Burma to meet with King Theebaw, a despot who went in for fratricide. He was later dethroned by the British, who added Burma to the Empire.

It was in Mandalay that Forbes received a telegram from the *Daily News* informing him of the disaster at Isandlwana and to make all speed to South Africa. The outbreak of the Zulu War in January 1879 had caught the British press unprepared and hitherto, more importance had been attached the Afghan war than a brush with another African tribe. The British losses at Isandlwana and the gallant stand at Rorke's Drift changed this attitude and the newspapers hurried their correspondents to the seat of this dramatic war.

A slow and uncomfortable voyage brought Forbes to Durban in April as Lord Chelmsford prepared for the second invasion. Obtaining a press pass from Chelmsford's staff, who were hostile to any journalist, and equipping himself for the campaign ahead, Forbes began to make contacts with personalities who were to become household names back home.

During a visit with Chelmsford to Evelyn Wood's encampment at Kambula, Forbes met and got to know the young Louis Napoleon who had been allowed to accompany Chelmsford as an observer. During the long evenings they would talk about the Franco-Prussian War. Forbes told the Prince that during the manoeuvring before the Battle of Mars-la-Tour, he had seen Louis and his father through his binoculars emerge from a château and ride away to safety.

Some of Forbes' fellow journalists and illustrators were to gain fame from this short conflict. Melton Prior of the *Illustrated London News* was an old hand at campaigning and was the only person during the march on Ulundi to sleep in a tent and to bring his own supply of liquor. Another artist, Charles Fripp of *The Graphic*, was later to paint the most widely reproduced painting of the war; the last stand of the 24th at Isandlwana. (8)

One of Archibald Forbes' most effective reports was the piece he wrote after visiting Isandlwana on May 21st. He and his fellow reporters accompanied the Cavalry Brigade sent to inter the remains and to recover as many serviceable wagons as possible for the new advance. (9) It was a truly melancholy experience to visit the field of a battle left untouched for four months. Forbes later wrote;

The dead lay as they had fallen, for, strange to relate, the vultures of Zululand, that will reduce a dead ox to a skeleton in a few hours, had apparently never touched the corpses of our ill-fated countrymen.

Instead, the bodies had taken on a mummified appearance with leather-like skin stretched over fleshless bones.

With forty precious wagons collected from Isandlwana, Chelmsford felt he was now ready to commence the second invasion into Zululand. Chelmsford must have thought that all precautions had been taken against any further disaster but he had not reckoned on the vanity of the Prince Imperial.

On June 1st, the huge column began to move into Zululand. The following day, a bored Louis Napoleon pestered Chelmsford so persistently that he was allowed to ride on ahead, with a strong escort, to complete some map drawing. In the event, the main escort was delayed and the Prince and a special service officer, Lieutenant

Carey left with just six men of the Natal Horse.

Later that evening, Forbes was enjoying an after-dinner drink with some senior officers and fellow journalists in General Marshall's tent. Suddenly, Colonel Harrison poked his head through the tent-flap and exclaimed that the Prince Imperial had been killed. At first no one took him seriously and one of the officers even threw a lump of bread at the colonel. The laughter quickly died as the truth was confirmed. Forbes soon managed to interview the four troopers who had escaped from the ambush but found that they were evasive and reluctant to talk.

The next day, Forbes and his colleagues accompanied the large search party sent to recover the Prince's body. According to Melton Prior, it was Forbes who had the dubious distinction of finding the naked corpse. He wrote;

He was lying on his back, naked save for one sock; a spur bent out of shape was close to him. His head was so bent to the right that the cheek touched the sword. His hacked arms were lightly crossed

over his lacerated chest, and his face, the features of which were in no wise distorted but wore a faint smile that slightly parted the lips, was marred by the destruction of the right eye from an assegai stab. The surgeons agreed that this wound, which penetrated the brain, was the first and the fatal hurt and that the subsequent wounds were inflicted on a dead body. Of those there were many, in throat, in chest, in side, and on arms, apart from the nick in the abdomen which is the Zulu fetish-custom, invariably practised on slain enemies as a protection against being haunted by their ghosts. His wounds bled afresh as we moved him.

The death of the Prince caused a greater furore at home than the news of Isandlwana. This can be explained, in part, by the fact that Archibald Forbes and his colleagues were on the scene and recognised a story that was made in heaven; a popular and dashing foreign prince, a grieving widowed mother befriended by Queen Victoria, a lost throne and the last of the Napoleons slain helping the British Lion subdue the heathen hordes.

Pausing only to see the Prince's flag-draped body borne away on a gun carriage under escort to Pietermaritzburg, the column continued its advance on the Zulu capital, Ulundi. The march was extremely slow, with Chelmsford acting with great caution.

Forbes began to write critically of Chelmsford's control of the column and compared him unfavourably with Evelyn Wood's handling of the Flying Column. On the morning of Friday 4th July, having taken four weeks to cover about one hundred miles, the enormous British hollow square formed on the plain at Ulundi and waited for the Zulu army to attack. Forbes was surprised that Cetshwayo did not take advantage of the chaos there was in manoeuvring so many men into formation. In fact he was sure that the Zulus would not attack that morning and, rashly, made a wager to that effect. When they did attack, the contest was totally one-sided, and after just thirty minutes the mounted troops were in pursuit of the scattering warriors. Forbes and Melton Prior had spent the battle furiously scribbling and sketching oblivious to the Zulu bullets that whizzed about. In fact Forbes was hit and bruised by a spent bullet but this did nothing to break his concentration.

At the end of the fighting, Forbes had to settle his £100 wager with those who took his bet but was able to recoup some of it shortly afterwards. Having written up his notes, he approached Lord Chelmsford and requested that his report should be included in the despatches he was sure were leaving shortly. He was somewhat irritated by Chelmsford's reply that he would not risk sending a courier with the news of the victory until the following day. He pointed out, not unreasonably, that the countryside was still full of roaming bands of Zulus and it was too dangerous. Forbes was outraged and blurted out; "*Then, sir, I will start myself at once*". Afterwards he admitted: "*I was sorry for myself the moment I had spoken.*"

With the nearest telegraph over one hundred miles away at Landman's Drift, it seemed a foolhardy gesture. Lieutenant Henry Lysons bet him £5 he would not make it and insisted Forbes should stake the money as he did not expect to see him again! (10) Taking Prior's sketches and some staff messages, Forbes set off at dusk.

It was somewhat gruesome work, that first stretch through the sullen gloom of the early night, as I groped my way through the rugged bush trying to keep to the trail of the wagon wheels. I could see the dark figures of Zulus up against the blaze of the fires in the destroyed kraals to the right and to left of my track, and their shouts came to me on the still night air. At length I altogether lost my way, and there was no resource but to halt until the moon should rise and show me my whereabouts. The longest twenty minutes I ever spent in my life was while sitting on my trembling horse in a little glade of the bush, my hand on the butt of my revolver, waiting for the moon's rays to flash down into the hollow. At length they came; I discerned the right direction, and in half an hour more I was inside the reserve camp of Etonganeni imparting the tidings to a circle of eager listeners. The great danger was past. (11)

Using the fortified posts that had been established to protect Chelmsford's line of supply, Forbes was able to change his horse six times. About three o'clock in the afternoon, an exhausted and dishevelled Forbes reached Landman's Drift having covered 110 miles in 20 hours. His report was the first news to reach London and was read out in both Houses of Parliament. His 'Ride of Death', as it became christened, made him a hero to the British public and there was even a suggestion that he should receive the Victoria Cross. More modestly, Forbes applied for the campaign medal to add to his impressive collection of foreign decorations. It was Lord Chelmsford who firmly blocked this award as Forbes had not carried the official report and the telegrams he had carried were of a more personal nature.

Already critical of Chelmsford's handling of the campaign, Forbes, his ego bruised, was stung into writing a series of vitriolic articles attacking his lordship. To little avail, however, as the medal was not forthcoming. With the end of the war in sight, Forbes enjoyed being fêted and later undertook a successful lecture tour of England and America.

He was now in his early forties and years of hardship in the cause of journalism had affected his health to the extent that he never sought to cover another war. Instead, he sailed around the world and wrote several best-selling books of his exploits and observations. In the 1890's, as a semi-invalid, he journeyed to Baden-Baden in Germany to 'take the waters' He travelled through Alsace and Lorraine and was able to revisit scenes from his first intoxicating experience as a war correspondent.

His health deteriorated rapidly and one of the giants of journalism, Archibald Forbes, died in 1900 at the age of just 62.

References.

- (1). One of the regiments who had taken part in the Charge of the Heavy Brigade at Balaclava.
- (2). Forbes reported from the Prussian side because he could speak German. William Simpson of *The Illustrated London News* spoke French and covered the French perspective. His paper, which had adopted a distinctly pro-Prussian bias, did not help him.
- (3). The Paris Commune was a council set up to oppose the French National Assembly who were trying to negotiate a settlement with the Prussians. Civil war and starvation followed until the troops of the National Assembly, supplied and encouraged by the Prussians, crushed the Commune with great loss of life. The bitterness of this conflict still remains with the political French left.
- (4). Sheridan and his staff travelled to Europe to observe the Franco-Prussian War.
- (5). Sherman frequently told Forbes, with a smile, "*that all war-correspondents ought to be summarily hanged, and that he, personally, would have no objections to performing the operation.*"
- (6). MacGahan died of typhus later in the war. Millet covered many more wars including the Boxer Rebellion and the Spanish-American War. He drowned when the Titanic sank in 1912. Villiers had an extraordinary career which spanned over thirty years in which he covered the Balkans, Egypt, Sudan, Boer War, Russo-Japan, the North West Frontier and the early years of World War 1. He died in 1922.
- (7). In one incident 12,000 Bulgarian men, women and children were butchered and mutilated.
- (8). On display at the National Army Museum, Chelsea.
- (9). The Cavalry Brigade consisted of the newly arrived 17th Lancers and King's Dragoon Guards under the command of Major-General Frederick Marshall.
- (10). Lysons was awarded the Victoria Cross at Hlobane.
- (11). Forbes really was taking a great risk as Lieutenant Scott-Elliott and Corporal Cotter of the 21st Regiment had recently been killed on the same track.

Acknowledgements

Memories and Studies of War and Peace by Archibald Forbes
Barracks, Bivouacs and Battles by Archibald Forbes
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The Illustrated London News (1879)
The War Correspondents -The Anglo-Zulu War by Prof. John Laband & Ian Knight