

LT. HENRY CURLING'S STORY AFTER ISANDLWANA RECENTLY DISCOVERED PERSONAL LETTERS

Edited by Adrian Greaves

Editor's note: Curling's letters have been reproduced using his spelling, grammar and punctuation, any gaps or illegible words are indicated by (?). For a full account, see *The Curling Letters of the Zulu War* by Greaves & Best, Pen & Sword.

Curling's account of the battle and its immediate aftermath was reported in the June 1998 issue of the Journal, together with a letter about his attack of fever from mid February to the end of March 1879. He enlarged on this account in a letter from Helpmekaar dated 4 April to his brother Willy:

"I have never answered your long letter having been seedy must be the excuse. When I was ill I wrote such a stupid letter: I think I must have been off my nut when I wrote it. I was laid up for six weeks altogether as it pulled me down terribly and the fever lasted three weeks. I was sent down to a place called Ladysmith where there is a hospital and began to get better directly I left this (?). About 35 men and 2 officers have died of the fever which is a good proportion for force of about 1000 men in the short space of two months.

All the men who die the doctors say have typhoid and those who recover intermittent fever. As about ¼ of the men have been sent away sick there are not many left who have not had it. The severe diarrhea that everybody has with the fever is what pulls you down most. I could not walk a yard when I left and lay on my back in an ambulance for three days going down to Ladysmith.

We are living a very hard life up here and the constant anxiety makes it very trying. We are within three miles of the border and are constantly watched by Zulu spies. The fort is too small to sleep in and is too unhealthy so one sleeps in tents outside and are never quite safe from a surprise and the more so that the Zulus have been so successful in that form of attack. This is a very bloody war. Out of the 5000 white men with which the General began the campaign 1500 have been killed or invalidated from wounds. Out of the 12 artillery officers in the colony at the beginning of the war 3 have been killed.

Col. Wood had a big fight which although a success shows the tremendous power of the Zulus. We shall see another 10000 men out here before the war is over. We hope to move from this in about another two weeks and to advance again into Zululand in another month but if things go on as they have been going lately we shall not be strong enough to make any headway.

I do so long to come home and see you all again but it seems a terrible long way off. The worst of it is that I cannot get any credit out of it being a sub and one risks one's life without a chance of ever being thanked for it.

This is a very selfish way of looking at things but really one gets tired of being a complete nonentity. Mama writes very cheerfully from Cannes, she certainly is not worse for the change and I hope it has done her some good although she may not think so at the time. Having nothing to do any place would be dull for Papa even with a good club. By the way I hope the club is flourishing, I should uncommonly like to see the inside of it again. We lost the whole of our field kit uniforms etc at Isandhlwana and wear most extraordinary clothes now: Corduroy breeches etc. What I dislike most is sleeping on the ground. It is an advantage in one way that what with visiting sentries, picquets, & fort duty one seldom gets a couple of hours sleep at a time. We have got an awful lot of duffers out here on the staff: the only good man is Col. Wood and I am afraid he will be superseded by one of the Generals that have been sent out.

By the time you get this Papa & the others will be on their way home again I should think. May is quite a lovely month to be in England. It was very good of you to wire to Cannes as they did not know until the next day who the killed were. Our column will not be at all strong: and when numerous sick and the garrisons of the numerous forts that have grown up on the border have been deducted each column will not number 4000 men – too few to meet 20000 or more of the enemy elated as they are now by their success. I am afraid all this must be rather shop to you but it is what we most think about. Why does not Sir William Caphlan send Howard out here. He would get command of native cavalry at once and

would not be able to get a drop of liquor once he got up country. I hope Lizzie is not finding Ramsgate dull, the worst part of year is now over. Love to all at home from

Your Affec. Brother, H T Curling”

In a letter date 7th April, he added that,

we leave this place on Thursday for a camp nearer Colonel Wood. Our column will form one brigade of the force of whites Col. Wood will command the other brigade. He is by far the best soldier here and I wish we were joining with him.

In an earlier letter to his mother dated 1st April, he wrote,

I came up here from Ladysmith on Friday and I am strong enough now to get about and do a little duty and another sub is away sick leaving only one to do all the duty...Of course you have heard all about Col. Wood's fight. We as yet have had no particulars but our losses seem to have been very heavy. Poor young Nicholson was one of the nicest fellows I ever met: he was in my room at the Academy and I have always known him well. He was heir to a baronetcy. Barton too who was killed has 8 or 10000 a year and only soldiered for pleasure...The remains of the centre column seems to be forgotten by the General altogether. No doubt anything connected with it brings painful thoughts to him...When this war will be over no one knows. After June it is impossible to do anything as there is no grass for the cattle and if it is not over by that time we shall have to wait until next year.

On April 28th, he wrote to his mother from the Victoria Club, Pietermaritzburg:

I am living in luxury for a few days and enjoy it only has one can who has been away in the wilds for five months. I have been sent down here to bring up 89 men that have been sent from England to make up our losses at Isandhlwana. I have to equip two guns with horses and so expect to be here quite a week. I came down by postcard from Dundee, the place where our camp now is, about 25 miles from Helpmakar. We did 100 miles a day starting an hour before daylight and travelling until 9 or 10 at night. We changed horses every 10 or 12 miles and were nearly bumped to death over the bad roads.

I do enjoy the change to a comfortable bed, dinner with tablecloth etc. Being alone I put up at an hotel and can do what I like. Your letters all go wrong: the last I got makes no mention of your having heard from me since Jan 22nd.

Of course as long as I am away from headquarters I cannot get your letters but hope to get quite a budget when we get back. I see they have published the proceedings of the Court of Enquiry: when we were examined we had no idea this would be done and took no trouble to make a readable statement, at least only one or two did so. It is two weeks march from this (?) to the frontier but there is no chance of the troops advancing before we return. If the General delays more than a week or two it will be too late this year to do any good and we shall have to remain idle for five months.

The 17th Lancers marched away this morning: no one who has seen them in England would recognise them again. It is very amusing to read the accounts of Chard and Bromhead. They are about the most commonplace men in the British army. Chard is a most insignificant man in appearance and is only 5 ft 2 or 3 in height. Bromhead is a stupid old fellow as deaf as a post. Is it not curious how some men are forced into notoriety.

I am sorry to say our column is still to be commanded by the General (Lord Chelmsford). I feel these disasters have quite upset his judgment or rather that of his staff and one does not feel half so comfortable under his command as with a man like Col. Wood. Our column is likely to be the one that will have all the fighting.

The Zulus are afraid of Col. Wood with his veteran Regiments. Our force is entirely composed of young troops who have no experience of fighting and one troubles to think how easily a panic might occur...It is amusing what a crowd of outsiders have come out here. Parsons, photographers, newspaper people by dozens and no end of loafers. I fancy that few of them will ever get farther than this town where they can write lies to people at home as well as anywhere else....

Letter to mother from (?) Sandman's Drift May 28th 1879.

Just a few lines to say that I am in perfect health, indeed I never have been stronger.

You will see all about our doings in the papers as there are an army of correspondents out here now. I went with the cavalry brigade to Isandhlwana and in the following day assisted to bury Maj. Smith but you will see full account of everything in the papers...I have been so constantly on the move lately that I have had no time to write and all patrols now are made without tents so one cannot write in the open air. I found my account book and several letters at Isandhlwana but no vestige of the despatch box...

Another month will finish the campaigning season so you may expect to have some exciting news before long. I hope I may be with you before the next season comes again. There is certain to be no fighting of any consequence after this campaign..."

With Lord Chelmsford's column (?) Itzotzosi River Zululand. June 7th. Letter to mother.

We are now well into Zululand and far further than any of the columns have been before. I only hope that we shall have a fight soon before we get further into the country. We get more careless every day and one trembles to think what would happen should we be attacked at night. Our arrangements on the march are pretty good and the worst that could happen would be to lose part of our baggage but at night we are shut up in a huge intrenchment half a mile long far too large for us to defend properly. The natives retreat before us fighting as they go. You have heard of course about the poor little Prince Imperial's death. And yesterday the Adjutant of the 17th Lancers was killed in a skirmish in which I believe the enemy suffered no loss.

No one knows where the Zulu army is and until it has been defeated we are in a very ticklish position. I wish I could tell you all I think about it but don't like to do so in a letter. I was one of the pall bearers at the Prince's funeral: poor little fellow everyone feels so sorry for him and ashamed that he should meet his death in such a way. We do not seem to profit in any way by our former experience. Our baggage columns are larger than ever and we carry tents, camp beds etc, just the same as before. None of the troops from England believe in the enemy and we oldstagers are called alarmists.

You would hardly believe it possible but we do not know the road and are wandering on with the greatest uncertainty as to where we shall go. I have had no end of trouble about that letter that was put into the Standard and have been freely abused in the local papers for the remarks about volunteers. After all letters are dangerous things to write freely as one is not certain who may see them. There was nothing untrue in my letter and yet what trouble it has got me in.

Col. Wood's column marches a few miles ahead of us. It is a pity we are not organised like him but we consist of Generals with large staffs: too many cooks spoil any party and we have no less than five Generals (including two Brigadiers) with us. We are having lovely weather and are making the most of the short season before all the grass is burnt. Whether we shall finish the war remains to be seen but there can be no real peace until the Zulus have been thoroughly beaten and their cattle taken. The conditions of peace are very mild and there is some little chance of the Zulu King joining in to save himself. We cannot be certain that his chiefs will agree with him and everything will remain in a most dangerous state. I am wonderfully strong now, can sleep anywhere, and anytime, and can eat anything. It is now two weeks since I have had a letter from home and I am most anxious to get one...

When we went to Isandhlwana I went over the ground we came over when we escaped and it seems more wonderful than ever how any of us got away....

Fort Marshall, Zululand June 30th 1879. Letter to mother.

We are quite shut out here from any news of what is going and never get any letters as the Mail bags go on direct to Hd. Quarters and no one takes the trouble to send our letters back.

There is one consolation, in another 10 days their provisions will be gone so they must return when I hope we shall all go back to Natal. All our jams, tinned things etc are all gone and we live entirely on rations and in fact are quite grateful for a discovery we made that Eno's fruit salt is a capital substitute for baking powder in making bread. Now that the Fort is nearly finished there is little to occupy the men with and we all find it very monotonous. Every morning we stand to our arms from 5am until daylight which is not until 6.30 and you can understand how pleasant that is on these frosty mornings. Our latest news of the General is that he is starting with a flying column this day for Ulundi from which he is now only about 10 miles distant but the country is difficult and dangerous so that he can only move slowly. A special messenger from Sir Garnet Wooley arrived yesterday with a long telegram for Lord Chelmsford. We all fancy that peace will be made at any price. The King has already sent in 200 oxen and some ivory as a peace offering but the guns do not come in and they are to be the first signs that he really means not to fight. I met Fred Campbell of the 90th a few days ago. I suppose I met him as a boy a long time ago. He wished to be remembered to you and Papa. I passed through Escourt on the road from Maritzburg but not then knowing that Fred Birkett was living near there did not inquire about him...

What a block there is in promotion just now, only four steps since Jan 22nd when poor Smith was killed. I could not help thinking when we were burying him and how nearly I shared the same fate. He did not appear to have been assegaied and most probably died from the effects of falling down the rocks. We found his horse dead a little above him and 19 other white men who had all either fallen or been shot down while climbing down the rocks. I forget whether I told you that when we visited Isandhlwana we found the gun limber which was more particularly in my charge just where I left it. The horses were lying dead in their harness and the drivers a few paces off. Of the other gun or horses there was no trace.

The dead are now nearly all buried and in a few days the grass which is 5 or 6 ft high is to be set on fire when all traces of the fight will be erased. We find all sorts of articles taken from Isandhlwana all over the country every kraal has something: the stock of a fishing rod I had was found a few day's ago and something is brought in every day...

Fort Marshall. July 5th 1879. Letter to mother.

We heard this morning of yesterday's battle. Forbes the correspondent got here at daylight having ridden all night through a dangerous country. He hopes to get to the end of the wire and about 50 miles off this evening: anyhow he is far ahead for all the other correspondents.

He is a great strong coarse looking man able to undergo any amount of fatigue and to put up with any amount of snubbing. These specials are a terrible nuisance. They expect to be welcomed everywhere and in fact come whether you welcome them or not. One feels at the same time that it is dangerous to be uncivil to them. They are obliged to be pushing unsnubbable men, no others would get on at all. How pluckily the Zulus still fight: they are apparently unable to get large armies together now. From the 22000 that attacked Col. Wood at Kambula 100 miles from the chief kraal Ulundi they dwindled down to 10000 or even less that attacked yesterday near the kraal itself. From the top of the mountain close to us we saw Ulundi in flames but it was not till this morning that we heard of the fight that our people had.

Lord Chelmsford can now resign most peacefully and we all expect him to do so as soon as he can hand the command over to Sir Garnet Woolsey. He has not an easy job before him I think. The country is getting blacker every day & there is now hardly a blade of grass in our line of communications, all has been burnt.

Sir Garnet will have to get the army back with its 10000 oxen and 600 wagons and he is dealing with an enemy who apparently will not make peace but will fight to the end. We have now done nearly all the harm in a country that we can. All the open country has been overrun the kralls burnt and the crops destroyed. We cannot get the cattle: they have been driven into an inaccessible country far out of reach. I suppose we need not fear the Zulus attacking us in any considerable force unless they can get us at a disadvantage but still it will be interesting to see the result.

Fort Cambridge Zululand. August 5th 1879. Letter to mother.

We have had a move since I last wrote and are in quite a different part of Zululand about 40 miles from my old station Fort Marshall. We form part of a small column under Col. Baker-Russell who seems to be a smart go-ahead man though of course he knows nothing about the style of fighting out here as yet. We have been marching for the last three days and have halted today to give the cattle a rest. Tomorrow we move on again into a country where we have never been before leaving a small fortified post here. Zululand is now covered with little forts which are useful in preventing Zulus from returning to their kraals without our knowledge. When they come back and give up their arms they will bring their cattle which will be a good security for their future behaviour. The Zulu King has still some 10000 men who will follow him. They are all young men who own no cattle or wives and who have nothing to lose if they are beaten so there is a good chance of our having another fight. Anyhow another week will show whether the campaign is over or not.

I am so glad to get out of a fort and thoroughly enjoy being on the move again. I dined with Fred Campbell last night: he was sent out with some troops to make the fort here a few days ago...Sir Garnet's protégés have completely taken charge of everything out here, and the whole of the old staff have been shipped home to England. Many of them have been but a month or two out here. We shall have some terrible disaster some day caused by the newspapers & Members of Parliament trying to govern armies in the field. It will be quite impossible to keep up discipline now that flogging is done away with. However it will soon be established again as men will have occasionally to be shot and then what an outcry there will be.

(?) Emlongana Mipeni Station (?) Zululand. August 12th 1879. Letter to mother.

We have been on the move almost continuously since I last wrote. Col. Baker Russel who commands this column seems inclined to be far more energetic than the commanders we have been under before. Finding that our guns cannot get over the country he had turned us into cavalry and I returned last night from a three day patrol through the most difficult part of Zululand. We heard that the Zulu King was hiding in a kraal about 50 miles off so Baker Russel took out the whole of his cavalry about 400 strong to try and catch him. We started at daybreak three days ago taking nothing with us but some preserved meat and biscuit and went right into the heart of Zululand. The country was covered with Zulus who ran up into the mountains as we advanced. If they had chosen they could have cut us all off as in crossing the mountains we had to go through numerous places in single file leading our horses.

However, they only fired at us once and then nobody was the hit. When we had gone about 30 miles the horses were too done up to go on so we reluctantly turned back. As it was we had to leave about 50 horses behind us and many men came back on foot. We slept at night with nothing but our greatcoats on and our saddles for pillows and as we were in the saddle from daylight to dark were pretty well done up when we returned last night. We can never drive the Zulus out of the mountains, at any rate it will take years to do so and I have no wish to have to assist in doing it. I think Sir Garnet is too sensible to allow the war to drag on. If we had only been allowed to fight in the proper way the war would have been over now. After the action at Ulundi we might have burnt most of the kraals and taken any number of cattle besides killing plenty of Zulus but we did nothing and reaped no benefit from our victory...It is now nearly seven months since I have slept without my clothes and boots except a couple of weeks at Ladysmith when I was sick. There seems but little chance of our going home and still less of being promoted...I never put a stamp on my letter now as they are not to be got: I know you don't grudge the 6d.

Luneburg Transvaal. September 8th 1879. Letter to mother.

Your letters are part beginning to arrive with great regularity as the Post Office people have found out that we belong to Baker-Russel's column. Unfortunately we heard this morning that the column is to be broken up and we are to start for Utrecht tomorrow morning...When we

arrive we shall either be ordered to Pretoria or Petermaritzburg; we hope the latter but probably the battery will be divided. Col. Harness has gone down to Maritzburg on leave and hopes to get home leave at once. As soon as we are settled I think I shall put in for leave too if I don't get some steps in the meantime. The Zulu war is now completely over and the natives are most friendly. The border tribes are the only ones that give any trouble. We are now encamped close to the spot where Captain Moriarty's company was destroyed and have found the skeletons of several men who were killed while trying to escape.

There is a small tribe here living in some caves in a mountain that overlooks the road who will not submit. They have continued to fire on everybody passing by and have prevented any small parties from moving about. The first day we came here we surrounded their caves and summoned them to surrender. Eight of them came out with their arms and gave themselves up. Unfortunately some of our men were fired on from another cave and our own niggers immediately assailed the prisoners. The others there refused to come out. Large fires were lit at the mouth of the cave to smoke them out but without avail. We have been here 3 days and they will not give in so as we have to move tomorrow and this nest of Caterans (?) cannot be left here the caves are to be blown up with guncotton. We are expecting to hear the explosion every minute. It seems cruel but must be done.

Curling moved to Wesselstrom in the Transvaal early in October 1879, where he remained until the end of November. During this period, he heard that he had been promoted Captain and posted to a battery in "Caubul, in time to earn another medal". He hoped that he would be able to secure home leave before sailing to India, but it was not to be, and in a letter dated 25th January 1880 from Pinetown, he wrote that he expected to sail for India and the Afghan War on the 4th of February. In a letter he wrote during this period he mentions that of his 50 men, ten were in hospital and one had died a few days ago, usually from fever. In another letter, he wrote,

The horse I escaped with from Isandhlwana was not my own. I never rode him until that day. I kept him although a very unpleasant and useless horse for my work until he got sick when I was obliged to send him to a sick depot where he now is. He was one of the spare draught horses not used for riding purposes which makes it the more curious that he should have carried me so well that day.

After the Afghan War, Curling served in India, and at Aldershot, and in 1896 was Lt. Col OC RA in Egypt. His last years were spent on the staff, and he retired as a full Colonel in 1902. He died at Ramsgate on 1st Jan 1910.

Lt. Curling 'Saving the guns'. (mounted on nearside right)

