

## REDVERS BULLER – The Bayard of South Africa

By Brian Best

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When satirists lampoon a typical overfed, red-faced block-headed Victorian general, they probably have in mind a picture of General Sir Redvers Buller. In his sixties, and reluctantly in command of British forces at the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War, he did, indeed, cut an archaic and risible figure. He was ponderous in both speech and build and his rather piggy eyes were set in a crimson jowly face dominated by a large grey walrus moustache. He had a short fuse and a spectacular temper. He was also stubborn, lacking in energy and unsuccessful, which led to his being replaced by his hated rival, General Frederick Roberts. Sadly this lasting impression of Buller conceals what an exceptional and inspiring leader he had been just twenty years earlier in the Zulu War.

Born in 1839, Buller was the second of seven sons and four daughters born to a West Country squire and M.P. The family home of Downes, near Crediton, Devon, was a large well-run estate and the family was a close, self-contained unit, greatly influenced by their warm-hearted mother. His father, in contrast, was an undemonstrative and distant figure. The young Buller grew up as a country-boy who enjoyed mixing with the estate workers and gaining a firm grounding in carpentry, smithy work, animal husbandry and other rural skills that later often surprised his soldiers.

After a brief stay at Harrow, he moved to Eton where he was regarded as a clumsy country bumpkin and an undistinguished pupil. He lived for the holidays so he could work on the estate and indulge his passion for horse riding and hunting. His happy childhood, however, was shattered during the Christmas holidays of 1855. He and his elder brother, James, had accompanied their beloved mother on a shopping expedition to Exeter and were waiting on the station platform for the train to return them to Crediton. Suddenly his mother collapsed with a lung haemorrhage. Too ill to be moved, she lay in the waiting room attended all the time by Redvers until she died. A further tragedy occurred just six months later when his favourite sister, Julia, also died. The Bullers, despite living in the country, were not a robust family and sickness was to claim another sister and his elder brother.

With his brother, James, due to inherit Downes, Redvers decided on a career in the army, despite the family having no great military connections. In 1858, he was commissioned into the 60<sup>th</sup> Rifles, one of the elite British regiments. Accident prone, Buller nearly ended his new career before it began. Helping with some forestry in the estate woods, he badly hacked his leg with an axe. So severe was the wound that the doctor recommended amputation, but was deterred by Buller's vehement protestations. Although the injury gave him a limp for the rest of his life, it did not affect his skill in the saddle.

His first posting was to India and he arrived just as the last pockets of mutineers were being hunted down. From India, he was posted to Hong Kong and took part in the Second Opium War against China in 1860. Unlike most of his contemporaries, he had a conscience, believing that the war was unjust and he annoyed his fellow officers for many years by refusing to wear the campaign medal. A souvenir he did take from the China War, however, was a kick in the mouth from a frisky horse, which left him a speech impediment for the rest of his life.

At this time he was described by a contemporary as *'a raw and self-willed young man, with perhaps no great interest in his profession'*. His next posting changed that forever. Buller's battalion was sent to Canada, and he soon relished the beauty of its wilderness. He also became greatly influenced by his commanding officer, Colonel R.B.Hawley, who saw great potential in his protégé and encouraged him to perfect his soldiering skills. These came to be noticed when the 60<sup>th</sup> formed part of the Red River Expedition of 1870. Under the command of the senior staff officer in Canada, Colonel Garnet Wolseley, Buller was given the chance to shine and he took the opportunity with both hands. Although the campaign did not involve any fighting, Buller's energy and handling of his men contributed greatly to its success. Most importantly, it brought the young Buller into the favoured circle of officers that surrounded the ambitious Wolseley.

Three years later, Buller further enhanced his reputation in the foetid jungles of West Africa where he acted as Wolseley's Intelligence Officer in the Ashanti War. This gave him his first experience of handling spies, interpreters and volunteers. He also met the 'gentlemen of the press', and started a lifelong hatred of the profession. For their part, they were generous in their praise of him. One, Winwood Reade of *The Times*, perceptively wrote of Buller, 'his talents are best displayed on active service'.

The campaign left him with a brevet majority, a CB and a dose of malaria, which was to torment him for the rest of his life. He returned to Downes to recuperate and while he was there, his brother James died. Now, squire of Downes and a wealthy man, Buller was tempted to retire from the Army and devote his life to managing the estate. By now, Buller had begun to enjoy soldiering, especially under the reforming influence of Wolseley, and he chose to remain a soldier. His next overseas appointment was to accompany Major General the Hon. Frederic

Thesiger, the new Army Commander in South Africa. When they arrived in early 1878, the Ninth Frontier War was being fitfully fought in what was known as British Kaffaria, to the south of Natal. Almost immediately, Buller was given his first independent command, the 250 strong Frontier Light Horse. This could have been a poisoned chalice for the volunteers were an unruly mixed bunch made up of British deserters, sailors, bar-flies, failed miners and border toughs. As he wrote in a letter to a sister, '*I fear there is not much credit to be got out of being associated with them, but I will do my best*'.

In a short time, by dint of example, encouragement and hard-discipline, Buller had turned this unlikely rabble into a cohesive and effective force. An example of how he dealt with insubordination was illustrated by his handling of an abusive trooper who turned up drunk on parade. Pretending to ignore the incident, Buller led the unit out on patrol. After a few miles on the empty veldt, he ordered the offender to dismount and to walk back to camp. At this time, Buller's appearance was described as tall and wiry. He dressed like his men, in brown cord breeches, high leather gaiters, a flannel shirt, a many-pocketed jacket and a wide-brimmed hat with a red puggree. The whole ensemble was hung with bandoliers and ammunition pouches. The favoured weapons were Snider or Martini-Henry carbines, bayonets and revolvers but no swords. Buller led by example and proved he was as tough as they were, 'If we were lying in the rain, so was Buller. If we were hungry, so was he. All the hardships he shared equally with his men'. The Frontier Light Horse were involved in a few skirmishes, one which resulted in an officer and six troopers being killed, but mostly they were on long and fruitless searches for the elusive enemy.

The war had petered out by the end of May. In September, Buller was ordered to take the FLH north to the disputed territories that lay between the Boer republic of Transvaal and northeastern Zululand. There they joined Colonel Hugh Rowland's expedition against the belligerent Pedi tribe under the leadership of Sekhukhune. After a long and weary march, through a drought-blighted country, Buller was disgusted when Rowlands called off the advance within sight of Sekhukhune's stronghold.

Buller did not have to wait long before he saw action. When the British provoked a war with the Zulus, Thesiger, or Lord Chelmsford as he had become, appointed Buller as commander of all mounted troops in Wood's No. 4 Column. In addition to the Frontier Light Horse and the Imperial Mounted Infantry, which consisted of regular British infantrymen who could ride, there were six other units. These were the Natal Native Horse, Baker's Horse, Transvaal Rangers, Kaffrarian Rifles, Border Horse and the Burgher Force. The last mentioned was commanded by Piet Uys and was a forty strong all-Boer unit, of whom most were related to its commander. During the period that Buller was acquainted with Uys, he developed a strong respect and sympathy for the Boers, which he carried into the Anglo-Zulu War. This led Buller to be accused of being soft on the Boers and may go part of the way to explain his lack of ruthlessness during his attempt to relieve Ladysmith.

It is also worth mentioning that this unit would not accept payment for their service, but relied on their share of the Zulu cattle they could rustle. The Natal Native Horse consisted of Christian blacks that were well-disciplined and steady troops. The Border and Baker units were both commanded by former regular British officers and were made up of generally reputable volunteers. The Kaffrarian Rifles were recruited from the Transvaal and were entirely German and Dutch volunteers. The Transvaal Rangers were the unit that drew the most adverse comments. Recruits were variously described as 'a forbidding lot of mixed Hottentots and scum of the diamond fields as never collected together outside a prison wall', and 'if they fight as well as they thieve, they will be of great execution amongst the Zulus'.

All in all, Buller was in overall command of some 600 diverse and individualistic men of many nationalities. It speaks volumes that he welded them into a cohesive command that acquitted itself with some distinction during the War. After the defeat at Isandlwana, Chelmsford's column retired to Natal until reinforcements arrived. Wood's command had not been involved in the First Invasion and was strongly encamped just inside the Zulu border at Khambula.

From here, Buller and his command made frequent raids against Zulu kraals in the neighbourhood with the express purpose of capturing cattle and claiming prize money from the authorities. (1) It seems probable that Buller's motive for wanting to mount an expedition against the formidable Hlobane Mountain was less about neutralising the hostile Mbelini and more about capturing the considerable cattle herd that was grazed on the high plateau. In any event, the ill-conceived raid turned into a first class disaster, with Buller emerging as both villain and hero.

Having scaled the eastern side of mountain during the night, Buller's men reached the plateau and encountered some resistance. Undeterred, the volunteers commenced skirmishing and collecting together any cattle they could find. These they drove towards the western end, where the other half of their force was supposed to be in support. It was during this time that the main 20,000-strong Zulu impi from Ulundi came into view from the east. Buller then abandoned all thought of retreating down the path he had ascended and ordered a retreat to the precipitous kranz down which the cattle herd was being driven. Now it became a race to get clear of the mountain before it

was entirely encircled by the huge impi, some of whom had already ascended the mountain and were joining in the pursuit across the plateau. Buller had already lost 'A' Company of the FLH and the whole of the Border Horse when he had sent an ambiguous message, which sent his men towards instead of away from the Zulu horde.

Fighting and running all the way to the western slope, Buller found a disorganised mass of panic-stricken horsemen trying to negotiate the steep, boulder-strewn descent known as the Devil's Pass. Buller organised a seven-man rear-guard, which gave some breathing space, but as they turned to leave, they were overwhelmed and four of their number were killed. Later Buller recommended Captain Frederick Duck of the Veterinary Corps for a Victoria Cross for volunteering to serve on the rear-guard. Rather harshly it was rejected on the grounds that he had no right being there! Then, it was every man for himself as they fell and stumbled their way down amongst the rocks, stabbed and clubbed from every direction by Zulu warriors.

Another shock was in store for Buller. The retreat was not covered because another confusing message, this time from Wood, had removed the other half of Buller's command from the neck below Devil's Pass. As he descended, Buller tried to steady those around him, shouting for those without horses to find one, as it would mean certain death to retreat on foot. A sixteen-year-old FLH trooper, named George Mossop, received a clout behind the ear as he neared the bottom of Devil's Pass. It was Buller who insisted Mossop return to the top to fetch his pony. It says something of Buller's forceful personality that the youngster preferred to return amongst the Zulus than disobey his commanding officer. In the event, Mossop and his pony did escape, just, and managed to reach Khambula safely. Buller organised a line to give covering fire for those still trying to descend.

He also rode forward to pick up dismounted men, including Captain D'Arcy. Once D'Arcy was brought to safety, he, in turn, grabbed a loose horse and joined Buller in his rescue attempts. At length, Buller had gathered about 200 men, many of whom were wounded, and 100 horses. Covering their retreat with a rearguard, Buller started to lead the remnants of his command the 30 miles back to Khambula, which they reached at dusk. Buller had barely got out of the saddle when word came of some dismounted survivors still wandering the plain. Setting out again in pouring rain, he found them and brought them safely back to camp many hours later.

Although his superior, Colonel Wood, had been present on the periphery of the battle, Buller had effectively been in command and was responsible for what was the second worst defeat after Isandlwana. His bravery was not in question and he had effected a withdrawal that had saved many of his men. When it came to look for scapegoats for the disaster, the Army was not about to sacrifice a man like Buller. Instead, the unpopular Lieutenant-Colonel John Russell, who had pulled his men away from the bottom of Devil's Pass at a critical moment in the retreat, shouldered much of the blame.

With only a few hours rest, Buller was again involved in a battle. The main impi present at Hlobane was, in fact, on its way to attack the well-prepared camp at Khambula. At about 1 pm, the Zulus were observed getting into position to attack in the classic chest and horns formation. In order to break up this formation before it was completed, Buller led out his volunteers to incite the Zulu right horn to attack. At a distance of only two hundred yards from the Zulus, they dismounted and fired a volley at the massed ranks. This had a two-fold effect. The Zulus immediately charged and most of the volunteers' horses became spooked, with the result that many of the cavalry only just escaped with their lives as they tried to mount their panicked mounts. Amongst these was the disgraced Colonel Russell, who was saved by Lieutenant Browne, 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment, attached to the Imperial Mounted Infantry. For this act, he won the only Victoria Cross awarded for this battle.

As the volunteers reached their lines, the artillery opened fire with devastating effect. With the attack prematurely started, the rest of the Zulus started to advance. The attack lasted some four hours, with waves of Zulus being broken by the volleys of the infantry and artillery. As the assaults ran out of steam and the warriors began to retreat, Buller led out his horsemen. With Hlobane still fresh in their minds, they were bent on revenge. In a pursuit covering many miles, the countryside was littered with about 2,000 dead warriors. For Buller, the man who enjoyed foxhunting, this was an exhilarating experience and he indulged himself in the orgy of killing. In the aftermath, the slaughter was condemned and Buller accused of being bloodthirsty.

Despite his disdain of the press, the newsmen recognised that Buller was newsworthy and built him up as, "*The Bayard of South Africa*". It was Archibald Forbes, who had accurately described Buller as, "a stern-tempered, ruthless, saturnine man, with a gift of grim silence...". He further penned a rather purple tinged account of Buller, "Leading his men at a swinging canter, with his reins in his teeth, a revolver in one hand, and a knobkerrie he had snatched from a Zulu in the other, his hat blown off in the melee, and a large streak of blood across his face, caused by a splinter of blood from above, this gallant horseman seemed a demon incarnate to the flying savages, who slunk out of his path as if he had been – as indeed they believed him – an evil spirit, whose very look was death".

After the Khambula defeat, the Zulus retreated to Ulundi to await the inevitable final battle, which Cetshwayo knew would end in their destruction. The build-up of reinforcements, transport and supplies for the Second

Invasion was painfully slow. It would be twelve weeks before the now over-cautious Chelmsford was again ready to lead his huge unwieldy column across the border. In the meantime, Buller and his men kept up their constant round of patrols and cattle raids. On a few of these the young Prince Imperial accompanied him. After watching him break away, sword aloft, to chase individual Zulus, Buller refused to take responsibility for the Prince, and requested his return to Chelmsford's headquarters.

A postscript to this experience occurred on 1<sup>st</sup> June, as Wood's column were marching from Khambula to rendezvous with Chelmsford's main force. Wood and Buller were riding ahead when they spotted an officer galloping towards them.

"The Prince – the Prince Imperial is killed", the officer blurted out. Buller demanded, "Where – where is the body? Where are your men, sir? How many did you lose?" When the distraught officer, Lieutenant Carey, was unable to give a clear reply, Buller lost his temper, saying accusingly, "You deserve to be shot, and I hope you will be. I could shoot you myself."

Once the facts were learned and Buller cooled down, he was more sympathetic towards Carey, no doubt recalling his own experience with the headstrong Frenchman.

By 3<sup>rd</sup> July, the column went into laager just five miles short of Ulundi. Buller and his men were sent forward to select a suitable position for the British to occupy in the coming battle. Having chosen a possible site, Buller's men were ambushed by some 3,000 Zulus, who were hidden in long grass. Handling his men well, Buller extricated his command with units covering one another as they fell back. Seven men were killed and three Victoria Crosses won in this copybook withdrawal. The following day, the Zulu impi were broken after just thirty minutes. Buller's horsemen repeated their Khambula tactic of riding out to provoke an attack and then, when the Zulus retreated, were let loose to pursue and kill.

Lord Chelmsford had won his victory and so denied the glory to his replacement, Garnet Wolseley. Despite the new commander's wish to retain the services of his protégé, Buller returned home virtually a mental and physical wreck. No one had seen more action or ridden greater distances than had Buller. The bloodletting had also taken its toll and he was weary of killing. Exhausted and feverish, Buller also suffered from veldt-sores, which so crippled his hands that his writing was permanently affected.

A grateful nation was not prepared to let him convalesce quietly at his Devon home. He was promoted to colonel and ADC to the Queen and given the CMG. He was also summoned to Balmoral, where his sovereign pinned the Victoria Cross to his tunic. This was in recognition of his valour for rescuing at least four unhorsed men at Hlobane, but he could have won it many times over for other brave acts. For the record, after the 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment, who were awarded 9 VC's, the men of Buller's Mounted Irregulars won 6 Crosses.

Although Redvers Buller went onto higher command and a knighthood, the greatest achievement of his career was to be found in the Zulu War, where he took command of unpromising material and moulded them into the most effective unit to emerge from the conflict.

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