

Samuel Wassall VC (No. 427 Private) 1856-1927

By Robert Hope

Samuel Wassall was born on April 7th 1856 at Moor Lane, Kingswinford near Dudley in Staffordshire. Samuel was the son of Samuel and Emma, (Hubble) Wassall. His birth was registered in the District of Stourbridge, Sub District Kingswinford on April 21st 1856, Certificate No. 229.

At the age of eighteen years and seven months and having the trade of dyer, Samuel enlisted into the British Army on November 28th 1874, signing his attestation papers in Dudley. It was recorded that Samuel was 5ft4 $\frac{3}{4}$ in (1.64m) tall, had a fresh complexion, grey eyes and light brown hair.

On June 13th 1877 Samuel Wassall joined the 80th Regiment of foot in South Africa. The Imperial forces were short of mounted troops at his time and a call went out for volunteers from the various regiments and detachments. Samuel along with a number of soldiers from the 80th Regiment volunteered and was accepted. It was not long before he, along with the Imperial mounted troops assigned to 'Carrington's Horse', saw action against Kaffirs.

At the outbreak of the war against the Zulus, Samuel was still with the mounted infantry and the squadron he was attached to, were allotted to No. 3 (Central) Column. On January 11 1879 at daybreak the mounted troops and natives of No. 3 column crossed into Zululand via the ford (wagon drift) located near to Rorke's Drift, the infantry crossing the Buffalo River by ponts. Following the attack on Sihayo's Kraal on January 12th and after further reconnaissance, the Column eventually arrived at its first major campsite in Zululand at Isandhlwana Hill. As a result of reconnoitering work on January 21st, Lord Chelmsford made the decision to divide his forces and the next day he advanced further into Zululand to reinforce Major Dartnell, hopefully to attack and defeat the Zulu army. Samuel along with other members of the mounted infantry, remained with Brevet Lieutenant-Colonel Pulleine to protect the camp on the slopes of Isandhlwana.

During the late morning of January 22nd a Zulu force of some twenty thousand warriors attacked the encampment. Only those on horseback had any chance of escape and out of over a thousand soldiers left to defend the camp, only seventy-nine Europeans were to survive. With the way to Rorke's Drift cut off, the only means of escape was across the river and the veldt, some six to seven miles distance. To cross to safety, with the river in flood, was a formidable task. The point of the river, known from that day on as 'Fugitives' Drift', was where Samuel saved the life of a fellow comrade who was drowning whilst under enemy fire. For his brave deed, he was to be awarded the Victoria Cross, the first awarded during the Zulu War. In the London Gazette dated June 17th 1879 the War Office gave notice:

that the Queen has been graciously pleased to signify Her intention to confer the decoration of the Victoria Cross on the undermentioned Officers and soldier of Her majesty's Army, whose claims have been submitted for Her Majesty's approval, for their gallant conduct during the recent operations in South Africa, as recorded against their name.

One of these being Samuel Wassall of the 80th Regiment of Foot.

On July 30th 1879 in General Order No. 23 this was again confirmed and at a place called Utrecht, South Africa, on September 11th 1879, Samuel Wassall along with Robert Jones of the 24th Regiment (for his part in the defence of Rorke's Drift), were presented with their Victoria Cross medals by Sir Garnet Wolseley G.C.M.G., K.C.B. Samuel, at the age of twenty-two years and nine months was the youngest serving soldier at the time to hold the award.

On December 30th 1880 Samuel was transferred to the Army reserve having served six years with the Colours. To show for his short military career, Samuel was entitled to wear the following medals; the Victoria Cross and the South African Medal with the clasp '1877-8-9'. For being awarded the Victoria Cross he was also granted a pension of £10 per annum for life.

When he left the Army, seeking to better his prospects of employment, Samuel moved to Barrow-in-Furness and lived with his brother William at 18 Exeter Street. He was for a time employed in the electrical department of the Barrow shipyard. He fell in love with Rebecca Round the daughter of John Round a stocktaker and they were married on April 10th 1882 at the Parish Church of St. Matthew's. Samuel was the aged 23. They were to live first in Melbourne Street and later 32 Lyon Street, Barrow. They were blessed with seven children, sons, Samuel, Albert, Ernest and Henry and daughters Florence, Clara and Minnie, all of whom married. At the age of seventy Samuel was admitted to the North Lonsdale Hospital in Barrow and on Monday January 21st 1927 he succumbed to this illness. He is buried at St. James's Church, Barrow-in-Furness, in the same grave as his wife Rebecca who died after him on May 20th 1937.

Escape from Isandlwana 22nd January 1879 – Samuel's Story

On January 22nd 1879 the main encampment belonging to the No. 3 Column was attacked and successfully taken by the Zulus. When all was lost the remaining survivors made a bid to escape and only those on horseback appeared to have any chance of avoiding the oncoming massed black ranks of Zulu warriors with their ritual cries, slashing spears and bludgeoning knobkerries.

Private Samuel Wassall of the 80th Regiment of Foot, who had volunteered as a Mounted Infantryman, was part of the forces encamped at Isandhlwana. Making his escape from the stricken camp and nearing safety, Private Wassall risked his own life to save that of a fellow soldier, who was drowning. To quote in his own words: (Original text)

The only way to escape was by the Buffalo River, six or seven miles away and we had to get cross it into our own territory, Natal. A main road led to the river but the road was cut off by the Zulus and I had to take a road across the veldt, I knew nothing about. But, I was not in the mood to care which way I went so long as it took me away from the enemy, and so I furiously went on, stumbling over the rough rocky ground, expecting every instant that my horse, a Basuto pony, would fall. In that case I should not have had a chance for the Zulus would have been upon me before I could have got up again. To this day, I cannot understand how a living soul got away from Isandhlwana, because we were seriously harassed by the savages, shots came after us and clouds of spears, but I did escape from the field of the massacre and reached the Zulu bank of the river, and saw on the other side of the Natal territory, where my only hope of safety lay. I knew how dangerous the river was, there was a current running six or seven mile an hour, no ordinary man could swim it. But, the Zulus had a curious ways of using their elbows which made them able to get across. I drove my horse into the torrent, thankful even to be in that part and was urging him to the other side, when I heard a cry for help and I saw a man of my own Regiment, a Private named Westwood was being carried away. He was struggling, desperately and was drowning. The Zulus were sweeping down to the river bank, which I had just left and there was a terrible temptation to go ahead and just save one's self, but I turned my horse around on the Zulu bank, got him there, dismounted, tied him up to a tree and I never tied him more swiftly. Then I struggled out to Westwood, got hold of him and struggled back to the horse with him. I scrambled up into the saddle, pulled Westwood after me and plunged into the torrent again, and as I did so the Zulus rushed up to the bank and let drive with their firearms and spears, but most mercifully I escaped them all and with a thankful heart urged my gallant horse up the steep bank on the Natal side and then got him to go as hard as he could towards Helpmakaar about fifteen miles from Isandhlwana, where our main camp was. I ought to have gone straight onto Rorke's Drift after escaping from Isandhlwana but the Zulus were already surging on towards the Drift, which was held by a mere handful of men of the 24th, they expected to wipe out its defenders as they had wiped out the camp at Isandhlwana. At this time I was very lightly cold, I had thrown my helmet aside and my red tunic off, the British soldiers fought in the good old red in those days and not in khaki, so that I was clothed in just my shirt and trousers with my bandolier over my shirt and so I rode on as hard as I could, with a few of the fugitives from Isandhlwana.

Private Samuel Wassall, unlike so many of his fellow soldiers, lived to tell the tale and his brave rescue of a drowning comrade was an act of bravery which richly deserved an award. For his act of valour in the face of the enemy, Private Samuel Wassall was awarded the Victoria Cross.

Samuel Wassall (No. 427 Private) 1856-1927 Citation for the Victoria Cross

For his gallant conduct in having, at the imminent risk of his own life, saved that of Private Westwood, of the same Regiment. On the 22nd January 1879, when the camp at Isandhlwana was taken by the enemy, Private Wassall retreated towards the Buffalo River, in which he saw a comrade struggling, and apparently drowning. He rode to the bank, dismounted, leaving his horse on the Zulu side, rescued the man from the stream and again mounted his horse, dragging Private Westwood across the river under a heavy shower of bullets.

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