

We, *'The children of Isandlwana'*: Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift revisited
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One hundred years ago, King Cetshwayo's people's army spoke to the invading enemy with their spears at the battle of Isandlwana. It engaged and defeated the pride of the British colonial army – a feat which has gone down in history as one of the most glorious and spectacular achievements in world struggles to resist foreign domination. Faced with the might of the superior army, our heroic warriors knew no fear. They shed rivers of blood to remain free in the land that was undoubtedly theirs.

In a war which was deliberately provoked by the enemy, the people's army gave a clear motive that a time comes in the life of people when there is only one way out – the way of challenging oppression by force and violence

In doing so, they added a glorious page to a long history of our people's heroic resistance to the invasion of the land of their forefathers. Isandlwana has left us with a heritage, whose spirit of no surrender, whose spirit of sacrifice and discipline, inspires and guides our whole nation in the battles to come, a heritage which is a challenge to all of us – the children of Isandlwana. (1)

In the heart of Mitchell Street, Darwin, in Australia's Northern Territory, I came across a British Redcoat, similar to those who fought at Isandlwana. On a closer look, it was a café, called *Rorke's Drift bar/café*. He called the patrons to come and enjoy "the best of British hospitality in the heart of Mitchell Street."

Darwin is not only well known for its tropical climate and as a major tourist destination, but is also known for being the only major target of Japanese bombings during World War II. Well known for having survived cyclone Tracy, well known for the "Dingo Baby" case fiasco, well known for mandatory prison terms for theft, a crime closely associated with poverty and juveniles, this inevitably led the Aboriginal people being well and over represented in only one Northern Territory Government's institution – the Territory's prisons. Fairly recently, its Supreme Court's dismissed a claim for compensation filed by the survivors of the "Stolen Generation". It was this judgement and other interests, which for the purpose of this article, are irrelevant that brought me to this city at the Top End of the country Down Under. Before I trampled on a Redcoat next to the door of the Rorke's Drift bar/café, and as an indigenous person myself, I found it to be a warm city; I was impressed with its cosmopolitan multiculturalism compared with other cities in mainstream Australia. Earlier I had disembarked in Perth, I happened to be the only African to disembark there. I also happened to be the only one to be subjected to physical search by the Customs officials. I braced myself to see the best of Australian apartheid.

Probably having been the only African of Zulu descent to dine in the bar/café, I enquired as to what motivated the naming of the bar/café "Rorke's Drift", when the real Rorke's Drift was across the Indian Ocean, thousands of miles away. The answer was loud and clear on the menu: This is the Story of Rorke's Drift: In 1879, on January 22-23, the most extraordinary and dramatic events took place at Rorke's Drift, Natal, South Africa. On being alerted of the most disastrous of defeats at nearby Isandlwana, British troops numbering less than 150 prepared to defend the mission station at Rorke's Drift against 4,000 Zulus. This was a brutal, unrelenting assault, continuing on its ferocity for twelve hours.

Sheer courage, bravery, tactic and determination brought the battle to an end, the remaining Zulus retreating from the station and (their) humble kingdom saluting the bravery of the victorious British soldiers left standing. Eleven Victoria Crosses were awarded for their bravery and to date this is the most that has ever been won in one battle.

From this, the inspiration was born to create a unique theme bar/café unlike any other in the world, the idea being to provide 'the best of British hospitality in the heart of Mitchell Street'. (2) To me, this was the best of British patriotism in the heart of Australian soil.

In honour of the British army, I expected the menu to be full of the best of English dishes, something like Pulletine's Mince, Durnford's Stew or Melvill and Coghill Buffalo Wings, but I came across Impi Aphrodisiacs, Shaka Zulu Chicken Wings, Zulu Wedges and Rorke's Native Nachos. Despite the name of the bar/café, to me the menu appeared to be in honour of the Zulu army who fought in Rorke's Drift or Isandlwana. It was a "people's army," an army of armed ordinary people, armed with spears and shields fighting a professional army, armed with state- of- the- art arms at the time. They attacked a British military post (it was no longer a mission station). This regiment was comprised of warriors who were well over their forties. They had travelled in excess of 100km on foot; for almost five days they had little sleep and little to eat. They had to fight in the dark, which

was not within the Zulu army fighting skills and tactics. The fortitude to attack the fortified position of the British army through out the night has to be applauded.

The question to be asked is whether Rorke's Drift was of such strategic importance to the British army to warrant such defence and if so, whether the eleven Victoria Crosses won on that day were justified. To answer the first question, one has to understand why this Swedish mission was commandeered as a military post. The answer is simple. It was to be a depot and provide supplies to the advancing British army and of course a hospital. It was indeed strategic, but once the British army was wiped out at Isandlwana, to me it lost its strategic value in toto. The army that needed the supplies was no longer there.

When the news of the disastrous defeat at Isandlwana reached Lieutenant JR Chard, who was in command of the depot at the time, it did not occur to him that he should engage in a strategic retreat to Helpmakaar as the fugitives earlier did. It appears he simply decided to dig-in. He was an Engineer, having not seen combat before. At some stage he was described as "a plodding dogged sort..." and "Hopelessly slow and slack." (3) The second in command was Lieutenant Bromhead, once described as "fearless but hopelessly stupid", and nicknamed "The Deaf Duffer". (4) It still remains a mystery as to why the evacuation of the depot was never ordered despite the fleeing of Lieutenants Henderson and Stephenson with two squadrons which effectively reduced the strength from approximately 450 to less than 150 men. (5) There was enough time to evacuate from the time of receiving the initial report on the defeat and the initial attack. Almost two hours lapsed! (6) This was an unnecessary battle, which would have been avoided with no loss of life on both sides. Probably the "slowness and slackness" of Lieutenant Chard combined with the "fearlessness and stupidity" of Lieutenant Bromhead contributed to the decision not to retreat or evacuate but to defend a non-strategic depot, hence the Battle of Rorke's Drift. The VC can only be bestowed for action "in the presence of the enemy", between 1858-1881, which caters for 1879, it also included action "under circumstances of extreme danger".

But what if the incumbent misjudges the situation or creates a situation for such action when it could have been avoided? Gallantly defended as it was, Rorke's Drift never played any meaningful role for the remainder of the Campaign. It may be argued that no matter what fortitude the defenders of Rorke's Drift showed, the decision to dig-in and fight for a non strategic depot was profitless and a bad one, and as such the dishing out of so many highest medals, especially to those who took the decision to defend, was a bad one too, but understandably so in the light of the Isandlwana defeat. The morale of the troops was low and had to be boosted for Britain to reclaim the superiority of its army in battles to come, hence so many Victoria Crosses. A tally, which was never to be matched in any single engagement even in both World Wars. It is unlikely that it will ever be matched. Who can argue, using Rorke's Drift's yardstick, that there were no eleven brave men deserving VCs among those who fought in Delville Wood or among those who stormed the beaches in Normandy? Interestingly, only one VC was won in D-Day landings. (8) Even among the Wars, which Britain fought alone after Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift, one is alarmed by the scarcity of VCs in various important engagements, as a matter of fact; they make credibility of those awarded at Rorke's Drift really questionable. From Majuba to Spionkop the scarcity of this most sought after medal is obvious. Fairly recently, during the Falkland Islands War, the British Army fought approximately nine battles on its march to Port Stanley, the Battle of Goose Green was "arguably the longest and toughest battle of the war"⁸, 172 British troops against 200 Argentines were to perish in this battle. Again the Rorke's Drift VC record was not broken. Only one VC was won in this battle, albeit posthumously. All in all only two VC's were won in the Falkland Islands War, both posthumously. (9) At Isandlwana, out of six companies of the 24th Regiment who were engaged in battle, or rather on the firing line, not even one man survived, a record unknown even in modern warfare, or at least I could not find. Out of 1,700 British troops, who defended the camp, less than 450 were to live to tell the tale. Even 11 VC's that were to be awarded later, probably to overshadow this military history in the making, failed. Surprisingly, the only informative web site on the Victoria Crosses does not include the Rorke's Drift record among its "Unusual VC's" category. (11) Over one hundred years had passed since the defeat of the British Army at Isandlwana, but the Zulus' tactics appear to be still inspirational even to the modern British Army. During the Falkland Island War, and during the battle of Two Sisters, the Z company of the 45 Commando were shouting "ZULU!!" which is their "war cry" as they advance towards the enemy, as the Zulus were shouting "USUTHU!!" advancing towards them a century ago. (12) Probably the disciplined and controlled volley fire, with the Officer Commanding only shouting orders, which characterised the well drilled British infantry, is now the thing of the past.

Friedrich Engels, a well-known international Social Scientist, writing soon after these events, had this to say:

We have witnessed quite recently examples of this bravery in Africa. The Zulu...did what no European army could do. Armed only with pikes and spears and without firearms, they advanced, under a hail of bullets from the breech-loaders, right up to the bayonets of the English infantry--universally

acknowledged as the best in the world for fighting in close formation--throwing them into disorder and even beating them back more than once; and this, despite the colossal disparity in weapons and despite the fact that they have no such things as military service and do not know what military exercises mean. (13)

One must compare apples with apples. More closely to home, Bishop Colenso shared Engels' views, He had this to say about the Zulu: "were merely armed people, not a standing army." (14) If the decision to award the medals were left to Engels or Colenso, it would be interesting to know if those eleven Victoria Crosses would have been awarded at all or if they were to award same to the Zulu army, how many Victoria Crosses would gone their way.

On the other hand, it has been argued that King Cetshwayo had given clear instructions that his warriors should not cross the Umzinyathi River. He was fighting a defensive battle. He wanted it to be seen who the aggressors were. It has been argued that Prince Dabulamanzi kaMpande acted contrary to the King's instructions when he commanded the army into Rorke's Drift. It should be remembered that he was never reprimanded for his actions, as the doctrine of hot pursuit was well known even within the people's army. As a matter of fact, his regiment, which formed the right horn at Isandlwana, did not take part in the fighting earlier in the day but had to remain on guard and cut any reinforcement or retreat to or from Rorke's Drift, which they did. (15) They did the pursuit. The doctrine of hot pursuit was applied, though it was to be ruthlessly applied by the British at Gingindlovu, Khambula and Ulundi. In any event the land west of Umzinyathi River and west of Ncome River had been a matter of dispute for sometime between the Zulus and the Boers. Late in 1877 a British Commission was formed to investigate the matter and find in favour of the Zulus. As a matter of irony, it sat in Rorke's Drift, which within few months was to be a centre stage of fighting. As if this was not enough, Col. A Durnford, who was to die at Isandlwana few miles away in few months time, was part of the Commission. The Commission's report was not welcomed by the protagonists of the war like Governor Frere who wanted to use the land dispute as an excuse for the invasion. It was to be withheld until his wishes were achieved, and as such, it can than be argued that Dabulamanzi did not act outrageously. It is interesting to note that 29 farms in this area have now been returned to the Zulu families by the South African Land Commission. (16) Thanks to the non-protagonist, Henry Bulwer who initiated the Commission; our country has avoided Zimbabwean upheavals when it comes to land redistribution in this area.

The British defeat at Isandlwana is synonymous with the American's defeat in Vietnam or the French defeat at Dine Bien Phu. (17) Isandlwana, Vietnam and Dien Bien Phu became the symbols of hope and determination in the fight by indigenous people against foreign domination and imperialism. In 1979, to mark the 100th Anniversary of the victory at Isandlwana, and in line with its tradition, the African National Congress, then a liberation movement, declared 1979 the "The year of the spear" because of the central role played by the spear at Isandlwana. (18) A specialised Unit called "Isandlwana Detachment" was formed within UMKHONTO WESIZWE (The Spear of the Nation), the now disbanded military wing of the African National Congress. It was more successful in the field compared with the "Luthuli Detachment" which fought in Wankie, Rhodesia in 1967. (19)

As long as people still talk about Isandlwana, they will also talk about Vietnam and Dien Bien Phu. It is generally known that the most of the American "Vietnam Veterans" returned with a condition that was later to be referred to as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. I randomly picked two of the winners of Victoria Crosses at Rorke's Drift to determine how they lived after Rorke's Drift and Isandlwana. One Cpl Ferdinand Schiess, a Swiss national, died as a tramp aged 28, on a vessel to England after the members of the public contributed to pay for his passage. He was buried at sea off the coast of Angola. (20) The other, one Robert Jones, died aged 41. He committed suicide. The Coroner's records state that Jones suffered nightmares following his hand-to-hand combat at the South African mission station Rorke's Drift. Verdict: Suicide whilst temporarily insane. (21) It appears that the trauma of Rorke's Drift was too much to bear and was to take its toll years later.

A long train of 'movies' was to emerge in America portraying the Americans as 'Heroes' and Vietnamese as "Villains" who probably succeeded because of their numbers. The similar trend had emerged in English 'Films'. Of particular note is a 1964 film *ZULU*, starring Michael Caine and Stanley Baker. Not surprising, it failed dismally to capture moments of glory of the People's Army. Same can be said about *ZULU DAWN*.

On the other hand, the first American films on the Vietnam War, in the heroic mould, like the *Green Berets* were released when the American public was well informed and knew better, the movie audiences stayed away in droves and they were box office flops. Those who were anti-heroic or rather portrayed what may have been the true events, were indeed successful, I have in mind films like *Apocalypse Now*, *The Deer Hunter* and

Platoon. Probably the British audience still has to know what really happened in 1879, but it may be difficult to achieve this if British writers still refer to the Zulu victory at Isandlwana as “the massacre at Isandlwana.”(22)

We, the Children of Isandlwana, have to ensure that there exists a proper historical adaptation of these events in the form of art. Mbongeni Ngema’s stage play, *The ZULU* is a step to the right direction in setting the record straight though it failed to capture some important facts like the death of Prince Imperial, the last survivor of the Bonaparte dynasty. His death, at the hands of the Zulus, marked the death of the Imperial dream in France.(23) It corroborates the fact that, to a certain extent, the Zulus were not only fighting the British but also the European Army. It may have been over dramatised to the extent of portraying the warriors drinking paraffin thinking it was rum after taking over the British camp. This is not documented and may be a mere folklore. It is, in any event a good play, at least for the British audience to hear and see the other side instead of spending their pounds in the Lodges next to the battlefields and paying the guides to tell them what they want to hear.

I regard myself as one of the children of Isandlwana referred to by the late President Oliver Tambo in his speech quoted in the opening of this article. At the beginning of January 2001 after my wandering and trampling on the Redcoat in Darwin I visited the battlefields of Isandlwana and Rorke’s Drift. The purpose of my visit was to determine if, we, the children of Isandlwana, have in fact restored the dignity and honour of those soldiers of the people’s army who fell in those battles.

When I arrived at the main gate of the battlefield of Isandlwana the only conspicuous item was the British Union Jack flag flying solo among three flagless masts. That was the first insult to those who fell in that battlefield or rather to those who were victorious, the “people’s army.” It should be remembered that the Queen’s Colour was lost when the battle was lost, a sign of decisive defeat. It was to be recovered few days later along the banks of Umzinyathi River. Melvill and Coghill, who were assigned to carry the Colour, were killed and the Colour lost.(24) Because of the circumstances under which they were killed, it is very unlikely that the Colour would have been found had the Zulus knew what it symbolised. This makes the posthumous award of the Victoria Crosses to them even more questionable.

The security guard advised me that in order to gain access to the battlefield I would have to go and pay at the information centre a few metres away. Having travelled for almost 400km I needed to make use of the toilet. At the information centre they pointed me into a toilet, which to my surprise did not even have running water, another insult. I was denied access to use the toilet at the Lodge close by, as I was not one of their guests (The newly opened American owned Isandlwana Lodge. Ed.). Now having paid, I proceeded straight to the gate and gained access to the battlefield. Few metres from the gate there was a huge bronze artefact, which to me resembled the *Isinqu* an informal bravery award, associated with the Zulu army. It bears no names and the reason why it is there. To a non-Zulu, it is a meaningless huge bronze bracelet. I was disappointed but still hopeful that somewhere next to the mountain there was something recording and commemorating the decisive victory of the people’s army but I only came across unmarked English graves and closer to the mountain there were various monuments in honour of the British army. The one that struck me was from Maritzburg College Old Boys in honour of the “Old Boys” who died at Isandlwana fighting on the side of the British army.

I, one of the children of Isandlwana, left Isandlwana disappointed and proceeded to Rorke’s Drift. I decided against taking the fugitives’ route down to the Fugitives’ Drift but took the ordinary route. I had to cross the Umzinyathi river bridge. As I was crossing the bridge, there was a board reminding me that I was officially crossing the Buffalo River, and not Umzinyathi River as was and still known to local indigenous people. Seven years into Black majority rule, colonial names still haunt us, shame unto us, the children of Isandlwana.

The museum at Rorke’s Drift was well organised as I expected. They had running water and a state-of-the-art computer with clearly defined defence lines, the plan with audio-visual assimilation material. I failed to comprehend why there was such disparity between Rorke’s Drift and Isandlwana, but it soon dawned on me when I realised who were the victors there. Seven years into Black majority rule, there is no proper, I mean proper memorials dignifying those who were buried like dogs in those two mass graves. Shame unto us, the children of Isandlwana.

The decision by the Chief of Staff of the South African National Defence Force, Gen. Sipiwe Nyanda to honour an invitation by the Zondi Committee to attend the unveiling of the plaque in honour of Bhambatha ka Mancinza Zondi on the 16th December 2001 has to be applauded. The fact that it was a family affair has to be condemned. The 1906 Bhambatha Rebellion was not a family affair. It was to go down in history as the last armed rebellion conducted in “the spirit of Isandlwana”. The government of the people should have taken the initiative

To this day, seven years after the Black majority rule, there exists a ‘John Chard medal’ and a ‘John Chard decoration’ within the South African National Defence Force.(25) This medal and a decoration in named in honour Lt JR Chard, an Englishman, who was in command of Rorke’s Drift on the night of January 22-23, 1879.

What about Dabulamanzi ka Mpande, Jobe ka Matshana, Ntshingwayo, Sigcwelegcwele, Mavumengwana, Hinsa, Sikhukhuni and many more?

Having found the best of British patriotism in the heart of the Australian soil, I failed to find any African patriotism in South African soil in the form of Isandlwana or Rorke's Drift, but did find, once more the best of British patriotism in the form of John Chard Decoration and John Chard Medal right in the heart of the South African National Defence Force- shame unto us- the children of Isandlwana, a shame to King Cetshwayo's People's Army.

Year 2001 has been declared "THE YEAR OF THE AFRICAN CENTURY for democracy, peace and development" by South Africa's governing party.(26) Like the biblical "Children of Israel", may the "Spirit of Isandlwana" guide the "Children of Isandlwana" in battles at hand, battles against poverty, illiteracy, diseases, racism and battles for Black Economic Empowerment, prosperity, peace and the African Renaissance. But how will the "Spirit of Isandlwana" prevail if the honour and dignity of those who fell there is not properly restored?

Written in Memory of Troop Sergeant Major Khambula, DCM, an African, who for all the wrong reasons, but in good faith, fought bravely and loyally for the English Army from the beginning to the end of the Anglo-Zulu War. He was with the Natal Native Horse. He fought for "The Great White Queen" at Isandlwana, Hlobane, Khambula, Nondwengu and Ulundi. He guided his European Comrades through the African bush he knew better. He opened a path, which was later to be referred to as "The Fugitives Route/ Drift" for his Comrades to escape the slaughter at Isandlwana. He fired at his African Brothers across the Buffalo River for more of his Comrades to escape.

The Citation in his Distinguished Conduct Medal (WO 146/1) reads:

This non-commissioned Officer...saved the life of an Officer of the Frontier Light Horse by bringing him out of a very heavy fire behind him on his horse...

After the award, Rev. Owen Watkins of the Methodist Church of which Khambula was part of the flock, wrote,

Simeon Khambula had truly served The Great White Queen, he received the medal from the hands of an English General at a parade of the troops. Had he been a White Man, he would have received the Victoria Cross. (27)

So wrote the man of the cloth.

Troop Sergeant-Major Khambula was ostracised by fellow Africans as a traitor and denied the Victoria Cross by the English because of the colour of his skin. Let us learn from his mistake; let us know who we are. We are the Children of Isandlwana.

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