

The disaster at Isandlwana was so swift and so comprehensive that, even today, more than 120 years later, historians remain deeply divided about aspects of the battle. The very intensity of the event, and the paucity of direct evidence relating to it, has led over the years to the rise and fall of a number of conflicting theories, as historians and enthusiasts alike debate everything from logistics to the character traits of those in command.

One theory which has emerged in recent years is that of the 'lost companies' - the idea that one or more of the companies of the 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment marched out from the camp, and was over-run in isolation, its fate still largely undetermined today. There are similar stories to be found in most wars, and the myth of the 'lost command' or the 'lost patrol' is as old as human conflict itself, evoking, as it does, many of the feelings of tragedy, pathos, horror and mystery, which are central to our view of death in battle.

The question is, did anything of the sort occur at Isandlwana? The first suggestion that it might have is to be found in Lord Chelmsford's despatch of 27 January, breaking the news of the debacle to the Secretary of State for War. After he had returned to Rorke's Drift from Zululand, Chelmsford had ridden straight to Pietermaritzburg, and it was from there that he submitted a long report of the Isandlwana campaign, as he then understood it. After outlining his own movements, he commented significantly 'As regards the proceedings of the six companies of British infantry, two guns and two rocket tubes, the garrison of the camp, I can obtain but little information'. (1) Then, intriguingly, he commented that 'one company went off to the extreme left and has never been heard of since'. (2) That this might indeed have happened is apparently born out by a reference in arguably the most complete account of the battle from a Zulu source. Mehlokazulu kaSihayo Ngobese was the senior son of the important Zulu *induna* who lived on the Zulu side of the border at Rorke's Drift, Chief Sihayo kaXongo. It was Mehlokazulu's raid into Natal territory in search of his father's runaway wives, in July 1878, which had been seized upon as a *casus belli* by the British. Mehlokazulu's surrender was demanded in the British ultimatum, but King Cetshwayo had been unwilling to give him up, Mehlokazulu fought throughout the subsequent war as a junior commander in his regiment, the iNgobamakhosi. At the end of hostilities he was taken prisoner by the British, and sent to Pietermaritzburg to be tried according to the terms of the ultimatum. In the event, the case was dropped, but while in Pietermaritzburg Mehlokazulu was questioned about his role at Isandlwana, and as a result left one of the most comprehensive descriptions of the battle from a Zulu perspective. At one point, Mehlokazulu appears to confirm Chelmsford's suspicions when he recalled that,

two companies, which went on the hill ... never returned – they were every one of them killed. They were firing on the wings of the Zulu army, while the body of the army was pushing on, the wings also succeeded, and before the soldiers knew where they were they were surrounded from the west, attacked by the wings from the right, and the main body from the back. They were all killed, not one escaped ..(3)

If this incident did occur, and in the manner described, it is necessary to identify the troops involved, and the point in the battle at which this took place. And is it possible that the remains of men from one or two companies are still lying, undiscovered, and somewhere away from the main battlefield?

The question of who these men might have been is easily answered. Although detailed dispositions are still uncertain, the broad movements of the main elements of the British force are well known. Sometime before 11 am (4) on the morning of the 22<sup>nd</sup>, the camp commander, Lt. Col. Pulleine, sent Lieutenant Charles Cavaye's E Company, 1/24<sup>th</sup>, onto a low ridge of hills to the immediate north of Isandlwana hill. This movement was apparently made in support of Col. Durnford's sweep through the iNyoni range, which took place at about this time. Cavaye's command ascended the so-called 'spur', and crossed out of sight from the camp beyond the skyline. Shortly afterwards, once the news of the discovery of the Zulu *impi* by detachments of Durnford's men reached the camp, Pulleine despatched a further company of the 1/24<sup>th</sup> – F Company, under Captain William Mostyn – to support Cavaye. (5) Captain Essex, who, as Transport Officer to the column had no particular duties to perform that morning, recalled the despatch of Mostyn's men;

About noon a sergeant came to my tent and told me that firing was to be heard behind the hill where the company of the 1st Battalion 24<sup>th</sup> had been sent. I had my glasses over my shoulder, and thought I might as well take my revolver; but did not trouble to put on my sword, as I thought nothing of the matter and expected to be back in half an hour to complete my letter. I got on my horse and galloped up the hill passing a company of the 24<sup>th</sup> on its way to the front ... (6)

As he passed, Mostyn, who was presumably on foot,

requested me, being mounted, to direct Lieutenant Cavaye to take special care not to endanger the right of his company, and to inform that officer that he himself was moving up to the left. I also noticed a body of Lieutenant Colonel Durnford's Mounted Natives retiring down the hill, but did not see the enemy. On arriving at the far side of the crest of the hill, I found the company in charge of Lieutenant Cavaye, a section being detached about 500 yards to the left, in charge of Lieutenant Dyson. The whole were in extended order engaging the enemy, who were moving in a similar formation towards our left, keeping at about 800 yards from our line...(7)

In this description we find the main evidence to support Chelmsford's view that troops were sent out to the 'extreme left' of the British line. The question is, what became of them?

In some respects, the fighting on the ridge above the 'spur' remains the least understood aspect of the battle. At this stage – the very beginning of the Zulu approach – the fighting was still fluid, with both sides able to manoeuvre in a way which they could not once the Zulu net drew closer around the camp. To the right of Mostyn and Cavaye's companies, and largely ignored by them, Raw's and Roberts' troops from Durnford's command first retreated to the foot of the ridge, and then – supported by Vause's troop and a company of NNC who joined them at the bottom – counter-attacked back up the slope. The extended position on the ridge was, however, in danger of being outflanked by the advance of the Zulu 'chest' along the length of the iNyoni escarpment further to the British right.

It is Essex, again, who provides the clearest evidence of what happened next. In many ways, his accounts remain problematic to conservative historians, since he is not only unequivocal in his view that Mostyn and Cavaye retired safely down the 'spur', but he goes on to describe in some detail how he then organised fresh supplies of ammunition for the fighting line, giving the lie to the myth that ammunition failure was an important factor in the British collapse. Of Mostyn and Cavaye's predicament he says;

About five minutes after the arrival of Captain Mostyn's company, I was informed by Lieutenant Melville, Adjutant 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment, that a fresh body of the enemy was appearing in force in our rear, and he requested me to direct the left of the line formed, as above described, to fall slowly back, keeping up the fire. This I did; then proceeded towards the centre of the line. I found, however, that it had already retired. I therefore followed in the same direction, but being mounted had great difficulty in descending the hill, the ground being very rocky and precipitous. On arriving at the foot of the slope I found the two companies of 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment drawn up about 400 yards distant in extended order, and Captain Younghusband's company in similar formation in echelon on the left.(8)

This seems such a positive assertion that there seems little room for doubt that Mostyn and Cavaye did indeed retire from the ridge and join the main firing line. Is it possible, though, that the section under 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Dyson, which Essex recalled a detached to the extreme left, was somehow cut off, and gave rise to the idea of the 'missing company'? Not according to Essex, who – along with an unidentified source – was quoted in the eulogy to Dyson, which appeared in Mackinnon and Shadbolt's *The South Africa Campaign 1879*. Quoting a 'private letter written to his father', it states;

The last person who saw your son and escaped, that I can find, was Captain Essex, 75<sup>th</sup> Regiment, acting transport officer. He tell me that just before the Zulu horn got round our flanks and the last overwhelming rush was made, Dyson was with one section of his company, which was in skirmishing order to the left-front of the camp. He gave orders to retire, and I believe, from another witness, that he and all his company rejoined the main body without loss. The five companies were then together in line .... (9)

It is, of course, unwise of any historian to rely entirely upon one source. Are there, then, any independent witnesses who corroborate Essex's testimony? Nyanda, a senior man among the detachment of the Zikhali Horse that had first discovered the impi, described the fighting on the ridge in his official report;

One company of the redcoats and the remainder of our men then came out from the camp to support, and marched to the top of the hill on the left of the camp – we dismounted and mixed with them under command of Mr Shepstone – firing – our own footmen all came up the hill at this time (50 men) and supported us. The Zulus then closed on us notwithstanding our fire and we retreated to the bottom of the hill, mixed up with the Company of redcoats that had advanced with us. (10)

Of course, if Mostyn and Cavaye had not managed to retreat to the foot of the camp, the implications for the firing line were immense. Captain Younghusband's company had apparently been deployed to anchor the British left, and Essex indicates that Mostyn and Cavaye had fallen in to Younghusband's right, thus

completing the line that stretched out to the guns. If this did not occur, it is difficult to see how the British could have maintained any screen to the north of the camp; the line at this point would have been wide open, and the Zulu would surely have been able to penetrate it. Indeed, if the two companies had been wiped out on the hill, then the Zulu would have accorded to the regiment who faced them – chiefly the uNokhenke – the honour of being first to overcome the enemy. They did not; Zulu sources acknowledge that it was the uMbonambi – who broke through the line on the British right, between Pope’s company of Durnford’s men – who were the first to ‘stab’ the enemy. (11) Moreover, further tentative evidence regarding the fate of these companies is afforded by the subsequent burial detail. It must be admitted that this evidence is incomplete; although some of Lord Chelmsford’s officers made attempt to seek out the bodies of friends and colleagues when Chelmsford returned to Isandlwana on the night of the 22<sup>nd</sup>, it was of course dark, and the column moved on before daylight. The first attempt to bury the dead did not occur until May, by which time most of the bodies were unrecognisable, and most of the 24<sup>th</sup> were not interred until June. Further burial details were necessary for several years to come, because the summer rains regularly washed bones out of the shallow graves.

Nevertheless, the evidence afforded by the position of the bodies does tend to confirm the impression that Mostyn and Cavaye’s men did indeed retire to the camp, and were overwhelmed below Isandlwana, and in the valley behind. It is, of course, impossible to trace where individual soldiers fell, but there are tantalising glimpses of the fate of the officers. According to the eulogy in Mackinnon and Shadbolt – based on eyewitness testimony – Cavaye’s remains were recognised on the return of the main body to the camp on the night of the 22<sup>nd</sup>.<sup>1</sup> (12) Clearly, given the limited time that Chelmsford spent at the camp, this would only have been feasible if Cavaye had fallen in the camp area, and his body was relatively conspicuous. It is true that there is no reference to the body of Cavaye’s subaltern, Dyson, ever having been found, but there is some evidence to the fate of E Company’s officers. According to the contemporary regimental history,

Many months afterward a diamond ring was picked up on the field of Isandlwana. By mean of an advertisement, the finder was enabled to identify the ring as having belonged to Captain Mostyn, and restored it to that officer’s family. (13)

Of course, it is not clear from this where on the battlefield the ring was found, but a ring is an intimate item – most people don’t remove them except under unusual circumstances – and it is reasonable to assume that Mostyn had been wearing it when killed. His remains had probably lain nearby. If the finder of the ring had stumbled across a clump of skeletons lost in the hills above the camp, he made nothing of it; it is far more likely that the ring was found in the camp area. The fate of Mostyn’s Lieutenant, Edgar Anstey, is well documented; it was found on the banks of the Manzimnyama stream, surrounded by a cluster of men of the 24<sup>th</sup>. The remains were identified by his brother, Captain Anstey RE, and brought back to England for interment<sup>14</sup>.

The spread of the bodies in entirely consistent with Mostyn and Cavaye – and the men under their command – having retired on the camp, and been overwhelmed in the fighting below Isandlwana, and in the valley behind. It does not support the theory that these men were killed further out from the camp.

Is it possible, moreover, that successive burial details failed to locate the significant concentration of bodies that two or even one company represents? They might have been missed during the May burials, when the search was largely concentrated in the camp area, but the expeditions in June took place over several days, and were much more thorough. Moreover, the site was searched thoroughly again in September 1879, and yet again in March 1880, when the officer in charge, Lt. O’Connell of the 60<sup>th</sup> Rifles, specifically

made inquiries of natives respecting the kraal where it was said two companies of the 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment had fallen, but they knew nothing about it. Mr Johnson, the missionary, residing near the field, informed me that he had also made inquiries about this kraal, but that the natives had never heard of it. He believed the story to have no foundation. (15)

It is also significant that neither the early travellers to the battlefield – who arrived shortly after the war had finished, when much debris was still on the ground – nor modern tourists have found remains indicative of such heavy fighting in the ridge area. A preliminary field search conducted as part of the 2000 archaeological survey discovered nothing to support the ‘lost companies’ theory, although clearly much exploratory work remains to be done.

How can one explain, then, Chelmsford’s remarks to that effect in his original despatch, and the apparent support offered by Mehlokazulu’s account? Both, it seems, were more than a little influenced by the ‘fog of war’.

Chelmsford’s initial despatch was written on 27 January. At that stage, no attempt had been made to collect and collate the evidence of survivors from the battle, and Chelmsford had very little idea what had happened at the camp. Indeed, the purpose of the Court of Inquiry – convened at Helpmekaar on the 29<sup>th</sup> – was not, as is sometimes supposed, to investigate conduct of the campaign, but simply to provide Chelmsford

with a clearer picture of the events surrounding the loss of the camp. It was only on this occasion that the testimony of Essex and other survivors became known, dispelling the rumours that had prevailed since the battle itself.

And Mehlokazulu? Mehlokazulu's regiment, the iNgobamakhosi, had been on the extreme left of the Zulu line, furthest away from events on the British left. Indeed, Mehlokazulu had been preoccupied with fighting against the stand made by the Colonial Volunteers and by Durnford, and he admitted that in its last stages the fight had been desperate and confusing. 'Things were then getting very mixed up', he admitted, 'what with the smoke, dust, and intermingling of mounted men, footmen, Zulus and natives, it was difficult to tell' what was going on. (16) Clearly, any impression of events that took place beyond Mehlokazulu's immediate vicinity was influenced by hearsay after the event. And here, perhaps, it is possible that he was responding to descriptions of the fragmentation of the British line that took place as it collapsed. Several witnesses on both sides recalled that different companies of the 24<sup>th</sup> retired in different directions, and that the Zulus rapidly drove wedges between them. Indeed, the account of 'Untabeni and Uhlolwani', two members of the British intelligence department who fought at Isandlwana, is strongly reminiscent of Mehlokazulu's version, and probably reflects the impression of many who were there;

The company of the 24<sup>th</sup>, which was returning from the neck, got to within 200 yards of the NNC tents on the left, where they were surrounded and cut off to a man. (17)

That the 24<sup>th</sup> companies on the left of the line became separated during the retreat through the camp is supported by uGuku, a warrior of the uKhandempemvu regiment, who, referring to the same incident, recalled,

One party of soldiers came out from among the tents and formed up a little above the ammunition waggons. They held their ground there until their ammunition failed them, when they were nearly all assegaied. Those who were not killed at this place formed again in a solid square in the neck of Sandhlwana ... (18)

And it is in this terrible picture of the firing line breaking up, of companies becoming separated in the desperate retreat through the camp, of being swallowed up in the chaos, confusion, noise, smoke and horror of the camp's last moments, that we find the true origin of the story of the 'missing companies'.

It is, in its way, romantic to imagine that the bones of hundreds of redcoats still lie out in the empty veldt, crumbling under the onslaught of the elements, undiscovered more than 120 years on. They are not; they lie, together with those of their comrades, in the hard soil along the foot of mount Isandlwana and in the Manzimnyama valley beyond, where they fell.

## References.

1. Despatch of 27 January, published in British Parliamentary Papers C 2252.
2. Ibid.
3. Mehlokazulu, interviewed on 27 September, 1879, reproduced in *The Natal Mercury's* digest of reports on the war, published 1879.
4. It is notoriously difficult to ascertain correct timings in the study of any battle, and this is particularly true of Isandlwana, where the trauma of subsequent events makes the estimates given by survivors unreliable. Contemporary references to the time at which incidents took place are confused and often contradictory. All timings given here are therefore approximate.
5. The most detailed evidence of these movements comes from Captain Essex's evidence to the Court of Inquiry, held at Helpmakar of 27 January. Captain Alan Gardner's evidence also confirms the general outline of these movements. BPP C 2252.
6. Essex, letter dated 'Rorke's Drift, January 26th 1879', published in *The Times*, 12 April 1879.
7. Essex, evidence at Court of Inquiry.
8. Essex, *ibid*.
9. J. P. Mackinnon and S. H. Shadbolt, *The South Africa Campaign of 1879*, 1880.
10. Statement of Nyanda, 25 January 1879. WO 32.
11. Testimony of Mpatshana kaSodondo in C. De B. Webb and J. B. Wright (Ed), *The James Stuart Archive*. Vol. 3, 1982.
12. Mackinnon and Shadbolt.
13. *Records of the 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment*, by Cols. Paton, Glennie and Penn Symons, 1982.
14. Mackinnon and Shadbolt; Anstey family sources.
15. Lt. M. O'Connell, report dated Pietermaritzburg April 16 1880. BPP C-2676.
16. Mehlokazulu's account, *Natal Mercury*.
17. Statement of Untabeni and Uhlolwani, WO 32.
18. Account of uGuku in *History of the Zulu War and its Origin* by Frances Colenso and Edward Durnford, 1880.