

Nearly a VC; An Incident in the Siege of Eshowe

By Ian Knight

By the end of February, 1879, Col. Pearson's No. 1 (Left Flank) Column was firmly dug in at Eshowe.

Pearson's original brief had been to occupy the deserted Norwegian Mission at Eshowe – one of the few European-style structures within the Zulu kingdom - and convert it into a supply depot, an advanced staging post from which he could advance in co-ordination with the other two invading British columns (Nos. 3 and 4). Early on the morning of 22 January Pearson had been attacked as he crossed over the Nyezane river by a Zulu force under Godideka Ndlela, sent to intercept him before he reached his objective; he had successfully driven off the Zulu attack, however, and had occupied Eshowe the following morning.

Any optimism his command might have felt was to be rudely disabused over the next few days by the arrival of the first rumours that something had gone badly wrong elsewhere in the war. On the 26th colonial troops on vedette duties outside the post had heard Zulus calling to one another across the hill-tops that they had won a great victory; Pearson and his officers had dismissed the report, but the following day a curt despatch arrived by runner from Sir Bartle Frere announcing baldly that Col. Durnford's column (No. 2, originally based at Middle Drift) had been defeated and Durnford himself killed. The news was mystifying since Pearson's command was under the impression that Durnford was still based upstream on the Thukela, and were unaware that he had been ordered to support the advance of the Centre Column from Rorke's Drift, further away; the following day, however, a note arrived from Lord Chelmsford himself and, while it gave no further details of the defeat, it warned Pearson that he was now unsupported, and suggested he either withdraw to Natal or dig in.

Pearson had opted to do the latter – but, with at least the possibility that he might be there for some time and conscious that his supplies were unlikely to be replaced, he decided to send part of his force – his auxiliary troops, the Natal Native Contingent, and most of his mounted men from the various Natal Volunteer corps - back to the Natal border to reduce the drain on his resources. By the time they had gone he was left with around 1700 men, of whom some 1300 were British regulars. A few of his colonial mounted troops and NNC officers had volunteered to stay and now provided him with the core of a small detachment of mounted troops for patrolling and vedette duties.

Pearson spent much of February turning Eshowe into the most complex British fortification built by the British during the war. Outlying mission buildings were blown up to clear the field of fire and a deep, wide trench was built around the post with the earth piled up inside to provide a rampart. The column's wagons were brought inside and placed around the perimeter to provide an extra barricade and, with no room for tents, shelter for the garrison to sleep under. Once the outline trace had been completed, work began on outlying obstacles, placing a belt of low wooden stakes in the grass around the entire perimeter, then criss-crossing wire between them as a trip obstacle. Further out, *trous des loups* were dug, 'wolf pits' comprising holes with sharpened wooden stakes placed in them point-upwards.

For the most part, despite a very real sense of urgency among the garrison, the Zulus did not hamper these works. Although in the shock immediately following iSandlwana Lord Chelmsford had warned Pearson to expect the full weight of the victorious Zulu army down upon him, in fact the British were unaware of the effect the same fighting had had upon the Zulus. At iSandlwana perhaps a thousand Zulus had been killed outright, and an equal number mortally wounded, many of whom would take weeks to die, whilst in other fighting across the same few days, at Nyezane and in the skirmishing around the foot of Hlobane in the north, perhaps another thousand had been killed. The sound of mourning songs could be heard across the length of Zululand, the countryside was full of wounded men struggling to

get home, and for the first time the country's ruling elites were becoming aware of the cost that might be paid in resisting the British invasion. As a result, although King Cetshwayo was indignant that Pearson seemed to have settle himself down in the country as if it was already conquered, he was reluctant to allow his army to risk a direct assault on what was rapidly becoming a stronghold. Instead, he directed the *amakhosi* and royal officials living in the Eshowe district to organise a cordon about the post, and to cut it off from any potential British support at the Thukela border. Men from the royal *amabutho* who had returned to their homes in the area were instructed to assemble at nearby royal homesteads and from there were deployed to watch over Pearson's column, rotating duties in temporary huts built in the surrounding hills. These men were then used to harass the British whenever they strayed from the safety of the fort; runners were killed, outposts attacked, and the cattle guard – which had to drive the column's compliment of oxen further away each day to find fresh grazing – were sniped at and taunted. In this way the king hoped to tempt Pearson to foray out from his fortifications, where he would be vulnerable to an attack in the open.

Pearson, of course, was well aware of this risk and was determined to avoid exactly that. Instead, he directed his energies to building a short-cut in the road on the approach to the site – at night the Zulus would come down and tear up the road-party's markers, until one night the British placed a dynamite charge beneath one, killing the Zulus who attempted to remove it – and to retaining control of key terrain points around the post. Among these were two high points on the edge of the escarpment upon which the mission had been built, and which commanded a spectacular view across miles of open country towards the border. Each day these were occupied by vedettes from Pearson's motley mounted detachment – who had ironically dubbed themselves 'The Uhlans', after the elite German lancer units – but were abandoned at night.

Once the Zulus had recognised the British military routine they tried to disrupt it as best they could and a series of skirmishes took place around these key strategic points.

Among 'The Uhlans' was Charles Robert St. Leger Shervington. Born in 1852 to a distinguished Anglo-Irish military family – his grandfather had served with the 11th Regiment in the Peninsular War and his father had been the senior effective officer serving with the 46th Regiment at the battle of Inkerman in the Crimea – Shervington and his younger brother Tom had both been drawn to southern Africa by the prospect of adventure in 1877 (a third brother, William, would join them towards the end of the Anglo-Zulu War). Both had served in the 9th Frontier War on the Eastern Cape, Charles as a captain in 'Pulleine's Rangers' and Tom with the Frontier Armed and Mounted Police. At the end of the frontier campaign both men had joined the Natal Native Contingent and were allocated to the 2nd Regiment, part of Pearson's command. Both men had been present at the action at Nyezane on the 22nd, but whilst Tom had returned with the bulk of the NNC to the border Charles had volunteered to remain at Eshowe. An excellent horseman who was relishing the adventure he found himself in, Charles Shervington took an active roll in particular in the defence of the outlying vedette posts, as Pearson himself noted;

I wish to mention a circumstance which I think reflects great credit upon Captain Shervington, and the under-mentioned men – Corporal Adams, Native Contingent; Privates Whale, Robson, Higley and Keys, 99th Regiment, and Trooper Garlands, Victoria Mounted Rifles.

The videttes shortly after our arrival at Ekowe were daily annoyed when they patrolled in the morning before finally taking up their posts, by the fire of a party of Zulus from a high hill. It was believed that this party took up their position very early in the morning, and Captain Shervington and the above party volunteered to go out at night and lie in wait for them behind some rocks near the top of the hill, being utterly ignorant however of the number of Zulus. I consented, and this little expedition

resulted in three Zulus being wounded (though not so seriously as to prevent their making good their escape), and the videttes never being annoyed from this hill again. In fact, no Zulus were ever after seen there. (1).

Although the Zulus might have abandoned that particular ambush spot they did not give up attacking the vedette outposts. According to Lt. Hamilton of HMS *Active*, present in the fort, on 7 March a Mounted Infantryman of the 99th, Pte. Carson, had a lucky escape when;

...some Zulus made a rush at him from a piece of bush, in which they were concealed, as he was riding past, fired, and hit him in 4 places, one shot disabling his right hand; one of the Zulus seized the horse by the mane, the animal reared, but the rider held on, and badly wounded as he was, stuck his spurs in and got away, the horse received an assegai wound as he galloped off. The man rode into camp and is doing very well, but has lost the best part of his right hand, and has a gunshot wound in both legs, and a wound in his back. (2).

A few days later another incident occurred in which Captain Shervington was directly responsible for saving the life of another man of the 99th (attached to the Mounted Infantry), a Private Brookes. According to Brookes' own account,

I and two other men proceeded to No. 4 vidette post under command of Captain Shervington. When ten yards from the post, about 30 Zulus jumped up and fired a volley at us. The two other men's horses took fright and bolted, whilst my horse threw me, and my foot caught in the stirrup. The Zulus rushed to within five or six yards of me, and were about to assegai me when Captain Shervington mounted, dashed forward and the Zulus bolted. He put me on his horse, and ordered me to get under a tree under cover whilst he went back on foot and picked up my rifle and helmet, under heavy fire of the enemy. Whilst this happened, a hundred or more Zulus appeared on the top, some 200 yards away, and also opened fire upon us. (3).

According to a family memoir,

Shervington said that he was on the point of bolting too, when he saw Brookes lying on the ground and the Zulus rushing to assegai him. By the time he had rescued him, the other two men had pulled up their horses and were returning, so he desired them to cover him with their carbines while he searched for the missing rifle. It took him a few moments to find it, and it was wonderful that he escaped unhurt, as the bullets were pitching all around him. (4).

Shervington was, however, not always so lucky in securing the safety of the vedettes and a few days later

I was at breakfast one morning when I heard the shots in the direction of No. 4 vidette post. I rushed out and found a man galloping in, who told me Private Kent, 99th, was shot. I took his horse from him and rode out to the post, and saw Kent's horse walking in covered with blood; no one had seen him fall. I galloped to the spot where the shots came from, but could see nothing. I was joined by some videttes from another post. We found Kent's body lying in the grass with sixteen assegai wounds all in front. He must have fallen off when his horse was shot and got up and run, but finding the Zulus ran faster, turned round and tried to defend himself. He was a very good man, and we were all sorry for him. (5).

In fact, despite these minor successes, the war was already beginning to turn against the Zulus on the Eshowe front. As early as 2 March the garrison had noted flickering lights at the

distant Thukela border and had quickly recognised it as an attempt to communicate by heliograph. At that stage of the war neither party was equipped with proper heliograph equipment (some would arrive towards the end of the campaign) but the Thukela garrison had managed to improvise sun-signalling equipment. The race was then on among Pearson's men to find a means of reply and Pearson's senior Engineer, Captain Richard Warren Wynne, made various attempts using to signal using a large roll of paper turned up at the mission and which he used to make a large signalling screen and a hot-air balloon. Neither attempt worked, however, and in the end he succeeded using a shaving mirror and a length of drainage pipe from one of the mission buildings. For the first time the garrison was able to communicate with the outside world, and the news was encouraging – Lord Chelmsford was assembling a relief column at the Thukela. After several frustrating delays Chelmsford crossed the river at the end of March and on 2 April, within clear sight of Pearson's outposts securely based on the contested vedette posts, broke through the Zulu cordon at kwaGingindlovu on 2 April. The following day Lord Chelmsford himself led an advanced party of the relief column into the fort at Eshowe – and the siege was at an end. The relief of the garrison – who had held out for over two months – was tempered by the announcement that Chelmsford considered the post too advanced to be held safely, and ordered its evacuation.

All three Shervington brothers served out the remainder of the war with the re-designated 1st Division in the coastal sector. Charles and Will would survive but Tom contracted the sickness which plagued the camps around Fort Chelmsford, where the road was littered with the bodies of transport oxen which had died on the route. Sent initially to the military hospital in Durban he was later transferred to the home of relatives in Natal, but died on 21 February 1880, aged twenty-one.

Charles Shervington went on to serve in the BaSotho 'Gun War' of 1880/81, and then, in 1884, he sailed to Madagascar where, as a soldier of fortune, he took a command among the royal Hovatroops resisting French encroachment on the island. He died in April 1898, aged 45, his end apparently 'hastened by a sever attack of fever – the fatal 'Tazo' of Madagascar, so much dreaded by Europeans' (6).

At the end of the Anglo-Zulu War Col. Pearson had suggested that Shervington might be eligible for the award of the Victoria Cross, in particular for his rescue under fire of Private Brookes. Certainly, other men were recognised in this way during the war, notably Lieutenant Browne of the 24th at Khambula, Major Knox-Leet of the 13th at Hlobane, and Sergeant O'Toole and Commandant D'Arcy, Frontier Light Horse, and Captain Lord Beresford, 9th Lancers, for the skirmish before Ulundi on 3 July. Shervington's was the only recommendation submitted for the entire Eshowe campaign; but Pearson lacked the political influence of other column commanders and his war lacked the glamour which came to be associated with the more dramatic battles elsewhere. Shervington's recommendation was turned down on the pretext that no senior officer had been present to witness the deed.(7).

REFERENCES;

- (1). Pearson, reproduced in Kathleen Shervington, *The Shervingtons; Soldiers of Fortune*, London, 1899.
- (2). Hamilton, National Army Museum Papers, reproduced in Ian Knight, *The National Army Museum Book of the Zulu War*, London 2003.
- (3). Brookes, reproduced in Shervington, *The Shervingtons*.
- (4). Shervington, *ibid*.
- (5). *Ibid*.
- (6). *Ibid*.

(7). The incident is, however, commemorated in a painting by Mark Churms, commissioned to illustrate the cover of *Fearful Hard Times; The Siege and Relief of Eshowe* by Ian Castle and Ian Knight (London, 1994), which remains the only complete modern assessment of the Eshowe campaign.



Charles St. Leger Shervinton in 1877, at about the time he sailed to southern Africa.