

The First Engagement of the 1879 British invasion of Zululand
'I led the attack'.....

From the personal diary of Lt. Harford.



“It was now nearing the 11th January, the date fixed for the troops to move across the border. Lord Chelmsford had arrived at Rorke’s Drift and Lonsdale rode over to have an interview with him but received no definite orders with regard to the movements of the Contingent. However, one morning I had occasion to go to Rorke’s Drift myself, to see the Adjutant-General, Major Clery. Luckily, arriving at a very early hour, and having completed my work with him, I was on the point of mounting my pony to ride back to camp, when Major Clery said, “You will have everything ready, Harford, won’t you, for the General today?” “Good Heavens, Major”, I said, “This is the first I’ve heard about his coming!” “You don’t mean to say that Lonsdale never told you about it?” He replied, “He is going to inspect you at twelve o’clock. The General gave Lonsdale his orders days ago.”

Well, I rode off as hard as I could go, to camp. I found Lonsdale sitting in his tent, looking over his Masonic orders and paraphernalia, and, on my breaking the news to him as quickly as I could, he said, “Good God! I forgot all about it. Shout for my pony, like a good chap.”

I also got a change of ponies. Kaffirs were sent out in all directions to call in the men who were drilling, many of them miles away. As soon as the ponies were ready, we jumped on, Lonsdale saying, “You take that way; I’ll take this”, and we went off at a gallop. We had scarcely parted company when Lonsdale’s pony shied at something and threw him off. I saw the fall. He appeared to have struck his head and then, rolling over on his back, lay quite still with one of his arms projecting in the air at right angles to his body. I got off at once and ran to his assistance, only to find that he was unconscious, and rigidly stiff. I shouted for the doctor, and as soon as he had come up with some natives and a stretcher, I galloped off again to collect the men. Eventually, after a real race for it, everybody was got in; but Hamilton-Browne and Cooper were still getting their Battalions formed up on parade when the General and staff made their appearance.

I had, of course, to ride out and tell the General what had happened. So we first went to Lonsdale’s tent, and finding that he was still unconscious, orders were given for his removal to Helpmekaar hospital. It was found afterwards that he had received concussion of the brain. Through his interpreter, he expressed his pleasure at what he had seen, and

gave some sound advice on matters of discipline, especially behaviour towards women and children and prisoners.)

On the following day we moved to Rorke's Drift, where Major Black, of the 2nd Battalion, 24th Regiment was given temporary command until Lonsdale returned. Before crossing into Zululand, the Battalion Commanders devised an excellent plan for keeping their various Companies intact, and for recognising them in the field should they become separated or lose themselves, viz: by having small flags made with the number of the Battalion, 1 or 2, and some special device for each Company painted on them. These devices represented, as nearly as possible, the soubriquets the Natives had imposed upon themselves, such as the *ingulube*, *izinkunzana* and so forth. This caused great delight, and gave rise to endless chaff and amusement on all occasions.

When the general advance took place, a few of our natives under a corporal named Schiess were left at Rorke's Drift as part of the garrison of the fort under Lieutenant Bromhead, of the 2nd Battalion, 24th Regiment, and Lieutenant Chard, of the Royal Engineers. Schiess was subsequently awarded the Victoria Cross for very conspicuous bravery. Some of the men of the 24th Regiment told me that he fought like a tiger, when Rorke's Drift was attacked by the Zulus and at one time, when some Zulus actually managed to clutch hold of his bayonet, he got it out of their hands and, springing over the parapet, bayoneted some six or seven of them straight away.

ISANDLWANA

On the 11th January the 3rd Column crossed the Buffalo into Zululand, the troops making their way over at different points. The Artillery and the 24th Regiment went over by degrees in the pontoon, a little above the main drift, (*a shallow crossing point*) known as Rorke's Drift after the Dutchman Jim Rorke, whose house and farm buildings were occupied by us as a Fort, after being entrenched. I was ordered to find a crossing for the 2nd/3rd Natal Native Contingent, higher up the river. The fog was so dense one could barely see anything a yard in front, but at last, after hugging the bank very closely for about half a mile or more, we came to a spot that looked worth a trial. So I put my pony at it and got across all right, the bed of the river being nice and hard; but the water came up to the saddle flaps, and there was a nasty bank to scramble up on the opposite side. However, that did not matter, it was good enough.

Then followed a truly unforgettable scene, firstly of the natives crossing over and then of the impressive ceremony when the regiment had formed up again on the other side and were addressed by old Ingabangi, the witch-doctor. In order to scare away any crocodiles that might be lurking in the vicinity, the leading company formed a double chain right across the river, leaving a pathway between for the remainder to pass through. The men forming the chain clasped hands together, and the moment they entered the water they started to hum a kind of war-chant, which was taken up by every company as they passed over. The sound that this produced was like a gigantic swarm of bees buzzing about us, and sufficient to scare crocodiles or anything else, away. Altogether, it was both a curious and grand sight.

All being safely over, the men were formed up in quarter-column on the hillside, and one or two officers on their ponies were sent out in different directions to try and find out in the dense fog where any of the other troops were, and what was going on. While this was in progress, old Ingabangi asked permission to address the men. Never shall I forget his extraordinary elocutionary power, and the splendid oration he delivered. The old fellow got to the head of the Column and then started off at a trot, going backwards and forwards at this pace for nearly an hour. He would have gone on much longer, had we not

received orders to move. Without stopping to take breath, he recounted the history of the Zulu nation, which was frequently applauded by a loud "*Gee!*" and rattling of assegais on shields from the whole Contingent. It was a wonderfully impressive scene, and one which will always remain fresh in my memory. The drift at which we crossed was subsequently known as Harford's Drift, but I don't suppose it has been used since.

Our scouts eventually got in touch with the 24th Regiment, and as we moved up to support them the fog gradually lifted. Then a very pretty sight presented itself as the troops were dotted about over the rolling hills in 'Receive Cavalry' squares formation, their red coats showing up distinctly in the clear atmosphere. No further advance was made that day, owing to the difficulties of getting the Transport across. So we camped where we were.

During the day, Major Dartnell with a few Mounted Police was out on a reconnaissance, and took me with him as Staff Officer. On our way up the Bashee valley towards Sirayo's kraal we heard a war-song being sung, evidently by a large body of natives; but where they were, or what became of them, we were unable to find out. However, as this was the ground over which we were going to attack the next day, it looked as if it were certain that we should meet with some opposition. Other parties had also been out in various directions, and had captured a considerable number of cattle.

Reveille sounded very early, about 3a.m. the next morning, and we marched to attack Sirayo's kraal, up the Bashee valley, through thick bush. It was most unpleasant going, for above us, on our right, were hills with the usual cavernous rocks encircling them a little below their crests. It was evident that the warriors we had heard singing their war-chant the day before were ensconced in these caves, for the instant the troops got within range a continuous popping went on from these places. The crack, crack, crack of their guns and rifles echoed and re-echoed among the hills in the still morning air and made it impossible to detect exactly where the shots were coming from. Now and again a Zulu was seen in the open, and on one such occasion I saw the man taking deliberate aim at Colonel Glyn who was standing in an open patch above me. Shouting as loud as I could, I told him to get out of the way before the shot was fired.

Colonel Glyn was in command of the troops, and Lord Chelmsford took up a position with his staff on the opposite side of the valley, to watch operations. Colonel Degacher commanded the 2nd Battalion, 24th Regiment, and Major Black our Contingent, as Lonsdale was still in hospital. We started skirmishing through the bush, Major Black leading the 1st Battalion NNC under Commandant Hamilton-Browne, and I following in support with the 2nd Battalion under Commandant Cooper. Before many minutes, bullets were whizzing about in all directions, and one of our Natives, who was close by my side, got a bullet in the thigh, breaking the bone. A short distance further on, seeing two NCOs sheltering behind a rock instead of leading their men, I went to drive them on; and had just got them away when 'ping' came a bullet and cut away a bough just at the spot where my head was a second before. This was luck!

As we got further into the bush all sorts of obstacles, such as rocky ground, ravines, and especially thick masses of creepers, prevented any sort of formation being properly kept, in consequence of which the firing line and supports soon got mingled together. Nevertheless, the men were kept well in hand. Before very long I could hear Major Black's shrill voice in broad Scotch urging his men on, and, making my way up to him with supports, I found that he and Commandant Hamilton-Browne were in a hot corner close to some caves, with hand-to-hand fighting going on. When I was within about twenty or thirty yards of the place, one of their men fell almost at my feet with a terrible assegai wound, which had nearly cut him in half, right down the back. The poor fellow was not dead, and although I could see it was only a matter of minutes my feelings almost led me to try to put him out of

his misery with my revolver. But I abstained. I went on to the ridge of the spur of the hill in front of me as fast as I could, with some men, to see what was on the other side and to assist on Major Black's flank.

Eventually, on reaching the foot of a ledge of rocks, where they curved in a horse-shoe bend overhanging a deep valley, a somewhat grim sight presented itself. Confronting me across the bend was a large, open-mouthed cave, apparently capable of holding a good number of men, and hanging below it were several dead Zulus, caught in the monkey-rope creepers and bits of bush. They had evidently been shot and had either fallen out, or been thrown out, by their comrades when killed. Later on, I learned that a Company of the 24th Regiment had been firing at this particular cave for some time, and had been ordered to cease firing on it when our men came up. It was an uncommonly awkward place to get at, as it meant climbing over nothing but huge rocks and in many places having to work one's way like a crab, besides which a loss of foothold might have landed one in the valley below. However, there was not much time to think, and I determined to make an attempt, so, sending some men to work round below, I took a European NCO who was close at hand, and told him to follow me. Clambering at once over a big piece of rock, I got rather a rude shock on finding a Zulu sitting in a squatting position behind another rock, almost at my elbow. His head showed above the rock, and his wide-open eyes glared at me; but I soon discovered that he was dead.

Scarcely had I left this apparition behind than a live Zulu suddenly jumped up from his hiding place and, putting the muzzle of his rifle within a couple of feet of my face, pulled the trigger. But the cap snapped, whereupon he dropped his rifle and made off over the rocks for the cave, as hard as he could go. Providence had again come to my aid, and away I went after him, emptying my revolver at him as we scrambled up. Out of my six shots only one hit him, but not mortally. I stopped for a second to reload, but finding the wretched thing stuck I threw it down into the valley below, at the same time turning round and shouting to the NCO, who I thought was following me, to let me have his revolver. But he remained behind, where I had left him at the start, and all he did was to call out, as loud as he could, "Captain Harford is killed!" However, I soon put this right by shouting down, "No, he is not, he is very much alive!"

All this was a matter of seconds, and after pronouncing my blessings pretty freely on the Corporal, followed up my quarry, who by this time was standing in the mouth of the cave. Speaking to him in Kaffir, I called upon him to surrender, explaining that I had no intention to harm him in any way and would see to it that he was not ill-treated by anyone. He then squatted down in submission. Before getting up into the cave myself, not caring to run my head into a noose thoughtlessly, I demanded to know if there was anyone else inside and was assured that there was no-one, and as all was quiet, although I must say I had some slight misgivings, I clambered in.

Close to the entrance lay a wounded man with his feet towards me. Although unable to rise, he clutched hold of an assegai that was by his side, but I told him at once to drop it, that I was going to do him no harm, and questioned him as to who was with him in the cave. He stoutly denied that there were any others there. By this time I was getting accustomed to the darkness, and saw several likely-looking boltholes and kept on repeating that I knew there were others somewhere in hiding and that they were telling me lies. At the same time adding, in a tone loud enough to be heard by anyone near the place, that if they would come out I would promise on oath that no harm should be done to them and that I would accompany them myself to the General, who would see that they were well treated.

In a short time this had the desired effect, and presently a head appeared from a hole, and as the object crept out I kept careful watch for any sort of weapon that might

emerge with it; another and then another crawled out from the same spot. All were unarmed, and squatted down close to me. I then wanted to know where the others were, but they swore that there was no-one else. As this seemed to be the case, I moved off with my four prisoners, leaving the badly-wounded man in the cave. We soon made our way down the valley to where the General and his staff were, and I was met by Major Clery, the Adjutant-General, who greeted me with, "Well, Harford, I congratulate you on your capture, the General and I have been watching your gallantry for some time." Then he told me that a section of the 24th Regiment had been firing into the cave half the morning, owing to the sniping that had been going on from it, and when Lonsdale's men were seen to be approaching, orders had been sent to them to cease fire. Having handed over my prisoners and telling the Adjutant-General the promise I had made them, and after seeing the man that I had myself wounded was placed in the ambulance wagon for conveyance to hospital, I went off again.

On getting back to the Contingent, one of the men walked up to me and with the usual salutation of *'Inkosi'* gravely handed me my sword, spurs and courier bag, all of which had been torn off me in walking through the bush, as well as the discarded revolver. Never was I more thankful than to get these things back, especially the courier bag which had been a parting gift from my Captain, Captain Moir, when I left Chatham and contained my field glasses, knife, fork and spoon, as well as other valuable odds and ends. It would have been almost impossible to have found them again, even if a search party had been sent out, but luckily this Good Samaritan had followed carefully in my tracks and picked up the things as they were dropped. Curious to say, in the excitement of the moment I never felt anything going".

Footnote.

1. Post battle, Captain Harford was called for by Chelmsford to be complemented and congratulated for his actions. Harford, very politely, commented that 'it was nothing' to which, on reflection, Chelmsford replied 'so be it'. Harford immediately realised he had just talked his way out of the first VC of the campaign. It was an inadvertent 'throw away' comment he regretted for the rest of his life.
2. Harford, was then instructed to arrange the arrest of two NNC officers for desertion; Captain Stephenson for abandoning Rorke's Drift and Captain Higginson for abandoning his men, taking one of their horses to escape and then going absent following his escape from Isandlwana. A letter from Harford's voluminous diaries to the general staff, dated January 31st, clearly shows he was perplexed by having to arrest the two officers. For further details see 'Harford' by Dr David Payne.