

## ON THIS DAY

From the *Daily Telegraph* which, in March 1985, reprinted the original submission from their correspondent in South Africa dated 6 March 1979 under the heading *On This Day*.

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‘From our Correspondent, Headquarters, Pietermaritzburg Feb 3.

My short telegram of last mail will doubtless have occasioned much anxiety to hear the details of the catastrophe then alluded to – a catastrophe more dreadful in that it was totally unexpected...’

On seeing the Zulus menacing the camp, some one – the officer commanding, I presume - ordered the troop to take up the following ground. On the left of the Native Contingent camp and the facing the hill over which the Zulus were pouring was a force consisting of two or three companies of the 24<sup>th</sup> with the Native Contingent on their right front; immediately to the right of the native tents were the guns, separated, it would appear, by 300 or 400 yards from our left, any by an equal distance from our right, which occupied the extreme right of the camp and rested on the road. The latter seems to have consisted of one or two companies of the 24<sup>th</sup> and the mounted corps. The infantry, now came into action all along our line, and from every account their firing seems to have been steady and rapid. The enemy fell in hundreds, mowed down by the Martin-Henry; but still came on in undiminished numbers. Nothing seems to have deterred them. As rank after ranks of the foremost fell, others pressed forward steadily and quickly. They do not appear to have made much use of their guns, but to have depended on their numbers to bring them at last within such distance of our men that they could use their assegais. All Colonel Durnford’s men by this time seem to have joined those who were defending the camp, and the company of the 24<sup>th</sup> which had been sent up to the nek had retired, but it was cut off by the Zulu centre and never rejoined the rest. Young and old, regulars and volunteers, alike fought as gallantly as ever British soldiers did, side by side. I cannot learn that the ammunition ran short. It may have been in individual instances through reckless firing, but I think the end came too soon for it to have done so in the majority of cases., As soon as the Zulu main body saw that its wings were approaching each other it rushed forward with the assegai, and, despite the heavy fire it encountered, bore down all opposition by sheer weight of numbers. As scene of utter confusion now seems to have occurred, horse and foot, black and white, English and Zulu, all in a struggling mass, making gradually through the camp towards the road, where the Zulu right had already closed the way of escape. Of what happened during that half-hour even those who lived to tell can remember but little. Every man who had a horse attempted to escape towards the river; those who had none died where they stood. But even to mounted men escape was all but impossible. The country was rugged, broken and covered with boulders and water washes – a country, in fact, over which the active Zulus could run as fast, if not faster, than horses. Then in front was the Buffalo, which had to be crossed where no ford was, and where many a brave man who had so far made his escape succumbed. Many were drowned, many were assegaied, a few shot. And so the pursuit went on, even into Natal. Not a few died after the colonial side had been gained, for many lost their horses and arms in the river even when they succeeded in crossing in person.

Such are the very bare, meager outlines of the greatest disaster which has ever happened to British arms in South Africa. It would be easy to write columns of anecdotes which reached us from those who escaped, but I prefer to confine myself, if not absolutely, to what I saw myself at least to such portions of their united narratives as do not require confirmation.

And did you know..... ?

Adrian Greaves

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Private Wassall of the 80<sup>th</sup> Regiment, later awarded the Victoria Cross for saving Private Westwood from drowning in the Buffalo River after Isandlwana, had earlier accompanied the unsuccessful British attack against King Sekhukhune and the Pedi people in October 1878. This was a small attack force under Colonel Rowlands which advanced through barren territory to try and neutralize the Pedi – a potentially aggressive threat behind Chelmsford's imminent invasion of Zululand supply lines.

The route had not been reconnoitered; it was ferociously hot, the terrain was barren and dry, and morale was at low ebb. There was no grass to feed their horses or beef cattle and Rowland's force came under constant sniping from the agile and well-hidden Pedi.

They then came under a full Pedi attack on the night of the 5<sup>th</sup> October which forced an ignominious British withdrawal. News of the Pedi success emboldened King Cetshwayo to meet the British invasion force head-on at Isandlwana.

Private Wassall uniquely survived two British defeats in the space of three months.