

Corporal Christian Ferdinand Schiess V.C.
Based on research by member Bill Rodham.

Rorke's Drift visitors were always fascinated by the accounts of the night's fighting. One character in particular stood out for his acknowledged bravery, especially as he fought on crutches. The fact that he was a Swiss national and, post battle, was believed then to have existed in illness and poverty, added to the intrigue. So, who was this brave and enigmatic character, what do we really know about him and what was he doing at Rorke's Drift? Here is Bill Rodham's thought.

"I am enclosing one final piece of research that I have completed regarding the V.C. recipients from Rorke's Drift. It concerns Corporal Schiess of the N.N.C. and I believe the research to be original, as I have not seen anything similar in publications on the subject. I have used contemporary news outlets, in particular, to build up a picture of the final few years of Schiess's short life and it gives a slightly different view to the one that is generally accepted. I received some very kind assistance from Maureen Heath of the Asia and Africa Studies Section of the British Library, whom I have acknowledged in the original article.

It is a sad fact that some survivors of the defence of Rorke's Drift had their lives cut tragically short by illness, or the dire circumstances in which they found themselves in later years. No individual epitomises this more than Corporal Schiess of the Natal Native Contingent, who died on board the troopship H.M.S. *Serapis* on 14 December 1884 while being repatriated to England. He was buried at sea off the west coast of Africa: he was only 28 years old.

Schiess seems to have packed a lot into his short life. Born at Burgdorf among the mountains of Switzerland on 7 April 1856, he was raised for some years in an orphanage. He was only 14 or 15 years old when he joined the French army where he is believed to have taken part in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71.

From Europe, he travelled to South Africa, where he eventually joined the N.N.C. and achieved the rank of corporal. His heroics at Rorke's Drift are well documented and were such that the 'British-only' rule for the award of the Victoria Cross was waived for this Swiss national. Schiess was two months short of his 24th birthday when he received his V.C. from Sir Garnet Wolseley on 3 February 1880 in Pietermaritzburg. He carried his medal to his dying day and it was found in his pocket before his burial; it is now on display in the National Army Museum.

The years between 1880 and his death in December 1884 are something of a mystery. The conventional narrative suggests he worked in the Durban Telegraph Office for some time after leaving the N.N.C., but then struggled to find work and ended up destitute and ill on the streets of Cape Town. In late 1884, public donations bought him an 'indulgence' ticket to England on board the *Serapis*, which had just docked from India: he sadly died a few days into the voyage. News of the death of a V.C. hero in such circumstances was not greeted kindly in some quarters. For example, the British periodical, *Truth*, offered this rebuke in its issue of 15 January, 1885:

The case of Corporal Schiess, V.C., does not look particularly creditable to his country. To what regiment Schiess belonged I do not know, but he served through the Zulu campaign, and was awarded the Victoria Cross for distinguished gallantry at Rorke's Drift. After the war he lapsed into absolute poverty at Natal and was lately in such a condition that a subscription was got up to pay his rations home as an indulgence passenger on the *Serapis*. Want and exposure, however, had so told on him that he died on the voyage. I dare say Schiess himself may have been partly to blame,

but we ought to be able to turn a man who could win the Victoria Cross at Rorke's Drift to better account than this.

This article is not notable for its accuracy and it does contain the rather cryptic comment about Schiess himself being 'partly to blame', but it does express a sentiment that was shared in some circles. Further examination of contemporary records and publications, however, casts doubt on this simplified account of Schiess's final years, certainly in terms of the timing. A short piece in *The York House* papers of 8 December 1880 provided more detail. The article reads:

From Natal I hear that large numbers of citizens have been flocking to commandant Baker's standard, that gentleman having volunteered to raise a corps of mounted men for service against the Basutos... Among the non-commissioned officers is the familiar figure of Sergeant Scheiss [sic] V.C., who was decorated with the Cross for valour, in recognition of his distinguished gallantry in Zululand.

From this, we can see that Schiess had not given up on military service after leaving the N.N.C. and he was obviously a known figure. Proof of his continued service with this mounted troop came from the unlikely source of a provincial Lincolnshire newspaper, *The Stamford Mercury*. On 15 April 1881, under the heading '*With Baker's Horse in Basutoland*', it published a letter sent to Mr. William Barton, the publisher of the Newspaper, from his son, who was serving with Baker's Horse 'which was destined for employment against the Basutos'. The young Mr. Barton recounted the following anecdote in his letter home, dated 2 February 1881:

I have been out the last few days - one of a party repairing the telegraph wires cut by the enemy; not a nice job for five fellows alone and about ten miles from camp. But we had a good man in charge - corporal Schiess, V.C., one of the Rorke's Drift heroes. He is a nice fellow and we are the best of friends. He was born in the Alps, and is Swiss. This mountainous country suits him. When we were out the other day we went and looked for some sham chamois. We were unsuccessful, of course. I think if he had seen some of the enemy it would not have been a sham. He is a dead shot.

This takes us to a distance of two years from the exploits at Rorke's Drift and there is still no sign of the destitution or 'absolute poverty' that the article referred to. There was to be one more twist to the story of Corporal Schiess in the unexpected setting of a royal visit to India by the Duke and Duchess of Connaught at the end of 1883. The following so-called 'incident' was reported widely in the press as the Duke was inspecting troops at Allahabad (now Prayagraj) on 1 December 1883. The same article was printed almost word for word in several publications, including *The Times of India*, dated 18 December 1883:

On arrival of the special train at Allahabad on the 1st December with their Royal Highnesses the Duke and Duchess of Connaught (after being presented to the notabilities of the station), the Duke proceeded to inspect the guard of honour composed of a very strong muster of the E.I.R. Volunteers. Glancing over the men his quick eye detected one little fellow, Volunteer F.C. Schiess, in the ranks, on whose breast hung the Victoria Cross. With that readiness and good feeling so general with the members of the Royal Family, he at once stepped up to him and, kindly with interest, enquired where and how he had earned the distinguished decoration. I leave it to be imagined with what pride the gallant little fellow answered, possibly "Sir, at

Rorke's Drift", such being actually the case. Unfortunately, poor Schiess, having his rifle at the 'present arms', was unable to grasp the ready hand extended to him by the Duke.

It seems that Schiess was still in uniform, although no longer an N.C.O., and had somehow found his way to India. The E.I.R. Volunteers which proved to be an auxiliary unit, was originally formed as the East Indian Railway Volunteer Rifle Corps whose records are kept in the British Library. On page 544 of the 1884 edition of this publication is a list of the guards staff at Allahabad Station: among the names is F.C. Schiess, but, unfortunately, there are no precise dates for his employment. As late as 1884, therefore, Schiess is recorded in an official directory as being an employee of the East Indian Railway Company and was serving in their Volunteer Rifle Corps. We may never know what took him back to South Africa from India, but there was exactly one year between Schiess being presented to the Duke of Connaught in Allahabad and boarding H.M.S. *Serapis* in Cape Town for his final journey. Whatever happened in this year must have been fairly sudden and dramatic and not the longer, slower decline that was previously believed.

As David Gilmour says in his book, *The British in India* '...there were also illnesses and diseases in India that would seldom or never have killed people in Britain...The most common disease for the British was malaria (sometimes known as jungle fever)...Numerous people died of it when they were in India or after being invalided home to Britain...' Could Schiess have succumbed to an illness such as this? We can't know from this distance in time. What we do know is that this particular hero of Rorke's Drift never got the opportunity to start a new life in the country that had awarded him their highest military decoration 'For Valour'".

There are no known photographs of Schiess, but Lt. Harford, who met Schiess at Rorke's Drift, described him as 'wearing earrings' and 'a very small man with the cut of a seafaring man, which I expect was his real calling'.