

## Two Anglo-Zulu War Letters from Richard Dawnay, Viscount Downe.

By Peter Duckers

Major-General Hugh Richard Dawnay, 8th Viscount Downe, KCVO, CB, CIE (1844 – 1924) was a member of a distinguished military family. His brother, the Hon. Guy Dawnay will be familiar to Anglo-Zulu War historians and researchers as the author of a much-quoted *Journal* covering his service in the Zulu War, in Egypt in 1882 and at Suakin in 1885.



As Captain Viscount Downe, 2nd Life Guards, Richard Downay was appointed on 26th February 1879 as aide-de-camp to Major General Frederick Marshall, a former CO of the Life Guards who would command the cavalry brigade in Zululand.

The letters reproduced below, omitting casual family chat, were written to his younger brother Lewis, and are principally of interest because of their comments on Captain R. J. Barton, Coldstream Guards, and Captain Hon. R. G. E. Campbell, Staff Officer to Colonel Evelyn Wood, both killed under well-recorded circumstances during the Hlobane debacle.

### Letters from Captain Richard Dawnay, Viscount Downe

"A more useless war was never started"

[no place] 12 Ap. 79

My dear Lewis,

...You will have heard that we got here safe on the 6th. The last of our cavalry ships got in yesterday and by Monday night we should be ashore. It takes two days landing each ship's horses. I hope the 1st wing will move up country on the 17th & I know we shall be a little over a fortnight after the last lot leaves here getting to Doornburg<sup>1</sup>. Guy<sup>2</sup> is very fit & goes with us [...?]. What luck for him getting here in time for Chelmsford's relieving column!<sup>3</sup>

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1 Presumably Doornberg in the eastern Cape

2 His brother Guy Dawnay, who was serving in Zululand as a volunteer and was the author of a well-known and much-quoted *Journal* of his experiences

3 Present at the battle of Gingindhlovu and relief of Eshowe, April 1879.

Poor Barton & Rowdy!<sup>4</sup> You send both your love & both dead - & so unexpectedly. Barton was so short sighted he was nearly killed 3 times one day as he never could see the Zulus. The time he was killed they made an awful mess of it.<sup>5</sup> After getting the cattle off the mountain they dismounted & rested for 4 hours knowing the defile they had to pass on their way down was occupied. Of course, they were mopped up. Rowdy's was worse - they saw a lot of Zulus go into caves - & Evelyn Wood & Rowdy went to draw them like a badger in his hole<sup>6</sup>. Doesn't it seem wonderful as Wood has done so [well?] out here & shown so much caution. They don't think the Zulus will hold together after 2 more lickings. One or two chiefs are come in already. Then the old king will be killed I suppose.

Our war bill will be heavy this year. The Tamar<sup>7</sup> got in yesterday with the shipwrecked Clyde men<sup>8</sup>. It was very lucky the weather was so good. The men landed in nothing but their sea kits and [...] - so have to be refitted today. They say Davis [sic]<sup>9</sup> behaved splendidly & was the last man to leave the ship. I suppose his nautical education came in useful. Our kit is of the lightest - no tents or anything after crossing the river. I expect they will give up attacking camps now & have a turn at a column on the march. As they are seldom less than 6 miles long we must mind our eyes. Having to carry provisions for a long time in bullock wagons is a great hindrance ... Ghirty my horse stood the journey well and I rode him the first time this morning. Lord Chelmsford inspected some of the cavalry & artillery. Very early things are here [sic] - up soon after 5. .... Dick



Captain Barton



Captain Campbell

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- 4 Captain Robert Barton, Coldstream Guards, commanding the Frontier Light Horse and Captain the Honourable Ronald Campbell, Coldstream Guards, son of the 2nd Earl Cawdor, Wood's chief staff officer
  - 5 The Battle of Hlobane, 28 March 1879
  - 6 A well-recorded incident; see for example, Lock, R., *Blood on the Painted Mountain*, Greenhill, London 1995, amongst others.
  - 7 Troopship which was involved in the landing of troops and stores in Natal.
  - 8 The Clyde, an iron screw steamer of 1480 tons built in 1870 and hired by the Admiralty after Isandlwana, was carrying over 500 reinforcements, mainly for 1-24th Regt., and sank on the 3rd April having struck a reef near Dyer Island. It carried huge quantities of military equipment (including Gatling guns), foodstuffs and stores, only some of which was salvaged. The chief officer of the *Clyde* set off by boat for the base at Simon's Town to report the incident and as a result HMS *Tamar* was dispatched to the scene, arriving to find only the masts and funnel of the *Clyde* still visible. All the passengers, crew and military personnel were rescued, having reached the mainland in the ship's boats. Interestingly, the *Tamar* had recently gone to the aid of the *City of Paris*, carrying troops and supplies, which ran aground in Simon's Bay on 23 March. She also suffered no casualties.
  - 9 Colonel (later Lieut. Gen.) Henry Fanshawe Davies Grenadier Guards, in command of the troops on the *Clyde*. He had served in the Royal Navy at Pegu in 1852 and in the Baltic in 1854 - hence the reference to his nautical education. Served in Newdigate's Division in the war, commanding the garrison at Landman's Drift.

Rorke's Drift  
25 June 79

My dear Lewis,

.... I fancy now we are very near the end of the play. The column is within 20 miles of Ulundi & a day or two must decide it. If successful, Ld Chelmsford will be the luckiest man alive - as anything so weak and senseless as he is cannot be imagined<sup>10</sup>. You will have heard of how our Cavalry Brigade has melted away till now he has only taken on 2 squadrons .... This has been done by no horse sickness but simple starvation and exposure. Consequently, my General's<sup>11</sup> command is gone & now we have a beastly job - the command of a lot of forts from the frontier to the army [sic] & the arrangement of a lot of wagons full of supplies & escorting them. However, it must be over soon & I hope Sir Garnet has brought reasonable terms of peace<sup>12</sup>. A more useless war was never started & I believe with proper management Cetewayo wd. always have been our friend. They are fine fellows these Zulus & the best skirmishers I ever saw. We had 3 days turn at them in nasty country where we could not get to close quarters, and the way the devils tried to outflank us was a caution. Luckily they were bad shots & shot very high or we should have lost a lot of men<sup>13</sup>.

There is no doubt poor Bobby Barton was killed. He was told to go round the right of the Zlobane mountain, instead of which he went to his own right & rode straight into the impi waiting at the bottom. It was all owing to his short sight, which got him into several scrapes before. Poor Rowdy went with Wood & one man to look into a cave. Some [Zulus] were inside and blew the top of his head off. Oddly enough he had a prayer book in his pocket out of which Wood read part of the Burial Service over him<sup>14</sup>. Tomorrow we go in to Isandhlwana to bury the rest of the 24th<sup>15</sup> & then we ourselves go on to Fort Marshall - a fort they have built on the Ibabanango<sup>16</sup>.

Guy is very fit<sup>17</sup>. He wants looking after as he wishes to poke his nose into every hornet's nest about & poke away there. So I keep him with me. You will be astonished to hear that what we suffer from in the intense cold at night, ice in the water outside the tents etc. We keep very early hours, up at 5 & waiting ready under arms for the Zulus who don't come. I believe they are like you and don't fancy getting up before the sun. I never was fitter in my life. The sun rises & sunsets are very fine - but the country is very monotonous - eternal hills & basins of burnt grass & no trees. We have seen very little bush, as we have done our best to avoid it. With luck we ought to get away by the end of July, as probably we shall be the first to go, our brigade being broken up .... Dick

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10 A pointed comment!

11 Major General George Frederick Marshall. Viscount Downe, served as A.D.C. to Marshall, "his old colonel", commanding the Cavalry Brigade of the 2nd Division, and was "mentioned" in the General's dispatches

12 Sir Garnet Wolseley arrived in Natal on 28th June 1879 to take command and supersede Lord Chelmsford though it took him some time to reach the front.

13 The skirmish fought at Zungeni on 5th June

14 Another well-recorded incident, though it is usually claimed that Wood took the prayer book from his own saddle-bag, his horse having been shot dead

15 On a previous visit to Isandhlwana with Marshall's Cavalry Brigade on 21st May, Viscount Downe had identified the body of the Hon. Standish Vereker, killed when serving as a Lieut. in the Natal Native Contingent. He had him properly buried, having removed his signet ring for return to the family.

16 Fort Marshall

17 His brother, Guy Dawnay, also serving in Zululand