

## Was Durnford Abandoned by his Officers?

By Ian Knight

It is one of the epic set-piece incidents of the battle of iSandlwana; the moment when Brevet-Colonel Anthony Durnford, and the men of his mounted African command, fell back in the face of the Zulu left and took up a position in the Nyogane donga on the British right. It was here that Durnford dismounted his men, their horses sheltered within the donga itself and the men lining the bank facing the Zulus, putting down such a heavy fire that the Zulu left – the u*Veibutho*, the youngest on the battlefield – actually retired until they were supported by the older iNgobamakhosi. Gradually, Durnford's men grew short of ammunition and the Zulus began to press through the donga on either side of them, both upstream and down, making Durnford's position untenable. When the donga was abandoned, the entire British right at iSandlwana lay open, making it impossible for the infantry companies of the 24<sup>th</sup> further north, to hold their ground; it marked, in effect, the moment the British position collapsed.

Traditionally Durnford's stand in the Nyogane is imagined in heroic terms, as described by one of his men, Jabez Molife;

The Colonel rode up and down our line continuously, encouraging us all, talking and even laughing with us – *'Fire, my boys! 'Well done, my boys!'* he cried. Some of us did not like his exposing himself so much, and wanted him to keep behind, but he laughed at us and said, *'All right, nonsense.'* He was very calm and cheerful all the same time. Sometimes, as he passed among us, one or other of the men brought him his gun with the old cartridge sticking, and he dismounted, and taking the gun between his knees, because of only having one hand with strength in it, he pulled the cartridge out and gave back the gun. There were not very many of us, but because of the way in which we were handled by our leader we were enough to stop the Zulus on that side for a long time. We could have carried him off with us safely enough at this time, only we knew him too well to try. But we now say, *'If we had known what would happen, we would have seized him and bound him, no matter if he had fought us for doing so, as he certainly would; no matter if he had killed some of us, we would have saved his life, for he was our master.'* Now we say that we will always remember him by his commanding voice, and the way in which he gave us some of his own spirit as he went along our line that day, and those amongst us who had not served under him before, as I have, say, *'Why did we not know him sooner?'* (1)

Whilst this heroic image is undoubtedly true, a close reading of the movements of Durnford's officers suggest that he may have been rather more popular with his African soldiers than with his officers.

Durnford had entered the camp at iSandlwana at about 10.30 that morning at the head of, up to that point, which had been a separate column, and which now consisted of five mounted troops, each of fifty men, and a rocket battery; or rather, since Durnford's men were mounted and moved faster than the rocket battery and its NNC escort, he had arrived with the rocket battery trailing behind. Upraised by Col. Pulleine of the 24<sup>th</sup> – whom Chelmsford had left in command of the camp when he, Chelmsford, had marched out before dawn to investigate reports of Zulus massing in the hills ahead – of the appearance earlier of Zulus on the iNyoni ridge, close to the left of the camp, Durnford had decided to use the manoeuvrability his mounted troops afforded him to ride out and investigate these Zulu movements.

Although Durnford's troops were largely African, he had a small staff of white officers, and each of the mounted troops had both a white officer and an African *induna*. Durnford's staff consisted of George Shepstone, the son of the prominent Colonial official, Theophilus Shepstone, who was officially Durnford's Political Officer, appointed because he spoke Zulu

and was knowledgeable on African customs and traditions, but also, perhaps, to exert a moderating influence on Durnford, who was already regarded as something of a maverick by the Colonial establishment. Also on Durnford's staff was a regular officer who had volunteered for 'special service', Lt. William Cochrane of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, who was appointed the column's transport officer, and a Colonial officer, Captain William Barton, whose role is not entirely clear. Three of Durnford's mounted troops were formed of men from the amaNgwane chiefdom in the Natal Drakensberg (uKhahlamba) foothills, and generally known as the 'Sikhali Horse'. Of the remaining troops, one was composed of Sothos, also from the mountain foothills, and led by their inkosi Hlubi Molife. The final troop was made up of Christian converts from the Edendale mission outside Pietermaritzburg. Their white officers were lieutenants Charles Raw, J.A. Roberts, William Vause, Alfred Henderson and Harry Davies respectively. Durnford also had about 250 NNC infantry from D and E companies of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment NNC.

When Durnford decided to take his men out of the Isandlwana camp, at about 11.30, perhaps an hour after he had arrived, the rocket battery, accompanied by the NNC infantry, were only just arriving in the camp, whilst Durnford's baggage wagons were also still on the track from Rorke's Drift. Judging the unfolding situation to be urgent, Durnford decided to press on without waiting for either element to catch up with him. He instructed the rocket battery to follow him as soon as possible, whilst Lt. Vause's troop of the Sikhali Horse was ordered to return back to escort the baggage wagons into the camp. At that point, Durnford was left with four mounted troops, and decided to split these into two groups, sending Lts. Raw's and Roberts' troops of the Sikhali Horse directly up onto the iNyoni escarpment, where the Zulus had appeared earlier, accompanied by a company of the NNC, and taking the Hlubi and Edendale troops, under Davies and Henderson out with him, riding straight out from the camp and encircling the escarpment from the far – eastern – end. Of his staff officers, Cochrane was with Durnford at this point, whilst George Shepstone went with Raw and Roberts. Captain Barton was also somewhere on the left.

At around noon Raw and Roberts' troops discovered the Zulu army bivouacking in the Ngwebeni valley, about five miles north of iSandlwana. The Zulus immediately deployed to attack, driving Raw and Roberts back towards the camp. By this time Durnford and his two troops had gone round the foot of the iThusi knoll at the far eastern end of the escarpment, and were proceeding up the valley beyond when they ran into the uVeibutho, the tip of the Zulu left horn, advancing rapidly in the other direction. The rocket battery, still trailing behind, had not rejoined Durnford, and indeed broke away to advance towards the escarpment once it became clear that a battle was developing. Vause's troop entered the camp, with the wagons, just as the fighting began, and here Vause met Shepstone who had ridden in to report the presence of the impi on the hills. Shepstone directed Vause to take his men to reinforce Raw and Roberts' troop.

Without Raw, Roberts and Vause's men, and without any of the foot NNC, Durnford had just one hundred men with him, and his white officers consisted of Cochrane, Henderson and Davies. Once he had encountered the uVe coming in the opposite direction, Durnford began an orderly retreat towards the camp, halting his men at regular intervals to allow them to dismount and fire a volley to delay the Zulu pursuit. Passing back around the foot of iThusi, and coming within sight of iSandlwana again, Durnford encountered the survivors from the rocket battery, who had advanced part-way up onto the escarpment only to encounter the skirmishers of the iNgobamakhosi *ibutho*, who had over-run the rockets and scattered the escort. An officer of the NNC, Captain Nourse, had managed to rally a handful of his men who were engaged in a fire fight with the iNgobamakhosi skirmishers; the Zulus seemed to be in no hurry at this point to press their advantage, since the skirmishers were no doubt well aware that the main body of their regiment was rapidly approaching, and about to crest the

skyline behind them. Durnford gathered up the battery survivors, and continued to retire until he reached the iNyogane donga, immediately south of the amaTutshane conical kopje.

Now, it should be noted that Durnford was not alone when he reached the donga. The staff officer, Captain Alan Gardner – who had himself only returned to the camp from Lord Chelmsford shortly before the battle had begun – had noted the pattern of the Zulu attack, and had gathered up a small number of mounted troops in the camp, mostly Mounted Infantry and Colonial Volunteers, and had taken them out to the donga to secure the British right. Gardner had returned to the camp, but when Durnford arrived he dismounted his men in the Nyogane next to the Volunteers. Although Durnford undoubtedly took command of the detachment already there, by virtue of his senior rank, it is worth noting they were not part of his original No. 2 Column command. Of his own officers, Durnford was without Shepstone, Barton, Raw and Vause, and the NNC officers; all he had with him were Cochrane, Davies and Henderson. Of those, Cochrane – presumably because he was a regular officer – left the most accounts of what happened next, both official and unofficial. Because of the question about command of the camp, and whether or not Durnford had formally taken command from Pulleine, much of Cochrane's surviving evidence is preoccupied with the conversations he heard between the two before the battle had started. Of the fighting, in his official account of the action he stated merely that

A retreat was continued until we arrived at a donga about half a mile in front of the camp. Here a few mounted men – Carbineers, Natal Mounted Police, etc. – reinforced our right. A stand was made here, but we were eventually driven in ...As far as I am personally concerned, when I got back to the camp with the mounted men who had now been driven out of the donga, I found that the enemy had rushed into the camp from the left and were engaged hand-to-hand with the Infantry, who were completely overpowered with over-whelming numbers. I saw that 'all was over'. I made for the direction which I had seen taken by the mounted men, guns, Royal Artillery, and the natives on foot...(2)

A superficial reading of this account suggests that Cochrane himself had been in the donga, alongside Durnford, and that he had left it only when Durnford's men were driven out. And yet on careful study, it seems he may not have actually been 'with the mounted men' he mentions, since he does not seem to have passed through the camp with them, and indeed made his escape on his own.

An explanation for this is offered in a description of his actions, apparently furnished by Cochrane himself, to Durnford's brother, Edward, and published in *A Soldier's Life and Work in South Africa*;

Up to this time there had been no communication (Durnford's element occupying the donga) with the camp force, which was about 1,000 yards to the left rear; holding the rising ground before mentioned. Lieutenant Cochrane, observing the Zulus massing at a kraal to the left front, pointed it out to Colonel Durnford, and asked if he should send an orderly to call the attention of the artillery to it.

The Colonel said 'No, they may not attend to him; you had better go yourself'

Cochrane at once rode back to the camp, but could not find his chief (Col. Durnford) again. This suggestion of a message to the camp force in all probability saved his life, for he would not have deserted his chief had he remained with him. (3)

There is no doubt that the Artillery did turn to fire at the Zulus massing at the homestead, so presumably Cochrane's errand succeeded – although the last line hints at a degree of survivor guilt, and perhaps an awareness that, whatever the reason, Cochrane had not been with Durnford during the crisis in the battle.

And what of the commanders of his two mounted troops, Lieutenants Davies and Henderson? According to Davies' account his men had been defending the donga for some time when

...my men called out they were short of ammunition. I took 15 with me to get ammunition; I managed to get some 200 rounds from the Carbineer's Camp, out of a box that I found open in one of the tents. I tried to get back again to the slit, but found everybody leaving it, and the Zulus very close on us... (4)

Davies did not rejoin Durnford and of his original officers, only Henderson remained with Durnford until the end of the stand. Hlubi – the African leader of Henderson's troop – seems to confirm this, and recalls that when Durnford gave the order to abandon the donga he

...rode off to the Camp with one man leaving us with Mr Henderson. We left the donga and followed Colonel Durnford. By this time we had to fight the Zulus on all sides of us. On nearing the camp, we saw the Native Contingent break and run towards the Buffalo followed by the Drivers and the leaders of the Camp wagons. The Zulus on seeing this shouted 'It is beaten. They are running.' This emboldened the Zulus and the camp was soon full of them. Seeing that it was useless to attempt anything beyond saving my men, having very little ammunition left, I made my way to Rorke's Drift forcing my way through the belt of Zulus on that side. (5)

Durnford seems to have had no intention of rallying his men after leaving the Nyogane; according to Simeon Nkambule of the Edendale Troop, 'Durnford said they must get out as quick as they could because there was no more ammunition'. (6)

By that point everything was undoubtedly chaotic in the camp as the forward British positions were driven in and Zulus streamed into the camp. And yet, as the British line collapsed, Davies met Henderson, and the two of them caught one of the last glimpses of Durnford alive;

I had seen Colonel Durnford on the spot where the guns had been in the morning; his mounted orderly was standing before him with drawn sword, and the Zulus all around. I looked round for my men, but they had gone with the crowd. I here saw Henderson, asked him what was the best thing to do, he did not reply; I said, I think it is a case of run and take pot-luck...(7)

Since Henderson left the camp with Hlubi's men shortly afterwards, they must have been close at this point, but neither Davies, Henderson nor Hlubi and his men made any attempt to join Durnford. No doubt the lack of ammunition was a crucial factor, and with the chaos in the camp further resistance must have seemed pointless. And yet there are suggestions that, by this point, Henderson had lost confidence in Durnford; he wrote to his father,

If I had known what sort of a man Durnford was, '(when he got into action) I don't think I would have gone with him. He was close to me during most of the fight and he lost his head altogether; in fact he did not know what to do. (8)

Henderson's impression, of course, is very different from that of Jabez Molife. By this point of the battle Durnford was alone; all of the officers who arrived with him had found reasons to be elsewhere. None of the men he had sent up onto the iNyoni had rejoined him, and there is only evidence that George Shepstone may have tried; whether he succeeded or not is unknown, but Shepstone was killed defending a rocky outcrop above the road, at the foot of iSandlwana. Lt. Roberts had been killed in the retreat; Raw and Vause left the field with their men. Davies would leave on his own; at least Henderson seems to have stayed with or near his men as the Sotho shot their way through the right horn and made their way to

Rorke's Drift. Indeed, Durnford's African troopers were the only units who were able to make any sort of ordered withdrawal from the battlefield – by sticking together they offered a potential for resistance which the Zulus were reluctant to contest.

No doubt the chaotic nature of the battle was largely to blame for this – and perhaps even Durnford himself, who made no attempt to regroup or rally his men. Nonetheless, when Durnford joined a group of Volunteers and infantry who were making a stand across the track at the back of the camp – which would of course prove to be Durnford's own 'last stand'. None of those who had ridden into the camp that morning were with him.

## FOOTNOTES

- (1). Statement by Jabez Molife, Parliamentary Papers.
- (2). Lt. William Cochrane, report dated 8 February 1879, National Archives WO33/34
- (3). Edward Durnford, *A Soldier's Life and Work in South Africa*, London, 1892.
- (4). Lt. Harry Davies, report, National Archives, WO33/34
- (5). Hlubi Molife, statement, Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository, SNA 1/1/34, No. 159.
- (6). Simeon Nkambule, report published in the *Natal Witness*, 17 August 1879.
- (7). Davies, report.
- (8). Lt. Henderson, letter to his father dated 28 January 1879, reproduced in P.L.H. Hathorn and A.H. Young, *Henderson Heritage*, Pietermaritzburg 1972.

The Nyogane donga, showing how far Durnford's troops were from the camp.

