

Schiess mythology

Belgian member Stefaan Calus

The conventional narrative persists in suggesting two accounts of Schiess, firstly he was not an orphan and, secondly, Schiess, after leaving the NNC, is labelled as having struggled to find work and ended up destitute and ill on the streets of Cape Town, until in late 1884, public donations bought him an 'indulgence' ticket to England. He died a few days into the voyage and there the matter rested. This account is perpetuated as recently as 2023 in the latest Knight and Stevenson version.(1)

While Rorke's Drift visitors were always, and remain, fascinated by the accounts of the night's fighting, one character in particular stands out for his acknowledged bravery, especially as he fought on crutches. The fact that he was a Swiss national and, post battle, was incorrectly believed to have existed in illness and poverty, added to the intrigue. So, who was this brave and enigmatic character, what was he doing at Rorke's drift and what happened to cause his early death?

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. The Captain's log reads:

Sunday 14th December 1884

10.20am Departed this life Mr. F.C. Schiess, VC

5.10 pm Stopped. Committed to the Deep the remains of the late Mr. Schiess, VC

5.15pm Proceeded

Ship's Noon observed position: Lat S. 13.00 Long W.7.24

Belgian member Stefaan Calus has researched Swiss national and local records and has provided some interesting Schiess entries.

Born on 7 April 1856 at Burgdorf among the mountains of Switzerland, Schiess seems to have packed a lot into his short life. Ubiquitous accounts state he was raised for some years in an orphanage adding, that, at the age of only 14 or 15 years, he joined the French army where he participated in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. Not so; research in Switzerland reveals a different and more likely account.

The enrollment registers of the former orphanage still exist in both the Swiss State Archives and the Municipal Archives in Herisau where Schiess was born. According to these registers, young Christian was enrolled together with his brother Gottfried on Sept. 24, 1861. Christian was five years old, his brother nine. Other children of the Schiess family also ended up there. Registration dates of 3 more sisters and 1 other brother were also found. (2)

The civil registry shows the father of the children, Niklaus Schiess, was born in Herisau on March 12, 1820 and died on September 21, 1893. The mother, Anna Ruchti was born on February 19, 1820 and died at Diemerswil near Bern on November 3, 1863. (3) Christian Ferdinand and his siblings were never orphans, they were there because of poverty. At that time the orphanage provided not only for the care of orphans but also for the care of children from very poor families. The

registration of one of Christian Ferdinand's sisters included the telling phrase : *brought with her only the clothes she wore.* (4)

Christian remained in the orphanage until June 26, 1870 when he was apprenticed to Master Locksmith Säger. (5) remaining under the care of the orphanage. The next report that could be found of Schiess is a Herisau police search notice dated September 1871. According to this notice, he abandoned his employer then disappeared without trace. This search for him originated from the orphanage still responsible for him.(6) The original notice appeared in the *Amtsblatt* news sheet.

Polizeiliche Ausschreibung.

Christian Ferdinand Schieß von Herisau, geb. den 7. April 1856, hat sich von seinem Arbeitsherrn heimlich entfernt, und es werden die Lit. Polizeistellen hiemit höflichst ersucht, im Betretunassalle ihn der Waisenbehörde von Herisau zuführen zu lassen. Schieß hat dunkelblonde Haare, ovales Gesicht und ein spitziges Kinn; bei seiner Entfernung trug er dunkelgraue Hosen und Weste, einen hellgrauen Paletot, einen braunen Hut und Bottinen.

Herisau, den 27. September 1871.

Die Kantonspolizeidirektion.

Translation:

Police Alert

Christian Ferdinand Schiess from Herisau, born On the 7th of april 1856, has secretly distanced himself from his employers, and the different police stations are hereby politely asked by the orphan agency from Herisau to bring him back. Schiess has dark blond hair, an oval face and a pointy chin; at his disappearance he was wearing dark grey trousers and vest, a light grey Paletot (three-quarter length, double-breasted men's coat), a brown hat and boots.

Herisau, September 27, 1871

The Cantonal Police Department.

If Schiess only disappeared in September 1871 his alleged participation in the Franco-Prussian war must be in doubt. That war ran from July 1870 to the Peace Treaty signed on the 10th of May 1871. At the same time, from mid-February 1871 to mid-March 1871, a total of 1,584 French soldiers of the 'Bourbaki Army', (7) who had fought in this war, were interned in Herisau pending disbanding. In a municipality of about 9,000 inhabitants, their presence would undoubtedly have impacted on the population, including on young Schiess. It is possible that he joined this French unit and served under a false name or pseudonym so that he could not be found.

Regardless of whether he took part in the Franco-German war or not, the youngster from Herisau then travelled to South Africa where he eventually joined the NNC with the rank of corporal.

Avoiding such speculative accounts of Schiess' demise, further examination of contemporary records and publications cast doubt on this guesswork 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 NNC 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, (8) 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, William Barton. 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, VC, 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 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 with no sign of destitution or 'absolute poverty' which modern authors cling to.

There is one more significant twist to the story of Corporal Schiess in the unexpected setting of a royal visit to India at the end of 1883 by the Duke and Duchess of Connaught. The royal event on 1 December 1883 was widely reported in the press as was the account of the Duke inspecting troops at Allahabad. The following 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.

Schiess was still in uniform, although no longer an NCO, 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. As late as early 1884 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, such as contracting one of many prevalent

diseases or an injury, and not the tale of the longer slower decline that has hitherto been promulgated.

References

1. *Rorke's Drift - By Those Who Were There* – Knight and Stevenson 2023
2. Email to author 10th of January 2024 from G. Leipold Municipal Archive Herisau
3. Email to author 2th of November 2023 from U. Butz State Archive Herisau
4. ditto
5. ditto
6. *Amtsblatt 1871, 2. Teil Bekanntmachungen*, Nr 36 S. 157-158
7. The Armée de l'Est (Army of the East) also Second Loire Army (nicknamed the 'Bourbaki Army' after its first commander, General Charles Denis Sauter Bourbaki). It was a French army unit which had taken part in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871.
8. *The Stamford Mercury*.

AND ADENDORFF AGAIN.

From a member.....

Dear Dr. Adrian,

I note in the current Journal (54) that the matter of Adendorff's presence (or otherwise) at Rorke's Drift again raises its head. While Sam Stopps's article (Journal 33) quotes Norris-Newman's *In Zululand with the British Army* written after the war and published in 1880, it may have been overlooked that Norris-Newman also wrote from Pietermaritzburg on 26th January, just four days after the battle, a letter appearing in the Natal press in which he, on the morning after the action when the relief column arrived and had given '.. material assistance' (The Red Book Page 44 right hand column). To my mind, from a reliable source that he (Adendorff) was both present at Rorke's Drift and part of the defence.

Kind regards,

Editor's reply.

Thank you for your thoughtful message.

I agree with you and Norris-Newman that Adendorff was indeed present at RD when Chelmsford returned - my question related to where was Adendorff overnight.

He could have been with the NNC who had fled RD to the safety of Helpmakaar - but returned to RD on hearing the Zulus had departed. – as did many of the NNC. I would really appreciate any actual evidence from anyone present at Rorke's Drift that night that Adendorff was also present. Chard wasn't sure - but then Chard was in a very difficult situation; with the Zulus attacking, he had just arrived, he didn't know anyone

and it was dark. You say that Norris-Newman states clearly that Adendorff was present – but so do many authors, but their opinions are not evidence?

In all my years researching on site at RD with Dr David Payne and David Rattray, with the best will we were unable to place Adendorff as a RD defender. His dramatic arrival at the river crossing with the news from Isandlwana is not in dispute. I agree totally with you about a letter appearing in the Natal press that Adendorff, on the morning after the action when the relief column arrived back at Rorke's Drift, '*had given material assistance*'. Of course he did; his return from Helpmakaar to Rorke's Drift would have gone unnoticed coinciding all the confusion surrounding the return of Chelmsford's force, Chelmsford wasted no time and immediately disbanded the NNC. As an NCO of the NNC Adendorff would have probably assisted with the gathering in of their weapons, feeding them, providing each with a blanket and then seeing them on their way. Hence the sketch of Adendorff that morning by Lt. Harford.

It would be helpful to know why N-N said Adendorff had been present overnight at Rorke's Drift. That night those at Helpmakaar were fully aware of the defeat at Isandlwana and of the Zulu attack progressing at Rorke's Drift, yet had the presence of mind to physically record survivors as they arrived.

Their accounts record Adendorff, under the heading 'NNC', arriving at Helpmakaar as a fugitive.

Dr Adrian Greaves

Journal editor.