

THE ASSEGAI

The 1879 Group



Isandlwana & Rorke's Drift

AUTUMN 2014

Newsletter of the 1879 Group

**The 1879 Group
Isandlwana & Rorke's Drift
Founded 23rd May 1998 at the Barracks, Brecon**

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The 1879 Group

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EDITORIAL

All members will know that this year has been a difficult one in which we have had to come to terms with the loss of one of our most knowledgeable and respected members. As the Group's Armourer Keith Piggott's role was paramount in managing the ordnance of the uniformed branch, the licensing, specification, storage and handling of rifles and powder.

Our deepest condolences go to Keith's family and long term partner Viv Watkins.

Keith's loss of course follows on the passing of Roger Manning last year and whilst they will be badly missed there is no doubt both would have wished the work of the Group to continue. With the continuing hard work of the committee and support of all members that will surely happen. A personal tribute to Keith is given below by Roger Morgan whose sentiments I am sure we all share.

IN MEMORIUM – KEITH PIGGOTT

This year we lost one of the longest serving and certainly the most dedicated member of the Group. Keith blasted into our lives in a great cloud of smoke shortly after the Group was founded to act as our Armourer. He arrived to look over the Martini Henry rifles which we had purchased and in no time had infected us all with his great enthusiasm for all things historical and particularly for all things which went bang! Keith had an encyclopaedic knowledge of historical firearms and was a recognised expert in his field advising museums, film and television productions and a legion of re-enactor friends. Anyone who ever had the pleasure of hearing his 'History of the Gun' talks will testify to his presentational skills and the wonderful played down way in which he imparted his knowledge taking us from the medieval cannon to James Bond's Walther PPK handgun and actually firing examples from his private collection.

But he was more than this, he was also a true and loyal friend bringing a joy to every meeting and turning up with a jolly 'hello matey' which we will miss so much. Certainly he had his troubles and anyone who saw him first thing in the morning in camp as he fought off the arthritis and coaxed himself into getting going against the terrible pain would really appreciate the grit of the man. But I believe we will all remember him after the events were closed and when dinner was done diving into his tent and emerging with the cheese board, crackers and bottles of something welcome and interesting. We will also remember his tendency to break into Victorian monologues at the drop of a hat and how he fitted all his equipment into his car (I still haven't worked that one out!) but above all we will remember his generosity. Not with material things but that most important element, his time. He always made time for everyone. I certainly count myself blessed that I could call Keith a friend and to be honest I still expect the phone to ring and to be tied up for an hour or so talking about Zulus, planes, pirates, knights and the merits of canvas tents. If only that could still be so.

What he brought to the 1879 Group was incredible, what he gave to historical re-enactment and living history since the 1960's is immeasurable and from standing in the firing line with his Martini Henry or thundering across a field on horseback, leading 'the dancing bear' (his father Dave) through an astonished crowd or just holding court around the camp fire, we will miss him. By heck we will.

And in ending, of course our thoughts are with Viv, Dave and his family who will miss him most. But we also will never forget our good friend Keith.

2014 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The AGM held on 24th May at the RRW museum drew 21 members and there was inevitably an air of sadness during the proceedings as we all remembered Keith. The meeting in fact started with a two minute standing silence whilst 'Sunset' and the 'Last Post' was played.

The agenda opened with the reading and acceptance of the 2013 AGM minutes which was followed by the Chairman's and Secretary's reports for the year. Balance sheets were handed out by the Treasurer confirming the Group's finances were satisfactory. The events programme for 2014 and membership were discussed and agreed followed by an update on the Assegai provided by the editor.

In line with the constitution the entire committee then stood down and were offered for re-election by the President together with two new nominations for the committee, Tony Burrows and Jimmy Patterson. All nominations were approved by the membership to serve for a further year. The Group were also very pleased to confirm Honorary Membership on Vivien Watkins.

The group dinner held in January was then discussed with general agreement that this should be repeated for 2015. Following final questions and answers the meeting was formally closed.

2014 RORKE'S DRIFT DINNER

After a lapse of a number of years the annual Rorke's Drift dinner was held once again at the Metropole Hotel in Llandrindod Wells on Saturday 18th January

Any doubts about the success of the dinner were quickly dispelled when forty two members and guests all in formal dress and period costume took the opportunity to socialise and meet old friends and make new acquaintances. Bob Coates provided some very original music during the evening and following grace an excellent three course meal was enjoyed. Roger Morgan acted as MC for the proceedings and speeches were given by Jimmy Reynolds and Douglas Bourne who made an impromptu talk on his memories of his famous grandfather. Bouquets of flowers were also presented to Daphne Manning and friends. Following the formal end of proceedings the rest of the evening was spent in the lounge relaxing and chatting.



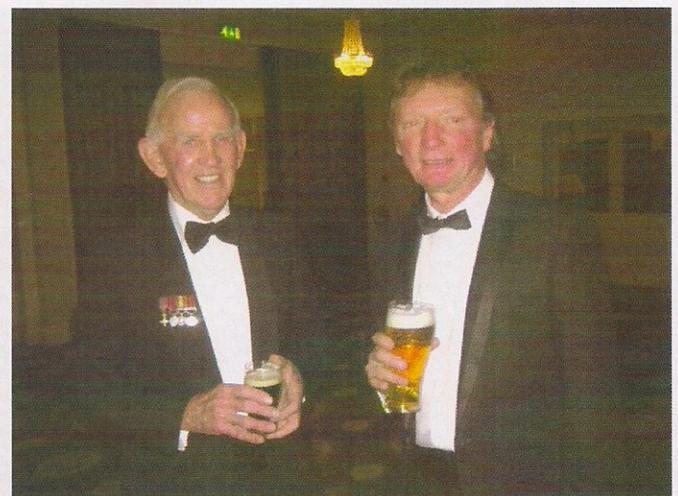
The Group during dinner



Douglas during his address



Committee members



President and Chairman

Just a few photographs of the many taken during the dinner which captures the mood of the evening.

2015 RORKE'S DRIFT DINNER

Following the success of the Group dinner last January and as agreed at this year's AGM the annual Rorke's Drift Dinner will again be held next year at the Metropole Hotel, Llandrindod Wells on Saturday 24th January at 7.30. The cost of the dinner for a three course meal will be £25 per person. Guests of members will also be very welcome. If you wish to attend please fill in the attached booking form and return with your payment to the Group Secretary Danny Tully. For accommodation at the Metropole if required a special rate has been arranged of £90 for a double room or £55 for a single room, all to include full breakfast and use of the hotel's facilities. Tel. 01597 82370. If booking direct please mention the 1879 Group. The dress code will be Black Tie, Mess Dress and uniform.

TYNTESFIELD 2014

Our return visit to Tyntesfield took place on 28th/29th June when a display of marching and drill took place followed by Danny in full Zulu outfit with the support of our men in red giving a talk on the battle of Isandlwana which was well received by a good crowd. In the afternoon Danny gave a further talk on Zulu weapons and tactics. The day's events ended with a firing demonstration.

Sunday started with a church service in which Roger Morgan paid tribute to Keith. The first show of the day was in front of the manor house when Danny this time in the uniform of the 17th Lancers talked about Rorke's Drift and the battle of Ulundi. To end our talks Roger gave his usual and always interesting demonstrations of battlefield medical techniques and treatments.

HUGHENDEN 2014



Action from Hughenden on 12th/13th July, featuring Russell, Glynne, Jimmy Patterson, Bob and Toby Coates on Rocket launching. Russell, Glynne and Jimmy on Signals.

No prizes for guessing who the mighty Zulu warrior is but he obviously packs a pretty mean assegai!

GROUP MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY

The Group's membership Secretary Mr. Barrie Evans has had to stand down for personal reasons. Barrie has been secretary for a number of years and was instrumental in restructuring the old paperwork system and digitising and regularly updating all of our members details. The committee is pleased to announce that Viv Watkins has agreed to be our new Membership Secretary. Many thanks Barrie for all your good work. We hope to see you at future Committee meetings.

ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP RENEWALS

All members will know that the annual membership fee of £10 is due on the 1st June each year and whilst the vast majority do in fact comply with this there are a small number who forget and have to be reminded sometimes more than once. To help rectify this situation it was agreed at the AGM that if payment is not received by 1st July and following a reminder, that individual's name should be removed from the official Group membership list. In the event that that former member then wishes to rejoin, a default payment of £5 will be required in addition to the normal £10 annual subscription. So would all members please avoid this situation arising and ensure prompt payment by the due date.

NEW RRW MUSEUM CURATOR

Most members will know that Bill Cainan has stepped down as curator. Since taking over this role Bill has made a major contribution in safe guarding the long term future of the museum and his restructuring of the Anglo-Zulu war room in particular has been very impressive. We will certainly miss Bill as curator but with his expertise in military history we hope to maintain our connection with him as a long standing member of the 1879 Group. Many, many thanks Bill and all good wishes. Ceila Green also has retired from her role as Customer Services Manager and we wish her a happy retirement though she will be retaining her links with the museum by undertaking some research work. The new curator and administrator is Mr. Stephen Farish who we wish every success in his new role.

THE DEATH OF THE PRINCE IMPERIAL

Following the French defeat in the Franco Prussian war of 1870, the French Emperor Napoleon III sought refuge in England. Napoleon's son Louis, the Prince Imperial was sent to the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich to be trained as an artillery officer, though being French he could never have been commissioned as a British Officer. He passed out 7th in his class in 1875 and on the death of his father, Louis became the heir apparent to the French throne. Should France have decided to restore Imperial rule Louis would have become Napoleon IV.

With the outbreak of the Anglo-Zulu war in January 1879 Louis petitioned the Army's Commander-in-Chief to be allowed to accompany the British Army to South Africa as an observer only.

Reluctantly the Government allowed Louis's request and in March aged 23 he arrived in South Africa. He was employed as an ADC on the General's staff and conducted a number of mounted reconnaissances. On 1st June the Prince embarked on another patrol but he was young and headstrong and refused to wait for a full escort of cavalry. In the early afternoon the small patrol of half a dozen men stopped at a small deserted kraal to rest their horses. They were suddenly ambushed by about 50 Zulus. The patrol fled but Louis unable to mount his horse was overwhelmed and killed.

Louis's body was eventually recovered and was returned to England. His tomb is now in a small convent in Farnborough, Hampshire.

The following year his mother Empress Eugenie decided on a pilgrimage to Zululand to visit the spot where her son had died. Although the war was over by this time, the country was far from peaceful but the Zulus were so impressed by her courage that they allowed her party to proceed unmolested.

On her way back to Durban the Empress stopped at the battlefield of Isandlwana and while there picked some wild flowers and sent them to the widow of Captain Reginald Younghusband of the 24th Regiment who was killed there. Those flowers are today still displayed at the RRW Museum Brecon.

ISANDLWANA. THE MYTH AND REALITY OF THE AMMUNITION BOXES

Part 1. The Myth

Following the catastrophic defeat at Isandlwana there was much debate in trying to understand how the defeat could have happened and who or what was to blame. One of the myths which evolved concerned the ammunition supply to the firing line which ran out as the ammunition boxes themselves could not be opened fast enough due to the lack of screwdrivers. This situation was supposed to have been made worse by the stubbornness of the two Battalion Quartermasters who refused to issue ammunition to anyone but soldiers of their own battalions.

The source of this arose initially as a result of an account written by General Horace Smith-Dorrien in his 'Memories of Forty-eight Years Service' published in 1925. In those memories written 46 years after the battle Smith-Dorrien says :

'I will mention a story which speaks for the coolness and discipline of the regiment. I, having no particular duty to perform in camp saw the whole Zulu Army advancing. I collected camp stragglers such as artillerymen in charge of spare horses, officers' servants, the sick etc and had them taken to the ammunition boxes where we broke them open as fast as we could and kept sending out the packages to the firing line. (In those days the boxes were screwed down and it was a very difficult job to get them open, and it was due to this battle that the construction of ammunition boxes changed.)

When I had been engaged at this for some time and the 1st/24th had fallen back to where we were with the Zulus following closely, Bloomfield the Quartermaster of the 2nd/24th said to me "For heaven's sake don't take that man for it belongs to our battalion". And I replied "Hang it all, you don't want a requisition now do you?"

It was about this time that Smith-Dorrien seems to imply that the ammunition supply to the firing line had broken down though he then contradicts himself by saying that he collected stragglers who opened some boxes and sent the packages to the line. He then goes on to say that the boxes were screwed down and it was a very difficult job to get them open. There then comes the statement that Quartermaster Bloomfield of the 2nd battalion refused to issue ammunition to the men of the 1st battalion!

From this the myth of the ammunition failure has arisen and was heavily re-enforced in the film 'Zulu Dawn'. As recently as 1995 an American book, 'Great Military Blunders' by Major Steven Eden (US Army) repeats the myth and embellishes it even further.

The distance from the ammunition wagons to the firing line has now grown to one mile, the screws securing the ammunition box have now increased to six and with only one screwdriver per battalion!

In addition **both** quartermasters are now refusing to issue ammunition outside of their respective battalions. (As some-one once said 'Why let the facts get in the way of a good story!')

Part 2. The Reality

On display in the Anglo-Zulu war room at the Brecon museum there is an original ammunition box which was recovered from the battlefield at Isandlwana together with a modern reproduction. On examination the copper bands can clearly be seen to keep the box intact whilst in transit. They do not have to be removed to open the box. The ammunition packages are accessed by a sliding lid between the copper bands. This lid is kept in place by its tapered shape and tongued and grooved side fittings which is held in place by one brass screw.

To open the box the screw is undone, the lid is slid out and the inner tinfoil box is accessed. The box remains intact and can be used again. As part of the cleaning kit for the Martini-Henry rifle there is a combination tool which has a number of screwdriver attachments. One man in five was issued with such a tool so that in every infantry company there would be at least 20 men who had the means to unscrew the single screw on the lid of the box.

However in an emergency a sharp blow (eg with a rifle butt) to the edge of the lid opposite to the side that held the screw would result in the side of the box splitting and the screw bending and falling out.

A recent archaeological investigation on the battlefield found a number of bent screws along the firing line, evidence that ammunition boxes had been brought up to the line and not issued from supply wagons as incorrectly portrayed in 'Zulu Dawn'.

THE ACTUAL AMMUNITION SUPPLY AT THE BATTLE

Each Imperial Company had its own ammunition wagon in which that company's reserve was kept. This would be approximately 25 boxes each containing 600 rounds. It is likely that the wagons of each battalion were located centrally behind that battalions' tent lines. Initially there were 7 companies of the 2nd/24th Regiment and 5 companies of the 1st/24th. In addition there would be ammunition wagons for the Natal Native Contingent and for the Natal Native Horse though this wagon was somewhere on the road from Rorke's Drift having fallen behind Col. Durnford's native cavalry men when they rode into camp that morning. Lord Chelmsford had in the early hours of the 22nd January taken 6 companies of 2nd/24 to investigate the sighting of a large Zulu force to the south-east near the Mangeni Falls. To facilitate a fast march the companies only took their ready ammunition with them which comprised 70 rounds per man. Their reserve ammunition remained in 6 wagons at Isandlwana under the control of Quartermaster Bloomfield who was probably under orders to keep the wagons loaded and ready to move forward should the reserve ammunition be required.

As the battle progressed the men of the 5 companies of the 1st/24 on the firing line would have re-supplied their ammunition from their own company ammunition wagons grouped under the control of their Quartermaster Pullen. One company of the 2nd/24 remained in camp and they would have re-supplied from one of Bloomfield's wagons.

Officers from the NNH tried to get some ammunition from Bloomfield to support Durnford's stand at the donga having failed to locate their own supply wagon. A point to be made here is that the NNH really required carbine ammunition not something carried by Bloomfield. The .45/577 round was theoretically interchangeable between the MH carbine and rifle but the round for the carbine was underpowered compared to the rifle round. Although the rifle round would fire from the carbine there was an element of risk. A similar situation occurred later in the day when the NNH arrived at Rorke's Drift having expended all their ammunition. Not all the native cavalry carried carbines that used ammunition compatible with the Martini-Henry.

The 1st/24 were clearly getting their ammunition from Pullen, their own battalion quartermaster, the 2nd/24 from Bloomfield, their Quartermaster, and the NNC from their wagon. The NNH should of course have had their ammunition from their wagon but unfortunately did not know its location!

So that particular myth is exposed but there were a number of other strategic errors which eventually led to the total defeat of Chelmsford's depleted army that day.

ALCOHOL AND TEMPERANCE IN THE ARMY

Drinking alcohol was often the soldier's only relief from the tedium and poor living conditions of the barracks. Each barrack did have a canteen, some were cosy affairs almost like a civilian public house while others had flagstones floors and a few rough tables and chairs. However not all canteens were 'wet' and from 1868 there were also 'dry' canteens. On foreign stations wide verandas around the outside of the buildings provided shelter from sun and rain while a serving hatch provided direct contact with the central store room and the drink.

Although being drunk was a criminal offence, officialdom frequently turned a blind eye to it in an off-duty situation. In the early period canteens stocked only spirits of cheap poor quality but in 1847 in an effort to control drinking the army switched officially to beer only though spirits could still be had. There were still frequent bar-room brawls however which led to a situation whereby regiments on home service got paid on different days to reduce the risk of fighting. It would be true to say that the majority were not drunkards and temperance societies had existed within the army since 1823 and by 1885 there were 144 societies with over 12,000 in India alone. By 1896 the figure had risen to over 22,000 with a further 12,000 at home. On active service of course there would have been a total ban on alcohol for the rank and file though one wonders whether this would have applied to officers?

Was there any substance to the officers Mess Tent scene in 'Zulu Dawn' for example where the place seemed to be awash with claret? Any further comments on this subject?

THOSE COMMISSIONING DATES

We all enjoy making comment on the historical inaccuracies which are in our favourite film but the one involving the seniority debate between Chard and Bromhead is perhaps not quite so obvious. Bromhead is first to tell Chard the date of his commission as Lieutenant as May 1872. Chard then replies that his commission was February 1872 giving him three months seniority. In reality Chard had over three years seniority with the actual date of his commission with the Royal Engineers as 15th July 1868. Bromhead was commissioned on 28th October 1871. (From Hart's Army List of 1878)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Roger Morgan, Bill Cainan, Danny Tully and Russell Dunton for responding so well to appeals for articles. Also thanks to Barrie Evans for helping with postage and packaging. Members addresses have now been digitised to labels which will help speed up distribution. My personal thanks also for the help and always ready co-operation of the Group's printer Andreas Haaf and son of Port Talbot.

ASSEGAI EDITORIAL SUPPORT

Any information, articles or comments on any aspect of the content in this issue of the Assegai or any views on the work or governance of the Group in general which you feel would be of interest to your fellow members will be very much appreciated. Please send any relevant material as soon as you are able to do so. The more material which can be gathered, the more likely we are to meet our aim of publishing two issues of the Assegai each year.

ADVERTISING

Should any member wish to sell any article or is looking for any specific item to purchase then please send in the details which will then be included in the next issue,

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MEMBERS NOTES :



TO OUR GOOD FRIEND KEITH