



The South African Military History Society

Die Suid-Afrikaanse Krygshistoriese Vereniging

Founded 1966

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NEWSLETTER - AUGUST 2008

Despite the freezing cold weather prevailing outside the lecture theatre, the last monthly meeting had a near-record audience that was warmly welcomed by the Chairman Bob Smith. After the usual notices of forthcoming tours and meetings Bob introduced the curtain-raising speaker who was Mr John Cramp.

John was born in the UK and after a career in the petroleum industry settled in South Africa in 1990. He has a wide variety of interests predominant among which is a love of military history, with particular reference to the period of "the scramble for Africa" between 1870 and 1910. The subject of his lecture was "Rorke's Drift - 1879: What Became Of The Heroes?"

Starting his talk with a brief summing up of the events leading to the outbreak of the Zulu War of 1879, John led us rapidly through the opening stages of that war, the British defeat at Isandhlwana, and the Zulu arrival at Rorke's Drift, a supply depot garrisoned by approximately 450 men. These consisted of 150 Imperial troops and 300 troops of the Natal Native Contingent who, on receiving warning of the approaching Zulu force, were a large enough number to quickly put up a series of barricades around the mission station which formed the core of the depot, the decision having been made to stay and fight from a defensive position rather than risk being caught in the open in an attempt to withdraw. The defences were commanded by two lieutenants, a Royal Engineer officer by name of John Chard and an officer of the 24th Regiment by name of Gonville Bromhead, Chard being senior to Bromhead by virtue of his date of commission.

John then led us through the actual engagement and the part played by various members of the garrison, adding that one incident, which at first appeared calamitous, was in fact a blessing in disguise. This was the instant desertion of the Natal Native Contingent, which left more room behind the barricades that were only the size of five tennis courts, and this allowed the Imperial troops room to move rapidly from point to point.

After the action, which resulted in Chard's force repelling the Zulu attack, the unexpected victory proved a distinct blessing for the British military authorities, particularly Lord Chelmsford, the British commander. Here was a golden opportunity to play off this victory against the astounding defeat at Isandhlwana and thus divert attention away from the defeat. In modern terms this would be known as "spin".

In order to maximise the part played by "the heroes of Rorke's Drift", and divert attention from Isandhlwana, Chelmsford ordered the Battalion Commander of the 2nd Battalion of the 24th Regiment of Foot to submit six

names of NCOs and Privates who had conducted themselves in an exemplary manner during the action at Rorke's Drift. This was done. On receiving the list Chelmsford added the names of the two officers and these eight names were gazetted. There was an immediate reaction in the form of a request that members of the Service Corps, namely the Medics and Commissariat, should also be added. This brought the total up to ten, and a further request that a member of the Colonial Forces should also be included, gave a final total of eleven Victoria Crosses being awarded. This is the highest number ever awarded for one action.

John then gave us a look at the later careers of each of the recipients in turn. None of them prospered. The two most famous, Chard and Bromhead, were described as dull and plodding before the action and the action did not change this. Unlike other gallant officers of the Victorian army, they made no attempt to use their VCs to further their careers and frustrated their superiors who tried to push them career wise. Chard enjoyed the patronage of the head of the British Army, the Duke of Cambridge, and was well liked by Queen Victoria, who entertained him to weekend visits on two occasions, but his career stalled at Colonel. He died of cancer of the tongue at the age of 50.

It is now supposed that Bromhead suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder after the action. He was also hard of hearing and these two problems combined to make him withdrawn and unsociable. He refused to speak about Rorke's Drift and never rose above the rank of Brevet Major, which was awarded to him as a result of the action. He died of enteric fever in Allahabad in India in 1891. Dr James Reynolds, the Medic who was awarded the VC, received accelerated promotion and a jump in seniority and passed away only in 1932 as a Colonel, after a happy and prosperous life. James Dalton, the stores officer, was severely wounded in the action and discharged. He returned to Britain and re-enlisted for a further 22 years before retiring and returning to South Africa. Once here, he purchased a share in the Little Bess Gold Mine but passed away suddenly in an hotel in Port Elizabeth, where he is buried in the Roman Catholic cemetery, the only Rorke's Drift VC to be buried in South Africa.

Corporal William Allen, one of the two NCOs to be awarded the medal, remained in the Army as a marksman and instructor but died of influenza in 1890. The other NCO, Corporal Ferdinand Schiess of the Natal Native Contingent, continued in active service until the end of the Zulu War when he was demobilised. He became unemployed but never at any time in his job applications mentioned his VC. In a state of destitution he was eventually given a passage to Britain in a Royal naval ship but died off the coast of West Africa and was buried at sea. His VC was found among his personal effects and is now on display in the National Army Museum in London.

The Private soldiers fared hardly any better. James Williams was demobilised but remained with the South Wales Borderers in a civilian capacity until his death in 1935, as the oldest surviving Rorke's Drift VC. William Jones was discharged as unfit for military service after a chequered career as an "old sweat". His civilian career was just as disastrous and after a music hall career and a stint in Wild Bill Hickock's Wild West Show he died a pauper in 1913 and was buried in a pauper's grave in Manchester. Private Fred Hitch was severely wounded in the shoulder during the action and invalided out of the Army. After a period as a commissionaire, he became a London taxi driver and held in high esteem by his colleagues who turned out en masse for his funeral in 1913. Robert Jones also suffered from stress after Rorke's Drift and, after working for a while as a farm labourer and gardener, he stole his employer's rifle and shot himself in 1891.

The final VC, and possibly the most famous was Henry Hook. On conclusion of the Zulu War, Hook bought his discharge from the Army and, using references to his VC, became a labourer at the British Museum. He rose through the minor hierarchy of the Museum becoming in turn a Book Duster and then in control of the Men's

Umbrella Cbakroom. After 27 years service, during which he also wrote his account of the action, he developed consumption and retired on medical grounds, dying a few months later in Gloucester and receiving a hero's funeral.

At the conclusion of this beautifully researched and illustrated talk John was thanked by Bob for his choice of such an interesting subject and the detailed personal research he had obviously done. Bob then introduced our Main Speaker for the evening. This was Mr Marius Whittle whose subject was "Airborne and Airmobile Warfare in Southern Africa".

Marius was born in South Africa and educated at Christian Brothers College in Kimberley before doing his National Service with 7 Medical Brigade. He has an Honours degree in Strategic Studies and a Master's in International Politics and a keen interest in recent military history, hence the subject of his talk.

The term "airborne" signifies the use of paratroopers or "parabats", while "airmobile" indicates troops landed by helicopter or glider, and using exceptionally good illustrations Marius set out to tell us how these different concepts were used in Southern African conflicts between 1961 and 1988. Gliders were never used and airborne operations were in the minority, so the focus was mainly on the use of helicopters landing small highly trained groups of troops in the vicinity of the enemy.

It came as a surprise to the audience to hear of Portugal's pioneering role in the use of both airborne and airmobile troops in her African colonies. Starting in 1961, Portugal commenced a Counter Insurgency (COIN) campaign in Angola, facing the difficulty of vast distances both in Angola and from her own bases in Portugal. These were overcome by the extensive use of aircraft and helicopters and her first operations in the campaign were carried out by paratroops that made four operational jumps in the first year of the campaign. In 1962 the Portuguese had acquired the Alouette III helicopter and by 1966 had perfected both an helicopter gunship, which Marius explained to us in detail, and airmobile tactics to go with it. With a combined operational area of 2 065 000 square kilometres - Angola, Portuguese Guinea and Mozambique - and only 93 helicopters to cover it, Portugal still managed the remarkable feat of containing the insurgency forces until 1974 when her own revolution brought her empire to an end.

In this same year fighting flared up in the then Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and, after showing us various examples of helicopter gun ships used by the Rhodesians, Marius described the concept of a "fire force" and how such forces were used. Using Alouettes, Lynxes and Dakotas, the fire forces grew in size and efficiency as airborne troops were added to the airmobile concept and by the end of the Bush War were highly effective.

South Africa drew on the experiences of both Portugal and Rhodesia but, as the prevalent land power of the region, was able to dominate the enemy in South West Africa (Namibia) and Southern Angola through the use of highly mobile land forces. Thus airmobile and airborne forces were never used very extensively. However an airborne assault was carried out in 1978 as part of Operation Reindeer, when a composite battalion of 370 parabats attacked the town of Cassinga. Marius concluded his talk by explaining this assault in detail, including an explanation of the tactics used.

After a brief question period, Marius was thanked for an outstanding talk by Hamish Paterson, after which the Chairman adjourned the meeting so that members could enjoy the tea and book sale that followed.

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FORTHCOMING LECTURES

Johannesburg:

14th August

CR	Felicia Fourie	Four Remarkable Women of the Anglo Boer War
ML	Ken Gillings	The Aftermath of the Anglo-Boer War.

11th September

CR	Robin Gardiner	Special Operations Executives in Burma
ML	John Parkinson	<i>HMS Durban</i> ; WW2 - The East & D-Day

KZN in Durban:

14th August

DDH	Mike Laing	Lili Marlene
MAIN	Robin Smith	Battle of Shiloh

Cape Town:

Thursday 14 August 2008 - **War in the Southern Oceans 1939 to 1945**

Our speaker is Mr Ulick Brown. He will discuss Sea Transport in Southern African waters during World War 2 - the control of shipping movements, the U-boat war waged against merchant shipping and the convoy system and other means used to protect merchant shipping. An unusual subject, this should prove to be a very interesting talk.

SAMHSEC in Port Elizabeth:

11th August

CR	Tim Jones	The RAF's most decorated squadron
MAIN	Peter Gordon	Xhosa Warfare

8th September:

CR	Piet Hall	Revolutionary Warfare
MAIN	Jock Harris	5 SA Infantry Battalion

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