



History 101

Rorke's Drift

I spotted this cover immediately...because I have the movie! [*Zulu*, Sean Connery, Michael Caine] What an event! What a story! Rorke's Drift was the name of the mission station in South Africa that became the site of an incredible battle in 1879 that was part of the Anglo-Zulu War, which in itself was also unique, as wars go.

On January 22, 1879, after already defeating the British Army earlier that morning, the Zulus launched an overwhelming attack against the tiny force at Rorke's Drift. It was approximately 4,500 Zulus (all fresh warriors) against 140 British soldiers, 10 African volunteer troops, and 5 civilians! In spite of being awe-inspiringly outnumbered, the three officers (Lieutenant Chard, Lieutenant Bromhead, and Acting Assistant Commissary Dalton) decided that staying and fighting was the only acceptable course. They had nowhere to really escape to since the Zulus might be anywhere, and the Zulus would have caught them in any event.

Once the decision was made, the station was fortified as best they could do. At this point, Chard (in command) had 129 healthy British soldiers, some 225-250 Natal Native Contingent soldiers, and 100 mounted natives of the Natal Native Horse! However, at first word that the Zulus were approaching, the entire native contingent and the mounted natives all fled! At a stroke, the defending force was reduced by more than half before the battle had even begun!

The battle continued back and forth through the day and well into the night, the British slowly, but continually, giving ground to the Zulu onrush. In the course of the fighting, the hospital had to be evacuated, as did the cattle kraal, leaving the defenders in a small bastion around the storehouse. At that point, out of 20,000 rounds of ammunition in reserve, Chard and his men were down to 900. The Zulu attacks continued until after midnight, but by dawn they had given up. By 8 AM, Lord Chelmsford's relief column had arrived.

The Rorke's Drift battle had cost the British 17 dead and 14 wounded. The Zulus lost app. 650, plus many more wounded. Shortly after the battle, three more of the garrison died, two of wounds, one from disease. Eleven Victoria Crosses were awarded to the British defenders at Rorke's Drift, the most ever received in a single action by one regiment. It could be argued that the unprecedented number of awards was a reaction to the earlier British defeat at the Battle of Isandlwana, although the British there killed twice as many of the enemy as they, themselves, lost, and that extolling the victory also took the public's attention away from the fact that Lord Chelmsford had disobeyed orders by entering Zululand. None of this takes anything away from the defenders of Rorke's Drift.

Worthy of note is Corporal Christian Schiess, the only non-British or Commonwealth VC winner, who died in poverty five years later on a ship to England and was buried at sea. His only possession was his Victoria Cross, which is now on display in the Regimental Museum with the others that were awarded for Rorke's Drift. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rorke's_Drift]

