



"Defending the Storehouse" by Jason Askew. Art courtesy Anglo Zulu War Historical Society, www.anglozuluwar.com.

BATTLE ANALYSIS: The Battle at Rorke's Drift

by Captain Arch Ratliff III

Although the following analysis of the Battle of Rorke's Drift is presented in an after action review (AAR) format, with obviously fictional dialogue, the information that forms the basis of the analysis is factual and taken from the accompanying bibliography of texts.

Observer controller (O/C): "Good morning gentlemen, let's get started with our AAR for the battle at Rorke's Drift. We have the British army commander, the garrison commander at Rorke's Drift, the Zulu army commander, and the Zulu commander at Rorke's Drift all present. Let us begin with a review of the British army's mission. Lord Chelmsford."

British commander, Lord Chelmsford: "Our mission was to attack in zone to destroy the Zulu army's main body along the center axis of advance into Zululand to prevent the enemy from attacking settlements in Transvaal and Natal.¹

"The decisive point of the operation was destroying the Zulu main body within the borders of Zululand. My intent was to advance into Zululand along multiple axis of advance from Transvaal and Natal to destroy the Zulu main body before we arrived at the Royal Kraal at Ulundi. Our advance along ma-

yor avenues of approach between Transvaal, Natal, and Zululand was meant to keep the Zulu army from conducting a counterattack into the two territories. The endstate desired was the destruction of the Zulu main body in Zululand, and to prevent enemy forces from conducting counterattacks into Transvaal and Natal."²

O/C: "Thank you. King Cetshwayo, please describe for us your mission and intent for your army."

Zulu King Cetshwayo: "My mission for the army was to defend in depth along the major avenue of approach from Natal to disrupt the center column's advance to Ulundi."³

"The decisive point of the operation was the attrition of the enemy heavily and quickly on Zulu soil. I realized early on that the British would move on Ulundi in an attempt to draw us out in an open fight. I also fully comprehended the logistics resources available to the British army, especially if the home government perceived us as a true threat to their colonial expansion. Therefore, my intent was to conduct a limited defensive campaign within the borders of Zululand aimed at attriting the British without appearing to be the aggressor. The endstate desired was to disrupt the

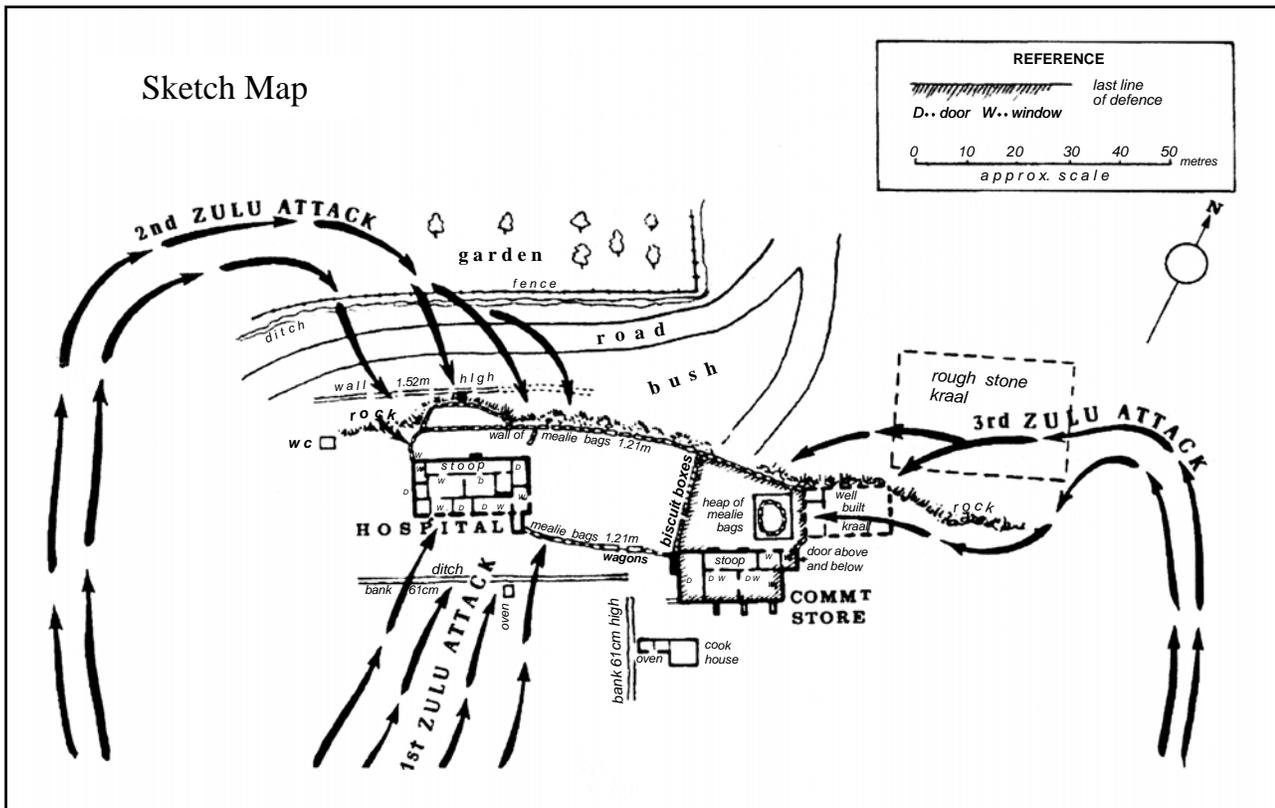
British center column prior to their arrival at Ulundi, to force a favorable resolution with the British government."⁴

O/C: "Thank you. Lieutenant Chard, please describe the situation at Rorke's Drift prior to the battle."

Rorke's Drift commander, Lieutenant Chard: "As an engineer officer, I was sent to Rorke's Drift to repair damage caused by the heavy traffic from the center column's crossing. The commander of the outpost, Major Spalding left for Helpmekeer on the morning of 22 January to help along the reinforcements promised us. Due to my seniority, he left me in charge of the outpost in his absence."⁵

"There were several aspects of terrain that I failed to consider during my initial estimate of the situation, until they became significant factors in the battle. I will refer to the accompanying sketch map (Map 1) throughout my description of the situation.

"The drift was located on the Mzinyathe River and was trafficable except during periods of extreme flooding. The outpost was approximately one-half mile from the crossing and consisted of two existing buildings converted into a hospital and a commissary storehouse."⁶



Map 1. The Defense of Rorke's Drift courtesy South African Military History Society, "The Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift" by G.A. Chadwick, *Military History Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 4, December 1978, <http://rapidtp.com/milhist/vol044gc.html>.

"Not many natural obstacles existed apart from the Mzinyathe River to the north and Shiyane Hill, 500 meters to the south. There were, however, several man-made obstacles including a well-built stone kraal to the east that measured 17x10 meters, and a rough stone kraal northeast of the storehouse that measured 30x30 meters. A barricade of mealie bags formed a perimeter between the hospital, the storehouse, and the well-built kraal. Additionally, biscuit boxes stacked two-high formed a wall that divided the outpost into two sectors, the west sector that included the hospital and its large open yard, and the east sector that included the smaller yard, the storehouse, and the well-built kraal.⁷

"A line of rocks forming a 1.5-meter-high ledge was located 5 meters from the hospital running east to west across the entire length of the outpost, providing excellent cover for the enemy. The mealie bag barricades were erected along the axis of the ledge to allow us to fire down into the deadspace that it provided, and in fact, it had the effect of creating an 8-foot barrier on the attacker's side. However, the thick brush to the north of the ledge provided excellent concealment to within meters of the ledge and some 5 meters from the perimeter. At the base of the ledge, a retaining wall allowed for some cover

and concealment from the enemy, but we lacked the resources to completely cover the deadspace it created.⁸

"Generally, observation was good, except for a blind spot on the west wall of the hospital, and the small intervisibility line created by the retaining wall along the ledge. Unfortunately, time did not permit the clearance of the brush north of the ledge, which limited target acquisition in that area.⁹

"Although the battlefield was fairly contained due to the small size of the defense, there were a number of key pieces of terrain in the small area. Shiyane Hill, a rocky hill to the south overlooked the outpost and provided a superb location for an enemy support by fire position. Had the enemy been able to provide accurate and sustained fire from the hill, it would have rendered our position untenable within minutes. The two buildings at the outpost and well-built kraal were key terrain due to the cover that they provided for the defender. Initially, I thought that the loss of any one of these, especially the storehouse, would have resulted in the defeat of the defense. The brush to the north of the ledge provided a location to advance a large number of personnel without immediate observation, a tactic that was successfully employed against us repeatedly during battle.¹⁰

"Even though the enemy seemed to come from all sides, it became evident that two main avenues of approach existed into the outpost. The first, from the west, took advantage of the blind spot created by the design of the hospital and would eventually prove the open yard in west sector to be untenable. The second was in the north and used the brush to the north of the ledge. It provided a superb assault position for the enemy and allowed them a location to regroup after each attack."¹¹

O/C: "Let's continue with the Zulu commander at Rorke's Drift. Prince Dabulamanzi, please explain your intent and concept of operations for the attack on the outpost."

Zulu commander at Rorke's Drift, Prince Dabulamanzi: "During the attack on the encampment at Isandlwana on the morning of 22 January, I was with approximately 4,000 warriors of the uThuwana, iNdlondlo, and uDloko Regiments, as well as elements of the iNdluyengwe Regiment. As the main body pursued British scouts and overran the center column's encampment at Isandlwana, we served as the reserve force and, therefore, did not take part in the assault. With this in mind, I intended to press the attack on the British by attacking the outpost near Rorke's Drift as the remainder of the main body

continued to search for the larger portion of the center column that had not been present at the encampment that morning. My estimate of the situation was that the garrison could have no more than a few hundred soldiers and we had just defeated more than 1,300 at Isandlwana. It seemed a simple enough operation.”¹²

O/C: “How did attacking the garrison at Rorke’s Drift meet your higher commander’s intent for the campaign?”

Prince Dabulamanzi: “Well, it did not meet with the king’s intent to conduct defensive operations on Zulu soil. However, my warriors did not get to take part in the battle at Isandlwana, and they could not return home without ‘washing their spears.’ I had hoped that a successful attack would counteract any repercussions from King Cetshwayo for attacking into Natal. However, a successful attack was not to be the case.”¹³

O/C: “Thank you. Please continue with your scheme of maneuver.”

Prince Dabulamanzi: “My scheme of maneuver for the attack on Rorke’s Drift was based on our standard tactics that have been employed for decades and served us successfully earlier in the day at Isandlwana. As we advanced on the garrison, the regiments were deployed into the standard ‘bull’s head’ formation with an advanced guard in front, the main body directly to the rear, and two ‘horns’ or crescent-shaped formations to each flank of the advanced guard. The advanced guard would fix the enemy, while the flanking formations would envelop the enemy to block its withdrawal. The main body was then employed at the weakest point to destroy the enemy. The bull formation and subsequent enveloping maneuver is a direct reflection of our warfighting philosophy, which favors tactical maneuver to apply overwhelming force at the enemy’s weakest point. Although we travel on foot, our warriors are some of the best conditioned in the world and have no trouble running for miles and launching directly into multiple-hour close combat battles using our stabbing spears and shields.”¹⁴

O/C: “As we commence analysis of the battle, please keep in mind that we are particularly interested in key events and how the warfighting functions of command and control, maneuver, fires, intelligence, logistics, and force protection were tied into the actions of the battle. Lieutenant Chard, please talk us

through the first Zulu attack on the garrison.”

Lieutenant Chard: “Although we heard shots all morning coming from Isandlwana, it was not until a Natal Native Horse Troop raced by the garrison that we received our first intelligence update. Having taken part in the defeat at Isandlwana, they had no intention of staying at the drift and quickly rode away. Much of the Natal Native Contingent followed their lead and abandoned post. It reduced our effective combat power from approximately 350 men to around 150, the bulk of which was made up of Lieutenant Bromhead’s Company B, 2d Battalion, 24th Regiment. The Natal Native Horse Troop commander did inform us of the results of the battle and it was my understanding that the entire center column had been destroyed. It was not until after the battle that I learned only the encampment at Isandlwana, and not the main body of the center column, had been destroyed.”¹⁵

“After the situation update from the Natal Native Horse Troop commander, I began considering our options. After consulting with subordinates and Lieutenant Bromhead, we came up with two basic courses of action. The first was for the garrison to pack up as much as possible including the infirm, of which we had about 30 men, and move to Helpmekeer approximately 30 miles away, to join the reserve force that had been left there. The second was to stay and establish a perimeter defense at the garrison and use our massed rifle fire to repel enemy attacks. Neither option seemed very appealing at the time. However, after considering the enemy’s tactics, his ability to move great distances, and his desire to use envelopment to overwhelm his enemy, I knew that conducting any type of road march over 30 miles of open ground would play to the enemy’s advantage. Therefore, I chose the second course of action to stay and defend the garrison.”¹⁶

“I placed an observation post (OP) at the top of Shiyane Hill to give me advance warning, and at around 1600 hours, it informed us that a Zulu army of about 4,000 warriors was moving east toward the garrison. The OP could see that they were starting to transition into their ‘bull’s head’ formation, at which point we immediately manned the entire 100-yard perimeter. At 1630 hours, we saw the initial elements of the Zulu army at about 600 yards west of the west

sector of the garrison. They immediately raced toward us, covering the ground more quickly than expected. Even though the Martini-Henry 0.450 caliber rifles we used could fire out to 1,000 yards, I held fire until 500 yards to more accurately mass our fires.”¹⁷

O/C: “Prince Dabulamanzi, what was your understanding of the situation at this point?”

Prince Dabulamanzi: “I quickly positioned myself on top of Shiyane Hill to observe the battle and more easily control the attack. At this stage, I knew that the advanced guard had immediately launched into an attack on arrival at the garrison. They sought to immediately overwhelm the force when they saw it was even smaller than expected. However, by 1640 hours, the continuous volley of rifle fire from the storehouse and the hospital had created such a heavy crossfire that the assault was halted some 50 meters from the perimeter.”¹⁸

“I would like to point out that although our force was numerically superior, the relatively small size of the enemy’s garrison prevented us from using our size as an advantage. As we tried to attack the small, weak points of the enemy’s defense, we quickly became backed up at the point of penetration. This meant that every time we massed our forces they were much deeper than they were wide and this limited the number of warriors that we could bring to bear against gaps in the garrison defense at any one time. Combine this bottleneck with the massed fires tearing through our ranks, and it made for a formidable barrier to overcome.

“However, while acknowledging the physical effects that the rifle fire had on our formations, at this point the psychological effects of sustained volleys of rifle fire were negligible. In fact, the 18-inch bayonet that the British used was much more intimidating. It outreached our stabbing spear by more than 2 feet, and each warrior readily understood its effects.”¹⁹

O/C: “Seeing that the garrison was able to effectively repel your initial assault and that your maneuver-style tactics had little effect on the defense, what was your intent with the arrival of the main body?”

Prince Dabulamanzi: “After the advanced guard’s attack was repelled, the remaining warriors moved around the

west of the hospital and to an assault position in the thick brush north of the western sector. By 1645 hours, they had commenced a series of assaults on the north perimeter by the hospital. At 1655 hours, seeing heavy fire to the southwest and the advanced guard engaged in an assault from the bush at the north, the main body moved to support the advanced guard's assault.²⁰

"It was then that I placed approximately 100 marksmen armed with Brown Bess flintlock rifles, relics of the Napoleonic wars, on Shiyane Hill. However, fires from the riflemen, due to the antiquated rifles and the lack of marksmanship training, failed to produce the desired effects on the garrison. Conversely, the British soldiers on the southern perimeter, being free from the attacks along the northern barricade, were able to fire accurately at the riflemen on the hill. The heavy billows of smoke from the black powder gave excellent aiming points for the British soldiers."²¹

O/C: "Fighting continued along the northern perimeter as the main body joined the fight with the assaulting Zulus spreading out to the east along the entire length of the northern perimeter. By 1800 hours, numerous uncoordinated assaults had occurred along the northern perimeter and to the west at the hospital. Prince Dabulamanzi, what was the intent of these assaults?"

Prince Dabulamanzi: "There was no 'intent' in the military sense of the word, other than to overwhelm the enemy through repeated assaults. These assaults were in effect uncoordinated above the small-unit level. The officers at the subordinate levels were controlling the assaults at this point. Without the ability to maneuver freely, they had started to rely on mass, trying to overwhelm the perimeter. However, they were doing so without coordination between the different units. Remember, we had four different regiments attacking a 50-meter perimeter at the north wall, and I was not in a position to control the attack at the small-unit level. It was a breakdown of the command and control structure caused by our failure to adapt to the enemy's small, well-defended garrison. We did realize, however, that the hospital proved to be the weak point in the defense and the warriors on the west side made a concerted effort to seize the hospital."²²

O/C: "Lieutenant Chard, it was at about this time, around 1800 hours, that you withdrew your men from the western sector and consolidated and reorganized your defense solely in the eastern sector with the small yard, the storehouse, and the well-built kraal. What was your intent by consolidating and reorganizing the defense and what effects did it have on the battle?"

Lieutenant Chard: "We were defending a 100-yard perimeter and started taking a number of casualties. I was concerned that we would not have sufficient numbers to man the entire perimeter, and therefore decided to consolidate my defense within the eastern sector."²³

O/C: "This left the hospital undefended. As you mentioned in your estimate of the situation, the hospital was determined to be key terrain, and without it, you expected the garrison defense to fail. How did you expect to overcome the loss of the hospital with your new defensive position?"

Lieutenant Chard: "Although the hospital was key terrain, as the battle progressed it became evident that if the large open yard were left to the enemy, it would give them no greater tactical advantage than they already had."

"With the same number of soldiers covering a perimeter of approximately 30 yards instead of 100, I was able to make my defense much more compact. It also became an issue of force protection as the eastern sector was almost completely obscured from the Zulu marksmen to the south on Shiyane Hill. Although the Zulu marksmen may not have been able to achieve their commander's desired effects, their sustained rifle fire still had some effects on the garrison, especially into the large open yard. In fact, with our withdrawal, we were now able to cover the large open yard by fire, turning it into a 'no-man's land.' Really, the only problem with the contraction of the defense is that it isolated the men in the hospital. However, once the thatched hospital roof was set on fire at about 1930 hours, most men in the hospital made the dangerous withdrawal across the open yard to the eastern sector."²⁴

O/C: "Prince Dabulamanzi, with the consolidation and reorganization of the British defense, how did you change your overall attack on the defense?"

Prince Dabulamanzi: "It quickly became apparent that by consolidating their perimeter in the east, our seizing the hospital would not cause the desired penetration of their defense. In fact, due to the enemy's covering fire of the large open yard, seizing the hospital put us further from the enemy than at any other point around the garrison. In addition to the sheer distance of open space created by the British withdrawal, the fire on the hospital roof served to illuminate the area as darkness fell."²⁵

"Seizing the hospital did gain us one advantage; it enabled us to use the ledge and mealie bag perimeter on the northwest side of the garrison as a covered and concealed assault position. This position became critical as the weakest point of the new defense became the northeastern corner of the eastern sector perimeter where the biscuit box wall tied into the mealie bag barricade. We tried to penetrate at this point, and succeeded in causing several enemy casualties, but again, due to the small size of the gap in the enemy defense, we could never mass enough warriors to break through before being repelled by close combat supported by volumes of enemy fire."²⁶

"When darkness fell at 1930 hours, we shifted our attack to the eastern flank of the garrison to assault the perimeter from an area that was not illuminated by the hospital's burning roof. However, attacking in the dark again exposed a fault in our command and control system as hand and arm signals were used extensively to coordinate the large formations. We were now required to shout orders over the sound of rifle fire and war cries, causing more confusion than anything else."²⁷

O/C: "The Zulu assaults on the eastern perimeter did, however, succeed in pushing the British defense out of the well-built kraal, leaving only the storehouse and the small open yard as a perimeter. Lieutenant Chard and Prince Dabulamanzi, please take us from this point to the end of the battle, and explain why the defense did not fold with the fall of the well-built kraal."

Lieutenant Chard: "The assault on the well-built kraal from the east did cause concern because it allowed the enemy to maneuver within feet of our perimeter that was covered by the rock walls of the kraal. However, we established a redoubt in the center of the

small yard that allowed a small group of soldiers to fire over the soldiers manning the perimeter and down into the deadspace created by the kraal. This did not allow the enemy to effectively use the kraal to advance toward our perimeter. More disconcerting to our situation was the low amount of ammunition we had left. We started with 20,000 rounds and by the last assault were down to 900. Any further assaults would have surely resulted in a complete hand-to-hand fight without supporting fires.”²⁸

Prince Dabulamanzi: “Even though fighting continued until well past midnight, this attack’s failure to produce a decisive result proved to be the culminating point of the operation. It was around 2100 hours, and our warriors had been fighting for over 4 hours non-stop and had sustained hundreds of casualties. We continued to conduct limited assaults on the perimeter for another hour, but were repelled by heavy fires each time. Hearing the British cheers at the defeat of the final charge at 2200 hours, we withdrew into the darkness to regroup. We kept up heavy fires at the enemy perimeter until after midnight and then a few times after midnight, but this was merely an attack by fire and did not support any further assaults on the garrison. By 0400 hours, the last shots were fired against the garrison and our regiments had withdrawn behind Shiyane Hill. A small contingent returned around 0700 hours to observe the garrison but soon left, moving to the southeast to meet up with the main body.”²⁹

O/C: “Thank you, let’s please finish up with a few conclusions from the battle. What actions during the battle would you like to see sustained in future operations, and which require improvement? Prince Dabulamanzi.”

Prince Dabulamanzi: The fierce manner in which our warriors executed their assaults is definitely the key action that should be sustained in future operations. It was the only element that kept us in the fight after it came to light that our maneuver tactics and massed assaults were not overcoming the enemy defenses.

“However, we will never overcome the massed rifle fires from a fixed defensive position if we do not revise our tactics for attacking an enemy strong-

point. Our maneuver tactics are superb in the open ground, but are less effective against a well-armed enemy using a perimeter defense. We need to have better trained riflemen and rifles to act as a support by fire as we advance to destroy the enemy in close combat. Until we achieve this level of coordination of effective fire and movement, the enemy will use their superior firepower to attrit us before we can close with and destroy them.

“Our command and control system also needs improvement, as we will increasingly be required to conduct night operations. Current hand and arm signals do not always allow us to adequately coordinate the maneuver of subordinate elements while allowing the commander to take up an observation point on the high ground. The use of runners and messengers, as well as the practice of organizing into standard formations for units smaller than a regiment, will allow us to exercise greater control over our warriors in the attack.”

Lieutenant Chard: “Until the Zulus can employ sustained and accurate fires to support their movement, we will overcome their maneuver tactics by forming a perimeter defense and using massed fires to repel their assaults before they close with our positions. As evidenced by the number of rounds we used to repel the attack — almost 20,000 — logistics sustainment will be critical to executing this tactic.”

O/C: “Thank you gentlemen. That concludes our AAR for the battle of Rorke’s Drift.”

Notes

¹Donald R. Morris, *The Washing of the Spears*, Simon and Schuster, Inc., New York, 1965, p. 294.

²Ibid., pp. 294-295.

³Ian Knight, *The Zulus*, Osprey Publishing Ltd., London, 1989, p. 31.

⁴John Laband, *The Rise & Fall of the Zulu Nation*, Arms and Armour Press, New York, 1997, p. 213.

⁵Ian Knight, *Rorke’s Drift 1879: Pinned Like Rats in a Hole*, Osprey Publishing Limited, Oxford, U.K., 1996, p. 23.

⁶Michael Barthrop, *The Zulu War, A Pictorial History*, Blandford Press, U.K., 1980, p. 77.

⁷Ibid., pp. 74-75.

⁸Knight, *Rorke’s Drift 1879*, pp. 26-30.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 28-36; and Victor Davis Hanson, *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power*, Doubleday, New York, 2001, p. 289.

¹¹Knight, *Rorke’s Drift 1879*, p. 40.

¹²Laband, pp. 231-233.

¹³Hanson, pp. 291-292; Laband, p. 233.

¹⁴Hanson, pp. 317-321.

¹⁵Morris, p. 397.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 392-395.

¹⁷Knight, *Rorke’s Drift 1879*, pp. 36-40.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 40.

²⁰Ibid., pp. 42-44.

²¹Ibid., pp. 44-45.

²²Hanson, pp. 318-321.

²³Knight, *Rorke’s Drift 1879*, pp. 46-48.

²⁴Ibid., pp. 48-50.

²⁵Morris, pp. 412-413; Laband, p. 236.

²⁶Knight, *Rorke’s Drift 1879*, p. 48.

²⁷Ibid., p. 65.

²⁸Laband, p. 236; Knight, *Rorke’s Drift 1879*, p. 69.

²⁹Laband, p. 236; Knight, *Rorke’s Drift 1879*, pp. 67-69; Morris, pp. 414-415.

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