

# **Notes on the Composition of the British Force at Isandlwana**

**by Lt. Col. Mike Snook**



## **Introduction**

It's good to see a new venture like Empress making such good headway and turning out such high quality miniatures, with all due regard to both 'character' and historical accuracy. Paul Hicks has done some stunning work on the range to date and I gather from the Empresses that there is much more to come in similar vein; good news indeed for all AZW enthusiasts. I am delighted therefore to pen a few hopefully helpful lines for Empress customers, in which I have set out to describe and enumerate the British force destroyed at Isandlwana on that fateful day in January 1879.

## **1st Battalion 24th Regiment of Foot – 16 & 398**

OC – Lt. Col. Henry Pulleine; Adjt – Lt. Teignmouth Melvill; Paymaster – Hon. Maj. Francis White; QM – Quartermaster James Pullen; Sergeant Major Frederick Gapp; Quartermaster Sergeant Thomas Leitch.

- A Coy – Capt. Wm. Degacher,<sup>1</sup> Lt. Francis Porteous.
- C Coy – Capt. Reginald Younghusband, Lt. George Hodson.
- E Coy – Lt. Charles Cavaye, 2nd Lt. Edwards [sic] Dyson.
- F Coy – Capt Wm. Mostyn, Lt. Patrick Daly, Lt. Edgar Anstey.
- H Coy – Capt. George Wardell, Lt. Charles Atkinson.
- Lt. Nevill Coghill (serving on the column staff, but injured and left behind at the camp).
- Band.
- Pioneer Section – Cpl. Richardson and 5-8 others.
- 6 man detail 90th Regt. attached [not included in 398 OR strength].

### **G Company and Rear Details 2nd Battalion 24th Regiment of Foot – 5 & 171**

Adjut – Lt. Henry Dyer; Tpt Officer - Sub-Lt. Thomas Griffith; QM – Quartermaster Edward Bloomfield; Quartermaster Sergeant George Davis.

- G Coy – Lt. Charlie Pope, Lt. Fred Godwin-Austen (2 officers and about 80-90 ORs).
- Battalion Guard Detail; 1 x section of A Coy (say 20-25 men).
- 6 x company rear parties (left behind to watch tents and kits). Say 4 men per coy (or 1 man per section) = 24 ORs
- Bandmaster Harry Bullard and 3 boy-bandsmen.
- Pioneer section (Cpl and 7-8 others).
- Officer's batmen and other miscellaneous rear details.

### **Notes on the Internal Organization of a British Line Infantry Battalion in 1879.**

A regular army battalion of 1879 was commanded by a lieutenant colonel (who might well, during the course of his 5-year command tour, receive promotion by seniority to the rank of full colonel), and consisted of a small headquarters and administrative staff, a band and eight companies lettered A to H.<sup>2</sup>

The battalion was sub-divided into 2 x four-company wings - namely the right wing consisting of A-D Companies, and the left wing consisting of E-H Companies. There were two majors in the battalion who each commanded one of the wings. The senior of the pair was designated the 'senior major' and was the *de-facto* second-in-command. Like the colonel and the adjutant, the wing commanders were 'field officers' and, as such, were mounted at the taxpayer's expense.

Before leaving the subject of majors, it should be noted that Francis White of the 1st/24th, KIA at Isandlwana, was the paymaster – or an 'honorary' major in other words. While such officers enjoyed the status and standing of their nominal rank, they did not count as line officers and were deemed not to be qualified to command troops in the field.

It was usual for an Army Medical Department (AMD) Surgeon (captain equivalent) to be attached to an infantry battalion. The 1st/24th's doctor was Surgeon James Henry

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<sup>1</sup> Degacher had been the acting battalion commander until the arrival on 17 January of Lt. Col. Henry Pulleine. He had certainly been accorded the acting rank of major up to that point, but we cannot be sure whether or not he had reverted to his substantive rank with Pulleine's arrival.

<sup>2</sup> And before that, numbered 1-8.

Reynolds, who had been left behind at the behest of the Principal Medical Officer (PMO) to run the base hospital at Rorke's Drift.

The eight companies were commanded by captains, who each had two subaltern officers to assist them. It was not uncommon, however, for a number of the captains to be absent on long leave, detached staff duty and such like, and for their companies to be in the charge of the most senior lieutenants. There was no such thing as a 'company sergeant-major' in 1879, the senior non-commissioned man in the company being its colour sergeant, who combined the latter day functions of CSM and CQMS in one post.

The companies were divided into four sections, each of them commanded by a sergeant with a full corporal as his second-in-command. The number of lance corporals was broadly comparable to the number of corporals, so one per section, on occasion two, would be the general rule of thumb. Two sections could be grouped together to form a half-company under the command of one of the subaltern officers. Typically the average strength of a company in the field fluctuated between about 75 and 90 all ranks, so something between 16-20 privates per section would be fairly typical. There was also one pioneer per company who usually paraded under the battalion pioneer corporal to give a composite pioneer section of nine. There were also one or two 'drummers' per company, who drummed on parade but actually bugled in the field.

Last, but not least, to the most senior non-commissioned men in the battalion. As we have seen there were no CSMs in 1879; rather there was only one sergeant major – known accordingly as *the* Sergeant Major. In today's line or light battalions he would be called the Regimental Sergeant Major or 'RSM', though in the Foot Guards the old convention is still preserved and the senior soldier is still referred to as *the* Sergeant Major. In 1879 the Quartermaster's right hand man was known as the Quartermaster-Sergeant, or QMS, who ranked as the second senior soldier after the Sergeant Major. Today he would be called the Regimental Quartermaster Sergeant or 'RQMS'.

The dress of the infantry can be seen in the painted figures shown elsewhere on the site, but a digression to describe the soldiers' personal equipment will probably be helpful at this juncture. The issued rig was the white leather 1871 valise pattern equipment, which tended to be worn complete on the march, but which was stripped down to a waist-belt rig for the rest of the time. This consisted of the waist-belt itself, the left and right ammunition pouches, the Pattern 1876 'lunger' bayonet and frog, and the expense-pouch or 'ball bag'. This was worn with the 'Oliver' pattern water-bottle and a white canvas haversack slung over opposite shoulders.

Ammunition for the .450 in. Martini-Henry rifle came in waxed paper packets of ten cartridges (with 60 packets to the ammunition box). The waxed paper packaging protected the cartridge from water ingress during rain, at river crossings or the damp and dew of picket duty. Some 70 rounds were customarily carried on the person – two sealed packets in each of the ammunition pouches, two more in the haversack, (or in the valise on the march), and one packet broken open ready for use and carried loose in the expense-pouch. The Quartermaster kept a further 30 rounds a man close at hand as the battalion's first line reserve.

### **Curling's Division, 'N' Battery, 5th Brigade Royal Artillery – 2 & 71**

'N' Battery was a horse-drawn field battery under the command of Brevet Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Harness who was upcountry with Lord Chelmsford and did not participate in the fighting around the camp. The battery was divided into three divisions, each of two guns, under the command of a lieutenant. Individual gun detachments were commanded by a sergeant. Technically the guns themselves were not actually field guns, though they were utilised as such, but rather 7-pounder mountain guns mounted for field service on locally

manufactured 'Kaffrarian' carriages. Of the battery's three divisions, only Lieutenant Henry Curling's division was present at Isandlwana. The battery captain, or second in command, Brevet Major Stuart Smith went out with Colonel Harness, but arrived back at the camp just in time to participate in the battle and lose his life. The battery's rear details, a combination of drivers, orderlies, farriers, saddlers, armourers and so on, had also been left behind at the camp, so that in total the Royal Artillery fielded two officers and 71 other ranks. The gunners and drivers were individually armed with revolvers and sabres, while the regulation provision of carbines was only two per gun-crew. The battery may in practice have acquired a few more rifles and carbines for local defence over the course of its service in the recent 9th Cape Frontier War.

### **Composite Detail, No. 1 Squadron Imperial Mounted Infantry (IMI) – 0 & 31**

The mounted infantry had been raised to make up for the shortfall of regular cavalry in South Africa. The squadron was mounted on local horses and armed with carbines in lieu of their Martini-Henry rifles. The soldiers retained their foreign-service helmets and regimental tunics, but were issued with Bedford cord breeches, riding boots and a brown leather ammunition bandolier. They retained their haversacks and Oliver pattern water-bottles but discarded the rest of their valise pattern equipment for mounted service. No 1 Squadron was a composite grouping drawn from four of the eight imperial infantry battalions serving in South Africa at the time, namely detachments of the 2nd/3rd (Bufs), the 1st/24th, the 1st/13th Light Infantry and the 80th Regiment. All of the squadron's officers and 80 of the other ranks were upcountry with Lord Chelmsford's force, leaving only 31 men at the camp. As the name suggests, the mounted infantry invariably dismounted to fight, telling off one man in four as horse-holders.

### **Major Russell's Rocket Battery – 1 & 9**

The rather grandly named rocket battery was part of Colonel Anthony Durnford's No 2 Column. It was commanded by Brevet Major Francis Russell RA and fielded three 9-pounder rocket troughs. Bombardier George Goff provided supervised 8 private soldiers detached from the 1st/24th's C Company. The battery's troughs, rockets and other paraphernalia were mule-borne.

### **Detachment, Natal Mounted Police (NMP) – 0 & 34**

The NMP was the quasi-military constabulary of colonial Natal, and been formed by an ex-regular army major by the name of John Dartnell. The police came into the field sufficiently strong, at a little under 120 officers and men, to operate as a tactical entity. Major Dartnell and Inspector George Mansel had taken 80 men upcountry with Lord Chelmsford and left 34 men behind at the camp. As was the case with all the mounted units, the rear details were a mixture of administrators and men whose horses were already lame or played out and in need of time to recuperate. The police wore a white helmet, adorned with a silver spike, and plain black breeches and trousers.

### **Detachments of Mounted Volunteers**

After the IMI and NMP, the third 'cavalry squadron' deployed by No. 3 Column, was a composite one made up of three smaller volunteer units. These were The Natal Carbineers, the Newcastle Mounted Rifles and The Buffalo Border Guard.

**The Natal Carbineers (NC) - 2 & 27.** The senior volunteer unit in the colony, the NC was regarded as a fashionable outfit, and tended to draw its membership from amongst the sons of the more prosperous families in Pietermaritzburg. The unit was commanded was Captain Theophilus Shepstone, 'Offy' to his friends, a son of the well known colonial administrator, Sir Theophilus. Left behind at the camp were Lieutenant Durrant Scott, one other officer and 27 other ranks. Scott was the OIC of the mounted vedettes thrown out around Isandlwana on the day of the battle. The Carbineers wore a white foreign-service helmet, with navy blue tunics faced in white at the collar and cuffs, and matching breeches with a broad white stripe down the outside seam. Like the NMP and the other volunteer units, the Carbineers were armed with revolvers and carbines and sustained themselves from haversacks, 50-round bandoliers and Oliver pattern water-bottles.

**The Newcastle Mounted Rifles (NMR) – 2 & 12.** The NMR had been raised in the nearby frontier town of that name and was commanded by Captain Robert Bradstreet. The unit was dressed after the fashion of rifle volunteers in black-braided rifle green tunics and breeches. Bradstreet had sent 20 of his NCOs and troopers out with a Lieutenant C. Jones and stayed behind at Isandlwana with one other officer and 12 other ranks. Whether by accident or design he was the senior officer of volunteers at the camp and would exercise overall command of the white mounted troops.



Mounted Volunteers

**The Buffalo Border Guard (BBG) - 1 & 7.** The BBG, commanded by Captain W.C. Smith, was the smallest of the volunteer units, being drawn from amongst the farmers scattered up and down the Buffalo River frontier with Zululand; the late Jim Rorke, for example, had risen to be the unit's lieutenant. The principal concern of the BBG had been the deterrence of stock theft. Mustered now for war, the farmers were smartly turned out in white helmets and braided black tunics and breeches. They would thus have been indistinguishable from the NMP at any great distance. Smith had joined Lord Chelmsford with 16 other ranks, leaving Quartermaster MacPhail and 7 other ranks behind at the camp.



Captain Robert Bradstreet NMR



Lieutenant Durrant Scott NC

### **The Natal Native Contingent (NNC)**

In order not to fritter away his already thinly stretched imperial infantry battalions, Lord Chelmsford had pressed the colonial authorities to levy a strong auxiliary force from amongst the tribes and clans of Natal. It was intended for screens, pickets, guards, outposts, reconnaissance, labour, convoy escorts, raiding, pursuit and such like. Lieutenant Colonel Anthony Durnford RE had been the principal architect of the NNC.

The NNC was led by European officers and NCOs who, for the most part, had been brought up by Lord Chelmsford from the frontier towns of the Eastern Cape. While some of the whites had been levy leaders in the Ninth Frontier War against the Xhosa, others were little more than colonial drifters with no military experience to speak of. Because they were from so far afield, there were very few who could speak Zulu – Natal's principal native tongue and the language of their men.

NNC battalions consisted of ten companies and were around 1100 strong. The OIC was known as the 'Commandant'. Companies were commanded by captains, with two lieutenants and six NCOs to assist. This meant that there were close to a hundred Europeans per battalion - and Chelmsford had opted to raise no fewer than seven battalions; hence, (with most of Natal's younger sons already enlisted in the mounted volunteer units), the necessity to ship the extra manpower up from the Cape.

The Europeans were armed with Martinis, full bandoliers of ammunition and, in the case of the NCOs, bayonets. There were one hundred native levies per company, of whom

only ten had been issued with a firearm. It was often the case, though not the invariable rule, that there were five modern Martinis and five obsolescent Snider-Enfields per company. The African riflemen were provided with only five rounds of ammunition apiece. This was a function, not of crass stupidity on Lord Chelmsford's part, as is so often portrayed, but of the reticence of the government of Natal to see the colony's black population equipped with firearms by the military. The 10% scaling represented a compromise solution, and Chelmsford had no real choice but to sign up to it. The balance of the men turned out with their traditional tribal weapons, assegais, knobkerries and cowhide shields. Some wore hats and odd items of discarded European clothing but, for the most part, the only thing that distinguished them from their Zulu cousins was a red rag worn wrapped around the head-ring or the upper arm. All the men had been issued with a blanket which they wore rolled over one shoulder.

The GOC had directed that the NNC be drilled in imitation of regular troops, but given the language barrier, the shortage of time for training and the incompetence of many of the Europeans, the learning curve was simply far too steep. Some white NCOs resorted all too frequently to verbal and physical abuse in a vain attempt to make themselves understood. Because their parade ground manoeuvres always seemed to go horribly wrong, to the evident ire and frustration of their white leaders, any belief the levies may once have had in their ability to meet the Zulu in open battle quickly ebbed away. Morale in the contingent was soon at a low ebb and was reflected in its battlefield performance.

In all, seven companies of NNC, drawn from three battalions, were involved in the battle of Isandlwana. Both the 1st and 2nd Battalions of Commandant Rupert Lonsdale's 3rd Regiment, 20 companies in all, had been assigned to the Central Column. Lonsdale had taken 16 of his companies out of camp on the morning of 21 January, to conduct a reconnaissance in force over the difficult ground to the right front of the camp. Thus each battalion left behind two companies to fulfil its picket commitments – its duty company for 21 Jan, and the company 'next for duty' the following day. A fifth company was sent back by Lonsdale as an escort to the livestock captured during the course of his foray.

The sixth and seventh NNC sub-units involved in the battle were from the 1st Battalion of 1st Regiment NNC and marched in with Colonel Anthony Durnford's command on the morning of the fight. These two companies were 50% stronger than their 3rd Regiment counterparts, because Durnford had temporarily disbanded a third company and dispersed its manpower between them. So it was that the seven companies listed below came to be present at Isandlwana on 22 January. It should be noted that the strengths given below represent the total *battalion* strength in the camp and that they appear in the order European officers/European NCOs/African levies:

**1st/1st NNC - 5/18/300**

- D Coy – Capt. C. Nourse
- E Coy – Capt. W.H. Stafford

**1st/3rd NNC - 11/31/200**

- No. 6 Coy – Capt. R. Krohn
  - No. 9 Coy – Capt. J.F. Lonsdale<sup>3</sup>
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## 2nd/3rd NNC - 9/28/300

- No. 1 Coy – Capt. O.E. Murray
- No. 4 Coy – Capt. E. A. Erskine
- No. 5 Coy – Capt. A.J. Barry

## The Natal Native Mounted Contingent (NNMC) – 6 & 257

In addition to the seven NNC battalions, Durnford also raised a 6-troop regiment of native horse which was referred to as the Natal Native Mounted Contingent - or 'the Mounted Contingent' for short. It is quite commonplace to hear the unit referred to as Durnford's Basutos or the Natal Native Horse (NNH), but neither designation is correct: only one of the six troops was of Basuto origin, while the NNH title was not adopted until well after the Isandlwana campaign had drawn to a close. It should be noted that the first three troops of the NNMC were recruited from the amaNdwane clan and were known collectively as Zikhali's Horse – in effect a unit within a unit.



Mounted troops watering their horses.  
Note the appearance of the NNMC/NNH troopers.

Durnford brought only five of his NNMC troops up to the camp on the morning of the battle - the sixth, Jantze's Horse, having been left behind at the 'Middle Drift' on the Tugela some days earlier. Each troop was around 50 strong and was commanded by a white lieutenant. The NCOs were all black Africans. Captain William Barton was the sixth and most senior NNMC officer, in effect the 'regimental' commander, though in practice



## Summary of Unit Strengths

Column Staff	7	&	11
HQ and 5 x Coys 1st/24th	16	&	398
90th Regt (att 1st/24th)	0	&	6
G Coy and Rear Details 2nd/24th	5	&	171
N Battery, 5th Bde, RA (2 x 7 pdrs)	2	&	71
Rocket Battery	1	&	9
RE	2	&	5
No 1 Sqn Imperial Mounted Infantry	0	&	31
NMP	0	&	34
NC	2	&	27
NMR	2	&	12
BBG	1	&	7
2 x Coys 1st/1st NNC	5	&	318
2 x Coys 1st/3rd NNC	11	&	231
3 x Coys 2nd/3rd NNC	9	&	328
5 x Troops NNMC	6	&	257
Army Service Corps (ASC)	0	&	4
Army Hospital Corps (AHC)	1	&	10
Army Medical Department (AMD)	1	&	0
Native Pioneers	1	&	10
Black African voorloopers, grooms et	Unknown but approx 300 approx		
White civilian contractors, interpreters etc	Unknown but estimated 2-3 doz		
<b>Total [not including civilians]</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>&amp;</b>	<b>1,940 [approx]</b>