

Saving the Queen's Colour

Just one hundred years ago, Cetewayo, King of the Zulus, pitted his Impi against the might of the British Army. On 22nd January, 1879, 11 days after the British invaded Zululand, he dealt Lord Chelmsford's army a crippling blow at Isandhlwana, but that same evening his men were turned back into Zululand by the defenders of Rorke's Drift. Victoria, Queen of England, approved the award of eleven Victoria Crosses to the defenders of Rorke's Drift. Thirty years later, when the first posthumous awards of the Victoria Cross were made, two other Anglo-Zulu War heroes, Lieutenant Teignmouth Melvill and Lieutenant Nevill Coghill, who had lost their lives in trying to carry the Queen's Colour of the 24th Regiment to safety across the Buffalo River after Isandhlwana, were honoured in this way.

Letters announcing the posthumous awards of the Victoria Cross, were sent to the nearest relatives of the dead soldiers, Sir Egerton Coghill and Mrs. Sarah Elizabeth Melvill. The former letter, now in the possession of Sir Patrick Coghill, reads¹

012/2199 (M.S.3.)

War Office,
London, S.W.,
6th February, 1907

Sir,

His Majesty the King has been graciously pleased to approve of the Decoration of the Victoria Cross being delivered to the representatives of those who fell in the performance of acts of valour, and with reference to whom it was officially notified that they would have been recommended to Her late Majesty for that distinction had they survived.

I have therefore to transmit to you a Victoria Cross engraved with the name of your late brother Lieutenant N. J. A. Coghill, 24th Foot, who was killed whilst endeavouring to save the life of Lieutenant Melvill, after the disaster at Isandhlwana, Zululand, on 22nd January, 1879, and I am convinced that it would have afforded Her late Majesty the greatest satisfaction to have personally decorated Lieutenant Coghill had it pleased Providence to spare his life.

An extract from the 'London Gazette', recording the act of courage, for which the distinguished honour has been awarded, is forwarded herewith.

You are requested to acknowledge receipt of this communication and its enclosures.

I am,

Sir,

Your obedient servant,
R. B. Haldane.

Sir E. B. Coghill, Bart.,
Glen Barrahan,
Castle Townshend,
Co. Cork.

This article is primarily a tribute to Melvill and Coghill, but is also intended as a tribute to the other British and Zulu soldiers who died bravely that day, but whose valour has not been acknowledged, simply because no eyewitnesses survived to give the necessary testimony.

Melvill and Coghill died while attempting to carry the Queen's Colour of the 1/24th Regiment to safety. What motivated them to give their lives for 'a banner on a pole'? Were they really heroes, or was Wolseley being unfair when he wrote:

'I saw the graves of Melvill and Coghill. I am sorry that both of those officers were not killed with their men at Isandhlawana instead of where they are. I don't like the idea of officers escaping on horseback when their men on foot were killed'.²

Wolseley was one of the new breed of soldiers who saw the whole pursuit of war as a science, with little room for sentiment. It is possible that he made this somewhat vituperative remark because he did not consider regimental traditions (in this case, those surrounding the Colour) to be of sufficient importance to warrant officers leaving their men on the field of battle.

In order to attempt an assessment of the validity of the heroism of Melvill and Coghill, it is necessary to investigate the significance which the Colour holds for those serving under it. Modern works of reference, such as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* III, pay scant attention to the subject of military Colours. The best exposition is given in the 11th (1910) edition of that work.³

When man first recognised the value of banding together in battle, he soon realised the value of holding aloft an easily visible insignia, which would act as a rallying point for his comrades. This insignia would also indicate the position of the leader of a group during battle. The Roman Army used the eagle (*aquila*) carried by the standard bearer, as the insignia. The banner of the individual knight gained a spiritual quality during the Middle Ages, in that it began to signify the whole corporate body of men serving under it.

By the 16th Century, the term 'Colour' was commonly used for this banner, and an intense feeling of regimental unity was fostered by the observance of ceremonies based upon the Colour. It is here that we find the origins of ceremonies such as 'saluting' and 'trooping' the Colour.

The capture or loss of the Colour in battle indicated the dispersal of the regiment and had at all costs to be avoided. This led to many dangerous situations, and many soldiers died in defence of their Colour. Melvill and Coghill were the last British soldiers to give their lives for a British Colour, for, as a result of their deaths, Queen Victoria forbade the carrying of the Colour into battle, believing that its defence constituted unnecessary danger to rash young subalterns.

It is clear then, that the Colour signified the corporate body of the Regiment. It is neither impossible, nor without precedent, that, no matter

what their original motive for fleeing Isandhlwana might have been, both Melvill and Coghill, in the final instance, forfeited their lives by trying to carry their Colour to safety.

Who, then, were Lieutenant Melvill and Lieutenant Coghill? They were both officers of the 24th Regiment, and gentlemen by birth.

Nevill Coghill was a prolific letter writer and diarist⁴ and much information about his activities and his character can be gleaned from his writings and, further, a short biographical memoir which was published in 1968 by his nephew, Sir Patrick Coghill, gives more information on his early life.⁵ Coghill was born in 1852, the eldest son of Sir John Joscelyn Coghill and Katherine Frances Plunkett. The family lived first in Dublin and later in Castle Townshend, Co. Cork. He was educated at Haileybury College, where he showed an early interest in sport, as might be expected of a typically Victorian gentleman who thoroughly enjoyed Irish society. On 26th February, 1873, he was gazetted sub-lieutenant, and posted to the 24th Regiment of Foot. His first posting was Gibraltar and, three years later, in 1876, he first sailed for the Cape with his regiment.

Coghill's companion in death, Teignmouth Melvill, was the son of Philip Melvill of the East India Company. He was born in London in 1842, and was therefore ten years senior to Nevill Coghill. He received an excellent education at Harrow and Cambridge. His gazetting to the 24th Regiment was in 1868, and nothing further is known of his career until he sailed for the Cape with the 1/24th in 1875. He served as adjutant to the 1/24th from 1878 until his death in Zululand. Unlike Nevill Coghill, who was a bachelor, Melvill was a married man with two children.⁶

During 1876 and 1877 an explosive situation began to build up in South Africa. The Xhosa on the Cape Border were restless, and soon it was necessary to subdue Krel. Lord Carnarvon was planning his federal policy, which led, in 1877, to the annexation of the Transvaal by Sir Theophilus Shepstone, and to the invasion of Zululand in 1879. Also, Sir Bartle Frere, who was to take up such an intractable stance against Cetewayo, was appointed Governor of the Cape Colony.

At this time, too, the principal British Army protagonists of the Anglo-Zulu war were assembling at the Cape. The veteran 1/24th arrived in the Cape in 1875, and was re-inforced in 1878 by the less experienced 2/24th. Colonel Sir Evelyn Wood and Major Redvers Buller were serving on the Eastern Frontier and building up the formidable Frontier Light Horse, a force which was later to play an active and successful role in Zululand. Colonel Glyn was posted to the Staff in Cape Town, supported by Teignmouth Melvill as Battalion Adjutant, and the Honourable Frederic Thesiger (afterwards Lord Chelmsford) assumed command in 1878 from Sir Alexander Cunyngham. Nevill Coghill was A.D.C. to Cunyngham, a position he later resumed under Thesiger when he returned from home leave.

There was some talk of Coghill's taking over the Adjutancy from Melvill, who was due to attend a Staff College Course.⁷ Thesiger was, however, loathe to let Melvill return to England, as trouble with the Zulus was already brewing, and it was vital that the Regiment should retain the services of its experienced staff officers. So Melvill stayed with the Regiment and marched up into Zululand, whilst Coghill left for Pietermaritzburg with the Commander-in-Chief.



SAVING THE QUEEN'S COLOUR by A. de NEUVILLE

Published with grateful acknowledgment to R. LEVITT Esq., Durban.



LAST SLEEP OF THE BRAVE by A. de NEUVILLE

Published with grateful acknowledgment to R. LEVITT Esq., Durban.

It is important to note that nowhere in the Coghill letters and diaries, written whilst he was at the Cape, is any friendship with Melvill indicated. Their relationship appears to have been nothing more than a casual regimental acquaintanceship.

The events which led to the outbreak of the Zulu War are well documented elsewhere and are beyond the province of this article. Suffice it to say that, when the Ultimatum presented to Cetewayo expired on 10th January, 1879, Lord Chelmsford invaded Zululand using a three-pronged attack. Number 1 column, led by Colonel Pearson, 3rd Buffs, entered Zululand across the Tugela River near its mouth at Fort Pearson. No. 4 column, under Evelyn Wood, was based at Dundee to the North of Zululand.

The main advance was launched from Helpmekaar and Rorke's Drift. The backbone of this column was the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 24th Foot under command of Colonel Glyn. The column, accompanied by the Commander-in-Chief, forded the Buffalo River into Zululand at daybreak on 11th January, 1879. Nevill Coghill wrote the following description in his new diary:

'It was a raw and misty morning, the mist rising every now and then and disclosing the disposition of our forces as they pushed across, but there was no sign of an enemy . . .'⁸

The column marched safely into Zulu territory and on 12th January attacked Chief Sirayo's⁹ kraal and by the 20th was encamped at the foot of Isandhlwana Hill. Here Coghill made the following entry in his diary:

' . . . On the way home we found some fowls at a deserted kraal and in capturing them I put my knee out which kept me in my tent for some days . . .'¹⁰

His knee was still causing trouble on the 22nd January and he remained in camp at Isandhlwana when, early that morning, Lord Chelmsford set out from the camp with a reconnaissance-in-force led by Colonel Glyn. The camp was left in charge of Lieutenant-Colonel Pulleine (1/24th) with five companies of men. Major Clery, Principal Staff Officer, later remembered discussing the orders with Pulleine and his adjutant, Melvill. Clery¹¹ reported later that Pulleine was ordered to draw in his line of defence, set outposts and advance cavalry vedettes. These orders were not carried out—his force remained deployed. It is claimed that the picquets were inadequate, as were the entrenchments. No laager was drawn, as Lord Chelmsford felt that this would be a waste of time. According to the official records of the 24th Regiment, Melvill had earlier expressed concern at the state of the camp, particularly at the decision not to laager.

'I know what you are thinking by your face, Sir: you are abusing this camp and you are quite right. These Zulus will charge home and with our small numbers we ought to be in laager . . .'¹²

A detailed study of the battle of Isandhlwana is not necessary here, having

been investigated elsewhere.¹³ What is of concern is to try to follow, where possible, the movements of Melvill and Coghill. It can be presumed that Melvill, as adjutant, saw to the execution of orders issued by Pulleine and Colonel Durnford, and was probably one of the party of senior officers who "lunched" together in camp before the main attack.¹⁴

Coghill was probably pottering around, nursing his game knee. This presumption is based upon the fact that Coghill was wearing a blue patrol jacket when he escaped from Isandhlwana.¹⁵ The blue patrol jacket was standard undress uniform,¹⁶ and was not normally worn on active duty.

However, there is no doubt that by 12.30 p.m. the camp was under attack, and a very serious situation had developed. Soon after the first Zulu attack, Melvill rode out to call in the far-flung line held by Captain Essex.¹⁷ The situation deteriorated very rapidly, and organised resistance by the British had collapsed by 3 o'clock. Before Colonel Pulleine was killed, he is believed to have charged Melvill to escape with the Colour.¹⁸

Further information is supplied by Lieutenant Curling, R.A., who gave evidence at the Court of Enquiry held at Helpmekaar on 27th January. After losing two guns from N. Battery, Curling returned to the camp, only to find the enemy had taken possession of it. He then fled towards Natal along the Fugitives' Road. 'We saw Lieutenant Coghill, the A.D.C., and asked him if we could not rally and make a stand; he said he did not think it could be done.' A little later he again met Coghill 'who told me Colonel Pulleine had been killed'. Curling only saw Melvill once. 'Near the river I saw Lieutenant Melville (*sic*) 1st Battalion 24th Regiment with a colour, the staff being broken.'¹⁹

The road to Fugitives' Drift was a nightmare. General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien (at that time a subaltern in the 99th Foot), lived to tell of his experience.

'After the desperate combat at Isandhlwana a scene of utter confusion seems to have occurred—horse and foot, black and white, English and Zulu, all in a struggling mass, making through the camp towards the road, where the Zulus had already closed the way of escape. The ground there down to the river was so broken that the Zulus went as fast as the horses, killing all the way.'²⁰

Fifty years later he recorded:

'I was passed by Lieutenant Coghill of the Twenty Fourth, wearing a blue patrol jacket and cord breeches, and riding a roan horse . . . When approaching Fugitives' Drift, and at least half a mile behind Coghill, Lieutenant Melvill of the 24th, in a red coat, with a cased colour across the front of his saddle, passed me going to the Drift . . . It will thus be seen that Coghill (who was orderly to Colonel Glyn) and Melvill (who was adjutant) did not escape together.'²¹

They reached the drift together with Lieutenant Higginson (1/3rd N.N.C.) who remembered:

' . . . I put my horse into the river and poor Melvill was also thrown;

he held on tightly to the Queen's Colour, which he had taken from the field of battle when all was over, and as he came down towards me he called out to me to catch hold of the pole. I did so and the force with which the current was running dragged me off the rock to which I clung but fortunately into still water. Coghill, who had got his horse over all right, came riding back down the bank to help Melvill, and as he put his horse in, close to us, the Zulus who were 25 yards from us on the other bank commenced firing at us in the water. Almost the first shot killed Coghill's horse, and on his getting clear of him we started for the bank and managed to get out all right . . . When we had gone a few yards further Melvill said he could go no further and Coghill said the same (I don't think they imagined at this time there was anyone following us.) When they stopped, I pushed on reaching the top of the hill. I found four Basuto with whom I escaped by holding on to a horse's tail.²²

The defence of Rorke's Drift by the garrison under Lieutenant Chard stayed any possible invasion of Natal. But Chelmsford's decimated forces were in total disarray. Not since the massacre at Chilianwhalla in 1849, had an attack on an encampment of the British Army had such disastrous results, and, in both cases, it was the 24th Regiment which took the brunt of the attack.

It was the 4th February before Colonel Glyn felt sufficiently confident of his situation to send a patrol out to search for survivors of the disaster, and to look for the missing Colours.²³ Lieutenant Harford²⁴ (then Staff Officer to Commandant Lonsdale), accompanied a party led by Major Black. His diary records:

' . . . and as there was still sufficient of the afternoon left, Major Black suggested that we should go a little further down, . . . when suddenly just off the track to the right of us, we saw two bodies, and on going to have a look at them found that they were those of Lieutenant Melville (*sic*) and Coghill. Both of them were clearly recognisable. Melville was in red, and Coghill in blue uniform, both were lying on their backs about a yard from each other. Melville at right angles to the path and Coghill parallel with it, a little above Melville and with his head uphill, both assegai'd but otherwise untouched.'

However, the patrol could not find the Colour. They continued the search the following day, and the Colour and its case were found by Harford in the Buffalo River, some 500 yards downstream. It was an emotional moment, Lieutenant Harford and his companions breaking into spontaneous cheering. The Colour was ceremoniously saluted by the rest of the search party before they returned to Rorke's Drift, with Major Black carrying the cased Colour aloft. The Colour was met there by a guard of honour, and the whole garrison also turned out to welcome it. Then the Colour was carried to Helpmekaar, and Harford, who had found it, was privileged to be standard bearer: a unique occasion, in that an officer of another regiment (the 99th) carried the Queen's Colour of the 24th. The Colour was again honoured by a full salute.

Higginson's story of the incident at the river touched the hearts of all Englishmen, and when the Colour returned to England with the 24th Regiment, Queen Victoria crowned it with a wreath of Immortelles, and the following message was sent to the Adjutant-General:

'As a lasting token of her act of placing a wreath on the Queen's Colour to commemorate the devotion displayed by Lieutenants Melvill and Coghill in their heroic endeavour to save the Colour on January 22nd, 1879, and of the noble defence of Rorke's Drift, Her Majesty has been graciously pleased to command that a silver wreath shall in future be borne on the peak of the staff of the Queen's Colour of the Twenty-Fourth Regiment.'²⁵

This colour is now honourably laid up in Brecon Cathedral. There is little doubt that, in the final instance, both Teignmouth Melvill and Nevill Coghill died for their regimental Colour.

Salute the brave!

Non dormit qui custodit.²⁶

J. A. VERBEEK

REFERENCES

1. GREAT BRITAIN *WAR OFFICE* (Haldane). Letter to Sir E. Coghill, 6.2.1907 National Army Museum ex Coghill.
2. PRESTON, Adrian *Ed. Sir Garnet Wolseley's South African journal, 1879-1880*. Cape Town: Balkema, 1973, p. 70.
3. *ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA* 11th ed. v. 6, p. 729.
This is perhaps an indication that Wolseley's ideals of scientific warfare have triumphed. The fact that there is no relevant entry in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* III, published in 1973, reflects to some extent a change in emphasis as far as "traditional" military matters are concerned.
4. Fifty-two of his South African letters survive, as well as two diaries. The first, 1877-1878, is held by the South Wales Borderers Museum, Brecon, and the second, which was miraculously recovered intact from the battlefield at Isandhlwana, has recently been donated by Sir Patrick Coghill to the National Army Museum, London.
5. COGHILL, Patrick *comp. Whom the Gods love*. Halesowen: the author, 1968.
6. MCKINNON, J. P., and SHADBOLT, S. *South African campaign of 1879 . . .* London, Low Marston, 1880.
His son, Tip Melvill, was to serve with distinction in his father's regiment until 1905. Private communication: Major Egerton, South Wales Borderers Museum, Brecon.
7. COGHILL, Nevill. *Diary 1879*. Unpublished MSS. National Army Museum, London.
8. *Ibid.*
9. The family of Chief Sirayo was blamed to a great extent for the declaration of war. His sons killed two of his runaway wives, after abducting them from sanctuary in Natal. The punishment of Sirayo's sons formed one of the demands of the ultimatum.
10. *Ibid.*
11. W/O 33-34. *Evidence given by Major Clery*. London: Public Record Office.
12. PATON, George, *et al. Historical records of the 24th Regiment*. London, Simkin, 1892. p. 230.
13. An excellent discussion has been written by Jackson, F.W.D., Isandhlwana, 1879—the sources re-examined (In: *J. Army Historical Research*, v. 43: 1965, pp. 30-43: 113-132: 169-183.)

14. W/O 33-34, p. 291.
15. SMITH-DORRIEN, H. *Memories of forty-eight years' service*. London: Murray, 1925. p. 16.
16. McBRIDE, A. *The Zulu War*. London: Osprey, 1976. p. 37 and private communication, Sandhurst Military College, 1976.
17. C 2260. *Evidence given by Captain Essex*. p. 83.
18. ATKINSON, C. T. *The South Wales Borderers, 24th Foot, 1639-1937*. Cambridge: U.P., 1937. p. 345.
19. C 2260.
20. SMITH-DORRIEN, H. (In: *Illustrated London News*, 29.3.1879).
21. SMITH-DORRIEN, *Memories* . . . p. 16.
22. HIGGINSON, W. Letter to Sir J. Coghill. National Army Museum: London, n.d. ex Coghill.
23. Each marching regiment had two Colours: a Regimental Colour and The Queen's/King's Colour. In January 1879 the Regimental Colour of the 1/24th had been left at Helpmekaar and only the Queen's Colour carried into Zululand. The two Colours of the 2/24th were both taken into Zululand and were lost at Isandhlwana.
24. HARFORD, H. C. *Diary, Natal 1879*. Unpublished manuscript, Local History Museum: Durban.
25. ATKINSON . . . p. 358.
26. He who guards does not sleep.