

Rorke's Drift 22nd – 23Rd January 1879



"Here they come, black as hell and thick as grass" Private Frederick Hitch

General

The Battle of Rorke's Drift stands even today as an amazing feat of bravery and courage. Over a period of approximately twenty hours one hundred men of 'B' company of the second battalion twenty-fourth regiment of foot (2nd Warwickshires) and assorted other troops successfully held off a four thousand strong Zulu Impi force. The British soldiers had superior technology in the shape of Martini-Henry rifles. These had not saved the 1700 force at Isandhlwana that morning when Zulu courage and determination along with 20,000 strong Impi had defeated the force. Great courage and bravery was shown on both sides. This has been recognized in the fact that eleven Victoria crosses and five silver medals for distinguished conduct were awarded. Most people's exposure to Rorke's Drift will be from the film "Zulu!" with Sir Stanley Baker and Sir Michael Caine.

Background

"But I left 1,000 men to guard the camp" Lord Chelmsford

In 1879 Sir Henry Bartle Frere decided to pursue the confederation of Africa under the influence of the British Empire by presenting to Cetshwayo kaMpande the Zulu king a set of demands that could not be met. In anticipation of the Zulus not meeting his demands Bartle Frere directed Lord Chelmsford to proceed with a plan to invade Zululand. On 11th January 1879 the British invaded. On the morning of the 22nd January 1879 the central column of the invasion was camped at Isandhlwana, they blundered into the Zulu army (20,000 strong) and were massacred. Some survivors passed on the news to the outpost at Rorke's Drift while fleeing the scene. Four Zulu regiments who had been the rearguard at Isandhlwana had not taken part in the actions and were keen to fight and set off for Rorke's Drift. This set the stage for upcoming battle.