

The British: 139. Zulu Warriors: 4,000. Let Battle Begin

January 22, 1879 — The Battle of Rorke's Drift took place in South Africa on this day and is remembered as one of the world's most remarkable military engagements. It was to be commemorated in 1964 with the release of the film Zulu, giving Michael Caine his first major screen role.

Britain was intent on expanding its territory and influence in South Africa in the 1870s and had declared war on the Kingdom of Zululand. Rorke's Drift was a mission station near the border between the British colony of Natal and the Zulu Kingdom and had been occupied by British troops. When the battle began, though, only 139 soldiers were encamped there. They had no idea what lay in store.

At 4.20pm on January 22, 1879 a force of 4,000 Zulu warriors began to lay siege to the station. Their intermittent attacks were to last for almost twelve hours.

Fortunately for the British, although some of the Zulus had old muskets and antiquated rifles, most were armed only with a short spear called an assegai and a shield made of cowhide. So in weaponry they were no match for the highly trained soldiers with their (then) sophisticated rifles and firepower. But the manpower advantage lay massively in favour of the Zulus.

By 4am, after nearly 12 hours repulsing wave after wave of attacks involving hand-to-hand combat, a number of British soldiers lay dead. Most of the others were exhausted, rapidly running out of ammunition, and probably in no condition to repel another assault. But they didn't have to. As dawn broke they saw that the Zulus were gone, leaving behind a battleground littered with the dead and dying. Zulu casualties were around 500, while the British sustained 17 dead and 10 wounded.

The Victoria Cross is Britain's highest medal for bravery. Eleven were awarded to the defenders of Rorke's Drift – the most ever received in a single action by one regiment.

According to American military historian Victor Davis Hanson: "In the long annals of military history it is difficult to find anything quite like Rorke's Drift, where a beleaguered force, outnumbered forty to one, survived and killed twenty men for every defender lost."