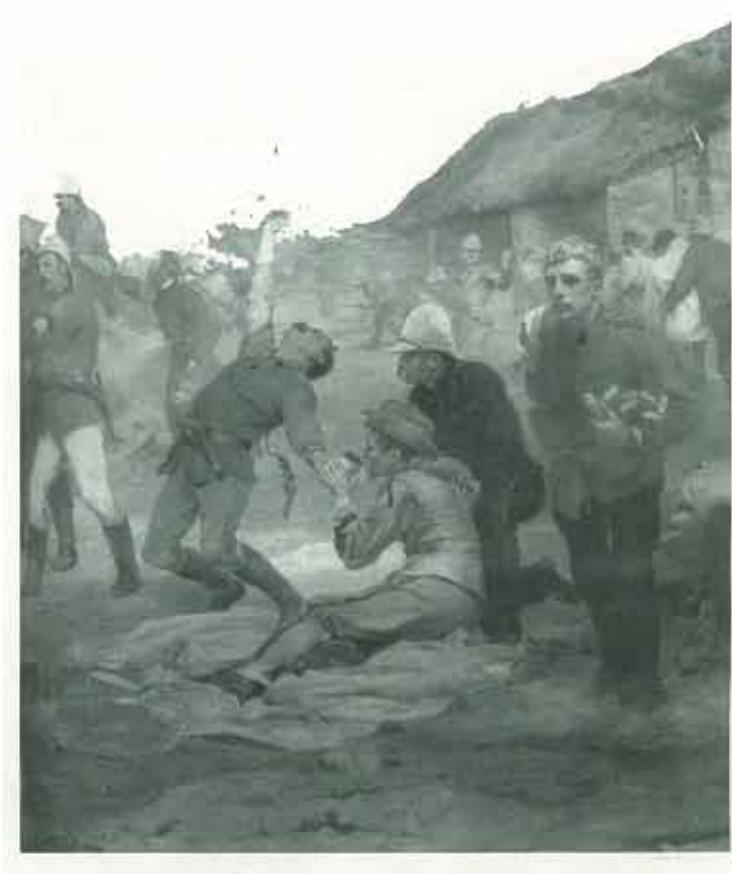


THE BATTLE
OF
RORKES DRIFT / SHIYANE



SELF-GUIDED TRAIL

INTRODUCTION

The battle site at Rorke's Drift / Shiyane has been considerably modified since the battle took place on the night of 22 January 1879. None of the buildings standing at that time remain and even the vegetation in the area is different.

The building which was situated on the site where the museum is now housed, was built by James Rorke and became Missionary Otto Witt's first home. It was taken over by the British and used as a hospital. The present church stands on the site of the commissariat store, which had been Rorke's trading store. The house, store and a cookhouse were the only buildings on the site at the time.

From contemporary photographs it is evident that the country around Rorke's Drift/ Shiyane was once open grassland, apart from a number of trees and shrubs that were planted on the northern side of the mission station. However, overgrazing has resulted in scrub encroachment and the spread of thornveld - a common problem in many areas of KwaZulu Natal. Several varieties of exotic trees have also been introduced.

Bear these facts in mind as you explore the site, and try to imagine Rorke's Drift/ Shiyane as if it was in 1879 - a lonely outpost on the border between Natal and Zululand.

MARKER A

When the main British force under General Lord Chelmsford crossed the Mzinyathi (Buffalo) River on 11 January 1879 to invade Zululand, a small garrison, numbering about 390 men, was left behind at Rorke's Drift/ Shiyane to guard the "mountain" of supplies and the hospital. Life had been quiet for the garrison, until the early afternoon of 22 January, when disturbing news was received that the British camp at Isandlwana had been overrun.

After a short discussion about what to do, the British officers decided that their only hope of survival was to defend the post. A barricade made of mealie bags, approximately four feet (1,2 metres) high was hastily built. The stones in the ground between where you are standing and the church demarcate the southern defence line.

The garrison was faced with a further crisis when 250 members of the Natal Native Contingent deserted and fled in the direction of Helpmekaar. The British force was in a desperate situation as a mere 139 men remained, of whom about 35 were patients in the hospital.

Lieutenant Chard, the senior officer present, quickly had a line of biscuit boxes placed in position to link the southern and northern defence lines, thereby creating a smaller and more easily defensible area immediately in front of the commissariat store, should this become necessary.

The defence barricades had almost been completed when the iNdluyengwe ibutho (regiment), made up of young men, appeared round the north-western slopes of Shiyane (Oscarsberg) hill. Their initial attacks were against the line of defence where you are now standing, including the rear of the hospital and the commissariat building. The British checked the iNdluyengwe with steady rifle fire, forcing them to take cover wherever they could.

Move on now, round to the *front of the museum, to Marker B, near the corner diagonally* opposite.

MARKER B

As the iNdluyengwe found themselves checked along the southern perimeter, they swung round the west side of the hospital, where you have just walked, and attacked the defensive positions near where you are now standing, probing for a weakness. The mealie bag barricade in this area had not been finished and the British rifle fire was less intense, with the result that it was a weaker position than others. The Zulu were thus able to get right up to the barricade itself, and some desperate hand-to-hand fighting took place. Eventually the British were forced to retire from this sector.

Move now to *Marker C, opposite the other end of the building.*

MARKER C

Chard had ordered a short "dog's leg" of mealie bags to be built to connect the corner of the hospital with the northern barricade. It was to this cover that some of the British soldiers retired from their positions on the north-west corner.

The arrival of the remaining three Zulu regiments, the uThulwana, uDloko and iNdlondlo, together with sniper fire from the sandstone caves on the slope of Shiyane, eventually forced Chard to withdraw all the men, other than those in the hospital, to the area in front of the commissariat store.

Zulu forces set fire to the hospital's thatch roof and succeeded in breaking into the building. Several of the rooms on the southern side of the building (facing Shiyane hill) had no inter-leading doorways, but only exterior doors and windows. As the Zulus held the rear of the building, the men in the hospital had to break through the walls which, fortunately for them, were made of soft mud bricks.

By fighting their way from room to room, the British defenders were able to evacuate most of the hospital patients. The retreat from the hospital to the area behind the biscuit box barricade was extremely hazardous as the intervening ground was only defended from behind the biscuit boxes.

Move now to *Marker D*, which is a little further along the front wall.

MARKER D

As the battle progressed, the Zulu massed on the flat land in front of you, extending round to the eastern end (towards the river). They took cover in the long grass and in the shrubbery and made a series of fierce attacks on the British defences. Several warriors took advantage of the sandstone ledge below where you are standing, periodically popping up and firing at point blank range.

If you turn round and face the buildings, you can imagine the scene that faced the Zulu and what they had to contend with: The sandstone ledge and the mealie bag barricade provided a difficult barrier for them to overcome.

Marker E is further along this mealie bag barricade.

MARKER E

You are now where the biscuit box wall met the barricade. From about dusk, the entire British force occupied the barricaded area between the markers E, F and H. As you move to markers F, G and H, note how small this defended area was.

Marker F can be found inside the stone kraal.

MARKER F

This is a reconstruction of the cattle kraal which stood here at the time of the battle and played an important part in the defence. The British were forced to evacuate the farther half of the kraal during the night, but the Zulus were never able to press home the advantage and capture the entire kraal. When the British counter-attacked during the middle stages of the battle, the Zulus were forced to retire.

Marker G is in the circle of stones between the stone kraal and the church.

MARKER G

During the night Chard ordered that a small redoubt be built with some of the remaining mealie bags, in case the Zulus broke into the final defensive area. The stone circle marks the position of this redoubt, which was about nine feet (three metres) high and hollow in the middle. The badly injured men were hoisted inside to offer them greater protection and snipers were positioned on the top to shoot any Zulu who breached the defences.



Prince Dabulmanzi KaMpande, brother of King Cetshwayo, led the Zulu attack on Rorkes Drift /Shiyane. This photograph was taken after the war in about 1882. He actively opposed the post-war division of Zululand and was killed in a dispute in 1886. He was buried at Nondweni, near to present-day Nquthu

Lt. John Chard, senior officer at Rorkes Drift / Shiyane. He was one of 11 recipients of the Victoria Crogt for bravery at the baffle. After the war he was posted to Cyprus and Singapore, and rose to the rank of colonel. He died of cancer, aged forty nine in 1897.



50m



Shop

Trail ends

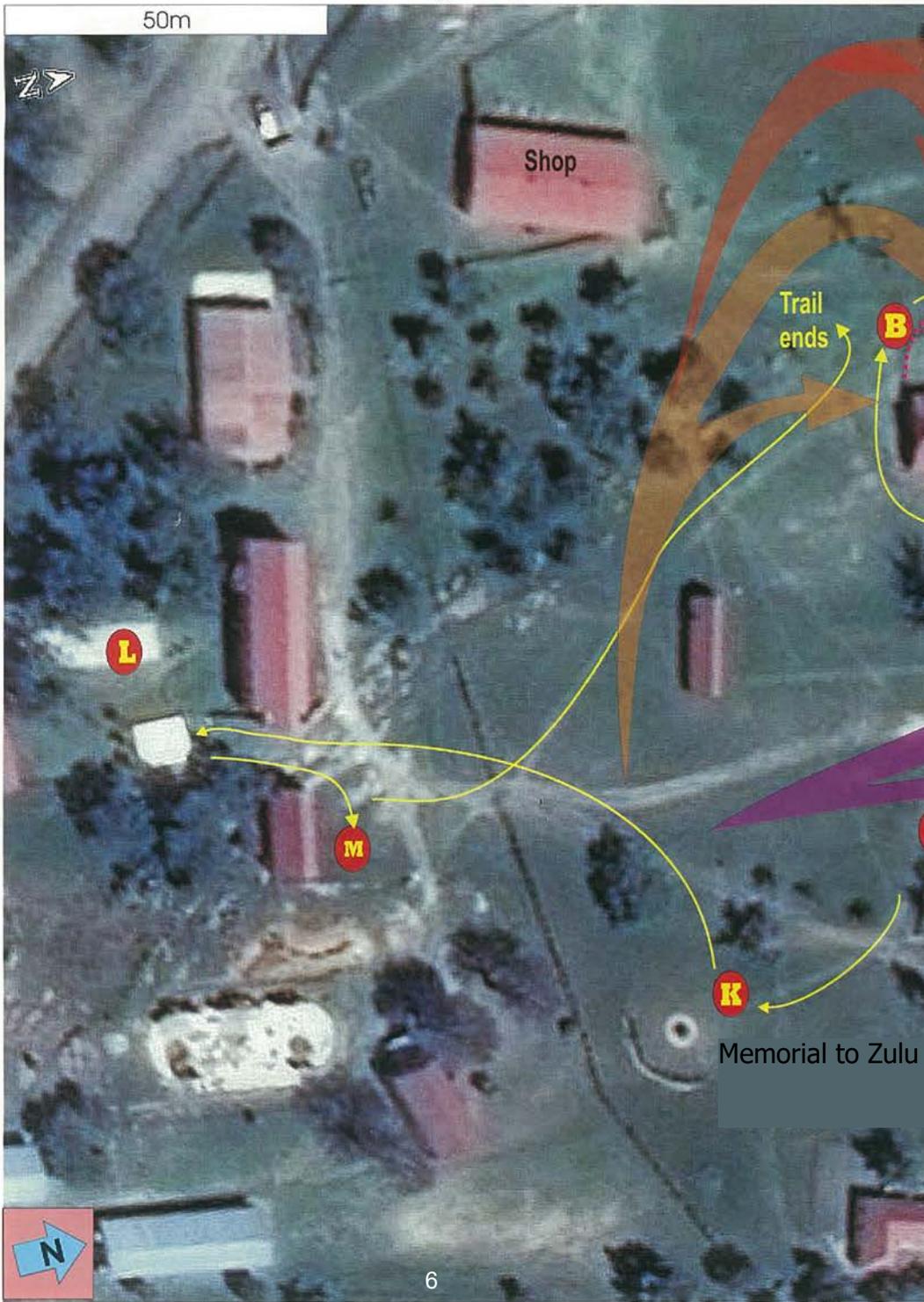
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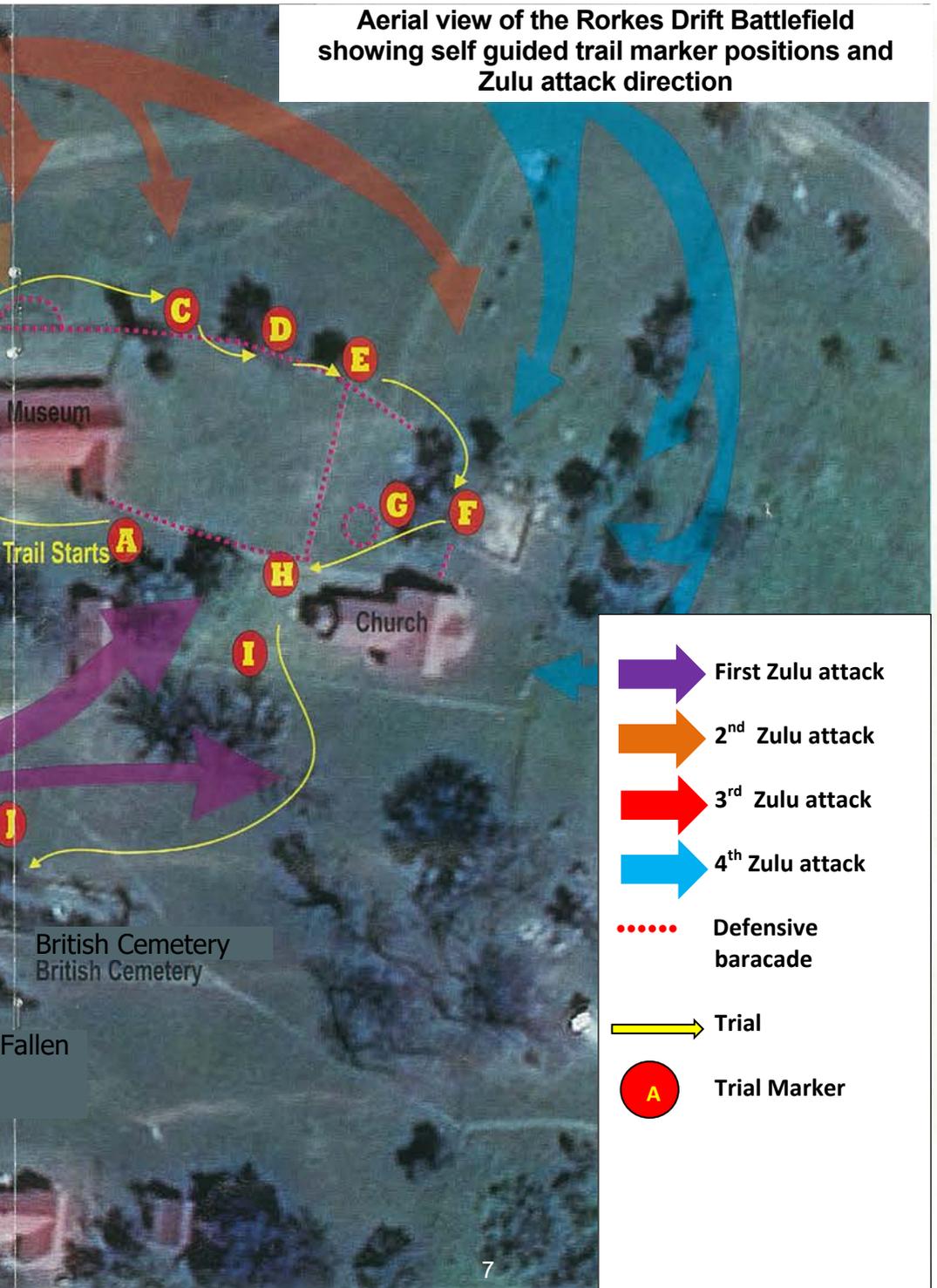
M

K

Memorial to Zulu



Aerial view of the Rorkes Drift Battlefield showing self guided trail marker positions and Zulu attack direction





This engraving depicting relief mounted troops arriving on the morning following the battle appeared in the Illustrated London News on 8 March 1879, News relating to the Anglo Zulu War was followed with intense interest in Britain.

Go on to *Marker H*, which is close to the front corner of the church.

MARKER H

Archaeological research has revealed parts of the foundation of the commissariat store, which is now marked by this line of stones. Most of the foundations are under the church.

After the battle, the British soldiers pulled off the thatch roof in case the Zulus returned and set fire to the building. In later years the missionaries broke the structure down and used the stone and timbers to build the original part of the church.

The next marker is round the other side of the church, past the west door.

MARKER I

The cookhouse and ovens that were used by the missionaries and by the British stood in this position. During the early stages of the battle the Zulus used these structures as cover from the fierce Martini-Henry rifle fire.

MARKER J

This is the site of the British Cemetery. British soldiers killed in the battle were interred here, their names were inscribed on the stone monument erected by their comrades.

MARKER K

The Memorial to the Fallen Zulu, This bronze piece, commissioned by Amafa Heritage KZN, and sculpted by Peter Hall. was erected in 2006. The tree growing in the centre of the memorial is a Buffalo Thorn, traditionally used by the Zulu to bring home the spirit of the departed.

MARKER L

This is the cemetery where Zulu dead were interred. After the Zulu retreat, most of the dead could not be retrieved and were interred by the British in hastily prepared mass graves. The names of the vast majority of those Zulu who perished remain lost to history.

MARKER M

Azaria Mbatha Exhibition area. In subsequent years after the battle Rorkes Drift served as a mission. During the 1960's The Evangelical Lutheran Church established an art school, that produced many well known artists, notably Azaria Mbatha and John Mafangeju, who rose to international prominence. Many of the artworks served as an outlet to political expression during Apartheid. The exhibition focusses on work produced from the 1960's to the 1990's. Ask for the key at reception. In the adjacent building is the Rorkes Drift weaving studio. Products of the weaving, textile and pottery studio can be purchased at the shop next to the reception.

From here you can make your way back towards the museum to the end of the trail.

CONCLUSION

When the Zulu failed to capitalise on their capture of part of the stone kraal, the ferocity of their attacks started to subside. From about 22:00 there were no further concerted attacks, but simply a number of sorties involving small numbers of warriors. However, periodic shouts of "uSuthu" kept the British defenders unnerved and prevented them from relaxing. Occasional firing still took place from the slopes of Shiyane and from the garden. When dawn finally broke at about 04:00 the Zulu had retired back towards Isandlwana

Quite extraordinarily, less than 150 British defenders had succeeded in warding off the attacks of some 4 000 Zulu warriors for nearly 12 hours.

A question often asked is why the Zulu failed to capture the post at Rorke's Drift/Shiyane despite overwhelming odds. The Zulu force had left Nodwengu, the military establishment outside Ulundi, on 17 January. While they travelled with the minimum of supplies, the distance to Isandlwana is over 100km and the men had lived off the land for some of the time. On the 22nd the Zulu force which attacked Rorke's Drift-Shiyane had covered another 12km from Isandlwana and had crossed the flooded Mzinyathi river. The force may already have been somewhat drained, despite the fact that the rest of the Zulu army had inflicted a severe defeat on the British at Isandlwana earlier in the day.

It appears too that the Zulu attacks were poorly co-ordinated. Prince Dabulamanzi, who commanded the Zulu force, may have been responsible for this. He was not a general, but because of his status within Zulu society, and through his forceful personality, he assumed command. As for the British force, it had no option but to fight. Under the circumstances it organized itself well by building a very effective barricade and having ammunition readily available. Disciplined marksmanship and cool head perhaps won the day, although clearly there were deeds of quite extraordinary heroism on both sides.

On the British side, eleven Victoria Crosses were awarded for gallantry and as many, if not more bravery awards, could have been awarded to the Zulus. 17 British soldiers were killed along with an estimated 500 Zulu warriors. Of the 20 000 rounds of ammunition with which the British started the defence, only about 600 remained at the end.

FURTHER READING

1. F. Emery, *The Red Soldier*
2. I. Knight, *Nothing Remains But To Fight*
3. I. Knight, *Zulu: The Battle of Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift*
4. Ilaband & P Thompson, *Kingdom in Crises: The Zulu Response to the British Invasion of 1879*
5. D.R. Morris, *Washing of the Spears*



We hope you have enjoyed your visit

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