

AN EXCEPTIONAL AND IMPORTANT ISANDHLWANA SURVIVORS SOUTH AFRICA 1879 AWARDED TO A COLONIAL COMMISSARIAT OFFICER ON DURNFORD'S STAFF WHO WAS WITH THE NATIVE HORSE TROOP THAT DISCOVERED THE ZULU ARMY, REPORTING THIS TO THE CAMP, FOUGHT IN THE LINE WITH THE 24TH AND WAS TWICE SAVED DURING HIS ESCAPE, RESULTING IN A RECOMMENDATION FOR THE VICTORIA CROSS A DETAILED PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF HIS PART IN THAT FATEFUL DAY SURVIVES



SOUTH AFRICA 1877-79, CLASP, 1878-9 'AG. COMST. OFFICER J. N. HAMER',

James Nathaniel Hamer was born in Clerkenwell, London, in October 1858, the son of James Hamer, a Clerk of the Queen's Bench. Believed to have served briefly as a member of the 6th (Volunteer) Battalion, Manchester Regiment, Hamer departed for South Africa in 1878, where he applied unsuccessfully for the position of Postmaster-General for Natal, no doubt on account of his youth, but with the advent of the Griqua War, he quickly found alternative employment as a Civil Commissariat Officer.

THE ZULU WAR AND THE BATTLE OF ISANDHLWANA

At the outbreak of the Zulu War, Hamer was serving as Civil Commissariat Storekeeper in Colonel Durnford's No 2 Column. Here he joined his friend, George Shepstone, who was serving as Durnford's political Assistant. On 22nd January 1879, Hamer and Shepstone joined Colonel Durnford, the mounted section of Durnford's Command, Rocket battery and two Companies of 1/NNC, that reinforced the camp at Isandhlwana after Lord Chelmsford's departure. Hamer would subsequently take part in the battle of Isandhlwana and was among a handful of men to not only escape the massacre but fewer still to leave a detailed account of events. Hamer's account of the battle is quite remarkable and given where he was during the battle, its probably one of the most remarkable to have been left.

In Brief, Hamer was with the Troop of Native Horse that actually discovered the Zulu Army, he then rode back to warn Colonel Puleine of the discovery. He then rode back to help the

mounted troops hold back to Zulu's. With the mounted troops retreating, he then rode back to the camp, dismounted, picked up a carbine and joined a company of the 24th Foot on the firing line. With this line about to be overwhelmed, he ran back to the camp, found his horse and with chaos death all around him, made his escape to helpmaaker. During his escape, he lost two horses and was saved by an artilleryman and later by Lieutenant Horace Smith-Dorrien!

A letter to his father takes up the story, the transcript of which is held in the collection of the National Army Museum. Hamer's account in italics;

'I dined the night before in his tent with Colonel Durnford and (poor?) Captain Geo. Shepstone. We were then at Rorke's Drift about 10 miles from the Isandhlwana camp. The next morning Wed. Jan. 22, we had a dispatch from General Lord Chelmsford and Colonel Durnford sent for me to his tent. I had some breakfast with him & he gave me a verbal message to Lord Chelmsford at camp. When I got there I found the General had left the camp to attack the Zulus. About an hour after my arrival in camp, Col. Durnford arrived with his mounted native horse, the rest of the native contingency being some miles behind.

Hamer was clearly sent ahead of Durnford and would have been the first to let Colonel Pulline know of Durnford's imminent arrival. Durnford arrived with his 4 troops of Mounted Natives, the rocket battery, 2 companies of 1/NNC and reserve ammunition/stores, bring up the rear. Hamer continues;

'The Zulus were then seen on the distant hills in small numbers (for an officer lent me his glass and I saw them myself). Colonel Durnford being superior officer took over command and orders from Colonel Pulline and of course has all the ... (?). Very soon after the mounted native horse had arrived they were sent out to some hills on the left of the camp. Captain George Shepstone in command. I went along with him, and after going some little way, we tried to capture some cattle. They disappeared over a ridge, and on coming up we saw the Zulus, like ants in front of us, in perfect order as quiet as mice and stretched across in an even line. We estimated those we saw at 12,000. After his having given orders to the Captain of the Native Horse to retire gradually, Geo. Shepstone (& myself) rode as hard as ever we could back to the camp and reported what we had seen'

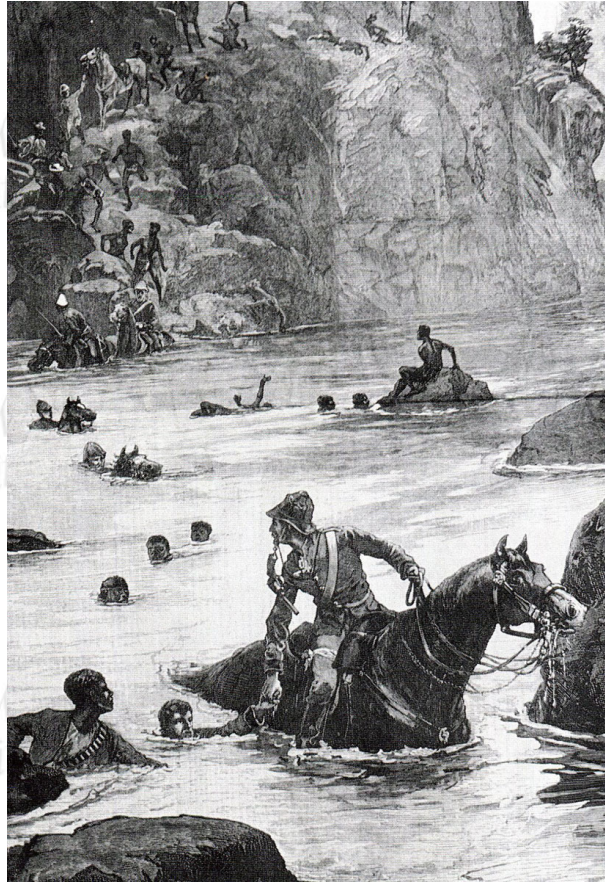
As the Native Horse (Natal Native Mounted Contingent) were sent out to patrol, they split into separate troops, with Hamer and Shepstone joining Lieutenant Raw's no 1 troop of the Zikhali Horse. It was Raw's troop that actually came across the Zulu Army, which immediately on discovery advanced to attack. Shepstone gave the order to hold the Zulu's off as best they could and he and Hamer galloped at full pelt, the five or so miles back to the camp to warn them. Reports of small parties of Zulu's had been coming to the camp for some time. However there was not great concern until Shepstone and Hamer arrived to report the discovery of the Zulu Army itself. This they did to Colonel Pulline himself. The camp was then put of full alert, with companies of the 24th Foot and NNC being sent out to support the mounted troopers. Hamer continues;

'A company of the 1/24 Foot was sent to back up our horsemen who by that time had retired down the hill towards the camp (I sent you a plan of the camp - which being the first I made out is slightly incorrect - I made out two other plans which have been sent to England to the War Office). We left our horses (for Geo. Shepstone & myself had rejoined the men) at the bottom of the hill, and went up and attacked the Zulus on foot, we drove them back at first, but after retiring over a ridge they were reinforced and came on in overwhelming numbers and we had a sharp run for it to our horses, which were some little distance away. We retreated towards the camp. Up to that time I had only had a revolver, so I rode into the camp and got a carbine. I then joined some soldiers in front of the camp and fired away as fast as possible, but we had to run for the Zulus came on us like ants on all sides.'



Being swept up by the dramatic events and clearly showing no lack of bravery, Hamer forgot about his 'real' job, which as a Commissary Officer, was to have been with Durnford's wagons. In particular to be supervising the preparation of and opening of ammunition boxes, so that flow of ammunition was kept up. In the event, when troopers were sent back to bring back ammunition to the lines, not enough was freely available and as time was of the essence, the troopers just grabbed what they could. Hamer continues;

'I had the greatest difficulty in finding my horse but got him and galloped through the camp, the Zulus being within 200 yards and then our company of the 24th with poor Colonel Durnford making a heroic and most gallant stand to cover the retreat. The scenes at the top of the camp baffles description, oxen yoked to waggons, mules, sheep, horses and men in the greatest confusion, all wildly trying to escape. I saw one gun brought over the neck of the hill, but it stuck fast among the stones. We had a very bad country to go over, large rough boulders and stones. Some distance from the camp is a small ravine which was hid by bushes, the greater part of the fugitives fortunately went above it, but several (with myself) went too low down, and met it at the centre. We could not go above as the Zulus were too near, and we had to go to the end of it before we could cross. The Zulus saw this and in large numbers tried to cut us off, I and four others were the last to get round, and we had to use our revolvers very freely, for the Zulus followed us up quickly, the ground being very bad for horses, and footmen had not the ghost of a chance. Several even were stabbed on their horses. My horse (Dick) had had a great deal of work that day and with tracking over the stones he got completely done and would not move a step further. I was in a jolly predicament when (thank God) a man of the Rocket Battery galloped up with a led horse and let me have it. I had just taken the saddle off poor Dick when a bullet struck him dead and the poor fellow who gave me the horse had only ridden ten yards when I saw him fall killed from his horse. The animal I was now on was a splendid beast, but the girth of the saddle was not strong enough and when I had galloped another two miles it burst and I came down on the stones, luckily I stuck like mad to the bridle and quickly rigged up a girth by passing the neck rein through the D of the saddle, and thereby saved myself as the Zulus were by this time close upon me. I managed all right till I got to the Buffalo River which was very difficult to cross. I myself saw several men swept down and drowned or killed. The Zulus charged us down to the river but they took care to cross lower down where it was safer. I had a dreadful ride to Helpmakaar half insensible and wet through.



Hamer doesn't mention in this account, that on reaching the other side of the river bank at Fugitive's Drift, his life was saved by Lieutenant Horace Smith-Dorrien, 95th Foot, who was serving as a Transport Officer (Later General Smith-Dorrien who Commanded II Corps at the battle of Mons in 1914). This may seem a bit odd now but it must be remembered that this is not an official document; it is an account written by Hamer to his father and no doubt leaves much out that we would think as important now. According to Smith Dorrien;

'With the help of my revolver and a wild jump down the rocks, I found myself in the Buffalo River, which was in flood and eighty yards broad. I was carried away, but luckily got hold of the tail of a loose horse, which towed me across to the bank, but I was too exhausted to stick to him. Up this bank were swarming friendly natives, but I only swam one European, a Colonial and Acting Commissariat Officer named Hamer, lying there unable to move. I managed to catch a loose horse and put him on it, and he escaped..'

Smith-Dorrien never caught another horse and managed to make it all the way to Helpmaaker on foot!

For saving Hamer and for another similar incident during the retreat, Smith-Dorrien would be recommended for the V.C. However owing to the wrong channels of communication being used, he never received the award. Hamer, however, did all within his power to get the recommendation accepted:

'Mr. Hamer, the civil commissary whose life he [Smith-Dorrien] had saved, wrote copious letters to the Horse Guards and to Horace's family but to no avail. When this became apparent, Hamer did his best to obtain for him the Royal Humane Society's Medal but was

told it was too late' (The Man Who Disobeyed: Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien and His Enemies, refers).

POST ISANDHLWANA

Also present at the battle of Ulundi, Hamer later gained appointment as a Sergeant, afterwards Acting Sub. Inspector, in the Cape Mounted Police, and was also for two years a Deputy-Commissary of Ordnance under the Cape Government. Having then briefly returned to the U.K., he sailed for New Zealand, where he found employment as a Sub. Manager with the Trust & Agency Co. of Australasia and was married in 1888.

And over the coming years he became a prominent local figure, rising to Manager of the Trust & Agency Co. and being elected a fellow of the Royal Colonial Institute, in addition to serving with the Canterbury Yeomanry. In the following year, Hamer enlisted in No. 24 Company of the 7th N.Z. Contingent, and briefly saw service as a Lieutenant in the Boer War before being invalided home on account of sickness - as a result of which he received the Queen's South Africa Medal with clasps for 'Cape Colony', 'Transvaal', 'South Africa 1901' and 'South Africa 1902'. Settling in Canada shortly before the Great War, Hamer returned to the U.K. in the early 1920's and died at Clun, Shropshire, in September 1925



HAMER AGED 27 IN 1888

CONCLUSION

Hamer's is a hugely important Isandhlwana survivors medal. Since George Shepstone did not survive and Lieutenant Raw did not claim his medal, this is the only medal to one of the men who first discovered the Zulu Army. Hamer could also claim to have been one of the two men to have personally delivered the news of the discovery of the Zulu Army (and the only

surviving one). He fought with the Zikhali Horse during their attempt to hold off the Zulu's and he would be one of the few survivors to have spent any time on the firing line with the 24th. Hamer only just escaped Isandhlwana by the skin of his teeth, helped firstly by an unnamed member of the rocket battery and finally by an Imperial Officer. All this at the age of just 20! To add to this, Hamer left one of the most vivid accounts of his part in the battle and escape from Isandhlwana, that is so often quoted in books on the subject.



Condition VF, a little edge bruising and just a touch polished. Sold with a quantity of copied research, including a couple of family photographs.