

AN EXTREMELY RARE ISANDHLWANA SURVIVORS MEDAL TO THE SERGEANT MAJOR OF THE 1ST BATTALION, 1ST REGIMENT NATAL NATIVE CONTINGENT WHO ACCOMPANIED COLONEL DURNFORD'S FORCE TO ISANDHLWANA. THE RECIPIENT LEFT ACCOUNT OF HIS ESCAPE, WHICH SUGGESTS HE WAS MOST PROBABLY WITH THE MOUNTED NATIVE TROOP UNDER LIEUTENANT VAUSE OR 'E' COMPANY UNDER CAPTAIN STAFFORD DURING THE BATTLE; BOTH OF WHICH UNITS FOUGHT NEXT TO EACH OTHER ON THE BATTLEFIELD, ESCAPING VIA FUGITIVES DRIFT WITH THE SIKALI TROOPS OF THE NATAL NATIVE HORSE UNDER CAPTAIN BARTON



Medal with 1879 clasp slipped on ribbon

**SOUTH AFRICA 1877-9, NO CLASP 'LIEUT SHARP: 1st NAT: NAT: CONTGT' 1879
CLASP SLIPPED ON RIBBON**

Lieutenant Thomas Sharp Adjutant of 1/NNC previously held the position of Regimental Sergeant Major of 1/1 NNC at the time of the battle of Isandhlwana and accompanied Colonel Durnford's Command into Zululand.

General Orders printed in the Natal Witness 29th and 31st May 1879 give the following:

*'The following Promotions and appointments in the 1st Battalion Natal Native Contingent...
Sergeant Major T. Sharp to be Lieutenant 21st May 1879 and Lieutenant T Sharp is
appointed Adjutant Vice Wynne retired 21st May 1879'*

Sharp left an account of his involvement in the form of a letter written to his Sister which was published in the Irish Times 5 May 1879, as well as to other Irish newspapers in early May 1879:

'A SURVIVOR OF ISANDULA

The following letter from Sergeant Major Thomas Sharp, Natal Native Contingent, who was present at the battle of Isandula, may interest some of our readers:-

*Rorke's Drift, Fort Melville
21st March 1879*

I suppose you will be surprised to hear from me after keeping you so long without writing. I have given up baking and gone to the front as it is a better paying job, but more dangerous... I am at present Sergeant Major of the 1st Battalion of No 3 Column, commanded by Colonel Durnford. We left Pietermaritzburg on 22nd December and arrived at Kraing Kop, 80 or 90 miles off, two days before New Years Day. We were stationed there about a month and then got orders to proceed to Rorkes Drift, the crossing place to get into Zulu country with wagons. We crossed in January all safe, about 5,000 Europeans and natives. On the 21st Lord Chelmsford took the main force away, as it was reported the Zulu's were some distance off. He proceeded with his force to meet them, but they came round a hill some way to his right. cut him off from us and commenced firing on the stores and wagons. Colonel Durnford was in charge of us, we advanced about a mile, threw out skirmishers and commenced banging away; the more we fired and killed the stronger they seemed to appear. At last we had to retire on the regulars who were fighting in another direction. Firing continued for several hours, till at last they came over the hill in front and rear and on both sides and we were hemmed in; they were just like a lot of bees. At last we had to give up our position and get ammunition from the wagons, but when we got to the wagons, to our great disappointment, they were in the hands of the enemy. The six companies of the 24th stood their ground to the last..there were two or three escaped of the six companies, the remainder died like true British soldiers. The loss of the regiment is about 600, including the Colonel. I believe the Zulu's took the two smallest drummer boys to Cetywayo's Kraal. What was done with them is hard to say, I do not suppose the poor little fellows will see their comrades again. In the battalion I am with, we lost rather heavily. Out of a thousand, there were 6 officers, 14 non-commissioned officers and 420 natives cut to pieces, including Colonel Durnford who fought with his one arm like a true British Officer. The last words he said were 'Now men this is our last escape; death or glory, god help us' He then gave the word 'charge' but before he got through a bullet entered his breast and he was numbered with the slain. We cut right and left and managed to clear through. I put spur to my horse and left the others to follow. The then Commandant told me to go and try if I could see anything of the main column. After hunting for miles I returned without finding any sign of it. I only saw about 20,000 more Zulu's, which were never brought into action at all. So you see I had a narrow escape. The total loss was about 1,400 to 1,800 on our side and it is said the enemy lost 4,000 to 5,000. They captured about 200 wagons and a large quantity of ammunition and rifles. Also the Generals provisions and a quantity of hard cash that was in Government wagons. They never saved anything, they burnt all the medicine of the medical staff, set fire to the hospital tents and killed the sick and wounded that were in the beds. They did not leave a single European with out cutting him open and letting his entrails out. Some they tied to trees, took out their eyes and put empty cartridge cases into the holes. They stripped all the dead of their cloths and wore them themselves. I am thankful to the Almighty I have escaped so far from the wicked brutes. I often think how poor father and mother used to give 3d or so to put into the plate at church for the poor heathen in Africa. Little did I think then I should be among the 'poor' so called heathen. It is nothing but the missionaries that make them what they are; once a Kaffir is Christianised he is no use to a white man for labour. He will commence to steal and plunder and do everything that is bad, whereas a raw Kaffir will do as he is told or die in the attempt. I have a lot of dealings with natives lately, and would sooner have a Kaffir straight from the hut than one who has knowledge of English. We are at a standstill at present waiting for reinforcements. I expect we shall be hard at it by the time you get this., and hope we shall take a lot of cattle as we get a share of the loot. We captured 17,000 oxen, sheep and goats, The country is full of them but there are very few horses as this country is bad for

horses to live in. In the Regiment I am the only white non commissioned Officer and am over about 2,000 natives; the remainder are taken away and made into a mounted troop. I have quite enough to do to keep them in order and see them fed. I get along with them very well. They call me their white chief and I am getting along with their language very fast, I can talk to them quite easily.'



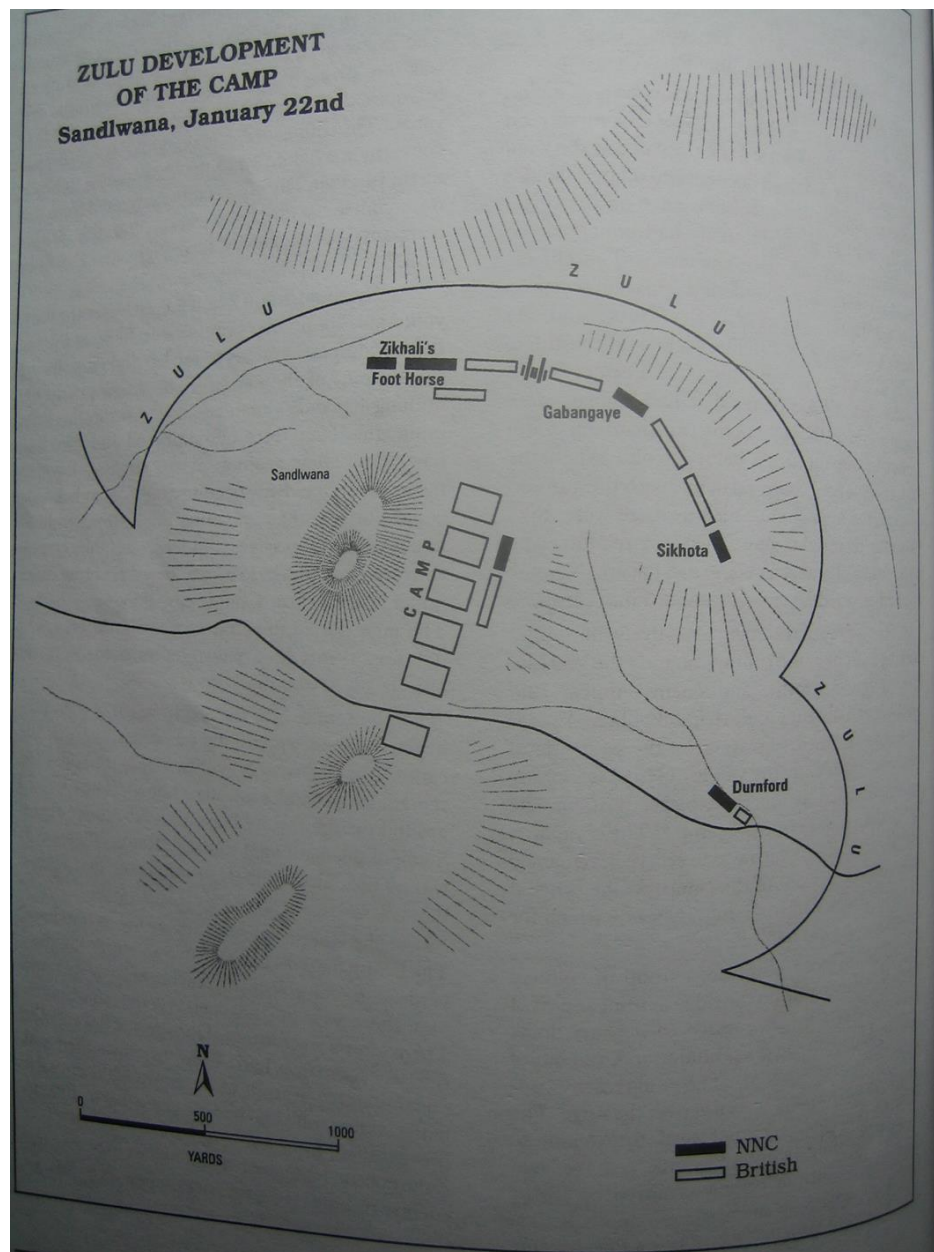
Medal minus clasp, as issued

WHERE EXACTLY WAS SERGEANT MAJOR SHARP DURING THE BATTLE

In his letter Sharp's letter he makes it clear he was mounted; which given his rank he would have been. He also makes it clear that he was out on the skirmish line and he mentions being about a mile out and firing in a different direction to the regulars. This suggests he placed himself with either Lieutenant Vause's mounted troop of the Natal Native Horse (Zikali) or Captain Stafford's 'E' Company of 1/1 Natal Native Contingent. Both these units were certainly (until falling back on the camp), firing in a different direction to the Imperial troops, being on the extreme left of the battlefield; the mounted troops initially skirmishing more forward until falling back to be more in line with Stafford. The other Company of the battalion under Captain Nourse's was with the Rocket battery much further from the camp, as were the mounted troops under Colonel Durnford.

To add to the above, as Regimental Sergeant Major, Sharp was part of 1st Battalion HQ and would have not have been assigned to a particular Company but would have placed himself, or been placed, where he was most needed. When Colonel Durnford first reached the camp at Isandhlwana, his supply wagons were lagging behind and he sent Captain Stafford's Company, along with Lieutenant Vause's troop back to protect and help them along. At this point it would have made sense to have also sent Sergeant Major Sharp, since as senior NCO he was mounted unlike the other Natal Native Contingent NCO's ranked Sergeant and below.

The only other Natal Native Contingent Sergeant Major present at the battle was Sergeant Major Williams, senior NCO of 1st battalion, 3rd Regiment. He also survived but is mentioned a number of times. By following his movements during the battle, we can get an idea of the probable duties Sergeant Major Sharp would have assumed. Williams was also mounted but he was at various parts of the battlefield during the battle itself.



Prior to fall back on the camp, note Stafford and Vause troops on extreme left (Zikhali foot/horse)

ESCAPE FROM ISANDHLWANA AND CONCLUSION

Sharp certainly seems to have fled the camp with Barton and the Native Horsemen as he mentions being with the 'then Commandant' (after Colonel Durnford's death), who was Captain Barton. Sharp's description was not an official statement but a private letter to his sister and therefore, it must be read as such and his exact movements must be pieced together from elements we know to ring true during the battle and what he has added from what he's heard; the death of Colonel Durnford and part about the drummer boys was certainly not something he saw but such stories were going around. As a conclusion, the above are thoughts of his most likely position during the battle but since we have no other accounts of his whereabouts, they cannot be considered anything more than likely. However Sergeant Major Thomas Sharp was present at and survived the battle of Isandhlwana and his name will be found on the list of survivors on all modern rolls and publications. As yet nothing more than this letter and Natal Native Contingent appointments have been discovered but that does not mean more may not come to light in future.

THE MEDAL

Medal does not appear on the roll which isn't hugely unusual with medals to Colonials but is correctly named in the style of other NNC medals, indeed it is identical in all ways to another 1/NNC Officers medal I have recently had through my hands. Strictly speaking it should have a clasp, however the rank on the medal being Lieutenant and the unit 1st NNC means the medal was authorised for services as a lieutenant when 1 NNC did not get bars. Again this is a common occurrence, indeed Commandant Montgomery of 1st NNC was also awarded a no clasp medal for later service in error.



Condition NEF, with original ribbon and an original 1879 clasp has been slipped onto the ribbon for display purposes. Isandhlwana survivors medals are extremely rare, ones with accounts are next to impossible to find! If Sharp's medal application or the missing roll pages are found, this medal would retail around a third more.

Medal and letter is featured on page 137 of the Zulu War medal roll by Roy Dutton.