

by Ian Knight

One of the first things which strikes many of those who have been lucky enough to visit the battlefield of Rorke's Drift is just how small the area of the final enclosure held by the British defenders actually was. None of the buildings on site today were there at the time of the battle but the lines of defence are marked out in stone, and at their most beleaguered, the ground held by the

British amounted to a single building with a line of barricades just 30 yards long in front. In the middle of that space was a pile of mealie bags (200lb. sacks of corn), hastily converted into a redoubt; and crammed in the space around it, huddled into the barricades, throughout the longest of long nights, were about 150 weary and battered men. Outside the confines of the compound, in the darkness of the African

night, were 3,000 Zulu warriors, trying their best to kill them. That they did not. That the battle at Rorke's Drift is so well-remembered today had little to do with the tactical flair which is so often a facet of military command, and rather more to do with the pragmatic and determined leadership of the two British officers in charge – Lieutenants John Chard and Gonville Bromhead.

Rorke's Drift had originally been built in the 1840s by an Irish trader named James Rorke. His property was framed on one side by the Mzinyathi (Buffalo) River, about half a mile away, and which constituted the border between the British colony of Natal and the independent Zulu kingdom; Rorke had made his living trading across the river by way of the ford, or "drift," which soon came to bear his name. Rorke had not built his home with defence in mind; it consisted of two stone-walled thatched buildings about 40 yards apart, built on a flat at the foot of a hill. In front of the buildings the ground dropped away in a natural step about six feet high, giving Rorke, in sipping his gin on his veranda in the evenings, a fine view of the sun setting upstream

in the valley. Rorke had died in 1875, long before any significance was attached to his name. His farm passed first to two settler families whose chief claim to fame is that they, in order to ensure some privacy for themselves in the same dwelling, had blocked up some of the interior doors of Rorke's old house, making it impossible to pass through it without going outside, a fact which would have unintended consequences during the battle, and then to a Swedish missionary, Otto Witt, and his family.

In December 1878, the politics of the outside world landed on Otto Witt's doorstep as the British Empire provoked a quarrel with the Zulu kingdom. The British general, Lord Chelmsford, was tasked with invading Zululand, and since he would have to transport all his army's supplies and equipment as they advanced, and, since the country's only roads had been pioneered by traders like Rorke, he based his strategy on those. Rorke's Drift, straddling a track which ran across the border and into the heart of Zululand, suddenly achieved a new significance. Chelmsford decided to make the spot the launching-pad for the invasion of his Centre (of three) Column – his main offensive thrust. Throughout the end of December the column assembled on the British bank and when, on 11 January 1879 the war officially began, Lord Chelmsford crossed the river.

Behind him he left Rorke's Drift as an improvised hospital and supply depot. The missionary, the Reverend Witt, had agreed to rent his premises to the military, and the British had filled one of Rorke's old buildings with sacks and crates of supplies and turned the other into a makeshift hospital. An infantry company, B Company 2/24th Regiment, together with some African auxiliaries, was left to guard the post. Both fell under the command of a Major Henry Spalding who was responsible for overseeing the line of communications extending back into Natal.

The process of transporting Chelmsford's wagons across the river proved an arduous

one, and soon exerted a strain on a pont (a flat-bottomed barge) and a barrel-raft which constituted the means of ferrying. Supervision of the pont required the services of a professional engineer, but Chelmsford was chronically short of Royal Engineer staff. An engineer company – 5 Field Company, RE – had recently landed in Natal and was on its way to the front but bad weather had delayed it on the roads. Chelmsford had despatched an order to the Company commander instructing him to send an officer and a handful of men ahead as quickly as possible to assist with the duties at the crossing.

The officer chosen was John Rouse Merriott Chard, a 32-year-old lieutenant from Devon. By all accounts Chard had an easy-going, relaxed, and affable personality, and his company commander pronounced him "a most amiable fellow" but "as a company officer he is so hopelessly slow and slack." Presumably Chard's appointment to the job reflected the fact that he would be expected to do no more than routine maintenance at the Drift, well behind the front line.

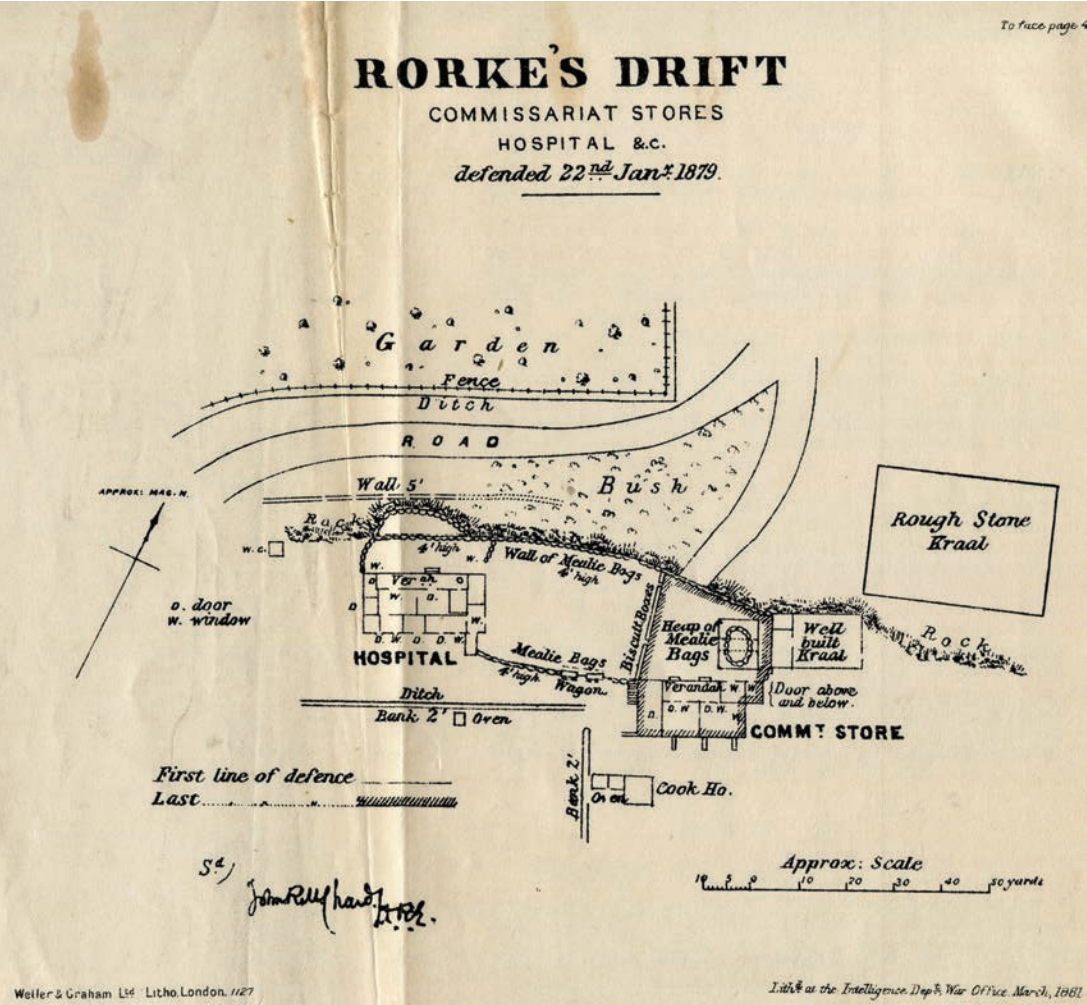
Chard and his party had arrived at Rorke's Drift on 19 January, and the following day Lord Chelmsford had moved his entire column forward from his camp on the Zulu bank to a distinctive rocky outcrop called iSandlwana. Those left behind at Rorke's Drift reflected ruefully that whatever fun lay ahead, they were likely to miss out on it.

Early on the morning of 22 January,

Chard received an ambiguous order instructing him to send his men forward to the camp at iSandlwana. Unsure whether he was himself needed, he accompanied them, and on arriving there found that Lord Chelmsford had taken about half of his command out of the camp before dawn that morning in response to a report that the Zulus were massing to his front. After he had departed, some Zulu movements had been spotted much closer to the camp and, on finding that he was not personally required, Chard set out back to Rorke's Drift with the news. There he had spoken with Major Spalding, who had decided to ride back down the line of communication to hurry along, in case they were needed, two companies of the 24th who were on their way to the border. This left only a handful of junior officers at the Drift including a Surgeon and a Commissariat officer, neither of whom were eligible for a front line command. That left Chard and the commander of B Company, Gonville Bromhead, known to his colleagues

OPPOSITE PAGE
One of Chard's maps of the defences at Rorke's Drift

BELOW
A group of Royal Engineer officers at the end of the Zulu campaign; Chard in the back row, wearing his newly-awarded Victoria Cross





FAR RIGHT
John Chard, "The Hero of Rorke's Drift" – a formal portrait after he had returned home, minus his campaign beard.

Chard was present in the British square during the decisive victory at the Battle of Ulundi and remained in Africa until the end of the war.

A lifelong pipe smoker, he contracted cancer and died on 1 November 1897

RIGHT
"Gunny" Bromhead, also minus his campaign beard.

Bromhead was posted to Gibraltar, dispatched to India, and served in Burma where his battalion took part in the Third Anglo-Burmese War. Bromhead was subsequently posted back to India, where he contracted typhoid fever and died on 9 February 1891

BELOW
The battlefield today; the hospital building stood where the present building stands on the right; note the rocky ledge, which Chard topped with a line of mealie-bag barricades



as "Gunny." Both were lieutenants, Bromhead had more combat experience than Chard, having commanded B Company in the final stages of the 9th Cape Frontier War the year before, and whilst he seems to have been popular within his battalion he was reserved with outsiders, perhaps as a result of early onset deafness (although there is no evidence to suggest that B Company had been "left behind" because of this). In the event, Spalding consulted his Army List, which gave the date of officers' commissions,

and found that Bromhead was senior by three years of service. He instructed Chard to command the post in his absence, but remarked as he rode off "Of course, nothing will happen, and I shall be back again this evening."

A few hours later the distant crackle of gunfire from the direction of iSandlwana first alerted the garrison at Rorke's Drift to the fact that something significant was occurring there. In fact Lord Chelmsford had been out-manoeuvred; the Zulu army had slipped round his flank, and

fallen upon the camp. Around 3:30 p.m. the first exhausted survivors arrived at the post with the shocking news that the camp had fallen, and that several thousand Zulus were on their way to attack Rorke's Drift. The survival of the garrison – and potentially the security of Natal (the defenders did not know, after all, that the Zulu King Cetshwayo had forbidden his men to invade Natal) – now depended upon the actions of two junior officers, only one of whom had combat experience. It has become fashionable in recent years

to suggest that neither man displayed any inspired leadership but that is a view which ignores the fact that what was needed in that moment was not tactical genius but dogged determination. After consulting with Bromhead and Assistant Commissary James Dalton, Chard decided to defend their ground; it was a wise decision since any attempt to retreat would undoubtedly have exposed the men to a Zulu attack in the open veldt. At a time when any display of indecision might have undermined the morale of the garrison, neither Chard nor Bromhead showed any outward sign of the daunting task which lay ahead of them. The large stockpile of supplies at the post provided an obvious source of barricades, and the two buildings were connected with a line of mealie-bags and boxes. There was no call for the extensive training Chard had undergone as an Engineer, but nonetheless his Engineer's eye was undoubtedly crucial. He directed that a line of barricades be run along the top of the rocky ledge at the front of the post; adding three feet to the existing drop of six feet, any Zulus attacking at the front of the post would have to fight against soldiers not only sheltered by mealie bags but ensconced above their own head height; for the Zulu warriors fighting with close-quarter weapons, this was a fatal disadvantage.

About 4:15 p.m., as lookouts on the hill spotted the Zulus approaching, the nerve of the African auxiliaries at the post broke and they fled. Such panic can easily spread throughout any force but Chard and Bromhead seem to have reacted stoically; Chard realised that the garrison was now likely to be too small to hold the entire perimeter, and he ordered the construction of a new line of biscuit-box barricade which bisected the position, allowing the

defenders to regroup should either one of the buildings fall.

This barricade was scarcely completed when the Zulus arrived – about 3,500 men of the uThulwana, uDloko, iNdondlo, and iNdlayenge regiments. These were mature men in their mid-forties who had formed the reserve during the attack on iSandlwana, and had missed the fighting there, and were keen now to seize some glory from the day. Their first attack was directed at the back of the post but they were checked by volley-fire from the 24th, and veered round to take shelter in a small orchard and overgrown scrub along the front. From there they repeatedly attacked perceived weak-spots in the British position, although they were hampered by the height advantage enjoyed by the British.

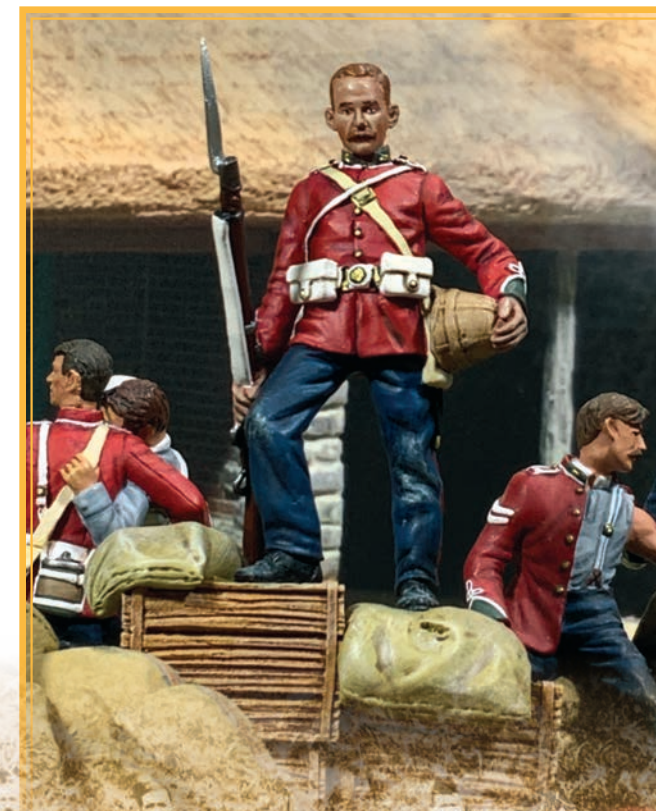
Throughout the battle both Chard and Bromhead were aware of the need to be conspicuous to encourage their men, despite the obvious risks. When a series of Zulu attacks drove the defenders back from the barricades in front of the hospital, Bromhead gathered a group of the 24th and they made a bayonet charge which drove the Zulus out. Chard paced about, directing the defence; when Commissary Dalton was shot and wounded next to him, Chard took up his rifle, and joined the men on

the barricades. Seeing him searching for cartridges, a wounded man crawled over and gave him his.

By about 6 p.m. the Zulus had finally broken into the hospital. The British had endured sufficient casualties that Chard was worried about the integrity of the line, and he ordered the men to withdraw behind the biscuit-box barricade. It was

BELOW
Some figures depicting an after battle display. Left to right: Evacuation of the Hospital Set, No. 4, 24th Foot Private John Williams and Medical Orderly Corporal R. Miller Carrying Patient, No. 20110; *We Made It!*, 24th Foot Standing on Barricade, No. 50081C; British Surgeon Reynolds Operating on Corporal Allen, No. 20042

BOTTOM
Some of the defenders of Rorke's Drift – B Company, 2/24th, photographed at the end of the war. Bromhead is sitting left, at the end of the first row



probably the only tactical decision he made during the battle, but as it happened it saved the day; Chard now had the same number of men to secure a much smaller defensive perimeter, and a large pile of sacks in front of the store was hastily converted into an improvised redoubt, which added another layer of fire to the British defence.

For the Zulus, however, it must have seemed as if victory was close at hand. They had captured one of the buildings – almost half the British position – and they renewed their efforts to take the rest. At one point an angle between the biscuit box and mealie bag line came under severe pressure, and Bromhead went over to stiffen the defence; he had been using a rifle since the start of the battle, and now handed his revolver to Pte. Fred Hitch, who had been shot in the shoulder and could not use his own. The corner held.

By midnight, when the battlefield was lit only by the flames from the burning hospital, the Zulu attacks began to slacken. The Zulus had passed an exhausting day crossing the country between iSandlwana and Rorke's Drift, and had been fighting for several hours – they were growing tired. They massed out in the darkness, and Chard and Bromhead climbed up on the slopes of the redoubt to listen for the shouted orders and chants which heralded a new attack. Those last attacks did succeed in driving the British out of a stone cattle pen adjoining the storehouse, but they could never quite break through

the British lines. By about 2 a.m. the battle was reduced to a spluttering fire-fight in the dark.

When dawn came up the following morning, the Zulus had withdrawn. One body lined a hill opposite the post, and for a few minutes Chard feared a new attack and doubted his men could withstand it. But the Zulus drifted away, and shortly afterwards Lord Chelmsford and his command – who had spent the previous day fruitlessly searching for the Zulu army and had returned that evening to find his camp littered with the dead – arrived back from Zululand.

The battle had cost the lives of 600 Zulus, and hundreds more wounded – an extraordinary casualty rate of almost one in three, a testament to their remarkable courage and endurance. In contrast, just 17 of Chard's men were killed – a testament, in their case, not only to their courage but to the effectiveness of Chard's barricades. As Chelmsford's men arrived and wandered the battlefield, Chard's batman turned up a bottle of beer that had escaped the carnage, and the two officers sat down to share a toast.

Both Chard and Bromhead were among the 11 members of the garrison to be awarded the Victoria Cross. Both served throughout the rest of the Zulu campaign – Chard was present at the final British victory at Ulundi on 4 July – and when the war ended returned to their military careers. Chard enjoyed the role of “Hero of Rorke's Drift” and was invited several

times to tell the story to Queen Victoria, and many times to attend banquets in his honour. Both posed for paintings of the battle – although by then they had discreetly shaved off the beards they had sported in the field in order to present a more conventional appearance. But, as fate would have it, neither man found themselves in a position to distinguish themselves again, and both died young – Chard as a Colonel, in Devon, in 1897, at the age of 49, and Bromhead as a Major in India in 1891, he was 46.

Chard's reputation has suffered as the result of a whispering campaign by senior officers, notably Sir Evelyn Wood, who for some reason took against him and characterised him as dull and uninteresting, implying that he was not worthy of the recognition that he received. It is true that he was probably a relaxed and unambitious officer – but the fact remains that on that day he displayed exactly the leadership qualities that the situation demanded. ■

Ian Knight is the author of *Zulu Rising: The Epic Story of iSandlwana and Rorke's Drift*

BELOW

This detail from a contemporary painting of Rorke's Drift shows Chard in the thick of the fight (left, picked out by the artist with an unusually clean helmet; in fact helmet plates were not worn in the battle)



51047 – iSandlwana, 22 January, 1879 \$35.00



All products are pictured somewhat, although not exactly, proportional

51082
Beginning of the End,
Mini Backdrop
\$7.50



51098 – The Mission Station at Rorke's Drift \$35.00



51100 – Rorke's Drift: Panoramic View Behind the Mission Station \$70.00



51099 – The Defence of Rorke's Drift \$35.00



For this issue the *Front & Center* staff picked not one, not two, but, five different items. All backdrops and all covering the Anglo-Zulu War, or rather, two particular days in that conflict – 22-23 January 1879, the battles of iSandlwana and Rorke's Drift.

THE ARMY DOESN'T LIKE MORE THAN ONE DISASTER IN A DAY

RIGHT
A rather convincing layout with relatively few figures. Of course the scene would be even more convincing with just 50 or so additional Zulus – but that's your call

A few years back, we designed and released an iSandlwana backdrop for our Anglo-Zulu War range. While this proved very popular with collectors, we received multiple pleas for more – specifically something for Rorke's Drift.

Well, we've done that – times three! 51098 *The Mission Station at Rorke's Drift* – depopulated and waiting for your figures to take the stage.

51099 *The Defence of Rorke's Drift* – the battle is on with plenty of figures but still needing your reinforcements.

51100 *Rorke's Drift: Panoramic View Behind the Mission Station* – this whopper measures a full 5 feet long allowing you plenty of room to capture the full sweep of the battle.

And now that you know, we'd like to enlist

your help. If, while out on your travels, you should come across a non-Club member flailing in the dark – whether on a message board, in a forum, blog, thread on your favorite social media site, or even at a bus stop – please take a moment to enlighten this poor soul and tell him how he can easily enhance and improve his Zulu War collection with one (or all!) of these new backdrops. You will surely be thanked and be warmed with the selfless satisfaction of having helped a fellow traveler. ■

