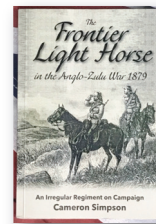


BOOK REVIEW:

The Frontier Light Horse in the Anglo-Zulu War 1879: an irregular regiment on campaign

by Cameron Simpson

*Assegai Genealogical Research: Cape Town; 2018; 307 pp.; ISBN 9780620772839;
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Alphonse du Neuville's epic painting *Defence of Rorke's Drift* has been stopping crowds at the Art Gallery of New South Wales for almost 140 years. Fifty-five years ago, the motion picture, *Zulu*, created cinema queues around Australia and has remained a popular film ever since. Today, Australian military historian and combat veteran, Cameron Simpson, reintroduces that period of the history of the British Empire with his latest book, *The Frontier Light Horse in the Anglo-Zulu War 1879: An Irregular Regiment on Campaign*. The book is a fascinating read and a valuable contribution to scholarship.

As the title suggests, the book is a unit history. At first glance, *The Frontier Light Horse* may appear to be a study of one of the obscure colonial units raised in South Africa to fight the wars of Empire in the late 19th century. On closer examination, however, the reader discovers that the Frontier Light Horse was the spearhead of one of the three columns that Lord Chelmsford launched into Zululand to initiate the war and was still fighting in the final battle at Ulundi (oNdini). Simpson devotes entire chapters to two of the most significant battles of the war, Hlobane and Khambula. The descriptions of these battles are not restricted to the role of the Frontier Light Horse. At Hlobane, the description of the retreat down Devil's Pass is as gripping as any adventure novel. In his account of the Battle of Khambula, in which a little over 2000 British and Imperial troops faced a Zulu army some 17,000 strong, Simpson observes with typical understatement that: "as the Zulus swept across the open veldt they were heard to be proudly chanting *we are the boys from Isandlwana*, a means of intimidating the British and at this point the anxiety amongst the young infantryman that lined the perimeter of the garrison must have been high".

More than half of the text is devoted to appendices. In these we discover Simpson's passion for genealogical research. The first appendix will satisfy a predictable curiosity for the Victoria Cross. The second introduces the reader to the terminology of the period.

It is in the third that Simpson shares his extraordinary research into the men of the regiment. What a fascinating bunch of people they are. The unit was made up of adventurers from all over the British Empire,

Europe, even the Americas. There are gentlemen's sons, clerks, sailors and others from every possible walk of life. Drawn together by war, some went on to live long and eventful lives while others faded into obscurity or lie in some lonely or unmarked grave in the African bush. Simpson provides accounts of the endurance and acts of bravery of many of these soldiers, as well as descriptions of punishments for desertion, drunkenness or cowardice.

As a student of the Second Anglo-Boer War, I was interested in Simpson's attitude to the flawed Major (later General) Redvers Buller. Simpson's descriptions of Buller's performance in and out of battle with the Frontier Light Horse provided a very different perspective on his personality and courage.

Among the more than 400 sets of biographical notes are notes on a number of Australians including two of whom who served in the New South Wales Military Forces and were part of the contingent that went to the Soudan in 1885.

Irish born Fred Bulmer was one of them. Said to be university educated, he fought in several frontier wars rising through the ranks until commissioned. After South Africa he moved to Australia and served in the New South Wales Mounted Police with parallel service in the military forces, including the deployment to the Soudan. In March 1906, Bulmer ended his own life with a bullet through the brain. He had not turned 53.

The other was another Irishman, William Fawcett, who, after fighting with the Frontier Light Horse in the Zulu War, moved to New South Wales and served in the Soudan then returned to South Africa to see action with the Scottish Horse during the Second Anglo-Boer War!

These are but two of the stories revealed in the biographical notes that are one of the great strengths of the book. Other strengths are the lavish footnotes and the thorough indexing. Also, conveniently located at the front of the work, are campaign and battle maps that are superb in their simplicity. The photographic section combines historical images with modern photographs of the old battlefields taken by the author and his mates as they walked the site.

I recommend *The Frontier Light Horse* to any historian interested in the wars of Empire – it should be an essential addition to their library. I recommend it as well to those just looking for a great story well told.

Brad Manera²

¹The book is available through Clarke's Bookstore, Long Street, Cape Town <http://www.clarkesbooks.co.za> and Foxhole Militaria <https://www.foxhole.co.za>

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