



Jules Hudson

COUNTRY ESCAPE

With many military anniversaries to celebrate this year, Jules looks to one of the Army's most celebrated victories – one that shocked South Wales communities

As anniversary years go, 2014 is set to be a bumper one, particularly if, like me, you're mad about military history. The centenary of the start of the First World War, the 70th Anniversary of D-Day, the following liberation of Rome and Paris, and the Battle for Arnhem are just a few of the commemorative highlights that we might look back and reflect upon. Yet to my surprise, there's one further military moment that also has a birthday this year. Just a few weeks ago, it was the 50th anniversary of the film *Zulu*.

You might think that celebrating a film release isn't quite the same as commemorating the date of the action it portrays, and ordinarily you'd be right. However, *Zulu's* story, that of the gallant defence of the mission station at Rorke's Drift in Natal by around 140 men – most of whom were Welsh – against an estimated 4,500 Zulu warriors, has become the stuff of both military and cinematic legend. It occurred on 22nd January 1879, following the massacre of an entire Battalion at Isandlwana.

Without the film, the battle at Rorke's Drift would almost certainly have remained a footnote in the history of the Zulu War, save for two things. Firstly, the amount of Victoria Cross medals awarded after the battle, 11 in all, and the subsequent fascination with the story of the film's director and leading man, Stanley Baker.

Baker's reverence for the tale of what happened at Rorke's Drift gave life to an idea that would become one of the most famous war films of all time. Baker went on to play the lead, Lt John Chard VC RE, whilst he cast a young Michael Caine as Lt Bromhead VC of the 24th Foot. The Regiment went on to become the South Wales Borderers and is now preserved in the Royal Regiment of Wales. At the time the 24th Foot notionally hailed from Warwickshire, but their operational depot was at Brecon, and its ranks were swelled with boys from the valleys. When news of the Isandlwana slaughter reached the communities around Brecon, its impact must have been appalling, tempered by news of the successful defence of Rorke's Drift. Both actions took place on the same day and would record, up to that point, the British Army's most infamous defeat and one of its most celebrated victories.

When we get behind the magic of the movies, often much is misrepresented but, in *Zulu's* case, what you see is pretty much what happened. The entire film was shot on location in South Africa where the action took place and perhaps what's even more remarkable, is that to reproduce scenes with thousands of warriors coursing through the landscape, would today almost certainly be achieved with computer graphics. Baker and his producers had no such luxury.

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Instead they enlisted the support of the Zulu nation and its current King Buthelezi. The film crossed the apartheid gulf that then existed in South Africa, and managed to reflect the pitiful struggle the Zulu Chief Cetshwayo, played by Buthelezi himself, faced at the time.

It's often said that we study history to avoid the mistakes of the past. Yet, 135 years after the Zulu War, we still seem set on fighting in foreign fields for dubious reasons. The boys that gave their lives in Natal fought not for VC's or for a place in the history books. Like soldiers through the ages they fought for their mates and their units and for survival. Today, young men are still based and train in the Brecon Beacons for wars still being fought, and for those sadly we will still go on to fight. So next time you pass through this famous Welsh town, think of the lads who never came back to enjoy the mountain views, and consider that, on occasion, the films that remember them are sometimes just as important as the dates that commemorate them.

JULES HUDSON was born in Essex but stayed in Wales after studying archeology at Lampeter University. He has worked in television since 1996 and is a member of the *Countryfile* team, but is best-known as the leading face of *Escape To The Country*. He moved back across the Border in 2012, to Herefordshire.

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