

# The Defense of the Hospital, Rorke's Drift, 1879

by

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“Here they come, black as hell and thick as grass!”

Private J. Waters could still hear the warning cry of a few minutes ago. Thousands of Zulus were attacking the mission station at Rorke's Drift, now a supply staging post for the British army's invasion of Zululand. [see Photo 1]

Private Waters, of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot (2<sup>nd</sup> Warwickshires), had been detailed to remain at the Drift with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion and a number of patients from the 1<sup>st</sup> who were laid up in hospital. Unknown to him at the time, he owed his current survival to the fact that he was not with the 2<sup>nd</sup> /24<sup>th</sup>, who had been wiped out at Isandlwana, only ten miles away. The morning had started out as a normal garrison day and now he was trapped in a smoky, claustrophobic nightmare.

There were barely 150 soldiers at Rorke's Drift, and from 20 to 30 of them were patients on the sick list, although only a handful were so incapacitated that they could not defend themselves. They'd had a few hours in which to prepare their defenses, and part of that involved stationing some men (like Waters) in the hospital. Waters and another private, Beckett, had looped the walls in their room and were firing as best they could, using their Martini-Henry single-shot breech-loading rifle to good effect. [see Photo 2] They had almost no idea of what was transpiring in the other rooms of the building. Rorke had built it so that it was a warren of small rooms with no interconnecting corridor, and several rooms did not open into each other, but directly to the outside.

Such was the room Waters and Beckett were in, cut off from the rest of the building unless they dug holes through the interior walls. The noise from the guns was deafening in the confined space, and now there was smoke from a fire on the roof of the hospital. Night was

falling fast, too, and it seemed the easiest thing to do was hide. The two Privates hid in a large wardrobe belonging to the Reverend Otto Witt, whose mission station this was before the British came along. Waters had been wounded twice, and there were several dead Zulu in the room, but their hiding place was not discovered.

As smoke filled the room, Beckett fled outside, probably hoping to lose himself in the night. Private Waters waited as long as he could stand it; luckily, the Zulu attack had ebbed at that corner of the building [see Photo 3] before he too dashed outside. However, he had taken the time to wrap himself in a black cloak, which he had found in Reverend Witt's wardrobe. This, combined with the darkness outside and the distraction of the fighting around the storehouse, permitted him to creep away unseen. [see Photo 4]

Waters worked his way towards the cook-house at the back of the post, only a few yards away from the storehouse, with the intention of rejoining the garrison. [see Photo 5] When he entered the cook-house, he discovered it was full of Zulus engaged in firing at the British position. Luckily for Private Waters, they did not notice him, so he smeared soot from the ovens on his face and hands. Then he crouched down in the shadows just outside, covering himself with the cloak.

Amazingly, he was not discovered. Private J. Waters survived to rejoin the garrison the next morning.

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I have taken a few liberties with the action, due to the fact that I can't perfectly recreate the layout. Also, the location of the cook-house is somewhat off, due to the limitations of my table and camera. This was a compromise I had to make in order to get any photos at all. I've used Old Glory 15mm figures, and a further liberty I've taken is that Private Waters does not have a cloak on in my pictures.