

REMEMBERING DURBAN'S HISTORICAL TAPESTRY – THE BATTLE OF CONGELLA

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Tuesday 23rd May 2017 marks an important date in Durban's historical tapestry – it is the dodransbicentennial (175th) anniversary of the commencement of the Battle of Congella in the greater city of Durban.

From a military historical perspective, the Congella battle site was actually named after former Zulu barracks (known as an *ikhanda*), called *kwaKhangela*. This was established by King Shaka kaSenzangakhona (ca. 1787 – 1828) to keep a watchful eye on the nearby British traders at Port Natal - the full name of the place was *kwaKhangela amaNkengane* ('place of watching over vagabonds').

Shortly after the Battle of Blood River (*isiZulu: iMpi yaseNcome*) on 16th December 1838, Natalia Republiek was established by the migrant Voortrekkers (Afrikaner Boers, mainly of Dutch descent). It stretched from the Tugela River to the north to present day Port St Johns at the UMzimbubu River to the south. The Natalia Republiek was seeking an independent port of entry, free from British control by conquering the Port Natal trading settlement, which had been settled by mostly British traders on the modern-day site of Durban. However, the governor of the Cape Province, Maj Gen Sir George Thomas Napier KCB (1784 - 1855), stated that his intention was to take military possession of Port Natal and prevent the Afrikaner Boers establishing an independent republic upon the coast with a harbour through which access to the interior could be gained.

The Battle of Congella began on 23rd May 1842 between British troops from the Cape Colony and the Afrikaner Boer forces of the Natalia Republiek. The battle ended in a British victory after the successful and heroic ride of Dick King to Grahamstown for reinforcements.

This article celebrates Durban's famous military battle and its association with one of Durban's and the South Africa's Defence Force (SADF) Citizen Force units, Congella Regiment (1980 - 2000), headquartered for most of its duration in the greater Durban area not far from the original Zulu barracks outlook post. All images appearing in this article (with the exception of watercolour painting from 1842), were recently taken by the author in the Durban area.

Background

The Great Trek (Afrikaans: *Die Groot Trek*) was an eastward migration of Voortrekkers (Afrikaner Boers) who from 1836 onwards, travelled by wagon from the Cape Colony seeking to live beyond the Cape Colony's British colonial administration. During the Great Trek, many Voortrekkers left the Cape Colony overland to escape British rule and were looking for land to farm. Some had crossed the Drakensberg Mountains and settled in the area known as Natalia.

Soon after the defeat of the Zulu king, Dingane kaSenzangakhona (ca. 1795 - 1840) at the Battle of Blood River, the Boer Natalia Republiek was founded. The capital was established in Pietermaritzburg and Durban was considered part of it. The Boers in the Natalia Republiek had resumed their farming lifestyles but the Zulu-speaking inhabitants of the region had some misgivings about these newcomers and war soon followed afterwards. Furthermore the Sovereignty of the Natalia Republiek had never been recognised by the British Government and its *burghers* continued to be regarded as subjects of the Crown. So the Cape Government became aware of the unofficial Boer Republiek, the attacks on British subjects at Port Natal, as well as the continued conflict with the Zulu kingdom. In March 1842, the Cape Governor decided to send a small force under Capt Thomas Charlton Smith to occupy Port Natal (since most of the residents were English), to take possession of the Natalia Republiek from the Boers and to resolve and settle disputes with the Zulu.

Farce at the Battle of Congella

On receipt of orders from Maj Gen Sir George Napier, Capt Smith left his post at Fort Mngazi – the furthest-flung British garrison on the Cape Colony Frontier – to Port Natal. His force comprised 263 officers and men, an 18-pounder howitzer and two 6-pounder field guns, and included elements of the Royal Artillery, Royal Engineers, Sappers and Miners, Cape Mounted Rifles and two companies of his own regiment, 27th (Inniskilling) Regiment of Foot¹. On 1st April 1842, he crossed the UMzimvubu River (isiXhosa name meaning 'place of the hippopotamus') into Natalia.

¹ An Irish infantry regiment of the British Army formed in 1689. It amalgamated with the 108th (Madras Infantry) Regiment of Foot in 1881 to form the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers

When Capt Smith was near UMkhomazi River (in isiZulu, there is an association with *umkhomkazi*, a whale cow), he ignored protests made by the Boers. On 4th May 1842 he reached Robert Newton Dunn's (1796 – 1847) farm 'Sea View'– situated some 10km (half a dozen miles) from Durban harbour. Capt Smith then instructed his men to set up their tents and position the wagons in laager formation at Fort Port Natal (now known as the Old Fort, Durban).



(From a watercolour painting of the British camp at Fort Port Natal in 1842: Local History Museums' Collection)

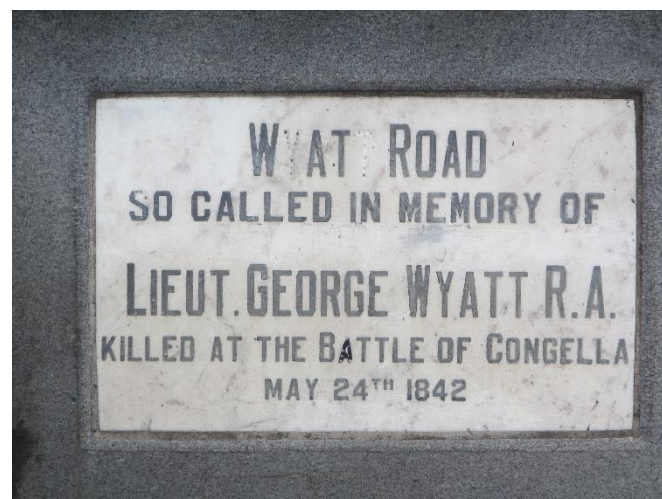
In the meantime, realising the gravity of the situation at Port Natal, Cmdt Gen Andries W Pretorius (1798 – 1853) of the Boers commenced assembling a commando force of the Natalia Republiek at his laager at Congella - the village of 'Kongela' was thereby strongly defended upon the arrival of British forces. Cmdt Pretorius had 364 volunteers under his command. Negotiations between Capt Smith and Cmdt Gen Pretorius were unsuccessful.



(Plaque in Congella Park, Umbilo, Durban commemorating the Voortrekker camp in 1842 of Cmdt Gen Andries W Pretorius)

At 23h00 on the moonlit evening of 23rd May 1842, Capt Smith set out for the Boer fort at Congella with 139 officers and men (of which 109 were from the 27th (Inniskilling) Regiment of Foot), supported by the two field guns. He decided to take a circuitous route along the beach, where the tide was rising, in order to attack the well-defended village of 'Kongela', which was 5km (three miles) from the British camp. The British forces had to skirt a dense thicket of mangrove-trees, held by an advance party of Boers and who opened fire on them. The Boer marksmen were well-hidden in the Kongela thicket whereas their opponents (the British) were completely exposed against the moon-lit sands and waters of Durban's harbour. Capt Smith's attack failed disastrously as every time the 'Redcoats' (as the Boers termed the 27th (Inniskilling) Regiment of Foot) "... stood up in the bright moonlight to reload, they offered to the Boers a target such as every marksman dreams of but seldom sees ..." [text extracted from the official history of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers]. Every shot fired by the Boers counted

The Boers had won a major battle. Capt Smith had lost many of his men, his 18-pounder had been captured, the two field guns abandoned during their retreat, muskets and pouch-belts and ammunition had been discarded and they littered the beach. Furthermore three men were drowned as they were caught by the rising tide. The final count was 22 dead, 31 wounded and six missing in action – making this disastrous night attack the cause of 59 casualties (or 42% of the British force) which had set out. The three officers who fell were Lt G Wyatt (shot dead), while Capt J F Lonsdale and Lt B Tunnard were severely wounded.



(Memorial plaque for Lt G Wyatt at Wyatt Road Military Cemetery, Durban)

On the Boer side, four men fell *en andere Helden* ('and other heroes') mainly during the closing stages of the battle. Capt Smith considered it "expedient to retire" [according to his official report] and retreated back to Fort Port Natal where he was promptly besieged by the Boers.



(Memorial plaque for Boer casualties situated in Bayhead, Durban)

Capt Smith realised he urgently needed to request reinforcements from the Cape Colony. Richard Philip 'Dick' King, an English trader at Port Natal volunteered to ride 970km (600 miles) to Grahamstown in order to request the assistance of its British garrison. King, accompanied by his sixteen year old Zulu servant, Ndongeni, set off and made his famous ten-day horseback ride (seven days less than the time normally taken) through the wilderness and fording some 120 rivers to summon relief for the besieged British garrison at the Fort Port Natal. Reinforcements were immediately dispatched to Natalia.

Thirty-one days after Capt Smith recruited Dick King, on 24th June 1842 the first reinforcements from Algoa Bay arrived at Port Natal aboard the schooner *Conch*. This was one of the British vessels which carried the relief parties, including 100 men from 27th (Inniskilling) Regiment of Foot (and Dick King as a passenger). These British troop reinforcements were in time to save Capt Smith's garrison from imminent surrender or starvation. Soon the surrounding Boers dispersed and the Battle of Congella therefore ultimately ended with a British victory. The Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers had thereby carved an honourable niche in the early history of Port Natal and Durban. A century later (in 1942) the city of Durban commemorated the centenary of Capt Smith's forces defending the Old Fort against the Boers at the Battle of Congella. Nowadays the Old Fort of Durban enshrines all the military history of Durban. It is a quiet place, quiet with a quietness of itself, although so close to Durban's noisy and bustling city centre.



(Ceramic tiled plaque for Capt Smith's forces in Francis Farewell Square, west of the Durban City Hall)

Thirty-eight years after this city of Durban centenary commemoration (ie. 138 years after the Battle of Congella), a newly-established SADF Citizen Force unit (Congella Regiment) was formed, and associated itself with the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers.

Establishment of Congella Regiment

Congella Regiment came into existence as a result of a new SADF military policy during 1980, whereby all members of Commando units who still had camp commitments to the State, were posted to SADF Citizen Force units (unless classified as 'area bound').

Cmdt I Deetlefs, at that stage the Officer Commanding (OC) of Umkomaas Commando and scheduled to take over as OC of Bluff Regiment, prevailed upon the OC Natal Command to allow him a personal selection of his leader group from various Commando units. On 28th November 1980 the following members (with their substantive ranks) were transferred to Bluff Regiment: Cmdt I Deetlefs, Maj E J Spalding, Capt D J Edgcumbe, Capt A J Macquet, Capt A M Rowe, Capt J K S Thorpe, Lt G Linscott, WO2 L N Kilminster and WO2 L B Stanway. Also transferred was the Administration/Clerical assistant, Mrs R Robertson.

Bluff Regiment, as the unit was originally named, came into 'official' existence with effect 1st January 1981 and comprised Citizen Force members from Bluff Commando, Durban North Commando, Durban South Commando, Highway Commando, South Coast Commando and Umgeni Commando. With effect from October 1982, the unit's name was officially changed to Congella Regiment. The unit was English-speaking.

The 'newly established' unit was housed in the premises of Bluff Commando which were located at Bayhead in a four-storey building belonging to the State Fuel Farm (Pty) Ltd. Early during 1984, the unit relocated to the former Good Shepherd Home, Blamey Road, Montclair, Durban which became its permanent home until its disbandment early in 2000.

Congella Regiment's unit badge incorporated the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers insignia, a three-turreted castle surrounded by a wreath of proteas and roses symbolising the historical association of South Africa with Great Britain. The unit adopted the Zulu motto *khangela amaNkengane* which reflects the Zulu influence in the shaping of KwaZulu-Natal's military history.



(Unit badge of Congella Regiment)

Four Officers Commanding served Congella Regiment:

- Cmdt I Deetlefs (1980 - 1984)
- Cmdt D J Edgcumbe (1984 - 1989)
- Cmdt K R Brewis (1989 – 1995)
- Lt Col² J A Moxham (1995 – 2000).

In its heyday, Congella Regiment comprised some 1,500 Citizen Force members and prided itself on some unique specialised operational capabilities such as a Tactical Support Team for daunting rural and urban operational tasks and a dog-handling section for operational duties. The dog-handling section also gave public demonstrations to Durban's citizens. Congella Regiment's Regimental pipe band was on display on numerous occasions and participated in some of Durban military tattoos.

The 30th March 1984 was a black day in the history of Congella Regiment. Four of its members were killed (with only one survivor) when their South African Army landrover was travelling from the KwaZulu-Natal south coast via Eston to Richmond, Natal Midlands. Approximately 15km from Richmond, the trailer from an out-of-control oncoming articulated truck broke loose, overturned and spilt its nine-ton load of wooden logs. The landrover was crushed. As a result of this fatal road accident, the 23rd May was declared by the unit as Congella Day.

² The rank title of Cmdt was substituted with Lt Col

Congella Regiment participated in border operations in the South African protectorate of South West Africa (now known as Namibia), as well as near Jozini in northern KwaZulu-Natal. The unit was deployed in both rural and urban counter-insurgency operations. Prior to the 1994 general elections, it conducted regular township patrols to combat civil unrest prevalent at that time.

The unit was disbanded (along with other Citizen Force and Commando units) after a decision by the second post-apartheid President of South Africa, Thabo Mvuyelwa Mbeki (1942 -), to phase out the commando system and replace it with sector policing under the leadership of the South African Police Services.

Cmdt Deetlefs continued to serve the South African Army (with the rank of Col in the Citizen Force Council). In 1997 he was appointed to the rank of Maj Gen in the post of Chief of Defence Force Reserves in the South African National Defence Force (SANDF). In 2003 Maj Gen I Deetlefs SSAS PG SM JCD retired from the SANDF.

Concluding remarks

In the context of Durban's historical tapestry, the Battle of Congella and Congella Regiment both occupy respective significant importance. The 23rd May is therefore an important date of celebration and remembrance in the city of Durban's history. We pause to remember those who served and made sacrifices in both the Battle of Congella and for Congella Regiment.

Notes

1. *Gratitude is expressed to the four independent reviewers who gave their constructive input to the earlier drafts of this article. In alphabetic surname sequence they are Ian Deetlefs, Steven Kotze, Adrian Rowe and Jeremy Thorpe.*
2. *This final draft article, written in 'regimental historian' style, was submitted to the 'Independent on Saturday' (IoS) newspaper on 2nd May 2017. Following discussion, consensus was reached between Deon Delport (Editor IoS), Duncan Guy (Multimedia Reporter IoS) and Udo Averweg (humble author) whereby a 'newspaper' style article materialised suitable for publishing in the IoS on Saturday 20th May 2017. No payment was received for either articles since they were crafted for the common good.*
3. *Udo Richard Averweg served as a commissioned officer with Congella Regiment. He is a member of the South African Military History Society (KwaZulu-Natal Branch). This article was penned in his personal capacity.*
4. *Udo Richard Averweg's contact details are: eMail address udo.averweg@durban.gov.za, postal address P O Box 50612, Musgrave Road, 4062, South Africa; and mobile number +27 (0) 72 699 7309.*