A Gentleman and an Officer

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Until 1870, many British Army officers purchased their commissions and promotions, frequently considering themselves as gentlemen first, and soldiers second. To them, a career in the Army was more about making the right social connections than serving for their country.

One such apparent officer was Charles Adrian Gough Becher (Figure 1). Becher was born in 1849 in Bengal, India, the eldest son of Lieutenant Colonel Charles Grant Becher, 8th Bengal Cavalry, and Henrietta MacDonald Becher. Lieutenant Colonel Becher had a distinguished career with the Bengal Army before being killed on April 2, 1859 while on active duty during the Indian Mutiny. His son followed his father’s footsteps and purchased his commission in the 1st King’s Dragoon Guards, stationed in Sheffield, on September 30, 1868. The regiment moved to Manchester on April 1, 1869 before receiving orders to prepare for service in Ireland on December 6, 1869. They landed in Dublin on the 11th and immediately were divided into several troops who were posted to Cahir, Waterford, Clonmel, Tipperary, and Carrick. While stationed in Ireland, the KDG were employed at various times quelling civil unrest. Becher purchased his Lieutenancy on March 23, 1870 and appears on the personal staff of the Headquarters General in that same year. The regiment was ordered to Scotland in June 1874 but it appears that Becher remained, being listed as an extra aide-de-camp to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, General Lord Sandhurst, GCB, GCSI, in 1875 and 1876. Becher was promoted Captain on July 15, 1876.

On February 11, 1879, the KDG received orders to prepare for active service against the Zulus. The February 17, 1879 issue of The Times announced that Becher resigned his appointment as an extra aide-de-camp to rejoin his regiment before their departure to South Africa. As described in the King’s Dragoon Guards Digest of Service, Becher accompanied the regiment when they departed Aldershot:

1st March 1879

The Ring Wing of the regiment arrived at Durban, Natal and disembarked on April 11, 1879. From there, the KDG marched inland, arriving at Pietermaritzburg on April 23rd. The Cavalry Brigade, consisting of the KDG and the 17th Lancers and under the command of General Marshall, advanced further, marching through the former battlefields of Rorke’s Drift and Isandhlwana on the 20th and 21st of May. Isandhlwana was a particularly poignant scene; bodies still lay about from the battle that had occurred four months earlier. The force did what they could to bury as many of the dead as possible. Major Marter (of the KDG) describes the day:

Before daylight we forced the Buffalo River, and made our way along a track between hills covered with scrub jungle, in which it was very difficult to keep a lookout. As daylight broke, the wagons of the ill-fated force
could be clearly seen in the distance against the sky. On arrival there was the camp, the oxen inspanned in the wagons, the horses at their picket line, the Officers Mess and their baggage, the Quartermaster’s Stores and supplies, and officers and men lying about in their uniforms-dead-but singularly lifelike, as from the state of the climate the bodies had only dried. Many were recognizable. They had not been mutilated. Birds and beasts did not seem to have molested them, and the Zulus had removed nothing but arms and ammunition, and part of the canvas of tents.

Becher is mentioned in King’s Dragoon Guards Digest of Service a few days later:

30th May 1879
‘A’ & ‘B’ Troops under the Command of Capt Douglas-Willan, with Lieut Taaffe, and 2nd Lieut Goold-Adams, proceeded to Rorkes Drift for reconnaissance duty and to cover the right flank of the 2nd Division on its advance into Zululand. ‘C’, ‘E’ & ‘F’ Troops and Head Quarters under Col Alexander with Captains Bethall, Becher, Godson, Watson, Lieuts. Wyndham, Dewar, Lowry and Sub Lieut. Harkness, Quarter Master Murphy and Vet Surg. Longhurst proceeded to Conference Hill for Reconnaissance Duty and to cover the left flank of the 2nd Division on its advance into Zululand. Lieut Brewster appointed Deputy Provost Marshal 2nd Division with 25 Non Commissioned Officers and men as Assistant Provosts.

During the Zulu War, troops of the KDG discovered the body of the Prince Imperial of France (who had been killed earlier), participated in the Battle of Ulundi, and captured the Zulu King Cetewayo (Figure 2). It appears that Becher was not present at any of these events. Given the number of staff appointments throughout his service, the most likely explanation is that Becher was employed on the regiment’s Headquarters staff. Of Becher’s Zulu War service, a regimental source states:

Marched up country with the regt.
Proceeded to Transvaal to purchase horses, and subsequently returned to Conference Hill.

The KDG were ordered to India in September 1880, while a detachment of two troops remained in South Africa under the command of Major W.V. Brownlow, KDG, with the intention of returning to England to form a depot. However, the Boer declared their independence resulting in the unsuccessful First Boer War (December 16, 1880 to March 23, 1881). The KDG detachment was part of the Natal Field Force, under the command of Major-General Sir George Pomeroy-Colley. The force was defeated at Laing’s Nek (January 28), Ingogo River (February 8), and Majuba Hill (February 27), resulting in a peace treaty granting the Boers self-government in the Transvaal.

The KDG detachment saw considerable action during the war, especially during the battle of Laing’s Nek. Under the command of Major Brownlow, Colley ordered
the squadron (191 soldiers, mostly from the KDG detachment) to form a mounted attack and charge the Boer's uphill. The attacking force was driven back but not before one soldier, Private John Doogan, KDG, earned the Victoria Cross for rescuing Major Brownlow, despite being wounded himself (Figure 3).

Becher served with the Natal Field Force during the Boer War of 1881. However, there is no evidence that he served with the KDG troop or even was present at any of the major engagements. Becher is not listed among those officers serving with the KDG troop and his war service record in the Hart's Annual Army List for 1890 does not indicate that he was present at Laing's Nek, Ingogo River, or Majuba Hill.

For his Zulu War service, Becher received the South Africa Medal with 1879 clasp (Figure 4). However, since the British were defeated in the Boer War of 1881, no campaign medal was issued, one of the few instances of the later Nineteenth Century where a full-scale British force did not receive such recognition. Becher was seconded to the Oxfordshire Yeomanry Cavalry (Queen's Own, Oxford) on June 14, 1881 and appointed their Adjutant, where he remained until he retired on June 14, 1886.

In 1881, the establishment for a cavalry regiment was raised from one lieutenant colonel and two majors to two lieutenant colonels and three majors and Becher was promoted Major on December 9, 1881. This promotion