



HISTORY OF THE SWISS
in Southern Africa

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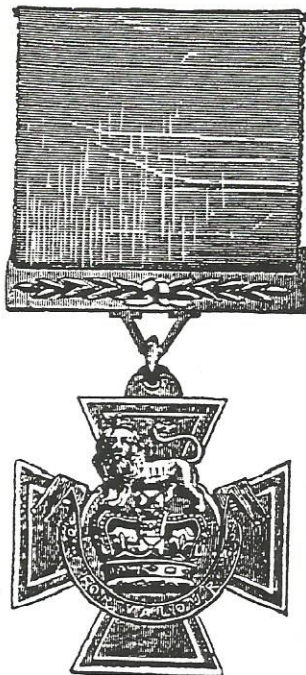
V I C T O R I A C R O S S (V . C .)

(Reference Encyclopedia
Britannica)

UNITED KINGDOM AND COMMONWEALTH

Great Britain.—The pre-eminent decoration for valour is the Victoria cross, founded by Queen Victoria in 1856 as an award open to all ranks of the army and navy without distinction who distinguished themselves by gallantry of an outstanding nature. The conditions of warfare changed so considerably in the succeeding 100 years that, whereas in 1856 the saving of a comrade's life under fire or the capture of a standard was sufficient to earn the Victoria cross, during World War II a much higher degree of self-sacrifice was required, as was shown by the number of Victoria crosses posthumously awarded. In all by 1957, 1,343 crosses had been awarded, to which must be added three bars for second awards, making a total of 1,346 in all. The decoration is in the form of a cross pattée bearing the royal crest (a lion standing on a crown) above a scroll inscribed "For Valour." The 1½-in.-wide ribbon is described in the statutes as red, but is actually a dull crimson. The crosses are individually forged and are made from guns captured from the Russians in the Crimean War.

(The latest figures (1992) are a total of 1356 Victoria Crosses awarded)
with Ferdinand Christian SCHIESS the only Swiss to receive this honour)



FOR VALOUR

The History of Southern Africa's
Victoria Cross Heroes



IAN S. UYS

History of the Swiss in Southern Africa

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SCHIESS Christian Ferdinand

Born 7 April 1856 in Burgdorf (Berne) Switzerland the son of Niklaus and Anna Schiess. He grew up in the orphanage in Herisau (AR) at the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 he joined the French Forces. He was then 15 years old, but looked older because of his strong build. In the same year, 1870, he received his baptism of fire on the battle field.

After the cessation of hostilities he served another five years with Bourbaki's Army, before taking his discharge and returning to Switzerland in 1876.

At about this time Agents of the Cape Government were busy recruiting Swiss labourers and farmers to emigrate to the Cape on a state-aided scheme. During 1877 and 1878 some 67 men, many with families were landed at Cape Town and East London.

C.F. Schiess was in a group of Emigrants who arrived by ship in East London during August 1877, he was then 21 years old. He joined the army volunteers to fight with distinction in the Frontier War between the Cape Forces and the Xhosa Tribes.

During the interval of peace which followed, not having learned a Trade, he worked as itinerant labourer ("Handlanger").

When in 1879 the Zulu War began in Natal he again joined the Army and because of his military experience was made a Corporal in the "Natal Native Contingent" (NNC).

During an attack on Chief Sirayo's Kraal, (Camp) he was wounded in the leg with an assegai (spear) he was hospitalised at Rorke's Drift on the Buffalo River. At this time fleeing soldiers brought the news from the nearby Battlefield Isandhlwana that the British forces had been defeated and about 4000 Zulu Warriors, excited by their victory, were approaching Rorke's Drift, originally a Mission Station and Trading store, to attack. Rorke's Drift consisted of just a few Buildings one of which served as a hospital and contained 28 wounded. The garrison was made up of some 100 British and 850 native soldiers.

The commanding officer, decided that it was not possible to carry the wounded with him on a retreat and he would not abandon them. He ordered the position to be prepared for defence. As tension mounted, the native soldiers all fled. Now the defensive lines had to be shortened. Everybody irrespective of rank set to work. Using mealie (maize) bags, ammunition boxes and anything else that could be moved, barricades were erected between the buildings to form a laager. When the attack came in the afternoon of 22 January 1879 they were ready, 139 men of which 104 were fit to fight and facing some 4000 attacking Zulus. Of the wounded in the hospital only two could take an active part in the defence one of them was Corporal Schiess, He was a gigantic man and conspicuous by the Badge of his Military Unit, a red rag twisted around his hat.

The Zulus attacked furiously, like all defenders at Rorke's Drift, Schiess fought like a tiger, but when his hat was shot off his head by some Zulu, he bent down to restore it, Even in this split-second a Zulu Warrior mounted the barricade in front of him and Christian looked up just in time to fight him off. Schiess himself continually jumped onto the barricade to despatch warriors crouching behind it. The battle went on all night and in the morning the Zulus retreated defeated. The defenders suffered 17 casualties. For their heroic defense a total of 11 Victoria Crosses were awarded, the most in any battle.

Geskiedenis van die Switsers in Suider-Afrika

GESCHICHTE DER SCHWEIZER IM SÜDLICHEN AFRIKA

Schiess was presented with the Victoria Cross during a Parade in Pietermaritzburg, Natal, on the 3 February 1880, he was 24 years old, the award was made by Lord Garnet Wolseley. Later Schiess went to India but fell on hard times and he returned to Natal in South Africa. He could not find work and he was given a passage on the Ship "Serapis" to return to England. However his health had deteriorated and he was too ill to survive the sea voyage. He died on 14 December 1884 aged 28, on board ship and was buried at sea off the coast of Angola. Although Corporal Schiess became destitute he retained possession of his Victoria Cross, the only one awarded to a Swiss National, and it was found on his body when he died on board the ship "Serapis". The V.C. was sent to the War Office in England and it is now on display at the National Army Museum, London.

Some notes on the personalities involved in the Zulu Wars and the Battle of Rorke's Drift:

Lord Chelmsford was the Commander in Chief of the British Forces during the Zulu Wars. The men in charge at the Battle of Rorke's Drift in 1879 were
 Lt. G. Bromhead of the 24th (2nd Warwickshire) Regt.
 Lt. J.R.M. Chard of the Royal Engineers

The King of the Zulus was Chief
 Cetshwayo
 and his brother Prince Dabulamanzi led the 4000 warriors in the attack on Rorke's Drift.

(Compiled by Kurt Scheurer P.O. Box 2685 Randburg, South Africa from various sources)

3/1993

The official

C i t a t i o n

for the award of the Victoria Cross (V.C.) to Cpl. Ferdinand Christian Schiess for the Battle of Rorke's Drift, Natal, South Africa on the 22/23 Jan. 1879 reads as follows:

Cpl. Schiess, 2 Natal Native Contingent, for conspicuous bravery in the Defence of Rorke's Drift Post on the night of the 22nd January, 1879, when, in spite of his having been wounded in the foot a few days previously, he greatly distinguished himself when the Garrison were repulsing with the bayonet a series of desperate assaults made by the Zulus, and displayed great activity and devoted gallantry throughout the defence. On one occasion when the Garrison had retired to the inner line of defence, and the Zulus occupied the wall of mealie bags which had been abandoned, he crept along the wall, without any order, to dislodge a Zulu who was shooting better than usual and succeeding in killing him, and two others, before he, the corporal, returned to the inner defence.

2985
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P. M. Burg, 2nd August, 1884.

To

Colonel Mitchell
Colonial Secretary
P. M. Burg.

Honored Sir

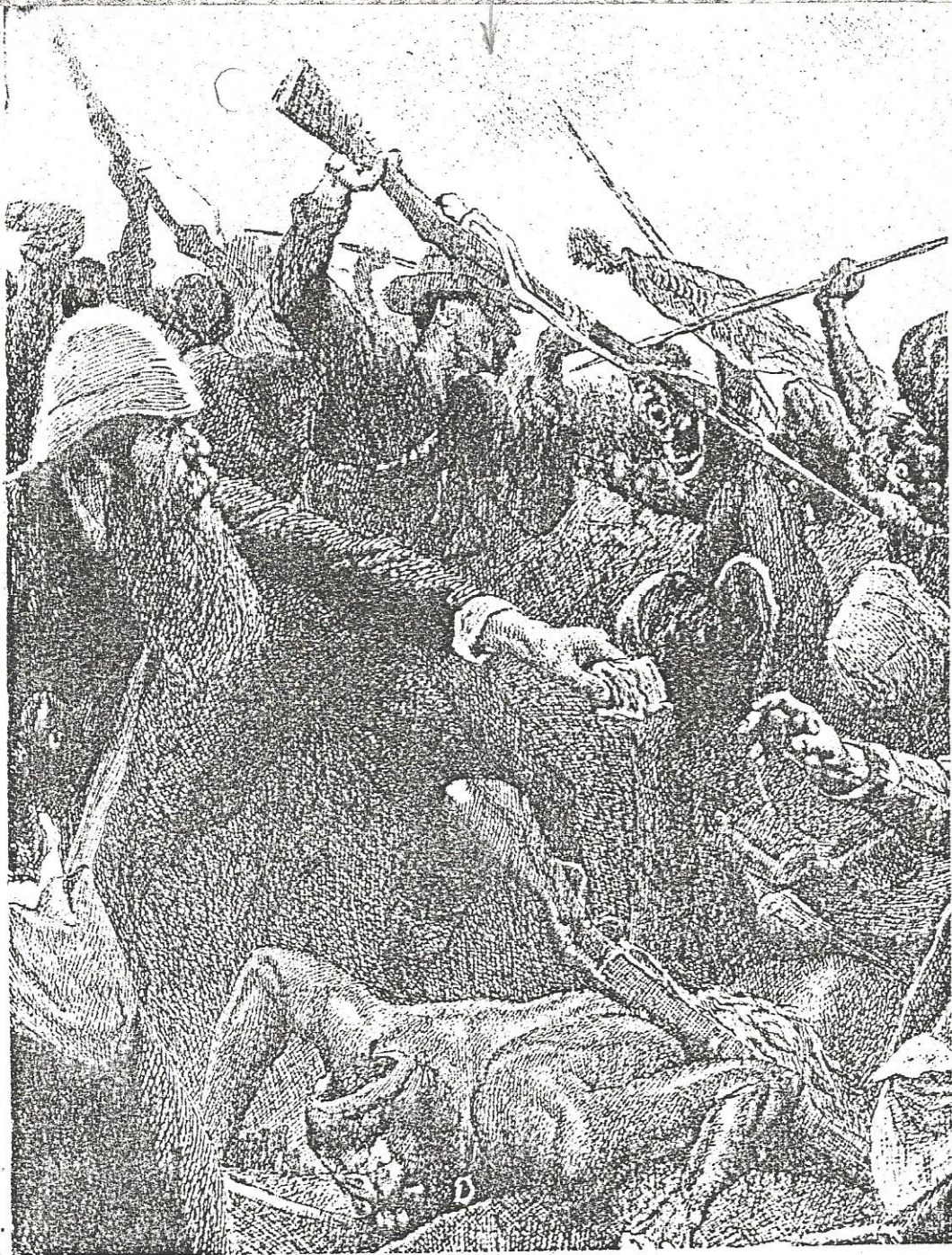
I venture to address your Honor once more for the purpose of getting your valuable assistance in obtaining some employment for me in the Government service, as you will see by the attached letter from Mr. Hunter, Genl. Manager N.G.Ry that there is not the slightest chance to get employed on the Railway at the present time.

I would regard it as an act of great favor, if you would kindly recommend me to the Superintendent of the Govt. Prisons to enable me to get employed as turnkey or anything else in that branch of the service, in fact any situation in any other Dept. of the Govt. service would suite me, no matter how small the salary will be.

Trusting you will be good enough to give this application your favorable consideration

I remain

Honored Sir
Very respectfully
Your obedient servant
F. C. Schiess
Cp. Post Master
P. M. Burg.



(Africana Museum, Johannesburg)
Detail from "Defence of Rorke's Drift" showing Cpl. Schiess with his rifle raised and
Commissary Dunn handing out ammunition

22.1.1879

From Book "For Valour"
by Ian S. Uys

