

A response from Ian Knight to surprise from some members of the public at his new approach to interpreting the battle of Isandlwana

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I am delighted that 'Secrets of the Dead' provoked such a strong response, since above all our aim was to open up some of the debates about what actually happened at the battle.

In fact, there has been quite a shift in interpreting events at Isandlwana (no 'h') in the last thirty years. The work of scholars such as David Jackson, Professor John Laband and indeed my own efforts have tended to cast doubt on the Victorian version of events, based as that was on a limited number of British survivors' accounts, and the need to contain the impact of the disaster. Indeed a number of those accounts have suffered from unquestioning repetition over the last 120 years, and often look quite different when read in a modern context.

Horace Smith-Dorrien's account is a case in point. In his autobiography - written over forty years after the battle - he makes much of the incident in which QM Bloomfield refused him ammunition. Yet in a letter written to his father the day after the battle, he makes no mention of this, but states that for much of the time he was out in the firing line distributing ammunition! This is not to say that the incident with Bloomfield did not occur, but it does suggest that it took on a greater importance later in Smith-Dorrien's life, and that the significance he then attributed to it has distorted our understanding of the battle. It is, for example, quite clear from Captain Essex's evidence that Bloomfield relented early in the battle, and indeed Essex claims that he then sent an entire cartful of ammunition boxes out to the line. This is particularly significant in the light of the discovery of a number of handles from the lining of opened ammunition boxes which the archaeological team found at exactly the point suggested by Essex.

Moreover, the ammunition failure theory only holds good if one ignores a wide range of Zulu evidence, which was adamant that the 24th companies continued to fire heavily after they had abandoned the forward line, and that in fact firing only ceased during the later stages of the hand-to-hand fighting.

It is true that the programme opted not to dwell on the tactical minutiae of the battle. We felt that it simply was not possible to do it justice in anything other than broad strokes. Our reference to the number of dead included those fighting on the British side. In the past, African auxiliaries fighting for the British were also blamed for the disaster - they allegedly fled at a crucial moment during the battle - but in my view they were ideal scapegoats, being outside the closely-knit world of the regular Victorian army. Survivors' evidence clearly indicates that they held their place in the line until the general retreat - at which point they retired rather more precipitously than the redcoats! However, in my view their rout was a result of the over-all British collapse, not a cause of it.

There is no doubt that the eclipse did occur, though of course whether it affected the outcome of the battle is another matter. It can be scientifically verified, and indeed it is mentioned by many Zulu survivors. 'The sun grew dark like night', one recalled, for example. The eclipse was only partial, however - 65% - and the effect on visibility would only have become marked when combined with the huge quantities of smoke produced by the 24th as their companies tried to rally together. While it added a suitably apocalyptic touch to the final stages of the battle, my own feeling is that the battle was lost and won by that stage anyway.

As far as the advanced firing line is concerned, our investigations were entirely shaped by a careful reading of the evidence, both Zulu and British. Although the programme only showed one find - which of course would not prove anything - we did in fact find a scatter of cartridge cases consistent with action in the area. Nor should this be wondered at; in fact, the position initially taken up by the 24th was on a low rise, which commanded a series of gullies lying across the approach to the camp. By holding this ground, the British effectively turned the gullies into a death trap for the advancing Zulus; once the Zulu assault was fully deployed, however, the British position was too extended, and an attempt to regroup led to collapse.

As far as the Martini-Henry is concerned, its tendency to overheat and foul is a feature of contemporary battle accounts. I have no doubt that rifles did overheat and jam at Isandlwana - they did at Rorke's Drift, where the barrels grew so hot that they glowed in the dark during the night fighting - but whether this had any material effect on the broader outcome is debatable.

I do not agree that we gave the impression that the Zulus were an inferior force; we reflected the prevailing opinion among the British that this was the case, and indeed this overconfidence was a major factor in the British failure. Throughout the battle the Zulu commanders held the initiative, and their attack was intelligently directed and courageously executed.