

## Is Lord Chelmsford fit to command?

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(Original spellings remain).

It is with deep regret that we feel compelled to join our Tory contemporaries in asking whether the Government still intends to continue to entrust the active command of the British Army in Zululand to Lord Chelmsford. The cold determination which supports an officer under even merited disaster, because of a conviction that it is the sense of support which makes great officers, had usually our cordial approval; and we have read history enough to know how often even commanders of the first rank have fallen into disastrous errors. There is nothing, moreover, in Lord Chelmsford to exasperate public opinion. His military record, both in India and Abyssinia, was a very good one, and though he may have owed his position in South Africa to his connections, so did Marlborough and many another greatly successful General. He did not do anything to provoke this war, he asked perseveringly for reinforcements, and he appears from the first to have recognised the arduous nature of his undertaking.

Even in his despatch on Isandula, on which the public has condemned him, a despatch written on January 27<sup>th</sup> at Pietermaritzburg, the fine nature of the writer is conspicuous to all who read. It is the despatch of a man utterly saddened by events, full of pity for his people, distaining all concealment, resolute to tell his superiors the whole truth, painful or satisfactory, so far as he knows it.

But it is also the despatch of a man who should not be entrusted with the command of a large army, engaged on a most difficult and hazardous undertaking. He has not the primary faculty of understanding what his own subordinates and the enemy are about. He has collected no accurate idea of the country he was about to invade, saying, with the heart-breaking naïveté which runs through the whole communication,

the country is far more difficult than I had been led to expect, and the labour of advancing with a long train of wagons is enormous. It took seven days of work by one-half of No. 3 column to make the ten miles of road between Rorke's drift and Insalwana Hill practicable, and even then, had it rained hard, I feel sure the convoy could not have got on.

Those surely were primary facts in Zululand campaigning. How is even one day's work to be arranged, when the country one mile ahead is to the General like the surface of a new planet?

He was at once aware of the necessity of guarding his communications, and utterly neglectful of them. He says,

The line of communication is very much exposed, and would require a party of mounted men always patrolling, and fixed entrenchment posts of infantry at intervals of about ten miles.

Yet he kept up no communications between Isandula and the point ten miles in advance to which he accompanied Colonel Glyn, without the bulk of the latter's column, in order to assist Major Dartnell, who had been ordered out to reconnoitre a stronghold, who found the enemy in force in front of him, and who made up his mind to an attack.

Lord Chelmsford, moved by urgent messages from this officer, moved out very early on the 22<sup>nd</sup> from Isandula to support him – though thousands of Zulus were in the neighbourhood, and though he himself dreaded an attack on the immense convoy at Isandula.

This evident, for Lord Chelmsford ordered up Colonel Durnford by express with his native column to strengthen the camp, and left strict instructions with the officer in charge of the camp - Lt-Col Pulleine – not to quit it. But Lord Chelmsford never provided the entrenchment he himself says is necessary, kept no patrol on the way, though he had mounted men, and but for an accident would never have heard of the attack on the camp, and would himself have ridden into the midst of the victorious Zulus, to his certain death. His own account of his own proceedings we must give in his own words, for it is simply wonderful both in its transparent truthfulness and its extraordinary ineptitude. He had just driven off the enemy, when, at 9 a.m. of the 22<sup>nd</sup>:

Col. Glyn received, about 9 a.m., a short note from Lt-Col. Pulleine, saying that firing was heard to the left front of the camp, but giving no further particulars. I sent Lt Milne, RN, my

ADC, at once to the top of a high hill from which the camp could be seen, and he remained there at least an hour with a very powerful telescope, but could detect nothing unusual. Having no cause, therefore, to feel any anxiety about the safety of the camp, I ordered Lt-Col. Russell to make a sweep round with the mounted infantry to the main wagon track, whilst a portion of the infantry went over the hilltop to the same point, and the guns, with an escort, retraced their steps. I, myself, proceeded with Col Glyn to fix upon a site for our new camp, which I had determined to shift the next day to ground near the Mangeni River. Having fixed upon the situation for the camp, and having ordered the troops then on the ground to bivouac there that night, I started to return to camp with the mounted infantry, under Lt-Col. Russell, as my escort. When within about six miles of the camp...Commandant Lonsdale rode up to report that he had ridden into camp, and found it in possession of the Zulus.

Once warned, Lord Chelmsford recalled his men from the front, and marched rapidly back to camp, to bivouac for a night of horrors among the debris of the plundered camp and the bodies of the slain Europeans, now at last known to have exceeded 900 in number.

At early dawn the following morning, I ordered the troops to move off with all speed to Rorke's Drift, about which post I was in some anxiety. The troops had no spare ammunition, and only a few biscuits, a large portion of them had had no other food for 48 hours. All had marched at least 30 miles the day before, and had passed an almost sleepless night on the stoney ground. No one, therefore, was fit for any prolonged exertion, and it was certain that daylight would reveal a sight which could not but have had but a demoralizing effect upon the whole force.

If Rorke's Drift had been lost, as it seemed to be, for flames appear to be ascending from it – they were flames from the house of the Swedish missionary Witt, and not from the post itself – it would seem as if the British column, already half-staved, would have perished from fatigue and hunger; while if the Zulus had known of the ghastly bivouac among the dead, the whole column, Lord Chelmsford included, must have been cut up. Attacks by night are the Zulus' forte, and the Missionary Witt reports that it was the light of his blazing house, which helped to foil the attack upon Rorke's Drift.

Fortunately, Lieutenant Chard's cool resourcefulness in stocktaking the garden of the post with sacks of Indian corn, and the courage of Lieutenant Bromhead and the men, had protected the post, and thereby saved Natal from a terrible invasion. But not for this result is the country indebted to any generalship, or any attention to the commonest rules of warfare exhibited by Lord Chelmsford. If he had been riding to hounds in Leicestershire, he could not have been more easily taken in, and he would have taken far more trouble to know the country.

There is precisely the same incompetence to obtain information visible in the General's speculations as to the fate of the unfortunate garrison of the camp:

One company went off to the extreme left, and has never been heard of since, and the other five engaged the enemy about a mile to the left front of the camp, and made there a most stubborn and gallant resistance. So long as they kept their faces to the enemy, the Zulus were, I am told, quite unable to drive them back, and fell in heaps before the deadly fire poured into them. An officer who visited this part of the field of battle on the following morning reported that the loss of the Zulus in killed could not be less than 2,000. When, however, the Zulus got round the left flank of these brave men, they appear to have lost their presence of mind, and to have retired hastily through the tents, which had never been struck.

Immediately, the whole Zulu force surrounded them, they were overpowered by numbers and the camp was lost. Had the force in question but taken up a defensive position in the camp itself, and utilized there the materials for a hasty entrenchment which lay near to hand, I feel absolutely confident that the whole Zulu army would not have been able to dislodge them. It appears that the oxen were yoked to the wagons three hours before the attack took place, so that there was ample time to construct that wagon lager which the Dutch in former days understood so well.

Yet this simple precaution had not been taken by Lord Chelmsford. It is easy, and may be just, to blame Lieutenant-Colonel Pulleine for carelessness in not linking the wagons, as the Dutch do, but where were the orders to make those preparations of which the General has so high an opinion? The truth is, the General knows little about the matter, and he is too truthful not to reveal the plenitude of his own ignorance. That little touch about one company line – the General does not know which – which went off of itself – the General does not know where – except that it went somewhere 'to the left', speaks volumes as to the capacity of the General, who had or ought to have cross-examined the

one or two men, including one officer at least, who escaped to Rorke's Drift. There is a want of grasp of the situation, of everything except sad reflectiveness, which leaves in our minds no possibility of any other conclusion than the General is by nature unadapted to independent command. The despatch is the reflective but ill-informed report of a special correspondent to his employers about a disaster for which he is himself in no way responsible. It is a document to excite not anger, or even contempt, but deep pity for a man of fine qualities, placed in a position to which he was obviously unequal, and who, we cannot help thinking, feels his inequality. There is every reason to be just to the sad man who has to record such a narrative of failure; but justice does not require that he should again be left in supreme command of a British Army. Is there no competent soldier in England of sufficient rank to supersede Lord Chelmsford, without punishing him, who would undertake the task?

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### **Lord Chelmsford.**

