

On 20 March Wood received an order from Chelmsford to 'demonstrate' against the abaQulusi, which would theoretically draw Zulu forces away from southern Zululand and enable Chelmsford's relief column to lift the siege of Pearson's camp at Eshowe. Wood saw the logic of the order and Chelmsford's instruction provided him with the ideal opportunity; he accordingly made preparations to attack Hlobane during the night of 27 March. Wood's overall plan was to rout the Zulus on Hlobane and seize their cattle; a successful action would wrong-foot the abaQulusi as well as depriving any approaching Zulu army of essential food supplies. He proposed to mount a night attack against the Hlobane stronghold with two independent columns of mounted troops,

The flat top of Hlobane is nearly four miles long and one and a half miles wide; it is generally 1,000 feet above the surrounding plain and apart from two or three precipitous pathways, a skirt of vertical cliffs protects the virtually inaccessible mountain. The link between the upper level of Hlobane and its lower level, Ntendeka, was little more than an illusion; at best it was an extremely steep, boulder-strewn knife-edge. The location had never been visited by a European and its precipitous descent would severely test Buller and his men.

The operation was ill conceived; even though the defeat at Isandlwana was still fresh in his mind, Wood had not subjected Hlobane to any form of reconnaissance other than a cursory appraisal some two weeks earlier. The routes up and down the mountain were based on Wood's distant viewing and although he had roughly guessed their location, the exact routes to the top of Hlobane were unknown to the British. Wood's fatal presumption was that the connecting ridge between the two levels of Hlobane and Ntendeka presented an easy passage; it would prove to be a graveyard for many of Buller's men.

The force, under Buller, consisted of two groups of Colonial horsemen and black auxiliaries; each force would attack the mountain after dark - Buller's from the east to take the higher plateau of Hlobane itself seizing Zulu cattle, while Russell's force simultaneously attacked from the west along Ntendeka. Wood believed the final stage of the plan was equally easy to execute - Russell would meet up with Buller and their combined force would drive the captured cattle back to Khambula.

Buller's force consisted of about 400 mounted men, all local volunteer horsemen except for a few Imperial officers, and 280 black auxiliaries. Included among the horsemen were the Border Horse commanded by an experienced ex-cavalry officer, Lieutenant Colonel Frederic Weatherley, who had fought in both the Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny. Russell's force was made up of approximately 200 mounted troops and 440 black auxiliaries, including 200 Zulu warriors who had defected to the British, along with their leader, Prince Hamu, a half-brother of King Cetshwayo. Both groups left Khambula just after dawn on the 27th; they had been issued with extra rations and unusually, twice the amount of ammunition normally carried on such a raid.

The combined force left Khambula just after sunrise and divided at noon, Buller's men unsaddled for an hour to take lunch and then moved off to the south of Hlobane. Their presence was clearly seen by the abaQulusi on Hlobane who lit a row of signal fires, although the significance of the fires was not realized by Buller who proceeded for several miles beyond Hlobane before making camp, the intention being to give the abaQulusi the impression that the real target of his column was the Zulu Army, its location unknown but possibly on its way from Ulundi. Buller's men lit a number of campfires and after dark the fires were stoked to give the abaQulusi the impression that they were staying put. At about 8 p.m. Buller led his men under the cover of darkness back towards the western end of Hlobane where they began the laborious task of following a cattle track that led in the general direction of the plateau.

In reality, Buller had no idea of the close proximity of the approaching Zulu Army camped only five miles from Hlobane and now alerted by the abaQulusi signal fires. Had Buller's force concentrated on looking back in the direction of Ulundi they would certainly have seen the distant Zulus advancing towards Hlobane, likewise, his white scouts proved incompetent and for a crucial few hours seriously neglected their duty by concentrating their attention on the proposed route up Hlobane rather than around them. His black scouts had seen the Zulus' fires but had kept the information to themselves knowing their words were never heeded. Having left Khambula later than intended, Weatherley and his Border Horse became mixed with Russell's force and in the confusion, spent most of the night unsuccessfully trying to find Buller. In fact, by searching for Buller, Weatherley's scouts inadvertently discovered the encamped Zulu Army and reported the fact to

Weatherley. Early the following morning Weatherley reported the Zulus' location to Wood, only to have his report dismissed out of hand.

Colonel Wood, together with Captain Ronald Campbell and his personal staff officers and small escort, had spent the night with Russell's force and at dawn rode out to watch the action on Hlobane, totally unaware of the fast approaching Zulu Army. Whilst riding beneath the towering cliffs at the eastern end of Hlobane; they unexpectedly met up with Weatherley and his Border Horse, who were clearly uncertain where they should go. At this point a most interesting exchange takes place. Weatherley told Wood about the strong Zulu force now camped close to Hlobane. Indignantly Wood replied, "Nonsense, I have had my men out yesterday, there is no Zulu impi about". Dennison was Weatherley's deputy and he replied, "I saw them, I was in fact almost within touching distance of them and judged them to be a strong force". Wood retorted, "Can't be, Dennison, you are mistaken". (1) Weatherley's force then began the climb with the intention of joining Buller's main force.

Wood conveniently omitted this conversation in his memoirs but he did remember that, just as the two groups met, they were fired upon by Zulu marksmen hiding in a cave near the top of the cattle track that led onto Hlobane. Both groups took cover to assess the situation. Wood later pointedly wrote that he, with his staff, pushed through Weatherley's sheltering men directly towards the enemy, leaving most of the Border Horse 200 yards behind. Within moments, a Zulu marksman killed Mr Llewellyn Lloyd, Wood's Political Officer, the son of a retired British general and a member of the Natal Legislative Assembly. According to Wood, Campbell impetuously ran forward and brought back Lloyd's body to a stone cattle kraal where Wood and his staff were sheltering.

Wood alleges that he then told Campbell to order the Border Horse forward, but Weatherley's men, also under heavy fire from the unseen Zulu snipers, apparently declined to advance as they considered the Zulu position impregnable. Wood later claimed that three of his staff then attacked the snipers' position after a request for assistance to Weatherley was refused - although this version is strongly disputed by the few Border Horse survivors. In any event, Campbell approached the snipers only to be shot dead as he entered their cave. Captain the Hon. Ronald Campbell, Coldstream Guards, was only thirty years old and the second son of the Earl of Cawdor. Wood and his remaining escort rode off to Khambula, narrowly escaping the advancing Zulu Army; curiously Wood then disappeared for some eight hours before he returned to Khambula.

The abaQulusi on Hlobane had seen Russell's column heading to the western end of the mountain and correctly anticipated that their stronghold was to be attacked from both ends. They prepared for the attack with confidence, building stone barriers at each end of Hlobane, knowing that the approaching Zulu army, which Lord Chelmsford had assumed would be opposing him 100 miles away at Eshowe, was now camped less than five miles away from Hlobane. Buller's attack against Hlobane, undertaken in a violent thunderstorm under the cover of darkness, was virtually unopposed; some shots were fired and several boulders were rolled down on the advancing force as they struggled up a cattle track.

Once on top, Buller left 'A' Company at the top of the path as a rearguard. The abaQulusi had disappeared into a number of underground caves enabling the British to loot their cattle as they headed to the far end of the plateau to meet up with Russell. Unbeknown to Buller, Russell had arrived at the bottom of the precipitous face known as 'Devil's Pass' and found his route to the higher plateau of Hlobane virtually inaccessible due to its steepness. He left a small force to round up stray cattle and to guard the pass; then, with his main force, began to retrace his route off the plateau when he received Wood's inexplicable note ordering him to Zunguin Nek, which lay some five miles off in the direction of Khambula.

The abaQulusi warriors hiding in Hlobane's caves then saw the main Zulu army now less than a mile distant; they left their caves and joined by some 2,000 reinforcements that had meanwhile climbed onto Hlobane from the adjoining Ityentika to the east, prepared to attack Buller's men now retreating before them with the Zulu cattle. Buller's black auxiliaries forced the looted cattle down the steep face with the intention of driving them back to Khambula. The Zulus advanced upon Buller's remaining force now converging towards the lip of the ridge that joined Hlobane to the lower plateau of Devil's Pass. It was several minutes before Buller became aware of the approaching Zulu army; his first reaction was to send the remaining unmounted black irregulars down the precipitous face so that they could escape back to Khambula. He then detailed Captain Barton to take thirty riders from the Frontier Light Horse to quickly bury those lost in the ascent of Hlobane; he was then to find and warn Weatherley to retreat off Hlobane and retire back to Khambula. The reinforced abaQulusi on Hlobane quickly routed 'A' Troop who had been left defending the original ascent route; they fled towards Buller's men who were now being driven towards the western end of Hlobane. It was during the growing chaos that Buller first became aware of the presence of the main Zulu army moving to

encircle Hlobane. He sent two troopers in hot pursuit of Barton with an order for Barton to retreat 'by the right of the mountain'. Barton was still unaware of the encircling Zulu army when, several hundred yards ahead of him, he saw Weatherley and his force reach the summit rim of Hlobane; at that very moment the two troopers arrived with Buller's message and Barton presumed from the new order that, because he was now facing east, he should continue as previously ordered by Buller. Barton's misinterpretation of Buller's ambiguous message would wrongly take Barton and Weatherley's combined force back down the original ascent route to the base of the cliff and directly into the path of the approaching Zulus.

Barton and his burial party met Weatherley's force who had climbed the path earlier taken by Buller; having concentrated their attention on the steep climb in front of them, no one in Weatherley's force had noticed the rapidly closing Zulu army now only one mile away. Barton blurted out the awful news and in the minutes that Weatherley and his men had left to live, they rapidly descended by the same path in the mistaken belief that they could escape if they complied with Buller's last order. Once off Hlobane they realized that they had inadvertently ridden towards the main Zulu army who were now less than a quarter of a mile away and rapidly closing around them. They about-turned and rode with all speed towards the nearby saddle between Hlobane and Ityentika Nek in the mistaken belief that they could ride across the saddle and descend to safety down the far side – it was not to be. The Zulus knew that the saddle ended abruptly at a 400-foot precipice to the valley below. The Zulus rushed at Weatherley's trapped force and drove them to the very edge of the cliff that ran along the whole of the northern side of Hlobane. In the fierce fighting that ensued, Weatherley, his son and 66 men were killed while Barton somehow managed to climb down the cliff and having found a loose horse, made off towards the camp at Khambula. Moments later he came across Lieutenant Poole of the Border Horse, who had also climbed down the cliff and was running for his life. Barton collected up the exhausted Poole behind him and the pair set off but were quickly spotted by a group of fleet-of-foot Zulus who gave chase; a grim pursuit ensued over the next eight miles until the Zulus gradually overhauled the pair on their weakening horse; Barton and Poole were eventually caught and killed on the bank of the Manzana River. The following year, a Zulu who claimed to have killed Barton escorted Wood to the scene. The two bodies were buried on the riverbank; numerous attempts have since been made to find the graves but the location has not been traced.

With the Zulus bearing down on them, both Buller and Russell's columns simultaneously experienced a state of confused alarm; both could clearly see that they were on the verge of being surrounded by an overpowering force of Zulus. As if by a miracle, it was Russell's turn to receive an ambiguous message; this time it was from Wood – and it would save Russell's life and those of his men. Unsure whether Buller and Russell had seen the approaching Zulus, Wood tried to warn his two commanders and sent an order to Russell mistakenly ordering him to move immediately to Zunguin Nek five miles from the scene. Wood intended that Russell should remain on Ntendeka and support Buller; Russell did not hesitate for a moment, he and his men departed as fast as they could ride - controversially abandoning Buller and his men to the encircling Zulus. The message read:

Below the Inhlobane. 10.30 A.M. 28/3/79

There is a large army coming this way from the south. Get into position on Zunguin Nek. E.W.

So steep was the descent down the Devil's Pass that many of Buller's men and horses fell to their deaths; for the survivors, their ordeal was to become even more serious as the Zulus from the main force now reached the lower reaches of the pass and began closing in on both sides of Buller's desperate men. The Zulus commenced firing at point-blank range into the desperate soldiers while others darted among them, stabbing and spearing them to death. As survivors reached the bottom of the pass, the remaining Zulus began closing with them.

In the midst of the life-and-death struggle, a young trooper of the Frontier Light Horse, sixteen-year-old George Mossop, had earlier abandoned his horse on the upper plateau of Hlobane and scrambled down the steep face to join his colleagues fighting at the bottom of the pass. Buller shouted at the lad to recover his horse, knowing that, without a horse, the young trooper would be lost. Mossop climbed back up to the top, darting through the Zulus, he later wrote of the fight:

Zulus, crawling over the huge rocks on either side, were jabbing at the men and horses. Some of the men were shooting, and some were using clubbed rifles and fighting their way down. Owing to the rocks on either side the Zulus could not charge. The intervening space was almost filled with dead horses and dead men, white and black. (2)

Mossop saw his horse some forty yards away near the cliff edge. Mossop ran to the horse, named Warrior, only to find himself being encircled by Zulus. With only one other unhorsed trooper for

company, the two moved towards the sheer cliff edge; in an instant the trooper shot himself leaving Mossop trapped. Mossop wrote of the incident:

...placing the muzzle of his carbine in his mouth he pulled the trigger. A lot of brains and other stuff splashed on my neck. (3)

The only alternative to certain death at the hands of the Zulus now stared Mossop in the face; with seconds to spare he jumped off the cliff with his horse. Both bounced down the cliff face and finally fell into a boulder-strewn clump of trees. Miraculously both Mossop and his horse survived the fall, although Mossop saw that Warrior was bleeding profusely from injuries sustained in the fall; thankfully the area was free of Zulus so Mossop adjusted the saddle to staunch the horse's bleeding before mounting up. By evading the Zulus, who were intent on dealing with Buller's men higher up, both Mossop and Warrior were able to escape from Hlobane and the pair reached the safety of Khambula later that day. Mossop nursed his dying horse through the night but Warrior died as dawn broke.

At the base of the pass there was little that Buller or his surviving officers could do other than hold their men together and pour rapid fire into the attacking Zulus; Buller and Major Knox-Leet repeatedly rode back into the fighting to rescue men whose horses had been killed or to help men in danger of being isolated by the Zulus. With hundreds of Zulus converging on the Devil's Pass the fighting was soon over and only those riders who had reached the lower plateau with their horses had any chance of getting away; those on foot soon fell. The harrowing experience continued for the mounted survivors who were chased for several miles by the jubilant Zulus; it was a long and frightening trek for those fleeing for their lives as any horse unable to maintain the pace for the first few miles was quickly overhauled and its rider slain. Buller arrived back at Khambula after sunset; he learned that several of his men whom he had seen escaping were still missing. Typical of Buller, he took a fresh horse and went in search of his men; they all returned safely just before midnight.

By attacking Hlobane at all, Wood and Buller had collectively embarked upon an incautious expedition. All the lessons from the recent disaster at Isandlwana were disregarded; the reconnaissance was scant and the scouting was both careless and negligent. No one taking part in the attack knew the layout of Hlobane and as at Isandlwana, the scouts failed to detect a Zulu army camped only five miles distant. Even when Weatherley informed Wood of the proximity of the Zulus, Wood scornfully dismissed his timely warning. Collectively, Wood and Buller provoked the second greatest disaster of the war, yet the news and implications of the defeat at Hlobane was successfully screened the following day by the British defence of Khambula, just as the successful defence at Rorke's Drift screened Isandlwana.