

Brave Men Indeed'
Zulu Warfare Through the Eyes of the British Soldier

By Ian Castle

It seems clear, when reading accounts written by participants in the Zulu war, that in the early stages many expected Zulu attacks to feature dense masses of warriors rushing forward in an unsophisticated attempt to make contact as quickly as possible. Zulu tactics at Isandlwana and Nyezane on 22 January quickly dispelled this misapprehension. Here for the first time British soldiers encountered the now famous *impondo zankomo* formation, the 'beasts horns'. In this formation the attacking force divided into four units, reminiscent of a charging bull. The *isifuba*, or chest, was intended to advance directly against the enemy and fix him in place while the *izimpondo*, or horns, were thrown out wide to move around the flanks and surround him. A final unit, known as, *umuva*, the loins, provided a reserve, held back until needed to support the attack. An important element in the attack was the employment of skirmishers armed with firearms and this more than anything seems to have surprised the British the most. There are a number of references during the war to the efficient skirmishing of the Zulu, which drew many admiring observations from those who saw them in action. Yet, this should not have come as such a surprise. In F.B. Fynney's *The Zulu Army*, a report prepared for Lord Chelmsford prior to the war, he states that, 'Their [Zulu] skirmishing is, however, extremely good, and is performed even under heavy fire with the utmost order and regularity.' Chelmsford had copies of this report distributed to his officers so it is interesting that many should have been so surprised by the Zulu skill in this discipline.

Captain Edward Hutton, 3/60th Rifles, arriving in Natal with his battalion late in March 1879, almost immediately received orders to march to the Thukela River and join the Eshowe Relief Expedition. There was probably no time to issue him with a copy of Fynney's report before he encountered the Zulu army for the first time at Gingindlovu on 2 April. He was clearly impressed by what he saw.

Shortly after we were in our places large, streaming masses of the enemy were seen moving at a rapid rate through the bush that hid the Inyezane from our view. The Zulu *impi* was estimated at 12,000 men; contrary to precedent, they did not wear their full war costume, but carried rifles, assegais, and small shields. The dark masses of men, in open order and under admirable discipline, followed each other in quick succession, running at a steady pace through the long grass. Having moved steadily round so as exactly to face our front, the larger portion of the Zulus broke into three lines, in knots and groups of from five to ten men, and advanced towards us. Not a sound was heard...

The Zulus continued to advance, still at a run, until they were about 800 yards from us, when they began to open fire. In spite of the excitement of the moment, we could not but admire the perfect manner in which these Zulus skirmished. A small knot of five or six would rise and dart through the long grass, dodging from side to side with heads down, rifles and shields kept low and out of sight. They would then suddenly sink into the long grass, and nothing but puffs of curling smoke would show their whereabouts. Then they advanced again, and their bullets soon began to whistle merrily over our heads or strike the little parapet in front. 1

Captain Hutton was not alone in his admiration for the way the Zulu attack developed at Gingindlovu. Guy Dawney, a gentleman adventurer, who managed to attach himself to the 5th Battalion, Natal Native Contingent, shared his wonder.

We could see large bodies moving round behind the first ridges...The big bodies of Zulus broke up into skirmishing order before crossing the ridge, and the way they then came on was magnificent. We kept up a heavy fire at every black figure we saw, but they crawled through the grass, and dodged behind bushes, shooting at us all the time, and soon every bush in front of us held and hid two or three Zulus, and the puffs of smoke showed us they were there. 2

A newspaper correspondent writing for the *Natal Mercury*, also present at the battle, reported the Zulu method of attack to his readers, confirming the impression gained by Hutton and Dawney.

...two large columns of the enemy were seen coming down the Inyezane hills, while one came round the left by the Amatikula bush, and another smaller one from the direction of the old military kraal. In ten minutes' time our laager was completely surrounded, and the attack began. The enemy came up with a rush to within three or four hundred yards of our position, being favoured in many places by the nature of the ground. They then scattered more, and advanced skirmishing, under a hot fire, to about one hundred yards of the laager, all round. Unfortunately there was plenty of long grass and bushes to shelter them, and as they lay down immediately after firing, our men were not able to dislodge them. 3

Lieutenant E.O.H. Wilkinson, 3/60th Rifles, another eyewitness, watched the Zulu attack close on the British laager but fail to charge home.

The Zulus meanwhile had got up to about 30 yards from the trench, wriggling through the grass at an incredible pace, but the fire of our fellows was too hot, and though they held on behind any cover they could get hold of, they could not 'rush' us as they intended.⁴

The image of Zulus 'wriggling through the grass' is repeated by Lieutenant Main, Royal Engineers, who, at Nyezane on 22 January, felt they, 'slithered through the long grass.' With the Zulu attack at Gingindlovu now losing its momentum, Lord Chelmsford ordered the mounted men and African levies out to drive the Zulus from the field. It was a dramatic British victory but the bravery of the Zulu did not go unrecognised by their opponents. An officer of the Natal Native Contingent, telling of the battle in a letter, wrote,

Fancy, there were some of them twenty yards from the trench. Talk about pluck! the Zulu has all that. They were shot down one after the other, and they still came on in hundreds.⁵

Yet this respect earned at Gingindlovu was nothing new. The Zulu attack at Nyezane earlier in the campaign had already impressed the British soldier. Their speed and their efficient skirmishing surprised Corporal F.W. Licence, Royal Engineers. In a letter to his parents he wrote

We did not even have time to fall in before the bullets came amongst us fearful. We were in the thick, and could not see many that were firing at us, only the smoke out of the bush, and I can tell you I don't believe that there was ever such sharp firing before. ⁶

Colour Sergeant J.W. Burnett, 99th Regiment, writing home after Nyezane, reminded a friend how they used to joke about fighting Africans. He now saw things differently.

I never thought [Africans] would make such a stand. They came on with an utter disregard of danger...our 'school' used to laugh about these [Africans], but I assure you that fighting with them is terribly earnest work, and not child's play.⁷

On the same day that Colonel C.K. Pearson's column in the coastal sector defeated the Zulu attack at Nyezane, elsewhere in Zululand, Colonel R. Glyn's Central Column also experienced Zulu attacking tactics for themselves. At Isandlwana the main Zulu army overwhelmed a force of six companies of British infantry, two artillery pieces with colonial mounted and infantry support. In a classic demonstration of the 'beast's horns' attack the British force was held in position, surrounded and destroyed. Lieutenant W.F.B. Cochrane, 32nd Regiment, operating as a Transport Officer, was out with Colonel Durnford when the main Zulu attack first appeared.

They were in skirmishing order but ten or twelve deep, with supports close behind. They opened fire at us at about 800 yards, and advanced very rapidly.⁸

H. Smith-Dorrien, 95th Regiment, another Transport Officer, one of the few to escape, saw the attack develop.

It was a marvellous sight, line upon line of men in slightly extended order, one behind the other, firing as they came along. For a few of them had firearms, bearing all before them...They were giving vent to no loud war-cries, but to a low musical murmuring noise, which gave the impression of a gigantic swarm of bees getting nearer and nearer.⁹

Lieutenant H. Curling, Royal Artillery, another officer fortunate to survive the battle, watched the Zulus as they closed on the British position.

The Zulus soon split up into a large mass of skirmishers that extended as far around the camp as we could see. We could get no idea of numbers but the hills were black with them. They advanced steadily in the face of the infantry and our guns...Very soon bullets began to whistle about our heads and men began to fall.¹⁰

The Zulu attack charged home and with retreat prevented by the outflanking 'horns' most of the British force died in desperate last stands close to the base of Isandlwana hill. Part of the Zulu army continued on towards the British supply depot at Rorke's Drift where it launched an attack against the heavily outnumbered garrison. Private J. Waters, 1/24th Regiment, working as a hospital orderly, witnessed the leading Zulus appear around the shoulder of Shiyane hill.

...the Zulus came over the hill and I saw about fifty of them form a line in skirmishing order, just as British soldiers would do. Their main body was in their rear over the shoulder of the hill. They came about twenty yards, and then opened fire on the hospital.¹¹

Private F. Hitch, 2/24th Regiment, from a vantage point on the storehouse roof was watching 'the black mass extending into their fighting line'. Corporal J. Lyons, despite never having faced the Zulu in battle before, observed that,

The Zulus did not shout, as they generally do; but, after extending and forming a half-moon, they steadily advanced and kept up a tremendous fire.¹²

The heroic defence of Rorke's Drift by B Company, 2/24th Regiment, is well known, but those who took part respected the courage shown by their assailants too. Colour Sergeant F. Bourne, who himself earned the Distinguished Conduct Medal at the battle, was moved to write, 'Looking back, one cannot but admire their fanatical bravery.'

In late March the main Zulu army, veterans of Isandlwana, attacked the camp of Colonel E. Wood's No. 4 Column at Khambula in the north of Zululand. The Zulus once more approached in a mass before separating into the component parts of the 'beasts horns' to surround the position. Wood admired the spectacle.

The attack on this camp was a wonderful sight. The front of the Zulus stretched over ten miles. What astonished me most of all was their tactical skill.¹³

The Zulu right horn, provoked into launching their attack prematurely, could not fight through the heavy volume of fire directed at it. An unidentified soldier who saw the attack pour forward was astonished. 'I never saw the like; nothing frightened them, as when any of their numbers were shot down others took their places.'¹⁴ Meanwhile, the left horn, utilising a deep valley during their advance, closed on the British position, protected from a similar destructive fire. Captain E. Woodgate, 4th Regiment, serving on Wood's staff, noted that the Zulus generally were reluctant to leave this cover in large bodies but were

... skillfully availing themselves of existing cover, the Zulus were able to maintain a heavy cross-fire, many being armed with Martini-Henry rifles captured at Isandlwana and Luneberg [Ntombe], which caused considerable loss.¹⁵

Observing the left horn, a journalist with the Column, reported

... successive lines of skirmishers poured up the steep ascent to the ridge on which the camp is situated, and a furious fire was poured into the fort and the exposed faces of the cattle and main laager...they fought with a pluck and a determination that is the admiration of all military men here.¹⁶

The sheer volume of British firepower prevented the Zulu army from closing with the strong defensive position. The attack stalled; sensing the moment Colonel Wood unleashed his mounted men and the Zulus retreated. Sergeant E. Jervis, 90th Regiment, spoke for many when he wrote in a letter,

I confess that I do not think that a braver lot of men than our enemies in point of disregard for life, and for their bravery under fire, could be found anywhere.¹⁷

The battle of Khambula marked the turning point in the war. Four days later another strong Zulu force was defeated at Gingindlovu, as highlighted earlier. Both sides now appeared to recognise that the Zulu tactics could not break down a solid all-round defence. There would be one more major battle, at Ulundi; Lord Chelmsford determined to defeat the Zulu army in the open, away from entrenchments and laagers.

Many of those who took part in the battle were experiencing a Zulu attack for the first time. A great number who stood in the British square that day had come to Zululand as part of the reinforcements sent out following the news of the British defeat at Isandlwana.

Despite their failure to close with the British formations at Khambula and Gingindlovu the Zulu army attack developed along familiar lines once more. Major F.W. Grenfell, 60th Regiment, serving on Chelmsford's staff, was in the square at Ulundi.

The Zulus now appeared in great numbers on all sides of us and soon came into collision with our mounted men who, after firing a few volleys, retired rapidly into the square... It was a dramatic sight, the small square of under four thousand men with the Zulus closing in on it...the Zulu army

manoeuvring in different regiments...closing on to the square, their skirmishers firing wildly from every sort of weapon.

...The Zulus fought in their old way, advancing in a horn-shaped formation, continually feeding their flanks, till the square was entirely enveloped. Their fire ceased and they came boldly on with their stabbing assegais, and sought to close with the British Force.¹⁸

Captain J.E.L. Jervis, 7th Hussars, attached to 17th Lancers and shortly to become the 4th Viscount St. Vincent, was another surprised by the manner of the Zulu attack.

As soon as we reach the centre of the plain our enemy's tactics begin to develop. On the hills on our right and left the Zulus were lining the crests, and closing in on our fronts and rear, [they] advance in beautiful order, covered by skirmishers, apparently in one long continuous line about four deep, with intervals between the different regiments – not in the dense irregular crowds we had been led to expect. It is evidently their object to surround us, with their largest force in our rear to cut off our retreat; it was a grand sight.¹⁹

Major A. Harness, R.A., who had been out with Lord Chelmsford on the day of Isandlwana, felt they 'came on very pluckily in small groups taking wonderful advantage of cover.'²⁰ Another, who had previously experienced the Zulu attack at Khambula, was Bandsman J. Banks, 90th Regiment.

At a quarter to nine the enemy came in sight from the hill on our left, the bush on our right to the rear of us, and the largest body coming from the King's kraal...They steadily advanced in silence, for these [Zulus] do not make any noise going into battle.²¹

In contrast, Major F. Russell, 14th Hussars, a staff officer with Newdigate's Second Division, only reached the column the day before the battle. He was left in the laager at the river but watched the Zulu attack from a distance.

For the first half hour all seemed quiet, then gradually we saw thick lines of black men advancing rapidly down the opposite hills and out of the bush on our right, moving in splendid order just like the skirmishing waves of modern tactics.²²

Major C.W. Robinson, Rifle Brigade, another II Division staff officer, also noticed the similarity between Zulu and British army tactics.

When the cavalry were in, the guns opened with shell, but the Zulus were too much in skirmishing order for them to do much damage at first. They gradually came down in the long grass, running round to try and surround us. There were no dense bodies such as I have read of...The formation was rather like our loose file advance...covered by skirmishers. Our men's infantry fire did not check this at all at first, and the corner of the square between the 21st and 58th, where I stood principally, the Zulus came on steadily in spite of it working round at a sort of half run (fired at by case and musketry) in the most determined way...It surprised one enormously though to see them come on thus in the face of a withering fire and 7 rounds of case (from Trench's 2 guns) up to less than 100 yards from us. ²³

Guy Dawney, who earlier fought at Gingindlovu, witnessed this same attack, although he felt the Zulus held a tighter formation than Robinson suggested.

After about twenty minutes came the event of the attack, a large dense black mass of Zulus, the only really thick mass I ever saw attacking, appeared opposite our corner about 130 yards off, the ground favouring their getting so far, and made a rush. Our fire didn't check them the least; nearer they came – 100 yards – 80 yards – still rushing on, a thick black mass. Lord Chelmsford came galloping up, telling the 58th and 21st to fire faster; Newdigate pulled out his revolver. The nine-pounder crashed through them again and again; but at that short distance the canister did not burst. Everyone thought it would be hand to hand in another minute, when at 60 yards the mass faltered, wavered, and withered away.²⁴

This was the area of the square where the Zulu attack came closest to hand-to-hand combat; nowhere else around the square did the Zulus come so close in any numbers to breaking in. Despite the view of Private E. Edwards, 1/24th Regiment, that 'the Zulus are a lot of fearless men. They poured upon us like a number of lions',²⁵ bravery alone was not enough. Philip Robinson, the correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph*, noting the strength of the British firepower, felt 'It was impossible for any force long to face the deadly storms of lead poured in among them at such short distance'.²⁶ Inevitably the attack faltered, as it had done at Gingindlovu and Khambula, and, as at those two battles before, the mounted men rode out and turned retreat into bloody rout.

After the great success at Isandlwana, elements of the Zulu army gained minor victories at Ntombe and Hlobane. But the crushing defeats at Gingindlovu and Khambula that followed, and now, a further defeat, in the open at Ulundi, convinced the Zulu army that the war was over and they accepted defeat. The British soldiers that fought the Zulu army were full of admiration for their opponents. They had entered the war with a condescending attitude that permeated all ranks but now that had all changed. The Zulu army, by displaying great courage and skill in battle, had earned their respect. Rather than purely relying on their superiority of numbers in mass attacks, the Zulu army had generally launched well-controlled attacks, utilising tactics clearly recognisable to a European army. A main body approaching in strength before sending out parties to outflank the enemy, a silent disciplined approach and the extensive use of skirmishers to shield the advance, combined with good use of cover. These tactics were not greatly dissimilar from those advocated for a British battalion attack in the 1877 Infantry Field Exercise Manual.

Perhaps the final word should go to a man who fought the Zulu. Lieutenant A. Blaine, Frontier Light Horse, experienced the horrors of the retreat down Hlobane mountain on 28 March 1879. Three days later he offered an opinion shared by many; 'No man ever fought more pluckily than the Zulus, they are brave men indeed.' 27

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