

A boy, his book and a battle.

In memory of Haig Chelmsford Ntanze 1962 - 2004

(Article originally published in the Natal Witness January 1982)

By Ed Coan

To some the battlefield of Isandhlwana is a graveyard. To the others it is a tourist attraction. To still more it is a place where their ancestors met with brutal death. To a few it is home. Among these few is Haig Chelmsford Ntanze, so named after Lord Chelmsford, commander of the British forces in Zululand in 1879. Tragically, he decided to split his force at Isandhlwana and left a disorganised camp of more than 1,000 soldiers to be slaughtered by marauding Zulus.

That was more than a century ago. Today, only the numerous white cairns, that look like the droppings of some enormous bird, bear witness to the carnage.

In the 19 years Haig Chelmsford has lived on or around the battlefield, he has learnt the significance of each of these cairns, and of the several regimental monuments that pockmark the site. At the moment, Chelmsford, as he is affectionately known to visitors, lives with his father in one of the beehive-shaped huts at Nyoni's Hill at the eastern end of the battlefield. But Chelmsford's waking hours are mostly spent in the small diorama that contains a relief map showing the course of the battle, and a few scattered relics.

It's from the diorama that Chelmsford guides visitors to various parts of the battlefield and also fills them in on the historical and personal details of the engagement. Much of his knowledge has been gained by living in the area, reinforced by the vast amount he has read on the war. "I have eight copies of *Washing of the Spears*, Morris's standard work on the war, he proudly proclaims. "They are my treasures."

Mind you, Chelmsford is not the official guide on the battlefield – that part is played by a rather wizened old woman. "That lady," Chelmsford calls her, as if she has stolen something that is rightly his. Strangely, the Ntanze family played no active role in the melee of 1879. "They had a far more important job," says Chelmsford. "They could not be risked. They planted and tended to the dagga that was used to instil frenzy into the warriors."

Today, Chelmsford and his father, Bantubezwe, - his mother died six years go – have swapped dagga for the less exciting mealie. But Chelmsford has little intention of remaining a farmer. The geography of his youth has given him military ambitions. "I would like to join the British Army," he says. "And I would also like to learn to speak Welsh – in honour of the 24th Regiment that was virtually wiped out there. They originally came from the Brecon Hills of Wales." But before the army, Chelmsford has other plans.

He has just completed Standard 8 at the Zamokwakhe Secondary School, to where pupils flock from all over Zululand. "There are 183 pupils in my year," he says, "and 48 in my class. I was fourth in my class." At the backbone of his excellent results are insatiable interests in maths and physical science. "I would like to study at the University of the Witwatersrand and become a doctor if I don't join the army," he says. "I am good at studying, but not at football and I don't like singing. Then, of course, there's his "working" interest in history. "I'm very interested in Napoleonic history," he says, "especially as the Prince Imperial, the son of the exiled Napoleon III, was killed in Zululand." The death of the Prince Imperial was only one of the "unfortunately incidents" that plagued the British army throughout the Zulu War.

Isandhlwana was undoubtedly the biggest debacle of the five-month conflict. And just below the topsoil of the battlefield are the impedimenta of that debacle – cartridge cases, collar badges, regimental buttons, hospital supplies – all the paraphernalia of an imperial war. Chelmsford, himself, with the help of metal detectors he was given, has come across many remnants of the battle. "But the National Monuments Council told me to stop using the detectors," he says. "The battlefield was getting a bit untidy."

So it was back to studying the written word on the battle, rather than the more physical evidence. And if you go to Isandhlwana, that is normally how you'll find Chelmsford – sitting in the diorama, nose buried in a book on the Zulu Wars – but still with half an eye on "that lady."

But go quickly, for Chelmsford has his heart set on military glory – and a chance to reverse the ignominies that were showered on the man whose name he carries.

