

# The Role of Chance in the Battle of Isandlwana

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### Introduction

There can be little doubt that chance played a major role during the battle of Isandlwana 22nd January 1879; it is perhaps, what makes the battle so fascinating.

The Battle of Isandlwana was one of the worst defeats suffered by the British army during the Victorian era; it was also a defining moment in the history of the Zulu Kingdom. The part-time soldiers and herdsmen of a little known African Kingdom were suddenly transformed around the world into a powerful and enduring stereotype, alien, savage, and incomprehensible, which colours our understanding of Zulu culture, even today. At the same time, Isandlwana ensured the destruction of the Zulu kingdom in its original form, and defeat was born of victory, for the British Empire was hardly inclined to make peace without first restoring its honour on the battlefield. Over one thousand two hundred men out of the one thousand seven hundred in the camp were killed at Isandlwana.

Through extensive research by such recent revisionist historians such as Ian Knight, John Laband and Adrian Greaves, to name a few, it has become apparent that the main reason for British defeat at Isandlwana was due to the infantry being too far spread out as a result of trying to defend a camp that was constructed for twice their number. The consequences of this meant that it took longer for the British to pull in tighter to the camp when they needed to and resulted in them being out run by the Zulus.

Like most historical calamities, the British defeat came about not through any single great error of judgement, but rather through a combination of misunderstanding, miscalculation and sheer bad luck; the outcome heavily reliant upon the importance of chance.

### The Importance of Chance

Lieutenant General Lord Chelmsford was the senior British commander in Southern Africa when he decided to invade Zululand with three offensive columns, with two more in support. His political brief was to break up the Zulu political and military system as quickly as possible. Before the start of his Zulu campaign Lord Chelmsford had recently just brought a small war on the Cape Frontier to a successful conclusion, and in many ways I believe that his involvement with the Cape Frontier is one of the underlying factors which brought about many of the chance related factors which inevitably led to the demise of the British army at Isandlwana. Although his Intelligence Department had made a careful assessment of Zulu fighting capabilities, Chelmsford could not quite believe that the Zulus would be any different from the Xhosa. When fighting the Xhosa in the Cape, Chelmsford's enemy used guerrilla warfare, preferring hit and run tactics, launched from mountainous bases, rather than a direct challenge in open combat.

Lord Chelmsford like most of the other men under his command, including the officers of the 24th, anticipated that the Zulus would respond in the same way. Therefore Chelmsford's whole strategy of three separate columns approaching oNdini, revealed his preoccupation that he would have to force the Zulus into a corner and make them fight. One of the first chance related factors came about at the beginning of the invasion and took place in the Batshe valley. On the 12 January Chelmsford attacked the homestead of Chief Sihayo KaXongo. Sihayo's followers fought well but were no match for Chelmsford's troops. The result of this skirmish went on to prove to be disastrous for the British; firstly because it encouraged a complacency in the British camp and secondly because it shaped King Cetshwayo's response to the invasion.

Cetshwayo had not sought to fight the British. However he could not accede to the British demands when realising their hidden agenda, and so he waited for the British to make the first move before reaching a decision. Chelmsford's attack on Sihayo led to the Zulu amabutho being prepared for war and the Zulus marking him down as the most dangerous of the three invading columns, resulting in the majority of the amabutho being sent to attack him at Isandlwana rather than any of the other invading columns.

The next chance related factor that took place, once again related to Chelmsford's involvement with the Cape Frontier campaign, and the actions of Chief Matyana. By the 20 of January both Chelmsford and the amabutho had begun to close in on each other. Chelmsford established camp on the forward slope of the mountain at Isandlwana. Reports had already started to reach him that the Zulus were on their way to attack. Secure about his left flank and front Chelmsford was concerned about the range of hills, Hlajakazi and Malakatha, which obstructed his view to the right. Beyond the hills were rows of ridges and steep valleys and due to his experience with the Xhosa in the Cape Frontier Chelmsford feared that the Zulus would employ similar avoidance tactics and force the British into fighting in terrain they would find difficult to cope in rather than fighting a direct confrontation. As a result he decided that he would send a reconnaissance in force the following day.

And so, on the 21<sup>st</sup>, Chelmsford sent Major Hugh Dartnell and most of his African Auxiliaries and mounted men out to scour the hills to the east. The direction of the Zulu capital at Ulundi. At this point in time the main Zulu impis were concealed to the North East of the camp waiting for an opportunity to attack the British line. However by accident and by complete chance Chief Matyana had led a number of his men to the South East of the British camp and who were spotted by Dartnell. Word was sent back to Chelmsford and it looked to him as if everything he suspected was coming to pass.

Believing that he had found the main Zulu impis, and giving orders to deploy the same tactics as used against the Xhosa, Chelmsford ordered about half his command, most of the 2/24th and four of his six guns, to march out of camp immediately. As a result the camp was heavily under-manned and very susceptible to attack. If it had not been for the mistaken actions of Matyana and Chelmsford's fixation with the Cape Frontier, Isandlwana would never have been undermanned as the main force would still have been based there, and logically, the infantry may not have been so far spread out resulting in the British being outrun by the Zulus when they tried to pull back into camp

. One of the other main reasons for the British defeat at Isandlwana was due to the actions of Brevet Colonel Anthony Durnford, whose actions during this battle were clouded by his determination to dispel doubts about his judgement reaching back to the Bushman's River pass affair several years prior. It is this that I believe to be another chance related factor that affected the outcome of this conflict. Durnford's column had been sent to Isandlwana as a support column and arrived on the morning of the 22nd. On the same morning the sound of distant skirmishing from Lord Chelmsford's encounter at Mangeni had brought one of the amabutho out onto the iNyoni ridge and were spotted by Pulleine. This action by the amabutho led to a dilemma for the British as large numbers of Zulus had now shown themselves to the left of the camp in the opposite direction from where Chelmsford was searching for them. Armed with this information and eager to prove himself this led Durnford into abandoning the camp at Isandlwana in order to scour the iNyoni heights and meet the Zulus head on. He divided his force of around five hundred men, sending one part, two troops of cavalry under Lieutenants Roberts and Raw, up onto the heights, while he led the remainder around the bottom of the escarpment. The idea was to catch the Zulus in a pincer movement and drive them away from both the camp and Chelmsford.

Raw and Roberts could see small groups of warriors in the distance and gave chase until the ground dropped away into the valley of the Ngwebeni stream. At the bottom looking up was the main Zulu army. When the army saw Raw it broke out into attack in its traditional chest and horns formation. Durnford was four miles from camp at the time. Meanwhile at the same time as Durnford had ridden out of camp Pulleine had sent one company of the 1/24th up onto the heights. When hearing the sound of fire indicating it had come into action he dispatched another company to support it as he was still sceptical to the full extent of the Zulu threat and it was only when the chest of the Zulu army came into sight from the camp that it was realised that the companies were in danger of being cut off. The battle now came down to the simple question; would the rate and density of British musketry outweigh the determination of the Zulus charge?

Due to the actions of Durnford the British were too far spread out. Pulleine's troops were also too far away from the camp. This meant that the density of fire was being dispersed and was not as effective as it could have been. Durnford began to run out of ammo and it became clear to the British that they had no choice but to cease fire and pull in tighter to the camp. When the Zulus saw this they were ordered to charge and with no co-ordinated, massed volley of fire to stop it, it overtook the British line and slaughtered it. If it had not been for the chance related factor of the Zulu amabutho coming out onto the iNyoni ridge due to the sounds of distant skirmishing from Lord Chelmsford's encounter at Mangeni, then Pulleine and Durnford would have not noticed their whereabouts to the left of the camp and Durnford would then never have left causing the camp to be too far spread out and as a result dispersed their fire power, which inevitably led to the British defeat at Isandlwana that day.

I believe that the outcome of this conflict would have been considerably different if it had not have been for the three important chance related factors involving this battle. If we compare Isandlwana to

the Battles of Rorke's Drift and that of Khambula I would find it hard to see that anybody could not come to the same conclusion, that if these three incidents had not taken place then Isandlwana would almost certainly have been a British victory.

The progress of the Zulu attack at Khambula was almost identical to that of Isandlwana however, the result was very different. The Zulu strategy, intending to move with their fullest strength against Khambula, was to draw Wood into the open by harassing his livestock. Unaware of the near presence of the Zulu army, Wood proceeded with his plans to raid Hlobane. On 28 March, Buller and 675 men started to scale the eastern slopes of Hlobane, at the same time the 640 men of Lieutenant Colonel Russell's force moved from the west onto the adjoining Ntendeka Mountain.

Wood intended that Russell's column would create a diversion in Buller's favour, and draw the defenders away from the eastern side of Hlobane. Buller led his men through a heavy crossfire and gained the summit, and from there he extended his force and advanced west across the mountain top only halting when they reached Devil's pass at the western extremity of Hlobane where they exchanged a hot fire with the Zulus. The Zulus on Hlobane however, knew that the main army was approaching from oNdini and so their task was to prevent the British from withdrawing until the main Zulu army had arrived.

It was then, at between 10 am and 11 am that Buller could then begin to see the enormous Zulu army come sweeping towards Hlobane from the South East with its horns thrown out either side of the chest in its traditional formation. The British now had to retreat down the mountain as quickly as possible for fear of the Zulu army moving directly on Khambula and its depleted garrison in a repetition of the Isandlwana. Hlobane was undoubtedly a disastrous day for Buller and Wood however the only positive aspect for the British in the affair was that the main Zulu army had been diverted by the situation on the summit delaying its assault on Khambula, and thus giving the garrison time to concentrate and prepare.

This allowed them to pull in tight to the camp and concentrate a heavy mass volley of fire onto the Zulus which led to a British victory. There was a limit to what even the Zulus could stand. At moments heavy and accurate fire paralysed their movements, while the destructive effect of artillery shells to whole groups proved to be disheartening. The iNgobamakhosi of the right horn was quite demoralised by such fire. It was first pinned down since it could not face the bullets, and then fell back to the shelter of the rocky outcrops. The left horn and the chest were literally mowed down until they too had to retire. If the three incidents at Isandlwana had not taken place that led to the British being too dispersed then they too could have pulled tight to the camp and enjoyed a similar victory as the scenario was almost identical.

Rorke's Drift was also another example of British superiority against the Zulus when the British lines were pulled in tight. A total of 131 men and 8 officers defeated a Zulu army whose strength was somewhere between 3,000 and 4,000. The key therefore to defeating the Zulus comes down to the simple question of the rate and density of British musketry outweighing the determination of the Zulus' charge, which can only assure a British victory when a camp is pulled in tight in order to make sure that the fire is not dispersed. Had it not been for those three chance related factors – Sihayo fighting in the Xhosa rather than the Zulu fashion, Matyana heading away from the main impi rather than joining it, and Durnford trying to save his honour, the outcome at Isandlwana might have been very different.