

# A Comparison between the 1876 Sioux Campaign and the Zulu War of 1879

By Kevin Galvin and Sandy Barnard

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## **Editor's Note:**

a. The authors (1) gave their talk as a PowerPoint presentation at the 19th Annual Symposium of the Custer Battlefield Historical & Museum Association (CBHMA) in Hardi, Montana on Friday, 24th June 2005. This is a paper transcript that has been developed from that presentation.

b. Additional details the authors were able to adlib into their commentary may not have been reproduced here. However, some text has been added where necessary to clarify points and the article tailored to reflect that it has now been reproduced for the Anglo Zulu War Historical Society.

I am Kevin Galvin, a serving British military officer having completed, to date, 35 years in the Infantry, and a student of the events that took place in Montana and Wyoming and in South Africa for almost as long — if not longer. A love affair created by two films — *They Died with their Boots On* and *ZULU*. [2]

Much has been written on both the Sioux Campaign of 1876 and the Zulu War of 1879, and comparisons have been made of both of these clashes of culture. Historian James O. Gump, wrote *The Dust Rose like Smoke: The Subjugation of the Zulu and the Sioux*, published by the University of Nebraska Press in 1994. Derek Batten, who many of you may know, actually gave a brief introduction and some comparisons to four of the initial battles in both campaigns at the first CBHMA symposium in 1987, when he quoted Donald Morris from his book *The Washing of the Spears* that Rorke's Drift, made more famous by the film *ZULU* was, "a more satisfactory battle than such better known events as the Alamo or the Little Bighorn." As for Isandlwana, he noted, "a defeat more grievous than modern troops had ever suffered at the hands of the aborigines." [3] Of course, the use of the latter word would not be considered politically correct today. Even earlier in 1974, Roderick Murchison III wrote a short article for the South African Military History Society, again comparing the Little Bighorn with Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift. [4]

In this presentation our aim is to provide a comparison of the two campaigns, but in the time we have available, it is unlikely that every aspect that can potentially be compared will be covered, nor do we expect to go to any great levels of detail in those areas that are.

## **The Two Campaigns**

The 1876 Sioux Campaign took place predominantly in what we now know as the modern states of Wyoming and Montana in the United States of America. In 1876, they were both territories and included an area that under the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie was known as the "Unceded" land to the west of the Great Sioux Reservation. The latter encompassed an area in what is now North and South Dakota and part of northern Nebraska. Figure 1 shows the Area of Operations in 1876 and to some extent illustrates the terrain showing the waterways and mountain areas as well as its size.





Figure 3 – The iNyoni Heights overlooking the battlefield at Isandlwana.



Figure 4 – Deep Ravine at the Little Bighorn where 28 bodies were said to have been located.



Figure 5 – Donga from where Durnford engaged the Zulu right horn.



Figure 6 – The Conical Hill (centre rear) at the Rosebud from where the Sioux maintained fire on Crook's command until driven off.

## **Population**

In both cases the areas of operations were inhabited by indigenous native populations. In the 1876 campaign, it was the Sioux (or Lakota) who were aligned with their close allies, the Cheyenne. In the 1879 campaign in South Africa, it was the Zulu nation. It should be noted that neither of these peoples had been the original owners of their respective territories. Instead, they had usurped the rights of other tribes and had gained control of the land by victory in battle.

Both native peoples were nomadic hunter/warrior societies in which men dominated everyday life. For sustenance, the respective groups relied on specific animals. For the Sioux it was the buffalo that sustained their way of life, and for the Zulu it was their cattle.

They both lived in tribal sub-groups with each village having its own headman, and the respective nations were bound together by a common religion and language. However, the Sioux were a more loosely defined nation. As historian Robert Utley wrote:

Each band had its own chief. ... His duties were to carry out the will of the majority.” When these sub-groups came together to celebrate in the summer months at the Sun Dance such authority that prevailed was exercised by a tribal council. [5]

The Sioux were grouped into seven divisions from three geographical areas [6], and in the 1876 Sioux Campaign, it was the division of the Teton Sioux, or Teton Dakota, who were the most predominant in fighting the U.S. Army. In turn, the Teton themselves were divided into seven bands.

Until the rise of the Zulu King, Shaka, in the early 19th century, the Zulus were a small clan, one of many who were Nguni-speaking peoples. They were a more loose confederation not dissimilar to the divisions of the Sioux, but Shaka changed that, unifying the various clans and extending the use of the word Zulu to them, creating a formidable warrior nation which conquered weaker tribes in the region. Zulu kings after Shaka had far greater powers over the nation and created regiments of age-grade men who were trained in the Zulu methods of waging war that Shaka had devised with the use of a short stabbing spear. These regiments, or *amabutho*, were not new, as it was a concept adopted before Shaka, but it was the method of fighting that was the key differential. New regiments were formed every few years when the King called up young men at age 18 or 19. They occupied military barracks or *ikhanda* and were only permitted to marry on the King's orders and a period of up to 20 years might pass before that permission was granted — this meant that young girls were married to older men. Only after marriage were they able to retire, per se, and become part of the reserve. It would take place at a large annual ceremony known as *umkhosi* (First Fruits) performed before each harvest in either December or January.

### **Military Similarities**

From a military viewpoint the similarities between the two peoples are striking. The Zulu were considered excellent light infantry, able to run great distances and still fight at the end, whereas both the Sioux and their close allies the Cheyenne were considered some of the finest light cavalry. Both raided other tribes, the Sioux to steal horses and the Zulus cattle.

They both preferred to charge their enemies in larger numbers in order to scatter the enemy's ranks and then defeat the fleeing foe [4]. As Murchison stated, "both were highly determined and courageous fighters", and the warriors of both nations could sustain horrific injuries yet somehow survive.

They were excellent in close combat although the Zulu did not practice the art of "counting coup" or taking scalps like the Sioux and other tribes in North America. Both however practiced the ritual mutilation of their enemies — with a common purpose: to prevent the dead man's spirit from returning to "haunt" their slayer.

Both were adept with their native weapons — the Sioux the bow and arrow and the Zulu the short stabbing spear but they also possessed firearms. The Sioux were perhaps able to exploit this white man's technology far more than their Zulu counterparts who were extremely poor shots. As usual however the availability of ammunition was a problem.

### **Ultimatums**

As a prelude to the wars that were to take place, both the United States government and the British government's official representative in South Africa issued ultimatums. In the United States before taking military action against the Sioux, President U.S. Grant, along with Generals William Sherman and Philip Sheridan, having determined a course of action to resolve the Black Hills question, needed to give the Sioux who remained off the reservation an opportunity to comply with U.S. Government's demands. To this end, an ultimatum was sent out on December 6, 1875 by the Secretary of the Interior to bands in the unceded territory to report at the agencies by January 31, 1876, or be branded hostile and driven in by the Army. Assuming that the runners sent out from the Agencies could locate the elements outside the reservation during a harsh winter, it meant that they would have 54 days to comply. The instructions that were sent to each of the Indian Agents are as follows [7]:

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,  
OFFICE OF INDIAN AFFAIRS,  
December 6, 1875.

SIR:

I am instructed by the honorable Secretary of the Interior, under date of the 3d instant, to direct you to notify Sitting Bull's band, and other wild and lawless bands of the Sioux Indians residing without the bounds of their reservation, who roam over Western Dakota and Eastern Montana, including the rich valley of the Yellowstone and Powder Rivers, and make war on the Arickarees, Mandans, Gros Ventres, Assinaboines, Blackfeet, Piegans, Crows, and other friendly tribes, that unless they shall remove within the bounds of their reservation (and remain there) before the 31st of January next, they shall be deemed hostile and treated accordingly by military force.

You will acknowledge the receipt of this order, and notify this Office of the execution of it.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,  
EDW. P. SMITH,  
Commissioner.

J.S. HASTINGS, Esq.,  
United States Indian Agent, Red Cloud Agency, Nebraska.

Letter to the same effect addressed the same day to Agents Howard, Bingham, Burke, Livingstone, Beckwith, Reily, and Anderson.

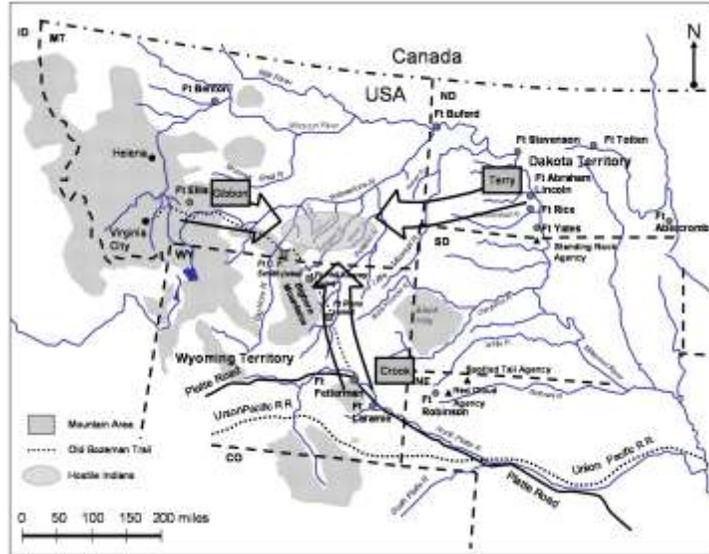
Similarly, in South Africa on December 11, 1878 at the Tugela Rive, representatives of the Zulu King had gathered to listen to the outcome of a border dispute — that ironically was resolved in favor of the Zulu nation. Instead, Her Majesty's High Commissioner, Sir Henry Bartle Frere, issued his country's own ultimatum to the Zulu. Albeit without the government in London's consent as they wanted him to treat the Zulu with a "spirit of forbearance." [8] It required Zulu King Cetshwayo ka Mpande to:

- Send to the Natal government those responsible for cross border violations in both Natal and Transvaal;
- Do away with the military system maintained by the king and require the men to return to their homes;
- Accept an officer appointed by the Queen's High Commissioner to live in the Zulu country, or on its immediate border;
- Allow all missionaries to teach ... and no Zulu should be punished for listening to them;
- Give an answer within 30 days.

Neither the Sioux with their Cheyenne allies in the unceded lands nor the Zulu nation could accept the respective ultimatums that the United States and British (Cape Colony) administrations had issued, although for differing reasons. Both were prepared to fight but their respective tactics differed significantly.

### **Military Strategic Plans — The U.S. Army**

For its part, the U.S. Army had wanted to conduct operations in winter when the Indians would be less mobile and less able to concentrate their own forces, but bad weather and possibly a lack of will on the part of some commanders meant that this strategy did not fully evolve, forcing the Army to undertake a much less preferred summer campaign. In fact Sheridan was convinced that if they could not be corralled in by the spring then they would have no chance in a summer campaign. It was, however, envisioned that the Army would use three converging but not coordinated columns to locate and force the Indians to comply with the government ultimatum. They would deploy from their assembly areas at Forts Ellis, Abraham Lincoln and Fetterman as shown on the map at Figure 7, to move towards the area south of the Yellowstone River where the hostile elements of the Sioux and Cheyenne were expected to be.



**Figure 7 — Sioux War Campaign Plan**

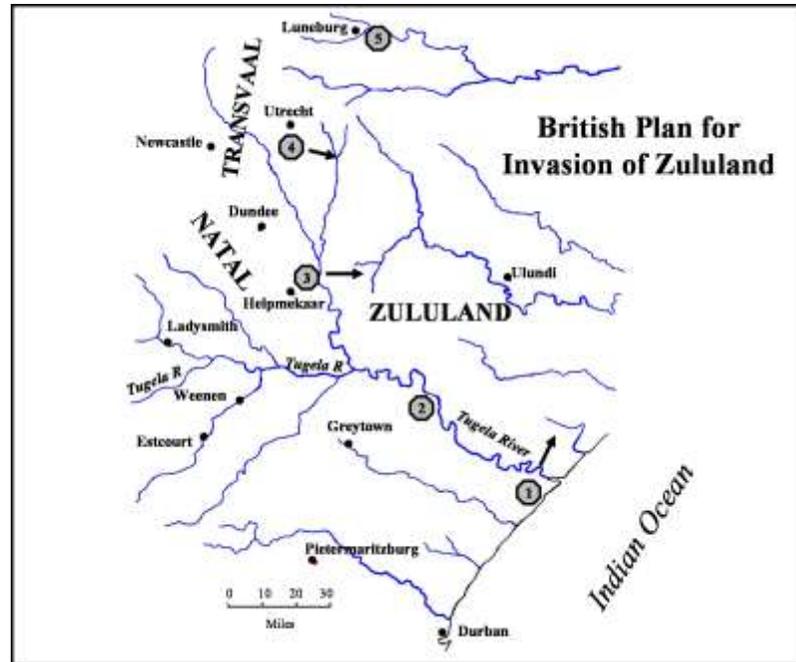
These columns would be under the command of:

- Brig. Gen. Alfred H. Terry, out of Dakota Territory, with all 12 companies of Lt. Col. George Custer’s 7th U.S. Cavalry as his primary strike force and a number of infantry companies from the 6th and 17th U.S. Infantry plus a Gatling gun battery manned by men from the 20th U.S. Infantry (total strength 922);
- Brig. Gen. George Crook, out of Wyoming Territory, heading the largest column which consisted of cavalry from both the 2nd and 3rd U.S. Cavalry (total strength 1,051);
- Col. John Gibbon, out of Montana Territory, commanded the smallest column with four companies of the 2nd U.S. Cavalry and six companies of the 7th U.S. Infantry including a Gatling gun detachment manned by that regiment (total strength 450).

The columns were predominantly mobile and supported by Indian auxiliaries and scouts. The first column to take to the field was Crook’s in March 1876, but he was forced to abandon the offensive after an initial victory in a St. Patrick’s Day fight at the Powder River turned sour. Interestingly, without a common doctrine to follow, both Crook and Terry organized themselves differently for operations in the field.

**Military Strategic Plans — The British Army**

In their own campaign with the Zulu, the British objective was to capture the enemy’s capital at oNdini (Ulundi). Initially, the British planned to advance, organized as columns, from five separate points, as shown on the map at Figure 8, following known tracks to oNdini:



**Figure 8 — British Plan for the Invasion of Zululand**

- No. 5 Column: Col. H. Rowlands commanded, with his regular element the 80th of Foot (total strength 2,278);
- No. 4 Column: Col. Henry Evelyn Wood commanded, with regular soldiers from 1st Battalion, 13th of Foot and 90th of Foot plus elements of the Frontier Light Horse (total strength 1,565);
- No. 3 Column or Center Column (as it was also referred to): Col. Richard Glyn commanded (accompanied by the senior commander, Lt. Gen. Lord Chelmsford, and his HQ Staff), with his main force comprising of companies from the 1st and 2nd Battalions, the 24th of Foot (2nd Warwickshire's) supported by the 3rd Regiment Natal Native Contingent (NNC) (2 battalions), cavalry, artillery and engineers (total strength 4,709);
- No. 2 Column: Lt. Col. Anthony Durnford commanded a predominantly native force comprising of three battalions of the 3rd Regiment NNC, a rocket battery and five troops of Natal Native Horse (total strength 3,871);
- No. 1 Column: Col. Charles K. Pearson whose command consisted of the 2nd Battalion, 3rd of Foot and six companies from 99th of Foot with two battalions of the 2nd NNC Regiment (total strength 4,750).

A failure to get the Swazi Kingdom to attack in conjunction with the Britis, and poor logistics meant Chelmsford advanced, instead, using three columns with two providing a reserve (No. 5 and No. 2 – the former was eventually disbanded according to one source and No. 2 was to effectively merge with No. 3) and also some defence along the border with Zululand. Chelmsford, not unlike Sheridan, also believed that any one of his columns individually was capable of withstanding anything that the Zulu Army could throw at it. The advancing columns had as the core British regular battalions. Significantly, Lord Chelmsford accompanied the force into the field. That was not an uncommon event for senior commanders in the British Army in contrast to Sheridan, although to be fair to Sheridan he had faith that any one of his columns was sufficient to defeat the Sioux.

### **Capabilities and Strengths of Opposing Forces**

We will now look at the capabilities and overall strengths of the opposing sides in the campaigns. First, the U.S. and strengths:

- The U.S. Army with its civilian and Indian scouts numbered about 2,500 men. As stated, Crook's column was the largest, then Terry's column which eventually merged with Gibbon's smaller column;
- The British Army, the native contingents in the form of the NNC and the locally recruited cavalry force, organized into five columns as described earlier, had about 17,000 men.

Both the U.S. and British military organizations were trained to fight in specific formations. In that way, in the case of the infantry sufficient firepower could be brought to bear on an opponent. Tactics were designed to fight against a European-type army. The U.S. Cavalry was deployed predominantly as mobile infantry, and used the skirmish line, setting out men at regular intervals with every fourth man as a horse holder.

The Sioux and Cheyenne were initially made up of those tribal members who remained outside the reservation all year round but they were joined by "seasonal warriors" — the summer roamers — not all of whom had reached the combined camp by the time the attack on Crook was made. It is estimated that 800-900 warriors were to take part in this pre-emptive strike lead by Crazy Horse, on June 17, 1876. By the time of the Little Bighorn fight on June 25, the camp consisted of tribal circles of the Hunkpapa, Oglala, Brule, Sans Arc, Blackfoot Sioux, Two Kettle, Miniconjou and Northern Cheyenne with a number of Arapaho, Southern Cheyenne, Santee and Yanktonais. It probably numbered no more than about 2,000 relatively well-armed warriors.

As noted, the Zulu Army was organized into regiments — *amabutho* — who functioned as the tactical elements. Its main Army was about 20,000 strong and assembled at the King's capital oNdini with 12 regiments organized into what the British described as three corps. The Zulu Army was not, however, a regular standing army despite its organization into regiments and corps. It was a National Service Army and normally only met up each year for the First Fruits ceremony at oNdini. It could be argued that it was bad luck — or bad intelligence - that Chelmsford invaded just as the Zulus had been gathered for their annual meeting. At any other time of the year it would have taken the King time to assemble his force. Although their military prowess was well known and highly regarded, as an army, despite being well-trained, they were inexperienced in war, having been at relative peace for 23 years [9]. Of course, it could be argued that Chelmsford wanted to fight the Zulu Army in a set battle and its assembly in one place would enable him to defeat them in one large engagement. In addition, he was able to move his forces across the borders with Zululand unopposed.

It was this force that was deployed at Isandlwana and outflanked Chelmsford's advance force from the No. 3 Column that the Zulus had correctly recognized as the main threat. Other Zulus who lived in the north and south were tasked to harass the other columns.

The Plains Indian was an individual warrior who belonged to a warrior society but would follow only proven leaders in battle whereas the Zulu warrior was part of a regimented army system but more akin to a national guard-type militia called out as required. Both, however, were armed with traditional weapons. Although they both had firearms, only the Sioux could be described as proficient, but neither possessed plentiful supplies of ammunition until after their victories.

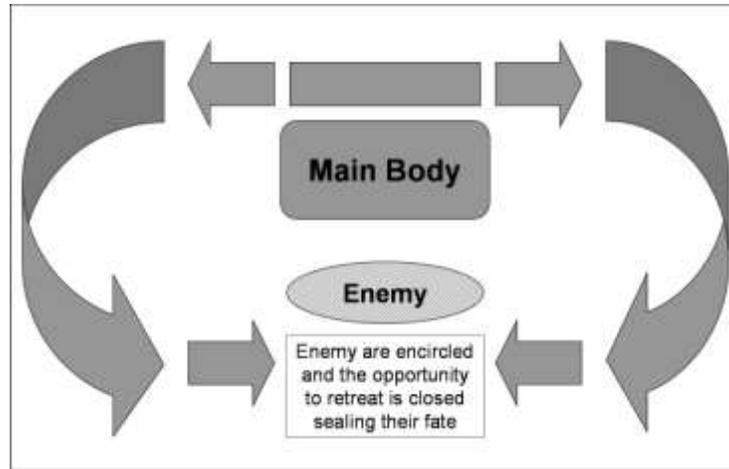
On the native sides, both the Sioux leader Sitting Bull and the Zulu leader Cetshwayo retained prominent positions in the stories of their people's struggles in the 1870s, but their official standing was markedly different. Sitting Bull wasn't a warrior leader any longer, but was more of an esteemed figure behind the scene during this war. As king, Cetshwayo also did not lead his warriors in the field, but he had a more controlling role in the eventual outcome affecting his people. Both sides were led by others in the field — the Sioux by proven warriors and the Zulu by appointed commanders.

### **Native Tactics**

The Sioux and Plains Indians, in general, preferred to ambush an enemy, attacking only if the odds favored them. The Fetterman fight is an example of how effective this tactic could be. The exception to this was the Rosebud, where they chose to meet Crook's column in open combat. Of course, the degree to which they might have caught Crook totally by surprise by this tactic is unknown. Had it not been for Crook's scouts deployed forward, the outcome might have been dramatically different.

At Little Bighorn it was the Sioux who were surprised, but they were able to exploit their knowledge of the surrounding terrain and ultimately defeat each component of the 7th's strike forces.

The Zulu Army organized into regiments and corps, followed an attack formation it had developed called *impondo zankomo* — or "the beast's horns" — Figure 9 illustrates this. Despite being on foot, they were highly mobile.



**Figure 9 – The *Impondo Zankomo***

Although the Zulus could easily have launched an attack into Natal, King Cetshwayo decided to employ a defensive strategy which meant that his forces were supposed to remain in Zululand. This provided him with an effective political argument that he was only responding to British aggression. The actual attack across the border at Rorke's Drift was unauthorized and wiped out any moral support that those in Britain opposed to war could bring to bear.

The use of deception, however, enabled the Zulus to draw out elements of No. 3 Column which enabled them to attack the camp at Isandlwana with ultimately an overwhelming force. At Rorke's Drift, however, the ability of its defenders to create a defensive position prevented another stunning defeat.

### **Attitudes of U.S. and British Military**

The U.S. and British military both feared that the "enemy" might not be located or brought to battle. Equally, neither nation fully respected the fighting capabilities of their opponents. They believed that superior firepower and tactics could enable them to overcome their less sophisticated opponents. Another factor that goes a long way toward explaining the eventual setback both nations endured was their over-confidence and their relative unfamiliarity with the ground they were to fight on.

### **Obstacles to the Campaigns**

Both the U.S. and British Armies faced considerable obstacles in planning and executing their respective campaigns. These included:

- Poor logistics;
- Poor intelligence and reconnaissance;
- Inability to coordinate and communicate with columns;
- Training and some equipment unsuited to conditions that they would operate under.

Logistics was perhaps the biggest handicap in both campaigns and both the U.S. and British Armies were not well equipped to deal with a campaign that took them so far from their normal supply chains. Both needed to establish base camps that themselves had to be re-supplied and guarded. In the United States the area of operations was vast with no major roads, although good use was made of the rivers that enabled steamboats to move material to the base camps. Although wagons would be a key requirement for both forces, one of the field commanders in the U.S. Army — Brig. Gen. Crook — preferred to use mules as his prime logistics mover. For Chelmsford, his main form of transport was a Cape Wagon — 18-foot long, heavy and difficult to pull once fully laden, requiring up to 18 oxen. He did, however, have the luxury of following tracks to the Zulu capital at oNdini, even if they proved difficult to move along particularly in bad weather.

Intelligence was to hamper both regular armies. The U.S. Army relied on civilian and Indian scouts to locate the enemy and help them traverse unfamiliar territory. Intelligence on the location, intentions and capability of the hostiles was based on reports from the Indian agencies and on experience in fighting on the plains since 1865. The British Army was equally reliant on the knowledge of civilians who knew the Zulu and their territory and could also speak their language but it appeared not to have used members of the indigenous population as scouts in a similar way. They were, however, in receipt of information as at least one source makes it known that Chelmsford had been made aware that the main Zulu Army had left oNdini.

Co-ordination and communication was a challenge, particularly for the U.S. Army, and although there was coordination in the overall military campaign planning process between the principal commanders there was little direction given to the operational commanders as Sheridan clearly indicates in his letter to Sherman on this subject on May 29, 1876.

As no very accurate information can be obtained as to the location of the hostile Indians, and as there would be no telling how long they would stay in one place, if it was known. I have given no instructions to Generals Crook or Terry... as I think it would be unwise to make any combinations in such country as they will have to operate in. [10]

Chelmsford had similar problems, once general movement had begun, between his most northern and southern columns. He was still able to get messages to his other field commanders and he was able to confer in person with Colonel Wood at a meeting that took place on January 11, 1879. Even after the disaster that befell No. 3 Column at Isandlwana, Chelmsford was able to get a communication to Wood advising him of the situation. After the Rosebud, Crook made no effort to inform either Terry or Gibbon of what had taken place on June 17, 1876. While it would have been a difficult task to accomplish, it might have prevented the defeat at the Little Bighorn.

Training is perhaps one area that the British held an advantage in comparison to their U.S. counterparts, as Knight and Castle remarked. "In 1879 the British Army was undergoing a period of increased professionalism." [11] It had begun to appreciate the value of applying tactical movements on the field of battle. Although the British Army in this campaign still wore the traditional red tunic, it had begun to issue khaki uniforms in India to make soldiers less obvious targets. In the U.S. Army it was not until after the disasters that befell both Crook and Custer that it began to take a more professional approach to the conduct of war. Marksmanship training, for example, was only initiated after the campaign concluded. Whereas the British were more effective in delivering sustained volley fire out to 600 yards and were able to inflict considerable casualties on the Zulu Army particularly from behind a defensive barrier. The evidence in the Sioux War suggests the Sioux and Cheyenne suffered few casualties at both the Rosebud and Little Bighorn.

### **Initial Battles of the Wars**

The first encounter of the 1876 campaign in the Western United States had taken place on St. Patrick's Day in March on the Powder River. Despite surprising an Indian village, capturing the Indian ponies and destroying the Indian's provisions — food and shelter — Colonel Reynolds, who commanded the strike force, proceeded to lose the pony herd which led to his court-martial. More important, the Sioux and Cheyenne had become aware of the U.S. Army's intent and were able to prepare by banding together to provide a greater degree of protection.

When Crook's forces returned to the field in June, he took personal command of the Wyoming Column but was surprised by the attack by the Sioux and Cheyenne on June 17 at the Rosebud. Had it not been for his Indian scouts who operated as a forward picket, he may have suffered a defeat not dissimilar to Custer's. At the end of a hard day's fighting with the battle ebbing and flowing, and the Sioux and Cheyenne having withdrawn, Crook could claim that he held the ground, but in reality the victory was the Indians'. More important, Crook's column was now neutralized and would play no more part in the immediate future. He preferred to rest and recuperate than to pursue the Indians in Montana. [12] As stated, this was a fact not known to Terry and his subordinate commanders, as they deliberated over their own plans on the steamboat *The Far West* on June 22, 1876.

We find in the Zulu campaign striking similarities but in their fighting the Zulus, as Murchison pointed out, carried out a secondary attack against Wood's No. 4 Column after their victory at Isandlwana against No. 3 Column, which was a reversal of events in America [4]. Like the Sioux against Crook at the Rosebud, they were able to surprise the British in the first engagement.

### **Little Bighorn**

The Little Bighorn battle was a series of engagements that took place over a three-day period. On Day 1, it started with the Reno Valley fight and subsequent “tactical withdrawal” to the bluffs. [13] It was followed that same day by the engagement of Custer’s immediate command, which in itself was probably a series of separate company actions.

The first day’s action ended with the withdrawal from Weir Point of Reno’s and Benteen’s combined battalions and the subsequent Indian encirclement of the Reno-Benteen defensive position. That phase continued the next day and ended only after the Indians departed the Little Bighorn Valley with the distant approach of Terry on June 26, the end of Day 2. Terry’s command arrived on Day 3, June 27, to relieve the formerly besieged troops on the bluffs.

### **Isandlwana and Rorke’s Drift**

The battle at Isandlwana could be described as somewhat similar to the Rosebud when the British Army troops were caught in camp without any anticipation of being attacked, but in other aspects, including the outcome, it is more like the Little Bighorn.

The ground was also similar to the Rosebud. Although pickets gave warning of the advance of the Zulus, British troop dispositions and the enforced rout of the NNC probably led to an ultimate defeat. Similar to the Custer fight at the Little Bighorn, the British were spread over a wide area with insufficient troop strength to hold the ground. Undoubtedly, a series of bravely fought company actions occurred, which, in turn, were defeated by the onrushing warriors. Unlike at Little Bighorn, where much of the fighting may have occurred at a distance until the troops exhausted their ammunition, the Zulu attack involved more sustained combat.

An interesting facet of these two battles is that in both cases the battle followed because the attackers had either been physically discovered or had perceived that they had been. At the Little Bighorn it was Custer who wanted to attack on June 26, not June 25, but circumstances convinced him he had been discovered and must attack immediately. Similarly, in South Africa in 1879, the Zulus themselves had not wished to engage in battle until the following day, but after they had been discovered by a British scouting party, they were forced into early action.

The engagement at the Rorke’s Drift mission station across the border in Natal could be described as an extension to the Isandlwana battle as it followed directly and was prosecuted by the Zulu reserve that had been behind the right wing and had not “washed its spears in blood.” As stated, this attack across the border into Natal was against the express orders of the Zulu king. For the British, it was a defensive action that bore similarities to the Reno-Benteen hilltop fight — in particular with the establishment of a defensive perimeter with whatever resources were at hand. In both cases, it required the defenders to counterattack when their opponents appeared to be gaining the advantage and the demand for water in both instances led to heroic actions on the part of the soldiers.

This battle at Rorke’s Drift ended successfully for the British after Chelmsford’s remaining force from No. 3 Column arrived at the mission station, although the Zulus had already begun to withdraw after suffering horrendous casualties.

### **Reaction to Defeats**

Both the United States and British were stunned by their respective defeats and sought to punish their opponents, neither of whom could sustain themselves as either a concentrated force in the case of the Indians or without gathering the harvest in the case of the Zulu. Important, too, neither could replace their losses.

The U. S. and British armies were able to deploy fresh forces and pursue the “enemy” in the field, wherever he might have sought refuge. The Little Bighorn was the last great Indian victory, and, likewise, the Zulu were unable to repeat their success at Isandlwana.

Both the U. S. and British armies awarded military honors to their survivors from the Reno-Benteen fight and Rorke’s Drift. Eleven Victoria Crosses were awarded to men who fought at Rorke’s Drift and five Distinguished Conduct Medals and three VCs to those for Isandlwana, two posthumously. The Army awarded 24 Medals of Honor to members of the 7th U.S. Cavalry.

## **Failure to Obey Orders**

In both campaigns after the debacles at Little Bighorn and at Isandlwana, much debate ensued over whether subordinates had obeyed orders of their respective commanders. Interestingly both Custer and Durnford were “operating under a cloud of an official reprimand” [4] Did they both seek glory in order to enhance their reputations? Many have argued that this was the case. The British held an inquiry within two days of the defeat. The United States waited for more than two and a half years when, in January 1879, a Court of Inquiry requested by Major Marcus A. Reno opened. Ironically, that was just two days after the start of the Anglo-Zulu war.

At the Little Bighorn the debate focused on Terry’s famous set of instructions to Custer — which has been analyzed ad infinitum — with different conclusions, but equally concerning whether both Benteen and Reno failed to support Custer in the wake of his final message, carried by Trumpeter John Martin, to Benteen to “come on, big village, be quick bring packs, P.S. bring packs.” [14]

At Isandlwana, debate centered on who was in command, Lt. Col. Henry Pulleine or Lt. Col. Anthony Durnford. Durnford had been ordered to move his command to Isandlwana. Chelmsford argued after the event that his instructions to Pulleine to defend the camp were equally binding on Durnford and he had clearly disobeyed them. Chelmsford’s military secretary testified to the court of inquiry that Durnford had received specific orders to take command of the camp. Interestingly a war correspondent characterized the British proceedings as a “solemn mockery.”

These attempts to blacken the names of dead commanders, when closely examined, do not stand up well to scrutiny. Terry’s orders to Custer gave him “sufficient reason” to take the actions he did when in close contact with the Indians. [15] Dividing his command may not have been wise in retrospect but only the commander on the ground can determine the tactics he wishes to employ based on the intelligence he has available. Equally in the case of Durnford, Lt. Horace Smith-Dorrien, one of the few to survive the disaster at Isandlwana, did not remember Durnford receiving in the orders he took to him the previous night, any instructions to take command of the camp at Isandlwana.

## **The Battlefields Today**

Today both battlefields are well marked — by stone cairns at Isandlwana and marble markers at Little Bighorn. These allow modern visitors to recreate for themselves the combat actions of 1876 and 1879. However, the markers on the field at Little Bighorn, white for the military and red for the Indian as shown in the photographs [at Figures 10 and 11], do not contain known remains of the combatants. The Indians removed their dead in 1876, and the 7th Cavalry dead are buried under the 7th Cavalry Monument on Last Stand Hill [Figure 12] or elsewhere in the country in the case of the officers, with the exception of one whose father requested that he remain interned at the battle site and those whose remains were not identified. [16] The markers simply designate where it is believed men had fallen or their bodies were discovered. At Isandlwana, the stone cairns actually contain the remains of the dead British soldiers and locally recruited troops who died alongside them, and there are monuments commemorating the actions of specific units such as the 24th Regiment monument [Figure 13].



Figure 10 – Markers of the fallen U.S. 7th Cavalry on Last Stand Hill. The headstone with the black marking and red pennant is where Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer was found.



Figure 11 – This is a marker placed to commemorate where Noisy Walking, a Cheyenne warrior was killed.



Figure 12 – The 7th Cavalry monument at the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument.



Figure 13 – The 24th Regiment monument at Isandlwana.

The authorities at both the Little Bighorn and Isandlwana belatedly honoured the bravery and capability of the respective indigenous peoples who fought to protect their homelands by erecting monuments. These are shown in the photographs at Figures 14 and 15.



Figure 14 – Memorial to Zulu nation at Isandlwana



Figure 15 – Section of the Indian Memorial at the Little Big Horn National Battlefield Monument

## **Conclusion**

No doubt one could find many more comparisons that one could make and perhaps we have only scratched the surface in the time available. We would both recommend that you pay not only a visit to Little Bighorn but also save your money for a trip to modern day South Africa to visit the battlefields of the Anglo-Zulu War. At the same time you may wish to see sites of another conflict, the Anglo-Boer War. It, too, has similarities to another war – the U.S. Civil War.

Not surprisingly, events themselves at the Little Bighorn and Isandlwana resonate even today. Many of the respective historical characters remain bigger than life. Even minor figures remain known to students of military history in general and these battles in particular.

The legends still beckon to us; the mysteries still engage us. Both stand alone as historical events. Remember, too: The historical personages in America and South Africa knew little, if anything, about each other. Yet all share one commonality: brave men fought and died on both sides.

### **Recommended Reading:**

Much as been written on the 1879 Anglo-Zulu War and members of the Anglo Zulu War Historical Society will be all too familiar with them. For those members wishing to examine the Sioux War of 1876 campaign in more detail, a number of good books have been published. Below are some that provide insights to the overall campaign and to the battles at the Rosebud and at the Little Bighorn:

Taunton, Francis B., *Army Failures Against the Sioux in 1876* (available from Westerners Publications Limited, 90 Babbacombe Road, Bromley, Kent, BR1 3LS, United Kingdom).

Sarf, Wayne, *The Little Bighorn Campaign: March - September 1876*, (Combined Books, 1993, ISBN 1-84176-612-7)

Panzeri, Peter, *The Little Bighorn* (Osprey Publishing, Campaign series 1995, ISBN 1-85532-458-X)

Mangum, Neil C., *Battle of the Rosebud: Prelude to the Little Bighorn*, (Upton and Sons, 917 Hillcrest Street, El Segundo, CA, 90245, ISBN 0-912783-11-7)

Michno, Gregory F., *Lakota Noon: The Indian Narrative of Custer's Defeat* (Mountain Press Publishing Company, ISBN 0-87482-349-4)

### **Further information can be found on the following websites:**

Custer Association of Great Britain – [www.custer-association.gb.org.uk](http://www.custer-association.gb.org.uk)

Little Big Horn Association – [www.lbha.org](http://www.lbha.org)

Custer Battlefield & Historical Museum Association - [www.cbhma.org](http://www.cbhma.org)

Anglo Zulu War Historical Society – [www.anglozuluwar.com](http://www.anglozuluwar.com)

### **References.**

1. Sandy Barnard is a retired Associate Professor of Media Studies at Indiana State University. He served in the U.S. Army as an Intelligence Officer including one tour in Vietnam. He has written a number of books on personalities associated with the 7th U.S. Cavalry. He is the Editor of *Greasy Grass*, the annual historical publication of the Custer Battlefield Historical & Museum Association
2. Major Kevin Galvin is a serving Infantry Officer in the Worcestershire and Sherwood Foresters Regiment and was the Officer Commanding B (Rorke's Drift) Company from March 1988 until March 1990 in the Royal Regiment of Wales. He is the Technical Editor of *The Crow's Nest* – the bi-annual journal of the Custer Association of Great Britain.

3. Batten, Derek, "An Englishman's View of the Little Big Horn", *1st Annual Symposium, Custer Battlefield Historical & Museum Association*, held at Hardin, Montana, 26 June 1987, p. 13.
4. Murchison III, Roderick, "A Comparative Analysis of the Battles of Rorke's Drift and Isandlwana/Rorke's Drift and the similarities between the American Plains Indians and Zulus", *The South African Military History Society*, Vol. 3 No. 2 December 1974.
5. Utley, Robert M., *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation* (Second Edition) (Yale University Press, 2004) p. 9.
6. The Sioux were divided into three geographical divisions; Western, Middle (Yankton) and Eastern (Santee). These were as stated divided into seven divisions; Teton, Yanktonai, Yankon, Mdewakanton, Wahpekute, Wahpeton and Sisseton. For further information see Johnson, Michael, *Tribes of the Sioux Nation* (Osprey Publications Men-at-Arms series, ISBN 1-85532-878-X), pp. 5-9.
7. Carroll, John M., edited by, *General Custer and the Battle of the Little Big Horn: The Federal View*, (J. M. Carroll & Company, Bryan & Mattituck 1986 ISBN 0-8488-0018-4 (Soft Cover).
8. Greaves, Adrian, *Isandlwana*, (Cassell's Fields of Battle series, 2001), ISBN 0-304-35700-6), p. 69.
9. Correspondence Greaves-Galvin
10. Sarf, Wayne M., *The Little Bighorn Campaign: March — September 1876*, p. 75.
11. Knight, Ian, and Castle, Ian, *Zulu War 1879: Twilight of a Warrior Nation* (Osprey Publishing, Campaign series, ISBN 1-85532-165-3), p. 18.
12. Sarf., *The Little Bighorn Campaign*, p. 125. In his report to Sheridan, Crook explained that the hostiles "showed that they anticipated that they were strong enough to thoroughly defeat the command ... I expect to find those Indians in rough places all the time, and have ordered five (5) companies of infantry, and shall not probably make any extended movement until they arrive ... ." Sarf states that Crook showed no urgency and took advantage of the bountiful fishing at Goose Creek, which is near modern day Sheridan in Wyoming.
13. Reno claimed that the withdrawal to the bluffs above the Little Big Horn River was a tactical move. Others who were present were less charitable and the Sioux described the ensuing pursuit as like hunting buffalo.
14. Custer's Adjutant gave Trumpeter Martin a written instruction addressed to Captain Benteen based on Custer's instructions to the orderly trumpeter, it is believed, because of Martin's poor command of the English language as he was an Italian whose real name was Giovanni Martini. Benteen kept the instruction. Having thought it had been lost in a fire it was found and it was finally placed on exhibit at West Point.
15. Terry's instructions to Custer were issued prior to the 7th U.S. Cavalry moving out on the afternoon of the June 22nd. The instructions included the statement that; "... the Department Commander places too much confidence in your zeal, energy, and ability to wish to impose upon you precise orders that might hamper your action when nearly in contact with the enemy. He will however, indicate his own views of what actions should be, and he desires that you should conform to them unless you shall see *sufficient reason* for departing from them." For an examination of these instructions see Taunton, Francis B., "Sufficient Reason", *English Westerners' Society Special Publication No.5*, 1977.
16. Only one of the 7th's officers was buried on the field at the request of his father. This was Lieut. John J. Crittenden [20th Infantry], whose father, Colonel Thomas L. Crittenden, 17th Infantry, had said: "Let my boy lie where he fell."