

PRESS CONFUSION OVER THE BATTLES OF HLOBANE AND KAMBULA
IN THE LONDON AND DEVON NEWSPAPERS

By Stephen Manning

After the news of the British defeat at Ntombe Drift, the British press became evidently concerned as to the fate of those troops of Pearson's command besieged in Eshowe and this appears to have resulted in the papers taking, initially, little notice of the news of Wood's battles with the Zulus around the Hlobane mountains. Despite the fact that news of a British reversal at Hlobane, followed by a defeat for the Zulus at Khambula, was reported as early as 17 April, nearly a week before news of the relief of Eshowe arrived in England, these events were overshadowed in the press by concerns about the relief of the besieged troops. Although the events of the two battles were reported in the daily papers, editorial comment was still restricted to speculation as to the progress of the relief column under Chelmsford.

The timing of the receipt of the news of the relief of Eshowe, on Tuesday 22 April, meant that the majority of the weekly newspapers of Devon, produced between Wednesday and Saturday, concentrated on the events of the relief and the battle of Gingindlovu. Indeed, details of the battles of Hlobane and Khambula did not appear in many Devon weekly papers until two weeks, or more, after they were first reported in the London daily papers. By then, of course, the news of the relief of Eshowe, and other British military successes, overshadowed news of a British reversal. The lack of attention given to the events of Hlobane and Khambula resulted in some confusion in their reporting in the newspapers, which, it seems, Wood, at least, was able to use to his advantage to conceal the worst of the news concerning these two battles. Indeed, at the most extreme, the two battles were combined as one in some of the Devon weekly newspapers, with the British reversal at Hlobane not even being reported. Examples will be given to support these assertions.

In an article expressing frustration at the lack of news about the relief of Eshowe, which appears in *The Times* of 17 April, it seems evident that details of the British reversal at the battle of Hlobane must have been received. Commenting on the receipt of news from South Africa, the article stated-

We have received intelligence from Cape Town up to the 1st of the month and from the advancing army up to the 30th of March.

As the battles of Hlobane and Khambula took place on 28 and 29 March respectively, details of the events concerning these engagements should have been available for the newspapers to print. Indeed, this is the case; in the same edition of *The Times*, the first mention of Khambula is made when the paper stated-

A telegram has just been received from Maritzburg stating that Colonel Wood reports an engagement with the Zulus on the 29th March.

The news article then went on to give completely inaccurate details of the two battles-

Wood's attack was completely successful [Hlobane]; the Zulus were surprised, defeated, and some thousands of cattle captured by the dashing Colonel of the 90th [Wood]; Umbelini [Zulu Commander] however, rallied his men, followed up the retiring British forces; attacked them in their own camp [Khambula], and, owing to the cowardly desertion of all the native contingent, completely nullified the success of the previous day.

The confusion caused by the errors in *The Times'* article was compounded by mistakes in reports in other newspapers, and by the wording of the official report from Wood as to the events of 28 and 29 March. The *Daily News* first reported news of Hlobane on 17 April when it printed a report from its own correspondent who, presumably, was either working jointly for a colonial newspaper or was a member of the armed forces. In the article, the date of the battle of Hlobane is incorrectly given as 29 March and the listing of officers killed, and other casualties, implies that these occurred at the battle of Khambula, a British victory, when in fact they were all casualties of Hlobane. It is clear that the confusion as to the number of British deaths was directly caused by the ambiguity in Wood's official report.

This official report appeared in all daily newspapers, including the *Western Daily Mercury*, the *Devon Evening Express* and some of the Devon weeklies, such as the *Tavistock Gazette* of 18 April.

The report stated-

DESPATCH FROM COLONEL WOOD.

Kambula Camp. March 29th 9.00pm

We assaulted the Kholobana [Hlobane] successfully yesterday and took some thousands of cattle but while on top about 20,000 Zulus coming from Ulundi attacked us, and we suffered considerable losses, the enemy retaking the captured cattle. Our natives deserted. Our camp was attacked today from 1.30pm to 5.30pm in the most courageous manner by about 20,000 men. We have lost about seven officers and seventy killed and wounded, but we have entirely defeated the enemy who were pursued for a considerable distance.

What Wood did not make clear in this initial report was that the casualty figures referred only to those that occurred at the battle of Hlobane. This ambiguity in the report continued in the reporting of the events surrounding the two battles. For example, both *The Times* and the *Daily News* of 17 April listed Captain Campbell, Mr Lloyd and Piet Uys, the Boer representative, as among seven officers and seventy men killed. It was left to the *Standard* to try to highlight the error in reporting the casualties, but it too just added to the confusion. In an article from their special correspondent in Pietermaritzburg, dated 1 April, which appeared in the paper on 17 April, the writer seems to have accepted that the casualties described by Colonel Wood occurred as a result of fighting at Khambula, not, as actually happened, at Hlobane, but he at least raised the question as to the number of casualties at Hlobane-

Our loss was heavy, consisting of seven officers and about seventy men killed and wounded. Among the killed were Captain Campbell, Lieutenants Piet and Uys [one person, not two], and Mr Lloyd....No statement has been received of the loss which the column suffered in the first day's fighting.

The confusion over the degree of casualties continued in the Devon weekly papers. Under the headline of 'ATTACK ON COLONEL WOOD'S CAMP-LOSS OF SEVENTY MEN', the Exmouth Journal produced an article which was clearly just a summary of Wood's official report-

On the 29th March Colonel Wood attacked the Zulus at Kolobane, and took many cattle. On his return he was attacked by the Zulus, who recaptured the cattle, inflicting severe loss on us. Our natives deserted. Next day Wood's camp sustained a desperate attack for four hours. He lost seven officers, and seventy men, and had his horse shot under him, but repulsed the Zulus, and completely routed them. Captain Campbell, Mr Lloyd, and Piet Uys, the Dutch trader are reported killed. (1)

Exactly the same report appeared in the Bideford Weekly Gazette, three days later. It seems that it was not just the newspapers who were confused as to the events surrounding the two battles, but even the Central News agency reported incorrectly. In the pages of the Weekly Express, of Chudleigh, and the Torquay Directory, the Central News was quoted, and reported no news of the battle of Hlobane, and did directly name the battle of Kambula. The report also incorrectly stated the casualty figures, and even the supposed death of 400 British soldiers in this report does not overshadow the initial news story of the relief of Eshowe-

Colonel Wood's column was attacked near Luneberg by a large number of Zulus. The enemy was finally repulsed with great loss. The British loss, however, is estimated at seven officers and about 400 men. Our troops fought gallantly, but appear again to have been taken by surprise. (2)

This exact same report was still being reproduced in the Devon papers into the month of May. For example, the article can be seen in the *Kingsbridge Journal* on 3 May, although the paper does not attribute the story to the Central News, or any other source. It seems likely that this paper simply copied the report from one of its Devon contemporaries.

It is clear that the ambiguous wording of Wood's initial official report as to the events of Hlobane and Khambula did cause confusion in the British press. Can it be argued that Wood's ambiguity was deliberate so as to deflect from the scale of the reversal at Hlobane, or is there a simple explanation for the poor wording of Wood's first report? A report in the *Western Morning News* described that at the time of Wood's battles there was only one telegraph line between Natal and Cape Town, which would have been heavily used to report not only the two battles, but also to report on Chelmsford's advance to Eshowe, as well as for normal military and civilian traffic.(3) It could be argued that

Wood was aware of the pressure on the telegraph line and kept his initial report brief, and unfortunately ambiguous, so as to facilitate its transmission and to allow for the line to be used for other traffic. However, even if this theory is correct, and, of course, nothing can now be proved, there is no doubt that the ambiguity in this initial report did benefit Wood's reputation at a time when, if the scale of the British defeat at Hlobane had been reported correctly, the army, and surely the Government, would have been heavily criticised. In his 1906 autobiography, General Wood made no mention of the confusion caused by his report, but simply placed the blame for the reversal at Hlobane on the unfortunate arrival of the Zulu impi. (4) However, in a later book, Wood did dwell on the death of his Staff Officer, Captain Campbell, at Hlobane, but again makes no comment on the events surrounding the defeat. (5)

It was the loss of troops from Wood's column, in the defeat at Ntombe Drift in March, which had resulted in much criticism of the conduct of the army in the British press. If the scale of the casualties at Hlobane had been initially reported accurately, there is little doubt that the newspapers would have been damning of Wood, Chelmsford and the army as a whole. The timing of the receipt of the news, just when anxiety over the relief of Eshowe was at its height, could have caused near panic and a crisis in confidence in the conduct of army operations. As it was, the confusion caused by the initial report hid the scale of the losses, and the fixation on events surrounding the relief of Colonel Pearson's troops and Wood's victory at Kambula meant that the story received scant coverage. Indeed, some Devon weekly newspapers, such as the *Totnes Times* and the *Teignmouth Gazette*, gave no coverage to events surrounding Hlobane, and even Kambula, and concentrated rather on the relief of Eshowe. Whether Wood deliberately set out to hide details of the reversal at Hlobane, by writing in such an ambiguous fashion, is open to debate, but it is clear that the delay of over a week before the true level of the defeat became apparent was certainly advantageous for both Wood and the reputation of his forces, for the defeat was lost in the pages of many of the daily and weekly papers by the news of the successful relief of Eshowe.

It was not until 22 April that the first details of the scale of the casualties at Hlobane were released from the War Office, via the Press Association, to the newspapers. However, the reports, which appeared in the London and Devon dailies on 23 April, were lost amongst the excited reporting of the relief of Pearson. Thus, although the War Office confirmed that 80 men had been killed, and supplied a long list of those officers who had fallen, the scale of the defeat was initially overlooked. Indeed, although the *Western Daily Mercury* did print the War Office details, it did so under the headline of 'ANOTHER VICTORY GAINED BY COL. WOOD', which referred to the events of Kambula. (6)

It was only with the receipt of details of the two battles, via both the colonial press and Wood's more detailed official report, that the confusion as to the casualties and the events of the two battles was resolved. The returning mail steamer, the *Dublin Castle*, brought these sources to Plymouth on 1 May, and the Devon press wasted no time in printing articles from the colonial newspapers. The *Devon Evening Express* published copy, on 2 May, from the correspondents of the *Times of Natal* and the *Cape Argus*, who had both been with Wood's forces. The *Exmouth Journal* printed extracts from the *Times of Natal* concerning the battle of Kambula on 3 May. Also on this day, the *Ilfracome Chronicle* published details from the correspondent of the *Cape Argus*.

The *Weekly Express* of Chudleigh published a detailed report from the *Cape Argus*, concerning the events surrounding Hlobane, in its edition of 7 May. Once this fresh information had been received, it did not take long for some criticism to be directed towards Colonel Wood, as well as some questioning as to the motive behind the delay in the receipt of the correct details. This is best seen in the pages of the *Devon Evening Express* of 2 May. In this edition, the editor questions Wood's abilities, as the full details surrounding the events of Hlobane became known-

We have regarded Colonel Wood as the one competent general engaged in this war on our side. But the occurrences of the 28th of March [Hlobane] have shaken our faith in his skill and judgement as a commander.

This edition also, curiously, printed the following line at the end of an article setting out details of Wood's more complete report as to the events of Hlobane and Kambula-

Pietermaritzburg telegram says the full details of this affair [Hlobane] were kept back until after the mail left. The English losses were enormous. Colonel Buller's Horse lost 250.

Not only is this claim not attributed to a specific source, but also the scale of casualties is incorrect, or exaggerated. It appears to be likely, however, that the claim was made by a correspondent working for the *Cape Argus*, as he is quoted in the same edition of the paper. Clearly, the editor of the *Devon Evening Express* thought there had been a cover-up, or a deliberate attempt

to confuse, as he decided to print the details of Hlobane on the front page of the newspaper, along with further assertions. These were that-

It seems that we might have had the news of Colonel Wood's engagement a week earlier, but that it was purposely held back, at least, so says the correspondent of the *Argus*, telegraphing from Maritzburg on April 2nd. This is the message- "Further particulars of Wood's affair leaked out through officers who have seen despatches, which are not yet published [presumably Wood's detailed report]. Seems, as I suspected, to have been the narrowest escape from most appalling disaster. Two hundred and fifty men (Buller's Horse) were killed in cutting their way out of the Zulu army. Have best grounds for knowing that full extent of disaster was known yesterday, but was kept back until steamer left the Cape for England.

Despite extensive research, these claims cannot be found to be repeated in any other paper of London or Devon. Indeed, although the *Devon Evening Express* made such strong initial claims, they are not seen again in its pages. Apart from some general criticism of Wood's actions, the newspapers of London do not make any comment as to Wood's ambiguous initial report and certainly do not imply that Wood deliberately tried to confuse and deceive. The *Dawlish Times* also raised some question marks as to Colonel Wood's initial account of the events of 28 and 29 March. It published a report from the special correspondent of the *Daily News*, who wrote from Wood's Kambula camp on the evening of the 29 March, and gave a detailed account of what it called 'the Zlobane mountain disaster.' In the report, the correspondent gave details of the casualties and the events surrounding Hlobane, 'which are not mentioned in Colonel Wood's official account of the attack.' (7)

However, this report could not be found in the *Daily News* itself. An editorial in the *South Molton Gazette* of 10 May, which commented on the events surrounding the battle of Hlobane, was able to review the latest information concerning the reversal, and its conclusion gives an indication of the likely furore that would have resulted had this defeat not been followed by the victory at Kambula-

Further details respecting Colonel Wood's daring raid on Umbilici's stronghold [Hlobane] show that it resulted in a disastrous rout of the English troops, which might have been averted by more caution, and about which there would be a far louder outcry had it not been retrieved by the repulse of the Zulus from the camp next day.

It would also appear that the Prime Minister himself was only made aware of the scale of the British reversal at Hlobane on 23 or 24 April. Writing to Lady Bradford, from Downing Street, on 24 April, it appears that Wood's initial report had even hidden the scale of the defeat from the Government-

Pearson's relief was a great relief to us and to all- but nothing else seems very good. It is quite clear that Evelyn Wood has had another "Disaster", though partly veiled by the subsequent repulse of the Zulus; but we lost many men and quite a massacre of officers. He was surprised riding at the head of his staff! (8)

There does appear to be some evidence to support the various allegations found in the Devon press that ambiguity and unnecessary delay surrounded the reporting of the events of Hlobane. An examination of the numerous Natal Government telegrams, which can be found in the letters and correspondence of Lord Chelmsford, held at the National Army Museum, does seem to indicate that, first, Wood's initial report of 28 March was delayed in reaching Pietermaritzburg, and secondly, that the Wood's report was superseded as early as 2 April by an official communiqué correcting the earlier report. A telegram sent from Bellairs in Durban to Chelmsford, on 1 April, clearly shows that news of the battle of Hlobane on 28 March, presumably Wood's report, was not received in Pietermaritzburg until 1 April. (9)

Strangely, however, Norris-Newman, special correspondent of the *Standard*, claimed that news of the defeat was reported in Ladysmith on 29 March. (10) If this was the case then the news was severely delayed in reaching Pietermaritzburg, or the military authorities there were extremely slow in forwarding the news to Chelmsford, and presumably the Government.

A second telegram, also from Bellairs to Chelmsford, dated 2 April, requests that the telegram of the previous day, presumably Wood's initial report, be superseded by this second telegram, which outlines the extent of the casualties from Hlobane. With such apparent delay and confusion in the telegraphic correspondence between the British forces on the ground in South Africa, concerning the battle of Hlobane, it is understandable that the casualties and event of this battle were, initially,

reported incorrectly in the papers of Devon and London. It is, of course, now open to conjecture as to whether the delays and ambiguities were deliberate or caused by the 'fog of war'.

It appears that by early May the newspapers had realised their earlier errors in the coverage of the events of Hlobane. Their reliance on Wood's initial report had caused confusion in the reporting of casualties between the two battles, and there appears to have been awareness in the month of May that Wood had benefited from the delay in printing the correct details. However, the army was fortunate that the events surrounding the relief of Pearson swamped the interest, and coverage of Wood's defeat and the subsequent victory at Kambula ensured Wood would maintain his reputation as a successful commander.

The military historian Charles Rathbone Low, writing in 1880, did not hesitate to point out to his readers that Wood himself had written to Chelmsford before Hlobane to instruct the Commander-in-Chief that his spies had informed Wood of the likely approach of the whole Zulu army from Ulundi. In these circumstances, Rathbone Low commented that 'it is somewhat singular that he had not taken precautions to guard against surprise.' (12 Yet, due to the confused reporting of the two engagements of 28 and 29 March 1879, Wood was revered as the victor of Kambula rather than the vanquished commander at Hlobane.

References.

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3. *Western Morning News* 23 Apr. 1879.
4. General Evelyn Wood, *From Midshipman to General* Vol. 2 (London, 1906), p.67.
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12. C. Rathbone Low, *Soldiers of the Victorian Age* Vol.1 (London, 1880), p.276.