

Campaign life in the British Army during the Zulu War

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The British Army of the 1870's was absorbing the reforms implemented by Gladstone's Secretary for War, Edward Cardwell. Besides such humanitarian acts as abolishing flogging during peacetime, the main object was to save money. The Army Enlistment Act of 1870 shortened a soldier's active service from twelve to six years with six more on the Reserve. For the first time in its history this gave the Army a large well-trained reserve and, with the short service, had the potential of attracting a better calibre of recruit.

In practice, the physical standard of the average recruit actually fell. In 1870 the average height for a soldier was 5'8" but by the start of the Zulu War it had dropped to 5'4". Although the number of recruits increased during the 1870's, the Army's strength by 1879 was only 186,000 (compared with the Prussian army of 2.2 million!)

The Army was still regarded as the last resort for a desperate man and private soldiers were still looked upon as social outcasts. Although the bad old days of giving a convicted criminal the choice of prison or the army had long passed, the stigma still stuck. The unemployed and the unemployable found security of a kind in the Army. Bored youngsters dazzled by the stories and flattery of flamboyant recruiting sergeants, soon found the reality of a home posting in the Army even more restricting than their previous existence. It was something of a relief when a regiment was sent abroad to some exotic posting just to escape the grinding grimness of barrack life.

For the Officer Class, Cardwell's abolition of the purchase system appeared to open the door to an unwelcome influx of the non-elite serious career soldier from a more modest background. In fact the social composition of the officer class had hardly altered. Low pay, coupled with the high cost of being an officer, meant those without private means could not afford to become officers. Also, with the establishment of the Staff College, the quality of officers from the wealthy class improved and it was not until the Great War and the decimation of the old officer caste that a commission was open to all those previously denied.

The average officer came from more or less the same background and education. Emphasis was placed on fitness, loyalty, team spirit and physical bravery. Most enjoyed sports, particularly hunting, and relished the prospect of going to Africa and the chance to hunt game and the native foe. On campaign there was also the opportunity to do something that would favourably catch the eye of the High Command and enhance promotion prospects. These motives prompted many officers from regiments not involved in the conflict to volunteer for any of the jobs available ranging from staff, transport and supplies to serving with locally raised units.

The average soldier, on the other hand, had no such motivation. Initiative was not expected or encouraged; just blind obedience. Those that served in the Zulu War had little or no idea of any overall plan or as to why they were fighting. Rumour and hearsay was rife and little or no attempt was made to keep the men accurately informed. Their needs and ambitions were more basic; keeping as dry and comfortable as conditions would allow, finding a supply of liquor, playing cat and mouse with the NCO's and generally trying to keep a low profile; a familiar pattern for soldiers throughout history.

For the First Invasion, Lord Chelmsford had at his disposal seven Infantry Battalions - 2/3rd, 1/13th, 1/24th, 2/24th, 80th, 90th & 99th. Most of them had experience of campaigning, if not fighting, against the Gaikas in the recent Frontier War and were well acclimatised and confident for the coming conflict. Both officers and men were tanned and heavily bearded and their uniforms showed the rigours of campaigning. The men's feet were hardened from marching over rough broken terrain and they were in generally good physical health. Campaign life also brought men and officers in closer proximity to each other and the other ranks were quick to spot a caring officer that they could trust as well as those whose remoteness and indifference made them unpopular.

Redvers Buller was an example of an officer who was popular and respected in that he shared all conditions with his men. In his book *Running the Gauntlet*, Trooper George Mossop recalled that;

If we were lying in the rain, so was Buller. If we were hungry, so was he. All of the hardships he shared equally with his men.

After a long drought during 1877/78, the weather broke just as preparations were under way for the First Invasion. Regiments were moved from their posts near the larger towns of Natal and the Eastern Cape and concentrated along the Zululand border at the three crossing points.

Here they lived under the less than weatherproof canvas of the large Army bell tent, which held fifteen men arranged around the centre pole like the segments of a dart board. There were no issue groundsheets and the men had only a blanket or greatcoat to cover themselves. Often, on the march or after the disaster at Isandlwana, there were no tents so the men slept in the open in all weathers. Small wonder so many became victims of chronic rheumatism.

The Zulu War was the penultimate campaign in which the British Infantry wore traditional red jackets. The exception were the 60th, whose tunics were "rifle green". Single breasted and made of a course serge, they were less elaborate and looser fitting than those worn in earlier campaigns. The collars and cuffs had a coloured patch

in the regimental facing colour; the 24th, 88th and 94th wore green, the 3rd and 90th wore buff, 57th, 80th, 91st and 99th had yellow, the 58th wore black, the 4th and 21st wore dark blue, while the 60th had red. With the exception of the 91st Highlanders, who wore tartan trews, trousers were of a thick dark blue Oxford material with a thin red stripe down the outer seam of the leg and were worn either tucked into black leather gaiters or into the tops of heavy ammunition boots.

The blue Home pattern spiked helmet had given way to a white Foreign Service version worn without the star-shaped helmet plate or spike. This was dyed in tea to a dun colour or a foul weather cover was worn in an effort to make it less conspicuous. The whole ensemble, however, was entirely unsuitable for daily wear for a hard campaign in Southern Africa. With the exception of socks, there was no change of clothes, so after a short while "the Pride of the British Army" looked and smelled like a band of vagrants.

The officers, on the other hand, carried with them enough equipment to make campaign life quite pleasant. They shared tents with no more than a couple of fellow officers, slept on camp beds and relaxed in folding chairs. Their valises contained changes of clothing and some included cricket bats and pads, hunting guns and artist's materials. Dress regulations were relaxed and they wore a mixture of uniforms. Jackets mostly favoured were the unlined frock, still heavily laced or the more practical dark blue patrol jacket with its elaborate black frogging across the chest. From photographs taken at the time, officers displayed the Victorians' love of headgear by wearing anything from the tropical helmet, the glengarry, the leather peaked forage cap to civilian wide-awake felt hats and straw boaters. As officers were mounted, the usual footwear was the elegant black leather-riding boot worn to the knee. Leather was also sewn to the seat and inside leg to prevent wear in the saddle.

Suitable horses were at a premium as many of the replacement officers discovered. Those that brought their own mounts from England found that the strange forage was unpalatable and the flies were a torment. An outbreak of horse sickness affected the highbred animals and many died. Officers were then forced to purchase locally bred animals, supposedly better conditioned for the rigors of the African climate. The drawback was that these animals were not trained for military use as witness the many examples of horses throwing their riders in the heat of battle with fatal results. Also, it was not always the good-looking horse who proved the steadiest under fire. In fact, some of the ugliest proved to be the toughest and most manageable. Redvers Buller rode a horse named *Punch* which was a "fiddle-headed, brindled, flat-sided, ewe-necked cob and perhaps the very ugliest horse of his day and generation in all South Africa..." but which proved in many a fight to be trustworthy. In contrast, the Prince Imperial, purchased a beautiful looking grey named *Percy*, who's skittish and temperamental nature was instrumental in ending the Napoleon dynasty.

Breeders and dealers made the most of a seller's market and charged the Imperial officers an exorbitant £40-£50 per animal. In at least one instance, an officer in the 58th parted with £50 for a horse that was dead within two weeks from horse sickness. Because of the rough terrain and the long distances covered, the farriers were kept busy re-shoeing not only horses but also the oxen and mules.

Food and water on campaign were of dubious quality. Bread and meat were the staple fare with whatever vegetables that could be obtained locally. Fresh meat was provided by the slaughter of cattle driven with the column although on occasion it was less than fresh. One soldier of the 24th recalled eating a vile stew made from a draught oxen that had died in its yoke, and which was later cut up and fed to the men. For those on the march, the old standby was hardtack, a toothbreaking titbit, carried in the haversack. An old soldier's trick for making it softer to eat was to place it under the armpit when on the march.

Water was carried by individual soldiers in an unsanitary wooden water bottle known as the "Oliver". This was at a time when the medical profession were only just beginning to discover water-borne diseases so there was little restriction on where the water was obtained. As a consequence, the incidence of dysentery and typhoid was high. Some medical officers knew enough to recommend that the men did not drink water that had been contaminated by dead animals, but with the coming of the dry season at the time of the Second Invasion, the men took their water from wherever they could find it.

Hard liquor had been the sole solace for the lower classes for centuries and the common soldier was no exception. The Army recognised this and officially issued a daily tot of rum which only whetted the thirst of the serious drinkers. In South Africa the liquor traders plagued the towns and camps purveying some very questionable gin which came to be called *Cape Mist*. One soldier of the 58th died the first night he arrived in Cape Town, getting drunk and falling into the dock. Despite being banned by the Army, the soldiers found ways of obtaining this rough liquor, risking punishment if found drunk; and punishment on campaign was extremely harsh.

During the duration of the War no less than 545 British soldiers were flogged; the highest number in one year for many years. The wrongdoer was given twenty-five lashes for offences ranging from drunkenness and stealing to insubordination and desertion. A common offence was "dereliction of duty", which covered those sentries who fell asleep when on guard duty, and merited fifty lashes. After Isandlwana, the Zulus were taken very seriously and any lack of vigilance which jeopardised the security of the camp had to be dealt with severely to "encourage" the other sentries. With the drop in morale, desertion was another real threat. Until

reinforcements arrived and equipment replaced, the Army were reduced to sleeping in the open in cold and wet conditions, with only hard biscuits to eat. The soldiers were in no condition to resist the expected Zulu invasion. The Army perceived that the only way to keep the troops in line was to publicly flog any wrongdoer. Given the times and conditions and the fact that the Army did hold together and ultimately triumph, the harsh punishment could be said to have been justified. Back in Britain, however, the sudden increase in the number men flogged in such a short time, especially young recruits, caused an outcry and led this form of barbaric punishment to be totally banned. Its place was taken by Field Punishment Number One, a left-over from the flogging ceremony in which the man was tied spread-eagled to a wagon wheel and left for several hours under a hot sun. (1)

The Infantry relied on its ability to march long distances over rough terrain and emphasis was placed on care and preparation of the men's feet. Liniment or soap was rubbed into the feet, and socks were changed as often as possible but by the end of the war, both socks and boots were so worn out that many men resorted to wrapping rags around their feet.

When the Invasion began, the Army's morale was high with the expectancy of defeating another primitive tribe. Isandlwana changed all that. Those soldiers who returned to the camp and witnessed the terrible carnage were shocked to the core. The dead had not just been killed but ritually disembowelled and brained. Not a living creature had been spared. Men, little drummer boys, horses, oxen and even pet dogs; all had been butchered. The effect on the soldiers was profound and the shock waves spread throughout the Army. The Zulus became imbued with almost superhuman qualities. They could swiftly cover large distances and then charge without fear until they overran their foes, who could expect no mercy. After Isandlwana, the British soldier's fear and hatred of the Zulus led them to become ruthless in their pursuit of defeated warriors and prisoners were rarely taken.

There is little doubt that outrages occurred despite official policy of accepting surrender of the defeated foe. The more experienced soldiers took delight in scaring new recruits witless with tales of what would happen if the Zulus captured a white soldier. They also played on their justifiable fear of snakes, and there must have been many a young recruit who spent sleepless nights lying on his blanket wondering which was going to get him first.

When the Centre Column retreated back into Natal after Isandlwana, the Coastal Column had advanced thirty miles into Zululand to Eshowe. They had experienced extremely tough conditions on the march. The area was more humid than inland and the rugged terrain was creased with rivers and dongas, which made the advance painfully slow. The soldiers spent much of the march helping to push the huge wagons out of gluey clay and up steep rocky hills.

On the march, the men would have been woken at 4.30a.m to breakfast and parade before setting off by 6a.m. Mounted infantry would scout well ahead followed by the pioneers who would have attempted to smooth the way by cutting slopes into river banks and filling in the deeper holes on the trail. There would be a halt at midday for three hours before the day's march was completed by nightfall. After forming a defensive position by laagering the wagons, a rough trench was dug around the perimeter. Sometimes broken beer bottles were scattered about in the hope that the barefooted Zulus would obligingly step on them and give away their position.

There were several incidents when nervous recruits on night guard, imagining they saw or heard Zulus, had opened fire causing further panic in the camp. Private Tuck of the 58th saw the comical side of what was potentially a disaster. On a moonless night a piquet was returning to the camp lines when a nervous guard opened fire. In the confusion, the piquet also blazed away, giving the impression the camp was under attack. The procedure was for the soldiers to get out of their tents and collapse them to give a clear field of fire. In the pitch black, some soldiers were slower in evacuating their tents and were left struggling under the weight of the canvas. When the firing eventually ceased, it was found that, miraculously, the only casualty was regimental pride.

Another incident involved the newly arrived 60th Rifles who were made up of ill-trained young recruits. During the march to relieve Eshowe, they mistook John Dunn's native scouts for Zulus and killed several. The 60th were also less than steady in the square during the Battle of Gingindlovu, where their commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Frances Northey, fell mortally wounded. After a year in the field, however, both the 58th and 60th regiments had gained enough experience to give a good account of themselves in the First Anglo-Boer War of 1880.

The number of wagons and animals to pull them was enormous and the invading columns stretched for miles making them vulnerable to attack. Apart from the Battle of Nyezane, where the steadiness and discipline of the Buffs and Naval Brigade repulsed the initial Zulu thrust, the Zulus persisted in attacking static prepared positions with disastrous results. After a day's march the wagons would be formed in to an oval or sometimes a large square (this latter formation was difficult and laborious to achieve and the former was more commonly used). The soldiers would then dig a trench around the outside of the wagons and the draft animals would be herded inside the circle. Sleep was made even more difficult by the lowing of the cattle and the braying of the mules.

Personal cleanliness was impossible to maintain on the march and lice often infested the dirty, unshaven soldiers. In an age when pungent smells were commonplace, an army on the move in a hot climate must have been particularly repugnant. As the hot season arrived, the troops would have been prey to heat-stroke in their unsuitable clothing. Headaches from squinting in the bright light would have been the norm as well as insect bites, sores, thorn scratches, dust, ticks, flies and mosquitoes, blisters and chafing. All in all, the men would have felt uncomfortable at best and downright tormented at worst.

When on the march, the haversacks were stowed on the wagons but the men still carried ammunition and bayonet on their belts and shouldered the nine-pound Martini-Henry rifle. The officers were armed with privately purchased 0.45 calibre revolvers carried on either the white sword belt or the leather Sam Browne. They also carried swords, which were used effectively by the mounted arm when pursuing fleeing warriors. This was about the last campaign that this weapon was used in anger before it became purely a ceremonial bauble.

Off duty time was used to write letters and journals by both officers and other ranks. The troops were issued with one bottle of ink between three tents but if none was available, a mixture of gunpowder and water was used. As there was no censorship by the officers, many of the letters posted home were frank and reflected the disillusionment the soldiers felt about campaign life.

One of the subjects taught at Staff College was sketching, which was used in reconnaissance in the way that photography was later used. Many of the officers were accomplished artists and drew life on campaign. Some, like Lieutenant W.W. Lloyd of the 24th Regiment, were thought good enough to have their efforts published by the Illustrated London News and Lloyd had a book of his paintings published after the war.

When in camp, sporting events such as running, cricket and tug-of-war were organised. It was during the latter event held at the camp at Kambula on 20th March that Major Knox-Leet of the 1/13th badly wrenched his knee. Despite his injury, he was helped into his saddle and was in the thick of battle on the Devil's Pass at Hlobane on the 26th, where he won the Victoria Cross.

After Isandlwana, camp life became tedious and uncomfortable. Morale slumped to a low ebb exacerbated by the cold and wet conditions together with a poor and monotonous diet. Men of the 2/24th, including B Company, who had defended Rorke's Drift, found themselves confined in a fortified camp in the ruins of the mission. Their commanding officer, Colonel Glyn, traumatised by the losses to his regiment, was close to a nervous breakdown. This conveyed itself to his subordinates, who could do little to raise their men's spirits.

Letters sent home reflect the miserable conditions the men endured there:

We have plenty of livestock on some of us. We are not allowed to take our things off to get a wash.

The soldiers grumbled that they did not receive any pay although there was nothing to spend it on. The list of sick steadily grew and included Lieutenant John Chard, who went down with fever. As most of the medicines and equipment had been destroyed in the fire in the hospital during the fighting, treatment was rationed by what the medical officers carried in their own equipment. Henry Hook became disillusioned enough from this period of his service to use the £10 annuity awarded with his Victoria Cross to help buy his way out of the army. Many men were discharged after the War as being medically unfit for further service.

The additional setbacks at Eshowe, Intombi River and Hlobane further dampened enthusiasm for the campaign. On the coast, Number 1 Column under the command of Colonel Pearson had penetrated into Zululand as far as the mission at Eshowe. They had taken five days to struggle some thirty miles from the border to their objective, fought a stiff action at Nyezane, only to become besieged for seventy-two days. It took this time to assemble reinforcements, replenish lost stores and equipment before Chelmsford was capable of leading a relief column. In the meantime, the men in the cantonment at Eshowe endured mud, filth, poor diet and sickness. Even such simple comforts as tobacco ran out and the men were reduced to smoking dry leaves, herbs and even dried tealeaves. Confined in such an overcrowded area sickness was bound to take its toll and when Pearson's command marched away once relieved, they left twenty-eight crosses in the cemetery.

Only from the north came good news. In late March, the Left Flank Column, commanded by Colonel Evelyn Wood, had inflicted a severe defeat on the Zulus at Kambula. This was tempered by the news of the debacle on Hlobane Mountain, where many of his mounted troops were killed. Wood was the ablest of Chelmsford's commanders and the Kambula victory lifted his men's spirits. He was also concerned with their well being and set up a bakery to provide fresh daily bread, although the product was not always well received being described as 'Indian corn and sand'. In Redvers Buller he had an energetic and fearless commander of mounted troops, who were constantly patrolling and scouting deep into Zulu territory. Here, at least, the soldiers did not feel they were just rotting away.

There now followed two months of inactivity while reinforcements arrived, including two regiments of cavalry, the Kings Dragoon Guards and the 17th Lancers. The warm weather arrived, rations improved and the men were drilled in preparation for the expected Second Invasion. When it came at the beginning of June, there was no dividing into diverging columns that had proved such a disastrous tactic in January, but just one large Second Division, augmented by Wood's Flying Column. There was a column led by Colonel Crealock that

advanced along the coast, but at such a snail's pace as to be quite ineffective and contributed little to the outcome of the war.

Soon after the cautious advance began, Chelmsford was dealt another blow. He had reluctantly bowed to pressure from the Duke of Cambridge to add the young Louis Napoleon to his staff to act purely as a passive observer. In his desire to see some action, the young prince had fallen victim to a Zulu ambush and so created a public outcry even greater than Isandlwana.

When his body was recovered and began its long journey to the coast for transportation to England, the High Command felt compelled to issue a Special Order to the troops. Fearing that the British soldiers would be less than respectful to a Frenchman, not to say the grandson of Napoleon Bonaparte, the black bordered Special Order laid out how the troops were to behave and not to display any untoward disrespect or anti-French behaviour.

Meanwhile and as the military juggernaut carefully approached the Zulu capital at Ulundi, so the morale of the soldiers lifted. They were part of an enormous column of field artillery, Gatling guns, cavalry and thousands of men which was on its way to wreak revenge on a Zulu Army already expecting to be defeated. Predictably, the overwhelming firepower broke the Zulus before they could get anywhere near the huge British square and, within half an hour, the mounted troops were released from the square to ride down and kill the fleeing natives.

The Zulu War was over and most of the regiments embarked for the long voyage home. Their campaign experiences had not enamoured many to military life and most soldiers took the first opportunity to leave the army. They had been thrown into a conflict with an enemy who were unjustifiably provoked into a war they did not want to fight. Instead of a swift and glorious campaign, the soldiers endured months of trauma, privation, sickness and low morale which the Ulundi victory did little to erase. The Zulu War was one of a series of military reverses at this period. These included the First Anglo-Boer War in 1880, defeats in Egypt and a drubbing at Maiwand.

Despite these setbacks, the public perception of the Army and its soldiers was changing thanks to the unprecedented reporting allowed. Magazines like the Illustrated London News used dramatic and heroic engravings to show the British public just how exciting and noble was the life of a soldier. Queen Victoria took a great interest in the War, commissioning photographs of its heroes and paintings of its battles. Medals and decorations aplenty were bestowed on its participants. Music hall songs were full of praise for the "Boys in Red". For the ordinary Zulu veteran, however, the image projected for the public was rather different from the reality.

Editor's note.

Readers will possibly be surprised at the high incidence of flogging during this campaign, though already banned in the Royal Navy. Such strong measures to ensure discipline emanated from Lord Chelmsford himself who instructed his officers on the 31st December 1878, just days prior to the invasion, that any soldier, European or native, transgressing orders "*renders himself liable to a flogging*". Other senior officers followed his example, Col. Clarke wrote,

Discipline was, in general, very good but it is necessary that the power of inflicting corporal punishment should be maintained with an army in the field'. Col. Bray continued, 'the discipline of the army suffered much from the difficulty of preventing the men from buying spirits. Flogging can never be done away with in wartime in the English army unless some equally efficient punishment can be discovered.

The above comments came from an original copy of the *Précis of Information concerning Zululand* which formally belonged to Maj. Dartnell of Isandlwana fame. (With grateful thanks to Ian Knight for the temporary loan of this historical gem).