

Tactics and Logistics during the Anglo Zulu War

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British Army Strategy

Once Sir Bartle Frere had committed his military commander, Lord Chelmsford, to an offensive campaign against Zululand, five independent columns were prepared and assembled for the invasion of Zululand. By the date of the invasion, the 11th January 1879, this number was reduced to three; Col. Pearson's Coastal Column (1st), consisting of 1,800 Europeans and 2,000 natives; Col. Glyn's Central Column (3rd) with 1,600 Europeans and 2,500 natives; and the Northern Column (4th), commanded by Col. Wood VC, with 1,700 Europeans and 300 natives. The 2nd Column, commanded by Col. Durnford, was to guard the Natal border against a Zulu incursion and had a theoretical strength of 3,000 natives. In reality, the effective strength amounted to 500, of which half were the elite and very loyal (to Durnford) Natal Native Horse and a small Rocket Battery commanded by Maj. Russell, RA. On the morning of the 22nd January, Durnford and his NNH were hastily amalgamated into the 3rd column at Isandlwana just hours before the Zulu attack. The 5th Column with 1,400 Europeans and 400 natives under Col. Rowlands VC was to remain in the north near Luneberg to maintain a defensive watch on the malcontent and increasingly rebellious Boers in the Transvaal. Lord Chelmsford's strategy of invading Zululand with three independent columns was devised to discourage the Zulus from outflanking any one column or, more seriously, retaliating against a defenceless Natal before he could inflict defeat on the Zulus' main force.

Chelmsford's chosen invasion date in early January was a deliberate choice as the spring rains were late, thus delaying the Zulu harvest and, on advice from his staff; he presumed the Zulus would be unprepared for a lengthy campaign during the intensive harvest period. From January until early April the rivers forming the Natal boundary with Zululand were expected to be in full flood and would thus provide a natural defence against a retaliatory Zulu counter-attack on a defenceless Natal. Chelmsford also relied on natural grazing for the invasion force's numerous oxen and horses which precluded invading during the later grassless dry season.

Due to the rocky terrain of Zululand and the ponderous progress of ox-drawn supply wagons, the British invasion force would be very slow moving. Ordinarily, such serious transport deficiencies would have been a serious handicap, but Chelmsford turned this slow progress to his tactical advantage. A measured advance towards the Zulu capital of Ulundi permitted both adequate reconnaissance of uncharted Zululand and allowed the progressive destruction of Zulu crops and villages as his invasion force advanced, actions calculated to provoke the Zulus into attacking his prepared squares or entrenched positions.

Zulu Strategy

Faced with the inevitable British invasion of Zululand, King Cetshweyo sought a decisive defeat of the invaders. Knowing the British possessed overwhelming firepower, he argued against the traditional Zulu mass frontal attack preferring the use of siege tactics. He reasoned that, once trapped or starved into submission, the invaders would be forced to withdraw to Natal rather than face a humiliating defeat on the battlefield. He accordingly instructed his generals to by-pass the invading columns and isolate them from their supply lines. This tactic soon proved highly effective against the 1st Column which the Zulus successfully besieged at Eshowe. It was very nearly successful against the 4th Column at Kambula (1) until the approaching Zulu army was goaded by Col. Buller into a premature attack on the well prepared British position.

The Zulu king was also a shrewd diplomat. Cetshweyo knew that once the British invasion force was trapped he could seriously embarrass Britain internationally and force her invading army commanders to sue for peace. Unfortunately, his own field commanders were autonomous and were either unable or unwilling to follow the King's orders. After the Zulu success at Isandlwana, Natal was utterly helpless to defend itself, the British invasion force was part-defeated and part-surrounded, yet Cetshweyo failed to capitalise on his victory. Had he ordered his army into Natal, the consequences for the Natal population and the subsequent history of the area would have been difficult to imagine.

British Tactics

Lord Chelmsford confidently anticipated the swift and total defeat of the Zulu army. His officers and their troops were all experienced in African native warfare and his main fear was that the Zulus would not fight. He knew the Zulus had lived peacefully for the previous twenty-three years though they were highly disciplined as a nation. Chelmsford had nevertheless been very strongly warned by a number of Boer leaders experienced in Zulu affairs that he faced a powerful and tactically astute adversary. Within days of the invasion, the very first skirmish at

Sihayo's homestead met with only a token resistance by its Zulu defenders which clearly strengthened Chelmsford's rather haughty viewpoint.

The standard battle tactic employed by the British in South Africa was a combination of good reconnaissance followed by ruthless skirmishing. In rough country, both the infantry and cavalry would advance to meet the enemy, the infantry breaking up any established groups and the cavalry harassing them in flight. If the Zulus appeared in any number, the British were trained to form a square or entrench their position, thus drawing the Zulus into the range of their overwhelming firepower. Well-aimed rifle volley fire, supported by rockets, artillery and, later in the campaign, Gatling guns, would, in Chelmsford's view, ensure the invincibility of the invasion force. Once a Zulu attack on such a well defended position faltered, the cavalry would leave the protection of the entrenched position to harass and then rout the attackers.

Zulu Tactics

The Zulus historically favoured a dawn attack but were prepared to fight at any time. Military operations were always controlled by senior Zulus, usually from a remote vantage point, although one of their number could be dispatched into the battle to rally or lead if an assault faltered, as happened at Isandlwana. Prior to an attack, the Zulus would be indoctrinated by *sangomas* (witchdoctors) and the use of cannabis and other narcotics as a stimulant was widespread.

Zulu tactics were based on the encircling movement, often wider than a mile across, which had developed over hundreds of years when hunting large numbers of game. The tactic was also successfully extended to include the human foe. The Zulu force would approach an enemy, be it native, Boer or now the British, in huge columns which could then rapidly deploy into an encircling movement. The British commanders were aware of the principle of the tactic but never expected the Zulus to use it on any large scale. At Isandlwana, the Zulus were able to control an extended advance across a four mile front so successfully that they encircled not only the British position but the mountain of Isandlwana itself. All battlefield orders were delivered by runners.

The actual Zulu battle formation resembled a crescent shape with two flanks moving to encircle the enemy. The formation was invariably known by Europeans as the 'horns of the buffalo' and by the Zulus as the *'impondo zankomo'*. The encircling horns consisted of the younger fitter warriors, with the body or chest made up of the more seasoned warriors who would bear the brunt of a frontal attack. The tactic was most successful when the two horns completed the encirclement of the enemy and relied, in part, on remaining out of sight until the horns met and then closed in to slaughter the surrounded enemy. Features of the attack were speed and precision. Popular myth records the Zulus moving into the attack in mass formation. However, the reality was an attack in open skirmishing lines although in large campaigns these lines of warriors were more than half a mile deep. Certainly, from a distance, such a large force carrying shields would have appeared very densely packed. The force would advance at a steady jogging speed and complete the final attack at a run. Once amongst the enemy, the short stabbing spear or *assagai* was most effective. The Zulus rarely used firearms with any effect although by 1878 they already possessed an estimated twenty thousand serviceable firearms and five hundred modern breech-loading rifles.(2) A sizeable reserve was always kept behind the main body to bolster any weakness which developed during an attack and, on several occasions, the reserves were kept out of sight of the action to confuse the enemy as to their strength and to ensure they remained calm until required.

Many writers have credited Shaka with the development of the *impondo zankomo* though modern researchers are aware that the Xhosa tribe were also familiar with its use for hunting. Certainly the technicalities were more effectively used by the Zulus who would create feints with one horn to confuse the enemy. Such a tactic succeeded at Isandlwana; the Zulus manoeuvred and advanced the main body and left horn into full view of the British while the right horn slipped unnoticed behind Isandlwana and isolated the British position. The British were only aware of the right horn when, according to Commandant Hamilton-Browne who watched the battle two miles from Isandlwana, they emerged in force from behind the mountain, driving the column's bellowing and terrified cattle from the wagon park and into the undefended rear of the British position.

The similarity of the *impondo zankomo* to Chelmsford's invasion plan using the main central column under Glynn with two flanking columns led by Wood and Pearson is obvious. Cetshweyo would have recognised the pattern and, understanding its subtle defects, counter attacked accordingly.

Immediately prior to the invasion, Lord Chelmsford had issued a circular to his officers pointing out certain notable Zulu characteristics. He wrote that the Zulus were 'masters of the ambush and other ruses', and that, "in going through bush, remember that natives will often lie down to let you pass and then rise to fire on you". Perhaps the wisest section related to ambushes, "A common ruse with the natives is to hide a large force in the bush and then show a few solitary individuals to invite an attack. When the troops enter the bush in pursuit of the latter the hidden men rise and attack them".

It was this piece of advice that was most ignored and thereby cost numerous unsuspecting soldiers their lives.

Logistics and supplies

Despite the disaster of the Crimean War, which had been caused in part by insufficient supplies, there was still no established system of transport within the British Army in 1879. Lord Chelmsford's invasion force amounted to an estimated total of 16,000 fighting men, 985 wagons, 60 mule carts, over 10,000 oxen, 870 horses and 450 mules. The overall aim of the invasion was a relatively simple task when compared with the task of supplying this force with food and water for men and animals alike. There were extensive stockpiles of tins of bully beef, 200lb bags of locally grown corn, and wooden crates of tough army biscuits. Sufficient tentage, consisting of Bell tents, had to be transported (1 for every 8 men and named after their inventor, not the bell shape), together with mobile bakeries, engineering equipment, ammunition and medical supplies. The list of supplies was endless and included much valuable equipment soon to fall into Zulu hands, items such as axes, blankets, kettles, lanterns, shovels, tools, lifting jacks, stretchers, ropes, and waterproof sheets. The stores also had to include such incidentals as sufficient supplies of grease for the men's boots, and spare flannel shirts. It was calculated by Chelmsford's staff that the total weight of these stores would amount to nearly two thousand tonnes.

The task fell to the existing Commissary General Strickland and his staff of less than twenty fit officers and men to commence the organisation of supplies for the whole invasion force. Following the first of a number of scathing observations by Maj. Crealock of Chelmsford's staff, that the commissariat and storage system had "*utterly broken down*", these officers were soon supplemented by regular commissariat officers sent from the UK, including Lt. Smith-Dorrien who was later to escape from Isandlwana. Due to their inexperience, these commissariat officers were highly vulnerable to a variety of fraudulent deals and considerable losses were suffered by the British. Horses and cattle were sold to the military at highly inflated prices and, in some cases, were not even delivered. The most successful fraud, (or was it just good business?) related to the widespread practice of wily civilian contractors purchasing, at knockdown prices, Zulu cattle seized by the British troops during skirmishes, only to be immediately resold to the army caterers as fresh meat at twenty times the price.

Having assembled sufficient stores, establishing an effective transport system was the next problem. All assembled stores had to be scaled down according to the size and purpose of the unit. The scale of transport was also meticulously prepared down to company level so that each company was mobile yet totally self sufficient, a huge logistical undertaking. The total number of wagons per infantry battalion amounted to seventeen, including one HQ wagon; a battery of artillery was allocated ten wagons and a squadron of mounted infantry had four. The overall responsibility for transport fell on the appointed Transport Officer, one per invading column, assisted by a sub-conductor for every ten wagons.

It is likely that the marching soldier was more concerned with the availability of his daily rations and bottled beer. His daily entitlement was a minimum of 1lb of fresh meat, 1 1/2 lb. of fresh bread or its equivalent in biscuits, plus fresh vegetables and fruit or lime juice and sugar in lieu. Rum was available but only if authorised by the accompanying medical officer.

Chelmsford quickly realised that the invasion force would be slow moving and therefore vulnerable to attack by the fast moving Zulus. He knew only too well that victory depended on the Zulus attacking prepared positions where they would face awesome firepower. He accordingly gave priority to the implementation of regulations relating to the availability of ammunition. Each artillery battery of two guns carried 68 rounds each together with 12 rockets and additional reserves were to be readily available in accompanying carts and wagons. Rifle ammunition was calculated at 270 rounds per soldier, 70 in the possession of each man and 200 rounds in clearly identifiable ammunition wagons. All column commanders had received written instructions that "a commanding officer would incur a heavy responsibility should required supplies fail to arrive in time, through any want of foresight and arrangement on his part".

By the time of the invasion, Chelmsford had achieved an almost impossible task. He had assembled sufficient supplies and transport to sustain his campaign. Unusually for the period, he had also carefully informed his force of the nature of the campaign and of the strengths of the enemy.

References.

1. The battle of Kambula will feature in following Journals. (9, 18 and 19 Ed.)
2. The 1878 price of a modern British Enfield rifle in Zululand was one sheep – *Anatomy of the Zulu Army*, Ian Knight