

Lord Chelmsford

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There are two categories that matter for a military leader; successful and unsuccessful. Wellington, Campbell, Wolseley, Roberts, and Wood can be counted as belonging to the former. Cornwallis, Raglan, Colley, and Lord Chelmsford can reasonably be argued as belonging to the latter. Although both categories of leaders shared setbacks at some time, only the second group actually presided over military disasters. Cornwallis at Yorktown, Raglan with the loss of the Light Brigade, Colley at Majuba and Chelmsford at Isandlwana.

Lieutenant General Frederick Augustus Thesiger, or Lord Chelmsford as he became following his father's death, lost his reputation when his inadequately defended camp at Isandlwana was overrun and laid waste by Cetshwayo's impi. Despite his eventual success in defeating the Zulus and the strenuous efforts of his friends in high places to absolve him of blame, Chelmsford is generally regarded as an unsuccessful commander.

Born in 1827, he was of German origin, which may go some way to explain his unimaginative, pedantic, and orthodox approach to military matters. His background, despite lacking much wealth, was conventional for a Victorian gentleman. His education at Eton was followed by the purchase of a commission, initially into the Rifle Brigade, and then into the Grenadier Guards. He was a conscientious and diligent officer at a time when most officers did not take much interest in their military duties. He was subsequently promoted to the rank of captain and appointed ADC to the commander of forces in Ireland. In 1855 he joined his regiment in the Crimea and thus missed the Battle of Inkerman, in which the Guards played so crucial a role. He was designated to a succession of staff duties and ended his posting to the Crimea as Deputy Assistant Quartermaster General.

A further promotion brought him the lieutenant-colonelcy of the 95th (2nd Bn. Sherwood Foresters) and it was with his new regiment that he sailed for India in 1858. By the time they arrived, the Indian Mutiny had all but been suppressed but they were involved in mopping up operations in Central India during 1859.

Chelmsford's reputation as a competent staff officer resulted in his appointment as Deputy Adjutant General. It was in this capacity that he was a bit player in a *cause celebre* which tested the Army establishment. His younger brother, Captain Charles Weymess Thesiger, was serving with the 6th Dragoon Guards and became embroiled in a notorious scandal known as the Crawley affair. This issue stemmed from a bitter personality clash between the newly appointed commanding officer, Henry Crawley, and most of his officers, who objected to his autocratic behaviour. In his paranoia, Crawley saw plotting against him from every quarter, even from his most senior NCO, RSM Lilley. What made the case sensational was the close arrest of RSM Lilley who, with his dying wife, was confined in an ill-ventilated room at the height of the Indian summer. The RSM died through heat stroke. Chelmsford sided with the 'Establishment' and, despite two trials; justice was not seen to be done as Crawley was acquitted. It is of interest that one of the officers serving with the 6th at that time was Frederick Weatherley, who later commanded the ill-fated Border Horse at Hlobane.

When General Sir Robert Napier was ordered to mount an expedition against King Theodore of Abyssinia in 1868, he chose Chelmsford to be his Deputy Adjutant General. In a well-organised and successful expedition, the Anglo-Indian force suffered few casualties despite the potential for disaster. Chelmsford emerged from the campaign with much credit, being mentioned in despatches and being made Companion of the Bath for his tireless staff work. He was also appointed ADC to the Queen and made Adjutant General of India. This period of his life was to be his happiest and most successful, for he also married the daughter of an Indian Army general who eventually bore him four sons. It was also at this time that he became friendly with the Governor of Bombay, Sir Henry Bartle Frere, a man who would have considerable influence on Chelmsford's life. After sixteen years service in India, Chelmsford was recalled home. With little in the way of family wealth, for Chelmsford had married for love and not for money, the prospect of expensive entertaining befitting an officer of his rank was a constant source of worry to him.

When he was offered the post of Deputy Adjutant General at Horse Guards, he felt obliged to decline and made known his wish to take a command again in India, where the cost of living was much cheaper. Instead, he was promoted to Brigadier-General commanding the 1st Infantry Division at Aldershot pending a suitable overseas posting.

It was fate that the vacancy he accepted occurred in South Africa and was, coincidentally, his first independent active service command in thirty-four years. He was able to renew his association with Sir

Bartle Frere, now the High Commissioner for South Africa, and to share Frere's vision of a confederation of southern African states under British control.

When Chelmsford arrived at the Cape in February 1878, the fighting against the Xhosa rebels was entering its final stages. His subsequent experiences against a foe that relied on hit-and-run tactics, rather than becoming involved in a full-scale battle, coloured his opinion of the fighting capabilities of South African natives. Chelmsford did, however, show himself to be a commander who did not shirk hard work, often riding great distances over rugged country in the effort to break any remaining resistance. He was a commanding figure with his tall, spare frame, pleasant features, usually hidden by a black beard and bushy eyebrows.

The Xhosa Wars finally petered out in May and Chelmsford felt that he had acquitted himself well. His handling of troops had been exemplary and he even earned the grudging respect of the generally ill-disciplined colonial volunteers.

For such an experienced staff officer, he displayed a curious personal weakness that did not help the British cause in the coming confrontation with the Zulus. He virtually disposed of his personal staff, surrounding himself instead with just a few trusted colleagues. Chelmsford thereafter found himself heavily embroiled in petty matters that should never have involved an army commander. This reluctance to delegate put enormous pressure on him, affecting his judgement, causing vacillation and an apparent lack of leadership. He was not helped by his choice of Military Secretary in Major John Crealock, a colleague from the 95th Regt. Crealock's abrasive and sarcastic manner antagonised anyone approaching the commander, this trait together with his habit of vetting what was reported to his chief, produced circumstances which conspired to make Chelmsford a rather remote figure.

Despite this, Chelmsford was regarded as a true gentleman, who, at the beginning of the invasion at least, was regarded warmly even if he did not inspire. His letters reveal his tireless capacity for work and his commitment to trivia. They also show him to be solicitous to the health and welfare of his colleagues, particularly his friends Evelyn Wood and Sir Bartle Frere. He displayed particular warmth to the former. His writing is not without irony and humour, more so before the invasion of Zululand began. In writing to Wood, he explained,

All the other transport officers have been told off to their respective stations - I could send you up Lt. Col. Law to do the work, but it is questionable whether you would care to have him. He could do the work well enough if he chose, but he is not over-fond of work and his present idle life suits him down to the ground.

He was critical of many of the officers and officials and openly wished they could all be like Wood and Buller. Significantly he was irritated by Colonel Anthony Durnford's role on the Boundary Commission once it found in favour of the Zulus and he was to find further fault in Durnford's actions in the days leading up to the Invasion. In one particularly stinging rebuke, Chelmsford actually threatened to remove Durnford from his command. One can see that, in the aftermath of Isandlwana, Chelmsford would have had little compunction in laying the blame for his defeat on a despised, and now conveniently dead, subordinate officer. During this period before the Invasion, those that came into contact with Chelmsford found him unfailingly courteous but not outgoing. He kept his emotions firmly under control, until the enormity of the events at Isandlwana nearly crushed him, for he had no confidant to whom he could unburden his feelings. He wrote to his wife but her support and sympathy took many weeks to reach him.

The letters he wrote to Wood reveal much about his state of mind. Seeming to suffer from bi-polar depression, Chelmsford fluctuated between confidence and despair. Six days after the disaster he wrote, If we establish ourselves in good positions at different points in that part of the country and make good use of the mounted men for reconnoitring and raids, we ought to be able to bring the Zulus down upon us again when thoroughly prepared to meet them.

He followed this with a despairing letter;

The situation of affairs does not seem to improve, and I am fairly puzzled when I contemplate our future operations.

He signs off with;

I wish I saw my way with honour out of this beastly country, and you as my travelling companion. Best love to Buller - You two will have to pull me out of the mire.

He and Frere obviously discussed the option of resigning and Chelmsford accordingly wrote both to the Duke of Cambridge and to Colonel Frederick Stanley, the Secretary of State for War. In his letter to the latter, he reveals that he had contemplated being replaced as far back as June 1878! He wrote,

the strain of prolonged anxiety & exertion, physical & mental, was even then telling on me - What I felt then, I feel still more now.

He suggested that

...an officer of the rank of Major-General should be sent out to South Africa without delay. H E Sir Bartle Frere concurs in this representation, & pointed out to me that the officer selected, should be fitted to succeed him in his position of High Commissioner.

The result was the appointment in May of Lieutenant-General Sir Garnet Wolseley as both High Commissioner for South Eastern Africa and Commander-in-Chief of the Forces in South Africa.

It is of interest that several other senior officers suffered physical and mental breakdowns during the closing stages of this campaign. Colonel Glyn, the popular commanding officer of 1/24th Regiment, became withdrawn and depressed at the loss of, not just his regiment at Isandlwana, but of so many close friends.

Despite his incapacity, Glyn was not removed. Not so Colonel Charles Fairfax Hassard of the Royal Engineers, who built Fort Helpmakaar. Soon after serving on the Court of Enquiry, he was invalided to Cape Town suffering from a nervous breakdown. His adjutant, Lieutenant John Baxter was similarly invalided out with him. Lieutenant-Colonel John Russell, commander of No.1 Squadron, Imperial Mounted Infantry, was so unnerved by the sight of the slaughter at Isandlwana, that it adversely affected his later actions at Hlobane, to the point that he was accused of cowardice and subsequently removed from his command.

Adding to Chelmsford's woes were the relentless personal attacks on him by the newspapers, who blamed him for the loss of the camp, despite the clean bill given him by the Court of Enquiry, which he convened solely to report back to him! Affecting disdain for the newspapers and in particular the ever present war correspondents, Chelmsford was deeply hurt and shaken by the vitriolic attacks on his reputation, attacks which further eroded his confidence. His friends advised him to retire on health grounds but, with Wood's decisive victory at Kambula and the arrival of several regiments of Imperial troops, Chelmsford seemed to sufficiently recover his determination to defeat the Zulus.

He personally chose to lead the column to relieve Colonel Pearson's besieged force at Eshowe. Moving cautiously and laagering at night, Chelmsford put into practice the painful lesson he learned from Isandlwana. Within sight of Eshowe, his well entrenched men fought off a large Zulu impi at Gingindlovu and, in the following pursuit, inflicted many fatalities on the fleeing Zulus. Within the entrenchment, Chelmsford and his staff had displayed the Victorian officers' disdain of enemy fire by remaining standing to encourage the troops, many of whom were newly arrived raw recruits. The result of such foolhardy exposure was that, although Chelmsford was not hit, Crealock was slightly wounded in the arm and lost his horse while Captain Molyneux had two horses killed. As they constituted the high command, it seems an unnecessary risk to have taken.

With Eshowe relieved, the ever present spectre of the unburied remains at Isandlwana was the next priority. Besides soothing his conscience, Chelmsford had a much more practical reason for sending a large burial party; their role was to recover the precious wagons of the slaughtered central column which he urgently needed for the re-invasion of Zululand. Chelmsford had a long running feud with civilian authorities in Natal and both parties bombarded an increasingly despairing British Government with despatches that revealed the lack of firm leadership and determination to end the conflict. Their commander displayed all the signs of being demoralised and bereft of inspiration.

However, as his forces and supplies built up, so Chelmsford's confidence appeared to return. Once the invasion was under way, he moved cautiously, laagering his camp every night, building forts to protect his lines of communication and scouting well ahead. Nevertheless, it was on one of these map-making reconnaissances that another misfortune befell the luckless commander.

Prince Louis Napoleon had badgered both the Horse Guards and Queen Victoria to allow him to serve in Zululand in the furtherance of his military career. He succeeded and arrived in Zululand to work in a junior staff capacity under Chelmsford. It was during a routine reconnaissance by a small patrol, which included the Prince, that a party of Zulus silently approached the Prince's party through long grass. At point blank range, the Zulus opened fire on the party and in the scramble to safety; the Prince and two troopers were caught and slain.

When the news broke in the British newspapers, the shock was even greater than that of the Isandlwana massacre. Chelmsford could not reasonably be blamed for the Prince's death but, following all the previous disasters, his culpability was implied. As with Isandlwana, a scapegoat was required and Captain Carey, the patrol leader who escaped unscathed, was the obvious candidate to face a court martial.

Chelmsford also received the news that he was to be replaced by General Sir Garnet Wolseley, both a blow to his ego and a spur to his intention of personally defeating the Zulus in a final showdown. In the

event, it was a close run thing. Wolseley arrived just too late to prevent Chelmsford disobeying Wolseley's previous direct order not to attack Cetshwayo. Chelmsford proceeded to inflict a crushing defeat on the Zulus at Ulundi which allowed him to hand over his command on a high note. It is interesting that no real attempt was made by the British force to capture Cetshwayo. Did Chelmsford leave the King 'at large' to confound and occupy Wolseley while he reaped the glory on his progression back home?

In any event, and wishing to return home as soon as possible, Chelmsford journeyed to Capetown, where he received an enthusiastic reception by a population for whom Ulundi had eradicated the memories of earlier disasters. He sailed home on the RMS German in the company of Wood and Buller, his most effective and reliable commanders. Both were friends of Wolseley, who would have liked them to remain with him in South Africa, but both were suffering from the effects of the campaign. Buller, in particular, had physically deteriorated so much that he required a lengthy convalescence before returning to duty. Before sailing, they likeable person.

Opinion at home had polarised. Disraeli refused to receive the Commander who had cost the country so much and brought discredit to the Government. Some newspapers continued to pillory Chelmsford and popular songs mocked him and even some of his fellow peers were critical. But it was those who really mattered, the Horse Guards and Queen Victoria, who rallied to his support.

Chelmsford was showered with honours. His rank of lieutenant-general was confirmed, the Queen bestowed the Knight Grand Cross on him and used her influence to have him appointed Lieutenant of the Tower. He later became a full general and Colonel of the Sherwood Foresters and then of the 2nd Life Guards.

Even with such protection, he was frequently drawn into defending his conduct during the Zulu War in general and Isandlwana in particular. Although some 1,400 men were lost at Isandlwana, it was not the worst military disaster of the period. In America, the loss of Custer's Seventh Cavalry at the Little Big Horn in 1876 troubled that nation's conscience for decades.

Even more catastrophic, with regards to the numbers of casualties sustained, was the Italian defeat at the hands of Ethiopian tribesman at the Battle of Adowa in 1896. Some eight thousand well armed soldiers were killed in the barren mountains by the primitively armed Ethiopians. The Italian general, Baratieri, in common with Custer and Chelmsford, underestimated their native opponents and all suffered the fatal consequence.

After his retirement, honours still came Chelmsford's way. Queen Victoria appointed him Gold Stick in Court. An honour that was carried over when her son, Edward, succeeded her. He also made the ageing general a GCVO. Many soldiers who had achieved success in the field were rewarded with less.

Chelmsford lived out his last years in London enjoying his family and the companionship of long-time colleagues. His eldest son was rising in the colonial office and eventually became Viceroy of India and First Lord of the Admiralty. On 9th April 1905 at the age of 78, Lord Chelmsford had a seizure and died while playing billiards at the United Service Club.

So died a man with many admirable attributes but who was thrust into a position for which he was not intellectually equipped. Instead of being a long forgotten Victorian general, his name is still remembered as the man ultimately responsible for the Victorian Army's greatest military defeat.

References.

1. Chelmsford isolated Glyn at Rorke's Drift which prevented him from giving evidence at the Court of Enquiry which Chelmsford convened to consider the defeat at Isandlwana. Hassard's removal to the Cape also conveniently prevented Hassard from making any contact with Glyn. The court effectively laid the blame on both Glyn and Durnford, a contrived decision which was to haunt Chelmsford. This subject will be considered in a forthcoming Journal article.
2. The battle of Ulundi and the associated implications for the future of S. Africa will be considered in a forthcoming Journal.