

A Scene of Utter Confusion Seems to Have Occurred... (1)

An exploration of some of the controversies which still surround the battle of Isandlwana.

Ian Knight

In his despatch, written from Pietermaritzburg and dated 27th January 1879, which broke the news of Isandlwana to a stunned nation at home, Lord Chelmsford was refreshingly honest about the state of his own knowledge of those terrible events. He was, he said, “able to furnish the following narrative, the absolute accuracy of which, however, I cannot vouch for...” and admitted starkly that “as regards the proceedings of the six companies of British infantry, two guns, and two rocket tubes, the garrison of the camp, I can obtain but little information” (2). Nearly 120 years later, generations of historians and enthusiasts alike have picked over the story of the battle, but most of them would still recognise something of Chelmsford’s confusion, and agreement on exactly what did take place is as far away as ever.

The nature of the battle itself is, of course, the main reason for this. The very elements which make the battle so interesting to study - drama, horror, mystery, heroism - make it difficult to sift fact from mythology and rumour. Reconstructing Isandlwana is like trying to reconstruct a crime in which none of the witnesses survived: we are hampered by a lack of unequivocal evidence from commanding officers on both sides, since not one of those holding a front-line command on the British side survived to explain his actions, and no-one bothered to interview the senior Zulu commanders to gather their recollection of events. Furthermore, the evidence of ordinary participants is often both incomplete and limited. Eyewitness accounts of battles are notoriously myopic, as survivors’ perceptions are usually limited by excitement, fright, and the confusion of battle, to those events going on immediately around them. This is all the more so in a desperate action like Isandlwana when, by definition, all of those who survived had undergone a particularly traumatic experience. Most were exhausted, terrified, and haunted by the sight of friends killed before their eyes, to the extent that many were on the point of nervous collapse when they reached safety. This is often reflected in their understanding of the battle as a whole; their accounts are rich in personal incident, horror, and a sense of trying to come to terms with desperately inexplicable events.

Moreover, the climax of the battle took place over a very short period of time. While accounts of battles are notoriously unreliable when it comes to timing - events seem stretched out or compressed in the excitement, while few participants have the opportunity to consult a watch and make notes! - it is generally accepted that the Zulu army was discovered by Raw’s troops of the NNH at about 12 noon, and that the British line collapsed between about 1 p.m. and 1.30 p.m. Major resistance continued for perhaps an hour after that - the so-called ‘last stands’ - while individual soldiers held out much longer. The crucial events which decided the course of the battle, however - the ones that give rise to so much debate - probably took place over no more than a ten or fifteen-minute period, in the middle of the battle. Moreover, they took place against a background of all the noise, smoke and confusion of battle, which assaulted the senses, and limited visibility; in the memorable words of one who watched the British collapse from afar, it was “seething pandemonium of men and cattle struggling in dense clouds of smoke” (3). One Zulu who took part recalled that years later he could “remember little and saw less, except for a twisting mass of men” (4).

Small wonder that historians are still trying to make sense of it all so long after the event.

Something in the way of an official version of what happened emerged in the immediate aftermath of the battle itself. A court of Inquiry was convened at Helpmekaar on 27th January, under the Presidency of Colonel F.C. Hassard, R.E. Hassard was assisted by Lt. Col. Law, R.A. and Colonel Arthur Harness, R.A. Harness had been personally involved in the Isandlwana campaign as the commander of N/6 Battery, which had lost two guns in the battle, although he had been out with Chelmsford, rather than in camp, at the time of the battle. The most important aspect that needs to be understood about the Court of Inquiry was that it was not an impartial body, set up to consider the campaign as a whole, or to pass judgement; it was set up by Lord Chelmsford himself, to gather information on one specific issue, the loss of the camp. It was, indeed, set up to discover the very information which Chelmsford had regretted the lack of in his despatch home.

As such, the members of the Court, and specifically Harness, considered it their duty to exclude any information which did not relate to their narrow remit. Certainly, there was never any intention to examine Chelmsford’s role, since the General himself was the intended recipient of the report. Furthermore, the Court’s attitude was shaped by an over-reliance on testimony from regular Imperial officers. There were two reasons for this bias; firstly, the Court members expected that fellow professionals would best be able to give them some insight into the defence arrangements at the camp, and that officers were more likely to be privy to any command decisions that were taken. Secondly, most Imperial officers were wary of colonial volunteers, whose professional and social background was often different to their own. Even before the battle, there had been something of a gulf of understanding between the regulars and the colonial volunteer units who had been

attached to the various columns. This was, perhaps, inevitable; the volunteers felt that their experience of the country, and their knowledge of Zulu customs, should have given them more influence in military decisions than it actually did, while the Imperial troops (who were also experienced in South African warfare), preferred to rely instead on their own professional instincts, and looked down on the volunteers as amateurs. This gulf had widened after the battle, when one of Harness' subalterns had carelessly remarked that "most of those who escaped were volunteers and Native Contingent officers, who tell any number of lies" (5), and found himself quoted in print. Settler society in Natal was indignant, and Harness himself had been embarrassed, and insisted on a retraction. Nevertheless, Harness' own attitudes seep through his comments on the Courts' findings - "a great deal of evidence was heard", he wrote, "but it was either corroboratory of evidence already heard, or so unreliable that it was worthless" (6). Only one colonial officer's testimony was included by the Court (Captain Nourse, NNC.); by excluding Volunteers and other ranks, let alone the African troops of auxiliary units such as the NNC., the Court effectively denied itself access to much of the evidence, simply because such men made up the bulk of those who survived. Harness saw no fault in this, because these men had not been at the centre of events, and "it seemed to me useless to record statements hardly bearing on the loss of the camp but giving doubtful particulars of small incidents more or less ghastly in their nature" (7).

It was upon the evidence recorded by the Court that Lt. W. James, R.E., compiled a confidential report in March, 1879, outlining the battle. This report in turn formed the basis of the account in the official history of the war, *The Narrative of Field Operations Connected with the Zulu War of 1879*, first published by the Horse Guards in 1881. This remained the orthodox view of events, and it was not until 1947 that a professional historian, Sir Reginald Coupland, attempted a re-appraisal of the battle.(8) Despite the fact that he visited the battlefield in the company of a Zulu veteran (a member of the iNgobamakhosi, who was by that time over 80), and was assisted in his researches by two local experts, Col. H.C. Lugg and Denys Bowden, both of whom had interviewed many veterans of the war, Coupland made little attempt to challenge the accepted version of events, and his account largely follows that of the official history.

It was in the 1960s that the major debates about Isandlwana began in earnest. In 1966, Donald Morris published the best-loved of all general histories of the war, *The Washing of the Spears*. Morris - a one-time C.I.A. operative who did much of his research while based in Berlin - also followed the official history, but added greater depth, drawing largely on a body of memoirs, diaries, and letters of British participants. Morris' account has had a tremendous impact on the public at large, and is largely responsible for shaping the battle in the popular imagination. Almost contemporary with Morris, however, was published a very different interpretation of the battle. This was written by F.W.D. Jackson, and appeared in three issues of the *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* in 1965.(9) Jackson, a meticulous researcher and analyst, had deliberately by-passed the official history, and reconstructed the battle from original sources - including material from Zulu sources, and those survivors discounted by the original Court of Inquiry - to produce a revisionist history which differed from the orthodox in several key respects.

The areas of contention largely revolve around the conduct of the British companies during the battle, and in particular, their positions, and the reasons for their collapse. In the conventional view, the 24th are pictured in two compact lines, deployed at a sharp angle to one another, with the field guns between them, and a company of the Natal Native Contingent covering the angle. According to this interpretation, these companies are able to hold their position against the Zulu attack, until such time as ammunition runs short, whereupon their fire falters. Seeing this, the NNC break, and the Zulus burst through the centre of the position, rolling up both lines from the flank, and killing the 24th where they stood. In the revised history, the 24th companies are initially drawn up in a line, facing northwards (i.e., not at right angles to one another) and are interspersed with various Native Horse and NNC companies.

Most importantly, there is no 'angle', and no NNC company protecting it; the 24th are deployed right up to the guns on either side. As the attack of the Zulu left horn develops, however, the companies to the right of the guns turn to face it, so that at the height of the battle the British line forms a gentle curve, running from the north (left) to south-east (right). In this version of events, the collapse has nothing to do with ammunition failure; the line is simply too over-extended to cover its front indefinitely, particularly when Durnford's command abandon the right flank. The 24th companies are ordered to withdraw, with the intention of taking up a new position closer to the tents. As they do so, however, the NNC units retire faster than the 24th, gaps appear in the lines, and the Zulus mount a swift assault which pushes between the various 24th companies, and prevents them from re-forming. The fighting then continues through the camp area, onto the nek below Mount Isandlwana itself, and down into the Manzimnyama valley behind.

One area of evidence is particularly useful in deciding between the two versions - the accounts of the British burial details who were sent out to inter the remains. Since most of the British dead were buried within a few feet of where they fell, the location of the bodies gives a vital picture of where exactly the heaviest fighting took place. No burials were made immediately after the battle, however; because the Zulu victory had effectively shattered Lord Chelmsford's original invasion plan, and because the threat of a Zulu invasion of Natal was considered very real, it was not until 21st May that a serious attempt was made to inter the bodies at

Isandlwana. Even this was prompted, as much as anything, by the practical necessity of recovering the wagons which were still left on the field, and which remained serviceable, since they were needed for the new invasion, which was about to begin. This expedition found that most of the bodies lay between the camp area and the Manzimnyama stream behind. The greatest concentration was on the nek, between Isandlwana and Mahlabankhosi ('Black's Koppie') where, according to Zulu sources, the stiffest fighting had taken place. Since the burials took place on hard, stony ground, and in a hurry, many on this occasion were inadequate, while not all bodies were, in any case, buried. At the request of Colonel Glyn of the 24th, those bodies which could be identified as belonging to that regiment were left unburied, so that the regiment might have the mournful honour of burying its own dead. This interment took place over three days in June, 1879, when Lt. Col. Wilson Black took 140 men of the 2/24th, together with 80 King's Dragoon Guards and a large force of auxiliaries, up from Rorke's Drift to attempt the task. Many of the remains were scattered, however, and in some places earlier burials had been exposed by the elements, so that in September, 1879, another party was despatched under Major C.J. Bromhead - Gonville's brother - to complete the task. Bromhead was methodical and thorough, but over the next summer the heavy rains again opened many graves, and in March, 1880 a party of the 60th Rifles was sent to re-inter a large number of remains which had become exposed. The Isandlwana dead remained particularly stubborn, however, and persistent complaints from travellers that the bones we still being washed out led the Lieutenant-Governor of Natal to commission one Alfred Boast to properly re-bury the remains once and for all. Boast spent three weeks on the job in February and March 1883, collecting scattered bones, exhuming partially exposed remains, burying them at a greater depth, and turning the rough piles of stones which marked the graves into proper cairns.

It is interesting to note that all of these burial expeditions broadly agreed with the original party of May, 1879; that the dead were to be found not out on the firing line, but through the camp area, along the nek, and down into the Manzimnyama valley behind. Indeed, although the battle field suffered some neglect in the 1930s and '40s, and some grave-sites have undoubtedly been lost, the white-washed cairns which scatter the battlefield today are largely those erected by Boast. The 24th memorial marks the spot where the largest number of bodies was found (C.J. Bromhead had marked this site with a large cairn; the base of it can now be seen just next to the 24th memorial; the stones were possibly removed to make the base of the monument). If the story told by the graves is to be believed, few soldiers were killed out on the line; they began to take casualties as they retreated through the camp, and suffered severely as they tried to stand on the nek, but were pushed down into the valley behind Isandlwana. The last great concentration of graves is on the banks of the Manzimnyama itself, where a group under Lt. Edgar Anstey was brought to bay...

It is interesting to note, incidentally, that the famous photographs of a burial party were taken during the June 1879 expedition, and not on 21st May, as is sometimes supposed. The photographs were taken by James Lloyd, a civilian photographer based in Durban, and there are several reasons for reaching this conclusion. For one thing, there is no mention of a photographer being present in May, when the short duration of the visit, and the possibility of Zulu attack, would have made it difficult for a civilian photographer to operate effectively. Secondly, the large number of wagons and conspicuous debris, mentioned by members of the May expedition and depicted in the sketches of the war-artist Melton Prior, are not evident in the photographs, while the burial party featured there is clearly a much smaller one.

One question which continues to intrigue historians and enthusiasts alike is whether Lloyd took more photographs than those which are generally known. Despite the fact that no collection, either in the U.K. or South Africa, features more than three (perhaps four; one photo, of the mountain with a small amount of debris in the foreground, might have been taken on that occasion or sometime thereafter) photographs of the expedition, the possibility exists that more were taken but have never come to light. Lloyd of course, made a living by selling copies of photographs, particularly to visiting officers; he may have suppressed any particularly graphic photos out of considerations of taste.

The other main area of contention between the two interpretations concerns the reason for the collapse of the British line. Donald Morris, in particular, expanded the view that it was due to a failure to supply the 24th companies with ammunition. In this respect, his evidence is based on general references to ammunition at the time, and in particular to an incident described by (then) General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien in his memoirs.⁽¹⁰⁾ Smith-Dorrien, a young transport officer at the time of the battle, recalled that he had tried to procure ammunition from the Quartermaster of the 2/24th, Edward Bloomfield, but had been refused permission on the grounds that it was reserved for 2nd Battalion use only (the 2nd Battalion was out with Lord Chelmsford; Chelmsford had ordered that the battalion reserve be made ready in case he sent for it). Smith-Dorrien also argued that the faulty design of the ammunition boxes further delayed the distribution of rounds. According to this view, it was failure to supply ammunition to the 24th companies which led to their cessation of fire, and the subsequent collapse in the face of the Zulu charge.

The whole ammunition question is one which still provokes heated debate, and several strands need to be pulled apart when analysing it. Firstly, it must be said that there is no doubt that the shortage of ammunition was a contributory factor in Durnford's retreat from the donga; Durnford was responsible for the supply of

ammunition to his own men. They had been heavily engaged for some time, and the men he sent into the camp to procure fresh supplies of ammunition could not find his ammunition wagons in the confusion. This is referred to by several survivors. The question of ammunition supply to the 24th is a different one, however, since the 24th's supply was quite separate from Durnford. The 24th's position is crucial because their fire was undoubtedly the backbone of the camp's defence. The debate revolves around three issues; were the 24th short of ammunition at all? If there was a shortage, what were the reasons, and in particular, was it due to the faulty design of ammunition boxes? And if there was a shortage, is that what caused the line to collapse?

It is interesting to note that in the earliest accounts of the battle - including the Narrative of Field Operations - have little to say about ammunition supply, and instead place the blame for the defeat at the feet of the NNC, who supposedly ran away. Many accounts of the burial expeditions, including Wilson Black's - do refer to ammunition failure, but suggest that this took place after the British collapse, once the camp had been over-run, and the 24th were unable to reach their wagons. In other words, ammunition failure was a consequence of the collapse, not the cause of it. The Historical Records of the 24th Regiment (11) - published in 1893, and heavily influenced by officers who served in the campaign - stops short of attributing the defeat to ammunition failure, but does refer to the lack of a proper system of front-line supply (which is undeniably true), and to the fact that those companies who were first engaged (Mostyn's and Cavaye's) were running short of ammunition during the latter stages of the battle. Coupland also refers to a failure to organise a proper supply, and to difficulties in opening the boxes, but does not directly link this to the British collapse. It should be noted that the overwhelming mass of evidence from Zulu sources suggests that the 24th carried on firing - and heavily, at that - throughout their withdrawal, and for some time during the 'last stand'. Once they were surrounded, they could not replenish their supply, and their fire dwindled; indeed, most Zulu agreed that it was at this point that they were at last able to close in with them, and finish them. If this evidence is accepted, it is difficult to see how ammunition failure can have been a contributory factor in the collapse of the British line. Those who hold this view argue that the 24th's line became untenable once Durnford had retreated from the donga, and that the British retreat was part of an attempt to rally on a stronger position near the tents.

The argument that the ammunition supply was hindered by over-zealous quartermasters and poorly designed ammunition boxes is largely based on Smith-Dorrien's evidence. It is interesting to note that Smith-Dorrien made no mention of ammunition boxes in a letter written shortly after the battle; indeed, his comment that "I was out with the front companies of the 24th handing them spare ammunition" (12) suggests no particular difficulty. By the time he wrote his memoirs, however, forty-eight years later, his conversation with Quartermaster Bloomfield had become central to his understanding of his recollection of the battle. This is not to suggest that conversation did not take place; merely that the passage of time had deprived it of a wider context and exaggerated its significance. Smith-Dorrien was adamant (in 1925) that the ammunition boxes had been difficult to open, while Henry Francis Fynn, a civilian border agent (who was out with Lord Chelmsford on the day of the battle, and not present in camp) was also convinced that "the strong mahogany boxes, bound either with brass or galvanised iron bands all strongly screwed together (no nails) and the sliding small lids secured with brass screws also, could not be opened." (13) Those who do not accept that the design of ammunition boxes played any part in the defeat argue that similar boxes were used throughout the campaign, and that no reference exists to difficulties experienced elsewhere (at Nyezane river, also fought on 22nd January, the Buffs recorded no difficulty in opening similar boxes), and that the 1/24th were an experienced battalion who had been in action on a number of previous occasions. (14) Nevertheless, Ron Lock has continued to stoutly defend the view that the design of the boxes was faulty, based on experience of a reconstructed box of the appropriate type, and that this was a significant factor in the defeat. (15) Historians remain divided on the issue.

One other factor which needs to be considered is whether there was a general panic among the troops when the line collapsed. Certainly, the column interpreter, James Brickhill, thought so. "Men were running everywhere", he recalled afterwards, "I could see no officers, the only body of soldiers yet visible rose from firing their last shot and joined me in the general flight. Panic was everywhere, and no officer to guide, and no shelter to fall back on...." (16). Indeed, as already mentioned, many bodies were found on the Manzimnyama side of the nek, and it would be foolish to suggest that all had died fighting nobly to the last. The sight as the British line disintegrated, and thousands of Zulus rushed forward towards the camp, was undoubtedly a terrifying one, and many of those in camp tried to escape at this point. Indeed, everyone who got as far as the fugitives trail must have left before the 24th were pushed back through the tents, since

Nevertheless, Brickhill's words should not necessarily be taken to suggest that the 24th ran away. Brickhill was observing the battle from the camp area, and would undoubtedly have been impressed by the confusion which seems to have reigned behind the lines; most of the officers, after all, were out in the fighting line. Many of those around him did flee, but as Brickhill himself implies, he could not see much of the firing line from his position, and he left as the red-coats retired on the tents. The stubborn resistance around the camp and down into the Manzimnyama valley therefore occurred after he left. Another survivor, Captain Essex, describes the same moment in an account which is more in accord with Zulu descriptions of the subsequent

hard fighting on the nek; “the right of the 24th was turned, and the men became unsteady. A few fixed bayonets and I heard the officers calling on their men to keep together and be steady. It was, however, no use (i.e. to hold the Zulus back). In a few seconds the field was a rabble and the Zulus were among us. We were driven up through the camp”(17)

It is interesting to note that in most early accounts of the battle, the auxiliaries of the Natal Native Contingent were often blamed for the disaster. Undoubtedly poorly armed and trained, it was said that the NNC broke and fled at the crucial moment, allowing the Zulus to pour in through gaps in the line, and overwhelm the 24th. The NNC were, of course, ideal scapegoats at the time, they had black skins, and few champions to defend their cause. In fact, there is no evidence that the NNC did anything other than hold their positions until the entire line retired; it was only at that point that they refused to rally. Once again, their flight was not so much a cause of the collapse, but a result of it. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that some elements of the NNC made gallant stands around their officers. The NNC’s reputation in the war as a whole is in need of rehabilitation.

It should also be noted that much more information from Zulu sources is available to modern historians than to previous generations. Although a number of interviews with Zulu veterans of the battle were published at the time, many have remained obscure until recently, while other evidence remained unpublished, and has only recently seen the light of day. The extensive use of Zulu accounts does, of course, make it a far more complete picture of the battle possible.

One interesting feature of the final stages of the battle is the fact that some of the Zulu used cattle to mask their rush towards the tents. In the period immediately before the British collapse, the Zulu had been suffering heavily from British fire. In particular, the youngest regiments, out on the left horn, the iNgobamakhosi and uVe, had stalled before the fire of Durnford’s men in the donga. There was, however, a gap of several hundred yards between Durnford’s left, and the next 24th company (Lt. Pope’s G. Company 2/24th). Some elements of the uMbonambi, on the left of the Zulu ‘chest’ (i.e., to the right of the iNgobamakhosi) had tried to push through this gap, but had been driven back by cross-fire from both sides. When Durnford’s men retreated, however, the uMbonambi drove cattle forward as they tried to pursue them, presumably to mask themselves from fire from Pope’s company. These cattle were probably not Zulu cattle, but oxen from the camp which had been turned loose to graze. The British had an awful lot of cattle in the camp; there were over 1,500 with No. 3 column, and over 250 with Durnford’s, leaving aside the question of whether cattle captured from the Zulu in the sweeps of 21st January had reached the camp safely. Some were undoubtedly on the nek during the fight; earlier that day, spans of oxen had been yoked together to drag the 30-odd wagons parked there down to Rorke’s Drift, to collect supplies (the same supplies that were used in the defence of the mission station, incidentally).

The convoy’s departure had been cancelled when the battle began, but the oxen were in many cases attached to the wagons. However, only a small proportion of the camp’s oxen had been required for this task, and there must have been hundreds more around the camp. There was no grazing on the nek - where the soil is shaley and the grass-cover thin - but the grass grew thickly on the forward slope, beyond the camp. Presumably a herd had been turned loose to graze there, and been forgotten; this was, indeed, the direction of the uMbonambi attack. Certainly, one of Durnford’s officers, Lt. Harry Davies, recalled “about 40 (Zulu) here got into the camp by driving a lot of our oxen that had been out of camp before them. We shot some of them.....”(18) Several miles out across the plain, Commandant Hamilton-Browne saw the same movement, “Good God! What a sight it was. By the road that runs between the hill and Kopje, came a huge mob of maddened cattle, followed by a dense swarm of Zulus. These poured into the undefended ring and rear of the camp, and at the same time the left horn of the enemy and the chest of the army rushed in”.(19)

After the war was over, the Zulu agreed among themselves that the uMbonambi, attacking towards the front of the camp, had been the first to ‘stab’ the enemy (i.e. penetrate the line), followed by the iNgobamakhosi and uKhandempemvu on either side of them. The uNokhenke regiment entered the camp from the rear, across the nek, as the British were driven in.

As the 24th fell back on the nek, Captain R. Younghusband’s company, originally on the extreme left of the line, retired up onto the shoulder of Isandlwana itself. It is not clear quite how they reached this position, but the location of the graves suggest that they retired up the slope from the northern end of the mountain, and certainly Zulu accounts refer to a company falling back behind the tents. The stand made by Younghusband’s men on the shoulder impressed many witnesses at the time, and all accounts agree that they held a good position, and were able to keep the Zulu back for as long as their ammunition lasted. As for their demise, the main source is an account by a warrior of the uNokhenke - who would have encountered them as they entered the camp - reported by Bertram Mitford, in his delightful travelogue;(20)

..... a lot of them (i.e. soldiers) got up on the steep slope under the cliff behind the camp, and the Zulus could not get at them at all; they were shot or bayoneted as fast as they came up. At last the soldiers gave a shout and charged down upon us. There was an induna in front of them with a long flashing sword, which he whirled round his head as he ran - it must have been made of fire. Wheugh! {Here the speaker made an

expressive gesture of shading his eyes}. They killed themselves by running down, for our people got above them and quite surrounded them; these, and a group of white men on the “neck”, were the last to fall

One might wonder why Younghusband’s men abandoned such a good position, but of course once they had run out of ammunition, they were effectively trapped, with no chance of replenishing it, and nowhere to go. Although some accounts suggest that the charge down the hill-side was a last heroic death-or-glory- gesture, it was probably more pragmatic, an attempt to link up with the rest of the 24th, still struggling below. It is possible that they made it, for Younghusband’s body was found among a large clump of dead on the nek. According to Black; “about sixty bodies lay on the rugged slope, under the southern precipice of Isandlwana, among them those of Captain Younghusband, and two other officers, unrecognisable; it looked as if these had held the crags, and fought together as long as ammunition lasted”.(21) This makes the popular story - that Younghusband climbed into a wagon-bed and defended it to the last -unlikely. That particular story, similar to an incident referred to by Mehlokazulu kaSihayo,(22) was first described in *The South Africa Campaign 1879*, a collection of eulogies for dead officers.(23) The book was compiled quite soon after the war, however, and many of the details given in it are based on hearsay; that a soldier died as described need not be doubted, but the association with Younghusband is tenuous, and is not supported by burial reports, which suggest that he was found at the centre of a large concentration of the dead, rather than alone.

All this attention given to the failure of the British defence has produced a significant distortion of emphasis. To the Victorian mind, it seemed incredible that a modern army, equipped with the most sophisticated weapons of the age, could be defeated by an enemy armed largely with shields and spears. Underlying this was a deeper assumption of cultural and racial superiority. To many at the time - and since -it has been easier to seek reasons for the battle’s decisive result in British failure - stupid command decisions, badly designed ammunition boxes, bumptious Quartermasters, cowardly auxiliaries - than to accept that Pulleine and Durnford were simply outmanoeuvred and outfought on the day. Yet such an approach begs any number of questions in itself. Supposing ammunition failure were the cause; can we assume that the British would have kept the Zulu at bay indefinitely, had the supply not failed? Were so few men, then, easily able to defend such an extended front? Would the situation have been the same if the odds had been stacked even more in the Zulu favour? Did the Zulu make no moves of their own, which might have contributed to the result?

All of these questions presuppose that the Zulu were essentially passive throughout the battle, that the British were calling the shots - literally - and that the Zulu were merely reacting to events as they unfolded. In fact, the true situation was exactly the opposite. From the beginning of the battle, it was the Zulu who had seized the initiative, and it is time that Isandlwana was considered, not just a British defeat, but as a Zulu victory.

If one considers the battle from the Zulu perspective, their first great achievement was their success in moving their forces so close to Isandlwana without being detected. The Zulu army had effectively crossed Lord Chelmsford’s front, masking their advance behind Siphezi mountain, which lies about fifteen miles beyond Isandlwana, and is clearly visible from the camp site. On the 21st, when Chelmsford was probing the Malakatha range to his right front, the Zulu army moved from Siphezi into the Ngwebeni valley, to his left front. This achievement should not be under-estimated, since it demonstrates that Zulu scouting techniques and use of terrain were far superior to those of the British.

The country through which the army moved is comparatively open and undulating, and rather than march in one conspicuous column, the regiments dispersed and moved in small groups (probably companies). They were screened by scouts led by one of the most able Zulu commanders of the war, Zibhebhu kaMapitha. The army was, of course, very vulnerable during the move, which took place in the early morning, and might have been detected by more vigorous British scouting, had not Chelmsford been looking elsewhere at the time. As it was, a party of Mounted Infantry under Lt. E. Browne very nearly blundered into them, but was skilfully driven away from the main body by Zibhebhu’s scouts. (24)

Another area which still divides historians is the question of where the Zulu high command deliberately tried to split Chelmsford’s force on the eve of the battle. Chelmsford was drawn out to the Mangeni gorge by an encounter on the 21st with men belonging to a local Sithole chiefdom, under the command of Matshana kaMondise. Matshana is known to have had discussions with the izinduna of the main army as it approached his territory; was he ordered to decoy Chelmsford out of the camp? This view has the support of a number of distinguished historians, but it does beg serious questions. For one thing, it shows a degree of strategic sophistication which is not evident in any of the other battles; for the most part, the Zulu army, once it reached the vicinity of the enemy, simply advanced to attack as quickly as possible. For another, it assumes that the Zulus believed Matshana’s movements would indeed split Chelmsford’s force - when in fact, of course, Chelmsford might have reacted in any number of other ways. It also pre-supposes that the Zulus had timed a co-ordinated plan to take place on 22nd January, when in fact all the other evidence suggests that they had hoped to avoid a confrontation that day, because the night of the 22/23rd was that of the new moon, a time when dark spiritual forces were abroad, and likely to bring bad luck on any military activity.

The army spent the night of the 21/22nd in the vicinity of the Ngwebeni valley. Most sources suggest that they were lying at the foot of the valley floor when discovered by Raw's troops at about noon on the 22nd; recently, however, Ron Lock has argued that the main body actually bivouacked on top of the heights.(25)⁵ In his view, this accounts for the speed with which the Zulu were able to deploy to attack the camp.

Certainly, their advance was very rapid. Although it began in some confusion, the amabutho had taken up their traditional "chest-and-horns" formation by the time the army reached the iNyon heights, some four or five miles away from the Ngwebeni, and came within sight of the camp. This in itself is a tribute to the skills of the regimental commanders at controlling their men. Furthermore, the placing of those troops confirms that the Zulus had thoroughly scouted the British position beforehand, since the direction of attack for most of the amabutho was determined long before the majority of the warriors were in sight of the camp. Isandlwana was, perhaps, the supreme example of the "chest-and-horns" formation; it was launched in classic style, and it worked perfectly. Traditionally, one horn was usually thrown out well in advance of the rest of the force, making good use of cover, and slipping unnoticed around the enemy to cut off their retreat.

At Isandlwana, this task fell to the right horn, which descended from the heights into the Manzimnyama valley, behind the mountain; while Mostyn and Cavaye's men had noticed that the Zulus in front of them were moving across their front, rather than attacking them, they did not realise the significance of this. Indeed, no thought seems to have been given to the right horn until, at the climax of the battle, it burst into the camp from the rear. On the opposite flank, the left horn, too, mounted a determined attack; even the gallant resistance of Durnford's men could do no more than delay its advance. The two horns almost completely surrounded the camp, while the chest, coming down off the heights in full view of the British, finally broke through the firing line, and over-ran the camp.

The Zulu generals took up a position on the iNyon cliffs, above the present school, which gave them a commanding view of the whole scene - unlike Pulleine and Durnford, whose visibility was limited to the low-lying areas around the camp. Again, unlike the British, who constantly shuffled their positions to meet the Zulu attack, the Zulu commanders did not have to alter their over-all formation at any point. They were, however, flexible enough - and decisive enough - to react to those British movements, re-positioning amabutho (such as the uNokhenke) who were unnecessarily exposed to British fire, taking advantage of gaps and weaknesses in the British line, Pulleine and Durnford, by contrast, had no clear plan of defence, only a set of Standing Orders issued previously by Chelmsford, and they juggled their forces throughout the battle to no very determined or united purpose.

Pulleine sent companies up onto the hill when reports of the Zulu presence reached him; then he recalled them. He formed up facing one direction - despite knowing of the Zulu preference for encirclement - then had to move as the Zulu attack developed elsewhere. He was oblivious of the threat posed by the right horn, and only realised that he was overextended when it was too late. Durnford, by removing himself from the camp, had abdicated any responsibility for its overall defence, and found himself unable to do anything but defend his own front. By doing so, he also compromised Pulleine, because his position committed Pulleine to overextend his front to support him. Neither commander had the time or opportunity to recover from these errors because the Zulu commanders - who made no such mistakes - did not let them.

One inevitable consequence of the traditional Zulu attack formation is that the chest - which does not attempt to conceal its advance - is most exposed to enemy fire, and certainly this was the case at Isandlwana. The three amabutho making up the chest - the uNokhenke, uKhandempemvu and uMbonambi - all suffered heavily from rifle and artillery fire, and at one point the attack stalled. Nevertheless, they were rallied by the efforts of Mkhosana kaMvundlana Biyela, a commander of the uKhandempemvu, who had been standing with the generals, and was sent down to exhort his men to the attack. This is an incident which is justly remembered among the Zulu, for Mkhosana strode among the prostrate warriors, untouched by the British bullets, and regaled them with the first two lines of Cetshwayo's praises ("The little Branch of Leaves which extinguished the Great Fire kindled by Mantshonga and Ngqelebane"), urging them to come on. This was a tart reminder of their duty, and the uKhandempemvu rose to the attack. Mkhosana was shot dead, but deserves to be remembered as a Zulu hero of the battle. There were many of these - skilled, courageous and dynamic officers who handled their men well under fire, but whose names remain largely unknown in white accounts.

In the final analysis, the Zulus attack was beautifully and courageously executed across several miles of rugged and difficult terrain, and the British could not meet the challenge it posed. Whatever the truth of stories about faulty ammunition boxes and argumentative Quartermasters, this is the real reason why the battle was lost - and won.

Finally, a few words about the meaning of the name Isandlwana itself might be appropriate. In April, 1914, the novelist Rider Haggard made a nostalgic trip to South Africa, where he had served as a civil servant in his youth, and from where he had later drawn much of his inspiration as a writer. He travelled around the country, marvelling at the changes which were, even then, becoming apparent, and in the company of two great scholars of Zulu history, James Stuart (whose breathtaking collection of evidence on Zulu history and culture has recently been published by the University of Natal as the James Stuart Archive), and James Gibson (a District

Native Commissioner, and author of *The Story of the Zulus*). The party stopped off at Isandlwana, which Haggard had featured several times in his novels. The party wandered the battlefield, telling stories of the fight, and the conversation turned to the meaning of the name itself. Gibson and Stuart held different views; Gibson declared that it meant "Like a Little House", while Stuart opted for "The Second Stomach of an Ox". "When such learned doctors disagree, as they did with vigour", concluded Haggard, "I may perhaps be pardoned if I cling to the old rendering, "The Place of the Little Hand"". (26)

There, in a nutshell, is the nature of the debate, and ironically it seems that while Haggard was definitely wrong; both Gibson and Stuart were, in a way, right. Haggard's interpretation is based on the Zulu word for a hand, isandla; the suffix wana is the diminutive, meaning little. Put the two together, however, and the w is lost, because the correct word for a little hand is isandlana, but not isandlwana. The word isandlwana, quite literally, translates as like a little hut, from isa, similar to, indlu, hut, and wana. So much for Gibson's theory; however, this particular combination of phrases is seldom used when talking about small huts as such, but usually only when referring - wait for it! - to the second stomach of an ox! This imagery is obscure to the European mind, but the explanation lies in the fact that the second stomach of an ox resembles the small grass huts in which the Zulus store their grain, because that is where the ox's food, too, is stored, to be digested. The implication of this imagery is that the mountain of Isandlwana looks like the second stomach of an ox - an organ which is referred to in terms of its similarity to a grain-hut. (27) The name was, apparently, coined by the forebears of Chief Sihayo's Quengebe people, who lived nearby.

Interestingly enough, most contemporary scholars, who knew and understood Zulu language and imagery well, agreed with this interpretation. Henry Francis Fynn Jnr. (whose father had been the great pioneer at Shaka's court) simply stated that "Sandhlwana is the honey-combed smaller paunch"(28) while Bertram Mitford observed "the meaning of Isandhlwana is neither 'little hand' nor 'little house', nor any other of the hundred and one interpretations that were devised at the time of the disaster, but refers to a portion of bovine intestinal anatomy".(29) Col. H.C. Lugg (a great repository of Zulu lore, whose father, Harry Lugg, was a long-standing member of the Natal Mounted Police, and was present at Rorke's Drift) explained it all in some detail:

Sandhlwana is the Native name for the second or honeycomb stomach of a cow, and the hill was named, some say by Sihayo, because of its resemblance to this organ. The word itself is the diminutive for an isandhlu, the upper portion of a corn crib, or even a native watch-hut (ixiba), and because the stomach of a beast serves as a storehouse, and is similar in appearance to a corn crib, it was very appropriately called a corn crib, or isandhlwana.

A small corn crib is often referred to as an isandhlwana. This explanation should dispose of the controversy which has arisen over the word.(30)

If it does, it will be one of the few controversies surrounding Isandlwana to be finally laid to rest. Of course, whether Isandlwana should be spelt with, or without, the I at the beginning, and the h in the middle, is another whole story altogether...!

IAN KNIGHT is the author of *Zulu; The Battles of Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift*, published by Windrow and Greene.

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