

## THE USE OF CAVES AND NATURAL STRONGHOLDS BY THE ZULU IN 1879

By Ian Knight

Although the psychology of the Zulu army was essentially aggressive - conflicts were resolved by seeking out the enemy and attacking him - there was nonetheless an acceptance that non-combatants, possessions and cattle might have to be secured by defensive means from an enemy attack. This was accomplished through the use of *izingqaba*, natural strongholds which could be fortified as a secure place of shelter. These were selected for geographical features which made them difficult to attack; Hlobane Mountain, for example, with its flat summit largely surrounded by cliffs, was an ideal stronghold. The abaQulusi had further fortified the mountain by blocking the cattle paths which wound precariously onto the top with stone walls.



One highly desirable feature affecting the choice of a stronghold was the presence of caves. Much of the geology of Zululand consists of sandstone or volcanic rock like dolerite, neither of which lend themselves to particularly large under-ground caves complexes. Nevertheless, a combination of erosion and natural fissures in the strata has left its mark on the landscape, creating overhangs, gaps between fallen boulders, and here and there passages which extend back into the sides of mountains. The presence of these caves was usually well known to a local community, and often hidden to outsiders; in times of stress women, children and cattle might be driven up into them, the entrances barricaded with stones and guarded by fighting men. Often, items of value were simply hidden away in caves in the hope that they might escape detection by any passing enemy.

For all the popular attention given to the conventional large-scale battles of the campaign, Zulu defensive operations around caves featured heavily in the fighting. On 12 January Lord Chelmsford attacked the followers of *inkosi* Sihayo kaXongo in the Batshe valley. Sihayo, his principle sons and many of his followers were absent, having gone to oNdini to attend the general muster of the king's *amabutho*, but a number of men had been left to guard crops and cattle under Sihayo's younger son, Mkhumbikazulu. The action which followed was typical of Zulu defensive tactics. Women, children and cattle were hidden among the caves formed between fallen boulders at the foot of a line of cliffs on the kwaSogekle ridge. Mkhumbikazulu's men then hid among the rocks and taunted the invaders, daring them to come up. A fierce scrimmage then took place among the boulders, as Lt. Henry Harford, who was present with the 3<sup>rd</sup> NNC, described;

Confronting me across the bend was a large, open-mouthed cave, apparently capable of holding a good number of men, and hanging below it were several dead Zulus, caught in the monkey-rope creepers and bits of bush. They had evidently been shot and had either fallen out, or been thrown out, by their comrades when killed ... It was an uncommonly difficult place to get at, as it meant climbing over nothing but huge rocks and in many places having to work one's way like a crab, besides which the loss of a foothold might have landed one in the valley below. ...

Clambering at once over a big piece of rock, I got rather a rude shock on finding a Zulu sitting in a squatting position behind another rock, almost at my elbow. His head showed above the rock, and his wide-open eyes glared at me; but I soon discovered he was dead. Scarcely had I left this apparition behind than a live Zulu ... suddenly jumped up from his hiding place and, putting the muzzle of his rifle within a couple of feet of my face, pulled the trigger. But the cap snapped, whereupon he dropped his rifle and made off over the rocks for the cave, as hard as he could go ... I went after him, emptying my revolver at him as we scrambled up. Out of my six shots only one hit him, but not mortally ... Speaking to him in Kaffir, I called upon him to surrender, explaining that I had no intention to harm him in any way ... He then squatted down in submission.(1)

This description has much in common with the skirmishing which took place at the foot of cliffs on the southern side of Hlobane Mountain early during the assault of 28 March. Here both men of the Border Horse and Evelyn Wood's personal staff had come under close-range fire from Zulus concealed in the gaps between the huge fallen boulders. It is known that Prince Mbilini waMswati had a homestead nearby, and this spot may have been chosen as his personal refuge. Wood himself described the Zulu positions;

Umbellini, who shot Campbell, was in a hole at the end of this passage, which was about six feet wide, seventy feet long, and the walls were about eleven feet high. The footway, if such it can be termed, was composed of masses of rock with intervening spaces. The passage was open at the top to the sky, the den having been formed by a great fall of rock from the top of Hlobane, which stands about 400 feet above ..(2)

Captain Ronald Campbell, Wood's ADC, led Wood's personal escort to attack this spot but as he entered it Campbell was hit by a bullet which took the top of his head off. Wood's orderly, Lt. Henry Lysons, and Private Edmund Fowler of the Mounted infantry, climbed over Campbell's body and fired into the cave, driving the Zulus further down the passage, from which they emerged to clamber up the mountain.

Oral tradition among the abaQulusi today suggests that women and children had been concealed in other caves on the mountain before the British attack.

Prince Mbilini, indeed, had a number of secure places in northern Zululand from which he launched his effective guerrilla war against the British in the northern sector. As well as a home on the flanks of Hlobane he had another high on the Tafelberg Mountain, overlooking the Ntombe River. This too had caves in the cliffs above which he used as a stronghold. Further upstream in the Ntombe valley, the Khubekha people of Mbilini's close ally, Manyanyoba, also had a number of caves from which to protect themselves. After Mbilini and Manyanyoba's successful attack on the stranded 80<sup>th</sup> convoy at the Ntombe on 12 March, the attackers retired to these caves and were largely successful in defying British punitive attacks.

Indeed, the Ntombe caves saw the last shots of the war. Although Mbilini himself was killed in a skirmish on 5 April, both his followers and Manyanyoba's had refused to surrender to the British despite the dispersal of the royal *amabutho* at Ulundi on 4 July. On 5 September British troops under the Command of Col. Baker Russell began several days of concerted attempts to drive the Zulus out of the Ntombe strongholds. On 8 September two NCOs of the 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment were killed in skirmishing outside Mbilini's caves and in retaliation the British decided to seal up the mouths of the caves with gun-cotton, despite the fact that there were some thirty people still sheltering inside. According to one report,

The Engineers, under Captain Courtney, were employed blasting the rocks; but I believe their efforts were fruitless, at least as far as the outcasts were concerned. For, despite the incessant shocks from the concussion of the slabs of dynamite, which were employed on the occasion, we were totally unsuccessful in driving them from their location. (3)

The Engineers eventually succeeded in sealing the caves; none of the Zulus emerged alive. And upon this rather inglorious note the slaughter of the Anglo-Zulu War ended.

Throughout the war the Zulus concealed items of importance in caves to prevent the British from finding them. Some of these caves were later discovered, and found to contain weapons and items looted from the British camp at oNdini. Nomguqo Dlamini - a girl in King Cetshwayo's royal household - recalled that she and others were deputed to hide the king's personal possessions as the British advance drew near;

We carried all the king's goods and chattels to Hlophekulu and had to ascend the mountain, which is the home of hyenas and contains deep caves, to just below the white kranzes. With the

aid of a rope the king's belongings were lowered into a deep cave. We returned immediately and on the following day we carried our own possessions into hiding. On that day we consisted of a particularly large group; we were almost an army of our own. On our return we reported to the king that all was safely hidden. In reality ... when the king was captured and taken away, his possessions were retrieved by the men who had hidden them, and who enriched themselves thereby ... (4)

Later in the war, when Sir Garnet Wolseley had established a camp near the ruins of oNdini, patrols were sent out to the royal homestead of oLandandlovu, between the Black and White Mfolozi rivers, to investigate reports that a store of powder had been discovered nearby;

... they came upon a deep cave, extending under huge ledges and overhanging rocks, below one of the rugged mountain spurs of this wild country. This cave was found to contain 500 wooden 5 lb kegs, supposed to be of Portuguese importation from Delagoa Bay - in other words upwards of a ton of gunpowder. Sir Garnet decided that it should be destroyed at once; but to avoid the tremendous noise which an explosion in the cave would produce, and perhaps create alarm in the neighbourhood, to powder was removed to the summit of the hill and there destroyed. (5)

The end of the war and the British withdrawal brought no return of peace and security to the Zulu people, and indeed with the breakdown of the Wolseley settlement and the outbreak of civil war between pro- and anti-royalist factions, many Zulu women and children were again forced to resort to their natural strongholds. Some idea of just how impressive these could be comes from a description by Nomguquo Dlamini of an impressive edifice, undiscovered by the British, in northern Zululand;

The men entered the cave first, to see that everything was in order and safe; then they called out to us, 'Come inside! All is well and it is safe!' I was one of the last to enter. I was afraid that some of the huge boulders might come tumbling down on us. By the friction of two sticks ... fire was made and all parts of the cave were lit up, enabling us to select nice dwelling places within that large cave. Penetrating the cave ... we found inside a large pool of water ... The smoke from the fires was dissipated through fissures in the rocks; they were such that no sunlight ever penetrated ... Our enemies were afraid to enter ... We kept very quiet and stayed deep inside the cave until they moved off ... Our men, who were concealed near the mouth of the cave, would have immediately stabbed any entrant to death ... The cave was very large indeed. The cattle entered it from the west, and we from the east. The cattle suffered no hardship: there was sufficient grazing and water. (6)

Even today the exact location of many of these places of refuge remains unknown to outsiders.

## References.

1. *The Zulu War Journal of Col. Henry Harford*, Daphne Child (ed.) Pietermaritzburg 1978.
2. Letter from Wood to the Military Secretary, Horse Guards, dated 25 July 1881, reproduced in Frank Emery, *The Red Soldier*, London 1977.
3. Correspondent of the *Natal Witness*, report dated Luneburg 9 September 1879.
4. *Paulina Dlamini; Servant of Two Kings*, H. Filter (compiler) and S. Bourquin (translator), Pietermaritzburg 1986.
5. Report in *The Graphic*, October 11 1879.
6. *Paulina Dlamini*.

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