

‘Guided Rather By Accident’; The Opening Zulu Movements at Isandlwana

By Ian Knight

There can be no doubt that many aspects of the battle of Isandlwana are likely to remain shrouded in mystery. For such a cataclysmic event, the sources remain remarkably thin on the ground; few of the thousands of Zulus who fought in the battle left any record of their impressions, while the accounts of British survivors are inevitably fractured and distorted by the trauma they endured. Almost no accounts have survived from senior officers on either side to explain their intentions or actions, and it is left to historians pick over the slender bones of what remains, reconstructing a hugely complex crime scene from what amounts at times to little more than a scattering of circumstantial evidence - a process which, as we slip further and further away from the events concerned, seems more and more like looking at the world through the wrong end of a telescope.

The Zulu intentions on the eve of the battle remain of crucial importance, shaping as they do the context which gave rise to those initial encounters and which brought the two sides into battle like a collapsing house of cards. And at the heart of specific debates about the sequence of events, of timing and locations, lies a basic question - had the Zulus already committed themselves to an attack on the British camp at Isandlwana before Durnford's detachments blundered into them, or not? If they had not, then it follows that that initial contact was close to their over-night bivouac, and the subsequent Zulu deployment must be interpreted in the light of an army rapidly reacting to an unexpected encounter; if they had, then the pattern of their attack must surely already have been decided before that first clash, infusing the surrounding terrain with all manner of ripe possibilities.

Any answer to this question cannot be sought in the specific details of the battle alone, however, but, as Adrian Greaves correctly identifies, in the broader Zulu strategic - and indeed political and even spiritual - imperatives. Whatever exactly occurred in the few miles of undulating country north of Isandlwana on the morning on 22 January 1879, it had been framed by the events of the preceding day extending to the Siphezi mountain and beyond; that initial clash may be a clump of inter-connecting jigsaw pieces that need to be fitted closely together, but they are part of a bigger picture (1).

Firstly, it is necessary to outline something of the movements of the Zulu army, and in particular to stress the impact that its advance had had upon the Zulu communities lying close to the Natal border. In the tense weeks preceding the expiry of the British ultimatum, King Cetshwayo had prepared the Zulu people for the prospect of war, and orders had been sent out to assemble the amabutho (royal regiments) at the complex of royal homesteads on the Mahlabathini plain which constituted the Zulu capital. Yet the call-up was not universal, for the King directed trusted border amakhosi (chiefs) to retain their young men at home to watch and report on British incursions, and many other amakhosi instructed at least some of their followers to remain at home to protect their homes and crops. Thus, in the country directly opposite the British concentration at Rorke's Drift, inkosi (chief) Sihayo kaXongo had taken most of the fighting men of his amaQungebeni people to join the general muster. Indeed the British reported that the countryside there seemed strangely quiet on the eve of the invasion, but Sihayo had nonetheless left a few hundred men under his son Mkhumbikazulu to guard the amaQungebeni huts and cattle. Downstream, along the twisting lower reaches of the Mzinyathi river, the amaQungebeni's neighbours, the Sithole of inkosi Matshana kaMondise, had preferred to retire to local hide-outs along the bush-covered slopes of the Qhudeni mountain.

Thus, when the royal amabutho left the oNdini district for the front on 17 January, they did not advance through an entirely depopulated landscape. Across the next few days the army was joined as it marched by late-comers, both men from far-away districts who had not reached the muster in time, and by men who had hitherto remained at home but now rallied to the army as it passed. The army therefore represented a comprehensive cross-section of the

social and regional interests of the Zulu nation, from appointed generals and members of the Royal House at the top to young men who as yet had no homesteads, wives or cattle of their own at the bottom, and morale within it was high - there was a sense of indignation widespread throughout the country, an outrage at the presumption of the British and their ultimatum, the result of years of resentment at British interference in Zulu affairs and the undermining of the Zulu way of life by white traders and missionaries. For the thousands of ordinary Zulus within the ranks, the objective was clear - it was to drive the invaders out of their kingdom, and their aggressive mood had been heightened by the preparatory rituals which had taken place across several days at oNdini. These were designed to purify, strengthen and unite the amabutho, and they effectively removed those who had undertaken them from the routine world of every-day life and focussed them instead on the altogether darker spiritual plain of battle. The consequence was a prevailing sense of tension which grew palpably as the army drew nearer and nearer to its enemy.

Yet this aggressive spirit was not entirely in keeping with the political and strategic imperatives of the high command. King Cetshwayo did not, of course, accompany the army himself, but instead entrusted command to a small clique of senior advisers who represented a Zulu military establishment which extended back to the creation of the kingdom under king Shaka half a century before. Inkosi Ntshingwayo kaMahole, a tough and experienced officer in his sixties, was given overall command, assisted by the younger Mavumengwana kaNdelela, who was a personal confidant of the king himself. Although the men remaining in the borders brought the king clear intelligence that the British were invading Zululand in several columns, it was decided to direct the main response against the centre column, which had crossed the border at Rorke's Drift, and although the justification given for this later was the obvious aggressive intent of that column - which had attacked and destroyed Sihayo's homestead on 12 January - the decision may also have been influenced by the knowledge that renegade members of the Zulu Royal House were serving with that column among the NNC.

The king did not burden his commanders with detailed instructions beyond a general admonishing to be wary of entrenched British positions but did offer one crucial political caveat. Throughout the war, Cetshwayo was keen to point up the fact that it was the British, not he, who were the aggressors, and that he was fighting only in defence of his own country; now, with the shooting war about to break out in earnest, the king instructed Ntshingwayo, if he could, to engage the British on terms which clearly reinforced this point. Although the king's assurances, made in captivity after the war, that he had instructed his commanders to fight only after they had first talked to the enemy, have a decidedly artless air about them, the point remains, and the terms of engagement were probably well understood by Ntshingwayo - the amabutho were to destroy or drive out the British, but preferably in circumstances which played to Cetshwayo's political advantage (2).

This was an instruction which created an air of hesitancy which contrasted sharply with the mood within the army, and which deepened as the army moved through an uncertain political landscape towards the border - and confrontation with the British.

Moving slowly, so as not to tire them men - and it is noteworthy that Ntshingwayo eschewed the horses ridden by many Zulu officers, and walked alongside his warriors - the army reached the eastern flanks of the Siphezi mountain on 20 January. That same day, Lord Chelmsford advanced from his base at Rorke's Drift to Isandlwana, and the two armies lay only about twenty miles apart. Both sides had suffered from a wave of wet weather which had passed over them over the preceding days, the rain hampering the movements of Lord Chelmsford's wagons and chilling the Zulus in their open bivouacs to the bone. And while the Zulus had at least a working knowledge of the British whereabouts, Lord Chelmsford had almost no clue as to the Zulu movements.

Neither, of course, had much idea of the other's intentions, and while historians have traditionally picked over Lord Chelmsford's musings, and the reasons for his decisions of the next forty-eight hours, it is fair to say that similar questions also pre-occupied Ntshingwayo as the two armies groped their way towards each other.

From Siphezi mountain, Isandlwana lay directly to Ntshingwayo's front. Chelmsford had chosen his ground to afford himself a view across more than ten miles of open country

ahead, and unless Ntshingwayo was prepared to commit himself to a very conspicuous attack in the open - something which was largely precluded by the king's instructions - that line of approach had effectively been denied to the Zulus. Instead, Ntshingwayo might shift his line of advance south-west, towards his left front, and, passing behind the line of the Magogo and Silutshane hills, enter the Mangeni valley somewhere near its head, passing then down behind the bulk of the Hlajakazi and Malakatha range until emerging on the Mzinyathi downstream of Rorke's Drift. This was the option Chelmsford himself feared, yet it had several disadvantages to the Zulu high command, not least of which was that it would commit the army to an aggressive strike across the border into Natal - something which was again prohibited by the king's instructions.

Another under-rated disadvantage of taking this route was that it would pass through the territory of the Sithole people, whose loyalties were uncertain in the eyes of the high command. While Henry Francis Fynn Jnr's assertion that Cetshwayo had wanted to make the Sithole inkosi, Matshana kaMondise, leader of the entire army is unlikely to be correct - Matshana lay outside the trusted circle of established Zulu generals - there is no doubt Matshana was a royal favourite, and the army had probably been told to co-operate with him, as was often the case when local amakhosi could furnish valuable intelligence (3). However, the very factors which made Matshana a royal favourite had made him the object of some suspicion among the army's leaders; the Sithole had once been trusted allies of the Zulu, but circumstances had contrived to place them beyond the kingdom's borders, and Matshana had been born in Natal. Here, twenty years before, he had fallen foul of the colonial authorities and had fled to Zululand where Cetshwayo had welcomed him as something of a prodigal son. The king had sealed the bond by giving Matshana two of his sisters in marriage but to many high-born Zulus he remained an outsider. They feared that, when push came to shove, he might abandon his new loyalties and place himself once more under colonial influence. Ironically, and at about the same time, Lord Chelmsford too was wondering which way Matshana might jump but Matshana, having had rather too much experience of colonial rule for his liking, had no intention of finding himself in that position again.

Any wariness of Sithole loyalties must have been heightened on the 21st with any reports which came in to suggest that the British were beginning an extensive sweep of the Mangeni area. With the Sithole perhaps compromised any move to his left must have seemed increasingly unattractive to Ntshingwayo. Instead, he ordered that Matshana and his followers join the main army at Siphezi but, having sent out the instruction, he began preparations to move the amabutho without waiting for them to arrive. On the evening of the 21st, the army moved cautiously north-west, through the dangerously open country between Siphezi and the Ngwebeni valley. This was a shift to the Zulu right front, and it took it into the more familiar territory of the amaQungebeni, whose inkosi, Sihayo, was serving on the Zulu staff. Of course, this area was not entirely secure either, since Chelmsford had ravaged the amaQungebeni homesteads on the 12th, but it placed the main army much closer to the British camp at Isandlwana and eliminated many of the dangerous variables associated with the Mangeni route.

In the meantime Matshana's fighting men had emerged from their hiding places in the Mangeni bush and had moved up the course of the Mangeni river towards the rendezvous with the main army at Siphezi. It was probably the Sithole vanguard - there are no traditions of royal amabutho being involved - whom Dartnell's patrol encountered on the evening of the 21st. The initial encounter had apparently taken place a few miles east of the head of the Mangeni gorge, and Dartnell's Mounted Police had fallen back to join the rest of his command on the eastern edge of the Hlajakazi heights. They had been shadowed by the Sithole, who showed themselves somewhere on the flanks of Magogo, prompting Dartnell to probe their numbers; when the Zulus retired, apparently hoping to draw Dartnell after them, Dartnell broke off his engagement and opted to spend the night on Hlajakazi.

It is the reaction of the Zulus on this occasion which gave rise to the widespread impression among the British that they were being lured into a trap. Quite probably they were - the Zulus seem to have been trying to draw Dartnell's force towards Siphezi, where the Sithole believed the entire Zulu army was waiting for them. Later, it suited the British to

believe that this was part of a much more audacious plan - an attempt to split the British forces by luring Lord Chelmsford out from Isandlwana to support Maj. Dartnell's force. Such a view allowed the British the comfort of thinking that they had been out-manoeuvred by a wily and cunning enemy who, by so doing, appeared in some undefined way to be playing unfairly - but it is a view which poses almost insurmountable problems of interpretation.

For one thing, such a plan would have required a remarkable degree of planning and co-ordination, conceived, presumably, after the army had arrived at Siphezi on the 21st and before any direct and personal contact with Matshana had taken place. It would have meant co-ordinating the movements of thousands of men across more than twenty miles of broken country, and it would have required, too, an almost supernatural insight into British intentions. It is worth noting that no one in the Zulu command had experience of fighting British troops before, and only the more senior among them had even fought against the Boers. The Zulus had nothing at this stage of the war upon which to base assumptions about British behaviour - and they certainly had no reason to suppose the apparently cumbersome British column would divide and part of it attempt a rapid advance. Indeed, during the 1838-40 campaign against the Boers it had been more usual for the Boers, on encountering the enemy, to retire to fortified wagon-laagers - a situation which the Zulu commanders would have been unwilling to risk in 1879. Indeed, Lord Chelmsford's decision to support Dartnell on the morning of 22nd January was one that mystified contemporary commentators and has aroused the criticism of historians ever since - and there is no reason whatever to suppose that the Zulus had second-guessed him either.

In this regard a Zulu account of the skirmishing at Mangeni on the 22nd is instructive. The Sithole continued to move up the Mangeni towards Siphezi throughout the day, presumably expecting to find the army waiting for them there. Instead all they found were stragglers and late-comers following in its wake, and British observers that morning noted the number of men apparently drawing together and waiting on the slopes of Siphezi. Among them was Matshana himself, who emerged with his personal attendants just as Chelmsford was organising his first sweep of the morning across Magogo hill;

Matshana, when he went with his force towards the General, had not the least idea that they were enemies; but, seeing some of the natives attached to the General's force, he thought it was the Zulu Army, for the Zulu *Indunas* had ordered him to come and join them at the rendezvous near the place where the Whitemen were. So he went on, not knowing that the enemy was there, and on foot, a little ahead of his men, his horse being led by the bridle. As they drew near, they heard the sound of the enemy's firearms. His people tried to make him go back, and they too fired, so that Matshana might have an opportunity of escaping. So he mounted, and rode off, but all his force died...(4).

There is little room in that image of Matshana, mistaking the NNC for the royal amabutho he was summoned to join, and only narrowly escaping with his life, to argue the scenario of a carefully planned diversion.

But if the Zulus had not deliberately decoyed Chelmsford away from Isandlwana, is it possible that, on the morning of the 22nd, on finding the camp in a weakened state, Ntshingwayo seized the opportunity to launch a sudden attack?

It is certainly possible - but if so, not one Zulu account, collected then or across the lifetime of the Zulu participants thereafter, from all across the country and from men of rank and commoners alike, specifically and categorically stated the fact.

Indeed, while it is tempting to presume that the denuded state of the camp at Isandlwana was obvious to the Zulus, it may not have been so at all. Certainly, the British progress had been watched by those members of the border communities hiding out in caves or in the bush locally since the attack on Sihayo's homestead on the 12th. Yet during that time there had been various fluctuations in the British strength - movements up and down the road - and Ntshingwayo would no doubt have wanted a more specific and up-to-date report of his own. Certainly, Zulu scouts were seen - ironically, by Lord Chelmsford himself - on the

iNyoni heights on the evening of the 21st, but the time available for close observation was limited before darkness fell. Chelmsford only made the decision to reinforce Dartnell in the early hours of the following morning, and the troops were deliberately assembled as quietly as possible so as not to alert any Zulu scouts nearby. They were on the road to Mangeni before dawn broke, and much of their movement must have been further masked by the mist which hung in the valley until 8 or 9 a.m. - by which time Chelmsford had reached Dartnell. Certainly, scouts from the main army were watching the camp from first light, but while some differences from the night before were probably obvious - the number of men moving about among the tents - others aspects remained the same. Chelmsford had not taken the baggage wagons or tents apportioned to his command - they still stood at Isandlwana as they had the night before. Altogether, the reports reaching Ntshingwayo must have stressed a subtle and unsettling shift in the British dispositions - yet it cannot have been at all clear what they signified. In this respect an account by Mehlokazulu kaSihayo, who had been sent out with a group of scouts that morning, is suggestive. Mehlokazulu reported that the camp seem 'quiet', and 'on reporting to Tshingwayo, he said 'All right, we will see what they are going to do'(5).

In that image of an unusually quiet camp can one read some feeling of the Zulu confusion regarding the British intentions? And in Ntshingwayo's response - let's wait and see, then - can we discern a juggling of a realistic need to decide an appropriate military response balanced against a political need for caution?

It should not be assumed, either, that Ntshingwayo knew exactly where the missing British troops - whoever and however many they were - had gone. It's certainly true that the passage of an entire British battalion and four guns would have left an obvious spoor in the long summer grass along the northern foot of the Hlazakazi ridge, but it would have needed close observation to draw conclusions from it. An intriguing reference from Hamilton Browne - sent back to Isandlwana mid-morning with his battalion - suggests that the main army was seeking exactly that intelligence, but did not always get it;

... at 10 o'clock myself and Adjutant-Lieutenant Campbell, who were riding some distance in front, flushed two Zulus. They bolted and we rode them down. Campbell shot his one, but I captured mine and on Duncombe coming up we questioned him.

He was only a boy and frightened out of his life so that when we asked him where he came from, he pointed to the line of hills on the left flank of the camp saying 'he had come from the King's big army.' 'What are you doing here?' we asked, to which he replied 'that he and his mate had been sent by their induna to see if any white men were among the big hills' we had just left, 'but as they were sitting resting under the shade of a rock they did not hear the white men and were caught.' (6).

No doubt there were other scouting parties, and there are certainly references to other movements by small Zulu parties across the plain, but it is possible to argue that it took much of the morning for Ntshingwayo to build up a picture of the British movements, and that it was probably so incomplete that it prevented any rapid or reliable interpretation. Of course, the Sithole knew by 9 a.m. at the latest that the British had infiltrated the Mangeni hills in numbers, yet it must have taken them time, too, to carry this information to the Ngwebeni. If they made it at all, for by that time Lt. Col. Russell's Mounted Infantry had taken up a position in the open country to the north of Silutshana, squarely across the line of communication.

All of these factors fit nicely with Cetshwayo's assertion that his officers at Ngwebeni then convened a command meeting to discuss the situation. Although, with some 25,000 men poised so close to the enemy camp, it might seem an odd decision to opt for a further delay, it is entirely in keeping not only with the King's order to engage the enemy only in circumstances which painted the British clearly as the aggressor, but also reflects a cautious approach to an unclear strategic situation.

There was, of course, a further and well-known reason for delay; the 22nd was the night of the new moon, a time when dark and mysterious supernatural forces lurked dangerously close to the word of the living, an inauspicious time to launch an attack. Zulu spiritual beliefs

seldom get the credit they are due in shaping political and military events, yet the kingdom's history abounds in incidents when they had a decisive effect on decisions. As J.Y. Gibson, who wrote one of the earliest histories of the kingdom put it,

The 22nd of January was the day of the new moon. She was to begin her new life at about eight minutes before two o'clock in the afternoon, and her 'dark day' was considered by the Zulus as unfitting for an engagement in battle. It was therefore their design to defer attack till the 23rd. But the events of the day were destined to be guided rather by accident than by the will of those in direction... (7).

Gibson's description is not to be discounted lightly, for although not present at the battle himself his sources included many Zulu who were, including Prince Ndabuko kaMpande and Zibhebhu kaMaphitha, both of whom were privy to the decisions made by the command council. A delay until the morning of the 23rd had other advantages too - it allowed the army to rest after its recent march, it demonstrated a proper sense of restraint in keeping with the king's policies, it gave further time to access the British intentions - and first light, the so-called 'horns of the morning', was in any case a favourite time of attack.

So what, then, of the mysterious Zulu movements between the Ngwebeni valley and Isandlwana on the morning of the 22nd? Gibson, again, adroitly points out the disparity between the high command's intentions and the needs of the men in the ranks;

The year was one of scarcity. Many had little food to bring with them; others had travelled far and such little supplies as they had taken with them from their homes were exhausted. Hunger prevailed amongst them, and foraging parties were early astir to gather what could be found in deserted mealie fields ... There had been much agitation in camp...(8).

Certainly, the amabutho were aware by first light, if they had not been before, of their proximity to the British camp, and after days of focussing on the coming battle it would prove difficult to restrain them. This became even more problematic when the sound of distant firing drifted across the bivouac from the direction of Mangeni. The topography around Isandlwana has a curious effect on the perception of sound, the dips and hollows creating sound shadows while the hills reflect noise back from apparently unconnected directions. Several in the British camp noted the phenomenon, firmly convinced at first that the firing was originating not at Mangeni but many miles away, from Col. Wood's column to the north. It is not surprising then that, in their excited state, some of the Zulus were convinced that fighting at Isandlwana had already begun;

On the morning of the 22nd January there was no intention whatever of making any attack on account of the superstition regarding the state of the moon, and we were sitting resting when firing was heard on our right, which we at first imagined was the iNobamakosi engaged, and we armed and ran forward in the direction of the sound. We were soon told, however, that it was the white troops fighting Matyana's people...(9).

The amabutho who pushed forward from the valley, the uNokhenke and uKhandempemvu, were large ones, more than enough to account for the masses of several thousand men observed by the British picquets and vedettes posted along the edge of the iNyoni escarpment. At one point a large force occupied the sky-line to the west of the iThusi high-point, forcing the British vedettes off the ridge and down onto the plain below. In the camp Col. Pulleine wisely stood his men too, yet there seems to have been no undue excitement among the British, and indeed Lt. Curling of the Artillery noted that the Zulus seemed unwilling to attack, and that this confirmed impressions gained in the recent Cape Frontier campaign that that African troops were generally unwilling to commit to a frontal assault in the open. The Zulus retired from the skyline and were seen dispersing in several directions across the heights surely before Bvt. Col. Durnford's troops arrived at Isandlwana.

Since there is no evidence on the point it is impossible to know whether the Zulus had retired on seeing Durnford's approach, whether they had returned willingly on finding themselves unsupported by the rest of the army, or whether they had been driven back by their officers. A combination of all three reasons is highly likely.

What is certain is that there were only small bodies visible on the heights, all of them retiring towards the Ngwebeni, some of them driving cattle, when Durnford's troops, under the command of Lts. Roberts and Raw, moved up onto the ridge and gave pursuit.

It is true that the upland extending north from the iNyoni escarpment is undulating, and that there are hidden hollows and depressions where a skilled force like the Zulus, at home on their own turf, might hide even moderately sized detachments of men - Chelmsford's staff had observed that very fact the night before. Yet it stretches the imagination to believe that an entire army of 25,000 men could have been pushed forward in battle array without this being apparent to British observers somewhere. And had they done so, of course, it pre-supposes that Ntshingwayo had already decided to commit his men to the attack before their presence had been discovered.

Several important accounts suggest that he had not. One of the Zulus who had left the bivouac that morning with the uNokhenke was adamant that it had returned to its original position there before being discovered by Raw's men;

... returning to our original position. Just as we sat down again, a small herd of cattle came past our lines from our right, being driven down by some of our scouts, and just when they were opposite the umCijo regiment, a body of mounted men on the hill to the west, galloping evidently trying to cut them off. When several hundred yards off they perceived the umCijo and, dismounting, fired one volley at them and retired. The umCijo at once jumped up and charged, an example which was taken up by the uNokenke and uNodwengu on their right and the inGobamakhosi on their left... (10).

According to the king himself, his commanders were still in the middle of their command discussion when that encounter took place;

My chiefs were again consulting about sending to the English before fighting but suddenly they heard the roar of guns and saw the dust and smoke rising up to heaven, and our foragers rushing back to camp, and saying 'that the cavalry was near'. Then the chiefs, knowing that the work of death was being executed, broke up their meeting and went to their different regiments. (11).

For it to be true that Ntshingwayo had already committed the army to attack, this statement would need to be discounted entirely.

There are other reasons, too, to suppose that the Zulu reaction was a spontaneous one. After the excitements of the morning the desire to decide the issue with the enemy was intense, and in an account by a young Zulu boy, Muziwento - whose father Zibana fought in the battle - we find a strong hint that the absence of so many senior regimental commanders, away debating with Ntshingwayo, facilitated a break-down of discipline;

At once [Raw's men] found themselves in the close embrace of the Khandempemvu even as tobacco [is mixed] with aloes. The Zulu generals forbade [an attack], seeking to help the white men. But the regimental officers mutinied. They marched forward; they went into battle. They [Raw and the Zulus] were rolled along together towards Isandlwana...(12).

It is worth noting that there are other small circumstantial details, too, which support the idea that the army was not yet in battle array. As Gibson noted, foragers had been sent out that morning to pillage abandoned fields and homesteads for provisions. Such men were not the young herd-boys of cinematic myth but rather men picked for their fitness, courage and resourcefulness. It was one such party that Raw had pursued into the Zulu lines; if the troops

had already been marshalled for attack such men would have been recalled or expected to make their way back as quickly as possible since the same individuals played an important role as skirmishers during and assault. If the Zulu army had already moved forward, too, it seems unlikely that foragers would still have been operating in an increasingly narrow stretch of open country between the Zulu forces and the British camp.

It should be noted, however, that none of the accounts by Durnford's men who were there named the topographical features where that first encounter took place - indeed, they would not have known them. There is, then, some room for debate as to where the encounter exactly occurred - although the references by Raw, Hamer and Nyanda to a 'hill' or 'ridge' suggest a more pronounced feature than the more subtle undulations which lie between the iNyoni escarpment and the headwaters of the Ngwebeni. And, if the 'warrior of the ?' is to be believed, that encounter must have taken place somewhere on the high ground overlooking the bivouac.

There is another telling feature which suggests that the Zulus had not already begun the attack when Raw stumbled across them. The great rituals undertaken at oNdini a few days before, designed to bind the army together and protect it from spiritual harm, had been steadily leaking potency with each day that passed, and it was usual practise to top them up with a final application of medicines immediately before launching an attack. No such application took place among the majority of the amabutho at Isandlwana, and indeed after the battle one of the king's favourites, Sitshitshili kaMnqandi, bitterly reproached Ntshingwayo on that account, blaming the heavy casualties on his failure to do so. Yet, even as the amabutho rushed forward, Ntshingwayo and his officers struggled to restrain part of the army - in effect the reserve - to perform these ceremonies. This inconsistency can only be explained by the fact that the attack began spontaneously, without the proper preparation which would have been applied to the entire army had a decision to attack been made. Even if Ntshingwayo had fully recognised the extent of the British dispersment at Isandlwana that morning at decided to attack, he would first have called the amabutho together and prepared them; that he did not is a clear indication that no such decision had been made.

In the end, then, after days in which both sides pondered the whereabouts and intentions of the enemy, the battle began in a way which neither of them had anticipated. It's probably fair to say, however, that chance played more to the advantage of the Zulus; Ntshingwayo had at least been considering his options all morning, and Raw's encounter freed him from the constraints of the king's orders. The Zulu commanders were able to react more quickly to the dramatic change in circumstances, and thereby to re-assert something of their authority and to impose a common direction on the attack. Watching from the hollows at the foot of Isandlwana, their British counterparts could only react as the great catastrophe unfolded around them.

FOOTNOTES

- (1). This article is intended to present a basic framework for understanding the complexity of the Zulu response; some aspects still require further investigation, and Professor John Laband and I are in the process of examining some with a further publication in mind.
- (2). See the king's account of his own policies in Webb, C. de B., and Wright, J.B., *A Zulu King Speaks; Statements made by Cetshwayo kaMpande on the History and Customs of His People*, University of Natal Press, 1978.
- (3). Henry Francis Fynn Jnr, *My Recollections of a Famous Campaign and Great Disaster*, Natal Witness 22 January 1913.
- (4). Account by Magema Fuze - one of Bishop Colenso's informants - in Vijn, Cornelius, *Cetshwayo's Dutchman*, London, 1880.
- (5). Account quoted in Colenso, F.E., and Durnford, Lt. Col. E., *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, London 1880.
- (6). Browne, George Hamilton, *A Lost Legionary in South Africa*, London, c. 1913
- (7). Gibson, J.Y., *The Story of the Zulus*, London, 1911.
- (8). Ibid.
- (9). Account of an unnamed Zulu deserted recorded on 14 February 1879 by Hon. W.

Drummond of Chelmsford's intelligence staff. Published in the *Natal Witness* 24 February 1879.

(10). Ibid.

(11). Webb and Wright, *A Zulu King Speaks*.

(12). George H. Swinny, *A Zulu Boy's Recollection of the Zulu War and of Cetshwayo's Return*, London, 1884, reproduced with notes by C. de B. Webb in *Natalia* No. 8 December 1978.