

**Fire In The Sky;  
The Weather at Isandlwana, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1879**

**By Ian Knight**

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In the summer months in KwaZulu-Natal, dawn at Isandlwana can be a spectacular experience. Often, around 2 or 3 AM, a heavy mist will arise from the nearby river-valleys and from the beds of streams, hanging across the landscape like a dark blanket in the pre-dawn gloom. As the sun begins to rise behind the dark bulk of the Silutshana and Magogo hills to the east, the mist turns white with the growing light. Sometimes, the peak of Isandlwana stands out clear above it where it has settled in the valley, like an island in a sea of cotton-wool. Thin patches of high cloud in the sky above turn from their heavy overnight grey to a delicate flower-pink with the sunrise and the early rays fall square on the enigmatic face of Isandlwana. As the new day begins to warm, the mist dissolves, shrinking back and lingering for a while in the stream beds, or draped languidly across the hill-tops. For a while Silutshana and Magogo cast shadows across the plain almost as far as Isandlwana itself, and the air can be surprisingly chilly; then, suddenly, the sun is clear of the skyline and the air responds to the sudden heat, the last of the mist giving way to the swirling currents of convection.

Usually, what follows is a hot day, so hot that a heavy torpor settles over the landscape by the middle of the morning driving animals and people alike into the nearest shade, the air still and quiet, a silence broken only by the rhythmic whir of insects. Temperatures over 30° centigrade are not uncommon, and the effect on anyone unused to being out in them can be uncomfortable - unprotected skin, like the tip of your nose, the tops of your ears or the back of your neck, can turn red and painful in an hour or so. Sweat collects in your hat-band and dribbles down into your eyes and you feel the need to drink frequently. Unless you are very fit, after a few hours walking in these conditions you begin to feel tired, your boots knock more often against the rocky boulders and the air, sluggish in the undisturbed valleys, seems old and dusty.

All in all, it presents hardly an ideal context for the extreme physical and emotional demands produced by battle. Yet, for all they were preoccupied with desperate measures, there is a surprising degree of consistency among the accounts of veterans of the Isandlwana campaign that that is exactly what conditions were like on 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1879.

The mist was most noticeable for the troops of Darnell's command who had spent the night on the heights above the head of the Mangeni valley. It had not been a comfortable night for nerves had been strained by the glimpsed presence of a Zulu force somewhere on the flank of nearby Magogo at sunset the previous evening, and during the night the auxiliaries of the Natal Native Contingent, in particular, had suffered a number of false alarms. Many men had not slept and had been acutely aware of the night ticking by, waiting for dawn to bring some clarity to the situation, and with it the hope of relief. Their experiences had no doubt sharpened their awareness of their surroundings, for both Lt. Henry 'Charley' Harford, staff officer to the 3<sup>rd</sup> NNC, and the journalist Charles Norris-Newman commented on the mist that hung across the area at daybreak. 'Heavy mists hung over the tops of the hills', recalled Harford, 'until the sun appeared and cleared the atmosphere' (1). 'Dawn broke the next day, Wednesday, January the 22<sup>nd</sup>', said Norris-Newman, 'with heavy mists on the tops of the Indhlazakazi, Upindo and Isilulwane hills' (2).

Captain Henry Hallam-Parr, of the column staff, noted that 'it was barely light' when Lord Chelmsford's detachment left the camp at Isandlwana that same morning to support Darnell but that the Conical Kopje (amaTutshane) soon loomed out of the gloom, and that by the time the troops had reached Mangeni it was getting light and 'the sun came up to the right front ... and the morning became very hot, the sky perfectly clear, and only the faintest breath of wind'(3). Henry Francis Fynn Jnr, son of the famous pioneer of Natal, the magistrate at Msinga who was unofficially attached that day to Lord Chelmsford's staff, confirmed that 'on nearing the Nhlazakazi and Qudine wagon ascent the fog was rather dense'(4).

For both Chelmsford's men and Dartnell's command, once they had united, the day would prove demanding as they spread out across the hills above the head of the Mangeni gorge and began to sweep them, looking for signs of the Zulu force spotted the night before. By mid-morning, as the sun rose steadily in the sky, the heat was beginning to take its toll. The men of George Hamilton-Browne's battalion of the NNC first swept across the summit of Magogo hill only then to be ordered to march back down the track towards Isandlwana to assist in packing up the camp. By the time they were on the road, Browne noted that 'the time was then 9 a.m. on the 22<sup>nd</sup> January. We marched very slowly on, the day was intensely hot, and my white non-coms, who were on foot very fagged'(5). Certainly Hallam-Parr's observation that the sky was clear seems to be confirmed by Chelmsford's ADC who, about 10 AM, was sent up the slope of Magogo to observe the unfolding events. Although Milne's view towards Isandlwana was blocked by the bulk of Silutshana off to his right - which shuts out any view of the iNyoni heights - Milne clearly had no trouble with visibility, reporting that to the west 'I could see the camp' - and clearly enough with the aid of a telescope to distinguish that 'all the cattle had been driven in close around the tents' - while to the east a force of Zulus could clearly be seen 'now assembled at the foot of the Isepezi hill'(6).

Later, sometime in the early afternoon (he puts the time at about 11a.m., but most sources agree the battle did not begin at Isandlwana until after noon) Browne noted something usual on that clear day - a puff of smoke bursting against the face of the iNyoni escarpment. 'Presently another puff and in a moment I knew they were bursting shells. Not a cloud was in the sky, and I knew that the black shadow resting on the hills must be the Zulu army moving down to attack the camp' (7). Browne sent an urgent message back to Lord Chelmsford at Mangeni, and after consulting with his officers decided to withdraw his men to the security of a stony ridge lying next to the road and which they had passed a mile or two before. By the time they reached it they were feeling the effects of the heat all the more, their growing anxiety no doubt adding to their discomfort. 'There was no shade', recalled Hamilton Browne as his men waited tensely for Lord Chelmsford's return, 'and the sun shone like a ball of fire' (8).

As Browne's men watched, the tragedy at Isandlwana unfolded before them. Few of those who fought and survived the battle referred afterwards to the weather - no doubt they had other things on their mind - although for Walter Stafford of the 1<sup>st</sup> NNC the stifling temperature remained a feature of his recollection of the battle for nearly sixty years after the event. 'In conclusion', he wrote in an account written sometime towards the end of 1938, 'I firmly hope that Isandlwana' [i.e. the anniversary] of 1939 will not be as hot as January 22<sup>nd</sup> 1879' (9).

The only dissenting voice is that of Henry Fynn, who thought that the day had remained 'foggy' throughout and that it was 'a dark, dull day'. However, since he admitted that 'it subsequently transpired that there was a total eclipse of the sun', he was probably referring to the conditions which prevailed specifically at that time, and which later dominated his memory (10). At Mangeni, Trooper Fred Symons noted that there was a heavy stillness in the air in the early afternoon which he attributed to the eclipse (11).

At Isandlwana the lack of wind undoubtedly contributed to the confusion of the battle, particularly in the later stages when the Zulus finally stormed the tents. The sudden violent milling of thousands of men and animals in a relatively confined area threw up a cloud of dust which, mingling with the smoke produced by rifle-fire, hung over the camp, exaggerating the reduced light levels of the eclipse and producing nightmarish conditions in which it was impossible for those involved to see clearly what was going on.

The day passed and it was not until the sun was setting that Lord Chelmsford - who had inevitably been delayed by the need to regroup his scattered command at Mangeni - arrived back at Isandlwana. There were further delays as he deployed his men ready to meet any resistance the Zulus might offer, and it was quite dark by the time he reoccupied the camp. The evening appears to have been clear but it was a moonless night - the night of the new moon - and several observers commented on how dark it was during the early part of the night. Thunderstorms in the evening are a common enough phenomenon in the KwaZulu-Natal summer, and indeed both armies had suffered their effects over the previous few days

so it is likely that there was some cloud cover early that night. According to Hallam-Parr, 'the first part of the night was very black and dark, but about one a.m. the sky cleared and the stars shone out' (12). Several who were there recalled how inky that early blackness was - it was quite literally too dark for a man to see a hand in front of his face. Hallam-Parr recalled distributing rations and having a testy exchange with a man who was reluctant to collect food in his hat - although at arm's reach, Hallam-Parr had no idea who the man was. Charley Harford of the NNC found himself at one point out looking for missing picquets and blundering now and then into figures of whose presence he was entirely unaware in the 'inky darkness', and whom, he realised afterwards, were probably exhausted Zulus returning from the pursuit of the fugitives (13). Lt John Maxwell of the NNC had a worse story to tell - checking picquets himself, he tripped over a rock and fell down a short slope. Putting his hands out in front to protect his face, he felt himself brought up short with his hands striking something mushy in front of him; not until Major Clery of the staff held up a lantern to see if he was alright did Maxwell realise he was lying with his wrists inside the body of a disembowelled soldier of the 24<sup>th</sup> (14).

And so the night passed, the dreadful oppressive darkness merely serving to exaggerate the troops' awareness of the overwhelming presence of so much death so close to hand. Dawn, when it finally came on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, seems to have broken a fine, clear day, at least during the morning - although it remained to be seen, as they stood to and began to press on back down the road to Rorke's Drift, what might await Chelmsford's command when they arrived there.

Notes;

(1). Harford's account can be found in *The Zulu War Journal of Col. H.C. Harford*, edited by Daphne Child (Pietermaritzburg and Durban, 1978) and expanded with additional material in *Harford* by David and Emma Payne (Tenterden, 2008).

(2). *In Zululand With the British Throughout the War of 1879*, Charles Norris-Newman, London 1880.

(3). *A Sketch of the Zulu and Kaffir Wars* Captain Henry Hallam-Parr, London, 1880.

(4). *My Recollections of a Famous Campaign and a Great Disaster* Henry F. Fynn, *Natal Witness*, 22 January 1913.

(5). *A Lost Legionary in South Africa* by George Hamilton Browne, London c. 1913.

(6). *Report of Proceedings of the 21<sup>st</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> January, 1879, from Lieut. Milne, RN*, National Archives, London.

(7). Browne, *Lost Legionary*.

(8). *Ibid.*

(9). Walter Stafford. One of a number of typescript accounts held in both the Talana Museum, Dundee, and the Campbell Collections of the University of Natal.

(10). Fynn, *My Recollections*.

(11). Symons Papers, Campbell Collections, copies also in Talana Museum.

(12). Parr, *Sketch*.

(13). Harford, *Journal/Harford*.

(14). *Reminiscences of the Zulu War*, by John Maxwell, Cape Town 1979.