

“The most perfect weapons in the world”

The Martini-Henry Rifle and the Anglo-Zulu War, 1879

By Richard West

‘The Martini-Henry rifles did great mischief.’¹ It is with typical British understatement that Bandsman Joseph Bands, of the 90th Light Infantry, describes the effects of the Martini-Henry rifle at the final battle of the Anglo-Zulu war, at Ulundi, on the 4th July, 1879. The Martini-Henry was in fact one of the most devastating weapons available at the time, due in particular, to its very high calibre and was to prove a real ‘man-stopper.’ The soldiers had such confidence in the Martini-Henry that it led to Edward Hutton, 3/60th Rifles remarking on the battle of Gingindlovu that ‘we all had the utmost confidence in our rifles, which were at that time the most perfect weapons in the world.’² However, the reputation of the rifle through the years has not always been so glowing. Historians have often emphasised its faults during the Zululand campaign, perhaps in an attempt to explain how veteran soldiers of the greatest Imperial power of the day could be defeated by a nation of perceived ‘savages’ on the slopes of the mountain of Isandlwana. Indeed the *Natal Mercury* commented on the British invasion force that ‘This army could not be beaten the world over.’³ This perhaps epitomises the feeling amongst residents of Natal, Colonial officials and high-ranking British officers. They were over-confident, stemming in part from the faith they had in their firearms.

Much historiography has reasoned that there must have been an abject failure of British equipment or personnel involved to bring about a defeat as catastrophic as Isandlwana. In particular the ammunition myth has emerged as a convenient explanation for both historians and Chelmsford in light of the battle.⁴ More recently however, as historians have re-addressed the issue, there is real appreciation for the quality of the Zulu army. This was an opinion voiced most strongly by the eminent David Rattray asserting that, ‘it was a great Zulu victory.’⁵

It is difficult to find soldiers from the Zulu war criticising their Martini-Henry as a poor weapon. Certainly there are minor criticisms regarding jamming and the smoke produced but generally accounts are full of praise.⁶ It is perhaps only in the light of the Sudanese campaign in the mid-1880s that the Martini-Henry began to gain bad press, in particular for over heating and jamming. Extensive source material is available on the Martini’s testing and performance evaluation during the Sudanese campaign from War Office documents. Skennerton⁷ documents the changes in British war material and Temple & Skennerton⁸ have

¹ Bandsman Joseph Banks’ letter to his wife dated 21st July, reproduced in Frank Emery (ed.), *The Red Soldier – Letters from the Zulu War, 1879*, (London, 1977) p235

² Captain Edward Hutton, an account of the progress of the relieving column, reproduced in Emery (ed.), *The Red Soldier*, 201

³ *Natal Mercury*, December 1879, in Adrian Greaves, *Crossing the Buffalo – The Zulu War of 1879*, (London, 2005) p116

⁴ Greaves, *Crossing the Buffalo*, p. 210

⁵ David Rattray, *Day of the Dead Moon*, Part 2

⁶ George Mossop, *Running the Gauntlet: Some Recollections of Adventure*, (Nelson, 1937) p25; Henry Hook, in Michael Glover, *Rorke’s Drift*, (London, 1975) p114

⁷ Ian Skennerton, *List of Changes in British War Material in Relation to Edged Weapons, Firearms and Associated Ammunition and Accoutrements*, Volume I 1860-1886, (Margate, 1980)

⁸ Temple & Skennerton, *A Treatise on the British Military Martini – The Martini-Henry 1869-c1900*, (Kilcoy, 1983)

produced a thorough treatise on the Martini with much detailed information. Norris-Newman⁹ was the war correspondent accompanying Chelmsford but produces little information on the Martini. Smith-Dorrien published an autobiography¹⁰ and this is useful, as he was one of the few survivors of the battle of Isandlwana and documents the ammunition problem. Lieutenant Chard and Surgeon Reynolds both leave accounts of Rorke's Drift, but it is Henry Hook VC who leaves us with the specific details of soldiers' activities. The glaring weakness in any examination of Zulu war literature is the lack of written Zulu sources. Only Bertram Mitford records narratives of a warrior at Isandlwana 'nearly as possible in his own words.'¹¹

The trouble with many secondary works is that many authors have not fired the weapon they comment upon. Firing the Martini-Henry is essential to understanding the weapon and its intricacies. As far as possible contemporary accounts have been followed whilst using secondary works from Lock & Quantrill, Greaves and Knight to illustrate or contrast points about the rifle. Guy's work on firearms in the Zulu Kingdom¹² proved valuable in establishing Zulu use of the Martini during 1879. David Rattray and Rob Caskie have proved an inspiration for much of my interest in the Zulu war and their works and help are extremely useful, with their intimate knowledge of the Zulu people. Neil Aspinshaw was enormously helpful and gave me the opportunity to closely examine and fire the various Martini-Henry rifles.

The Anglo-Zulu War, 1879, came about for complicated reasons. The British were pursuing a policy of Confederation in South Africa, encouraged by Lord Carnarvon, the Secretary of State for Colonies. He summoned Henry Bartle Frere to be British High Commissioner, who arrived in South Africa in April 1877. Shortly after, the Boer state of the Transvaal was annexed to Britain by Theophilus Shepstone, Secretary for Native Affairs, without a shot being fired.¹³ This now meant that the British inherited the problem of the 'disputed territory' between the Zulu kingdom and the Transvaal, a dispute in which they had previously supported the Zulu claim.¹⁴

The Zulu kingdom, bordering British Natal to its south and west and the Transvaal to its north and west (Fig. 1), was built on a system forged by Shaka, Chief of the Zulus from 1816 until his assassination in 1828. The Zulu were moulded by Shaka into a powerful military force and 'he absorbed many of the other groups in the area into the new Zulu military kingdom.'¹⁵ Shaka gave the Zulus their identity and customs which would last, in that form, just 63 years until the battle of Ulundi. Shaka was succeeded by his brother Dingane, whose reign coincided with the arrival of Voortrekkers in the region.¹⁶ The Zulus were taught a powerful lesson at Blood River, when attacking a defensive position manned by Boers with muskets. This lesson was to manifest itself in Cetshwayo's order to attack the British on the move when not fighting from prepared positions, where their Martini-Henry rifles would take their toll.

King Cetshwayo, King of the Zulus at the time of the British invasion in 1879, was crowned in a curious irony by Shepstone in 1873. Shepstone failed to continue with his support of the

⁹ Charles Norris-Newman, *In Zululand with the British Army*, (London, 1880)

¹⁰ Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, *Memories of 48 Years' Service*, (London, 1925)

¹¹ Bertram Mitford, *Through the Zulu country – Its Battlefields and its people*, (London, 1883)

¹² J. Guy, 'A Note on Firearms in the Zulu Kingdom with special reference to the Anglo-Zulu War, 1879, *Journal of African History*, XII, (1971)

¹³ Rattray, *Day of the Dead Moon*, Part 1

¹⁴ Adrian Greaves, *Isandlwana*, 2010, Ch2, p19

¹⁵ J. Guy, *The Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom*, (London, 1979) pxviii

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12

Zulus and claimed the 'disputed territory' for the British Empire. With the policy of Confederation underway, it was probably inevitable that war would come, but the British procrastinated, leading the Zulus on and in March 1878 set up a Boundary Commission to establish rights over the disputed territory. This was largely the doing of the Lieutenant-Governor of Natal, Henry Bulwer, and the Commission found largely in favour of the Zulus.¹⁷ Cetshwayo was restoring the military character of his nation, while Frere also had a new commander-in-chief of the army in South Africa, Lieutenant-General Frederic Thesiger, who replaced the incompetent Lieutenant-General Arthur Cunyngham, and concluded the ninth Frontier war with a British victory. Frere undoubtedly felt that Thesiger could provide quick victory against the Zulus, removing their military power and advancing the plans for confederacy. The modern breech-loading Martini-Henry would afford the British far superior arms to the Zulus and gave them full confidence of victory. Writing to Carnarvon on February 17th 1878, 'Frere laid particular stress on the destructive power of the new breech-loading Martini-Henry rifle against the massed rushes of the 'Kaffirs' – tactics that he assumed the Zulus would repeat in any future war.'¹⁸

The Zulu chief Sihayo provided a catalyst for an ultimatum; the stoning to death of two of his wives in full view of the Natal bank of the river. The ultimatum was issued without the sanction of the British Government on 11th December 1878, demanding total disbandment of the Zulu army and numerous changes to their way of life.¹⁹ Lieutenant-General Thesiger assumed the title Lord Chelmsford on his father's death, and on 12th January he invaded Zululand with his artillery, wagons, natives and redcoats armed with Martini-Henry Rifles. The war was to prove significant for the British, not least for the implications it had in South Africa, throughout the Empire and at home. The Anglo-Zulu war was the litmus paper upon which the Martini-Henry would be tested as an effective weapons system for the British army. After many years of testing on training grounds it would be put to the test on a major Imperial campaign. The Martini-Henry was Britain's tool of empire at the time of the Zulu war, as the British army served to enforce ideas of British Imperialism across the globe.

The Secretary of State for war, Edward Cardwell, remarked on 5th September 1874, 'I think everything has been done to secure that the Martini-Henry shall be issued in as perfect condition as possible to the troops. I agree with Sir John Adye, that the time has come for the issue, and approve the course which he suggests.'²⁰ Issues of the rifles and ammunition commenced in October 1874, having been first approved on July 17th 1874. The rifle had been adopted by the British service in 1871 and the issuing ended a ten year process of design, development and trial, after it had been agreed that the British army should be armed with breech-loading rifles in 1864. It was the first breech-loading rifle carried by the British Army and was the product of a prize-winning competition set up by the War Office to find the best weapon available.²¹ The result was that Mr Frederick Chevalier de Martini's action and Mr Alexander Henry's barrel were combined, and the Martini-Henry rifle was born. The Martini-Henry Mark II, as carried by the majority of the soldiers during the Zulu War, had these specifications; 4ft 1½'' in length, weighed 9lbs and fired black powder 0.45 calibre, 480 grain, Boxer Mark III cartridges.

¹⁷ Rattray, *Day of the Dead Moon*, Part 1

¹⁸ Saul David, *Zulu – The Heroism and Tragedy of the Zulu War of 1879*, (London, 2005) p34

¹⁹ Ron Lock, *Zulu Conquered: The March of the Red Soldiers 1828-1884*, (Barnsley, 2010) p176

²⁰ Temple & Skennerton, *A Treatise on the British Military Martini- Henry*, 97

²¹ Brian Best, 'The Martini-Henry Rifle, Part 1', *The Journal of the Anglo-Zulu War Historical Society*, June 1998, p1

There is debate as to exactly which Mark of the Martini-Henry was carried by the Redcoats in the Zulu war. To take the 24th Regiment (Warwickshire's) as an example, the 1st battalion, were deployed to South Africa in 1875 and would have been issued with the Mark I version.²² The 2nd battalion and any new recruits leaving England after April 1877, when the Mark II was introduced would have carried the later weapon, the Mark I upgrade. Men sent out as reinforcements after Isandlwana may well have carried the full Mark II version. (Fig. 2) 'By 31st March 1878 about 260,000 Martini-Henry rifles will have been altered.'²³ It is therefore unclear as to the date the rifles would have been altered. Wilsey notes 'It is not absolutely clear to what extent the 1st battalion armourers might have been able to upgrade the rifles to Mark II standard (primarily a new trigger and tumbler assembly – Fig. 3) but it seems very likely they were not converted as the battalion was busy on operations and most conversions were carried out at RSAF Enfield.'²⁴ There is little doubt that these Mark I rifles would not have been upgraded as the armourers in the field were not able to complete this work.²⁵ This could only be done at Enfield.

This work will cover various aspects of performance of the Martini-Henry during the Zulu war and, in particular, attempt to separate the myths from the realities about the rifle. The rifle undoubtedly had certain flaws, but whether these flaws were serious enough to contribute to British defeats in the war is questionable and will be looked at in Chapter 1. The question of its reliability has certainly come under extra scrutiny as a result of the disaster at Isandlwana and the search for excuses in its wake. Chapter 2 will show that partly as a result of experiences in the Zulu war, the rifle would receive numerous developments in its short time as the standard issue rifle for the British army before it was replaced with the Lee-Metford magazine rifle in 1888. However, the Martini continued to serve Colonial troops and many were converted to .303 calibre.²⁶ Finally, in Chapter 3, the effects that the Martini-Henry had, as a consequence of bringing victory in the Zulu war, will be scrutinized. When considering the effects of the Zulu war it is important to remember that the fall out encompassed both the defeat at Isandlwana and the ultimate victory. Many consequences for the British stemmed from the defeat at Isandlwana rather than the final victory at Ulundi.

CHAPTER 1 – THE MARTINI-HENRY IN ZULULAND

'I am inclined to think that the first experience of the power of the Martini-Henrys will be such a surprise to the Zulus that they will not be formidable after the first effort.'²⁷ Lord Chelmsford thus confidently embarked on his invasion of Zululand. The Martini-Henry was a devastating weapon; its calibre is akin to an effective modern-day elephant gun. The soft-lead Boxer cartridge would flatten on impact, inflicting terrible wounds and causing huge trauma. Ian Knight describes its impact in detail;

The velocity of the bullet was such that when it struck a human target it tended to clip cleanly through unimpeded muscle and flesh but if it struck bone the lead flattened

²² Robert Wilsey, 'Battle in Zululand: The Martini-Henry,' *Classic Arms and Militaria*, Volume XV, Issue 1, p16

²³ Temple & Skennerton, *A Treatise on the British Military Martini*,

²⁴ Wilsey, 'Battle in Zululand' 1916

²⁵ Interview with Neil Aspinshaw, March 2011

²⁶ Dennis Lewis, *Martini-Henry .450 Rifles and Carbines*, (Tuscon, 1996) p8

²⁷ Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel H. E. Wood PMBurg 23 November 1878 in Laband (ed.), *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand campaign 1878-79*, (Army Records Society, 1994) p31

out, smashing its way through the body, splintering long bones or exploding the skull like a pumpkin.²⁸

Arthur Howard of N battery, Royal Artillery, present at Rorke's Drift due to sickness, describes the effects of their Martini-Henry rifles; 'when struck by the bullets, the niggers would give a spring in the air and fall flat down.'²⁹ It is perhaps understandable that Chelmsford wanted to fight the Zulus in the open; at Isandlwana he got the fight he desired.

Bartlett says of Chelmsford that 'Whilst he had been out picnicking, he had got the battle he wanted, the fight in the open, the Martini-Henry and the bayonet against the assegai. Unbelievably, the assegai had won.'³⁰ In the early hours of 22nd January 1879, Chelmsford made the fateful decision to split his force. He took over half the men and four of the six 7-pounder guns and marched from the camp at Isandlwana to support Major Dartnell, scouting to the south-east, who had reported a Zulu force too large for him to engage without reinforcements.³¹ While he was away the camp was completely annihilated and he was to remark on his return; 'I can't understand it, I left a thousand men here.'³² Chelmsford, buoyed by his early, but minor, victories had underestimated his enemies. Perhaps he had overestimated the advantage the Martini-Henry gave his soldiers?

The fact alone of superiority in our weapons tended to produce a feeling of confidence, and at the commencement of the Zulu campaign I do not think many officers felt the necessity of forming laagers, or even of entrenching, where artillery and Martini-Henry rifles were opposed to assegais and muzzle-loading small-arms.³³

Arthur Harness describes the feeling of the British officers in Zululand, including Chelmsford, but this was based upon a profound underestimation of Zulu capabilities. Cetshwayo also desired battle in the open, so that he could deploy the infamous 'horns of the buffalo' tactic. The British High Command were undoubtedly aware of this, but simply did not believe that two encircling horns consisting of 4,000 men each, could be deployed five miles apart as they were at Isandlwana. The battle completely changed British tactical thinking; from then on they would fight only from fixed positions. They had learned valuable lessons from Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift. The Martini-Henry did indeed give them an extreme advantage but that advantage was made yet greater when fighting from prepared positions. The main tactical blunder made by Colonel Pulleine, 1/24th, who had been left in charge of the camp at Isandlwana, was that his firing line was both too extended and too far from camp. This was in order to cover the swathes of 'dead' ground in front of the camp, which afforded an attacker huge cover. The topography of Zululand means that areas such as these are common and a weakness in any firearm is an inability to clear such 'dead' ground. (Figs. 4 & 5)

Aside from tactical miscalculations, a number of issues came to light during the Zulu war regarding the performance of the Martini-Henry. One considerable problem was that the barrel was liable to 'foul', not an inherent problem with the rifle but rather the black powder used in the Boxer cartridge. (Fig. 6) Once the barrel became fouled-up this led to increased recoil, which was already viewed as significant. Cleaning of the barrel, however, can be

²⁸ Ian Knight, *Zulu Rising: The Epic Story of iSandlwana and Rorke's Drift*, (London, 2010) p175

²⁹ Arthur Howard in a letter to his family, reproduced in Emery (ed.), *The Red Soldier*, p. 134

³⁰ W. B. Bartlett, *Zulu – Queen Victoria's Most Famous Little War*, (Stroud, 2010) p104

³¹ David Rattray, *Guidebook to the Anglo-Zulu war Battlefields*, (Barnsley, 2003) p40

³² Lord Chelmsford in Rattray, *Guidebook to the Anglo-Zulu war*, p. 52

³³ Arthur Harness in Sonia Clarke, *Invasion of Zululand 1879 – Anglo-Zulu War experiences of Arthur Harness; John Jervis, 4th Viscount St Vincent; and Sir Henry Bulwer*, (Johannesburg, 1979) p252

undertaken in around thirty seconds, significantly reducing the fouling. Sergeant Major Davies reported to the conference on Martini-Henry rifles in 1873 that he ‘finds considerable recoil’ and that although he ‘has not seen men cut about the face, hands have been injured.’³⁴ The increased kick can certainly lead to inaccurate shooting, particularly amongst new recruits or nervous men and this was brought up by Lieutenant Sharp. ‘The recruits and bad shots complain but the men get used to it. Nervous men also complain.’³⁵ The recoil is not shoulder breaking and the soldiers would have got used to it quickly. The recoil was perhaps a factor behind John Dunn’s remarks about the shooting of the British infantrymen at Gingindlovu explaining that ‘they were firing wildly in any direction.’ He goes further;

I was much disappointed at the shooting of the soldiers. Their sole object seemed to be to get rid of ammunition or firing so many rounds a minute at anything, it didn’t matter what.³⁶

This supports the fact that the soldiers he is referring to were young recruits who had not yet gained either experience of the rifle or the discipline required for steady volley-fire.

The number of rounds that the British infantry at this time could be expected to fire individually differed greatly from the actual number of volleys they would fire during a battle. British tactical principles encouraged a steady, well aimed volley where ‘the sudden crash of the volley created the impression in the minds of those on the receiving end that it was more destructive than it actually was.’³⁷ A modern, experienced user of the Martini-Henry could be expected to fire up to 10 aimed rounds a minute but it was more likely that the 24th were firing at a much slower, steadier rate. British soldiers at this time went through a sixteen-day programme in musketry training.

The first eight days are devoted to cleaning the rifle, theoretical principles, aiming drill, judging distance, and firing blank ammunition (80 rounds.) The other eight days are used for individual firing with sixty rounds, then ten each for volley firing, independent firing, and skirmishing.³⁸

Hence some soldiers during the Zulu war had fired only ten volleys before their first action and certainly this may explain some of the poor shooting in volleys noted during the Zulu war.

The rate of fire links in to an apparent problem with the over-heating of the barrel, as rapid fire can cause the barrel to become uncomfortably hot. When firing 40 rounds over the course of an hour, full military load, from a Mark I upgrade Martini; the barrel did become hot but not so as to affect the rate of fire. The black powder of the cartridge was also the source of the problem for the over-heating of the barrel. This was a problem which the 1/24th had learnt to overcome while campaigning in South Africa by binding damp raw-hide on the barrel which would shrink to offer protection for the hand. Again this was a problem that had been previously mentioned at the conference on the rifle. ‘I think it quite possible that the heating of the barrels on rapid firing, on a hot day especially, may prove a serious drawback to rapidity of fire. A barrel cannot be touched after 5 or 6 rounds on some occasions.’ This was

³⁴ The National Archives, Kew : SUPP 5/893, ‘Conference on Martini-Henry rifles; report and minutes 1873-76’, p7

³⁵ Ibid., p.8

³⁶ John Dunn, 2nd April, with Eshowe relief column reproduced in Emery (ed.), *The Red Soldier*, p. 203

³⁷ Ian Knight, ‘Old Steady Shots’ *The Martini-Henry Rifle, Rates of Fire and Effectiveness in the Anglo-Zulu War*, *The Journal of the Anglo-Zulu War Historical Society*, June 2002 p1

³⁸ Jackson, *Hill of the Sphinx*, (Kent, 1988) p75

the verdict of Superintendent Fraser in September 1873. Indeed, he mentioned at the time that a leather shield may be a 'necessary addition.'³⁹ The soldiers of the 1/24th found this to be so, during their South African campaigns.

The cartridge was the main source of problems for the Martini-Henry in Zululand. Henry Hook VC explains his problems and the root cause was the cartridge. 'We did so much firing that they became hot and the brass of the cartridges softened and the cartridge chamber jammed. My own rifle jammed several times and I had to work away with the ramrod till I cleared it.'⁴⁰ The cartridges were 'made of sheet brass, 0.004 inch in thickness' and this was liable to cause one of two problems.⁴¹ The thin brass would melt, causing a jam, as private Hook records or alternatively the rifle would 'cook' the round, discharging it early. When the cartridge melted to the barrel the extractor tended to tear the end off the cartridge meaning the soldier would have to work the cartridge out with his ramrod or knife. Taking the battles of Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift as examples, it is interesting to think about the implications of such a jam occurring. No soldiers from the firing line at Isandlwana survived the battle, therefore accounts are non-existent but the battle was fought in the middle of a 'hellish-hot day'⁴² and the line was engaged for a significant period of time. It is easy to imagine that there were jams on that day, meaning an eight to ten yard gap in the firing line. With the fire less concentrated, the 'morale-crushing' effects of the volleys could be lessened, giving the Zulu army an opportunity to resume their advance. In contrast, at Rorke's Drift, the men of 'B' company 2nd/24th were defending an area the size of five tennis courts, and later in the night of only two tennis courts. They fought shoulder to shoulder, any jammed rifle had less impact, and much of the hand-to-hand fighting was done with bayonets. On top of this, especially in the hospital, soldiers may have had a spare rifle to use from a patient. The ammunition was kept safe, still and dry in the storehouse at the post, rather than being on the move, in the ball-bags of marching men. Colonel Redvers Buller VC, accompanying Colonel Evelyn Wood's column invading from the north, produced a memorandum on the Boxer cartridge, as his men carried their ammunition in bandolier belts, criticising it in comparison to the Snider ammunition⁴³:

- a) By becoming bent in the front of the swell.
- b) By getting bruised more easily.
- c) The bullet is far more apt to drop out.
- d) It is far more liable to get damp. This I consider very important.

In addition, Buller notes that 'a good shower of rain would spoil at least one-third of the ammunition (Martini-Henry) exposed to it.'⁴⁴ Despite these apparent frailties in the Boxer cartridge, Evelyn Wood sent a cartridge to the Superintendent of the Royal Small Arms Factory from the field of Isandlwana and 'though it had been rather knocked out of shape, it entered the chamber without difficulty, and gave a muzzle velocity of 1,313 feet per second.'⁴⁵ Certainly there were flaws with the ammunition and the difficulties were largely ironed out by the introduction of the rolled brass cartridge described later, but the problems experienced in the Zulu war were accentuated by the barrel heating troubles. Clearly the rifle

³⁹ TNA: SUPP 5/893, 'Conference on Martini-Henry rifles', 11

⁴⁰ Henry Hook VC, quoted in Michael Glover, *Rorke's Drift*, (London, 1975) p114

⁴¹ p. 2661 in Ian Skennerton, *List of Changes*.

⁴² Rattray, *Day of the Dead Moon*, Part 2

⁴³ TNA: SUPP 5/896, 'Martini-Henry rifles and ammunition', part I, 7

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

was still capable of firing ammunition which was out of shape, showing it to be less sensitive than many have given credit for.

The ammunition supply and the boxes that carried it have provided a long-running debate for historians and it is one of the most discussed and controversial aspects of the campaign. The idea that the defeat at Isandlwana came about through the front line running out of ammunition, due to tricky boxes and pedantic Quartermasters is a myth, as Adrian Greaves believes, stemming from Chelmsford's need for an explanation for the disaster.⁴⁶ The mere logistics of the battlefield seem to offer a more credible explanation. It is known, from archaeological evidence, where the firing line was and also where the ammunition would have been in the wagon park, in the saddle of the mountain. I believe this distance to be almost one mile distant to Pope's 'G' company on the right flank and comfortably more to 'A' company commanded by Cavaye on the left flank.(Fig. 7) This is a considerable distance when carrying ammunition boxes which weigh close to 80lbs⁴⁷ when ground between is covered with erect army tents. Standard military practice of the time was to 'strike' a camp when under threat. That is, to kick out the tent peg so it collapses, thereby giving a clear field of view, no obstacles for one's own troops and not affording the enemy any cover. Striking of the camp was not done at Isandlwana and this was reported to Chelmsford by Lieutenant Milne after he was sent to check the camp with his telescope. Chelmsford was seeking signs of normality after news of Zulu movements around the camp 'and in that snapshot of the tents standing peacefully in their rows, Milne had given him just that.'⁴⁸ (Fig. 8) Given these considerable obstacles it is not impossible to imagine anything more than a slow trickle of extra ammunition making its way to the firing line.

Privates Williams and Bickley of the 1/24th described ammunition being taken out 'by bandsmen and wagon drivers and other unarmed people about the camp.' Despite this they go on to say that they kept firing 'till they got short of ammunition.'⁴⁹ This suggests that the supply was not good enough to keep up with the rate of fire of the 24th. It supports the idea of logistical difficulties with individual men running over a mile with only the ammunition they can carry. Lock and Quantrill make the valid point that 'With a wall of warriors only a few hundred yards beyond the firing line, the unarmed ammunition carriers must have been reluctant to venture in that direction.'⁵⁰ Williams and Bickley support the theory that attempts were made to get ammunition to the line but 'the greater part never got there.'⁵¹ Lieutenant Essex also mentions a mule cart being loaded to bring ammunition to the men, but this too would have had difficulty negotiating the tents.⁵²

Lieutenant Smith-Dorrien was a survivor of the battle of Isandlwana attached to the Royal Artillery, and was to become a full General in the First World War. He documents the ammunition supply problem, noting that 'no steps were taken until too late to issue extra ammunition from the large reserves we had in camp.'⁵³ However he also notes how he had collected numerous camp stragglers together 'where we broke them [ammunition boxes] open as fast as we could, and kept sending out the packets to the firing line.' However these packets contained just ten rounds each and would have soon been exhausted by the six

⁴⁶ Adrian Greaves, *Isandlwana*, 2010, Ch5, p69

⁴⁷ 2661 in Skennerton, *List of Changes*.

⁴⁸ Knight, *Zulu Rising*, p.310

⁴⁹ Williams and Bickley 1/24th in Ron Lock and Peter Quantrill, *Zulu Victory: The Epic of Isandlwana and the Cover-up*, (London, 2002) p324

⁵⁰ Lock and Quantrill, *Zulu Victory*, p.325

⁵¹ Williams and Bickley 1/24th in Lock and Quantrill, *Zulu Victory* p. 324

⁵² Lock and Quantrill, *Zulu Victory*, p.323

⁵³ Smith-Dorrien, *Memories of 48 Years' Service*, p.13

companies of the 24th on the firing line, especially as these trips may have taken twenty minutes to complete. Adrian Greaves regards Smith-Dorrien's claims with caution, as he 'wrote of an ammunition box difficulty nearly fifty years after the event. He obviously forgot that a few days after the disaster he wrote "I was out with the front companies of the 24th handing them spare ammunition"'. The myth grew to make an inexplicable defeat explicable.⁵⁴ The issue of logistics in getting the ammunition to the soldiers in the line was a serious problem and it is conceivable that the Zulu advance could have been made possible by a slackening in the fire.

In sharp contrast was the situation at Rorke's Drift, where not only was the battlefield tiny in comparison, but 'boxes of ammunition were placed behind us.'⁵⁵ Further to this there is no mention of the difficulty in opening the ammunition boxes themselves at Rorke's Drift. When discussing Isandlwana Donald Morris suggests that 'there were no extra screwdrivers' and that the lids were held down with copper bands and nine large screws, 'frequently rusted into the wood.'⁵⁶ This is not wholly accurate. The boxes were held shut with one securing screw and 'an arrow with the word "unscrew" is painted on the lid.'⁵⁷ In the heat of battle these boxes could be smashed open with relative ease. It seems farcical that a lack of screwdrivers could be responsible for such a catastrophic defeat and it is more likely that logistics and lack of foresight left the line short of ammunition. In any case there was a Martini-Henry action tool (Fig. 9), one issued for every five rifles, which had two screwdrivers and all NCO's at Isandlwana would have had one.⁵⁸ It is unlikely that extra ammunition in the firing line would have done anything but delay the defeat, as the extended firing line had been outflanked by the Zulu left horn, with the Zulu right horn already in position behind Isandlwana hill. Could the British troops have been unaware of these facts, as their view was obscured by smoke from their rifles?

When the Martini-Henry is fired it produces a small jet of flame and a puff of smoke, insignificant when fired alone, but when massed ranks fire collectively it can become a serious impediment to the sight of soldiers. (Fig. 10) George Mossop recalls that 'We were armed with Martini-Henry rifles charged with black powder, and each shot belched out a cloud of smoke; it became so dense that we were almost choked by it - and simply fired blindly into it.'⁵⁹ Supporting this Lieutenant Wilkinson wrote about the battle of Gingindlovu that 'we had repeatedly to cease fire to allow the smoke to clear off' and that the fire 'helped our daring opponents to get close up under cover of our smoke.'⁶⁰ Despite there being no mention of a problem with smoke during the trials of the Martini-Henry rifle,⁶¹ it was added to *Field Exercises – Rifle and Carbine Exercises and Musketry Instructions* issued by Horse Guards (War Office) in July 1879 and Lieutenant Wilkinson is quoted in the appendix in light of his experiences in the Zulu war. A warrior of the Umbonambi regiment notes the smoke twice, when speaking to Mitford. 'There was so much smoke that I could not see whether the white men had got through or not.'⁶² Once they got into camp he records that 'there was a great deal of smoke.'⁶³ Adrian Greaves supports this view; 'The 'smoke screen scenario' must

⁵⁴ Greaves, *Isandlwana*, 2010 ch5 p68-9

⁵⁵ Arthur Howard in Emery (ed.), *The Red Soldier*, p.133

⁵⁶ Donald Morris, *The Washing of the Spears*, (London, 1965) p372

⁵⁷ 1616 in Skennerton, *List of Changes*.

⁵⁸ Interview with Aspinshaw, March 2011

⁵⁹ Mossop, *Running the Gauntlet*, p. 25

⁶⁰ Lieutenant E. O. H. Wilkinson, writing a formal letter for publication in *The Eton College Chronicle*, in Emery (ed.), *The Red Soldier*, 1978

⁶¹ Temple & Skennerton, *A Treatise on the British Military Martini*.

⁶² Mitford, *Through the Zulu Country*, p.92

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.95

not be overlooked especially as the battlefield of Isandlwana sits in a wide bowl ringed by hills which, on a hot day, can be airless and still.⁶⁴ Again the relative significance of this factor must be brought to question. Whilst it would be an undoubted hindrance to the soldiers at Isandlwana, the Zulu right horn had already outmanoeuvred them to their rear, and if they were obscured from view during the retreat, it would have made no difference to the outcome. Clearly there was an effort on the British part to counter this problem as Greaves notes how the British tried to avoid the problem in the final battle of Ulundi; 'Volley firing by sections was employed throughout the battle although on several occasions it was necessary to wait between volleys for the smoke to clear.'⁶⁵

Perhaps one of the most important yardsticks in examining a rifle during a campaign is its range and accuracy. The Martini-Henry's lack of time in action comes to the fore here as ideas of its most effective range changed through the war. Chelmsford's Staff Officer, Crealock, had noted that towards the end of the ninth Frontier war a company of 2/24th tried to cut off a Xhosa retreat and 'at a distance of 1,300 yards were making good practice' with their Martini-Henrys.' This was the extreme range of the Martini-Henry and only superb marksmen could expect hits at that range although it was sighted to 1,400 yards on the increment sight bed. Volley firing was commenced at around 800 yards by the British army at this time, whilst they considered it to come into its most effective range at around 600 yards. *The 1884 Field Exercises Manual* stated that a trained soldier could be expected to hit a company at 'open files' at 800 yards 'without wasting ammunition.'⁶⁶

The truly effective range of the Martini in Zululand is more open to debate and the experiences of soldiers there was to begin to alter the thinking of British army officers about the best point to open fire. At Gingindlovu Captain Edmund Wyatt-Edgell, 17th Lancers noted that 'It was curious to remark the three separate lines of Zulu corpses which marked the respective ranges at which the death-dealing Martini-Henry's had swept their ranks.' He goes on, 'At 300 yards a thin boundary of black bodies and white shields might be traced; at 200 yards and 100 yards from our lines their walls of dead were more thick.'⁶⁷ The interesting point is that at 300 yards there was only 'a thin boundary of black bodies.' This could be for two reasons; either the Zulus were able to carry away their dead and wounded from beyond these ranges or the Martini was simply not as effective beyond these ranges. It is most likely that the soldiers were not the greatest shots. As mentioned already, John Dunn notes he was 'most disappointed at the shooting of the soldiers,'⁶⁸ coupled with the fact that wounded might have been able to crawl to cover and the Zulus may have collected their dead beyond these ranges. As Greaves notes 'the efficacy of the rifle was never in doubt but the wisdom of opening fire beyond 200 yards began to be questioned by the British front-line officers.'⁶⁹ The bullet is not stabilised until 400 yards, so its effectiveness at ranges up to 400 yards cannot be questioned.⁷⁰ Smith Dorrien notes of Isandlwana that the 24th 'possessed of splendid discipline and sure of success, they lay on their position making every round tell, so much so that when the Zulu army was some 400 yards off, it wavered.'⁷¹ This goes some way

⁶⁴ Greaves, *Crossing the Buffalo*, p. 132

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.310

⁶⁶ 1884 Field Exercises manual, quoted in Knight, 'Old Steady Shots', *The Journal of the Anglo-Zulu War Historical Society*, June 2002, p3

⁶⁷ Major Ashe & Capt. Wyatt Edgell, *The Story of the Zulu Campaign*, (London, 1880) p169

⁶⁸ John Dunn, 2nd April, with Eshowe relief column reproduced in Emery (ed.), *The Red Soldier*, p.203

⁶⁹ Greaves, *Crossing the Buffalo*, p.250

⁷⁰ Interview with Aspinshaw, March 2011

⁷¹ Smith-Dorrien, *Memories of 48 Years' Service*, p.14

to supporting the idea that the soldiers at Gingindlovu were not the same calibre as the ‘old, steady shots’⁷² of the 24th.

Although the firearms present in Zululand prior to the invasion were primarily obsolete European weapons, sold to Africa as European armies re-armed with breech-loaders⁷³, Zulus were able to capture Martini-Henry rifles. At Isandlwana they took a significant haul of around 1,000 Martini-Henry rifles and 500,000 rounds of ammunition.⁷⁴ At Intombe Drift in March, a company of the 80th Regiment under Captain Moriaty was wiped out whilst escorting ammunition to Evelyn Wood’s column. Edgell notes that after the battle of Khambula ‘There were also 326 firearms picked up, amongst which were recognised one Snider, belonging to the artillery, and 16 Martini-Henry’s belonging to the 24th and 80th Regiments.’⁷⁵ The capture of British Martinis might account for the greater effectiveness of the Zulu fire in the latter part of the war.⁷⁶ Certainly, Lieutenant Slade, present at Khambula, explained how the Zulus ‘made it very hot for him, with Martini-Henry rifles’ and he ‘never expected to leave that neck alive.’⁷⁷ Redvers Buller also notes that the casualties taken at Khambula were ‘principally by Martini-Henry bullets.’⁷⁸ It is ironic that the very weapon supposed to give the British complete superiority in Zululand gave the British themselves real problems.

CHAPTER 2 – THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MARTINI FOLLOWING THE ZULU WAR

Despite the Martini-Henry proving itself both deadly and sturdy there were clearly issues highlighted on campaign in Zululand and the rifle was developed in light of this campaign and that in Afghanistan. The main issue was with the Mark III Boxer foil brass cartridge and on June 9th 1885 a new solid drawn brass cartridge was introduced for ‘immediate issue to Egypt,’⁷⁹ followed by a Mk II version thereof just over three months later. The change would significantly reduce the probability of jams, now that the brass was less likely to melt on the heated rifle. There were also changes to the ammunition boxes; in addition to Chelmsford’s insistence on campaign that extra screwdrivers should accompany ammunition wagons, Smith-Dorrien notes that it was ‘owing to this battle [Isandlwana] that the construction of the ammunition-boxes was changed.’⁸⁰ They were indeed altered in May 1881, but it did not constitute a change of pattern.⁸¹ This was probably a response to the perceived Isandlwana ammunition crisis, after which Chelmsford insisted that ‘The regimental reserve boxes must have the screw of the lid taken out, and each wagon or cart will have a screwdriver attached to one of the boxes so that it may be ready for opening those in which the screw has not been taken out.’⁸²

⁷² Bartle Frere in David, *Zulu*, p.34

⁷³ Guy, ‘A Note on Firearms’, p.559

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.562

⁷⁵ Ashe & Edgell, *Story of the Zulu Campaign*, p.145

⁷⁶ Guy, ‘A Note on Firearms’, p.562

⁷⁷ Lieutenant Frederick Slade in a letter to his mother, 29th March, 1879 in David, *Zulu*, p.72

⁷⁸ TNA: WO 132/1, ‘Papers of Sir Redvers Buller’ p14

⁷⁹ 4756 in Skennerton, *List of Changes*.

⁸⁰ Smith-Dorrien, *Memories of 48 Years’ Service*, p.14

⁸¹ 3858 in Skennerton, *List of Changes*.

⁸² Chelmsford in a memorandum, March 1879, quoted in Jackson, *Hill of the Sphinx*, p75

The barrel over-heating and becoming too hot to handle was addressed by the issuing of a leather hand-guard on 24th October 1885.⁸³ This had been an issue since the early days of Martini-Henry testing, in April 1874, and a hand-guard was suggested but shelved to a later date. 'Considering that it would be an additional article of store, costing 1s. each, the committee consider that no supply should be ordered until further experience has been obtained with the arm in the hands of the troops.'⁸⁴ This experience was obtained in Zululand and it was introduced accordingly.

The Martini-Henry Mark III was introduced in August 1879, too soon after the end of the Zulu war for it to have had an impact on the modifications brought forward. The Mark IV version was designed largely with the Sudanese campaign in mind, but the issues in the Sudan had been previously raised in Zululand. The changes made were designed to improve extraction of the used cartridge and the new extractor was .5-inch longer and the extractor lever was 3 inches longer.⁸⁵ These changes were rendered almost pointless by the improvements already made to the cartridge. This was now a perfected version of the rifle which could only be bettered by a magazine rifle. The adoption of the Lee-Enfield magazine rifles by the British Army after 1888 meant that the Mark IV Martini-Henry was largely confined to use by Colonial troops, particularly in India. The advent of the Lee-Enfield magazine rifle made single shot weapons obsolete and the lower calibre of the rifle made it far more user-friendly in comparison to the brute force of the Martini-Henry. Certainly experiences in Zululand and in the Boer wars heightened the need for smokeless ammunition in the British army.

British war material at this time seems to have been designed largely with Colonial wars in mind. The Hale rockets carried by the British forces in Zululand carried the instructions to aim the tube 'at the savages.'⁸⁶ The high calibre and the devastating effect of the Martini bullet was undoubtedly aimed to create panic and crush morale amongst an enemy. Inevitably it was believed that the less disciplined armies faced in Colonial wars would be yet more over-awed by its power. Norris-Newman notes that they 'gradually brought the Zulus to a stand, checked by the withering effects of that hail of bullets, which did such murderous execution as all their efforts could not prevail.'⁸⁷ Undoubtedly it is huge credit to the bravery of the Zulu army that they were able to face such devastating fire. It was this demoralizing fire-power in the hands of the Imperial infantry that gave Colonial officials such as Frere huge power to engage on such 'personal imperial vendettas.' In theory, large 'backward' armies could be suppressed by relatively few soldiers equipped with the most modern service rifle, the Martini-Henry. Michael Glover believes that this advantage has been over-estimated because 'as long as a soldier had to fumble in his pouch for each round, he could not fire fast enough to keep off overwhelming numbers in close formation and willing to accept vast casualties, unless he was in close formation and given all round protection by the fire of his comrades.'⁸⁸ At Rorke's Drift and at other major victories, they were in close formation, laagered or behind barricades. At Isandlwana they were not. The Martini-Henry was perhaps a poisoned chalice for Colonial officials, giving the feeling of complete superiority, but practically, not offering it. Disraeli was to admit after the war that he had given far too much leeway 'to petty colonial officials'⁸⁹ and Emery notes that 'after entering office in 1874,

⁸³ 4937 in Skennerton, *List of Changes*.

⁸⁴ TNA: SUPP 5/893, 'Conference on Martini-Henry rifles', p.16

⁸⁵ Temple & Skennerton, *Treatise on the British Military Martini*, p.145

⁸⁶ Rattray, 'Day of the Dead Moon part 2'

⁸⁷ Norris-Newman, *In Zululand with the British Army*, p.225

⁸⁸ Glover, *Rorke's Drift*, p.33

⁸⁹ Rattray, 'Day of the dead Moon', part 2

Disraeli gave free reign in matters of Colonial policy to Lord Carnarvon.⁹⁰ This was indeed a decision he would regret. The Zulu war was to have a profound effect on British politics, changing Imperial policy at a time of heightened Imperial activity.

CHAPTER 3 – THE EFFECTS OF THE MARTINI BRINGING VICTORY IN THE ZULU WAR

It was from the barrel of the Martini-Henry that the Zulu war was won. Many consequences of the war, certainly for the British, stemmed from the fallout from Isandlwana rather than the final victory at Ulundi on 4th July, 1879. It was to be a sad day for the Zulu nation and the end of an era for a nation forged a mere 63 years previously.

In Britain, the war was to have profound effect politically. Gladstone went on ‘a passionate attack upon the idea of Empire’ during his Midlothian campaign.⁹¹ He claimed that the Zulu Kingdom had been smashed ‘for no other offence than their attempt to defend against your artillery with their naked bodies, their hearths and homes, their wives and families.’⁹² It was on the back of Imperial disasters in Zululand and Afghanistan that Disraeli’s Conservative government was replaced by Gladstone’s Liberals. Gladstone had been highly critical of both Britain’s conduct and spending during the Zulu war which was a tremendously expensive campaign. During the Zulu War, the average cost to the government of each Martini-Henry rifle, including bayonet and cleaning kit, was £14/1/8d.⁹³ The Zulu war cost the British taxpayer a sum of £5 million and on top of this, 1,430 Europeans had been killed.⁹⁴ It has led Morris to remark that ‘the warriors at Isandlwana had dealt Disraeli’s administration a mortal blow.’⁹⁵

The Zululand campaign was to prompt a change in Britain’s attitude to Colonial wars. Cetshwayo was to prove a hugely popular figure on his visit to London. The public warmed to him and even Queen Victoria had an amiable meeting with him,⁹⁶ despite the loss of many Imperial troops and the prestige of her friend Lord Chelmsford. ‘Cetshwayo was lionised by fashionable society’ and was ‘nothing like the vicious savage conjured up in the vulgar imagination of the people.’⁹⁷ For once the image of Britain’s Colonial wars was being brought to the British people’s front door, and they were shocked by it; not repulsed, but impressed by this regal figure of a perceived nation of ‘savages.’ Cetshwayo’s visit must have contributed to the change of attitude to Britain’s Imperial activity, as finally a face could be put to these nations suppressed by Great Britain. This highlights the personal nature of the Zulu war. Certainly the British learnt respect for the Zulu during the course of the Zululand campaign and began an erosion of prejudices within the minds of individuals. Colour-Sergeant Burnett displays this in a letter to a friend from Eshowe. ‘The Zulus stood for about four hours, our people firing shells, rockets, Martinis and the Gatling guns. I never thought

⁹⁰ Emery, *The Red Soldier*, p.

⁹¹ James Morris, *Heaven’s Command – An Imperial Progress*, (London, 1973) p384

⁹² Gladstone in Morris, *Heaven’s Command*, p.384

⁹³ Greaves, *Isandlwana*, 2010, Ch3, p35

⁹⁴ Morris, *Washing of the Spears*, p.588

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ John Laband, *The Rise and Fall of the Zulu nation*, (London, 1997) p350

⁹⁷ Ibid, p.350

niggers would make such a stand.’⁹⁸ It highlights prejudices of the time which were overturned as a result of experiences of the war by individual soldiers. Norris-Newman however was still of the belief that fighting nations such as the Zulus was different to fighting a ‘civilised’ enemy. ‘The fallacy of fighting with an uncivilised race with the same feelings of humanity that dictate our wars with civilised races was thoroughly proved.’⁹⁹ In contrast, Smith-Dorrien notes how the Zulus were in fact far from savages, having served as a General in the First World War and noted first-hand the horrors committed by ‘civilised’ European countries.¹⁰⁰ The change of government from Conservative to Liberals at this time meant a change in British attitudes towards Zululand and Gladstone refused to further intervene in Zululand. Having caused internal strife within Zululand through military action and the settlement, Britain then ‘washed her hands’ of Zululand.

It is clear that the Martini-Henry broke the old Zulu order, whilst also causing great loss of life to the Zulu people. After the battle of Isandlwana, itself a Zulu victory, the Zulu losses were so great that in Cetshwayo’s words: ‘An assegai had been plunged into the belly of the Zulu nation.’¹⁰¹ The metaphorical assegai was thrust yet deeper at the battle of Ulundi and over the coming years the life blood of the old Zulu nation would continue to spill out. Sir Garnett Wolseley, who had been sent out to replace Lord Chelmsford as Commander-in-Chief but had arrived too late for the final battle at Ulundi, was responsible for the peace terms imposed by the British. The Zulu kingdom lost its king, its army and submitted to the authority of the Crown. Excessive petty kingdoms, thirteen, were created under chieftains who either owed their position to the Crown or disliked the royal uSuthu faction.¹⁰² The old ‘Boundary Commission’ was ignored with new boundaries to be respected. The old military system was to be abolished, those wishing to work in neighbouring territories were not to be obstructed and there was a trade embargo on arms.¹⁰³ ‘From Wolseley’s settlement came disastrous civil war’¹⁰⁴ and the internal divisions created were compounded by the reinstatement of Cetshwayo in 1883 as the divisions within his old kingdom were now permanent. In the years after the Anglo-Zulu war it was to be Zulu fighting Zulu, tearing apart the kingdom they had fought so valiantly to defend.

Bartlett correctly asserts that the real losers were the Zulu people.¹⁰⁵ The Martini-Henry had completely changed Zululand and re-shaped the kingdom. H. Rider Haggard, who had been private secretary to Bulwer and aide to Sir Theophilus Shepstone remarked in his book, published three years after the end of the war, ‘Cetywayo’s rule, bad as it was, was perhaps preferable to the reign of terror that we have established, under the name of settlement.’¹⁰⁶ Morris conservatively estimates that 8,000 Zulu warriors lost their lives in the war, this may be as many as 10,000, with around twice that number injured. The injuries left behind by the Martini-Henry’s devastating bullet must have been horrendous and without medical attention many must have perished.¹⁰⁷ When the rifle is fired with bayonet fixed, as would at Rorke’s Drift, it quickly becomes fouled by the black powder. Any wounds that were inflicted with

⁹⁸ Colour-Sergeant J. W. Burnett in a letter to a friend reproduced in Emery (ed.), *The Red Soldier*, p.185

⁹⁹ Norris-Newman in Bartlett, *Zulu*, p.61

¹⁰⁰ Smith-Dorrien, *Memories of 48 Years’ Service*, p.19

¹⁰¹ Cetshwayo in Lock, *Zulu Conquered*, p.89

¹⁰² Morris, *Washing of the Spears*, p.76

¹⁰³ Guy, *Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom*, p.9

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71

¹⁰⁵ Bartlett, *Zulu*, p.261

¹⁰⁶ H.Rider Haggard, *Cetewayo and his White Neighbours*, (London, 1882) p48

¹⁰⁷ Morris, *Washing of the Spears*, p.588

the bayonet would be likely to result in blood poisoning, especially as the Zulus would have had no adequate treatment.

The massive technological advantage and power of the British over the Zulus, encapsulated by the Martini-Henry, inevitably affects the post-Colonial views of the Colonial era; the powerful white man with a modern, breech loading Martini-Henry rifle, facing a 'bunch of savages armed with sticks.'¹⁰⁸ The Martini-Henry was a tool with which to advance the boundaries of Britain's Empire and it facilitated the cause of Imperialism. Brian Best believes that the Martini-Henry rifle 'immediately conjures up vivid images of a steadfast, back-to-the-wall soldier fighting on some sun-baked boundary of the Empire.'¹⁰⁹ This was undoubtedly a picture of Empire in contemporary Britain, as well as an image we would associate with Victorian years of Empire even today. However, the cause of Imperialism was severely dented by the Zulu war, and indeed by the Boer wars in South Africa that followed.

The Martini-Henry was a symbol of Britain's power and superiority over the Zulu. This is borne out by Chelmsford's reply to Cetshwayo's appeal for peace in the build up to Ulundi. 'If the Induna brings with him (1000) one thousand rifles taken at Isandlwana....he must bring the two cannon and the remainder of the cattle.'¹¹⁰ The Martini-Henry was the face of British power and whilst they were still in the hands of the enemy Chelmsford would not consider peace. It is likely that Chelmsford knew Cetshwayo would not be able to return all the arms, now scattered over Zululand, and he wanted a final victory to restore British military honour.

It was Ian Knight who said that 'Ironically, Isandlwana had proved a spear-thrust in the belly for both the Zulu kingdom, and the Confederation scheme.'¹¹¹ The political attention it drew to South Africa meant that Zululand could never be annexed in the same way as the Transvaal had been. The Boers in the Transvaal took advantage of the divisions within Zululand to reclaim the disputed territory. However Gladstone announced that 'our judgement is that the Queen cannot be allowed to relinquish her sovereignty over the Transvaal.'¹¹² The Zulu war had shown that the British could be defeated and the Boers were unhappy at the decision, leading to the first Boer war. There was certainly unwillingness on the part of the British to become embroiled in another expensive, protracted colonial war and the defeat at Majuba led to the British backing down. The British, still equipped with their Martini-Henry rifles, fought in an antiquated style against the commando-style Boers, emphasising volley fire rather than individual marksmanship.

CONCLUSION

The service life of the Martini-Henry as the standard issue firearm for the British army was just 27 years. This was no slight on the quality of the weapon. Victorian technology was moving fast and the magazine rifle was always going to surpass single-shot weapons. It is difficult to find many reports from soldiers of difficulties with their rifles, although accounts from the firing line at Isandlwana are non-existent, so much of what is written of that battle is conjecture. Hook is the only soldier to report jamming¹¹³ and he was involved in an action which required rapid fire followed by small delays. This would lead to fouling of the barrel

¹⁰⁸ Rattray, *Day of the Dead Moon*, part 2

¹⁰⁹ Best, 'The Martini-Henry Rifle Part One,' *Journal of the Anglo-Zulu War Historical Society*, June 1998.

¹¹⁰ TNA: WO 32/7763, message from lord Chelmsford to Ketchwayo (20th June, 1879)

¹¹¹ Knight, *Zulu*, p.131

¹¹² Gladstone in Morris, *Heaven's Command*, p.440

¹¹³ Hook VC in Glover, *Rorke's Drift*, p.114

and a hot barrel, causing jams, but he would have had a chance to quickly pull-through his rifle during a lull in the fighting.¹¹⁴ Any modern weapon is liable to jam when subject to such rapid firing. Certainly the Martini-Henry was a far superior weapon to its predecessor, the Snider, reported by the 75th regiment at Newry in January 1876. ‘Very superior weapon to the Snider in every way.’¹¹⁵ Many historians look at the rifle from a modern perspective and certainly there were issues which came up during the Zulu war which were largely addressed in the coming years. It was a state-of-the-art arm for its time and was only held back by the fact that it was a single-shot weapon.

The simple fact that the Martini-Henry gave the British a feeling of such superiority in Zululand is more likely to have contributed to the defeat at Isandlwana rather than any of its failings. The Zulu victory at Isandlwana merely stiffened the British resolve for a total victory and victory did come, from the barrel of the Martini-Henry. Glover remarks of the Zulus after Isandlwana that ‘They had destroyed a battalion of British regulars but they had learned a healthy respect for the Martini-Henry.’¹¹⁶ Cetshwayo had embroiled himself in a war which he could never win. In winning individual actions, he provoked the British into reinforcing Chelmsford to an extortionate extent. Ulundi was to completely change Zululand and its structure and Wolseley’s settlement plunged Zululand into internal strife for years to come.

It is significant that the Zulu war was embarked upon without the knowledge or approval of the British government in Westminster and the Martini played a crucial role in why that was the case. It afforded superiority in firepower that was completely unprecedented, allowing Colonial officials such as Frere to commence wars with relatively few troops, when facing a native, primitively armed opponent. Frere’s decision was to contribute to the downfall of Disraeli’s Conservative government, replaced by Gladstone’s Liberals, leading to a distinct ‘reigning in’ of Britain’s entire Colonial policy.

The rifle has been immortalised in the film *Zulu*, ‘It’s a short chamber Boxer point 45 calibre miracle.’¹¹⁷ The rifle was put under huge strains at Rorke’s Drift, with over 20,000 rounds of ammunition fired by just over 100 men, and came through that test admirably. It was a weapon well-liked by the soldiers who used it in Zululand and its accuracy is comparable to a 1940s Lee-Enfield rifle.¹¹⁸ The Martini was more than just a piece of technical equipment; it was the very symbol of Britain’s Imperial power in the Colonies. As a result the weapon was given a great deal of attention by the War Office to maintain it as the most advanced weapon of the time. It was only on the advent of the magazine that it was surpassed in rifle technology. As early as 1875, the rifle was considered by Colonel Haives ‘superior to any arm yet introduced into the service,’¹¹⁹ and the development of the arm and the ammunition was significant by the time of the Mark IV. The Martini had a significant impact on the political scene throughout the British Empire, as well as in military terms. It was certainly to cause more than just ‘great mischief’ with the Zulu people and their nation, remoulding South African politics. Chelmsford had not reckoned with the courage and tactical skill of the Zulu army and through no failing of the rifle was to live to regret his words, that ‘the power of the

¹¹⁴ Interview with Aspinshaw, March 2011

¹¹⁵ TNA: SUPP 5/893, ‘Conference on Martini-Henry rifles’, p.66

¹¹⁶ Glover, *Rorke’s Drift*, p.114

¹¹⁷ Cy Enfield and Stanley Baker, *Zulu*, p.1964

¹¹⁸ Interview with Aspinshaw, March 2011

¹¹⁹ TNA: SUPP 5/893, ‘Conference on Martini-Henry rifles’, p.51

Martini-Henrys (Fig. 11) will be such a surprise to the Zulus that they will not be formidable after the first effort.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford in Laband (ed.), *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand campaign* , p. 31