

# The First Battle of Hlobane

By Ian Knight

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Sometime about mid-morning on 11th January 1879, the British general commanding forces in southern Africa, Lord Chelmsford, had a meeting with the commander of his Left Flank Column (No. 4), Colonel Evelyn Wood, at a spot on the open veldt about twelve miles north of Rorke's Drift.

The Anglo-Zulu War had, of course, only begun officially that day. The British ultimatum, presented to King Cetshwayo's representatives a month before, expired on the 11<sup>th</sup>, and before dawn that morning Chelmsford had made a tense crossing into Zululand with the Centre Column at Rorke's Drift. Chelmsford had been concerned that the crossing might be opposed but as the sun came up and the mist which had hung heavily in the Mzinyathi valley burned away it became apparent that there were no Zulu concentrations close by, and after supervising the deployment of a defensive screen around his bridgehead, Chelmsford had left the remainder of the column unpacking the wagons and making their first camp on Zulu soil before riding out to meet his appointment with Wood.

To reach their rendezvous Wood had already covered over twenty miles of potentially hostile country, pressing down from his start point on the Ncome River to the north. Wood had a reputation as a particularly energetic commander, and he had not waited for the legal formalities of the ultimatum - his column had crossed the Ncome a few days earlier, on the 6<sup>th</sup>, and established a camp near a distinctive hill on the eastern bank known as Bemba's Kop. Although Bemba's Kop lay within the so-called 'Disputed Territory' - ownership of which was bitterly contested by both the Transvaal Republic and the Zulu Kingdom, a wrangle which had played its part in the outbreak of hostilities - Wood's advance across the river before hostilities had officially begun was regarded as provocative by many Zulus living along the frontier. Nothing daunted, Wood had set out to meet Chelmsford on the 10<sup>th</sup>, marching south down the length of the Ncome towards Rorke's Drift, on the Zulu side of the border, accompanied by a sizable part of his command including twelve infantry companies, two guns, mounted men and auxiliaries. If either Wood or Chelmsford considered this movement premature, considering the fact they were not yet officially at war, they did not comment on the fact. On the evening of the 10<sup>th</sup>, having marched nine miles, Wood established a bivouac and left most of his infantry there, pressing on the next morning with just a small escort.

At their meeting Wood and Chelmsford discussed how to proceed in the light of the unopposed crossing onto Zulu soil. Despite Wood's rapid movements, Lord Chelmsford felt convinced that it would be several days before his own Centre Column could advance, largely because weeks of intermittent heavy rain had swollen rivers, flooded dongas and made the fragile wagon-track, which served the Centre Column as a road acutely vulnerable to damage from the passage of so much heavy transport. Chelmsford's original plan had called for Wood to secure his sector of the border before co-ordinating his advance with that of the Centre Column. Now, with the Centre Column likely to be immobile for a week or more, Chelmsford stressed the need for Wood not to over-reach himself and to wait for events to unfold. To Wood, this offered an opportunity to pacify Zulu groups living close to his base at Bemba's Kop - he was, he said, 'uneasy concerning Zulus to the north of our left flank', and 'obtained the general's approval to my going in a north-easterly direction to clear the Ityenka Range, including the Inhlobane mountain, of Zulus under Umsebe and Umbiline, hoping to be back before the general was ready to advance with No. 3 Column' (1).

With their strategy decided, the meeting broke up and Chelmsford and Wood returned to their commands. Wood reached his bivouac that evening but a wave of wet weather

passed over the area the following day making the countryside 'almost impassable' (2) and it was not until the 13<sup>th</sup> that he arrived back at Bemba's Kop. During the march his mounted detachments had energetically rounded up any Zulu cattle they had encountered but had experienced almost no opposition, probably because, as the official history commented astutely, 'the Zulus, though well armed and present in large numbers, were at this time without definitive orders as to the attitude they were to assume towards the British'(3)

That attitude would change over the following days. The next morning, the 12<sup>th</sup>, men from Chelmsford's command attacked and destroyed kwaSogekle, the homestead of the important Zulu border *induna*, Sihayo kaXongo, and when news of the incident reached King Cetshwayo, in conference with his commanders sixty miles away at oNdini, it largely shaped the Zulu response to the British invasion. While the men of the king's royal regiments, the *amabutho*, would be directed to attack Chelmsford's Centre Column, messages were sent directing Zulu loyalists living in the areas facing the British flanking columns to harass the enemy where possible, to hamper any attempts they might make to act in support of the Centre Column.

In the northern sector it was the attitude of these Zulus which already concerned Wood. To the north-east of Bemba's Kop - lying to Wood's left flank, between his column and the base of the much smaller No. 5 Column (Col. Rowlands) at the hamlet of Derby in the Transvaal - lived several groups who were particularly loyal to the Zulu Royal House. Lying as it did at a geographical and strategic cross-roads between Zululand and both Natal and the interior, this area had already endured a troubled history, being largely depopulated by the passage of successive armies during the violence of the 1810s and 1820s which had given rise to the Zulu kingdom. Here and there, a few of the original inhabitants had managed to survive, often living close to natural features which offered them some protection, like the Khubekha, who retired at times of danger to the caves which pock-marked the hill-sides overlooking their settlements in the Ntombe valley, or the Ntombela, who lived close to the sanctuary of Zungwini mountain.(4) To secure his hold over the region, however, Shaka had established a royal homestead in the area, ebaQulusini, which served as a centre of royal authority, and in the half-century since the descendents of those placed under its control - many of whom had originally been Swazi-speakers, although by 1879 they considered themselves Zulus - had come to think of themselves as a distinct group of their own. They called themselves abaQulusi, and they were considered a section of the Royal House, and were ruled over by *izinduna* appointed by the king himself rather than by hereditary chiefs. They were not subject to the usual *amabutho* system, but in times of war mustered as a regiment of their own and an incarnation of the ebaQulusini homestead still existed, some 250 huts nestling in a horse-shoe of hills a few miles to the north-east of the Hlobane Mountain. The abaQulusi themselves lived in settlements spread across the countryside, most of them extending on the northern side of Hlobane towards the Swazi border.

Indeed, Hlobane - Wood's 'Inhlobana' - was a critical element in abaQulusi strategic thinking. It lay at the centre of a chain of rugged, largely flat-topped features which extended eastwards from Zungwini in the west, past Hlobane in the centre and ended in a long ridge which the British knew as Ityenka but which the Zulus called Mashongololo. Of these, Hlobane was something of a natural fortress, a long, irregular plateau with a summit almost entirely surrounded by cliffs which were penetrated here and there by steep paths known only to the abaQulusi. At the western end Hlobane was abutted by a lower, triangular plateau called Ntendeka but sometimes known to the British as 'the little Inhlobana', and the two were connected at the apex of the Ntendeka triangle by a steep, narrow staircase of rock. The summits of both Zungwini and Hlobane were almost entirely devoid of cover and were desperately exposed at times to the full fury of electrical storms and the Zulus preferred not

to live on the heights. Instead, they would drive their cattle up there when threatened, and Hlobane in particular, which was well watered by a stream flowing across the summit and draining by a waterfall off the southern edge, provided an ideal corral which the abaQulusi could further fortify by blocking the paths behind them after their ascent with stone walls.

Fortified by Chelmsford's permission, Wood organised mounted forays towards Zungwini and Hlobane. On both the 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> patrols led by Wood's equally energetic cavalry commander, Redvers Buller, pushed up the course of the White Mfolozi River from Bemba's Kop, probing towards Zungwini. Although they returned with large quantities of captured Zulu cattle - probably intercepted en route to the safety of Hlobane - they also reported an increase in Zulu activity and a distinct shift in attitude among them. Having received the king's orders to resist, the abaQulusi were preparing to defend themselves and Buller had noted a fresh determination in the way his patrols had been opposed.

There was another local figure whose response was of concern to Wood. Mbilini waMswati was a prince of the Swazi Royal House who had fled Swaziland following a succession dispute in the 1860s. He had offered his allegiance to the Zulu king, Cetshwayo, who had granted him permission to settle on the remote Zulu/Swazi/Transvaal border. Mbilini had built himself a homestead on the Tafelberg mountain in the Ntombe valley but had also cultivated a good relationship with the abaQulusi leaders and had built another homestead further south, on the southern side of Hlobane. A young man, still in his thirties in 1879, he had tried to rebuild his following and influence by occasional raids over the years directed at Swazi settlements on the Swazi or Transvaal side of the borders. Local white settlers regarded him as a dangerous marauder, and he would emerge as the most dynamic guerrilla leader fighting for the Zulu cause during the war.

In the light of Buller's reports, Wood decided to make a major foray against Mbilini and the abaQulusi. On the 18<sup>th</sup>, Wood abandoned his camp at Bemba's Kop, striking out across country to the north-west, crossing the White Mfolozi on the 19<sup>th</sup> and establishing a new camp close to another prominent local feature, a pointed hill known as Thinta's Kop after Chief Thinta of the local Mdlalose people. Wood's policy towards the Zulu groups on the northern border was always a knowing combination of carrot and stick, and while he intended to act against the abaQulusi he had hopes that Thinta might be persuaded to surrender. Accordingly, on the following morning - the 20<sup>th</sup> - while Wood himself set off eastwards to try and meet with Thinta, Buller was despatched north with a detachment of mounted troops to feel out the temper of the abaQulusi. Although Thinta himself was reluctant to risk the wrath of Zulu loyalists by openly defecting, Wood returned that evening with a number of the chief's followers, surrendered as a sign of his goodwill.

Buller, on the other hand, had had a rather more adventurous day. He had set off at the head of seven officers and seventy-five men of the Frontier Light Horse and twenty-two Boers under their Commandant, Piet Uys. Starting up the western bank of the White Mfolozi they had crossed the river about two miles north of Thinta's Kop, then struck out towards Zungwini, intending to pass eastwards around the southern slopes and down into the valley which lies immediately north of the saddle connecting Zungwini to Hlobane. Their objective was apparently Kulabatu, the homestead of an important *induna* of the Ntombela people, Mabamba, which the British knew lay somewhere on the north-eastern spurs of Zungwini. As the patrol drew near to the foot of Zungwini, a number of armed Zulus were spotted in a homestead on the lower slopes who, when the Boers rode forward to investigate, scattered towards a line of rocks above them, opening fire as they did so. Buller promptly deployed his men to attack and a brief fire-fight broke out among the boulders which left one man of the Frontier Light Horse wounded by a thrown spear and at least twelve Zulus dead. The Zulus broke and fled and Buller ordered their abandoned weapons collected up and smashed. But while this was going on, the Boers reported that the Zulus were now

assembling in some force higher on the summit above them. Buller ordered his men to mount up and ride up the hill to disperse them, hoping then to carry on across the summit of Zungwini and 'get a view of Mabamba's kraal from above'(5) His men went up a difficult and stony path but by the time they reached the top the Zulu numbers had grown and 'the hill was too strongly held for us to force it'. The Zulus had by now taken up their usual 'chest and horns' formation and begun to descend towards Buller who halted and directed his fire against their centre. At least eight Zulus were seen to fall and the 'chest' halted and went to cover only for the 'horns' to advance rapidly 'in tolerable order across the open ground'. Finding himself 'totally outflanked' by some 400 men on either side, Buller gave the order to withdraw. As they retired down the hillside, one of the Frontier Light Horse was wounded by Zulu fire, two more men were struck by spent bullets, and the horse being ridden by one of the Boers, a Mr Raymond, was killed. The Zulu pursuit continued until Buller rallied and made a stand at the White Mfolozi, finally driving the Zulus off. (6)

Buller returned to Wood's camp at Thinta's Kop at about 9.30 that evening and his report confirmed Wood's impression that the local Zulus were mustering on the Zungwini/Hlobane line. Since he had brought with him his command's full compliment of transport wagons, which could hardly be left unprotected, he decided to spend the 21<sup>st</sup> making these secure before making a foray against the abaQulusi early on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. A series of stone redoubts were built to serve as a secure base at Thinta's Kop where he intended to leave 'all superfluous stores, over one week's supply' (7) and a garrison of one company each of the 1/13<sup>th</sup> and 90<sup>th</sup> regiments. He then set out on his new expedition at about midnight on the 21<sup>st</sup>/22<sup>nd</sup>. His objective was Zungwini, and in particular Mabamba's homestead, which had seemed to serve as a rallying point for the force which had attacked Buller. Wood planned his attack in two sections, sending Buller with two guns, the Boers and mounted men up the course of the White Mfolozi towards the 'Jagd Pad', the so-called 'Hunter's Road', a wagon-track first pioneered by the Voortrekkers in the 1830s which ran from the Transvaal and Swaziland in the north, down into Natal to the south. The 'Jagd Pad' passed by the western edges of Zungwini and allowed Buller's horsemen an easier route to sweep round the supposed Zulu positions to the left. Wood himself, commanding the 90<sup>th</sup> Regiment the rest of his guns and the auxiliaries of Wood's Irregulars, struck straight north, aiming directly for the southern slopes of Zungwini at a point about three miles eastwards of Buller's projected ascent. A third detachment, consisting of the 1/13<sup>th</sup> under Col. Gilbert, left Thinta's Kop later than the others with orders to establish a bivouac at the south-eastern end of Zungwini.

Wood's party had reached Zungwini first and had climbed to the summit not long after first-light when Buller's men rode up from the west and joined them. To their disappointment, the Zulus had made no attempt to oppose them. There were large numbers of Zulus on the summit and Wood and Buller swept across it, rounding up the cattle. Some 1,000 Zulus, who had been presumably posted to guard these, retired northwards off the mountain without a fight. When Wood and Buller reached the far side of the mountain they looked down over spectacular views of the open country below which stretched northwards from Zungwini and Hlobane towards the Swaziland border. Below them, on a spur jutting out from Zungwini, they could clearly see Mabamba's homestead and, nearby, moving on the flats between Zungwini and Ntendeka, a body of as many as 4,000 Zulus. Wood watched fascinated as they 'formed in succession a circle, triangle, and square, with a partition about eight men thick in the centre' (8) until, late in the afternoon, the Zulus began to retire towards Hlobane.

Wood did not trouble himself with the exact identity of these men, but they probably represented the coming together of various local groups - the Mdlalose, Khubeka and, of course, abaQulusi - and the formations he describes correspond to those adopted during the

performance of rituals necessary to prepare men for war. Unknown to Wood, they may well have included another element, too, for reports from the Luneburg settlement in the Ntombe valley suggested that Prince Mbilini had abandoned his Tafelberg homestead and gone, too, to join the abaQulusi.

Wood and Buller descended Zungwini at sunset, driving some 250 captured cattle and 400 sheep with them. They met with Gilbert's detachment and the whole force spent the night a few miles south of Zungwini Mountain. That evening, 'as we sat around the camp fire', Wood and his officers noted the sound of artillery fire way off to the south, and Wood commented that gunfire after dark suggested 'an unfavourable situation'. (9) He was right; it was the sound of Col. Harness' guns shelling the devastated camp at iSandlwana as Lord Chelmsford re-occupied it after the battle.

Wood was now concerned about the condition of his men, since 'the 90<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry had been nineteen hours out of the twenty-four under arms, had covered a considerable distance' (10), and had been carrying an extra load for most of that time, having been issued an extra thirty rounds of ammunition in addition to their usual seventy rounds. Accordingly, the column was ordered to rest on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, but work parties were sent ahead to investigate the state of a track which passed below Zungwini and then over the nek - Zungwini Nek - between Zungwini and Hlobane. Wood intended to make a fresh attack on the morning of the 24<sup>th</sup>, apparently intending to go over Zungwini Nek and down into the valley beyond, then skirting eastwards along the northern foot of Hlobane with the intention of attacking the ebaQulusini homestead itself. His start was delayed that morning, however, by a heavy mist, and the column waited for this to lift before packing away its tents and starting off. The column had gone about eight miles by 7.30 a.m. and was passing along the foot of Zungwini, some two miles off to the left, crossing the nek between that mountain and Hlobane, when it suddenly came under a sporadic fire from parties of abaQulusi under the command of Msebe Zulu who had been watching its progress from among a line of boulders which stretch around the western edge of Ntendeka. Wood ordered the 90<sup>th</sup> to continue their march with the baggage wagons while he set off to his left accompanied by the Boers and the 1/13<sup>th</sup> and two of his guns. As soon as the Boers came under fire they hesitated, much to Wood's disappointment, and he and Piet Uys had 'to ride in front to induce the men to go on to cover the advance of the guns' (11), although one observer thought the Boers then recovered well and 'carried every position of the Zulus by a steady dogged advance, and in face of the enemy's fire, from behind stones, rock and holes in the kranzes' (12). Not far from the foot of Ntendeka, however, Wood found a deep donga lying across his path and decided it was impossible to go any further. The Zulus concealed in the rocks had in any case begun to disperse, some falling back up the slopes of Ntendeka and others apparently shifting northwards, to their right, and down out of sight into the valley beyond. Telling his men to follow behind, Wood rode off to find the men of the 90<sup>th</sup>.

As he crossed the nek he soon discovered where the Zulus were going. According to his own account he had intended the 90<sup>th</sup> to halt by a small kopje and wait with the wagons but he found to his surprise that 'the oxen had just been loosed from the Trek-tow, but to my great vexation, they were without any guard, and the 90<sup>th</sup>, which ought to have been with them, was three-quarters of a mile in front, advancing rapidly in line, without any supports, against some 4,000 Zulus' (13). These were, apparently, the same Zulus he and Buller had seen two days before, and they were once again moving close to Mabamba's homestead, 'mustered in force on the ridge running parallel to the valley, on which was situated a large kraal' (14). The same observer was particularly impressed by the way in which the 90<sup>th</sup> had gone forward to attack them;

On arriving at the base of the hill the Zulus opened fire on the troops from their centre

of their position at the large kraal, four companies of the 90<sup>th</sup> advanced in skirmishing order with the field pieces on their flank, and opened fire with coolness and precision and with such rapidity that the Zulus kept at a respectable distance. Zulu spirits were considerably damped; and when an advance movement was made, the military ardour of the troops was with difficulty restrained by their officers, the men wishing to charge up the hill and close with the enemy at close quarters. (15)

Wood, however, saw the danger of such enthusiasm, and noted that some of the Zulus who had abandoned the positions on Ntendeka were streaming down into the donga and heading unnoticed 'towards the 90<sup>th</sup>'s Ammunition carts, which had been left with some bugler boys, who had no firearms' (16). With the Boers and mounted men now disengaging off to his right, Wood sent a hurried message to Buller recalling him.

At that point, fate intervened. A mounted African rode up and handed Buller a hastily scribbled note; it had been written by Captain Alan Gardner (17) who had survived iSandlwana and had ridden all the way to Utrecht to warn Wood. Exhausted and uncertain of Wood's whereabouts in the field, Gardner had scribbled a note and handed it to an artilleryman who claimed to know the location of Wood's headquarters. This man had ridden first to the camp at Thinta's Kop and then on to the bivouac below Zungwini where he had handed it over to an African who volunteered to deliver it. The news it carried was astonishing - a terrible disaster had befallen the Centre Column. Wood was still digesting the news when Buller rode up in response to his summons, and 'telling him in one sentence of the misfortune'(18) Wood sent him off to intercept the abaQulusi sweeping down on the 90<sup>th</sup>'s wagons.

Already, by this point, the action was turning in favour of the British. To the front, the Zulus near Mabamba's homestead were beginning to fall back, moving across the British front and drifting along the northern slopes of Hlobane, presumably heading towards ebaQulusini. By now Buller had blocked the abaQulusi threat to the wagons, and the mounted men harried the Zulus as they withdrew. Wood then ordered the column to re-assemble. He professed himself quite impressed with the conduct of the 90<sup>th</sup> as 'the young soldiers were very steady and expended less than two rounds of ammunition per man', but rather 'expressed a strong opinion to the Senior officer - not belonging to the Regiment - who had contravened my orders'(19).

Once the column had reassembled, Wood, 'against the advice of some of the senior officers', read them the note he had received (20).

The action had lasted for some three hours and, despite a few tense moments, had been an unqualified British success. Wood reported no casualties among his command while at least fifty Zulus were thought to have died, several sons of important headmen were wounded and at least one induna later died of his injuries. The Khubeka had suffered heavily and returned to their homesteads in the Ntombe valley while the abaQulusi were said to be greatly discouraged by their defeat. Moreover, the eclipse that took place on the 22<sup>nd</sup> - while Wood and Buller were driving across the top of Zungwini - was interpreted by some as a sign that Prince Mbilini's power was waning.

Yet in fact - as he so often was in the Anglo-Zulu War - Evelyn Wood had been lucky. He had fought the battle as if he were still fighting on the Eastern Cape Frontier, and the tactics he had used were no different from those Lord Chelmsford employed with such disastrous consequence in the iSandlwana campaign. Like Chelmsford, Wood had taken the fight to the enemy, seeking the Zulus out and scattering his command over miles of hill country as he sought to disperse them. And, like Lord Chelmsford, he had split his forces, advancing miles away from his base at Fort Thinta - and leaving far fewer men to guard his camp than Chelmsford had at iSandlwana. The point was not lost upon either Wood or his

command when Gardner's bombshell broke; 'when Col. Wood heard of this,' wrote a corporal of the 90<sup>th</sup>, 'he thought of his own small camp, 3 days in rear of him. He ordered a return march at once and marched night and day until he got to camp' (21).

Wood was back at Thinta's Kop by 7 a.m. the following morning. He did not stay there long. Realising that such a forward position made him exposed to any fresh attack by the Zulu army which had triumphed at iSandlwana, and that he could not from there guarantee the safety of the Transvaal border settlements, he began preparations the following day to shift north-westwards to the Khambula ridge, a position which lay squarely between the Zungwini-Hlobane complex and the Transvaal village of Utrecht.

It would be two months before Wood tried his hand again at clearing the abaQulusi off their stronghold at Hlobane.

## References

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9. Ibid.
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11. Ibid.
12. Report in the *Natal Mercury* dated 'Umvelosi, Thinta's Drift, Jan 25<sup>th</sup>', issue of 29 January 1879.
13. Wood, *Midshipman to Field Marshal*.
14. *Natal Mercury*, report of 25 January.
15. Ibid.
16. Wood, *Midshipman to Field Marshal*. The term 'Boys' should not be taken too literally - most buglers (drummers) were mature men.
17. 14<sup>th</sup> Hussars, staff officer to No. 3 Column.
18. Wood, *Midshipman to Field Marshal*.
19. Ibid.
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