

The first Battle of Hlobane. 21st and 22nd January 1878

By Adrian Greaves

Members will be familiar with the accounts of the ‘day of the dead moon’, the 22 January 1879, when it has been suggested that the Zulus held off attacking the British at Isandlwana as the moon was in the wrong phase. This theory overlooks the fact that, regardless of the moon’s phase, they did attack Isandlwana, and at the same time also launched a full scale attack against the advancing British coastal column at Nyezane. Which leaves the northern column and, surprise surprise, the Zulus also engaged them at Hlobane on the 22nd. Regardless of the ‘dead moon’ theory which, by their simultaneous actions against all three invasion columns, the Zulus effectively disproved, little is known of this first engagement between the British and Zulus at Hlobane. Significant and bloody as it was for the participants, its significance soon faded once the news of the disaster at Isandlwana reached the British authorities in Natal and then London.

The engagement at Hlobane had been precipitated on 12 January when Chelmsford’s command advanced from Rorke’s Drift towards Isandlwana attacking and destroying kwaSogekle, the homestead of the important Zulu chief, Sihayo. When news of the attack reached King Cetshwayo, in conference with his commanders sixty miles away at Ulundi, it largely shaped the Zulu response to the British invasion. The King directed his main army to attack Chelmsford’s Centre Column, deeming it to be the most dangerous especially as it was being personally led by Chelmsford. Messages were sent directing Zulu loyalists living in the areas on the routes of the Northern and Coastal columns to harass the invaders where possible, and to hamper any attempts they might make to act in support of the Centre Column.

In the northern sector it was the gathering of these Zulus which began to concern the column commander, Colonel Wood VC. 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 (Colonel Rowlands) at the hamlet of Derby in the Transvaal, lived several groups of Zulus who were particularly loyal to the Zulu royal family. Originally, a hundred years earlier, to secure his hold over this hilly region, King Shaka had established a royal homestead in the area, known as *abaQulusi*, which served as a centre of royal authority. Originally Swazi-speakers, by 1879 they considered themselves true Zulus. They called themselves the *abaQulusi* after the area in which they lived, their settlements extending along the northern side of Hlobane Mountain towards the Swazi border; they felt privileged to be a section of the Royal House, ruled over by a chief appointed by the king himself rather than by hereditary chiefs. In times of war they mustered as an independent Zulu force and operated under the direction of their own chiefs.

The mountain of Hlobane had long been a critical element in *abaQulusi* strategic thinking. It lay at the centre of an uninhabited 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. Of these, Hlobane was an almost perfect natural fortress with a four-mile level but rocky summit plateau, over one mile wide, and surrounded by sheer 500ft cliffs at its upper level which were penetrated by but a few secret steep paths known only to the *abaQulusi*. At the western end, Hlobane was

abutted by a lower triangular plateau called Ntendeka but known to the British as ‘the little Inhlobana’, and the two were connected at the apex of the Ntendeka triangle by a seriously steep and narrow staircase of rock just fifteen feet wide that dropped 400ft from the Hlobane plateau to the lower Ntendeka plateau. The summits of both Zungwini and Hlobane were entirely devoid of cover and were desperately exposed to the full fury of violent rain and electrical storms which discouraged the Zulus from inhabiting the heights. When threatened, they would gather and hide their cattle on Hlobane, being well watered by a stream flowing across the high plateau and draining by a spectacular waterfall off the southern edge. Being protected by cliffs, Hlobane was an enormous cattle kraal which the *abaQulusi* could further fortify with stone walls to block the paths behind them after their ascent. Unbeknown to the British, the south-facing ridge of Hlobane was pitted with a series of interlinked natural caves which ran from the summit ridge of Hlobane to the lower slopes, which the Zulus would soon use to their advantage.

Fortified by Chelmsford’s permission to commence action, Wood organised mounted forays towards Zungwini and Hlobane. Between the 15th and 17th January, patrols led by Wood’s equally energetic cavalry commander, Colonel Redvers Buller, pushed along 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 obvious increase in Zulu activity; the *abaQulusi* were apparently preparing to defend themselves and Buller had noted a fresh determination in the way his patrols had been shadowed and threatened, though not attacked.

There was another local figure whose response was of concern to Wood. Chief 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 north of Hlobane. Mbilini had built himself a homestead in the Tafelberg hills in the Ntombe River valley and, having cultivated a good relationship with the *abaQulusi* leaders, he 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 princely influence by occasional raids over recent years directed at Swazi settlements on the Swazi or Transvaal side of the borders. Local white settlers regarded him as a dangerous and vicious 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 18th January, Wood abandoned his camp at Bemba’s Kop, striking out across country to the north-west, crossing the White Mfolozi River on the 19th and establishing a new camp close to another prominent local feature, a pointed hill known as Tinta’s Kop after Chief Tinta of the local Mdlalose people. Wood hoped Tinta might be persuaded to surrender but, after an uneventful day searching for the chief, Wood returned with a number of the chief’s followers, who surrendered as a sign of Tinta’s goodwill.

Buller, on the other hand, had experienced 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. Their objective was Kulabatu, the homestead of an important chief, 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 at a homestead on the lower slopes and who, when the Boers rode forward to investigate, scattered towards a line of rocks above them then wildly opening fire with their old muskets and rifles. Buller promptly deployed his men to attack and a 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 remaining Zulus broke away and fled further up the steep hillside whereupon Buller ordered their abandoned weapons collected up and smashed but while this was going on, the Boers reported to Buller that the Zulus were now assembling in force higher on the summit above them. Buller ordered his men to ride up the hill to disperse them, hoping then to carry on across the summit of Zungwini to 'get a view of Mabomba's kraal from above'. (1) His men began riding up the difficult and stony hillside but before they reached the crest the Zulu numbers had grown and 'the hill was too strongly held for us to force it'. The massing Zulus had by now taken up their usual 'chest and horns' formation and commenced rhythmically beating their spears against their shields. As the Zulu flanks began to descend towards Buller in an attempt to surround his force, Buller halted his men and directed accurate fire against the advancing Zulus. Some warriors were seen to fall under the British fire and the 'chest' halted and went to cover among the rocks, a typical Zulu tactic, only for the 'horns' to advance rapidly in tolerable order across the open ground. Finding himself totally outflanked by 300 or 400 advancing Zulus on each side, Buller wisely gave the order to withdraw. As his force retired down the hillside one of the Frontier Light Horse was seriously wounded by Zulu fire, two more men were struck down by ricocheting bullets, and the horse being ridden by one of the Boers, a Mr Raymond, was killed outright. The Zulu pursuit continued until Buller rallied and made a determined stand at the White Mfolozi River, finally driving off the Zulus. (2)

Buller returned to Wood's camp at Tinta's Kop at about 9.30 that evening and his report confirmed Wood's impression that the local Zulus were mustering on the Zungwini and Hlobane hills. Since he had brought with him his command's full complement of transport wagons, which could hardly be left unprotected, he decided to spend the 21st making these secure before making a foray against the *abaQulusi* early on the 22nd. A series of stone redoubts were built to serve as a secure base at Tinta's Kop where he intended to leave 'all superfluous stores, over one week's supply' (3) and a garrison of one company each of the 1/13th and 90th Regiments. He then set out on his new expedition to attack the Zulus just before midnight on the 21st. 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 for the 22nd 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', an old Boer wagon-track 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 west of the supposed Zulu positions. Wood himself, commanding the 90th Regt, 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 1/13th under Colonel Gilbert, left Tinta'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 1,000 or so Zulus seen at dawn guarding the cattle on the summit made no attempt to engage them and melted away leaving Wood and Buller to sweep across the summit, rounding up the Zulu cattle. When Wood and Buller reached the far side of the mountain they had a spectacular view of the open country below them 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 flat plateau of Ityenka as if it were a stage in front of Hlobane, a body of as many as 4,000 Zulus were parading. Wood's party watched fascinated as the Zulus 'formed in succession a circle, triangle, and square, with a partition about eight men thick in the centre'(4) until, late in the afternoon, the Zulus began to retire in formation towards Hlobane.

Wood did not trouble himself with the exact identity of these warriors 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 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'.(5) He was right; it was the sound of Colonel Harness' guns shelling the devastated camp at Isandlwana as Chelmsford re-occupied it after the battle.

Wood was now concerned about the condition of his men, 'the 90th Light Infantry having been nineteen hours out of the twenty-four under arms, and having covered a considerable distance', (6) and they 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. Accordingly, the column was ordered to rest on the 23rd, 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 24th, 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 *abaQulusi* homestead itself. His start was delayed that morning 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, which was some two miles off to the left crossing the nek between that mountain and Hlobane, when the columns suddenly came under sporadic fire from parties of *abaQulusi* under the command of Msebe Zulu who had been watching Wood's progress from among a line of boulders which stretched around the western edge of Ntendeka. Wood ordered the 90th to continue their march with the baggage wagons while he set off to his left accompanied by the Boers, the 1/13th 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', (7) 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 fire, from behind stones, rock and holes in the kranzes'. (8) Not far from the foot of Ntendeka, Wood came up against 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 retreating 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 90th.

As he crossed the nek he soon discovered where the Zulus were going. According to his own account he had intended the 90th 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 90th, 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'.(9) 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, 'mustering in force on the ridge running parallel to the valley, on which was situated a large kraal'.(10) The same observer was particularly impressed by the way in which the 90th had gone forward to attack them;

On arriving at the base of the hill the Zulus opened fire on the troops from the centre of their position at the large kraal, when four companies of the 90th 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, their spirits being 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.(11)

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 90th ammunition carts, which had been left with some bugler boys, who had no firearms'. (12) With the Boers and mounted men now disengaging off to his right, Wood sent a hurried message to Buller recalling him.

And 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 (13) 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 where Wood's headquarters was. This man had ridden first to the camp at Tinta'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'. (14) Wood sent him off to intercept the *abaQulusi* about to sweep down on the 90th 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 retreating along the northern slopes of Hlobane. 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 90th 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'.(15) Once the column had reassembled, Wood, 'against the advice of some of the senior officers', read them the note he had received. (16)

The action had lasted for some three hours and, despite a few tense moments, had been an unqualified British success. By good fortune, 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 chief later died of his injuries. The Khubeka had suffered heavily and returned to their homesteads in the Ntombe valley while the *abaQulusi* were believed to be greatly discouraged by their defeat.

Almost mirroring Chelmsford's advance beyond Isandlwana, Wood had taken the fight to the enemy by seeking out the Zulus and scattering their command over miles of hill country as he sought to disperse them. And, like Chelmsford, he had committed the cardinal sin for a military commander of splitting his forces in enemy territory and advancing miles away from his base at Fort Tinta - and leaving far fewer men to guard his camp than Chelmsford had at Isandlwana. The point was not lost upon either Wood or his subordinate officers when Gardner's bombshell broke; 'when Colonel Wood heard of this,' wrote a corporal of the 90th, 'he thought of his own small camp, 3 days in rear of him at Khambula. He ordered a return march at once and marched night and day until he got to camp'.(17)

During their confrontations that week, Buller and Wood's men captured some 7,000 Zulu cattle; these were sold to civilian butchers for thirty shillings each - who slaughtered the cattle then sold them back to the Column contractors for £18 a head.

Buller's skirmish with the Zulus would have been considered significant had it not been for Chelmsford's defeat at Isandlwana on the same day. It had the hallmarks of a successful and active engagement and had Wood been able to follow on with further operations led by Buller, the *abaQulusi* Zulus would, most likely, have been dislodged from Hlobane and scattered. When news from Isandlwana reached the Zulus, they were encouraged to strengthen their position on Hlobane and, bolstered by victory at Isandlwana, became emboldened. Apart from being of vague interest to Zulu War researchers, Buller's two days of serious engagements with the Zulus has been largely ignored and rarely features in accounts of the campaign. Buller's skirmishing took place over a wide area around Hlobane which is largely inaccessible and hence rarely ever visited, although in recent years a handful of hardy enthusiasts have traced Buller's route on horseback. At the time, Buller's men never explored the possibility of finding a route to the vast upper plateau of Hlobane which suggests a high level of over-confidence on Buller's part for him not to bother with such a fundamental reconnaissance. Due to this omission on his part, his following expedition to capture Hlobane was doomed to failure. Buller's account of his experiences of the skirmishes was, understandably, limited in its explanation and therefore his experiences over the two days did not feature in any major account. The defeat at Isandlwana neatly diverted any questions from Buller and so the first battle of Hlobane was conveniently forgotten.

References

1. Buller, report dated 'Camp, White Umfolosi River, January 21 1879', BPP C2260.
2. Ibid.
3. Wood, report dated 'Camp, Zungwini Nek, January 23rd 1879', BPP C2260.
4. Wood, *Midshipman to Field Marshal*.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Report in the *Natal Mercury* dated 'Umvelosi, Thinta's Drift, Jan 25th, issue of 29 January 1879.
9. Wood, *Midshipman to Field Marshal*.
10. *Natal Mercury*, report of 25th January.
11. Ibid.
12. Wood, *Midshipman to Field Marshal*. The term 'Boys' should not be taken too literally - most buglers (drummers) were mature men.
13. 4th Hussars, staff officer to No. 3 Column.
14. Wood, *Midshipman to Field Marshal*.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Diary of Lance Corporal Andrew Guthrie, 90th Regiment, published in Andrew Guthrie Macdougall, *The Guthrie Saga*, Durham, 1998.