

Spying and Intelligence during the Anglo-Zulu War.

By Stephen Wade

Military intelligence is basically about knowledge of the enemy. That sounds very simple, but of course a reflection on the nature of 'knowledge' soon leads to complex questions about partiality, trust, responsibility and above all the status and source of the knowledge. This applies in all areas of human activity, but in war, it applies in terms of saving lives, preserving reputations and even at times, ensuring the progress of a great ideological machine called an Empire.

For Victorian commanders, confronted with a variety of enemy forces each with their own weapons, tactics and shared aims, often with tribal loyalties and various bonds of allegiance through kinship, there was a base-line body of knowledge relating to the foundations of military thinking required. In the case of the Zulu kingdom, the back-story was well known, as the fame of Shaka, founder of the modern military systems of the nation, was widely known beyond Africa. In a large number of periodicals and ephemera from the Regency period to the 1860s, there was a burgeoning of interest in the 'Dark Continent' and indeed all other corners of the world. A typical issue of *Home Friend*, for example, published in 1857 just after the Crimean War, contained, for general readership, an account of the Zouave warriors, a tract on 'Field Fortification and Siege Work' and a piece on the Walcheren expedition. Military affairs naturally interested the reading public when so many of them had relatives abroad, fighting in all the little wars of Victoria's reign as well as in the major conflicts.

However, the information that really mattered was the mix of the current intelligence and the fundamental knowledge. That combination meant that it would be possible to predict the enemy actions. Again, everyone seemed to have an opinion on this and once more, Rider Haggard had a theory in his head: 'I think I told you that their plan of battle is to engage us in the open for three days and three nights and then charge in from every side.'¹ He had been told about the 'horns of the buffalo.' Clearly, Shepstone was his teacher, and this opens up the whole subject of the diplomats and the border agents in the period before Chelmsford's advance north.

The men already in place, men such as Shepstone, knew the country, but they were not there to prepare maps, and maps were, naturally, a key element in the essential knowledge on which intelligence in the field could work. Earlier, Thomas Best Jervis had seen the importance of cartography, but even by the 1870s it was not a priority. Henry Curling notes the problem, writing in 1878: 'The lack of accurate maps was a handicap during the invasion of Zululand and great reliance was placed on the colonial scouts to seek out the best routes. The Royal Engineers took the opportunity to survey and produce the first accurate maps of the region.'

Shepstone, knowledgeable as he was on Zulu civilization, was war-mongering with Bartle Frere; he told Frere in January 1878 that no peace was possible until the Zulu power was crushed. Everything began to focus on the Boundary Commission which started to consider the situation with regard to the three main interests in Zululand – Zulu, British and Boer. The Commission met on 12 March 1878 at Rorke's

Drift, but the expected outcome, that the Boers would be given their share and there would be a war, was not so straightforward. One reason was that the Colonial Secretary, Carnarvon, was replaced by Sir Michael Hicks Beach. He did not have the same set opinions as Frere so there was to be more debate. Hicks Beach was more open to consider the Zulu position, and so what becomes particularly interesting with regard to the gathering intelligence on the Zulu is the correspondence between John Sutcliffe Robson, Eustace Fannin, border agents at Umvoti, together with magistrates Henry Fynn junior and W H Beaumont, and Hicks Beach.

Robson, born in 1824, had sailed for Natal from Gravesend in 1850, and settled at Newcastle, Natal. There he became a J.P. and was a Special Border Agent. When war broke out he went with the Newcastle Buffalo Border Guard, a force of only twenty men when first formed. They were sent with the Centre Column in the advance into Zululand and eventually joined Durnford at Isandlwana, standing with his men at the last. The various volunteer groups were essential to Chelmsford: he had only an inadequate force of imperial soldiers, and in order to create the advance he wanted, he desperately needed native volunteers. Almost 300 volunteers were to take part in the campaign. Obviously, people such as Robson were immensely valuable for intelligence, and his messages to Hicks Beach illustrate the potential knowledge and local information at the disposal of the high command.

Fynn was born in the Cape Colony in 1846 and became a magistrate in Msinga after working with Shepstone; he was the interpreter at the meeting when the British ultimatum was given, and later, as the advance was close at hand, Chelmsford drafted in Fynn to be a special intelligence adviser. He had been with Chelmsford at Mangeni when Isandlwana took place. He figures prominently in Chelmsford's planning in transit as well as before the move north. Fannin was particularly effective in enrolling police, so that groups were speedily assembled to watch key points on the Tugela River.

Chelmsford had been given permission by Sir Henry Bulwer to raise 7,000 native troops in November, 1878, and not long before Christmas after that, the Boundary Commission was in favour of the Zulus, but the thirteen conditional clauses included what amounted to a direct provocation to war. Therefore, as Cetshwayo was told to disband his army and accepting a British resident at Ulundi, war was coming soon. Between December and January, just before the battle of Isandlwana, Robson wrote from Ulundi with his reports for Hicks Beach. Parallel with this, Chelmsford was writing to Evelyn Wood and others, explaining his thinking and planning. The gap between the two is very informative about the difference between actually working to understand the Zulu and their homeland, and the military preparations: it is a case of Chelmsford meticulously working out and anticipating moves, responses and problems, while Hicks Beach gets solid facts.

The intelligence reports concern attitudes among the Zulu, movements, hints about whether or not Cetshwayo was preparing for war, and constantly there are comments on the river, as waiting for the level to decrease was crucial to the advance of Chelmsford's columns. From 1 January to the day of Isandlwana, the reports came to Hicks Beach and of course then to Chelmsford, up to the point of departure. What then becomes apparent is how the important information given in the days preceding the disastrous rout was used or passed on.

Fannin was at Umvoti, and there he spoke to any stray Zulu with scraps of information and placed men by the river on watch. On 1 January he listed possibilities, based on his conjectures of likely developments: 'The men of the tribes might simply be ordered to take their stand along the river and resist any attempt at an inroad, sending instant intelligence to me by way of the police. They might take up their quarters at their kraals of the respective tribes which were nearest...' ⁱⁱ

Robson also had a string of spies out on watch, reporting on 6 January that 'a reliable source' had told him that reinforcements had gathered with Sihayo, an *inkosi* (hereditary chief) of the iNdabakawombe people, who was based by the mountain Ngedla. Some of his most enlightening statements are drawn from natives who had been traveling across the river:

This may be only boasting, but it is well known that both the tribe of Sihayo and that of Matyana are burning to try their strength with the English. Large parties of mounted and armed Zulus may be seen riding from point to point. ⁱⁱⁱ

The information was flowing in, but what we learn from this is that, given the extent of Zululand being 10,450 square miles and Ulundi (the main objective of Chelmsford's drive north) was far to the north-east, communication had to be efficient. Even between Frere and Henry Bulwer there was confusion and a certain amount of nervousness, as can be seen in this exchange:

January 7 1879

I conclude this kind of information is regularly communicated direct by the border officials to the officers in the military detachments.

H B. E. Frere

Colonial Secretary,

I think you have given instructions to all the border agents to communicate with the officer commanding the nearest column.

H. Bulwer. ^{iv}

Such notes convey a sense of anxiety, of giving additional reminders and sometimes rather fretful statements as if the communication system is not regarded with confidence. In practical terms, as Chelmsford was sending three columns north: one from the lower drift, Chelmsford's own, going from Rorke's Drift, and a third from the headwaters of the Blood River, it meant that the border police and reserve personnel who were being hurriedly recruited by Fannin and Robson, would have to be prepared to cover large distances and move very speedily. Instructions were issued and sent to Robson:

Instructions for Native Border Police

General Duties – The general duties of the Border Police will be to watch the fords, to gather intelligence, and to ascertain the business of all natives crossing from either side.

Directions, Stations – They will be stationed in such places as the Border Agent of the district shall from time to time direct.

Conveying intelligence – The Border Agent will make his own arrangements as to the method of conveying intelligence by the Police to himself. He will transmit all intelligence that he considers deserving of credit or of any significance to the Colonial Secretary, for the information of the Lieutenant-Governor and to the officer in command of the military line in which his district is, using special messengers to such convenient points when the matter to be communicated is of urgent importance. ^v

What was happening was something that had been well established in India, but over a century: the liaison between regional magistrates and the army. It was by a magistrate that the *thuggee* killers had been apprehended, using spies to infiltrate gangs. In Zululand, the men like Robson were magistrates also: he lived in a small fortress in effect. His home had a jail and he had servants and police. As a settler, he represented a kind of law and administration that the Zulu would have found very strange, but they would have seen his power and respected it.

Now Robson, Fannin and others were to act as effectively the only intelligence arm of Chelmsford's force outside his official ranks. Because the field intelligence had always been undertaken, since Wellington's days in particular, by a mix of scouting detachments, Royal Engineers and adjutants with power to select individuals, the plan of having three columns appears on paper to be sensible: it meant that detachments of scouts could move quickly and meet any riders from the Border Police. But there was one major obstacle: the country itself. The topography was such that, as was to prove fatal at Isandlwana, the deep-cut valleys, the dongas and the sheer number of undulations of all kinds, communications were always going to be problematical.

During January the information kept pouring in from Fannin and Robson. Fannin was recruiting new police, and his notes imply that he was being given provisions, as he had badges delivered on 2 January. But he needed greatcoats for them 'to render them efficient in wet weather.' He was probably asking for funds.

On 5 January the Tugela was still too high to cross. But Fannin's police reported regularly that there were Zulus across the river, eager to fight. What then began to be included in the reports was something more than facts. Intelligence reports always need a dimension other than the facts, though they are something to be considered and often wrong. What started to happen was that assessments were made of intangible elements such as this statement:

I think I am justified in saying that there is a better feeling growing up among our own natives. I think they have more confidence in our power to overcome the Zulus, and see that, to use a common expression, they are in the same boat, and must sink or swim with us. ^{vi}

There were also the usual ruses. After all, what was Cetshwayo doing while these preparations were in progress? He was a master of misinformation, just as in the field the Zulu habit was a feint and the use of deception, so there were various stories given to civilians, such as the reports from Bishop Schroeder at the Christian mission in Robson's area. The Bishop said that Cetshwayo had given orders for all the younger warriors to go to him at Ulundi, and that only the older men were along the river, to reduce the chance of a clash with the guards and police. This may have been true, but it

is likely that this was a temporary measure, preparatory to the King sorting out which impi would be deployed in specific locations. In other words, the informants who told Schroeder put another 'spin' on the story.

However, Fannin and Robson had trusted men, and these were sent as spies into Zululand. On 11 January, Fannin wrote to describe a spy sent twenty miles beyond the Tukanhla forest, so he would have been in the heart of the southern area of Zululand. The spy was smart enough to note minor but telling details such as this:

My informant took note of one very significant act of the Zulus. Two very old men, named Manxondo and Bilbana, who live near the Tugela and who are unable to walk, have this week been carried away on men's shoulders to kraals on the edge of the Inkhanla forest for safety.

These were not just any random Zulu people: Manxondo was a tribal chief and Bilbana was a highly-rated warrior.^{vii}

Other spies reported, just two days later, that John Dunn's place, Emangeto, was then crowded with gathering warriors. John Dunn was to become a very important figure in the intelligence within Chelmsford's army, notably later, in the aftermath of the setback at Isandlwana. He had lived among the Zulu for many years and so he was extremely valuable to the British when he 'came across' and he had already requested, before the Zulu arrived at his home, that his family and servants be given somewhere to stay in Natal. They had been dealt with by Henry Bulwer who had advised that the people be used in the Public Works Department, and very meanly, he remarked that as Dunn was a rich man, he need not ask the British government to feed the employees.

But on 11 January, Chelmsford's centre column was crossing the river at Rorke's Drift. It is hardly surprising that Fannin reported that one of his contacts reported in Zululand, 'two Zulu doctors were daily expected to sprinkle for war all the tribes living near this border.'

All this shows just how important the magistrates were in the context of intelligence; foremost in many ways was Henry Fynn Jnr., who had been with Shepstone and Haggard when Cetshwayo was 'crowned' – a meaningless ceremony in which there was a proclamation of peace with regard to Zululand and its neighbours. Fynn became a very important interpreter, and after Isandlwana, he played an important role in setting up border guards. He had also helped Chelmsford in the diplomacy involved in meeting Gamdana, a brother of Sirayo.

It is clear from some of Chelmsford's letters from camp, though, that he had treated the reports from border agents with skepticism. On 21 January he wrote to Bartle Frere:

I do not believe Mr Fannin's report about a large force in the Inkandla bush, and I am certain that the Tugela River at the present moment is not one which a force would dare top dash across. Middledrift moreover is still watched by two battalions of Col. Durnford's column.

Yet Fannin and Robson had both sent missives when the river level was low enough to cross. Up-to-date information was crucially important, as is surely seen in the statement by Frere that a large portion of the regiments' warriors would be harvesting grain at the time of the advance – something proved wrong when it was noted that the rains were later than expected.

The diplomats, from Shepstone and Fynn down to the local magistrates, were extremely important in the initial phase of intelligence gathering, and of course they

were also recruiting police. There were also the native contingents, as already noted. Shepstone was particularly important; he had become so familiar to the Zulu that they had a nick-name for him – ‘Somtseu’ – meaning *mighty hunter*. He could speak with confidence and intimate knowledge of the Zulu culture, tradition and language. Men like him and the other settlers who played these major roles in intelligence were self-made: they learned by doing. When Rider Haggard was appointed Master and Registrar of the High Court in May, 1877 he had no legal training at all. Yet he learned and coped well. As for Shepstone, he had been agent for the native tribes since 1845. At a time when fluent speakers of Zulu were in short supply, he, together with Fynn, were arguably the key figures in establishing information sources, despite the fact that Shepstone wanted what Frere wanted, and had the utter assurance that he was right. The attitudes of the imperialists such as he are expressed succinctly in a publication twenty years after the wars – a geography of the Empire from 1899 has these words:

The Zulu king was reinstated in 1883, but died the following year and the British government, finding that the Zulus could not form any orderly government, declared the country British territory in 1887.^{viii}

Although the settlers and diplomats were part of the scene in the intelligence establishment, they were often led by personal vision and the imperial ideologies they embraced thoughtlessly, and of course the paternalistic attitudes to African people did little to improve their status when it came to their approaches and thoughts being tested by change and warfare.

After all this, it was the turn for field intelligence and communication to take centre stage. Reading Chelmsford’s papers today, what strikes us is the fundamental habit of thought which John Laband describes:

... it is hardly surprising that field intelligence under Chelmsford during the Anglo-Zulu War was minimal. He had no intelligence officer on his staff in January 1879 and he saw no need for such an appointment.^{ix}

In December 1878 Chelmsford wanted someone to act as intelligence officer but Cornelius Clery, who was interested in tactics and theory, had been assigned to Colonel Glyn with the Centre Column. There is something disturbingly whimsical and careless in Chelmsford’s letter, when he says,

Have you anyone who could take up Clery’s work *pro tem*? I am most anxious to give Glyn a good staff officer before the time arrives for him to move down to Rorke’s Drift, and I have absolutely no-one available.^x

That implies that Clery was the only man suitable for any forward role in field intelligence. Major Clery had served in Griqualand West in 1877 and in the Transvaal in 1878. Interestingly, he had been an instructor in tactics at The Royal Military College, having been a professor there in 1872-75.

The overall picture of intelligence, then, on the eve of Isandlwana, was that the three columns were about to move into Zululand, with only border agents ahead, simply watching the river crossings, and settlers who had local knowledge which they kept to themselves – with the exception of Henry Fynn.

ⁱ Lilius Rider Haggard p. 36

-
- ii PP Transvaal 1879 p. 308
 - iii Ibid. P.308
 - iv Ibid. p.309
 - v Ibid. p. 309
 - vi Ibid. p.310
 - vii Ibid. p.312
 - viii Haynes, *Advanced Geography* p. 487
 - ix Laband, *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign* p. xviii
 - x Ibid. p.45