

The Battle of Inyezane 22nd January 1879

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On the morning of 12th January 1879, the long awaited invasion of Zululand began. The Centre Column, under Lord Chelmsford's command, was the main thrust and was supported on its flanks by the Left and Right Columns.

The latter, also known as the Coastal Column, was under the command of Colonel Charles Knight Pearson, who was also the Commanding Officer of the 3rd Regiment (The Buffs). He, like his regiment, had a reputation for steadiness and reliability. His invasion command was formidable and consisted of over 400 men of his Regiment and 160 of the 99th (Duke of Edinburgh's Lanarkshire) Regiment. He was accompanied by a strong contingent of Royal Engineers numbering 90 which was augmented by 60 men of the Natal Native Pioneers. The Royal Artillery presence was two seven-pound guns which were operated by 22 men. The two battalions of the 2nd Regiment Natal Native Contingent supplied the largest number, 1,655 officers and men. The eyes of the Column were drawn from 115 Mounted Infantry and 117 Colonial troopers.

Crucially, he had been given the Naval Landing Brigade from HMS Active numbering 138 sailors and marines. Their firepower included two seven-pound guns, a rocket battery and a Gatling gun. This contingent of Blue Jackets, together with the Buffs, gave a strong backbone to Pearson's command. The detail of the Column's progress is covered elsewhere in the Journal. Suffice to state that progress was slow, hampered by the inclement weather, a quagmire of a track and the many rivers and flooded dongas that had to be forded. Apart from several false alarms initiated by the "green" soldiers of the 99th, there had been no sign of the Zulus.

On the 21st January, Pearson learned that about four to five thousand warriors were assembled at the royal homestead (*ikhanda*) at Gingindlovu. Detaching two companies of the Buffs, most of the Naval Brigade, his artillery, some mounted men and a couple of companies of NNC, Pearson sent them to verify the rumour. In fact the impressive *ikhanda* was deserted, although, as they were soon to discover, the Zulus were not that far away. Pausing only for some target practice, which left the *ikhanda* in flames, the detachment returned to the main column.

The activities of the column kept the Zulus at a distance which forced them to bring forward their original plan to attack the column. After dark, the Zulu impi, which had gained in numbers since leaving Ulundi and now had a strength of six thousand, reached the still smouldering *ikhanda*. From here they followed the detachment's trail until they approached the British camp. The Zulus then withdrew, deciding that they were unable to launch a co-ordinated attack at night in unfamiliar terrain. Also, they may have been deterred by the sentries routinely calling to each other that all was well. They may have thought their presence had been detected.

At daybreak it was discovered that the long grass surrounding the British camp had been flattened, but of the Zulus there was no trace. After sending out mounted scouts, Pearson quickly had the column on the move and by 4.30 am. all were heading for the next obstacle, the Inyezane River, four miles distant. The scouts crossed the river and followed a track until they came upon a fairly open area approximately half a mile from the river. Beyond this point, the track climbed up a spur leading to the crest of a ridge. Extending from this ridge and running parallel either side of the track were two further spurs. The ravines between the three spurs were filled with tall man-concealing grass. A third of the way up the central spur was a grassy knoll situated to the right of the track. Also to the right and dominating the ridge was a dome-shaped hill known locally as 'Wombane'. On the left of the track and nearing the summit, was a native homestead (*umuzi*).

This, then, was the terrain that confronted Colonel Pearson as he joined Captain Percy Barrow, the officer commanding the mounted troops. (1) Because of the surrounding thick bush, it was with some reluctance that Pearson took Barrow's advice to call a breakfast halt prior to the long climb to their destination at Eshowe. While the laborious task of bringing the wagons across the Inyezane was being undertaken, some of the mounted troops, who were not on vedette duty, took the opportunity to bathe in one of the small streams that flowed down from the heights. In the meantime, the first wagons had crossed the river and had halted at the open area at the base of the centre spur. At around 8.00 am. one of the vedettes reported to Barrow that a small party of Zulus had been seen gathering in the hills ahead.

Barrow passed this information on to Colonel Pearson who immediately ordered the NNC to advance in order to drive the Zulus off. Led by Captain Fitzroy Hart, the NNC advanced up the track on the centre spur. (2) A small party of Zulu scouts were seen moving on the skyline above, melting into the bush and then reappearing on the lower slopes of Wombane to the right of the British.

The NNC left the track and crossed the ravine before emerging onto the lower reaches of Wombane hill. Hart got his command into some sort of order before advancing up the slope. The officers had no knowledge of their troops' language and the inevitable confusion ensued. The natives were clearly aware of

the Zulus hiding in the long grass ahead and tried to warn their officers. In turn, the officers could not understand their men's reluctance to advance and tried to urge them on. One even brandished his sword and yelled "*Baleka!*" thinking it was Zulu for "*Charge!*"

In fact, it means "*Run!*" The natives needed no further encouragement; they turned and ran back down the slope into the protection of the ravine. At the same time, hundreds of Zulus emerged from behind the crest of the hill and fired a ragged volley before charging down on to the retreating NNC. Some white officers and NCO's were rooted to the spot and tried to hold their ground but were quickly overrun and killed. Hart did not stay to be slaughtered and managed to get back to safety.

Meanwhile, the sudden volley of gunfire and yells alerted the troops and the rest of the mounted men at the wagon park. Those who were bathing hastily dressed and rushed back towards the centre spur. The battle started to evolve with no set plan. The Zulu charge by their left horn was the premature attack of a carefully planned ambush although the centre and right horn were not yet in position to pose an effective threat. The Mounted Volunteers quickly formed a firing line to the right of the track and fired into the left flank of the Zulu horn as they tried to work their way towards the wagons. Hart's men started to emerge from the undergrowth of the ravine only to be met by "friendly fire" until they were identified.

Pearson could see he was in a highly vulnerable position. His wagons were strung out for miles and the river was dividing his command. He was in no position to form an effective defence and his only course of action was to rush as many reinforcements forward as possible. Fortunately, he already had with him his artillery, the guns and men of the Naval Brigade and two companies of the Buffs. As they were getting into position, the men of the Royal Engineers, who had been working at the river crossing, joined the Mounted Volunteers on the firing line and helped keep the Zulus at bay.

The seven-pound guns and rocket tubes were dragged up the track to the grassy knoll which gave them an excellent field of fire. The rest of the Zulu impi now appeared on the ridge above. The centre descended to occupy the *umazi* while the right horn tried to encircle to British left. All the time British reinforcements were arriving at the double. Men from the 99th and another company from the Buffs hurried forward, while those further back in the column speculated what was happening beyond the crossing.

Pearson placed himself on the knoll with the artillery and his beloved Buffs; he then ordered both the Queen's and Regimental colours to be unfurled. The Zulus on the right had gone to ground and were putting down a heavy fire, they were also crawling through the thick grass and getting closer to the defenders. Casualties were mounting and some officers directed a concentrated fire on those Zulu sharpshooters who were causing the most damage. One casualty was Colonel Pearson's horse, which was badly wounded and had to be put down.

The Gatling gun was still at the wagon having sustained damage to its limber pole. It was rapidly repaired and a nineteen-year-old Midshipman, Lewis Coker, had it rushed up the track to the knoll. (3) This young man had the distinction of supervising the first use, by the British, of the machine gun in battle. Although it soon jammed, the minute-long burst of 300 rounds, at an area of bush from which there had been particularly galling fire, neutralised this troublesome source and proved this weapon's worth.

The artillery and rocket tubes began to concentrate their fire on the *umazi* where the massed warriors were causing serious problems for the men on the knoll. A chance hit on the *umazi* by one of the notoriously unpredictable rockets caused the Zulus to scatter but not to retreat. Meanwhile, on the left, the few men of the Colonial Volunteers had effectively prevented the Zulu right horn from advancing far enough to affect the outcome of the battle. When they tried to advance by another route further to the left, they were met by the fire from just eight men of the Natal Hussars who had been acting as a vedette before the fight. This limited action was enough to make the Zulus withdraw back beyond the ridge.

The British realised that the Zulu attack on their right had slackened and that the Zulus were slowly retreating back up Wombane. Pearson then agreed to allow the Naval Brigade, supported by a company of Buffs, to advance and clear the *umazi* of any remaining Zulus. Led by Commander Campbell, the 'Blue Jackets' tore up the centre spur with guns blazing and drove the Zulus from the *umazi*. The advance slowed as it met stiff resistance near the top of the ridge and several sailors were shot. The attack stalled about 100 yards from the summit with the Zulus firing not only from the ridge above but also from both flanks. Campbell requested reinforcements but, before they could arrive, he ordered his men to charge again.

Yelling and with fixed cutlass-bayonets, the sailors reached the summit and put the Zulus to flight. Up to this point, the Zulus considered that they were winning until 'those horrible men in the white trousers rushed up and showered lead on us.' The Naval Brigade and the Buffs, much to their annoyance, had not been able to keep up with the sailors and now moved to clear Wombane to their right. By now the Zulus had conceded defeat and were streaming away. The time was 9.30 am. and the battle had lasted eighty minutes.

Unlike subsequent battles of the war, the mounted troops did not pursue and slaughter their vanquished foe. Instead, the Zulu wounded were given water and medical treatment. Prisoners had been taken and, after being questioned, were then released. After Isandlwana, this humane behaviour was abandoned.

The greatest calamity to befall the British Army was only three hours and fifty miles away. With it came a hardening of attitude towards the Zulus and there was an unofficial understanding that no prisoners were to be taken; defeated warriors were thereafter to be hunted down and killed.

With the Zulus disappearing over the surrounding hills, the British counted the cost of the battle, ten of the NNC had been killed in the initial clash on Wombane and two privates of the Buffs died during the battle; twenty had been wounded, two of whom later died. A common grave was dug just below the knoll; the dead were buried and the spot was marked with a wooden cross. (4)

A body count was made of the Zulu dead, and some 400 were left where they fell. Many more had been wounded but had been carried from the battlefield. Amongst the Zulus there was much recrimination. Their carefully prepared trap had been sprung with the premature attack by their left horn. The centre and right horns had not responded until later and had not given support.

In fact, the right horn had shown an un-Zulu lack of resolve and the ambush had been quickly neutralised. This and the battle itself were all but forgotten and overshadowed by the events at Isandlwana. Colonel Pearson, however, had grounds for satisfaction at the way his men had behaved in this stiff little action. From potential disaster, the British had improvised a resounding victory, sadly to be overshadowed by Isandlwana.

Having buried his dead and tended the wounded, Pearson was anxious to move on, not only to reach Eshowe but also to show the distant watching Zulus that they had not deflected the British advance. As the British column slowly ascended the escarpment towards Eshowe, the sun partially disappeared behind the moon bathing the land in a premature twilight, many soldiers thought it was a bad omen.

Acknowledgements.

Fearful Hard Times by Ian Castle & Ian Knight

The Red Soldier by Frank Emery

The Zulu War- Then & Now by Ian Castle & Ian Knight

A Good Dusting by Henry Keown-Boyd

The South African Campaign of 1879 by Mackinnon & Shadbolt 1879

References.

1. Brevet Major Percy Henry Stanley Barrow was born in 1848. He joined the 19th Hussars in 1868 and was quickly recognised as an exceptional cavalry officer. He was appointed Brigade Major of Cavalry at the Curragh in 1877 until he was sent to South Africa to form a mounted infantry squadron. He commanded the mounted troops in both the Coastal Column and the Eshowe Relief Column and he was wounded at Gingindlovu. After the Zulu War he served with the Egyptian Army and was badly wounded in 1885 during a stiff fight near Tokar. The British Army was robbed of a talented officer when he died the following year as a result of his wound.

2. Captain Arthur Fitzroy Hart joined the 31st (Huntingdon) Regiment in 1864 and volunteered for South Africa in 1878. He was appointed Staff Officer of the 2nd NNC and took part in both the battles of Inyezane and Gingindlovu. In the latter he was slightly wounded and mentioned in despatches. He ended the Zulu War as Brevet Major and Principal Staff Officer of Colonel Clarke's Column. His father was Colonel Henry Hart, the founder of *Hart's Army List*, indispensable to all historians and collectors.

3. Midshipman Lewis Cadwallader Coker entered the navy at the age of twelve. He was regarded as having an exceptional career ahead of him and his commander had no second thoughts about placing such a young man in charge of the Gatling gun team. Having used his charge to good effect at Inyezane, Coker went onto Eshowe, where he became one of the besieged. Because of his pride at being in charge of the Gatling, he chose to sleep by it in the open. This exposure lowered his resistance and he died of dysentery on 16th March.

4. A handsome grey granite memorial now marks the site. The battlefield has changed with a metalled road paralleling the centre spur and running through fields of sugar cane.