"*NOT AT ALL CHILD'S PLAY"*
The Siege and Relief of Eshowe 1879

Ian Knight

Inevitably, it is the great battles of Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift which continue to attract attention, even among established enthusiasts of the Anglo-Zulu War. It is not hard to see why; these two battles are a saga of victory and defeat, courage and endurance, of drama, folly, and horror, all qualities which give them a lasting appeal. Yet our fascination with these battles has tended to distort our understanding of the war as a whole, to draw attention away from what was actually a brutal and prolonged slogging match, in which the battle honours were almost even, until the British began to win the war of attrition which finally led them to the final victory at Ulundi.

One theatre of operations which has been consistently over-shadowed by more dramatic events elsewhere is that of the British Right Flank (No.1) Column, commanded by Col. Charles Pearson, which operated in Zululand's coastal sector. This is a shame, since the story of the coastal column is rich in unusual incident, not least because it saw the best part of a British column besieged for 72 days.

When Lord Chelmsford drew up his plans to invade Zululand in 1878, he initially planned to do so in five separate columns, which were to start on the rivers which marked the boundary between the British colony of Natal and the Zulu kingdom, and to converge on Ulundi (or oNdini), King Cetshwayo kaMpande's principle homestead. By this means he hoped to restrict the freedom of manoeuvrability of the Zulu army, which he recognised as being far greater than his own. In the event, lack of resources, particularly of transport, meant that he had to amend these plans, and he decided instead to use three columns for offensive purposes, while the remaining two were reduced in size, and given a defensive role. Chelmsford's new plan therefore saw a three-pronged attack, with the Central Column (No. 3) as the main thrust and two flanking columns in support. The Central Column, accompanied by Chelmsford himself, was to cross into Zululand at Rorke's Drift, and follow one of the best-established trading routes towards Ulundi. The Left Flank Column was to move into Zululand from the Transvaal border, further up country from Rorke's Drift, while the Right Flank Column would follow the line of another long-established traders' track, up the coast.

Each column had a backbone of British infantry battalions and a battery of artillery, and was fleshed out with Volunteer cavalry - drawn from part-time units raised among the settler population in Natal for the colony's defence - and the hastily raised Natal Native Contingent. Most of Chelmsford's troops had recently served under him on the Cape Frontier, and the troops were used to functioning together as an army, and to African climate and conditions.

Colonel Pearson's Right Flank Column was perhaps the least hardened of the three, however. Although it included Pearson's own regiment - the 2/3rd (the Buffs) - who had been in South Africa for some time, the other regular infantry battalion, the 99th (Duke of Edinburgh's) had been one of the few to be sent from home in response to Chelmsford's request for reinforcements, and had no experience of African warfare. Indeed, the 99th had been brought up to strength with a large draft of recruits, many of whom were young men recruited under the controversial new 'short service system', which had been introduced to make service in the army more attractive to a better class of volunteer. The system was regarded with some suspicion by old hands, who felt that it discouraged mature men from remaining in the army, and therefore filled the ranks with inexperienced men. The performance of the 99th in the following campaign was the subject of much comment in this regard.

In addition, Pearson had only a section (two guns) of 11/7 Battery, RA, armed with 7 pounder RML guns, a detachment of Royal Engineers, and the 2nd Regiment, NNC. His mounted arm consisted of a number of small colonial Volunteer units - the Victoria, Stanger, and Alexandra and Durban Mounted Rifles, the Natal Hussars, and a squadron of Imperial Mounted Infantry. He was also able to call upon the services of a small Naval Brigade, consisting of men from HMS Active and Tenedos, who had been landed on the coast, and who brought with them an impressive array of armament, including a Gatling gun and 24 pounder rocket tubes. Pearson's force amounted to 4271 combat troops, and it required a train of 384 wagons, 24 carts, and over 3000 oxen to transport its food, equipment and supplies. In is interesting to note, when assessing Chelmsford's initial dispositions, that by his own account the Zulu army could put as many as 40,000 men into the field - and that each column ran the risk of being attacked by the full weight of the enemy in isolation.

The starting point for Pearson's advance was a crossing point on the Thukela River known as the Lower Drift. The Thukela had been recognised as the border between the Zulu kingdom and Natal since the 1840s, and the Lower Drift was perhaps the oldest entry point into the kingdom. Traders had regularly entered the country from there, and at least two battles had been fought nearby, as armies passed to and fro. Cetshwayo had appointed his white adviser, John Dunn, as chief with control over the border regions, precisely to monitor white movements through the district. In January 1879 the river was a formidable obstacle, a brown sheet of water, broken here and there by sandbanks, as much as two hundred yards wide in places. A ridge ran along the Natal bank, and Pearson's column promptly made

this secure with the addition of an impressive earthwork redoubt, named after him; from the top of this redoubt, the river could be seen flowing out to sea, only a few miles downstream.

Chelmsford had intended to co-ordinate the advance of the two flanking columns with that of his own Centre Column. Pearson's first objective was a mission-station known as KwaMondi, at Eshowe, where he was supposed to establish a supply depot. From here he was to await Chelmsford's instructions as to the exact route of his advance. Like all other Zululand missions, its missionaries had deserted KwaMondi in the tense days before the war. Many missionaries had actively campaigned for British military intervention in Zululand, as they blamed King

Cetshwayo's administration for their failure to secure Christian converts, and hoped that by prising the Zulu away from their traditional beliefs and way of life they might encourage them to convert. Once that intervention seemed likely, however, they felt understandably vulnerable, and abandoned their property for the safety of Natal. To Lord Chelmsford, their abandoned mission stations were a rare source of permanent roofed structures, which made ideal storage depots (as had happened with the Swedish mission at Rorke's Drift on the Mzinyathi).

The country lying between the Thukela and Eshowe - a distance of 25 miles as the crow flies, but longer by road – was undulating grassland, rising in a series of hilly terraces towards Eshowe itself. It is still an area of breath-taking sub-tropical beauty, despite the impact on the landscape of intensive sugar farming. At the time, more than one British officer responded to its allure, but as country to campaign in, its appeal was distinctly limited. It was crossed by a number of major river systems - the Nyezane, amaTigulu and iNyoni – while even small streams had cut deep, narrow channels by the time they had so nearly reached the sea, and were formidable obstacles. Much of the area was carpeted in tall grass, made wet recently by seasonal rains, while here and there were patches of dense bush, and the heights around Eshowe were crowned with the ancient forest - the Dlinza, the place of grave-like meditation. All in all, while Pearson had the advantage of an established track to follow, he could expect the going to be difficult.

And so it was. In the weeks preceding the invasion, it rained heavily, and days of suffocating humidity gave way in the evening to torrential downpours. The Thukela itself came down in flood, washing away the hawser Pearson had stretched across the river, so that despite the fact that the British ultimatum officially expired on 11th January 1879, he was not able to cross the river until the following day. His crossing was unopposed, but it took him several days to ferry his supplies into Zululand, and it was not until the 18th that he felt able to advance. Because of the poor state of the track, he split his force into two divisions, which advanced a few miles apart, to spare the pressure of so much wheeled transport on the road.

The column began the advance in high spirits, but this was soon deflated by the difficulties of the march. Every minor stream took hours to negotiate, and the column advanced at a crawl. Moreover, once it was operating inside enemy territory, the unfamiliar sounds of the bush began to prey on the nerves of the new arrivals, particularly at night, and there were a string of dangerous false alarms. Moreover, Pearson began to receive reports that a Zulu army had been sent against him with the intention of contesting his advance. This was true. As Chelmsford had hoped, the three invading columns had posed something of a dilemma for King Cetshwayo and his councillors. The Zulu high command had, however, identified the Centre Column as the most serious threat, and sent their main army against it. Lacking the men to make a similarly forthright response to the flanking columns, Cetshwayo had simply ordered the men living in the districts threatened by them to harass the British advance as best they could. A small army of a few thousand men under a chief named Godide kaNdlela was sent to reinforce local elements on the coast, and by 20th January this force was within striking distance of Pearson's command.

On the 21st, the two armies narrowly missed one another. Pearson received a report that a Zulu force had congregated at a Zulu ikhanda, kwaGingindlovu, which lay five miles east of his line of advance. KwaGingindlovu had been built in shortly after Cetshwayo's defeat of his brother and rival, Mbuyazi kaMpande, in 1856, and its name reflected that; it means 'The Swallower of the Elephant'. Pearson sent a force of two companies of the Buffs, supported by the Naval Brigade, artillery and some NNC, out to investigate the report. The royal homestead was deserted, however, and Pearson's men set it on fire before returning to join the column.

In fact, Godide's army was nearby. The advanced guard had occupied kwaGingindlovu that morning, but had disappeared before the British arrived. Godide hurried the main body forward, only to find the British gone and the huts a smouldering ruin. That night he moved closer to the spot where Pearson had established his camp, and some of his regiments apparently surrounded the camp during the night. The Zulu were generally reluctant to fight at night, however, and on this occasion the shouts of the British sentries, sounding off, convinced them that Pearson was prepared for them. Instead, Godide retired further north, ahead of Pearson, and took up a position behind the hills overlooking the Nyezane river.

Pearson reached the Nyezane early on the 22nd. The river itself was narrow but deep, and fringed with thick bush. Pearson sent mounted scouts to search through the hills beyond, and when they reported them clear, he began to move his column across the river. He had not long been doing so, however, when a party of Zulu scouts was observed, watching from the slope of a hill named Wombane opposite. Pearson sent some of his Native Contingent forward to drive them off, and as the NNC advanced up the slope of Wombane, a body of several hundred Zulus suddenly rose out of the long grass right in front of them. The NNC officers had been issued a booklet containing

useful Zulu phrases to address their men, and one of the officers immediately stood out resolutely and shouted "*Baleka*!" thinking it meant "*charge*!" He wasn't far wrong, but his imperfect understanding of Zulu cost him his life; "*baleka*" means "run", and the NNC needed no further bidding. They fled back down the slope, abandoning their white officers and NCOs; several of whom were over-run and killed before they could get away.

The Zulu force turned out to be the vanguard of Godide's army, which was about 6000 strong, and lying behind the crest of Wombane. Immediately a line of warriors rushed down towards the river, sweeping round Pearson's right flank. The British, of course, saw them coming, and Pearson hurried his men along the road, up a rising spur which flanked Wombane, and took up a position on a commanding knoll. From here his line looked across a gully at the Zulu streaming down Wombane opposite, and the British opened a heavy fire.

Nyezane is in interesting battle in a number of respects. For one thing, it was the first pitched battle of the war - it took place two or three hours before Isandlwana. Secondly, it was to be fought using the same open-order tactics which Lord Chelmsford had specified in his Standing Orders at the beginning of the war, and which would prove so disastrous at Isandlwana just a few hours later. Nyezane, however, was a British victory. Despite the fact that Pearson's position was scattered, as Pulleine's would be at Isandlwana, Pearson's firepower was too great, and Zulu numerical superiority too small, and the Zulu were driven off with losses of about 600 killed and many more wounded. Nevertheless, the battle had been a sobering experience for the British, for the Zulu had fought with remarkable skill and courage, quite disabusing Pearson's men of their preconceptions that the Zulu were a disorganised and undisciplined enemy. The battle was, in the words of a Colour Sergeant Burnett of the 99th, "terribly earnest work, and not at all child's play".

The Zulu attack did not slow Pearson's advance, however, and the following day he occupied Eshowe. The site consisted of an impressive church, and a number of thatched buildings - houses, stores and sheds - surrounded by orchards of fruit trees. Regretfully, Pearson ordered an earthwork to be built around the mission site, and the fruit trees to be cut down to clear the field of fire.

Chelmsford had intended Eshowe to be little more than a staging post on the line of advance, and Pearson did not expect to remain there long. Nevertheless, the following day his mounted pickets - Colonials, who spoke Zulu - heard Zulus in the surrounding countryside calling to one another across the hill-tops that they had won a great victory. The regular officers were reluctant to take these reports seriously, but the next day a runner from the Thukela brought the first of a series of confusing messages which confirmed that the British had indeed been defeated elsewhere in the country. The truth did not emerge until a message arrived from Chelmsford himself, baldly informing Pearson of the defeat at Isandlwana, that Pearson must expect an attack from the entire Zulu army, and that he must behave as he saw fit.

The news was shocking enough in itself. Although the British had made some attempts to understand the Zulu military system, it had seemed inconceivable that any foe armed primarily with spears, no matter how brave, could overcome an army equipped with all the awesome weapons that a great industrial nation could produce. Moreover, the practical implications were disconcerting; all the strategic guidelines by which Pearson had acted hitherto were removed. His command was a long way from the border, isolated, vulnerable, and with limited supplies. Yet Pearson felt it would be admitting defeat to retire to the border; if he could not advance, he would not retreat. He convened a council of war among his most senior officers, and it was decided that the column would stay at Eshowe. To lighten the burden on their supplies, however, the mounted Volunteers and the NNC would be sent back to the Thukela. In all, some 1,800 men would remain at Eshowe during the siege.

On the 28th January, therefore, the Volunteers and NNC returned to the border, feeling rather more nervous en route than they did on the way up. At Eshowe, Pearson's senior Engineer, Captain Richard Wynne, made preparations to defend the post for a long stay. Initially, the buildings were loop holed and a deep ditch thrown up around the perimeter, with the earth piled inside to form a rampart. As the days wore into weeks, Wynne was able to add all manner of refinements to the fort, including traverses, to stop plunging fire raking the interior lines, while *trous-de-loup* - 'wolf-pits', holes dug in the ground with a pointed stake placed in the bottom - were placed across the approaches. Wire entanglements were stretched from stakes hidden in the long grass, so that any Zulu attack would be slowed as it entered the garrison's most effective fire-zone. All in all, the fort at Eshowe became the most sophisticated British earthwork built during the entire war.

In fact, the Zulu were far too astute to attack the post outright. Although the king was outraged that Pearson appeared to have settled down in Zululand as if it had already been conquered, the Zulu high command had learned the folly of attacking entrenched positions at Rorke's Drift. Moreover, in the immediate aftermath of Isandlwana, the Zulu army dispersed to its homes to rest and recover, and the king was not in any case able to put a large number of men in the field.

Instead, the Cetshwayo ordered his local commanders – including his brother Prince Dabulamanzi, the unsuccessful commander at Rorke's Drift, whose personal homestead lay quite close to Eshowe - to invest the post. Large numbers of warriors assembled at military homesteads in the district, and from these several hundred were constantly employed in watching the fort, living in temporary shelters nearby. Their intention was to try to draw the

British away from their entrenchments, where they could be more easily attacked in the open, or to watch for any attempt to relieve the garrison from the Thukela.

As a result, it was not long before Pearson's runners were unable to take messages through to the border. From that point, the garrison was completely isolated, unaware of events in the outside world, not knowing whether the war was being won or lost, and prey to every type of rumour and imagining.

Indeed, the attempts to open up communication with the posts at the border form a chapter to themselves in the saga of the siege. Although the hills near Eshowe had a direct line of sight to the Thukela - 25 miles away - and heliographs were used in the British army in 1879, Chelmsford had none with him in South Africa when the war began. As a result, not only did Pearson have no mechanical means of contacting the Thukela garrisons, but neither did they of contacting him! Over the weeks Captain Wynne made various gallant attempts, most of which were frustrated by the weather. These included a large paper screen, which he erected on a hillside near the fort, and intended to use as a background for semaphore; no sooner was it finished than a sudden storm blew it down. Next he turned to a hot-air balloon, made of paper - the wind blew it in the wrong direction. Various attempts were made to improvise a heliograph from items found around the mission site; when success at last came - after six weeks of siege - it was achieved through the means of a carefully positioned piece of lead piping, taken from the church roof, and an officers' shaving mirror!

Although the Zulus never attacked the post, they did make life uncomfortable for the garrison. Pickets and vedettes were sent out daily to keep the Zulus away from the fort, and these went in frequent danger of ambush. The Zulus used to lie in wait and fire on pickets from the brow of a hill nearby, until one morning a group of volunteers rode out and surprised the Zulus as they were taking up their positions, and drove them off after a stiff skirmish. Nevertheless, at least one vedette - Private Kent of the 99th, attached to the Mounted Infantry – was killed by Zulus who had crept up unnoticed in the long grass to within a few yards of him, while another, Cpl. Carson, was fired on at close range, and only just managed to return to the fort, bearing several wounds as proof of his adventures.

The main danger at Eshowe came from the uncomfortable conditions, and boredom. To keep up his men's spirits Pearson had the bands of the 3rd and 99th play alternately, and organised foraging parties which scoured deserted Zulu homesteads for fresh food. Although Pearson's rations were to last throughout the siege, he did find it necessary to reduce them, and the monotony of the diet - tough meat from slaughtered trek-oxen, and army biscuit - preyed on the men's nerves. Pumpkins plundered from nearby Zulu gardens were eagerly sought after, and when a wagonload of exotic supplies, left behind by the Volunteers, were discovered, they were auctioned off at fantastic prices.

To avoid the danger of night attack, the entire garrison slept inside the fort at night. Since there was no room for tents, the men slept on the ground, lying under the wagons - which had been built into the defences - where they were lucky. The weather was dreadful, hot days and wet nights, and many men slept in the rain and mud night after night. Despite Pearson's best attempts to maintain hygiene, men began to succumb to dysentery, and the first casualties were buried on a grassy slope nearby. Surgeon Norbury of HMS *Active* later complained that the health of the garrison was hardly improved by the men's habit of filling their water bottles from a stream which drained off the slope where the dead were buried!

Throughout February the garrison looked for some sign of relief. At the beginning of February, the first flashed messages were received from the Thukela. Although the garrison's morale improved, it soon became clear that relief was not imminent. While British fears that the Zulu might attack Natal in the aftermath of Isandlwana proved unfounded, the fact remained that Chelmsford had been effectively defeated, and his invasion repulsed. At the very least he needed troops from Britain to replace those lost at Isandlwana; realistically, he needed many more. Although the relief of Eshowe became his priority, it was not until the first of those reinforcements had arrived at Durban and marched up to the border that he was able to act.

The news that a relief column was being assembled had a mixed effect on the garrison. Obviously, they were elated at the prospect of an end to their hardships, but a string of inevitable delays - largely due to the effects of the poor weather on Chelmsford's transport - added to a growing sense of frustration, and the garrison's anxieties were heightened by reports from their patrols that the Zulus were gathering between them and the border, to oppose Chelmsford's advance. To keep up his men's spirits, Pearson organised two forays against nearby homesteads - one belonging to Dabulamanzi himself - and sent out road-building parties to build a short-cut from the old track to the fort. In response, the Zulu stepped up their harassment of Pearson's patrols, and came down every night to try to pull up the Engineers' road-markers. This particular activity was stopped after the Engineers booby-trapped one such post with dynamite and several Zulus were killed as a result.

Chelmsford's force eventually set out from the Thukela on the 29th. It was a mixed force, reflecting the way the relief column had been cobbled together as fresh troops arrived from home. It consisted mainly of the 57th, 60th and 91st regiments - all new arrivals - and several companies of the 3rd and 99th, who were not with their HQs at Eshowe. A scratch force was assembled from among the Natal Volunteers, and included a significant number of men who had been sent back to the border by Pearson. Some of the mounted men therefore had the distinction of serving in both Pearson's original advance, and the relief column. There was also a Naval Brigade, consisting of

men from HMSs *Shah, Boadicea* and *Tenedos*, and two battalions of the NNC - a total of over 5000 fighting men.

Chelmsford intended the advance to be rapid, so no tents or unnecessary baggage were allowed, condemning the men to an uncomfortable time among the nightly downpours. Even so, it was still painfully slow, hampered by the wet ground, and by the inexperience of the column in forming protective wagon-laagers which - since Isandlwana - were considered essential.

Moreover, it became clear to Chelmsford's scouts that the Zulu were mustering to oppose them. Not only had the warriors who had invested Eshowe moved down to concentrate between the fort and Chelmsford, but they had been reinforced by fresh regiments from Ulundi, led by the izinduna Somopho kaZikhala and Phalane kaMdinwa. The proximity of a major Zulu army made Chelmsford all the more cautious.

On the evening of 2nd April Chelmsford formed a square laager on the top of a low rise on the southern side of the Nyezane River - within distant sight of Pearson's battlefield of 22nd January - and close to the ruins of kwaGingindlovu, which Pearson had burned on the way up. The wagons were parked in echelon, and a trench dug a few yards beyond them, surrounding them on all sides. The earth from the trench was piled up inside to form a rampart, and when at their posts the men lined the rampart, with the wagons behind them, and the transport animals inside.

After the usual wet and uncomfortable night, the sun rose on the 2nd to reveal a dense mist hanging in the Nyezane valley. As it burned off, several large columns of Zulus could be seen advancing up rapidly from the river. They swung out to form the usual 'chest-and-horns', and spread out to attack the laager. Chelmsford's men took up their positions, but the infantry held their fire until the Zulus were within 400 yards; the battle was opened by a siting burst from a Naval Brigade Gatling, which chopped a lane clean through the Zulu lines.

The battle of Gingindlovu, as it became known, showed how much Chelmsford had learned from his mistakes at Isandlwana. There were no more open formations, and no more exposed flanks. Instead, there was a solid concentration of men, which met the Zulu on every side, and in turn demonstrated the one great Zulu weakness - its inability to respond to concentrated firepower. Not that the Zulu attacks were not courageous. The first attack, on the front face, came so close that one Zulu commander was actually killed touching the Gatling, while other attacks reached within twenty yards before being driven back. Once the Zulu had found themselves unable to force a way in, they lay in the long grass on all sides, keeping up a heavy but inaccurate return fire. At last, Chelmsford judged the moment right to send out his mounted men, who drove the Zulus away from the laager, and then in full retreat towards the river. In the aftermath of Isandlwana, feelings were running high among the British, and the mounted men cut down exhausted and wounded warriors without mercy.

By mid-morning the battle was over. Chelmsford's losses were light, considering the extent of his victory - nine dead and fifty wounded, several mortally. Over 500 Zulu bodies lay around the laager, and many more on their line of retreat. By common consensus, their losses amounted to at least 1000, and possibly 1,200.

Rather than risk his entire column on the final leg to Eshowe, Chelmsford set out on the morning of the 3rd with a light flying column, leaving the rest at the laager. The road lay up a steep incline, past the Nyezane battlefield, and the march proved gruelling on a hot day, but early in the evening the first troops reached Eshowe, and were cheered in by the garrison. The siege had lasted a total of 72 days, and had cost the lives of four officers and over twenty men, mostly from disease. Chelmsford had already decided that the post was too vulnerable to hold, and, much to the disgust of the garrison, they were ordered to break down the defences and prepare to withdraw. On the 4th, while Lord Chelmsford took a detachment of his command out to burn a homestead belonging to Prince Dabulamanzi, the rest of his forces, together with Pearson's men, began their retreat.

On the return march the expedition was marked by a tragic mistake. Chelmsford had persuaded John Dunn, the erstwhile 'white chief of the Zulus', who had abandoned his patron Cetshwayo when the war began, and who had unsuccessfully tried to remain neutral, to join the column. The relief expedition had marched through Dunn's territory, and he had been invaluable as a source of intelligence. On the night of 5/6th April, Chelmsford's force was camped near the deserted mission station at eMvutsheni, with Dunn's followers - his African retainers - providing the advanced picket. At about 3.30 in the morning a picket of the 91st, between Dunn's scouts and the camp, gave the alarm, and Dunn's men hurried back to the camp, only to be mistaken for Zulus in the darkness, and met with the bayonet. Several were seriously injured, and at least one later died of his wounds.

It was a sorry end to an extraordinary saga. The siege of Eshowe may not be rich in stories of great massacres or heroic stands, but it was nonetheless remarkable. For three months a Zulu army, lacking artillery, had completely immobilised an entire British column, necessitating a fresh British expedition to relieve them. For the British garrison, cooped up in unhygienic conditions and with dwindling supplies, the experience was no less arduous than many of the sieges on the Northwest Frontier which would later attract much more attention. When the campaign was over, Chelmsford was back where he was at the start of the war; the invasion had not advanced in the slightest, and he was left to assemble new columns on the Natal-Zulu border.

It would take fresh fighting elsewhere in Zululand, and a whole new campaign of invasion, before the Zulus were finally defeated.