

## Book Review

“Great Zulu Battles, 1838-1906”, by Ian Knight,

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Ian Knight has dipped once again into the well of Zulu history, this time to bring us “Great Zulu Battles, 1838-1906”, an excellent book detailing ten important battles which span the rise and fall of the old Zulu Kingdom. This latest volume is well illustrated, and includes a number of pictures which were certainly new, even to this hardened reviewer. The maps are crisp and informative, and, as may be expected from this author whose works are always welcomed and well-received, the text is both lucid and entertaining. Each battle is placed firmly in its historical and political context, the strategy leading to each action is clearly defined, and the tactics fully explored.

The initial chapter covers the battle of the Thukela (1838), when the Zulu army experienced its first set piece against a force organised and led by the white man. In truth, the two opposing armies were very similarly matched, though the self-styled settlers’ ‘Great Army of Natal’ was strengthened by a central core of some 400 African retainers, who had been trained as elephant hunters and were therefore excellent musket-men. Despite this, the Zulu army managed to close with the settlers and defeat them, decimating the Grand Army, scattering and dispersing it a manner similar to previous inter-tribal conflicts. Yet this spectacular victory was to be negated just eight months later when the Zulu army launched a costly series of assaults against a well-sited defensive laager at Blood River. It was a salutary lesson, but the Boer victory was undermined by the continued effectiveness of the Zulu army, and by the Trekkers’ inability to guarantee their own safety in Zululand, and it was only by allying themselves to be a disaffected section of the Zulu Royal House, led by Prince Mpande, that the Boers were finally able to ensure their future security.

With the accession of Mpande to the Zulu throne, the Zulu kingdom began a period of relative peace and prosperity. Though often regarded as ‘fat and indolent’, the king was, in truth, a highly skilled politician, who successfully weathered the acute external pressures placed on the kingdom by encroaching European settlers. He was, however, unable – and perhaps unwilling – to resolve disputes among his sons over the question of his succession, an issue which was resolved as the battle of ‘Ndongakusuka in 1856, a particularly bloody affair which was fought very much in the traditional manner, and upon the outcome of which the presence of a small group armed and led by whites had very little impact.

Prior to the Anglo-Zulu War and immense number of firearms had been traded into Zululand. Many were useless, and all were out of date, and this obsolescence, coupled with the Zulu failure to recognise or control the tactical usage of firepower, led them to adopt an offensive approach when fighting to defend their homeland against the British invasion. Throughout the campaign, Zulu hopes of success depended on their ability to locate and surprise the British forces unprepared and in the open. At Nyezane, they achieved just this, catching Col. Pearson’s lumbering column at its most vulnerable, strung out and divided. The British forces were, however, well handled, and able to beat off the assault with comparative ease, although this much neglected battle was overshadowed by events which befell the camp of the Central Column just a few hours later. Isandlwana will forever remain an enigma. A combination of errors, blunders and bad luck on the British side snowballed towards disaster, though it is clear from evidence on both sides that the Zulu came close to losing the battle, when their central assault was pinned down by heavy musketry. It is a striking tribute to the Zulu command, and to the heroism of the ordinary warrior, that when the opportunity arose to reverse this situation, the army reacted with such surety and swiftness. Yet from the moment that the defensive line was breached, and the British camp entered, the war was lost to the Zulu, for neither the British government nor the civilian population would allow such a tremendous defeat to go unrevenged.

The very heavy casualties sustained by the Zulu army at Isandlwana made it a pyrrhic victory, and when these are added to losses endured on the same day at Nyezane and Zungwini mountain, it is possible that Zulu casualties suffered on the 22<sup>nd</sup> equalled, or even exceeded, the losses at Kambula a few months later. Small wonder that King Cetshwayo declared that “an assegai has been plunged into the belly of the nation”.

By late March, with Pearson’s effectiveness nullified by the investment of his column at Eshowe, and the Central Column pushed back to the border, the Zulu army, buoyed up with its successes, embarked on a new campaign in the north west. Its very appearance was enough to turn the Zulu defence of Hlobane mountain – which was handled superbly by the abaQulusi section – into another British disaster. This latest victory over the invader carried the Zulu into battle in high spirits at Kambula the following day.

Kambula would, however, prove the turning point of the war, for despite six hours of ferocious fighting the Zulu impi immolated itself against Wood’s secure defensive works. Beaten and exhausted, it was routed from the field by a savage pursuit, against which they could offer no resistance. As the stone wall at Gettysburg has been called the ‘high water mark of the Confederacy’, so the Zulu bodies in the cattle kraal at Kambula delineated their high tide.

With the effective end of the war in July, the Zulu army officially ceased to exist, though elements of it survived to fight in the civil war battles of oNdini and Tshaneni, both of which are also described in this book. The final chapter follows the clash between the rising power of settler society and the decline of traditional African ones – a thread of conflict which

underpins the book's narrative – to its logical conclusion in the climatic battle of the 1906 Rebellion. The rebellion was a relatively small and localised rising, ostensibly against punitive taxes, but it threatened greater things, and the Colonial forces, recently emerged from the Anglo-Boer War, reacted quickly and ruthlessly. The main rebel forces, led by Bambatha and Mechlokazulu (of Isandlwana fame), were defeated in a superbly orchestrated action at the Mome gorge. This incident, rarely subjected to close examination, ensures a telling finale to the book.

Ian Knight is certainly an expert in his specialised field, and his knowledge and research combine to make this an extremely useful addition to the growing library on Zulu warfare; the inclusion of less well-known battles is a step forward, and even the well-worn paths of Isandlwana and Kambula are tackled in a refreshing style.

The book is highly recommended, and the future release of a companion volume – “Great Zulu Commanders” – currently in preparation, is something to look forward to.