

THE FALLING TREE
The Second Invasion of Zululand, April –July 1879

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By the beginning of April 1879, the Zulu kingdom had received two staggering blows, from which it would never really recover. Despite the Zulu success at Hlobane Mountain on 28th March, the main army - the same amabutho who had triumphed at Isandlwana, just two months before - had been utterly defeated at Khambula hill the following day. Moreover, just a few days later, and at the other end of the country, the Zulu forces investing Pearson's column at Eshowe were scattered at Gingindlovu. At both ends of the country, then, the Zulus had been broken, and their total casualties over those three battles numbered nearly 3,000 dead, with hundreds more wounded. In the blinking of an eye, all the strategic advantages, which King Cetshwayo had earned at Isandlwana, had been lost, and the war had turned decisively against him.

Kambula and Gingindlovu shook the king's faith in his army's ability to bring the war to a successful conclusion by military means. Holding back the British, he said, was like "warding off a falling tree". While his warriors dispersed to undergo the necessary post-combat purification rituals, to heal their wounds and to rest, the king tried to re-open diplomatic contacts with the British, to try to discover what terms they would accept for peace.

Yet there was now no hope of a negotiated settlement, for it was equally obvious to Lord Chelmsford that the war was turning in his favour, and both he and Sir Bartle Frere needed a decisive victory in the field, to erase the stain of Isandlwana. Moreover, throughout March and April a steady stream of reinforcements had arrived in Durban, and Chelmsford now had far more troops at his disposal than he had hoped for at the beginning of the campaign. With the Zulu capacity to mount an offensive broken, he was now in a position to mount a fresh invasion of Zululand. His goal remained King Cetshwayo's principle homestead at oNdini (Ulundi), in the heart of the country.

Chelmsford had learned much from the disastrous first invasion of January. Whereas his original columns were weak and failed to take proper precautions on the march, he planned his new columns to be juggernauts. They would be much stronger than the original columns, and would not only protect their halts with improvised laagers each night, but would also establish a chain of fortified posts in their wake to guard their lines of communication.

For the second invasion Chelmsford planned on making two main thrusts into Zululand. The first would be made up the coast, using troops from Pearson's old column and the Eshowe relief column. The new coastal column was designated the First Division, and was given into the command of Major General H.H. Crealock, one of several Major-Generals who had been sent to South Africa as reinforcements. Crealock was an experienced officer whose younger brother - John North Crealock - was Chelmsford's Assistant Military Secretary. Chelmsford planned that his second main thrust would come from the north-west, following roughly the line of the old Centre Column. However, as Chelmsford wished to spare his men the sight of the battlefield of Isandlwana - where the dead still lay unburied - he planned a new line of communication, anchored upon the village of Dundee, and crossing the Mzinyathi and Ncombe rivers upstream from Rorke's Drift.

This column would swing down above Isandlwana, and rejoin the old planned line of advance near Babanango Mountain. It would be called the Second Division, and composed of troops fresh out from England. It was commanded by another new arrival, Maj. Gen. Newdigate, although Chelmsford himself accompanied this column, and Newdigate, like Glyn before him, found himself with little real opportunity to exercise his authority. A new cavalry division, consisting of the 1st (King's) Dragoon Guards and 17th Lancers, and commanded by Major-General Marshall, as to be attached to the Second Division.

Evelyn Wood's column was the only one of Chelmsford's original columns which had remained active in the field. Chelmsford was reluctant to rob Wood of an independent command, so he was given the local rank of Brigadier-General, and his column was re-designated the Flying Column. Its orders were to affect a junction with the Second Division, and advance in tandem with it to oNdini.

Crealock's column began its forward progress first, moving forward from the Thukela on 21st April. Chelmsford did not anticipate any serious resistance from Zulu living in the coastal sector, and Crealock's orders were to destroy two important royal homesteads which lay on his line of advance - emaNgweni and Hlangubo (old oNdini). He was also to establish strong posts on his line of communications.

From the first, Crealock's progress suffered from a serious lack of transport facilities. Many of the wagons accumulated by the old Centre Column were still rusting on the field of Isandlwana, while the accumulation of reinforcements had created a further demand. The Natal authorities were increasingly worried that the ordinary commercial economy of the colony would grind to a halt as transport drivers abandoned their regular work for the easy pickings offered by the army, and were becoming more and more reluctant to cooperate with Chelmsford's requests. Crealock sent repeated messages to Chelmsford pleading for new

wagons, oxen and mules. He received only a fraction of those he asked for, and his progress became so slow that his column was dubbed 'Crealock's Crawlers' by the rest of the army.

The high mortality rate among his animals did not help. The coastal sector is hot and damp, and the humid conditions, over-work and mis-management led to the death of thousands of animals, most of which were simply dragged to the side of the road and allowed to rot. In places the decomposing bodies of oxen lying every few yards along the road marked the line of advance of the First Division. The stench was appalling, and within a few weeks the presence of so many dead animals began to affect the health of the First Division's troops. Outbreaks of enteric fever - typhoid - and dysentery soon put a worryingly high proportion of Crealock's troops hors de combat.

Nevertheless, Crealock achieved some of his objectives. He established a strong post above the AmaTigulu River, called Fort Crealock, and another, above the Nyezane, called Fort Chelmsford. These served as staging posts for his advance, and convoys of supplies made their laborious way between them. Sadly, both these important - but unglamorous - sites have been largely obliterated today, as the coastal sector is extensively farmed for sugar cane. A stone monument near the site of Fort Chelmsford bears testimony, however, to the number of Crealock's men who succumbed to disease. Crealock's men also pushed forward to the coast, at a spot euphemistically known as Port Durnford, where contact was established with naval shipping.

Port Durnford was a misnomer, which offered nothing in the way of a natural harbour, but merely a stretch of the beach where the surf beat less strongly. Nevertheless, it was possible to land supplies by surfboat, and the First Division had established an important link with the wider world. When hostilities ended, the captured King Cetshwayo was taken off from Port Durnford by surfboat, and into exile. Crealock also destroyed the two amakhanda, as he had been ordered. On 4th July mounted patrols from the First Division set fire to emaNgwani. It consisted of over 300 huts, but appeared to have been deserted for some time. Two days later, the same patrols burnt Hlalangubo, which had over 600 huts, but was similarly deserted.

That the Zulu made no attempt to distract the British from burning these two important complexes suggests the extent to which their capacity to resist was suffering. Indeed, the king had experienced some reluctance on the part of his warriors to muster when he first attempted to re-assemble the army at the end of May. By June they were prepared to answer the summons, but it was clear that they were no longer able to fight on more than one front at a time. Many of the fighting men from the coastal districts - who had hitherto stayed in their own areas to fight the invaders - had gone to oNdini to be ready to fight in defence of the heartland, leaving the coastal districts occupied only by old men, women and children. Many chiefs who lived in the area had also stayed at home, and despite the fact that the nation did not consider itself beaten, some began tentative negotiations with the British. The grim truth was that while many remained loyal to the king, with their young men gone they stood little chance of resisting the huge British column which was steadily occupying their territories.

As early as 21st April Prince Makwendu kaMpande, one of Cetshwayo's junior brothers, had surrendered to Crealock, and by the beginning of July such local dignitaries as Dabulamanzi - who had commanded at Rorke's Drift - and Mavumengwana kaGodide - the joint commander at Isandlwana - had established contact. On 4th July a large number of regional chiefs entered Crealock's camp and surrendered. That same day, Chelmsford had won the final battle of the war.

His advance had been very different in character to that of Crealock's division. Worried by the lack of transport wagons, Chelmsford had at last braved the terrible field of Isandlwana. On 21st May the cavalry division had ridden out to the old battlefield, and carried away those wagons still lying there which were still serviceable. Some attempt was also made to bury the dead, although those wearing red coats were left where they fell, as Glyn had requested that the 24th be allowed to bury its own. It was the first major expedition to the battlefield, which proved a sobering site. While many of the dead had been reduced to skeletons, and the bones scattered by scavengers, others had desiccated in the hot African sun, and their features were still chillingly clear. Chelmsford must surely have congratulated himself on the wisdom of his decision to avoid the Isandlwana road with his main column.

Chelmsford had assembled his column on the banks of the Ncome River - the border with Zululand - near Koppie Alleen by the end of May, while Wood had begun to move towards it from the north. On 31st May Chelmsford crossed the Ncome and the advance began.

Almost immediately, tragedy struck. The Zulu would remain more active in the central districts than on the coast, because a number of warriors had remained at home to guard their homes and crops, while the king had deployed a large number of scouting parties to observe the British progress. The main British advance would therefore be accomplished in the face of almost constant skirmishing. On 1st June a small patrol including Lt. Carey of the 98th Regiment and the exiled Prince Imperial of France set out from the Second Division to select a suitable camping ground. Despite the fact that the area had already been swept for Zulus, and the Flying Column was only a few miles away, the patrol was ambushed at the deserted homestead of an induna named Sobhuza, and the Prince was killed.

Although the Prince's death created a scandal, it was a minor incident in the history of the war. More serious opposition to the British progress occurred a few days later. On the morning of the 5th, irregular

cavalry from the Flying Column encountered a strong Zulu force on the banks of the Ntinini River (also known as the Upoko). The Zulu were secured in the rocks at the foot of a hill known as eZungeni. The irregulars opened fire on the Zulu, but began to retreat when the Zulu deployed to surround them. The sound of firing brought forward the 17th Lancers, attached to the Second Division. The Lancers had not so far seen action, and were keen to test themselves against the enemy. They deployed in line and repeatedly charged across the open ground at the foot of eZungeni, but failed to make contact with the enemy. The regiment's adjutant, Lt. F.J.C. Frith, was shot through the body by a Zulu marksman, and killed. The 17th then retired to the Division camp, carrying Frith's body across the saddle. The Zulu had clearly got the best of the incident, and the attempt to use regular cavalry tactics in the bush had struck one cynical observer as being like "chopping wood with a razor".

The Second Division established a fortified post near the Nondweni River, called Fort Newdigate. From here it was decided to send a convoy back to the border for supplies, and a halt was made until it returned. While stranded at Fort Newdigate the Second Division experienced a terrifying false alarm one night. Sentries out in the darkness fired warning shots, and immediately the entire column stood to at its alarm posts. With visions of Isandlwana before their eyes, the infantry around the perimeter opened fire at an imaginary enemy. Even some of the artillery opened fire. It was some time before order could be restored, and no enemy were found to be in the vicinity. A total of seven men were wounded, and several horses were killed. Among those whose glittering career was almost brought to a premature conclusion was Lt. Chard of Rorke's Drift fame, who had been on picket duty, and had taken shelter in a trench with his command. Infantry inside the camp had mistaken the rampart above it as the outside of the laager, and fired upon it, with the result that Chard and his men had passed an uncomfortable few minutes, lying in the mud with a storm of bullets whistling over their heads.

Despite such scares, Chelmsford's advance seemed inexorable. By the middle of June, they had reached the great range of hills which overlooks the emaKhosini, the place of kings, where the Zulu chieftom had begun, and where Cetshwayo's ancestors were buried. With an air of desperation the king tried several times to open negotiations with them, but the British had nothing to gain by talking. By this time, they had become increasingly ruthless, too, determined to bring the war to a conclusion by any means possible. They regularly burnt any Zulu homestead they came across, whether it had any military connection or not, and drove off whatever cattle they could find. On 26th June Chelmsford ordered a great raid into the emaKhosini itself, and many of the royal homesteads - which had existed in one form or another since Shaka's time - were destroyed. In one of them, esiKlebheni, the inkatha ye sizwe ya'kwaZulu - the sacred coil of the nation, a magical symbol of Zulu unity created by Shaka himself - was also destroyed. The omens for the kingdom were truly appalling.

At the end of June Chelmsford descended the Mthonjaneni heights towards the White Mfolozi River, and oNdini beyond. Here he established camp on the banks of the river, while a flurry of last minute diplomatic activity took place. Yet Chelmsford was not concerned with Cetshwayo's diplomatic overtures so much as with his own military preparations, for despite the fact that he knew his replacement - Sir Garnet Wolseley - was already in South Africa, and desperate to halt his advance, so as to be able to bring the war to a close himself, Chelmsford was determined not to make any last mistakes. On 3rd July he signified his readiness for the final battle by breaking off his negotiations with Cetshwayo, and by sending his mounted men across the river to scout the Ulundi plain. That night, the British could hear the unnerving sounds of the Zulu amabutho preparing for battle in the great royal homesteads around oNdini.

At first light on 4th July 1879 Lord Chelmsford led the fighting men of the Second Division and Flying Column across the river, to bring the second invasion of Zululand to its dreadful and inevitable conclusion.