

A review of

Lord Chelmsford's orders to his Column Commanders

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The Society's December 1998 Journal considered the question of Lord Chelmsford's orders to Col. Durnford that related to the latter's activities at Isandlwana on the fateful 22nd January 1879. The official measures subsequently taken to implicate Durnford for the defeat at Isandlwana were also examined (1). Following the Zulu War, Chelmsford finally damned Durnford's reputation in his speech to the House of Lords on the 19th August 1879 when Chelmsford stated that, "in the final analysis, it was Durnford's disregard of orders that had brought about its (the camp's) destruction". It was thereafter widely believed that Durnford had failed to assume command of the Isandlwana camp from the subordinate Col. Pulleine and then irresponsibly taken his men off to chase some distant Zulus. Most historical accounts relating to Durnford's actions at Isandlwana are uncertain of his orders, the exact sequence of events, or they suppose that Durnford was seeking to either warn Chelmsford of the presence of the Zulus or prevent Chelmsford's force being cut off from their base at Isandlwana. Most writers have challenged Durnford's actions on the basis of their illogicality in the face of his supposed orders 'to assume responsibility for the camp'.

In fact, Trooper A. Pearse subsequently found Chelmsford's orders to Durnford on the battlefield while seeking the body of his brother, also a trooper. The orders had been there for some months open to the elements and some parts were folded up in an envelope and so fragile that they could not be unfolded and read. As the papers were not referred to in contemporary writings it is reasonable to assume that they were not examined in detail at that time. A modern examination of these documents clearly reveals that Durnford totally obeyed his orders. It is also evident that, post-Isandlwana, Durnford's written orders were ambiguously 're-written' to vindicate Chelmsford and his staff and to incriminate Durnford and Pulleine. One must presume that Chelmsford's staff believed that the actual orders had been destroyed; indeed, there had been no trace of these latest orders until recently.

Amongst the papers found on Durnford's body were his fresh orders, as the commander of No.2 column, relating to the specific tactics to be used when engaging the Zulus and is dated 23.12.1878. These orders may well have been re-issued because the previous '1878' orders were generally disregarded and were mockingly known as 'Bellairs Mixture' combining the name of the Deputy Adjutant General and a popular patent medicine.

It is these replacement orders which I will now consider, and in so doing, the reader will be able to examine, and perhaps answer, the question which has baffled historians since Isandlwana, why did Pulleine deploy his manpower so far from the camp? I believe that Pulleine, like Durnford, was obeying to the letter the latest orders from Chelmsford which I presume had been sent to all the five column commanders, and referred to the tactics to be used in the face of the approaching enemy.

These orders, found in Durnford's jacket, were hand-written and signed by Chelmsford. They are dated Monday 23.12.1878 and must, therefore, have superseded Chelmsford's original *Regulations for Field Forces in South Africa 1878*. (2) They are now reproduced in their exact form, using the original, unabridged, and grammatically uncorrected text.

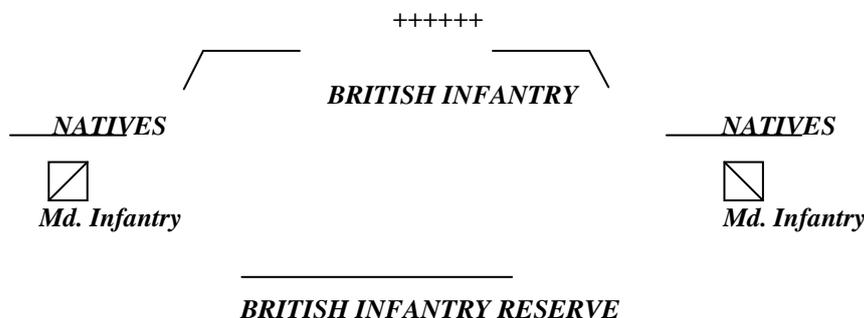
The Following Instructions are forwarded for the Consideration of Officers Comdg Columns when entering Zululand.

- 1) March as early as possible, so that all the animals may have plenty of time to feed during the day.
- 2) Take short marches at first, a slow, steady, advance, will be far better than a quick rush forward.
- 3) The first consideration must be how to keep man, & beast, healthy & strong.
- 4) The Time is sure to arrive, when it will be necessary, to make a forced march, either to seize a position or to pass over an unhealthy district.
- 5) Attention to Rule 3 will enable it to be done in the quickest time possible, and with the least distress.
- 6) Clear and precise orders must be issued regarding the order of march. British Troops must be prepared to form up for attack, or for defence, in any direction at the shortest possible warning.
- 7) The leading Troops must not be allowed to outmarch the Baggage wagons. The latter must be kept together as much as possible, and should one break down, or stick fast, those in front must not be allowed to leave it behind.
- 8) British Infantry, should form the advanced, and Rear guards, Mounted men being well to the front, and flanks.
- 9) The duty of protecting the flanks, and of helping the wagons, when in difficulties, should as a rule be performed by the Native Contingent.
- 10) The ground for encampment (while recognizing the necessity of having Wood, & water, at hand) should always be selected, with due regard to the defensive requirements of the situation.
- 11) It will be well to establish one Uniform System of camping, so that every man may always know his place.

- 12) The camp should be formed, so that in case of a night attack – every man may fall into his place with the least possible delay, and without confusion.
- 13) Every night before the men turn in the Whole Force should be made to assemble quickly, in the position told off to it, in case of attack just as is done in practices when the Fire bell is rung.
- 14) Outposts, should be posted far in advance of the Camp, and as a rule they should be placed on the ground, best suited for defence. At least one sixth of the Total Force should be employed on this duty. When thought desirable, a group of six, instead of four, may be placed on the line of sentries. In this case a double, instead of a single sentry – will be required equally in both cases.
- 15) In order to obtain the earliest information of a night attack, being intended, a group of British Infantry (six men), and a section of Natives (10 men), under an Officer should be pushed well forward to the Front, and to the rear, and to, each flank of the outposts just before dark. These groups of (16) men, should be at least 500 yards in front of the Line of outposts, and should be instructed to fire volleys in case the enemy is discovered to be advancing. Each of the 4 parties should be provided with a Lantern, and Flays, so that when having to fall back to the outpost they may not be fired on by their own side. They should also have the countersign given to them.
- 16) The possible tactics of the Zulus are as follows-
 - A) Avoid the Troops and attack our line of communications.
 - B) Attack the Column when on the line of march.
 - C) Attack the camp at night & charge into it with all their numbers.
 - D) Await attack in position between White, & Black Umvelosi Rivers.
- 17) Whatever tactics are adopted, it may be looked upon as a certainty – that when Zulus attack, they will threaten one or both flanks, as well as the front.
nb. item 17) indicates that Chelmsford was fully aware of the threat to a Zulu attack to the flanks. Ed.
- 18) The Formation which seems best adapted to meet such an attack is as follows - British Infantry in Front Line, deployed, or extended, with one or both flank companies thrown back.

Both flank companies thrown back – Native Contingent inline, in echelon (sic) well clear of each flank of British Infantry and well to the rear of each flank.

The RA guns in line and in front of British Infantry. (*Editor's note*; ++++++ = RA guns)
Mounted Infantry in rear of each flank, ready to move round the flanks, and rear, of the enemy.



(item 18) gives instructions on the defensive formation to be adopted of attacked. It is interesting that Chelmsford went so far as to draw a diagram of his requirements for defence arrangements in order to stress their importance. This is particularly relevant in the light of responsibility for the formation adopted on the 22nd Jan.1879 at both Inyezane and Isandlwana – see article summary. Ed.)

- 19) In an attack by daylight, neither guns nor rockets, - should be allowed to open Fire, until the enemy is within good infantry range, say 600 yards when every available fire arm should be opened upon him.
- 20) The British Troops must be told to expect an attack upon them by numbers very far in excess of their own and they must be cautioned not to fire until ordered. A charge, should it clearly become necessary, should be carried out as far as possible without breaking the ranks. This charge might be practised with advantage in presence of the Native Contingent, so that the latter may understand our Tactics, and gain confidence thereby.
- 21) In case of attack by day, clear instructions should be given, as to how the wagons & then other transport are to be placed. (*It is to be noted that there is no mention of laagers, entrenchments, sangars, or any form of breastwork. Ed.*)
- 22) When Halted, Troops should be on the alert at least an hour, before day light.

23) The more stormy, and wild, the night may be, the more chance there will be of a night attack, if Chaka and Dingaans Tactics still hold good.

(Signed) Chelmsford
L.G.

Lt. Colonel Durnford

F(1)ins (2)

Note; (1) had disintegrated (2) is illegible Ed.

Pietermaritzburg
Monday
23.12.78.

Please acknowledge receipt.

These instructions are addressed and dated as indicated on an envelope.

A comparison of Chelmsford's item 18) with the known Isandlwana line of defence reveals interesting parallels. If one compares the same item with Pearson's tactics at Inyezane only a few hours earlier there are yet further parallels.

Col. Pulleine's 'illogical' deployment of his experienced troops in an extended line so far out from the Isandlwana camp has been contemptuously referred to by many contemporary writers and has mystified most military historians. Pulleine had no battle experience and had little warning of the impending disaster – yet his deployment was not a figment of his imagination; likewise, no historian has ever produced evidence that the experienced 1st 24th officers ever challenged the extended deployment so far from the camp although Capt. Stafford NNC recalled in his memoirs that, when Durnford arrived at Pulleine's tent, Durnford expressed considerable alarm at the distant disposition of British troops. As the senior officer at Isandlwana, it was logical that Pulleine would follow Chelmsford's orders and so he deployed his men according to the plan drawn in his latest orders. No wonder that the officers of the 24th thus deployed did not demur.

A comparison of these orders with the Isandlwana dispositions prior to the Zulu attack reveals a deployment in exact accordance with Chelmsford's orders. Perhaps this is another reason why these orders were never referred to by Chelmsford's staff officers at the subsequent enquiry, or thereafter; their publication would have vindicated Pulleine. There is a distinct possibility that the five junior officers who survived Isandlwana were unaware of the existence of these orders, which may also account for their previous non-publication – in effect, the orders were highly restricted and would have been easy to conceal subsequently.

At the same time, Col. Pearson and his No. 1 Column were advancing into Zululand from near the mouth of the Tugela River. Early on the morning of the 22nd January 1879, the same day as Isandlwana, Pearson's Column was attacked near the Inyezane River.

Pearson would presumably have arranged his troop dispositions according to Chelmsford's instructions i.e. the same instructions as issued to Durnford and Glyn (and inherited by Pulleine). There should therefore be some correlation between Pearson's and Pulleine's troop dispositions at, respectively, Inyezane and Isandlwana, and Chelmsford's diagram in the new orders.

A representation of Pearson's initial troop deployment at Inyezane.

