

‘A GUN IS A COWARD’S WEAPON’:
The use of firearms among the Zulus in the war of 1879

Ian Knight

In the 1820s, Henry Francis Fynn, the British adventurer who was among the first Europeans to travel to the Zulu kingdom, described a curiously prophetic exchange with King Shaka kaSenzangakhona. Shaka, Fynn observed, had a keen interest in all things military, and the subject turned to the smooth-bore muskets carried by Fynn and his party. Shaka was not overly impressed, arguing that in battle his warriors could overcome an army equipped with firearms in the time that it took the musketeers to reload. When Fynn pointed out that British troops fired volleys by ranks, to overcome exactly that problem, Shaka remarked that,

losing a few men by the first discharge would be nothing to him who had so many.

Fynn commented,

We now showed him the position of the square, one of us kneeling in front, and the other two in their respective positions, which proved to him that, according to the system of firing in that manoeuvre, the position was invulnerable to an irregular force. He saw it, but his warriors being inclined to flatter his military genius, observed that by charging in a body, in the way to which they normally resorted, especially under his bold and judicious command, they thought it would more than overbalance the strength of our position, and the force of our arms. (1)

Fifty years later, the issue was to be put to the test in exactly those terms, and it is interesting to note that, despite significant improvements in weapon technology, the British still had to resort to the Napoleonic square to defeat the Zulus at Gingindlovu and Ulundi.

If the Zulus made the acquaintance of firearms early in their own history, it is fair to pose the question why they had not adopted them into their own armoury by 1879. Certainly, they had access to firearms in large quantities by that time, but they had made little impact on Zulu battlefield thinking, and it seems that the poor quality of the weapons available to them reinforced an innate military conservatism to deny the Zulus the advantages of effective firepower throughout the war.

In fact, the early Zulu kings were quick to realise the potential of European weapons. Despite the exchange cited above, Shaka was keen to exploit the possibilities of the new and strange technology. While it seems that the early white traders – who had established an enclave at Port Natal in 1824, under Shaka’s protection – balked at selling guns directly to the Zulus, they were pressured into supplying groups of trained African gunmen to support Shaka’s campaigns.(2) Moreover, following Shaka’s death, and possibly encouraged by the professed liberalism of his successor, Dingane, the whites did supply the Zulus with guns. Such a trade was unlikely to have been approved by the authorities in Cape Town, but the Cape was a long way away, and guns were shipped by American traders to the Port, and sold to Dingane. Despite the obvious risks to their own security, the traders apparently salved their consciences by supplying only poor quality guns, sometimes with crucial parts missing. (3)

Certainly, there are no suggestions that guns played any significant role in Dingane’s destructive war with the Voortrekkers in 1838/40. This is despite the fact that the Zulus had acquired perhaps a hundred guns following the death of Piet Retief in February 1838, and the attack on the Voortrekker laagers which followed it. Trekker veterans of the battles of mid-1838 noted that the Zulus did attempt to use some of the guns taken from Retief’s party, but that they were too few to have any affect whatever, while the Zulus clearly did not fully understand how to use them. Indeed, more remarkable is the fact that in this – the first war between the Zulus and Europeans armed with firearms – the Zulus rapidly developed methods of overcoming firearms, using traditional weapons and tactics. At the battle of eThaleni in April 1838, and again at uPathe in December that year, the Zulus used ambush and carefully selected ground to scatter mounted Boer troops, while at the battle of the Thukela in April 1838 they overcame a British settler force, who were using modified infantry tactics of the time, by a skilful use of the ‘chest and horns’ tactic.

It was during the reign of King Mpande kaSenzangakhona (1840-1872) that guns entered Zululand in large quantities. This was the time of the first major European penetration of the Zulu economy. While, on the one hand, the settler population in Natal grew following the advent of British rule in 1842, increasing commercial activity in the region, on the other the impoverished and weakened state of the Zulu kingdom following the war with the Voortrekkers led to a grudging willingness to accept the intrusion of white traders. In the 1850s and 1860s, white hunters clamoured to be allowed to hunt in Zululand; not only did the king often demand firearms as the price of his acceptance, but the hunters themselves trained up Zulus to assist their activities. While the king tried to maintain a monopoly in the gun trade, this too became impossible as traders and travellers mixed freely with regional chiefs and ordinary Zulus. As early as 1854, the hunter Baldwin commented that one chief,

made me a present of a small pair of tusks, and tried hard to bargain for one of my guns, offering me five splendid tusks worth ten times as much as the gun. (4)

The acquisition of guns had a political element, too; for the *izikhulu* – the so-called ‘great ones’ of the nation – the reality of political life involved walking a constant tightrope between their need to maintain an almost independent authority in their own regions, while at the same time being seen to support the king. The possibility of acquiring guns on their own account strengthened their personal power within the country, while at the same time giving them a greater opportunity to hunt, and thereby profit from the trade in hides and ivory with the whites. Thus the demand for firearms intensified, and the profits to be made for it stimulated supply.

Nevertheless, by 1856 guns had made almost no impact on the Zulu army. In the great battle of ‘Ndongakusuka in 1856, when the then Prince Cetshwayo defeated his rival Mbuyazi, both sides fought with traditional weapons. The evidence suggests that some of Mbuyazi’s followers may have had guns – reflecting the fact that Mpande favoured Mbuyazi over Cetshwayo – while Zulu traditions are emphatic that only Cetshwayo himself had a firearm on the other side. Despite the fact that Cetshwayo nonetheless won the battle, the knowledge that a group of African hunters, led by the adventurer John Dunn, took part on Mbuyazi’s side, and caused tremendous damage with their firearms, was not lost on him; it was one reason why, afterwards, he made his peace with Dunn, and offered him the role of a white Zulu *induna*. Dunn subsequently controlled a large tract of country north of the Thukela River, which allowed him to vet European incursion into the kingdom from Natal on Cetshwayo’s behalf; he also cultivated extensive trading links to the north, which gave him access to the Portuguese enclave in Mozambique.

The roles of both Dunn and Mozambique were crucial in the growth of the gun trade in the 1860s and ‘70s. Dunn successfully persuaded the Natal authorities – always reluctant to see African neighbours armed – that by supplying guns to Cetshwayo, he was effectively shoring up Cetshwayo’s position within the country and reducing political instability on the colony’s borders. Under cover of the reluctant approval by the Natal authorities, Dunn imported thousands of guns into Zululand. Most were shipped through Mozambique, to avoid the embarrassing spectacle of guns being ferried across the Thukela from Natal itself. Between 1872 and 1877 alone, 60,000 guns were legally imported into Natal, 40,000 of which were re-exported, and 20,000 of which went through Mozambique. While not all ended up in Zululand, hundreds did. Zulu veterans of the 1879 war recalled Dunn bringing guns to King Cetshwayo’s capital by the wagon-load, and indeed, on the eve of hostilities, the king made a deliberate effort to distribute guns among his younger regiments, who had not thus far acquired them in sufficient numbers. As late as 1906, an official military report observed that the long-term effects of the Portuguese trade were still in evidence, despite a widespread attempt to confiscate guns held by Africans in the aftermath of the Anglo-Boer War:

The Zulu people, as a whole, are not armed with firearms, but there are, nevertheless, a large number of those among them, the majority being distributed over the coastal lands of the Ingwavuma, Ubombo, and Hlabisa Districts, where they were introduced from the Portuguese territory in the north before the British Government had assumed active control over the part of Zululand. (5)

Furthermore, while Dunn was undoubtedly the most successful gun-trader, he was not the only one; nor was Mozambique the only point of entry.

How many guns were there in Zululand, then, at the time of the war? One report of August 1878 suggested that there were as many as 20,000 stands of arms inside Zululand, of which 500 were modern, good quality breech-loaders, 2,500 were recent percussion models, 500 were older percussion models, and the rest were obsolete muskets.

If the Zulus were well supplied in terms of quantity, however, as the above pattern suggests, their weapons had little to offer in terms of quality. The report of 1906 observed that even twenty years after the Anglo-Zulu War,

Quite seven-eighths of these firearms are muzzle-loaders of such obsolete types as the Tower musket, large calibre smooth-bore hunters’ guns, and many others, all being of varying calibre, and throwing a spherical or elongated projectile that, in dearth of lead generally existing amongst the possessors, was at times a bit of pot leg and at others a piece cut from a heavy brass armlet of which a great many were, until 1890, introduced as barter from the Portuguese territory and freely circulated. Gunpowder and percussion caps came from the same quarter, for the most part... (6)

Indeed, while British accounts of the early battles of the Anglo-Zulu War stress the volume of Zulu fire, most also comment on its inaccuracy, and undoubtedly the obsolescence of Zulu weapons was a major factor in this regard. A detailed description of the guns taken from dead Zulus after the battle of Nyezane gives a revealing insight into the type of guns available to them;

They were all sorts of guns. From Potsdam, from Danzig, Murzig, and Tulle, from ‘Manchester, N.H., United States’, etc. The majority, however, were Tower muskets. The foreign weapons were very ancient indeed; some of them manufactured in 1835. As far as I could make out by the inscriptions, the continental weapons were condemned army ones. The sights were the most extraordinary contrivances. (7)

The inadequacies of these weapons soon became apparent in combat. Many Zulus went into the war convinced that their firearms placed them on an equal footing with the British. Yet the sorts of guns they possessed had limited range and accuracy, even when they were new; certainly the old smooth-bore Brown Bess of the Napoleonic period was scarcely accurate at anything beyond fifty yards. By definition, weapons which had been dumped on the world market were usually – as the above report suggests – beyond their effective life anyway, and years of neglect in a hot, and often damp climate, had not improved them. Stored in the thatch of Zulu huts, the wooden part of the weapons was often attacked by termites, while metal parts rusted. Inferior powder and home-made ammunition made matters still worse. As a result, most guns employed by the Zulus in 1879 were scarcely effective at anything beyond close quarter range. Moreover, there was a common misconception among the Zulus which made many of them poor shots, as one British veteran observed;

...their want of skill (in firing) may be attributed in great measure to a misapprehension as to the use of the sights on their rifles. Knowing that when a white man wants to hit an object a long way off he puts up his back sight, they concluded that the effect of doing so is to make the rifle shoot harder, and wishing to develop the full powers of their arms of all times, they invariably used their rifles with the back-sight up, a misconception to which many a soldier owes his life. (8)

The combination of these factors undermined the effectiveness of Zulu firepower to the extent that a widespread disillusion crept in after the early battles. As Chief Zimema of the uMxapho ibutho commented bitterly after Nyezane,

We were still far away from them when the white men began to throw their bullets at us, but we could not shoot at them because our rifles would not shoot so far. (9)

Disappointed, many warriors preferred to rely instead on tried and tested weapons which, in any case, were better suited to Zulu psychology in battle. As Mangwanana Mchunu, a veteran of Isandlwana, put it, a gun is a coward's weapon, and a man has to be a man to fight with assegais", adding that "I fired one shot with my gun at Isandlwana and then held it with my shield and took hold of my assegais, it was our custom always to fire one shot and then charge as it was a long job to load the gun again. (10)

The last comment is particularly revealing, since it emphasises the fact that, unlike the Xhosa on the Eastern Cape Frontier, or the Basotho – both of whom adopted guns in large quantities, and adapted their tactics accordingly – the Zulus made no concessions to firearms. Rather than change their military thinking, to use firearms to their best advantage, they simply regarded them as an addition to their traditional armoury – and an unreliable one, at that. One result of this failure to adapt was to condemn them to the heavy casualties which were an inevitable consequent of making frontal attacks on enemy positions in broad daylight.

The situation was only marginally improved by the capture of British weapons at Isandlwana, Ntombe and Hlobane. Over 1,000 modern Martini-Henry rifles were captured at Isandlwana alone, together with 500,000 rounds of .450 Boxer ammunition. Guns were highly prized trophies, and despite a half-hearted attempt by the king to have the looted Martinis gathered together and re-distributed evenly among his army, most were kept by the men who took them. This was no great disadvantage, however, since the camp was looted by the very regiments who took the most active part in the war.

Nevertheless, there were clearly not enough captured rifles to go round, and the old obsolete weapons continued to be used throughout the war. Indeed, the traveller Bertram Mitford noted that when he visited Isandlwana three years after the battle large piles of empty cartridge cases were in evidence which, upon close examination, clearly bore teeth-marks, testifying to the fact that the Zulus had torn them open, to add the powder to their powder-horns for use with their muzzle-loaders.

Contrary to popular belief – and despite a suggestion by none other than Colour-Sergeant Bourne to the contrary – there is no evidence that Martinis captured at Isandlwana were used at Rorke's Drift. The regiments who attacked the Drift had formed the reserve at Isandlwana, and had not taken part in the looting of the camp. True, one regiment, the iNdluyengwe, had been employed mopping up British survivors at Sothondose's (Fugitives') Drift, and may have captured a handful of modern firearms there. Nevertheless, the inaccuracy of the Zulu firing throughout the battle – at ranges which the Martini could comfortably cope with – is highly suggestive. Moreover, the British medical reports testify that all of the garrison's casualties who were hit by musketry were wounded by irregular projectiles, rather than Martini bullets. If the Zulus had had Martini-Henrys on Shiyane hill, one might reasonably expect the most damage to have been done by those weapons; in fact, none was.

There was, however, a slight but perceptible increase in the accuracy of Zulu firepower in the battles of March 1879, undoubtedly due to the numbers of Martini-Henry's now being used by the Zulus. Most famously, at Khambula a group of Zulu riflemen occupied an over-grown dung-heap on the fringes of the British position and, at ranges which were beyond the capabilities of their older weapons, proceeded to make life very uncomfortable for the British garrison. Not only was Major Hackett's famous sortie seriously afflicted from this source (both Hackett and his subaltern, Lt. Bright, were wounded, suffering injuries which

were highly suggestive of the accuracy and power of Martini-Henry bullets), but enfilading fire caused a company of the 13th Regiment to abandon part of the barricaded cattle-laager. This Zulu fire was later effectively suppressed by British return fire, but it does raise the interesting question of what might have happened had the Zulus made a more concerted effort to profit by their captured weapons. Indeed, in the later stages of the war, Zulu sniping increased generally, partly due to the better guns in their possession. At the skirmish at eZungeni in June 1879 the adjutant of the 17th Lancers, Lt. Frith, was killed by a clean shot through the body at such a long range that it shocked and surprised his companions.

Nevertheless, the weapons captured at Isandlwana were quite insufficient to persuade the Zulus to abandon their traditional tactics, and at Ulundi on 4th July they put Shaka's theory to the test, attacking Lord Chelmsford's square in the open. While most of Chelmsford's casualties were caused by musketry, his losses were nevertheless light, for the Zulu charges were gunned down before they could make contact. The battle of Ulundi was, in many ways, the last great gesture of traditional defiance on the part of the old Zulu kingdom; that it was so utterly unsuccessful suggested just how far in favour of the white man the balance of military technology had swung since the 1820s, and how outmoded was the Zulu military outlook in the face of it.

There remains one intriguing question; what happened to the British firearms captured at Isandlwana? Certainly, several hundred were recovered before the end of the war, either from subsequent battlefields, or taken from surrendered Zulus at the end of hostilities. Many were not, however, and some undoubtedly saw action again in the civil wars of the 1880s. Following the gradual extension of British authority over Zululand as the century progressed, occasional attempts were made to confiscate modern firearms found in Zulu possession, particularly at the end of the Anglo-Boer War. In 1904, however, the Natal government estimated that there were 5,126 guns in Zululand – a surprisingly precise figure – most of which were antiquated, but ,
a small proportion of these are Martini-Henry pattern, and some of them were acquired on the battlefields of 1879. (11)

The intriguing possibility exists that a handful might still remain in rural Zululand, passed down by forebears who fought at Isandlwana, and carefully hidden in the thatch of smoky huts, a prey to termites and rust!

References.

1. *The Diary of Henry Francis Fynn*, edited by J. Stuart and D. Malcolm, Pietermaritzburg, 1950.
2. For example, at the battle of iziNdolowane, 1826. See Fynn, *Diary*.
3. On the subject of the clandestine gun trade in Dingane's time, see Louis du Buisson, *The White Man Cometh*, Johannesburg, 1987.
4. W.C. Baldwin, *African Hunting and Adventure*, London, 1894.
5. *Military Report on Zululand*, War Office, 1906.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Report of the 'Lower Thukela Correspondent', *Natal Mercury*, 12 February 1879.
8. Captain H.R. Knight, *Reminiscences of Etshowe*, United Services Magazine, London, 1984.
9. Zimema's account appeared in a supplement to the *Natal Mercury*, 22 January, 1929.
10. Mangwanana's account is part of the Bowden Papers in the Natal Museum Collection. It was reproduced in Ian Knight, *Kill Me in the Shadows*, Soldiers of the Queen, issue 74.
11. War Office *Report*, 1906.