

The conception of using sailors as soldiers for fighting on land gathered momentum during the Napoleonic wars. Apart from Wellington's Peninsula and Waterloo campaigns, it was the Royal Navy who largely thwarted Napoleon's ambitions of expanding his influence beyond mainland Europe. Besides fighting sea battles, the Navy became involved in many landings, mostly to attack enemy ports and defences.

It was not until Victoria's reign that the Royal Navy was equipped and prepared to go on campaign with the Army. During this long period without any major war to fight, the Royal Navy, with its overwhelming superiority, was not involved in any great fleet actions. Instead, her role became that of international policeman becoming involved in fairly minor brushes with pirates, slavers and hostile natives. With so many warships patrolling far-flung seas, the Navy was frequently called upon to supply men and guns to fight in many of Victoria's campaigns; the Opium Wars in China, the Baltic and Crimean campaigns against Russia, the Indian Mutiny, Abyssinia, the Maori Wars and the Ashanti War.

The Admiralty divided up the disposition of its ships into areas and here these vessels would stay for years at a time with the crews being rotated every few years. Those ships patrolling the tropics and Southern Hemisphere had their hulls painted white and their superstructure and masts a dark yellow.

During the 1870's, Southern Africa was within the scope of the Cape of Good Hope and West Africa Station. The commodore's ship was the 3000-ton corvette HMS *Active*, built in 1869. Like all warships of that time, she was steam driven but, with tradition dying hard, she was also fully rigged for sail. Her crew had taken part in the Ashanti War of 1873/4, patrolling the rivers and marching through the thick jungle in one the unhealthiest climates in the world. Returning to her base at Simons Bay, she was asked to supply a shore brigade by the Cape's Governor, Sir Bartle Frere. During the Frontier War of 1877-78, the small detachments from *Active* fought against the Gaikas. A rocket battery gave good service at the fighting at the Peri Bush and, with men of the 88th Regiment, fifty bluejackets beat off a strong attack on an advanced camp at N'amaxa. It was the *Active* that took the new commanding officer, Lord Chelmsford, from Cape Town to Durban to prepare for the invasion of Zululand.

With the war against the Zulus following so quickly, *Active* was again asked to supply men for the invasion of Zululand. This she did when 174 officers and men, with the addition of 43 Marines, disembarked at Durban on 19th December 1878 to an enthusiastic reception. They then travelled up the coast to the mouth of the Tugela River, where they joined the "Buffs" at the newly established Fort Pearson. (1)

Indeed it was sailors from *Active* who rowed the Zulu delegation across the Tugela where they were confronted with Frere's impossible demands under the Ultimatum Tree. Commander (Acting-Captain) Campbell's men were armed with Martini-Henry rifles and the 1871 Pattern Naval Cutlass. This pattern of cutlass had a cast-iron bowl guard that had a hole to take the rifle barrel and the pommel was machined to take the bayonet lug. In contrast to the army, the navy put great emphasis on weapon training and the crews were thoroughly schooled in both firearms and cutlass drill. In addition, *Active* supplied two 12 pound Armstrong field guns, two rocket tubes and a Gatling gun. The latter had been carried on board during the Ashanti War but this was the first time a machine gun had been used by the British on campaign. (2)

The officers wore either a dark blue double-breasted frock coat or a single breasted five-button tunic, with blue trousers and calf-length white canvas gaiters. Mostly they wore their peaked naval caps but some did wear the Foreign Service helmet dyed blue. The sailors wore their traditional blue loose-fitting jersey with open-neck wide collar. Blue or white trousers were tucked into leather bound tanned canvas gaiters. Those on the march wore wide straw sennet hats with the name of their ship painted around the blue band. Compared with the British infantryman, the sailors were dressed more suitably for marching in tropical heat and, as a consequence, suffered less. Both officers and men wore brown leather belts and ammunition pouches.

The Royal Marines were divided into Light Infantry and dressed in red and the Artillery, who were in dark blue just as their counterparts in the Army. As a courtesy to the Navy, Chelmsford appointed an *Active* officer, Lieutenant Archibald Berkeley Milne, to his staff. The rest of the crew was put under the command of Colonel Pearson and formed part of the First or Coastal Column.

The plan was to advance on the mission at Eshowe and establish a fortified supply depot to be garrisoned by the Naval Brigade. From here the column would advance on Ulundi in conjunction with the other two columns. Pearson's first task was to move his men, transport and supplies across the swollen Tugela. Working with an enthusiasm that drew admiration, the sailors rigged up a pontoon, repeatedly rowing across the fast flowing river to carry cables to the Zulu bank. Meanwhile, under the supervision of a Royal Engineer officer, the ship's carpenters constructed the pont, designed by Colonel Durnford.

A wet Christmas was celebrated in style and the Naval Brigade gained a reputation for enjoying themselves. One observer said that a sailor's camp was alive with music, singing and good-humoured banter. As was their habit, sailors soon made pets of monkeys and birds. They also cultivated vegetable patches and built coops for chickens they had acquired. Although no angels, the bluejackets appear to have been a disciplined outfit and there was only

one serious defaulter during eight months of campaigning. (3) This contrasted with the Army, who resorted to flogging on such a scale that a public outcry led to its total abolition.

On 6 January, the Naval Brigade was increased by the arrival at Fort Pearson of a landing party from *HMS Tenedos*. She was a 1,755-ton wooden built corvette which had been transferred from the West Indies Station. Her crew had brought with them one of the ship's bower anchors, which was used to secure the steel hawser on the far bank. (4) It was during an effort to pull the heavy hawser through the fast moving current that two of the *Active's* sailors were swept overboard from the raft. One was quickly rescued but the other, Able Seaman Dan Martin, drowned and his body was not recovered. He had the unenviable distinction of being the first casualty of the Zulu War.

After delays in assembling all his supplies and men, Colonel Pearson was ready to cross the river on the 11th of January, a task that took two days to complete. During that time, the Naval Brigade was engaged from 4.30 am to 8.30pm in hauling the laden pont and ferrying men and materials over in the several boats they had. (5) Finally, on the 13th, all but seventy men of *Active* and some from *Tenedos* were carried across the Tugela and onto Zulu soil. Those sailors left behind garrisoned Fort Pearson. Before marching onto Eshowe, Pearson ordered another fortified supply base to be constructed at the landing site and was named Fort Tenedos. Both *Active* and *Tenedos* arrived beyond the bar at the mouth of the Tugela and made abortive attempts to land supplies through the heavy surf. Unfortunately, *Tenedos* ran aground and suffered a badly damaged keel and screw and had to return to Durban. At last the fort was completed, filled with stores and left to be guarded by men from *Tenedos* and a company of the 99th Regiment. Pearson's column began its slow and laborious march to Eshowe over a route quickly churned to a quagmire and interrupted by fast running streams and rivers.

When they were within a day's march of their destination, the Zulus close to the crossing attacked the van of the column over the Inyezane River. In a sharp battle, the Zulus were repulsed and put to flight leaving some four hundred dead on the battlefield. The men of the Naval Brigade were prominent in this victory. Along with men of the Buffs, they formed a line that beat off the main attack from the right horn, while the 24-pounder naval rocket battery cleared a concentration of Zulus around a homestead on the hill to the front. (6) The Gatling gun, after a delay caused by a broken limber pole, was rushed to the British centre on a knoll. Under the command of nineteen year old Midshipman Lewis Cadwallader Coker, the Gatling was brought into action with a minute's burst into some brush from which the Zulus were causing the British some casualties. (7)

With the Zulus seeming to run out of steam, Commander Fletcher Campbell suggested to Colonel Pearson that now was the moment to clear the Zulus from the heights ahead. (8) Taking A Company and half of B Company and supported by a company of the Buffs, Campbell led the advance up the hill. Eager to beat the 'lobsters' (9) to the top, the bluejackets charged ahead, firing and yelling until the Zulus turned and ran. A prisoner later said that the Zulus felt that they were getting the better of the battle until '*those horrible men in white trousers rushed up and showered lead on them*'.

Pearson's men had dealt the Zulus a blow but this was completely overshadowed by the events about to take place fifty miles away at Isandlwana. Here Lieutenant Milne had ridden out of camp with the rest of Lord Chelmsford's staff to seek out the main Zulu army, which was believed to be massing to the southeast. Expecting that the camp would be broken up and joining Chelmsford, Milne left behind his servant, Signalman 1st Class W.H. Aynsley, to pack up his baggage and rejoin him. During the hours that Chelmsford's column spent fruitlessly looking for the Zulus, the camp at Isandlwana was attacked and overwhelmed by the main impi. Messages began to reach Chelmsford and he asked Milne to use his naval telescope, which was more powerful than the army binoculars, and report if he could see anything amiss at Isandlwana. Milne shinned up a tree and spent sometime trying to make out the distant camp but could not see anything significant. Unbeknown to him, the Zulus were already into the camp and a most desperate struggle was taking place. Men were dying terrible deaths or running in panic to escape the irresistible Zulu tide. Milne's servant, William Aynsley, stood and fought to the end. He was seen with his back to a wagon, slashing and hacking away with his cutlass and keeping the Zulus at bay. Finally, a warrior crawled beneath the wagon and stabbed the sailor through the spokes of the wheel. He was the only Naval Brigade battle fatality.

Meanwhile, the Coastal Column reached their destination at the hilltop mission at Eshowe, where they set about erecting formidable defences. (10) When news of the defeat at Isandlwana reached Pearson, he decided it would be safer to stay put than risk a retreat back to Natal. So began the loose siege of Eshowe. Very little fighting took place but the monotonous rations and increasing sickness took their toll. Between 23rd January until their relief on 3rd April, twenty-six men died, mostly of fever, including five of the Naval Brigade. Especially mourned was Midshipman Coker, who was struck down by typhoid on 16th March having insisted on sleeping by the Gatling covered only by a greatcoat.

HMS Shah was the next naval vessel to supply a landing brigade. Built in 1873, she was a 6,250-ton iron clad frigate, although she rated more as a first class cruiser. Since her commission, she had been on the Pacific Station, which covered the entire length of the Americas. She is unique at this period in that she fought a single-ship action at a time when such opportunities were rare. In 1877 she took on the Peruvian armoured turret ship *Huasca*, which had been taken over by Nicholas de Pierola, an aspirant for the presidency of his country. In order to keep at sea, the *Huasca* seized coal from British ships. The Station commander, Admiral de Horsey ordered the *Shah* to apprehend this Peruvian 'pirate'. When at last she was tracked down, the *Huasca* refused to surrender and defended her action as an act of government and lawful. She then set off for the shelter of the coast, closely pursued by *Shah*.

In a three-hour fight, the *Huasca* was hit between 70 to 80 times but sustained little internal damage because of her armour. One shell did penetrate her hull just above the waterline, killing one crewman and wounding two others. The *Shah* was also hit but only lost some rigging. Eventually the Peruvian vessel made it safely into harbour, where she surrendered to the official Peruvian Navy. Don Pierola became something of a national hero and was swept into power. There was such a clamour for compensation and a rising tide of anti-British feeling that de Horsey was replaced and *Shah* ordered home in disgrace.

It was on the return voyage that *Shah* put in to St. Helena to re-coal and learned of the disaster at Isandlwana from the Governor. Captain R. Bradshaw, perhaps with an eye to redeeming his ship's reputation, took it upon himself to take the island's garrison of a company of the 88th (Connaught Rangers) Regiment and No.8 Battery, 7th Brigade Royal Artillery and sail for Durban. *Shah* arrived on 7th March and Chelmsford gratefully received the addition of 394 sailors and additional Army personnel. (11) The additional bluejackets were sent to Fort Pearson, where they became part of Lord Chelmsford's column formed to relieve Eshowe. (12) Soon after *Shah*'s arrival, another warship arrived at Durban and disembarked 228 seamen. She was the 3,913-ton iron hulled corvette, HMS *Boadicea*, built in 1876 and sent to the Cape of Good Hope and West Africa Station for a tour of seven years. She had been delayed because of an outbreak of smallpox and had to serve a period of quarantine. Now, with her men, the total strength of the Naval Brigade numbered 863.

The column was large, consisting of 3,390 white troops and 2,280 natives of the NNC and their progress, like Pearson's, was dogged by torrential rains. Learning from the lesson of Isandlwana, the column entrenched each night. By the third evening they had got the hang of building an effective laager, which was just as well for the Zulus were about to launch a major attack.

The site chosen was on a slight rise near a kraal named Gingindlovu, within view of Eshowe. The bluejackets and their Gatlings and field guns manned the corners of the large square and were spoiling for a fight. The early morning light showed the mass of Zulus approaching from the north. The *Boadicea* Gatling gun commander asked permission to open fire at 800 yards as this had been paced out the night before. Chelmsford overheard and gave the order to open fire. A couple of turns of the crank cut a swath through the approaching warriors but did little to deter their advance. The tall grass hid their progress and it was not until they were within 300 yards that the defenders were able to see them. With the order to open fire by volleys thick white smoke soon surrounded the defenders, so obscuring their view of their attackers. As a result, the Zulus were able to get very close to the British. Some warriors even attempted to wrest rifles from the defenders. One young Zulu boy, a mat carrier, reached the British line when one of the *Boadicea* crew leaned over the rampart and grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and hauled him into the laager. The bluejacket gave him a good cuffing and sat on him for the rest of the battle. The young Zulu was later adopted as a mascot and inducted into the Navy.

The Zulus, showing great bravery, tried to breach each side of the square but were repulsed. Eventually, they began to waver which was a signal for the mounted troops to ride out and put the Zulus to flight. The rest of the defenders were given strict instructions to remain at their posts and not to take part in the pursuit. It was all too much, however, for *Boadicea* Commodore Richards. Despite ordering his men to stay put, he and Lieutenant Preedy scrambled over the rampart and started hacking and slashing at any Zulu they could find. The sailors thoroughly enjoyed the spectacle, shouting encouragement to the two officers until everyone was roaring with laughter.

Some pockets of Zulus attempted to make a stand but were dispersed by *Shah*'s guns. After ninety minutes, the battle was over. The Zulu loss was estimated at about 1,000 while the British counted 10 dead or mortally wounded. The Naval Brigade sustained 6 wounded. It is of some interest that the average expenditure of ammunition was only seven rounds per man per hour. The Royal Marines, however, fired 16 rounds per man per hour and were generally regarded as better shots than the average infantryman. Chelmsford's Column then completed its march into Eshowe and relieved the garrison. Sickness had sapped the strength of most of the defenders and left some 28 dead, including 5 of the *Active* contingent.

For the Naval Landing Brigade, there were to be no more battles. They were, however, actively involved in the re-invasion as part of the new Coastal Column commanded by General Henry Crealock. This column was rather unfairly referred to as "Crealock's Crawlers" by those who overlooked the tough conditions the troops endured. The bluejackets were involved in building and manning a couple of forts to guard the supply route and to bring in supplies. In order to get over the constant shortage of wagons and draught animals, a supply depot was established on the open beach at what was euphemistically called Port Durnford. This entailed collecting stores from supply ships and rowing them in through the heavy surf to the beach.

There was one other naval vessel that was entitled to the '1879' bar to the South African War Medal and that was the 450-ton gunboat *Forester*. With her shallow draught, she had surveyed the coastline and chosen 'Port Durnford' as being the most sheltered place to land supplies. It was during this survey that she reported coming under fire from the heavily wooded shore. A burst from her Gatling gun silenced any further annoyance.

On the 1st June the Prince Imperial of France, Louis Napoleon, was killed during Lord Chelmsford's advance on Ulundi. The shock of this single death was almost as much as that of the hundreds who died at Isandlwana. Great care was taken to observe proper protocol and due reverence in the transport of the Prince's body. When it reached Durban, there was a full military parade to accompany the coffin as it was placed on board HMS *Boadicea*. She then sailed to Cape Town and transferred her precious cargo to the troopship HMS *Orontes* for transport back to England.

The Zulu War reached its tragic climax with short but bloody battle at Ulundi. The British firepower was overwhelming and the defeated Zulus were ridden down unmercifully by the cavalry. The Navy's sole representative at this battle was Lieutenant Milne, who managed to sustain a slight bullet wound to his arm. Chelmsford had gained his victory not only against the Zulus but also General Sir Garnet Wolseley, who had been sent out to replace him and had hoped to grab the laurels for himself. In an effort to take the shortest route to Ulundi and forestall Chelmsford, Wolseley had the *Shah* take him from Durban to land at Port Durnford. Unfortunately, the weather turned bad and his attempt to land by a surfboat had to be abandoned and a drenched and seasick Wolseley was returned to Durban.

With the war over, the Naval Brigade was broken up. *Tenedos* had already departed with her crew on 8th May. The crews of *Active* and *Shah* made it through the surf at the mouth of the Tugela and embarked on the *City of Venice*, which took them to Durban. Here they joined the *Shah* which sailed to Simons Bay, where the *Active* was waiting. *Boadicea* remained at Durban and supplied her Landing Brigade for the ill-starred war against the Boers in 1880-81. They were unfortunate to be present at both Laing's Nek and Majuba Hill, where they lost twenty-one killed, including their commander. One of their crew, Assistant Sick Berth Attendant William Bevis was recommended for the Victoria Cross for remaining behind to look after the wounded, despite being under constant fire. In the event, he was awarded the Medal for Conspicuous Gallantry.

The officers who had taken part in the Zulu War were duly rewarded with promotions and some CB's. *Active*, *Shah*, *Tenedos* and *Boadicea* were to be made obsolete within a few years, so rapidly was the pace of warship design moving. They were either scrapped or used as block ships in port. It is of interest to note that when she was finally broken up in 1919, *Shah's* masts were used to replace those of HMS *Victory* at Portsmouth. The role of the Naval Landing Brigade in the Zulu War has been somewhat neglected. Despite their small numbers, they contributed considerably to the successful outcome of the campaign.

Acknowledgements.

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References.

1. The 2/3rd (Buffs) East Kent Regt. had good reason to welcome the sailors of *HMS Active*. In 1876 as the regiment's journey to the Cape neared its end, the troopship *St.Lawrence* ran aground and was wrecked ninety miles north of Cape Town. It was *Active* who rescued the marooned regiment from the desolate shore.
2. The Maxim 0.45mm single-barrel machine gun shortly superseded the Gatling. The former weighed just 63 lbs. against the latter's 444 lbs. Also the rate of fire was 600 rounds per minute against 400 rounds per minute.
3. A stoker liberated a bottle of brandy from a stores wagon.
4. *Tenedos* anchor is now displayed outside the Museum of Zululand at Eshowe.
5. The fully laden pont could carry 60 men in full marching order.
6. In command of this rocket battery was Boatswain John Cotter, who had served in the Naval Brigade in the trenches before Sebastopol alongside a certain Midshipman Evelyn Wood.
7. Lewis Cadwallader Coker was an exceptional young man and it is a measure of the respect and confidence his superiors had in him that he was given command of such an important weapon. Indeed, he may well have been the first Midshipman to submit a report as a commanding officer. Sadly his promising career was ended when he died of disease at Eshowe.
8. Commander Fletcher Campbell was given overall command of the Naval Brigade. To illustrate the slow rate of promotion in the Navy, he had served 27 years, nine of which were at his present rank. As a reward for his service in the Zulu War he was promoted to full Captain and awarded with the Companion of the Bath.
9. The Navy referred to soldiers as 'lobsters' because of their red coats.
10. The planning and construction of the defences were masterminded by Captain Warren Wynne, Royal Engineers.
11. For his initiative and prompt action, Captain Bradshaw was rewarded with the Companion of the Bath.
12. Lord Chelmsford took personal charge as the intended commander, Major-General Henry Hope Crealock, had been delayed in arriving.