

## Scouting Techniques in 1879; British Weaknesses or Zulu Strengths?

By Ian Knight

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In July 1878, Sir Frederic Thesiger – he did not become Lord Chelmsford until the October - wrote to the Commander-in-Chief, the Duke of Cambridge, pondering his plans for the forthcoming invasion of Zululand. He wrote,

I am afraid that there will be great difficulty, however, in keeping the mounted branches effective, owing to the climate of Natal and the Transvaal being so unhealthy for horses. I understand that there are only four months in which horse-sickness, as it is called, does not prevail. (1)

This concern over cavalry and mounted scouts was well-founded, for the lack of an effective mounted arm was indeed a major problem for Chelmsford in the early stages of the war in Zululand. In 1878, there were no regular British cavalry units stationed in South Africa, and the home government, reluctant to sanction Sir Bartle Frere's confrontational policy at a time when British troops were poised to intervene in Afghanistan, was unlikely to send him any. Although in the 1870s the tactical role of cavalry was under review by military theorists – experience in the American Civil War and Franco-Prussian War had suggested that the value of the *arme blanche*, the use of sword-armed cavalry as shock troops, had become largely redundant in the age of accurate quick-firing small arms – they retained an enormous value in colonial warfare. Their importance lay in two main areas, scouting and pursuit, and it was in the former that Chelmsford would most keenly feel their absence.

The border between British Natal and Zululand stretched for nearly two hundred miles. It followed the course of the Mzinyathi and Thukela rivers, two major systems that had cut deep crenulated valleys through the rolling hills. Even the best maps of the Zulu country had large areas marked simply 'unknown', while information concerning tracks, mountain ranges, rivers and Zulu settlements was largely dependent on reports from European hunters and traders, whose observations had hardly been made with military rigour. In such a country, it was essential that Chelmsford be able to feel his way forward; not merely to screen his advance from the enemy, but also to ensure that the geographical assumptions upon which he based his plans were correct. For this, if nothing else, he needed a cavalry arm. In the absence of regulars Chelmsford made the best of the varied material which was available to him. He could at least call upon the services of five very different troop types in an attempt to make good the deficiency – the mounted infantry, irregulars, volunteers, Boers and African auxiliaries.

Although often lumped together, these units were in fact very different in character, and it is important to understand this when assessing their performance in the field. A lack of regular cavalry was not new among the British forces in South Africa, and successive commanders from the 1850s had adopted a flexible approach to the problem. In the 9<sup>th</sup> Cape Frontier War (1877-78) a unit of mounted infantry was raised from the ranks of infantry battalions serving locally. Men were selected who had some experience of horses, although one officer wryly observed that the horses that were purchased for them locally 'would have been a handful to an accomplished horseman, and most of them were a great deal too lively for a foot-soldier'. (2)

**Mounted infantry** were, as their name suggests, expected to use their horses for greater mobility, but to dismount and fight on foot, usually as skirmishers. The men were issued with corduroy riding breeches and bandoliers – more practical on horseback than infantry pouches – but retained the frocks (as their every-day working tunics were called) of their parent battalion. This gave them a mixed appearance that rather suited their flexible role. By the time the Zulu War broke out, the mounted infantry had already learned their craft on the Eastern Cape, in Griqualand, and in the Transvaal. Useful as they were, however, their numbers were limited – Chelmsford had just two squadrons to distribute among his three offensive columns. To boost the numbers, Chelmsford extended the period of service of some of the irregular units serving on the Cape frontier, while three more units were raised in the newly annexed Transvaal.

**Irregulars** were troops raised directly by the British army for a specific period of service. They were uniformed and equipped by the British – mostly with brown corduroy suits and wide-brimmed hats – and usually placed under the command of serving regular officers. The recruits were drawn from the periphery of settler society – they were white, and often rootless, adventurers newly arrived in the colonies, unemployed labourers or unsuccessful diggers from the diamond-fields. Service in the irregular corps offered the prospect of excitement and a share of any prize money to men who often had little to lose, and the outlook of the irregulars was in marked contrast to the more settled Volunteer units. They could be – and were – sent

everywhere as the need arose, and the best of them, like the Frontier Light Horse, earned an enviable reputation as versatile and hard-fighting light cavalry.

**The Natal Volunteer units**, by contrast, were raised not by the Crown, but by the colonial authorities. Since their primary purpose was colonial defence, they recruited heavily among the sons of the colonial gentry – landowners and the urban elite, who had a vested interest in protecting their future in the region. In Natal in 1879 there were fifteen Volunteer corps in Natal – three infantry, one artillery, and eleven mounted – totalling over 700 men. The colonial administration provided weapons and equipment, but the men themselves were responsible for their own uniforms. Officers were elected from among each unit, the democratic choice being confirmed by a commission. The men were not full-time soldiers, but were expected to undertake a period of training each year, and were liable to be called up when the need arose. The Ordinance under which the Volunteers had been raised in the 1850s specified that they were liable to be used for colonial defence only, and special provision was needed if they were to fight elsewhere. Chelmsford was obliged to ballot the members individually to secure their consent before employing them across the border in Zululand. In the event, most voted to do so, and when the invasion began in January 1879 eight of the mounted units were attached to the Centre and Right Flank columns.

**The Boers**, again, were very different in character from either the irregulars or Volunteers. The British had annexed the Boer South African Republic – popularly known as the Transvaal – in 1877. The speed of the move had largely caught the Boers by surprise, and the lack of a concerted opposition led many British soldiers and administrators to believe that British rule had been accepted. This was far from the case. It took time for the full implications of the annexation to reach outlying parts of the Transvaal, and for an opposition movement to emerge. Indeed, it must be remembered that the Transvaal administration was not highly centralised; such was the independent spirit of many of the Boer groups who settled in the Transvaal that they accepted government authority only reluctantly, and expected to control local affairs with a fair degree of independence. This was certainly true of the Utrecht and Wakkerstroom districts, which abutted the north-western borders of Zululand, and would bear the brunt of military activity in 1879.

The attitude of the Boers is of particular interest. In October 1878 Chelmsford had written to Evelyn Wood, commanding the Left Flank Column – whose base was in Transvaal territory – instructing him to ‘find out how many Boers in your neighbourhood would come out for the invasion of Zululand – I have an idea that I shall send Carrington eventually to command them – They will make good Cossacks, and as such be useful’ (3) Wood prided himself on his ability to charm the Boers, and was convinced that the large landowners among them would see the advantages of the destruction of the Zulu power, and support the invasion.

In that he deluded himself. He soon found that most Boers were openly hostile to his recruitment drive, and indeed only one Boer of note – Petrus Lefras ‘Piet’ Uys – actively supported the invasion. Such was the patriarchal nature of Boer society that he brought with him a commando of 45 men. Yet Uys was not primarily motivated by loyalty to the British, by personal admiration for Wood, as Wood fondly believed, or even by desire to revenge himself upon the Zulu, by whom his family had suffered in the past. Uys, and most of the men with him, had farms in the areas around Utrecht that formed part of the ‘disputed territory’. The boundary award of 1878, by confirming Zulu title to the area, had placed these farms at risk, and most fought in expectation that a British victory would restore their claims. Moreover, Uys himself had dangled the carrot of the huge quantities of Zulu cattle which his followers might expect to loot from Zulu herds, and it is clear that some of his followers had no interest in the war beyond cattle raiding. (4)

The limitations of Boer support for the invasion became apparent as the war progressed. Uys himself was killed at the battle of Hlobane on 28 March, and the following morning – even as the Zulu army was moving to attack Wood’s base at Khambula – many of the Boers abandoned the British camp. Uys’ promised Zulu cattle had proved too costly, while the prospect of Zulu activity in the region required their presence to defend their farms – or at least to usher their families into the safety of the Utrecht laager. Elsewhere, indeed, Boer attitudes were even more ambivalent.

In the Wakkerstroom district the Boers not only refused to support the British, but also offered tacit support to the Zulu instead. When local Zulu groups raided white-owned farms in the Ntombe valley in February 1879, they were acting on information provided by some of the Boers, whose own property was left untouched by the raiders (5). Later, during the closing stages of the war, the same Wakkerstroom Boers again refused to support British mopping-up operations in northern Zululand, and warned the Zulu of British movements.

After the war was over, of course, the full extent of Boer antipathy towards the British became apparent when the Transvaal went into open revolt, leading ultimately to the British defeat at Majuba.

**The NNC.** In addition to white settler society, Natal had a very large African population, most of which had a history of antipathy towards the Zulu kingdom. It was potentially a rich source of manpower, but recruitment was problematic, both because the Crown lacked the resources – time and money – to properly equip and train an auxiliary unit, and because the Natal administration was wary of arming its black population. As a result, the promise of the Natal Native Contingent was largely wasted; a shame, since the NNC was most effective in its role as ‘foot cavalry’. While not expected to withstand a full Zulu onslaught in open battle, the NNC moved fast, understood the landscape, made good scouts, and were ruthless in pursuit of an unresisting enemy. Moreover, five troops of mounted African troops were also raised; these proved ideally suited to the roles assigned to them.

Yet the effectiveness of all of these slender resources was further undermined by failures at staff level. Throughout the war, Chelmsford and many of his officers regarded the reports submitted by colonial troops – black and white – with some suspicion, and this failure to take the reports of his only reconnaissance elements seriously would have serious repercussions.

To some extent, this was the result of the mind-set that prevailed among the regular soldiers. They prided themselves on their professional training and expertise, and tended to look down on auxiliaries as both amateurs and social inferiors. The well-known story of Lord Chelmsford’s reluctance to listen to the warnings of men such as Paul Kruger, who warned him of the danger of under-estimating the Zulu, is an example of this.

Yet it is important to understand that the value of such advice became clear only with hindsight. There were many reasons why Lord Chelmsford, weighing it up against his own experience, should have rejected it. Chelmsford was a regular soldier, who had campaigned in a wide range of theatres, from the Crimea to India and Abyssinia. He had far more experience of many different types of warfare than the local civilians who advised him, and he certainly knew the capabilities of a modern British army rather better than the Boers, who had not fought the British since the 1840s. Moreover, the examples used to illustrate such lessons were not as clear-cut as they now seem. Although the Boer victory on the Ncome (Blood) river in 1838 – forty years before – was held up as an example, the battle was by no means as decisive as is sometimes thought. Indeed, Boer fortunes during that campaign were decidedly mixed; within weeks of Blood River the Boers had been defeated in a running fight on the banks of the same White Mfolozi River which was now Lord Chelmsford’s objective, and had been compelled to retire from Zululand. Moreover, Chelmsford was only too aware of the poor showing of Transvaal forces in the disastrous war against King Sekhukhune in 1876. Against such a background, he must have taken the views of men like Kruger with more than a pinch of salt. Nor, indeed, had his own recent experiences on the Cape Frontier particularly impressed him with the reliability of auxiliary troops. In a scrappy and difficult war, fought over very broken terrain, Chelmsford’s careful strategies had often been thwarted by indiscipline among his auxiliaries; they had sometimes been too enthusiastic, lured out of their positions to attack weak targets, or not enthusiastic enough, refusing to hold positions when under pressure. Moreover, although the irregular units, who were attached to Wood’s column, had fought on the Cape frontier, most of the Natal Volunteer Corps had no direct experience of battle beyond the dismal Langelibalele campaign of 1873, while the Boers and NNC remained an unknown quantity. Under such circumstances, it is perhaps not surprising that Chelmsford preferred to have the observations of his auxiliaries confirmed by reports from regular troops before he acted upon them.

Yet this reluctance to take colonial capabilities seriously was also symptomatic of a wider failure to grasp the importance of the need to systematically process intelligence. Lord Chelmsford began the campaign with no intelligence officer on his staff, nor did he think one necessary. In this, he followed conventional army thinking which expected all staff officers to process such information that came within their orbit. Although the Staff College at Camberley had been training officers in systematic staff duties since 1858, there were many in the army establishment, headed by the Commander-in-Chief himself, the Duke of Cambridge, who considered such training no more than a fad. Not until Sir Garnet Wolseley – Chelmsford’s successor in Zululand – began to prefer Staff College graduates in his appointments did attitudes begin to change. In the opening stages of the war, therefore, Chelmsford’s staff were left to make what they could of a huge amount of undigested and often contradictory information, which originated not only with patrols in the field, but from African contacts working inside Zululand on behalf of Natal border agents. Chelmsford’s frustration with the limitations of such intelligence, and his worry that his officers might be led astray by it, underlie his famously tart message to Durnford after the Middle Drift incident in mid-January. (6) It was not until May 1879 that Chelmsford finally appointed a Natal civil servant who spoke Zulu, the Hon. William Drummond, to co-ordinate information as Head of the Intelligence Department.

The effect that these various factors had on Lord Chelmsford’s intelligence gathering during the first invasion of Zululand was catastrophic. His columns invaded a largely unknown country, screened by largely inexperienced troops whose reports were not in any case always believed. Certainly, the northern column fared best, for Wood worked closely with his chief cavalry officer, Redvers Buller, and had a high regard for both the irregulars and the Boers. This did not, however, prevent Wood from authorising the attack on

Hlobane Mountain, without a detailed appreciation of the terrain, and despite reports that a large Zulu impi was approaching the vicinity. Indeed, despite Wood's avowed high regard for his African scouts – 'their powers of hearing were extraordinary; they could see farther than we could with field glasses – their vision surpassed only by a telescope' (7) – it seems that their advice was seldom heeded. On 27<sup>th</sup> March – the day before Hlobane - African scouts belonging to Wood's Irregulars had spotted distant campfires, which they correctly assumed was evidence of a Zulu concentration; they did not bother to draw them to the attention of their white colleagues, however, since they had long since learned that their views were ignored. It was much the same elsewhere; at the battle of Nyezane on 22<sup>nd</sup> January – the same day as Isandlwana – members of an NNC patrol, sent to clear Zulu scouts from the slopes of Wombane hill, ahead of the British advance, tried to alert their officers to the sounds of Zulus lying concealed in the grass nearby, but were brushed off because their officers could not speak Zulu fluently enough to understand them. On that occasion, the officers paid a high price for their indifference; the patrol was suddenly attacked by the Zulu left horn, which had been concealed only a few hundred yards from them, and while the NNC rankers ran away, several of their officers were overtaken and killed.

**Zulu scouting techniques** were, by contrast, properly constituted and impeccable. The Zulu army relied on a three-tiered system for gathering intelligence – spies, scouts sent as close as possible to the enemy positions, and finally a protective screen thrown out in front of the army itself. Shaka himself had set the pattern. According to one early trader in Zululand,

Chaka always kept up a system of espionage, by which he knew at all times the condition and strength of every tribe around him, both independent and tributary; and these persons were always directed to make such observations on the passes to and from the country to which they were sent, as might be useful in leading the troops to the scene of action with the surest chance of arriving at their position, without being discovered on the one hand, or surprised on the other. (8)

Although this system was probably less effective by 1879, the fact remained that there were many links between the African population in Natal and the Zulu kingdom, and King Cetshwayo was able to make his plans in reasonable confidence that he knew of British movements. Moreover, inside Zululand the very nature of the Zulu army made the task of intelligence gathering easier. Because the Zulu army was drawn from men who at other times remained very much a part of civilian society, individual warriors were linked to an informal information network by the simple fact that in any given theatre there were men present who lived locally. If their families had remained in the vicinity of enemy operations, they could provide information; moreover, men with local knowledge were picked out as scouts. As one young officer put it, 'Being nothing but Zulus about the country here, they come and watch us; in fact they know everything that goes on.' (9)

In the Isandlwana campaign numbers of Chief Sihayo's followers, whose territory lay along the border opposite Rorke's Drift, served in this capacity, and it is notable that throughout the battle the Zulu forces had a complete mastery of the terrain. Such scouts, if they were particularly daring, might even attempt to infiltrate enemy forces, something which was comparatively easy in 1879, given the large numbers of Africans employed by the British. The British lived with the permanent suspicion that their own auxiliary forces were riddled with spies, and with some justification.

Certainly, the Zulu were audacious; there is a story that Chief Zibhebhu kaMaphitha, who was in overall command of the Zulu scouts during the Isandlwana campaign, had entered the camp in disguise, and had climbed the mountain to observe its details from above. While this story should probably be taken as symbolic rather than literal, it does suggest the degree of Zulu knowledge about the British position. Similarly, the day before the battle of Ntombe (12 March) the local Zulu commander, Prince Mbilini (who was actually a Swazi) was said to have entered the British laager with a number of 'friendlies'; he was recognised by a wagon-driver who knew him, but the report was not taken seriously. As a rule, however, the British were much more suspicious after Isandlwana, and indeed a number of suspected Zulu spies were hanged or shot at Rorke's Drift and Helpmekaar in the days following the massacre.

Behind the spies and individual scouts came a screen of skirmishers, composed of men picked out from each regiment by their commanders because of their courage. These were thrown out several miles in front of the main army as it advanced. Their job was to attack any enemy scouts they might encounter, to drive them away, and thereby mask the army's movements. It is interesting to note that one such body apparently carried out the attack on the Prince Imperial's party on 1 June.

The respective strengths of the Zulu intelligence system, and weaknesses of that of the British, gave the war in the field much of its character. Until almost to the end of the campaign the British commanders were forced to make their tactical decisions with no very clear idea of Zulu intentions or movements, until an attack was actually imminent. The Zulu, on the other hand, almost always knew exactly where the British were, and what they were doing. Nor did this situation change greatly with the arrival of two regiments of

British regular cavalry (the 17<sup>th</sup> Lancers and 1<sup>st</sup> Dragoon Guards) in April 1879, since they proved unsuited to light cavalry roles, and were most effective in tactical pursuit. (10)

One incident from the Isandlwana campaign is indicative of the consequences of this state of affairs. On 21<sup>st</sup> January, a patrol of mounted infantry under Lt. Browne, 24<sup>th</sup>, scouting to the front of the camp, encountered small parties of Zulus west of Siphezi hill. The Zulus fired on Browne's patrol and deployed to attack, and Browne, outnumbered, withdrew. This incident made no impression at Chelmsford's headquarters at Isandlwana, where no one realised its significance. But the Zulus had been some of Zibhebhu's scouts, and they had been masking the movement of the main Zulu army from Siphezi to the Ngewebeni valley, north of Isandlwana. The entire Zulu army effectively outflanked the British position without Chelmsford being in the least aware of its presence.

That same evening, meanwhile, the largely inexperienced troops comprising Chelmsford's reconnaissance to the Mangeni hills, further south, blundered into a Zulu force in the dusk, and their report convinced Chelmsford that the threat lay in that direction. He marched out before dawn on the 22<sup>nd</sup> to meet it. The Zulus had dispersed by the time he got there, and he spent the day fruitlessly searching for them; when he returned to Isandlwana that evening, he found that the camp had been over-run, and the garrison slaughtered.

## References.

1. Chelmsford to Cambridge, reproduced in *Lord Chelmsford and the Zulu War*, by Major the Hon. Gerald French, 1939.
2. See *The Transvaal Under the Queen* by Lt. Col. Nathaniel Newnham-Davis. 1900.
3. Thesiger to Wood, 1 October 1879, reproduced in *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1879*, edited by John Laband. 1994.
4. See for example the statement of D. Kritzinger in Ian Knight (ed), the Bowden papers, *Soldiers of the Queen*, Issue 74, Sept. 1993.
5. On this subject see John Laband's *Mbilini, Manyonyoba and the Phongolo frontier* in Laband and Thompson (eds) *Kingdom and Colony at War* (1990).
6. Durnford's column had been posted on the heights above the Thukela River to guard the Middle Drift crossing. Durnford received information, via contacts of the missionary, Bishop Schreuder, that the Zulus were about to cross the drift, and prepared to move his own column down to meet them. No attack developed, *From Midshipman to Field Marsha*, 1906.
8. Nathaniel Isaacs, *Travels and Adventure in Eastern Africa (Natal)*, 1836.
9. Letters and Diary of the Late Arthur C. B. Mynors, Lieut. 3<sup>rd</sup> Bat. 60<sup>th</sup> Rifles. (1879).
10. See, for example, John Laband's assessment of the failure of the 17<sup>th</sup> Lancers in the action at eZungeni of 5 June, *Chopping Wood with a Razor*, in SOTQ 74, September 1993. Although the Dragoons were successful in capturing King Cetshwayo at the end of August, they had found work in the hot and difficult Mfolozi bush exhausting.