

## The Battle of Khambula, 29th March 1879

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Late on the afternoon of 28th March 1879, British troops who had been left in the camp at Khambula hill, in northern Zululand, received the first inkling of the fate of a foray that had left them the previous evening to attack the Zulus. The expedition had consisted entirely of the column's mounted arm, supported by African auxiliaries, and the column commander, Colonel Evelyn Wood, had accompanied it. (1) Their objective had been a flat-topped mountain called Hlobane, which served as a rallying point for local Zulu groups. In the camp, the prevailing atmosphere was one of confidence, despite the fact that rumours suggested that a large Zulu force was approaching the area. Mounted strikes against the Zulus had been commonplace in a regional struggle that had been characterised by raids and counter-raids. Moreover, Hlobane lay eighteen miles from Khambula, and screened from sight by the intervening hills, and no sight or sound of action reached the camp. That evening, however, the fate of the expedition was only too clear when,

... the men [came] into camp in twos and threes, without coats, rifles, and ammunition belts, having thrown them away to lighten themselves for running, when their horses were shot or lost. Then there were two on a horse, and then perhaps you would see an officer come in mounted behind a trooper, glad to get in anyhow. Now and again, as the men came into camp, you would hear someone ask where was so-and-so, and the answer would be 'Left behind', 'He's gone'.... (2)

The attack on Hlobane had proved a complete disaster, and would provide the British with the worst butcher's bill of the war, excepting only Isandlwana. The Zulus had out-generalled Wood's men in the fighting around the mountain itself, and the surprise arrival of a large Zulu army from the royal homestead at oNdini (Ulundi) had completed British discomfort. Some 15 British officers and 79 men had been killed, together with at least 100 auxiliaries; Evelyn Wood himself had seen two of his staff killed before his eyes, and had been deeply disturbed by the experience. Moreover, as the survivors straggled back into camp that night, it was only too evident to the garrison that an attack on the camp itself was imminent.

Although the fighting in the northern sector in 1879 has traditionally been overshadowed by events surrounding the Centre Column, the battles that took place there at the end of March were destined to determine the outcome of the war. This was, moreover, entirely evident to both sides at the time - a factor that added a particularly ferocious edge to the struggle, as Zulu and British alike realised just how much hung in the balance.

British fortunes had been precarious since the early phase of fighting at the end of January. Of the three British columns that had originally advanced into Zululand, two had been neutralised. The Centre Column, although it lost less than half its effective strength at Isandlwana, was no longer able to act offensively, while Col. Pearson's right-flank column was besieged at Eshowe, near the coast. For two months, Wood's column had been the only means by which the British could actively prosecute the war, and while Wood was hardly in a position to advance unsupported, he was at least determined to keep up the pressure on local Zulu groups by constant raiding.

It was for this reason that King Cetshwayo and his council of advisers had singled out Wood's column as a prime target when the fighting resumed again in mid-March. The Zulu army had dispersed in the aftermath of Isandlwana in order to allow its men to rest and to attend to their civilian duties, and indeed the king had hoped that his victory might have been sufficient to bring the British to the negotiating table. Within a few weeks it was evident to the king's scouts that reinforcements were arriving on the Natal side of the border on an almost daily basis; if he were to gain any long-term advantage, the king needed to strike before the balance of power slipped irrevocably towards his enemies. For some weeks, the northern chiefs had petitioned Cetshwayo to support them in the face of Wood's incessant raiding, and the strategic advantage of destroying the most dangerous of the remaining enemy columns was obvious enough. There were, moreover, broader political advantages to be won by a Zulu victory in the north. Wood's column was operating from a base in the Transvaal, the former Boer republic, recently annexed by Britain.

The Zulu kingdom had a long-standing border dispute with the Transvaal, which had several times threatened to spill open into violence, and which was, indeed, one of the causes of the present war. By destroying Wood's force, the Zulus would expose the scattered Boer frontier communities to the possibility of unhindered attack. While it remains doubtful whether King Cetshwayo ever intended to make such an attack, he was well aware that the threat alone might cause the British to reassess the validity of the invasion. Furthermore, Wood's force was strategically positioned across the traditional Zulu gateway to Swaziland, and since 1840 - when Cetshwayo's uncle, King Dingane, had crossed into Swaziland to build royal homesteads out of the reach of the Boer Voortrekkers in the aftermath of Blood River - successive Zulu kings had preferred to keep the road to Swaziland open, if only as a bolt-hole in the last resort.

Nevertheless, the king did not embark upon the campaign lightly. The ominous lessons of the defeat at Rorke's' Drift, coming so soon after Isandlwana, had made it only too clear that, properly emplaced, the whites could be a very dangerous enemy. When the king re-assembled his army in the middle of March, he had been at great pains to warn them of the danger of attacking British forces in entrenched positions. 'Do not put your faces into the lair of the wild beasts', he told them, 'for you are sure to get clawed'. This was necessary because in the aftermath of Isandlwana, the ordinary warriors who made up the main striking army were convinced that they were more than a match for the whites, whatever the circumstances. As in the earlier campaign, the king appointed Ntshingwayo kaMahole, the victor of Isandlwana, as his senior commander, and to ensure that the army listened to his instructions, he sent his most senior and respected councillor, Chief Mnyamana kaNgqengelele of the Buthelezi, to act as his eyes and ears.

If the arrival of the main army at the height of the battle of Hlobane had taken Wood by surprise, it had at least given him warning of the impending attack on his base. No less than the Zulus, he, too, was aware of how much hung in the balance, and no sooner had he returned to Khambula that night than he began preparation for the battle.

His position was in any case a naturally strong one, situated on the crest of a ridge descending from a range of hills known to the Zulus as *Nqaba kaHawana* ('Hawana's Stronghold'; a reference to the fact that the hills had been a place of refuge in the wars of the early nineteenth-century). On both sides of his camp, north and south, the ground fell away to streams that formed the headwaters of the White Mfolozi River. To the south, the drop was sudden and steep, broken here and there by rocky precipices, but to the north the slope was more gentle, and the ground open and bare. Wood had topped a small natural rise in the centre of the ridge with an earthwork redoubt, and below it his fortifications rested on two strong wagon-laagers.

Both of these had been partially entrenched by the simple expedient of cutting a layer of turf and a shallow trench all round them, and piling the turf up between the wagon-wheels. The larger of the two laagers lay immediately to the west of the redoubt, while a smaller one, used as a cattle-pen, stood on a terrace below it, to the south. In anticipation of the attack, Wood had further strengthened the laagers by barricading the outside buck-rail of each wagon, and the gaps between each vehicle, with mealie bags.

Although the action at Hlobane had undermined the morale of the men who took part – most of Wood's Boer volunteers and some of his African auxiliaries deserted that night – the backbone of his column had been untouched by the debacle. This consisted of eight companies of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry, and seven of the 13<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry. He also had six seven-pound guns, two rocket troughs, and over 500 mounted men – a total of 2,086 operatives, which Wood deployed throughout his positions. Two guns were emplaced in the redoubt, and the rest were positioned on the open ground between the three strong points, a situation that allowed them to manoeuvre to meet the Zulu attacks as they developed.

Only one wing of the Zulu army had been engaged at Hlobane, but the news of the British defeat had spread through their ranks and can have only heightened anticipation for the coming contest. That night the Zulu army bivouacked along the headwaters of the White Mfolozi, a few miles west of Hlobane, and at dawn the following morning they began a leisurely advance toward the camp at Khambula. Wood's scouts spotted them in the early-morning mist, advancing in five dense columns. They paused a few miles short of their objective, to receive their final pre-battle purification rituals, and to allow their *izinduna* to address them. Chief Mnyamana, who was held in awe by much of the army and was considered a great orator, delivered such a powerful speech that he unsettled the warriors, working their emotions to a pitch, but at the same time playing on their fear of the consequences of defeat.

The army resumed its advance mid-morning, and at about 12.30 p.m. came in sight of the camp. As it manoeuvred to bring itself into position for the attack, it seemed to the defenders that it might by-pass the camp after all, and strike at the undefended Transvaal border. Indeed, this might have been more in accordance with the king's wishes, but when it was just a few miles away, the Zulu army turned, and began to deploy for the attack. Quite why it so clearly disobeyed Cetshwayo's orders has never been established, but throughout the war the ordinary warriors in the ranks proved to have little patience for the complex strategies adopted by their commanders. They regarded it as their duty to attack the enemy wherever they encountered him; and in eagerness for the fray, they accepted battle on terms that their *izinduna* knew were unfavourable, and the fate of the kingdom hung in the balance as a result.

To the north of the camp, the right horn – the young uVe and iNgobamakhosi regiments – approached across open ground, and swung round to within a few miles of the British position. To the south, however, the Zulu left was faced with more difficult terrain, for although its advance up the valley was largely hidden from the British, it was literally bogged down crossing the marshy beds of the streams which lay in the valley bottom. Nevertheless, the sight of the army deploying was an unnerving one, and Wood noted that when fully extended the Zulu front covered nearly ten miles. The regiments manoeuvred with obvious precision, and the different colours of their war shields, which distinguished them, were clearly visible, even at a distance.

At first, the British thought that the Zulus were hoping to attack on all sides at once, and indeed that was probably what the Zulu commanders had planned. At about 1.30 p.m. the right horn suddenly broke into a

run, and took up a position much closer to the camp. To Wood, standing on the slope outside the redoubt, it seemed clear that they were preparing to attack, but there was no sign of the left horn emerging from the valley on the opposite side. Wood realised that there was a chance to provoke the right horn to launch an attack unsupported, and he ordered about 100 of his mounted men to ride out to try to draw them on.

For the men involved, this was a testing experience. Many had barely escaped the disaster at Hlobane the day before, and were now required to ride down across the open slope and to dismount just a few hundred yards from the Zulus. Their numbers seemed pitifully small, while those of the Zulus seemed overwhelming, but the result was everything Wood had hoped. The mounted men unleashed a volley at close range and the Zulus promptly responded with a great shout of the war cry 'uSuthu!', and broke into a run. The riders fell back toward the laager, with the Zulu in close pursuit. A few men whose horses strayed into marshy ground were over-taken and killed, and it was at this point that the only VC of the day was won. Major J.C. Russell – a veteran of both the Isandlwana campaign and Hlobane – noted that Trooper Petersen of the Frontier Light Horse was having difficulty steadying his horse to mount. Russell went to his aid, dismounted, and helped him away, but in doing so got into difficulties on his own account. While Russell struggled to re-mount his horse, Troop Sergeant Major Learda of the Natal Native Horse formed a group of his men around Russell to keep the Zulus at bay. Lieutenant E.S. Browne, 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment – attached to the Mounted Infantry – who had himself just saved a private of the 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment under similar circumstances – saw Russell's predicament, and held the reins of Russell's horse, allowing him to mount. By this time, the Zulus were just yards away from them, but the entire group managed to get away without loss. Russell, Learda and Brown had all acted with conspicuous courage, but Wood did not like Russell, and while Browne was later awarded the VC, and Learda the DCM, Russell got nothing.

Most of the horsemen galloped back to the main laager just as the guns in the camp opened fire over their heads at the Zulu pursuing them. Some of the Native Horse, however, preferred to remain outside the defensive position, and throughout the day they hovered on the flanks of the Zulu army, riding close to fire at them, but retiring each time before the Zulus could respond.

The right horn rushed up the bare grassy slope towards the camp, and colonials inside the laager heard some of them call out, 'We are the boys from Isandlwana!' (3) After the war, they were criticised by their colleagues for their premature action, and indeed it is true that they were motivated as much by the desire to beat their rivals in the left horn into the camp, as by the British provocation. It was a fatal impetuosity; they were met with a ferocious volley that rippled out along the northern faces of the main laager and the redoubt. Instantly they were obscured in a dense cloud of smoke, but while a few leading elements apparently struck the outside of the nearest wagons, the majority could not stand before the fire, and threw themselves down behind the slender protection afforded by the ant-heaps which were scattered across the slope. Several times they tried to organise rushes to reach the British lines, but each time they were met by a storm of fire and driven back. 'I never saw anything like it', wrote one British participant later, 'nothing frightened them, and when any of their numbers were shot down, others took their places.' (4) The Zulus could not sustain this position indefinitely, and after a while they retired toward the cover of a rocky fold in the ground to the north-east of the camp. From here they opened a terrific but largely inaccurate fire on the camp.

Although it was not immediately apparent, the failure of this first attack largely decided the battle. Instead of attacking in overwhelming numbers on all sides, the Zulus were now committed to a series of uncoordinated attacks, and Wood could face each challenge in turn. In particular, he could move the four guns left outside the laager to meet each fresh attack, and the effect of their fire – particularly when firing canister at close range – would prove devastating.

The noise from the right horn's attack encouraged the left to move through the valley to the south to join in the battle. Much of their advance was screened from British fire, until they emerged up the slope at the head of the valley, and found themselves just 100 yards from the cattle-laager. At such a distance it was difficult for the British to concentrate sufficient fire to stop them, and the first attack by the Zulu left – the uKhandempemvu, uMbonambi and uNokhenke regiments – carried them up to the wall of the cattle laager. They were supported by a heavy and surprisingly accurate fire from a group of Zulu riflemen who had taken possession of the camp rubbish heaps on the lip of the escarpment to the west. In the heavy rain of the previous few weeks, a large mound of dung, the product of the column's transport animals, had sprouted a tall crop of mealies and green grass, which provided excellent cover. A large group of warriors, carrying Martini-Henry rifles taken at Isandlwana, nestled in among the stalks, and from their position were able to enfilade the front wall of the cattle-laager. 'The bullets whizzed across the camp like a perfect hailstorm', recalled one British observer. (5) That their accuracy was improved by the use of such rifles became all too apparent as a number of men fell to their fire. Just one company of the 13th, under Captain Cox, held the cattle laager and it was inadequate for the task. Some of the uNokhenke burst through the perimeter and fighting broke out hand-to-hand. Wood gave the order to recall Cox's company, and as the men scrambled back toward the main laager, several were hit by fire from the rubbish heaps. Cox himself was hit in the leg and C/ Sgt. Fricker was wounded in the head. A Private Grosvenor went to Fricker's aid and helped him

away, but Grosvenor himself lingered too long and as he turned at last to retreat he was speared in the back. Nevertheless, the Zulu left could not maintain a foothold in the open at the head of the slope, and it retreated out of sight to regroup, while the men occupying the rubbish heaps and cattle laager kept up a heavy fire at close range on the British positions.

At about the same time that the left horn first began to retire, the chest mounted its first attack from along the crest of the ridge to the east. Wood had moved his camp several times during his stay at Khambula for sanitary reasons and as the regiments composing the chest – the uThulwana, iNdlondlo, iNdluyngwe, uDloko, iMbube, iSangqu and uDududu – advanced in good order, they took what cover they could from the ruins of Wood's old entrenchments. In some places this attack carried forward so close as to leave bodies strewn at the foot of the redoubt's escarpment, but there was no obvious way in, and the chest – which included many men who had endured the fighting at Rorke's' Drift – also fell back.

It was now mid-afternoon, and Wood noted that a group of *izinduna* had appeared at the top of the slope to the south, and were clearly trying to encourage their men, out of sight behind them, to attack. Wood himself took the rifle from his orderly, and shot two of the commanders in turn, but he was worried that a fresh attack in force, no longer subject to hostile fire from the cattle laager, might work up sufficient impetus to reach the main laager. To counter it, he ordered two companies of the 90<sup>th</sup> to leave the shelter of the main laager, and advance to the head of the escarpment. Led by Major Robert Hackett, they marched out smartly, despite the Zulu fire, and extended across the top of the slope, in a deployment that allowed them to fire straight down into the left horn, now massing in the valley below. They delivered several volleys that broke up the Zulu concentrations, but were themselves exposed to a deadly crossfire from the cattle laager and rubbish heap on either side. Hackett himself was hit in the temple by a bullet that passed right through his head behind the eyes, destroying the optic nerves, and starting the eyeballs from their sockets. His subaltern, Lt. Arthur Bright, was hit in the thigh by a bullet that smashed one leg, and lodged in the other. Wood had little option but to recall the sortie, and both officers were still alive when they were carried back to the main laager.

If Hackett's foray had checked the left horn, the right had now recovered from its initial repulse and was ready to mount a fresh assault on the opposite slopes. The uVe and iNgobamakhosi rushed once more across the open ground, aiming for the nearest objective, which was now the redoubt. The last 300 yards of the approach was marked by a steep rise and the attack slowed just as it entered the British field of fire. The warriors were cut down in scores and the survivors were forced to abandon the attack before it struck home.

The main effort of the Zulu had now been repulsed on all sides, but small groups continued to make rushes around the camp for at least another hour, hoping to find a way in. A stiff firefight ensued between the Zulus on the rubbish-heap and the men on the southern face of the main laager. For a while, it seemed that the British fire was ineffectual, until Wood's second-in-command, Redvers Buller, ordered the men to fire, not into the long grass, but directly into the rubbish heaps themselves. The piles of decomposing dung were not strong enough to withstand the heavy calibre Martini-Henry bullets, and several heavy volleys all but flattened them. After the battle, the bodies of over sixty Zulu were found strewn among the debris.

By about 4.30 p.m. Wood judged that the Zulus were sufficiently exhausted for him to attempt to regain lost ground. A company of the 13<sup>th</sup> was sent out to re-capture the cattle laager, and after a flurry of fighting, those members of the uNokhenke who remained within it were driven out at bayonet point. Most of them slipped over the edge of the escarpment to join the left horn, which was still massed below. With the flanking fire largely suppressed, Wood ordered a company of the 90<sup>th</sup> under Captain Laye to take up Hackett's old position at the head of the slope, and to disperse the left horn blow.

It was now apparent that the Zulus were badly disorganised and were incapable of mounting sustained attacks. Many of the warriors were so exhausted by their physical and emotional efforts that they could scarcely carry their shields. By late afternoon, some of the regiments appeared to be preparing to withdraw, and Wood took the opportunity to unleash his cavalry in pursuit.

It was a truism of nineteenth century warfare that a vigorous cavalry charge could turn a retreat into a rout, and Wood was heard to lament the absence of a good British cavalry regiment. He did, however, have the mounted irregulars, and these sallied out on either side of the camp, driving the survivors of the right horn across the open slope to the north, and the left horn back into the marshy beds of the southern valley. Here and there a few warriors tried to resist, but most were too tired to fight, and were shot down as they stumbled away. Many of the horsemen were veterans of Hlobane, and they exulted in their chance to exact revenge for the disasters of the day before. Commandant Cecil D'Arcy of the Frontier Light Horse set the tone when he called out to his men, 'No quarter boys, and remember yesterday'. A Private John Snook recalled simply in a letter to a friend, 'I can tell you some murdering went on'. (6) In some cases, the work of destruction with carbines seemed too slow, and the irregulars snatched up spears from the fallen Zulus, and rode them down with their own weapons. Now and then a warrior would turn defiantly, demanding to be shot – and the white men shot. There was no mercy, and survivors were flushed out from the shelter of reed beds or ant bear holes and killed.

The pursuit continued for at least seven miles and was only called off as an evening mist began to descend. Wood's judgement had been correct; it was under the pursuit that the Zulu army had really disintegrated. Chief Mnyamana tried to rally some of the warriors at a distance from the camp, but Zibhebhu kaMaphitha dissuaded him, pointing out that the men were spent, and any attempt to regroup would only attract British attention.

By nightfall, the hardest fought battle of the Anglo Zulu War was over.

Wood's losses were surprisingly light. Just eighteen NCOs and men had been killed outright, while eight officers and fifty-seven NCOs and men were wounded. Of these, three would die of their injuries, including Arthur Bright; in the confusion of the battle, the surgeon treating him had attended to the obvious injury in one leg, but missed the damage to the other, and he bled to death. Major Hackett survived, though he remained blind for the rest of his life.

The country around the camp was a veritable abattoir. Over 750 Zulu bodies were collected from the proximity of the British position, and many more lay out on the line of retreat, their presence indicated by the distant circling of vultures and a taint in the air whenever the wind blew from that direction. The nearby dead were loaded into wagons and buried three-quarters of a mile below the camp. Some were terribly mutilated by close-range cannon fire, and the burial parties found the task disturbing;

... on the side the 13<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry defended the ground was strewn with bodies, most of the bullets taking effect on their heads and blowing their brains out. After the battle terminated I took a walk for a distance of a mile to the old camping ground near the hill, and the trenches were full of killed from the shells bursting. It was the most ghastly sight ever seen; some bodies the entrails were torn out by the shells. Several were shot in the act of throwing their assegais and firing their rifles, and retained those same positions when shot. The frightful appearance of those killed would make the most hard-hearted man's blood creep. (7)

For days after the battle, the slope leading down into the valley below the southern face of the camp was covered in coagulating pool of blood and brains.

Even at the time, it was clear that the battle had been decisive. Wood had not only recovered the initiative he lost at Hlobane, he had given the British the first unambiguous victory of the war. For the first time, the Zulu regiments that had triumphed at Isandlwana had been defeated in open fight; within days, the victory at Khambula would be followed by another British success on the other side of the country, at Gingindlovu, in the Eshowe theatre.

Within a matter of days, the tide of battle had turned irrevocably against the Zulus. (8)

## References.

1. Brevet Colonel H.E. Wood, VC, 90<sup>th</sup> L.I.
2. Private Joseph Banks, 90<sup>th</sup> L.I., letter published in *The Dover Express*, 6 June 1879, and reproduced in Frank Emery's *The Red Soldier* (1977).
3. Account by an unidentified British participant, quoted in D.C.F. Moodie's *The History of the Battles and Adventures of the Boers, the British, and the Zulus in Southern Africa from 1495 to 1879*, (1879), also reproduced in Frank Emery's *The Red Soldier*, (1977).
4. Same correspondent, *ibid*.
5. Report of the *Natal Mercury*'s correspondent, 'Khambula Camp, April 1<sup>st</sup> 1879', published on 9 April 1879.
6. Private John Snook, 1/13<sup>th</sup> Regiment, letter published in *The North Devon Herald*, 29 May 1879, reproduced in Frank Emery's *The Red Soldier*.
7. Correspondent with Wood's Column, report dated 'Camp Khambula, 31<sup>st</sup> March 1879', reproduced in *The Natal Mercury* of 12 April 1879