

Mounted Troops in Zululand

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With Britain's attention taken up with the events in Afghanistan during 1878, the War Office concentrated all available Imperial regiments on the North West Frontier. These naturally included units of cavalry sent to act as the eyes for the huge columns that began their advance during November. At the same time in South Africa, unbeknown to the British Government, Sir Bartle Frere, the High Commissioner, and Lord Chelmsford, the Army Commander, was preparing to invade Zululand.

Chelmsford was relying on the Imperial regiments with which he had successfully defeated the Gaikas and Gcalekas during the recent Frontier War. These were infantry battalions only, for there were no cavalry stationed in South Africa. In order to fill this gap, volunteers were taken from the 3rd, 13th, 24th, 80th and 90th Regiments and formed into two squadrons of Mounted Infantry with a total strength of 300 men. Many of these men were generally experienced with horses from their former civilian occupations, having been grooms, ostlers etc. Others, however, were not and it took sometime to train these would-be cavalrymen.

Once proficient, the Mounted Infantry acquitted themselves very well. The men were dressed as normal infantrymen, except that they wore cord breeches and calf-length leather gaiters. Instead of pouches, they carried their ammunition in bandoliers draped across the chest. Unlike other mounted troops, the mounted infantrymen were armed with a Martini-Henry rifle instead of the shorter carbine.

For the officers, the transition was an easy one as they were all mounted as a matter of course. Most were keen huntsmen as epitomised by Lieutenants Browne and Carrington of the 24th. Their colonel, Richard Glyn, was a fanatical huntsman who never lost an opportunity to organise a regimental hunt. During the regiment's stay at Cape Town, he encouraged his officers to hunt by keeping a pack of hounds. (1) The majority of Chelmsford's mounted arm, however, was made up of Natal Volunteers, who joined small regiments that had been raised during the 1850-60's. The towns of Alexandra, Durban, Victoria, Stanger and Newcastle gave themselves the title of Mounted Rifles. The impressively named Natal Hussars in their ornate uniform were no more than 38 strong. For most members, they were regarded as social organisations rather than serious fighting units. An exception was the Buffalo Border Guard, which never mustered more than 30. They patrolled the banks of that river, which was the frontier between Natal and Zululand. Incidentally, James Rorke, who farmed the land by the crossing to which he gave his name, served as a lieutenant with the Guard.

Others regiments took the name of their founders like Captain Francis James Baker, formally of the Ceylon Rifle Regiment, who raised 236 men in the Port Elizabeth area and Colonel Ignatius Ferreira, an ex-Imperial officer, who gathered 115 volunteers in the Transvaal.

During the Ninth Frontier War of 1878, Chelmsford appointed one of his staff officers, Redvers Buller, as commander of the 250-strong Frontier Light Horse. Buller made such a success of welding what was an ill-disciplined rabble into an effective and reliable unit, that he was appointed commander of all mounted troops for the invasion of Zululand (2). Replacing him as the commander of the FLH was Captain Robert Barton of the Coldstream Guards, one of the many special service officers who volunteered for the coming campaign. The Frontier Light Horse made a stab of wearing a uniform, which was originally black corduroy, with a double red stripe down the breeches. The uniformity became lost as some men wore buff coloured cords with black trim. After the many arduous miles they had covered during the campaign, the men resorted to wearing an assortment of hard wearing civilian clothes and the only concession they made to a uniform was to wear a red puggree wound round a slouch hat. As with most of the other colonial volunteers, they were armed with the Swinburn-Henry carbine (3).

One locally raised non-military unit was the Natal Mounted Police commanded by another ex-Imperial officer named John Dartnell, who was a veteran of the Indian Mutiny (4). After struggling against official parsimony and indifference, Dartnell managed to form a highly trained and well-disciplined force. Although small in number, just 100 men, it had gained a good reputation in the Colony. The men were smartly turned-out in an all-black uniform topped with a white sun helmet. Their pre-war function had been on the lines of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police that was to hunt down criminals and generally enforce the law. Dartnell now relished the opportunity of being drafted into the army and to see some real action again.

It was Dartnell's mixed command of colonials who were sent by Chelmsford to scout to the south-east of the camp at Isandlwana. As dusk fell, an impi of some 1,500 warriors were spotted on the nearby hills and a message was sent for Chelmsford to send reinforcements.

Convincing himself that Dartnell had found the main Zulu army, Chelmsford led half of his column out of the camp, so setting off a chain of events that culminated in the destruction of the camp and the deaths of 1500 men, including 26 Mounted Police.

The Natal Carbineers were raised in 1855 originally as the Pietermaritzburg Irregular Horse and were the closest the Colony had to a standing regiment. Commanded by Captain Theophilus Shepstone Junior, the Carbineers were a loosely organised unit, more social than military, but it attracted a good class of settler, who were all excellent horsemen. They were smartly dressed in blue tunics with white facings while the officers wore the addition of five rows of black braid across the chest. The white sun helmet was embellished with silver fittings. Like the Mounted Police, half their number rode with Dartnell on his scout while the rest remained in the camp at Isandlwana. During the battle, they lost 2 officers and 19 men, while 8 managed to escape (5).

To the south, Number 1 Column, commanded by Colonel C.K. Pearson, crossed the Thukela River and made its way to the mission station at Eshowe. The mounted unit consisted of The Natal Hussars (1 officer and 37 other ranks), The Stanger Mounted Rifles (1 officer and 35 other ranks), and The Victoria Mounted Rifles (1 officer and 45 other ranks). During the initial Zulu assault on Pearson's strung-out column at the Battle of Nyezane, it was the dismounted line of colonial volunteers who kept the Zulu right horn at bay long enough for the main body to get into a defensive position and ultimately carry the day (6).

After the failure of the First Invasion, Chelmsford called upon reinforcements to mount a second campaign. Besides additional Imperial regiments, he needed more mounted volunteers, which were to be concentrated in the north under the overall command of Colonel Evelyn Wood.

Captain Francis Baker had raised a regiment from volunteers around the East London area, and they had served during the recent Frontier War to Chelmsford's satisfaction. Hardly had Baker disbanded them, when he received a request from Chelmsford to raise this unit again and bring them to the camp at Khambula. Deciding to equip and mount his men when they reached their destination, Baker's men faced a trek of some thirty-six days, including sailing from East London to Durban. Beset with sickness and appalling weather, a foot-sore Baker's Horse managed to reach Khambula with about 200 men.

Another former Imperial officer who could not resist the call to arms was Frederick Augustus Weatherley, whose life could be described as "colourful". An excellent horseman, he had attended the Austrian Military Academy before obtaining a commission in the 4th Light Dragoons in 1855 (7). He served during the Crimea War and, in order to gain promotion, transferred into the 6th Dragoons, who were sent to India. Here he saw action during the Mutiny before spending years of inactivity in hot and dusty stations around the sub-continent. It was during this period that he became acquainted with both Sir Bartle Frere and Lord Chelmsford.

He married a "flashy little woman", who behaved unconventionally. She rode like a man, carried a revolver and beat the natives with her riding crop. Together, the Weatherleys produced two sons and a daughter and, after the Crawley Affair, decided to return to England (8). Selling his commission, Weatherley retired to Brighton before moving to South Africa in 1877, possibly encouraged by Frere, and became involved in a mining operation in the Transvaal. A confidence trickster, who persuaded him to challenge Sir Theophilus Shepstone's position as Administrator of the Transvaal, then ensnared Weatherley. The petition that was raised was found to contain almost 4,000 forged signatures and, amidst the ensuing furor, Mrs. Weatherley ran off with the con artist. The divorce that followed kept Pretoria society enthralled and resulted in Weatherley being granted custody of his children (9).

With war against the Zulus brewing, Weatherley saw an opportunity to redeem himself in Pretoria and set about raising a volunteer regiment from amongst the English settlers. He managed to recruit 60 men, including his two young sons aged 14 and 16, and named his unit the Border Horse. After a journey of three weeks, they reported to Colonel Evelyn Wood's camp at Luneburg. Wood did not find Weatherley to his taste and described him as being too flamboyant. Indeed, they would soon clash on the slopes of Hlobane, with fatal results.

The Kaffrarian Rifles were a rather unusual case. They were an infantry unit that had been used to guard the Luneburg area during the previous three months. Their tough old commander, Commandant Schermbrucker, responded to Wood's order by marching his 110 fellow Germans to Khambula and, on arrival, converting to cavalry.

The only Boer to offer his services was Piet Uys from the Blood River territory. He recruited 40 volunteers, including four of his sons, and they were collectively called the Burgher Force. Unlike all the other volunteers, they refused to be paid for their services seeing it as their duty to secure their property from the Zulu threat. The normally taciturn Redvers Buller had great respect for Uys and thought him to be one of the finest men he had ever met.

Another unit that extracted praise from the generally patronising Imperial command was the Natal Native Mounted Contingent. They were made up three troops of Zikhali Horse, who originated from the foothills of the

Drakensberg mountains, Hlubi's Troop were BaSotho and the Edendale Troop were Natal Christians. Their overall commander was Colonel Durnford of the Royal Engineers, who arrived at the camp at Isandlwana shortly before the Zulu assault. It was a patrol of mounted natives, commanded by Lieutenant Charles Raw that precipitated the battle that followed. After a fruitless search, Raw's men suddenly came upon the 20,000 strong Zulu army hidden in a ravine on the plateau to the north-east of the camp. The discovery triggered off the premature Zulu advance, which soon overwhelmed the British camp.

During the events that followed, the Native Mounted Contingent fought with Durnford in the donga in front of the British lines until they ran out of ammunition. Those that escaped when the camp was overrun were seen to give covering fire to other escapees at Fugitive's Drift. (10).

The losses from the battle led to a reorganisation with two new units emerging; Shepstone's Horse (or Shepstone's Basothos) commanded by Theophilus Shepstone Junior and the Natal Native Horse under the command of Lieutenant W. Cochrane. (11)

Probably the most controversial group of volunteers that presented themselves to Wood was the Transvaal Rangers under the command of Commandant Piet Raaf. He had recruited men from around the mining camps of Kimberley and 138 had enlisted. The result was summed up by an officer in Baker's Horse who described the newcomers as, "a forbidding lot of mixed Hottentots and scum of the diamond fields as was ever collected together outside a prison wall". Another observed that, "if they fight as well as they thieve, they will be of great execution amongst the Zulu".

In the event, Raaf and Buller kept these hard men under control and they generally acquitted themselves well.

During the long build up to the Second Invasion, the mounted volunteers were constantly patrolling and raiding. Chelmsford wrote to Wood, asking him to create a diversion to draw away the Zulus from the south so a relief column could march unmolested to where Pearson's Column was bottled up at Eshowe. Wood selected the mountain fortress of Hlobane, which was a thorn in his side and would have to be dealt with once the Second Invasion got under way. There was also a monetary incentive for rustling Zulu cattle and it was known that a considerable herd of cattle was kept on the 4-mile long plateau on top of the 1,500-foot mountain. It was a target that was irresistible to Buller and his men. (12).

In the event, the assault and following retreat produced the highest casualty list for the colonial volunteers of the whole campaign. After an apparent refusal by Colonel Weatherley to Wood's order to clear some snipers from caves on the mountainside, the Border Horse finally arrived on the summit as the fighting was at its most intense. In the confusion of battle, Weatherley's men found themselves isolated as the Zulus cut off all lines of retreat. They made a last ditch attempt to break through the Zulu ranks and suffered 60% fatalities. Weatherley died trying to protect his 14-year-old son and redeemed his somewhat tarnished reputation.

The FLH also suffered high casualties during the retreat, especially at the precipitous bottleneck called the Devil's Pass. Here, all semblance of order gave way and it was every man for himself. Nonetheless, there were many acts of bravery and sacrifice, with Buller setting an example to everyone by saving three dismounted men. For these acts of gallantry, he was awarded the Victoria Cross.

The survivors began to make their way back to the camp at Kambula in small parties or individually. Although some isolated survivors were run down by groups of Zulus, including Captain Barton of the FLH, the main impi halted for the night to the south, near the site of the present day town of Vryheid. In torrential rain, the broken volunteer regiments reached Khambula after nightfall. In total, they had lost fifteen officers and seventy-nine men. There was, however, no time to mourn their losses, for the volunteers were in action again the following day when the Zulu army attacked Khambula.

The Transvaal Rangers, who had lost 7 killed at Hlobane, set off in the morning to search for the impi. Wood, recovering his composure, had prepared his defences well and waited for what he knew would be a major battle. Around eleven o'clock, Raaf's men had returned with the news that the impi could be expected by noon. When the Zulus arrived and began to surround the camp prior to attacking, Buller suggested that his mounted men should induce an attack by the right horn before both wings could launch a simultaneous attack. Wood consented and Buller led out a party made up of men from the FLH, Natal Native Horse and the Mounted Infantry. They rode towards the massed Zulu ranks standing a mile away and dismounted at a distance of 300 yards. From here they fired a volley, which had the effect of stirring a hornets' nest as the Zulus surged forward. The volunteers then remounted and retreated. Because the troop's horses were ill trained, the noise of the volley had startled them and many became unmanageable. There were several instances of men being saved by officers like Lieutenant Browne, who placed himself alongside Colonel Russell's panicked horse and allowed him to mount (13). With the charging Zulus swiftly closing, the horsemen bolted back to their lines in some confusion.

The Natal Native Horse chose to remain outside the laager and retreated to the west. From here, they sniped and skirmished with the Zulu flank for the duration of the battle. With the Zulus provoked by this tactic, the attack

proceeded piece-meal and the outcome was an emphatic victory for Wood's men. As the attack began to lose momentum and some Zulus were seen to be retreating, Wood again called on the irregulars to go in pursuit. With cries of "*Remember Hlobane!*" 600 men went in search of revenge. For eight miles they rode down the exhausted warriors, using their carbines as clubs or grabbing assegais from the dead and stabbing without mercy. In the hour-long chase, many hundreds of Zulus were slaughtered which, added to those killed during the assault, amounted to 1,500 killed.

The Zulus sustained another heavy loss four days later when they attacked Chelmsford's well prepared square at Gingindlovu during the relief of Eshowe. Cut down in swathes by the Naval Brigade's Gatling guns and the volley fire of the infantry, the Zulus began to fall back after just thirty minutes. Chelmsford ordered his mounted troops to go in pursuit, which they did with a will. Under the command of Major Percy Barrow of 19th Hussars, some 280 horsemen galloped out of the square. They were made up of Mounted Infantry; Natal Horse and a scratch unit called Natal Volunteer Guides, drawn from various Natal units who had formed Pearson's original invasion column. With Isandlwana in their minds, they needed no encouragement to go looking for revenge and the retreating Zulus were shown no mercy. The Zulu casualties amounted to 1200 killed and just one prisoner taken.

There followed a lengthy pause as the Zulus counted their losses and Chelmsford made painstaking preparations to re-invade. During this period, the volunteers still operated from Wood's base constantly employed on raids and patrols. Amongst the reinforcements that reached Chelmsford were two regiments of Imperial cavalry, the Kings Dragoon Guards and the 17th Lancers.

Finally, Chelmsford felt strong enough to cross back into Zululand and march on the capital, Ulundi. Linking up with Wood's Column, the huge army began its slow advance. The next significant action involving the mounted volunteers occurred when the young Prince Imperial, Louis Napoleon, and a staff officer named Lieutenant Carey set out on routine reconnaissance in search of a suitable campsite. They were to have a combined escort of Shepstone's Basothos and Bettington's Horse. In the event, just six men of the latter reported for duty. Bettington's Horse were a short-lived unit made up of the NCO's of the disbanded 3rd Natal Native Contingent and, to give them their full title, were also known as the No.3 Troop Natal Horse.

The events that followed are too well known to be repeated in detail. When the Prince's party were ambushed as they prepared to mount up after a rest, both Troopers Abel and Rogers were killed in the first burst of firing. Prince Louis died shortly afterwards as he tried to escape. The other troopers managed to get away and arrived back at the camp independently of Lieutenant Carey. In the inquiry that followed, they were unanimous in the opinion that no retaliation was possible and that it was a case of every man for himself.

As Chelmsford's Column approached Ulundi, they camped nearby on the banks of the White Mfolozi River. Buller and his irregulars were sent across the river to both disperse those Zulus who were sniping at the camp and also to pick out a suitable site on which to mount a showdown battle with Cetshwayo. Some 500 men splashed their way across the river via two wagon drifts. Baker's Horse forded one just upstream of the rest of the command and immediately made contact with about thirty Zulus, who scattered. Captain Baker noticed from his position that Buller was leading the rest of the command into an area swarming with Zulus and he sent a galloper to warn Buller of the danger.

Meanwhile, Buller's command was galloping over the plain towards Ulundi chasing small groups of Zulus. His unit consisted of Mounted Infantry, the FLH, Natal Light Horse, the Natal Native Horse and the Transvaal Rangers. Buller halted Raaf's men as a reserve before advancing once more. The retreating Zulus made tempting targets, but they were leading Buller's men into a well-laid trap. At the last moment, Buller suspected just that, and called a halt. Immediately, they came under fire from the long grass on their flanks and some 3000 Zulus appeared at their front. Despite their poor marksmanship, the Zulus hit four troopers, killing two instantly. Attempts were made to rescue the other two as the command started to retreat. Captain Lord Beresford of Buller's staff, assisted by Sergeant O'Toole of the FLH, managed to save a Mounted Infantry sergeant. Captain Cecil D'Arcy of the FLH attempted but failed to carry away one of his troopers and barely escaped with his life.

Under covering fire from the Transvaal Rangers, Buller's men fell back and managed to reach Chelmsford's camp without losing any more men. For their brave conduct, Beresford, O'Toole and D'Arcy were awarded the Victoria Cross. The latter, although he actually failed to save his trooper's life, had had a previous application for the award turned down on the grounds that he was a Colonial and not Imperial officer (14).

The following day saw the demise of the Zulu nation on the plain beside their capital in a battle they were reluctant to fight. After hurling themselves against the deadly weaponry of Chelmsford's huge square and, following the pattern of previous battles, the Zulu attacks petered out and they began to fall back exhausted and demoralised. At this point, the square opened and released the horsemen to administer the *coup de grâce*. Led by Colonel Drury Lowe's 17th Lancers, the rest of the mounted units went in ruthless pursuit of the broken Zulu impi. This was the last battle of the Zulu War, although the volunteer units were not discharged until September. When a

sick and worn-out Redvers Buller bade farewell to the Frontier Light Horse, this hard and undemonstrative man had tears in his eyes. Buller did not know it at the time that this was the high water mark of his career, despite going on to achieve high office. Although he was an infantry and staff officer, he had developed into an outstanding commander of irregular cavalry. The colonial horsemen who volunteered for service had turned out to be one of the few successes in Lord Chelmsford's army. It had been proved that, if properly led, these independently minded, often ill-disciplined, volunteers representing different nationalities, race and backgrounds, could be directed into an effective and flexible force. It was an experience from which the British learned and were to employ in future colonial conflicts.

Acknowledgements.

Blood on the Painted Mountain by Ron Lock 1995

The Washing of the Spears by Donald Morris 1966

Uniforms & Weapons of the Zulu War by Christopher Wilkinson-Latham 1978

They Fell Like Stones by John Young 1991

The Story of the Zulu Campaign by Major Ashe & Captain Wyatt-Edgell 1989

References.

1. See article in The Journal, December 1998
2. See article in The Journal, December 2000
3. The Swinburn-Henry was one of the unsuccessful contenders at the trials to choose a breech-loading rifle for the British Army. Although very similar to the Martini-Henry, which was selected, the Swinburn-Henry was thought good enough to issue to colonial troops in South Africa. See article in The Journal, June 1998
4. John George Dartnell (1838-86) served as a lieutenant in the 86th (2/Royal Irish) Regiment. During the Indian Mutiny, he was severely wounded on the 3rd April 1858 during the only successful assault on the fortress of Jhansi. For this he was mentioned in despatches. He took part in the Bhutan campaign of 1865 and retired as a major in 1869. Moving to Natal, he unsuccessfully attempted farming. On the point of returning to England, he was persuaded to organise a permanent mounted regiment and so formed the Natal Mounted Police.
5. The Natal Carbineers are still an active regiment. In 1979, during the centenary of the Zulu War, they acted as hosts in Pietermaritzburg to the party organised by the South Wales Borderers.
6. See The Journal of the Anglo Zulu War Historical Society, December 1998
7. Coincidentally, Captain Louis Nolan, the officer who carried the message that fatally sent the Light Brigade to its destruction at Balaklava, had a similar start to his career. It would appear that the Austrian Army "head-hunted" exceptional cavalrymen. Like Weatherley, Nolan chose to join a British regiment. A further coincidence was that Weatherley's regiment, the 4th Light Dragoons, was part of the doomed Light Brigade, although he, himself, did not join until the following year.
8. The Crawley Affair was a *cause célèbre*, which tore the 6th Dragoons apart. Henry Crawley had been appointed their new commanding officer and set about imposing his mark on the regiment. In doing so he caused rifts and infighting. Seeing plots and opposition everywhere, the paranoid Crawley even had the Senior NCO, RSM Lilley placed under close arrest. As a result, Lilley died of heat stroke and Crawley was tried for manslaughter. Despite two trials and a hostile public reaction, Crawley was acquitted.
9. See *Blood on the Painted Mountain* by Ron Lock p.122-123
10. Ditto p.120
11. Lieutenant William Cochrane of the 32nd Regiment was Durnford's Orderly Officer and was one of six Imperial officers to escape from Isandlwana.
12. See The Journal of the Anglo Zulu War Historical Society, December 1999
13. For this act of bravery, Browne was awarded the Victoria Cross.
14. Redvers Buller had saved an unhorsed Cecil D'Arcy during the descent of the Devil's Pass at Hlobane. Once D'Arcy found another mount, he returned and helped carry other unhorsed men to safety.