

‘The Haze Obscures Much!’

Where, on the day of iSandlwana, Chelmsford’s ADC, Lt. Berkeley Milne looked at the camp.

Ian Knight

As you drive along the main Nquthu-Babanango road there’s a turn-off to the right at the enticingly named (but perhaps less visually appealing) Silutshana Tea Shop which will take you along new dirt roads, if you don’t get lost at various confusing turn offs, to a spot which played a critical – but often misunderstood – role in the saga of the iSandlwana campaign. Sweeping around the base of Silutshana hill and picking its way precariously across a couple of deep dongas – which threaten to wash away the road completely, next time there’s a heavy rain – it leads to the spot where Lord Chelmsford and his staff breakfasted on the morning of 22nd January 1879, and where his ADC, Lt. Archibald Berkeley Milne of HMS *Active*, was sent up the hill-side with his telescope to look back at the camp.

Not, of course, that many people travel that road now with history in mind – it exists to serve the local community in out-of-the way villages, and indeed the spot where Milne went up the hill is off the radar of most historical tours. This is partly due to its inaccessibility – it’s a confident driver who can get you there – and partly because there is a common misconception that Milne looked back at the camp from a different spot entirely (most people assume it was Mdutshane, the distinctive conical kopje at the head of the Mangeni gorge). Certainly, when I visited the spot in November, we were the first white people who had been since I was last there, a year before, and as a result we were mobbed on our way up the hill by the usual crowd of curious children who didn’t quite understand why we had come all this way to look back at iSandlwana when you could see it much more clearly from the main road. ‘*Perhaps you should build a lodge out here, for us history buffs!*’ someone quipped – to which came the prescient reply ‘*But you only come once a year – how would we make money from that?*’

On 22nd January 1879 Lord Chelmsford had, of course, come from the direction of iSandlwana, following the wagon track that led out across the plain before striking out across country. Responding to Major Dartnell’s message of the night before – to the effect that he had discovered a Zulu force in the hills above the Mangeni valley – Chelmsford had famously split his force, marching out of the camp at iSandlwana before dawn in the hope of intercepting the Zulu movements. By the time he had reached Dartnell it was first light, and a thick mist was only then beginning to lift off the hills. Even so, it was clear that the Zulus Dartnell had spotted the night before had disappeared and, far from fighting the decisive battle he had hoped for, Chelmsford was forced to disperse his troops among the hills in an effort to find out where they had gone. Some of his detachments encountered parties of Zulus moving from the Mangeni valley in the direction of the Siphezi mountain, and sporadic skirmishing broke out. Unbeknownst to Chelmsford, these were the followers of the Sithole *inkosi* Matshana kaMondise, who were hoping to join the main Zulu army which had, two days before, arrived at Siphezi – in fact, however, the Zulu army had already moved on the 21st, and ironically on the 22nd neither Lord Chelmsford nor the stragglers of the Sithole knew where it had gone.

In retrospect Chelmsford’s actions out at Mangeni on the 22nd seem curiously at odds with the potential danger. He scattered his men in pockets of companies among the hills, left his guns escorted by just two infantry companies, and rode off accompanied by only his staff and a small personal escort to try and work out for himself what was going on. In hindsight, given the sort of attack the Zulus would soon prove themselves capable of delivering, both his command and he himself were acutely vulnerable to being surprised and overwhelmed piecemeal. At the time, however, Chelmsford had no personal experience of a Zulu battle, and in the light of the apparent failure of Dartnell’s intelligence he had fallen back on a pattern of fighting, of trying to seek out, pin down and destroy the enemy with small detachments of troops, which had proved successful for him so recently on the Eastern Cape Frontier.

And in any case, Lord Chelmsford was a man who liked to assess a situation for himself rather than rely on the reports of others. Just two days before, when the Centre Column had arrived at iSandlwana on the 20th, Chelmsford had ridden out even as his men were unloading the wagons and setting up camp, again accompanied by just his staff and personal escort, to scout out the area around the Mangeni waterfall. This had taken him twelve miles ahead of his troops and deep into enemy territory, and he had done so despite a growing realisation that the Zulu army was moving to confront him, and despite riding through a landscape of political uncertainties in which the allegiances of the local *amakhosi* were by no means clear. Chelmsford does not seem to have considered himself personally at risk but in fact there was a realistic chance that he might have blundered into a Zulu patrol, and it is interesting to speculate what might have happened had he and his party been attacked by such a patrol.

Under such circumstances, however, it was perhaps not surprising that Chelmsford and his escort had moved through the Mangeni hills on the 22nd independently of the troops under their command. The previous evening Dartnell had spotted Zulus on the Magogo hill, which lies almost immediately north of the head of the Mangeni gorge. These had disappeared by the morning of the 22nd, but initial reports suggested they had withdrawn several miles further north-east, towards the Siphezi mountain. Deploying his troops to sweep Magogo, Chelmsford himself had set off to move around the western face of Magogo and into the valley which separated it from the next hill in the chain, Silutshana to the north. This was a route which would give Chelmsford a view of the country towards Siphezi, and offered a chance of intercepting any Zulus who might still be lurking on Magogo. Two companies of the 2/24th and four guns of N/5 Battery followed in the same direction but were delayed in crossing the many steep dongas which scour the ground there.

At about 9.30 – according to the timing in the official *Narrative of Field Operations* – Chelmsford decided to halt for breakfast on a nek of land in the valley between the Magogo (to the south) and Silutshana (to the north) hills, and it was soon after this that he received the first message sent out by Col. Pulleine from the camp at iSandlwana. This was timed at 8.05 AM and had been written in response to the appearance of a body of Zulus on the iNyoni ridge immediately to the north of iSandlwana camp. The message merely stated ‘Report just come in that the Zulus are advancing in force from the left front of the camp’. The note was received by Captain Henry Hallam Parr of the staff who noted on it that it was received at 9.30 AM. When Chelmsford read it he seemed unconcerned, and merely remarked ‘There is nothing to be done about that’. Shortly afterwards, however, he ordered his ADC Lt. Milne and Captain William Penn Symons of the 2/24th to climb up onto one of the hills nearby to observe the camp. They went up onto the slopes of the southern hill, Magogo, and took with them two powerful telescopes, one of which was Milne’s powerful naval one (1). Penn Symons suggests it was about 10.00 when they started the climb – both men were young and fit and used to the challenges of campaign life, and despite the fact that the slopes of Magogo are steep and stony it probably took them no more than ten minutes to reach a point where they could look back at iSandlwana, some ten or eleven miles away behind them.

It is not entirely clear where they went. A line of broken cliffs runs around the summit of Magogo, and a little way below this is a rocky outcrop shaded by a large *kiepersol* tree. There is a local legend that this was the spot where Milne sat and rested his telescope but while it is certainly a likely spot Milne in his official report refers to ‘reaching the summit’ which would have entailed a further scramble up through the cliffs. It is, of course, quite likely that both men would have moved about during their time on the hill, and quite possibly observed events from different positions in order to maximise their impressions – it is not inherently implausible, then, that one or the other of them spent time sitting on that particular rock. It is interesting to note, too, that there are discrepancies in their accounts – Penn Symons mentions Milne whilst Milne does not mention Penn Symons. Perhaps Milne thought he did the bulk of the work – or perhaps he and Penn Symons took up different viewing points early on, and Milne simply did not report what Penn Symons had done. Penn Symons mentions that they were accompanied by a party of signallers although Milne makes no mention of this and the official Narrative suggests it was Milne himself who ‘announced to Lord Chelmsford by flag signal’ what they observed (2). As a Navy man Milne would presumably have been familiar with signalling by flag, and there seem to be no other references to Chelmsford having a signalling party

present with him. What is more certain is that Milne and Penn Symons were up there for some time - at least an hour and a half according to the *Narrative*, and it may have been longer as Milne says that he had not long rejoined Chelmsford's party when, at about 12.30, Chelmsford resumed his ride.

It is worth noting that Milne and Penn Symons were ordered not merely to observe the camp at iSandlwana but to look for signs of Zulus in the surrounding hills and in the direction of Siphezi. Milne noted that 'I saw small clusters of the enemy on every hilltop around us, observing our movements', but that 'the main body of the enemy who had been in our front all the morning were now assembled at the foot of Isepezi hill'. This statement suggests that at some point he must certainly have gone to the top of Magogo, since the foot of Siphezi is not visible from the vicinity of the *kiepersol* rock. Penn Symons confirms that about 500 Zulus were seen moving towards the foot of Siphezi, away from the direction of Lord Chelmsford's probes.

Looking back towards the camp Milne merely noted that '*all the cattle had been driven in close around the tents, I could see nothing of the enemy on the left*'. According to Penn Symons, 'Beyond noticing that some of the oxen seemed to be collected about the wagons all seemed to be quiet in camp, and at that time it is certain that no fighting was going on.'

The questions are, therefore, what could Milne and Penn Symons have seen, what did they make of it, and could their report materially have affected the day's outcome one way or the other?

Certainly on my previous visits to Magogo I have looked back at iSandlwana through binoculars, and this time one of our party had brought with them an antique Victorian telescope in the hope that we could understand as much of Milne's experience as possible. There is no doubt that even from the *kiepersol* spot iSandlwana itself can be plainly seen, and even allowing for the heat and hazy conditions of 22 January 1879 it is likely that the bright white of the tents would have been visible to the naked eye as a smudge along the foot of the mountain. With the telescope, however, it was just possible to make out some of the larger white memorials which stand on the battlefield today; we were by no means experts at using it but it was clear that someone more practised, like Milne, would probably have been able to make out considerable detail, certainly to the point of seeing a dark mass of cattle around the tents. One thing is immediately clear, however - that any vantage point on Magogo does not give a complete view of the countryside around iSandlwana because the shoulder of the neighbouring hill, Silutshana, intervenes, completely blocking the view to the north of the camp. By moving about the shoulder of Magogo we could find a vantage point which extended our view of iSandlwana to include the Amatutshane 'conical kopje' - but no viewpoint which would give us sight of the iNyoni ridge. In the light of this Milne's comment that 'I could see nothing of the enemy on the left' [i.e. of the camp] is particularly significant - much as he might have been looking for the movements reported by Pulleine in his note, Milne simply could not see from his position the ground on which they had appeared.

As a result, of course, Chelmsford allowed himself to be reassured that nothing untoward was happening at iSandlwana, and the fact that the tents - which were habitually struck during an emergency - could clearly be seen still standing added to this conviction. He would spend the next few hours directing the movement to Mangeni. It was only about 2 PM that further rumours began to circulate that iSandlwana was indeed under attack, and by the time he took any meaningful action in response to them the battle there was already lost.

After the event, in notes appended to his report, Milne wondered with a degree of *mea culpa* whether he could have reacted differently. '*We are not quite certain about the time*', he wrote, '*but it is possible that what I took to be the cattle having been driven into the camp, may possibly have been the Zulu "impi"*'.

Yet in fact it could not. It's certainly true that both Milne and Penn Symons had set out up Magogo sharing the view that prevailed among the Headquarters staff that nothing unusual was happening at iSandlwana; they expected to see signs of normality rather than catastrophe, and in seeing the cattle grazing peacefully around the standing tents they were reassured. It's quite possible that they spent much of their time when they were on the hill looking in the other direction, trying to

make sense of the more obvious and mysterious Zulu movements around Siphezi. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to suggest that Milne had indeed witnessed the attack developing at iSandlwana, but had failed to recognise what it was – the timing simply does not support this. The first appearance of the Zulus on the iNyoni ridge was – as Pulleine had noted – about 8 AM, and they had remained within sight of the garrison there for perhaps ninety minutes, retiring from sight shortly before Durnford's command arrived in the camp somewhere between 10 and 10.30 AM. In other words, they had retired at pretty much the same time Milne and Penn Symons had been climbing the shoulder of Magogo – and even if they had not quite gone by the time Milne brought his telescope to bear, he could not in any case have seen anything of their presence on the iNyoni because Silutshana blocks off the view. Over the time that the two officers were on the hill events had indeed moved on at iSandlwana, and Durnford had ridden out to investigate the Zulu movements – he did not, however, encounter the main Zulu army until around 12 noon, and it would certainly have been later before any movements of either side could have been spotted on that part of the plain in front of iSandlwana which is visible from Magogo. By that time, Milne and Penn Symons had descended, and Lord Chelmsford had been reassured that nothing unusual was happening at the camp. The cattle seen by Milne close to the tents were, after all, merely cattle; if he had wondered why they had been driven there no doubt Pulleine's reference to a Zulu presence in the area had seemed explanation enough.

The truth is that from Magogo he could have seen no more of the attack on iSandlwana on the day than we could, through the haze of time, 137 years later.

Whatever doubts he may have had the incident certainly did not affect Milne's career. In 1891 he accepted command of the Royal Yacht *Osborne* and he became friends with the Royal Family – King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra referred to him affectionately as 'Arky-Barky'. He was made an Admiral in 1891 and Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet in 1912. At the start of WW1 Milne attempted to intercept the German battleships *Goeben* and *Breslau* which had sailed to Turkey to persuade that country to enter the war on the German side – unfortunately his own ships were too light and too slow, and he failed. Embroiled in controversy he retired in 1919 to make a vigorous defence of his actions. He died in July 1938.

FOOTNOTES

(1). Milne's account *Report on the Proceedings of 21st, 22nd, 23rd and 24th January 1879*, Government papers C-2454. Penn Symons' account is in a manuscript held by the Regimental Museum, Brecon.

(2). *Narrative of The Field Operations Connected With The Zulu War of 1879*. HMSO, 1881.

Lt. Archibald Berkeley Milne, HMS *Active*, as he was in January 1879 (Ron Sheeley)



‘The haze obscures much’ – actor Chris Chittell as Milne in the film *Zulu Dawn*. In fact this scene, of Milne with his telescope, was cut from the final print.



The site of Lord Chelmsford’s breakfast on the morning of the 22nd was close to the buildings bottom right; photograph taken from Magogo hill looking towards Silutshana (right) and iSandlwana in the far distance.



The shaded rock upon which – according to local stories – Milne sat to look back at iSandlwana.



The view of iSandlwana through a telephoto lens from near the summit of Magogo. The camp site and much of the plain in front of the hill is visible as far as the Amatutshane ‘conical kopje’ on the right; the shoulder of Silutshana, however, blocks out the view of the iNyoni heights, from where the Zulu attack developed.

