

An Early Zulu War Letter from Lord Chelmsford.

From Member Peter Duckers.

... *I had underestimated the difficulties of a campaign in Zululand*

The following letter from Lord Chelmsford to HRH the Duke of Cambridge on 19 March 1879, from the collection of the late Peter Metcalfe, is reproduced with permission of its current owner.

The letter lays out a number of Lord Chelmsford's well-known opinions on the war:

1. The great difficulties encountered with the use of wagon transport on a large scale.
2. Chelmsford's often-stated belief that the force at Isandlwana was quite enough to defend the camp: "two British Infantry Regiments armed with the Martini Henry, should in open country be able to successfully resist any attack of the Zulus, assisted of course by the force of mounted infantry attached to each column – and, if entrenched, or in a strong defensive position where the rear was secure, that one regiment would be equal to the occasion."

Given the debate over the lack of entrenchment or laager at Isandlwana, it is an interesting comment on the value of "an entrenched position" and "a strong defensive position where the rear was secure" and that "with the knowledge that I now possess of Zulu courage and determination, I should not consider myself justified in putting so small a column into the field".

3. A reflection of Chelmsford's well-known problems with the Natal and Transvaal governments over the raising (and arming) of native levies and the availability of colonial volunteer cavalry and their deployment beyond the Zulu frontier.

4. A comment on the importance of the prompt relief of "Ekowe" and his belief that although "the whole Zulu army is in the neighbourhood of Ekowe, and that the advance of any force to its relief will be strongly opposed" the assembling force "will be quite equal to the occasion".

Original letter.

Spellings are left as in the original.

LORD CHELMSFORD TO THE DUKE OF CAMBRIDGE

Durban – Natal

19th March 1879

[Answered May 1st/79]

Your Royal Highness,

Sir,

I only received Your Royal Highness' kind and considerate letter of Feb. 13th last night¹, when too late to acknowledge it by the outgoing mail – another mail however leaves this day via Zanzibar and I am in hopes that it may reach England before the regular mail a week hence.

I cannot adequately express to Your Royal Highness how deeply grateful I feel for the confidence which has been placed in me.

I must candidly express that I had underestimated the difficulties of a campaign in Zululand, owing to the inaccurate information which I had obtained regarding the physical difficulties of the country. I had calculated upon working in an open country over which wagons could pass without difficulty, but I at once discovered that colonial information was not to be depended upon. I believed and still believe, that two British Infantry Regiments armed with the Martini Henry, should in open country be able to successfully resist any attack of the Zulus, assisted of course by the force of mounted infantry attached to each column – and, if entrenched, or in a strong defensive position where the rear was secure, that one regiment would be equal to the occasion. Events, lamentable as they have been, have not disproved this assumption of mine; but with the knowledge that I now possess of Zulu courage and determination, I should not consider myself justified in putting so small a column into the field. Those who criticise my division of the forces at my command into four parts forget that I had the responsibility of the defence of the Natal and Transvaal border thrown upon me, as well as the invasion of Zululand.

Neither Government had made any preparations for the defence of their own country, as they at that time mistrusted their own natives, and would not induce the sparse European population to do more than defend their own homesteads.

The Natal colonial mounted forces were all placed at my disposal, as without their assistance my mounted men would have been far too few – I applied most urgently for mounted natives, but was told that the 300 furnished to Lt Col Durnford's Column (No. 2) had exhausted the resources of the colony in that respect.

Since however the affair of Isandlwana the Natal Government has discovered, to its great surprise, that there are very large numbers of excellent native horsemen in the colony, and they have now upwards of a thousand of these men actually called out and quite glad to

serve – They have also been calling out a large force of natives for the defence of the border, which is practically open to invasion, except for a very few weeks in the year, along its whole length.

The latest reports that have been received say that the whole Zulu army is in the neighbourhood of Ekowe, and that the advance of any force to its relief will be strongly opposed – I have found it impossible to test the absolute accuracy of any reports received, but this one seems fairly probable – as Ekowe is only provisioned up to the 4th April it is necessary that there should be no delay in sending forward a relieving column and convoy – The 57th, 60 Rifles and 91st are all good regiments with capable commanding officers², and I feel every confidence that they will be quite equal to the occasion.

There will also be a strong native contingent with due complement of Marines³, besides detachments of Buffs⁴ and 99th ⁵ consisting of 7 companies⁶. There will also be about 120 mounted Europeans⁷ and the same number of natives⁸. There is every reason therefore to be confident of the result.

Again thanking Your Royal Highness for continued favors

I remain

Your most obedient servant

Chelmsford LG

References.

1 In one letter, the Duke stated that he "has perfect confidence in Lord Chelmsford's ability....", The National Archives, Kew, WO.30/129 56316. HRH also telegraphed on 13 February that "... am satisfied that you have done and will continue to do everything that is right". Quoted, without stating source, in French, the Hon. G. Lord Chelmsford and the Zulu War, Bodley Head, London 1939, p. 265

2 Respectively Colonel C. M. Clarke (640 men), Lieut. Colonel Northey (540 men) and Lieut. Colonel A. C. Bruce (851 men). All figures from Narrative of the Field Operations connected with the Zulu War of 1879, London, War Office, 1881

3 Marines and Royal Navy personnel. The Naval Brigade was largely drawn from HMSs Tenedos, Boadicea and Shah. Approx. 550 officers and ratings and 100 Royal Marines served in the relief., out of approx. 850 naval personnel landed.

4 The two companies of the 3rd (East Kent) Regiment which had not served with the rest of their battalion through the defence of Eshowe and had remained in garrison at Fort Tenedos.

5 The Duke of Edinburgh's Regt. Its HQ and three companies served through the siege of Eshowe; the rest had remained on the Tukela frontier

6 i.e. in total, from both the 3rd and 99th regiments - 140 and 430 men respectively.

7 There were rather more than 120 in the end - drawn from the newly-raised Natal Volunteer Guides (men derived from the locally-raised Alexandra, Stanger and Victoria Mounted Rifles, whose regiments had been prohibited from crossing into Zululand) and part of the

Natal Horse. See Sole, T., For God Queen and Colony, Token Publishing, Honiton, 2011, pp. 358-60.

8. 4th Battn. Natal Native Contingent with approx. 800 men and 5th Battn. NNC with approx. 1200 men
