The ‘Part Time’ Zulu army.

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By 1879 it was believed across Natal that everything about Zulu society was based around its military structure, forgetting that the Zulus relied on its warriors meeting with arms only once a year for just two weeks national service; it was not a regular armed army. As soon as young Zulu men attained the age of about 16 years, known as *inkwebane*, they were formed into fledgling companies or *amaviyo*, which after a year’s probation would be placed in a regular *ibutho* or regiment. This first year bonded the young warriors and symbolised the transition from boyhood to manhood. The new *inkwebane* might either belong to another regiment with which the young one was incorporated, or it might be newly formed. As a rule several regiments of different ages were combined at the same *ikhanda* or barracks so that the young soldiers might have the benefit of the experience of their seniors, and on the latter dying out, might take their place and maintain the name and prestige of the ikhanda. In this manner loyal corps were formed, occasionally some thousands strong, and their duties required them to undertake a form of national service, to be trained in a number of social duties, including general policing, farming crops and guarding the king’s cattle, but also, when called upon, to join their allocated regiment as a fighting warrior. The Zulu army was soundly structured and consisted of twelve such corps, each with one or more regiments with its own ikhanda. These corps necessarily contained men of all ages, some being married, others unmarried, some being old men scarcely able to walk and others of boys. Five of these corps consisted of a single regiment while the remaining corps was composed of several regiments. Each corps or regiment possessed its own military ikhanda and was controlled by one commander, one second-in-command and several junior commanders who controlled the flanks in action. The uniform of the Zulu army was clearly laid down and was different in each corps. The great distinction was between the married and unmarried regiments, the former were obliged to shave the crown of the head and to wear a ring made of hemp and coated with a hardened paste of gum and grease; they also carried shields with predominately white colouring whereas the unmarried regiments wore their hair naturally and had coloured shields. By the time of the Zulu War, the total number of regiments in the Zulu army amounted to thirty-four, of whom eighteen were married and sixteen unmarried. Seven of the former were composed of men over sixty years of age, so that for practical purposes there were only twenty-seven Zulu regiments fit to take the field amounting to some 44,000 warriors. By1878 Lord Chelmsford’s intelligence confirmed that King Cetshwayo had in excess of 40,000 warriors at his disposal, 17,000 between twenty and thirty years of age, 14,500 between thirty and forty, 5,900 between forty and fifty and 4,500 between fifty and sixty.

The ibutho in residence at Ulundi was the uThulwana. These were the men who looked after the king and their work was rarely of a military nature; they maintained the nearby military amakhanda, the royal homesteads, and engaged in planting, reaping and fulfilling e king’s wishes. Each amakhanda was cared for by a skeleton staff and was only occupied when the King called up its *ibutho*. There were twenty-seven amakhanda, scattered about the Kingdom, thirteen of them were located in the region of Mahlabatini plain, near Cetshwayo’s residence at Ulundi. Ulundi itself was a huge complex of some 1,200 huts whose garrison was more or less permanently in residence.

Until 1878, the machine of military service in Zululand was, in effect, an integral part of everyday life in the kingdom although, unlike the British army of the time, the part-time Zulu

army was neither professional nor well trained. The only military training Zulu warriors received took place during their initial induction into their age-set regiment; in all matters they relied on instructions from their indunas who, in turn, demanded absolute obedience from their warriors. Tactical drill was unknown to the Zulu army though they could perform a number of essential movements with some accuracy, such as forming a circle of companies or regiments. Their skirmishing skills were extremely good, and in the coming war, would be performed under heavy fire with the utmost determination. The officers had specific duties and responsibilities according to their rank and discipline was most rigidly enforced. Commodore Sullivan, writing in August 1878, gave an accurate account of the discipline of the Zulu army. He stated that the regiments were so well disciplined that 'the men never fell out of the ranks on the march under any pretext; they marched at the double, and were said to keep up from 50 to 60 miles daily, carrying their own provisions'. (6)

Each year's *umKhosi* or 'First Fruits' ceremony (7) at Ulundi was traditionally held for the king to review his assembled regiments and herds of cattle, It was also the occasion for young men who had attained the age of about 16 years, known as inkwebane, to be formed into companies or amaviyo, which after a year's probation was placed in a regular ibutho or regiment. This first year also symbolised the transition from boyhood to manhood as a warrior. The new inkwebane might either belong to another regiment with which the young one was incorporated, or it might be newly formed. As a rule several regiments of different ages were combined at the same ikhanda or barracks so that the young soldiers might have the benefit of the experience of their seniors, and on the latter dying out, might take their place and maintain the name and prestige of the ikhanda. In this manner loyal corps were formed, occasionally some thousands strong.

Due to the British invasion unfurling and war clearly on the horizon, certain additional and important pre-war ceremonies took place on arriving at Ulundi. Various medicines and potions were administered to the gathering warriors to enhance their fighting capacity and render them immune from British firepower. On the third day after their assembly at the king's homestead, the medicine men sprinkled the warriors with magical muti or medicine and after all necessary formalities were completed, the warriors commenced their long march of some seventy miles towards the British border with Natal. The march was initially led by a corps specially nominated by the king, followed by the remainder of the army along the *umsila*, the path beaten down through the grass by the advance corps. The advancing Zulu army would have been similar to a British division advancing in line of brigade columns, each brigade in mass, each regiment in close column. The line of provision-bearers moved on the flank; the intervals between the head of columns varied, according to circumstances, from several miles to within sight of each other and with constant communication being kept up by runners. The march continued in this order but the baggage and provision-bearers fell in at the rear of the column on the second day and the cattle composing the commissariat were driven between them and the rearmost regiment until the force approached the advancing British force. When the latter were within striking distance the whole army formed an umkumbi, or gathering, for the purpose of enabling the Commander-in-Chief to address the men and to give his final orders for attack

Chelmsford made an arrogant error choosing his invasion date to coincide with the annual umKhosi assembly of Cetshwayo's regiments at Ulundi. Had he invaded Zululand a week earlier, or later, the massed regiments would have been back in their villages widely scattered across Zululand – and most unlikely to re-assemble en-mass at Ulundi in time to oppose Chelmsford's invasion. Likewise, this 'fear' of a Zulu invasion of Natal was not as singular or to the point as it seemed. Beneath Frere and Chelmsford's veneer of their apparently laudable crusade to protect Natalians lay more subtle practical and commercial causes, these included the subjugation of the Zulu people in order to facilitate the British

policy of Confederation in South Africa. This was itself a smokescreen to allow European commercial interests, both in Natal and the diamond fields, who needed access to the Zulu workforce. Almost as important, Frere considered the suppression of Zulu militancy was vital to protect the growing number of Boers, British subjects since the 1877 British annexation of the Transvaal, settling in Zululand. At the same time such suppression would, theoretically, confirm Britain's military invincibility to any potential adversary. It would also ensure the vainglorious Frere and Chelmsford honourable places in history.

Aftermath Timeline

1879

4 July	Chelmsford and British forces defeat Zulus at Ulundi.
15 July	Lt Gen Sir Wolseley supersedes Chelmsford.
28 August	King Cetshwayo captured in Ngome Forest.
1 September	Wolseley partitions Zululand.
28 November	King Sekhukhuni defeated at Tsate.

1883

10 January	King Cetshwayo returns to Zululand.
30 March	Zibhebhu routs King Cetshwayo's Usuthu in northern Zululand.
21 July	Cetshwayo defeated at Ulundi by rival chiefs, Zibhebhu and Hamu.

1884

8 February	King Cetshwayo dies.
30 December	Zululand annexed by the British and becomes a province of Natal. All of Zululand brought under control of Natal authorities.