

A consideration of the adequacy of British military tactics during the battles of the Anglo Zulu War.

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For the purposes of this essay British military tactics have been defined as those strategies devised to fulfil the military objectives of the invasion force of Zululand. To 'describe the adequacy' of these military tactics it has been necessary to determine whether the strategies employed were sufficient to fulfil the identified objectives and, if so, were they successful.

During the evaluation of military tactics the term 'battles' has not been limited to individual engagements but interpreted to encompass the invasion strategy and the specific tactics, which dictated the conduct of combatants on the march and in battle. It has been assumed that 'The Anglo Zulu War' is to include both invasions of Zululand although the examination of tactics has not extended beyond the British victory at Ulundi and the subsequent departure of Lord Chelmsford. Other than identifying commanding officer, no attempt has been made to assess the capabilities of each in employing the tactics identified. Whilst recognizing that logistical difficulties impacted upon military strategy, no in-depth analysis has been included in the scope of this essay.

The political agenda of the British High Commissioner and Governor of the Cape, Sir Henry Bartle Frere, and the economic objectives of Sir Theophilus Shepstone, British Administrator of the Transvaal, had ensured that confrontation with the independent Zulu nation was inevitable. The objective was total subjugation of Zululand. For any conflict with King Cetshwayo's people the formulation of British military tactics would be the direct responsibility of the Commander in Chief of British forces in southern Africa. This was Lieutenant General the Honourable Sir Frederick Augustus Thesiger, having succeeded his predecessor, General Sir Arthur Cunynghame, on 4 March 1878. In July 1878 Thesiger had been instructed by Frere to conduct an appraisal of military options for a campaign against the Zulus and by the end of August 1878 a report entitled, 'Invasion of Zululand; or Defence of the Natal and Transvaal Colony from Invasion by the Zulus' had been presented. Encouraged by Frere's and Shepstone's convictions that conflict could not be avoided, Thesiger considered that Natal and the Transvaal were ill prepared to prevent Zulu incursions along the miles of unprotected borders and that a pre-emptive strike into Zululand would not only best serve the protection of the British colonies but ensure the complete capitulation of the Zulu nation.

The military objectives of an attack against the Zulus were influenced by Thesiger's limited experience of the conclusion of the Ninth Cape Frontier War. Thesiger, who would inherit his father's title of Lord Chelmsford in October 1878, believed that the complete submission of a native people necessitated the thorough defeat of its army and the capture of its king. Indeed, Chelmsford had already indicated his intentions during the preparation of his report when in July 1878 he had informed Shepstone that the Zulus needed to be 'thoroughly crushed to make them believe in our superiority'.¹ In the context of the planned campaign against the Zulu nation

¹ Lock, Ron & Quantrill, Peter, *Zulu Victory*, (Greenhill Books, 2002), p27.

Chelmsford's three military objectives were the destruction of the Zulu army, the Zulu capital Ulundi, and the capture of King Cetshwayo. It was these objectives that British military tactics would seek to fulfil during the Zulu campaign.

Whilst the fulfilment of these military objectives required sufficient Imperial forces to be deployed into Zululand Chelmsford was aware that he still needed to prevent any possibility of a reprisal by the Zulus against Natal and the Transvaal. Even as late as 8 January 1879 Chelmsford demonstrated his concerns when he wrote, 'All the reports which reach me tend to show that the Zulus intend, if possible, to make raids into Natal when the several columns move forward'.² Chelmsford was also conscious that during the Kaffir Wars the native enemy had always evaded large and protracted movements of troops and avoided engaging a concentrated British strength. Chelmsford believed, therefore, that the use of one large and slow moving column would easily be circumvented within Zululand and permit an attack by the Zulu army on the British colonies. Further, it could possibly deter the full scale attack by the Zulus needed for the British to destroy the Zulu army and the campaign would subsequently deteriorate into a series of small, drawn out, skirmishes that had been experienced fighting the amaXhosa in the Eastern Cape Colony. Consequently, whilst the division of forces was never promoted as a military strategy, Chelmsford considered that for the Zulu campaign the division of forces into multiple, self sufficient, columns was a solution to these concerns.

Chelmsford planned to use five separate offensive columns to converge on Ulundi, each invading from a natural crossing place into Zululand; at the Lower Drift near the mouth of the Thukela River; at the Middle Drift near the Kranskop escarpment; at Rorke's Drift on the Buffalo River; at a point along the Ncome River and from the north-west Transvaal border. It was intended that these columns were 'equally adapted for attack or defence'.³ The route taken by each column would reduce the risk of being outflanked by the Zulu army whilst making the limited Imperial forces appear more formidable, encompass more enemy territory and increase the probability of catching the Zulu army in the open and exacting a decisive confrontation.

In reality this five-column invasion strategy proved impractical in terms of both manpower and logistics. Logistically southern Africa did not possess sufficient transport resources to ensure each column could be adequately supplied whilst without the sanction of the British government and with only minimal Imperial re-enforcements Chelmsford did not retain enough manpower either to support five columns or to protect their vulnerable and extensive lines of communications. Consequently Chelmsford revised his strategy to three offensive columns and two defensive columns. Each offensive column was to advance into Zululand from its designated crossing place, Bemba's Kop on the Ncome River, Rorke's Drift on the Buffalo River, and the Lower Drift, and establish a fortified advance supply depot before continuing in a coordinated march to converge on the Zulu capital Ulundi. The two smaller columns offering defensive options against a potential Zulu counter strike guarded the Middle Drift in Natal and crossing points along the Ncome River in the Transvaal.

The issuing of the British terms to be met by King Cetshwayo to avoid war in the December 1878 'ultimatum' had been deliberately timed to coincide with Chelmsford's strategic preference for a January invasion. He had been advised that the delayed spring

² Greaves, Adrian, *Crossing the Buffalo*, (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), p99.

³ Laband, John, *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, (Alan Sutton Publishing, 1994), p6.

rains would ensure the Zulus were preoccupied with collecting their harvest whilst the generally unfordable rivers between January and March would bolster Chelmsford's defensive options with a natural barrier to the British colonies. Although such a summer campaign suffered from the risk of heavy rain and humid conditions, it would also ensure a plenitude of grazing for each column's cattle stock and avoid the winter risk of frequent grass fires.

The backbone of each offensive column, distributed in approximately equal strength, was British Imperial infantry and artillery. Numbers were bolstered by mounted colonial volunteer forces and native auxiliaries, the Native Contingent, raised from the black population of Natal, many of whom were disenchanting Zulu refugees.

The purpose of the offensive right flanking column, No. 1 Coastal Column, consisting of 4,750 officers and men (including 2,256 Native Contingent) and under the command of Colonel Charles Knight Pearson, was:

“To cross the Tugela at Fort Pearson and encamp on the Zulu side; when ordered to advance, to move on to Eshowe, and there, or in its neighbourhood to form a depot, well entrenched.”⁴

The column crossed at the Lower Drift on 12 January 1879, camped on the Zulu bank of the Thukela River, and secured the crossing with the construction of Fort Tenedos. It subsequently advanced the thirty-five miles to Eshowe and by 6 February 1879 had converted the small Norwegian mission station, KwaMondi, into a fortified advanced supply depot. Whilst en route, the Coastal Column successfully repulsed a surprise attack from 6,000 Zulu warriors whilst crossing the River Nyezane on 22 January. Having achieved its initial objective, the coastal column awaited further orders from Chelmsford for the expected coordinated advance on Ulundi.

The central invading column, No. 3 Centre Column, composed of 4,709 officers and men (including 2,566 Native Contingent) was under the command of Colonel Richard Glyn. Its purpose was:

“To cross at Rorke's Drift... to move forward and form an advanced depot, strongly entrenched, as found advisable from the nature of the country, etc. To assist in clearing the border south-east of Rorke's Drift, and to keep up communication with the columns on left and right.”⁵

Chelmsford expected this central probe to attract the majority of Zulu military attention and consequently accompanied this column when it crossed at Rorke's Drift on 11 January 1879. Isipezi Hill, near the Zulu chief Matyana's stronghold, twenty-two miles into Zululand, was selected as the site of the first of the Centre Column's fortified advance supply depots. Whilst camped and awaiting additional supplies en route at Isandlwana, ten miles from its crossing point at Rorke's Drift, Chelmsford divided the Centre Column to reinforce a reconnaissance patrol twelve miles east of the camp. Fewer than half the column's original strength remained to defend the unfortified camp at Isandlwana and it was here that the main Zulu army of over 25,000 warriors attacked and

⁴ Greaves, *Crossing the Buffalo*, p99.

⁵ *Ibid*, p103.

destroyed the depleted British force on 22 January. Later that same day a single infantry company successfully defended the hastily fortified supply depot at Rorke's Drift from an attack by 4,000 warriors, which had broken away from the same Zulu army. The remainder of the column retreated into Natal the following day.

The left flanking offensive column, No. 4 Northern Column, under Brevet Colonel Henry Evelyn Wood VC, formed of 2,278 officers and men (including 387 Native Contingent) was ordered:

“To advance to the Blood River. In the event of a further advance, the advance depot of this column to be near the intersection of the roads from Utrecht to Ulundi, and Rorke's Drift to Swaziland; but to delay its advance towards the Umvolosi River until the border is cleared, and to move in a southerly direction towards Colonel Glyn's column to assist it against Sirayo”⁶

The column crossed the Blood River on 7 January 1879 and advanced ten miles to Bemba's Kop and built a fortified camp. Having invaded prior to the ultimatum deadline it then awaited the movement of the other two offensive columns. Following the British reverse at Isandlwana, Wood moved the Northern Column to a stronger position, fortified by 3 February, on Khambula Hill on the south-eastern side of Ngaba Ka Hawane from where it could defend itself against any Zulu attack towards Utrecht. The column moved a further two miles nearer Ngaba Ka Hawane on the 11 February for improved sanitation and closer proximity to the natural supplies of wood and water. By 13 February this position had been fortified and Wood awaited further orders.

No. 2 Reserve Column under Colonel Anthony William Durnford, one of the defensive columns, consisted of 3,781 officers and men (including 3,488 Native Contingent) was ordered,

“To form a portion of No.1 Column, but act separately, reporting to Colonel Pearson; to remain on the middle Tugela frontier until an advance is ordered, and Colonel Pearson has reached Eshowe’.”⁷

The Middle Drift near Fort Buckingham was one of the most accessible crossing places and this reserve column was initially intended to guard this drift. No. 2 Column was subsequently ordered to move north and cross the Buffalo River at Rorke's Drift, make camp and wait further orders in support of No. 3 Column. It eventually moved up to support the depleted camp at Isandlwana but its involvement in the disaster on 22 January ended any future participation in the Zulu campaign.

No. 5 Column, the second defensive column, under Colonel Hugh Rowlands VC with 1,565 officers and men (including 338 Native Contingent) was ordered,

“To observe any Boer military activity whilst maintaining a state of readiness in northern Zululand”.⁸

⁶ Ibid, p105.

⁷ Ibid, p100.

⁸ Ibid, p107.

The column, based at Luneberg, was to guard against Boer unrest and marauding Zulus through the disputed territories. Following the defeat at Isandlwana, No. 5 column was incorporated into the Northern Column during February and the column ceased to exist.

The revision of the initial invasion strategy, reducing the number of offensive columns from five to three, seriously compromised the defensive capabilities of each of the surviving columns. The Zulu army clearly demonstrated its mobility and stealth in the prelude to Isandlwana. If indeed it had been Cetshwayo's design to attack Natal it is reasonable to conclude that Chelmsford's strategic reliance on the defensive deterrent of three offensive columns, positioned over fifty miles apart from each other, and the capabilities of two small defensive columns, each guarding over 100 miles of border, would have been inadequate to prevent a sizeable Zulu raiding party slipping into Natal. Certainly with the withdrawal of the Centre Column from Zululand the remaining two columns, entrenched over one hundred miles apart, would have been unable to prevent any Zulu incursion across the Natal border. Consequently Chelmsford's immediate strategic priority after Isandlwana became the protection of the undefended borders of Natal and the fortification of military supply depots and towns like Greytown and Pietermaritzburg. Any coordinated advance by the Northern and Coastal columns was abandoned and what would become known as the first invasion of Zululand was brought to an end.

Pearson, given the option to either hold position or retreat to Natal, chose to remain and defend Eshowe, although all volunteer mounted troops and Native Contingent were sent back to the safety of Fort Tenedos. With only one troop of mounted infantry retained, however, the Coastal Column's offensive operations were restricted and from February it effectively became besieged by Zulu forces until relieved by a purposely-formed column at the beginning of April.

Wood's Northern Column remained at its fortified position at Khambula. Its strength was augmented by the Imperial infantry from the disbanded No. 5 Column and with six troops of mounted volunteers Wood was able to continue raiding against Zulu strongholds within the vicinity of Khambula. However, whilst providing an escort to supply wagons from Derby to Luneberg, one company of Imperial infantry from the 80th Regiment was ambushed and massacred by 800 Zulu warriors at the Ntombe River on 12 March 1879. Then, in a diversionary attack coordinated in support of Chelmsford's intended relief of Eshowe, a detachment of colonial mounted troops and native levies suffered defeat whilst attacking the Zulu stronghold of Mbilini on Hlobane Mountain on 28 March when it unexpectedly encountered the main Zulu army of over 20,000 warriors. Despite these setbacks, at full strength the Northern Column inflicted a convincing defeat on the same Zulu army when it attacked the entrenched British position at Khambula the day after Hlobane.

Not surprisingly, with the disaster at Isandlwana and with the benefit of hindsight, there were those that criticised Chelmsford's original campaign plan regarding the strength of the offensive columns deployed. Major-General H.H. Crealock expressed his disapproval in a letter to Sir Archibald Alison on 1 May 1879 stating, 'Had Chelmsford thought proper to have concentrated his column of advance and held onto his wings, concentrated, I think we should have been able to pull through'.⁹ Certainly, to fulfil the

⁹ Lock, Ron & Guantrill, Peter, *Zulu Vanquished*, (Grenhill Books, 2005), p168.

invasion objectives each column needed a sufficient concentration of firepower to thoroughly defeat the Zulu enemy on its own. Without immediate or direct communication and given the geographical distance and obstacles between the columns there was very little prospect for mutual support during the early stages of the advance into Zululand. However, any assessment of the adequacy of the offensive columns of the first invasion is complicated by the fact that no column ever faced the main Zulu army when at its original invasion strength. The Coastal Column proved its ability to repulse an attack from a Zulu force of over 6,000 warriors at Nyezane and its position at Eshowe was more at risk from disease than from defeat by a Zulu army. The Northern Column had already been augmented in strength by the disbanded No. 5 Column when it demonstrated its capability by inflicting defeat on the main Zulu army of 20,000 warriors at Khambula and the reverses suffered at Ntombe and Hlobane were only inflicted upon detachments from the main column strength. Chelmsford's belief prior to the initial invasion was that whilst the strength of each offensive column was 'only just sufficient to enable them to advance',¹⁰ each retained an adequate concentration of firepower to defeat the Zulu army on its own and this would appear to be a fair assessment. The Centre Column's inability to deal with the attack from the main Zulu army at Isandlwana was as a direct consequence of Chelmsford's decision to split the strength of one of these 'only just sufficient' columns in enemy territory. This demonstrated that, at anything under their original strength, British forces during the first invasion were inadequate to deal with the main Zulu army.

By March Chelmsford's attention had turned to the relief of the besieged Coastal Column. Having permitted Pearson to remain at Eshowe, Chelmsford had created himself an unnecessary tactical problem. The relief of the column consequently became a prerequisite for the formulation of a coordinated second invasion strategy and occupied Chelmsford's plans until the beginning of April. The arrival of the initial drafts of reinforcements enabled Chelmsford to raise a relief column consisting of 5,670 officers and men (including 2,280 Native Contingent). This single column proved adequate to repel and thoroughly disperse an attack from 12,000 Zulu warriors at Gingindlovu on 2 April before proceeding onto Eshowe. The advanced supply depot was abandoned and subsequently burnt by the Zulus. No. 1 Column withdrew to Fort Tenedos on the Tugela River whilst the Relief Column remained in Zululand. By 7 April it had established an entrenched camp approximately one mile south of Gingindlovu.

With the Coastal Column now relieved, Chelmsford was able to formulate his strategy for the second invasion of Zululand. Cetshwayo meanwhile, with a native army whose strength had effectively been reduced to 20,000 warriors, had realized that his army would be unable to bring a successful military conclusion to the war. His attempts to reopen diplomatic contact, however, were rebuked. In the light of the disaster at Isandlwana, both Chelmsford and Frere needed to rebuild reputations with a clear conclusion. Consequently, the military objectives for the second invasion remained consistent with those of the first.

With the arrival of further reinforcements during April, Chelmsford finally had access to an Imperial fighting force drawn from 9,000 infantrymen, 1,000 cavalrymen, 5 artillery batteries, including Gatling guns, and a staff that boasted an additional 4 Major-Generals. Yet with Natal sufficiently fortified, the need for multiple columns fulfilling

¹⁰ Greaves, *Crossing the Buffalo*, p99.

defensive and offensive roles had become largely redundant. Chelmsford eventually decided upon a two column advance and justified this strategy in a letter to Sir Bartle Frere on 21 April 1879, prior to the commencement of the second invasion:

“My view is that we should keep the Zulus collected together, and to prevent them as much as possible settling down in their kraals, where they would be able to reap their own crops and where they would not feel the inconvenience of a state of war. This can be done by threatening the country in as many directions as possible.”¹¹

Initially this plan retained the original column designations of the first invasion but without columns No. 2, No. 3 and No. 5, which had ceased to exist. No.1 Column would be comprised of two brigades; the 1st Brigade formed from the original forces of Pearson’s Coastal Column and the 2nd Brigade from the Eshowe Relief troops encamped at Gingindlovu. No. 4 Column would be formed by one brigade comprising of Wood’s existing column and one brigade from newly arrived re-enforcements. By 13 April, however, Chelmsford had decided upon different arrangements. The two brigades comprising No. 1 Column became the First Division South African Field Force under Major-General H.H. Crealock. The primary offensive force for the re-invasion would be the new Second Division under Major-General Newdigate consisting principally of the new troop arrivals in southern Africa. Wood’s No. 4 Column became ‘Brigadier-General Wood’s Flying Column’. It was to retain its independence but to act in support of the Second Division.

The function of the First Division was to advance along the coastal plain. Operating as ‘virtually an independent force’¹² it was to secure the right flank of the Second Division and suppress the Zulu resistance along the coast, which had been so active during the first invasion. Crealock was to reach ‘St Paul’s on the main Ulundi road’¹³ where ‘an entrenched post and supply depot’¹⁴ was to be established and further orders awaited. Its military objective was to ‘attack and burn’ the Zulu military homesteads of EmaNgwani and Hlangubo. Already in the field, the First Division spent April accumulating supplies and strengthening its line of communication. By 29 April a detachment from the 1st Brigade had advanced from Fort Tenedos and constructed Fort Crealock on the AmaTigulu River whilst the 2nd Brigade had moved south from Gingindlovu and constructed Fort Chelmsford overlooking the Nyezane River. Forward operations were not commenced until 20 June when at last two months provisions had been stock piled at Fort Chelmsford as instructed by Chelmsford. Then the Division advanced six miles to the Umlalazi River where the construction of Fort Napoleon was commenced on 22 June to guard the crossing. The advance continued to the coast where a location had been identified as suitable for landing supplies direct from the sea. On 30 June the first supplies were landed by surfboat at what would be known as Port Durnford, and Fort Richards was constructed on 1 July to protect the Port’s approach. It was from its encampment at Port Durnford that the First Division finally commenced its offensive

¹¹ Lock & Quantrill, *Zulu Vanquished*, p165.

¹² *Ibid*, p166.

¹³ *Ibid*, p166.

¹⁴ Knight, Ian, *The National Army Museum Book of The Zulu War*, (Sidgwick & Jackson, 2003), p222.

operations against the two Zulu Amakhanda. EmaNgwani was attacked and burned on 4 July and Hlangubo two days later. Both were unoccupied. Indeed, with all Zulu regiments responding to the call to assemble at Ulundi, Crealock's advance was virtually unchallenged. Despite its route to Ulundi being the shorter of the two divisions, the First Division's advance was slowed due to the problems associated with the difficult terrain, humid climate and unsanitary conditions. Although its military objective was accomplished the Division never made it to St Paul's and its existence was to prove superfluous to the invasion's military objectives.

The Flying Column was to rendezvous with the Second Division at the junction of the Tombokola and Itshotshosi Rivers. Its movement from its encampment at Khambula commenced on 5 May and its advance south of the Inhlazatye ensured it did 'not leave the frontier North of that mountain completely unprotected'.¹⁵ Marching by way of Segongamana Hill, Wolf Hill and then south-east from Munhla Hill, the column had arrived at the Itshotshosi River by 2 June and established contact with the Second Division the following day. Its subsequent movement would be as the lead in a joint advance on Ulundi with its role to support the Second Division.

The military objective of the Second Division was the destruction of Ulundi, 'the King's own Kraal'¹⁶. It was to advance from a position further north than the original Centre Column, joining the Rorke's Drift road to Ulundi beyond the Babanango Mountain. Whilst this route had the advantage of avoiding the unburied dead at Isandlwana, Chelmsford believed that tactically such an advance, by remaining close to the border in the early stages, offered 'Natal very effective assistance'¹⁷ against the possibility of a Zulu strike. Chelmsford's preoccupation with the relief of Eshowe, and an inability to determine an exact line of advance, meant that the column did not cross into Zululand until the end of May. From its base at Dundee the Division had initially begun to accumulate supplies at Landsman's Drift on the Buffalo River on 2 May. With a route finally determined further south, however, a new depot at Koppie Alleen was adopted to which the Division moved on 29 May. From here it crossed the Ncome River on 31 May and moving below Thelezani Hill effected its junction with the Flying Column at the Itshotshosi River. By 5 June both columns had progressed to the Nondweni River 30 miles east of Koppie Alleen where Fort Newdigate was constructed as the first supply depot. The combined column advance continued initially south for 10 miles where Fort Marshall was constructed on 18 June, and then east for 25 miles to the Babanango Heights where a third entrenched supply depot, Fort Evelyn, was built on 23 June by the Mzinhlanga River. It was here that the advance rejoined the track to Ulundi, the planned route of the first invasion. By 27 June the force had climbed the Mthonjaneni ridge and on 30 June from this new position of Fort Victoria the force, unencumbered by tents or baggage, moved into the valley of the White Umfolozi. By 1 July the British force had reached the Umfolozi River where Fort Nolela was constructed to cover the crossing and on 4 July the joint column finally crossed the river and moved onto the Mahlabatheni plain. In what would be the final offensive action of Chelmsford's command, the British force, at a strength of 4,156 officers and men, including 958 Native Contingent, 12 artillery guns and 2 Gatling guns, resoundingly defeated the Zulu army of over 20,000

¹⁵ Knight, *The National Army Museum Book of The Zulu War*, p224.

¹⁶ Ibid, p222.

¹⁷ Lock & Quantrell, *Zulu Vanquished*, p163.

warriors in the battle of Ulundi. With the subsequent destruction of the King's homestead under artillery bombardment, two of the three military objectives of the second invasion had been fulfilled. Cetshwayo himself, however, would remain elusive for a further two months.

Despite Chelmsford's justification to Frere for the use of more than one column for the second invasion, with permanent defensive measures in place, the use of two columns was excessive. The success of the Eshowe Relief Column had demonstrated that it was possible to advance into Zululand with just one column and neither deter a full scale attack by the Zulu army nor encourage an outflanking attack into Natal. However, too many troops were present in Natal to be left without a purpose and the size of any single column was restricted by the limited supply facilities.

The First Division consisted of over 8,000 officers and men (including 1,896 Native Contingent). It was effectively formed from the Eshowe Relief Column, which had conclusively beaten a Zulu army of 12,000 warriors in less than one hour at Gingindlovu, and Pearson's original Coastal Column which had dispersed 6,000 Zulus at Nyezane. Whilst its advance was unopposed, it is reasonable to conclude that the column strength would have been more than adequate to inflict a thorough defeat upon a full strength Zulu army.

The Second Division, numbering 3,850 officers and men (including 1,000 Native Contingent) operating in conjunction with the Flying Column, totalling 2,845 officers and men (including 465 Native Contingent) ensured that the greatest concentration of British firepower of the war was witnessed at Ulundi. Here the combined force proved more than adequate for the task required by inflicting the final crushing defeat upon the main Zulu army of 20,000 warriors in little over an hour.

Despite logistical constraints, the strength of Imperial military resources deployed in each offensive column for the reinvasion was more than double that of their counterparts during the first invasion. To protect the extensive lines of communication that these excessive columns necessitated, and to prevent a repetition of Ntombe, Chelmsford ordered the construction of a chain of fortified supply depots along each Division's route. As a direct consequence, the advance of each Division was slowed considerably and the use of columns of more than an adequate size undoubtedly prolonged the duration of the war.

In addition to the principle invasion strategies, the tactical conduct of the individual columns whilst in Zululand was addressed by regulations issued to column commanders by Chelmsford in November and December 1878. Specifically the adequacy of each column's arrangements regarding scouting, camp defences and deployment in combat would prove to be of critical importance during the campaign.

One problem that Chelmsford suffered during his preparations for the first invasion was the absence of reliable intelligence. With no accurate maps and little primary knowledge of Zululand available, the British commander was forced to rely on maps sketched by Colonel Anthony William Durnford, RE and the Honourable William Drummond, a Natal civil servant, and a report on the Zulu nation produced by H. Bernard Fynney, a Natal border agent. Chelmsford informed the Duke of Cambridge, Commander in Chief of the British Army, 'I have already pointed out to Your Royal Highness how impossible it has been to obtain really reliable information regarding the country.'¹⁸

¹⁸ Lock & Quanttrill, *Zulu Victory*, p47.

Indeed no member of Chelmsford's staff had any specialist training in assimilating intelligence and it was not until May 1879 that Drummond was appointed as Head of the Intelligence Department to facilitate the collation of information.

To compensate for this lack of intelligence, continual and thorough scouting was considered vital. The Boer pioneer Paul Kruger, who had survived a Zulu attack forty years early, had advised Chelmsford that the use of distant scouting was essential to combat the mobility and stealth of the Zulu army. Such reconnaissance was part of the function of mounted troops. Whilst in European warfare traditional cavalry were limited in use, in colonial warfare they were tactically essential. For the Zulu campaign they would be required to screen the advance of each column, to maintain communication between columns, to perform reconnaissance and to pursue fleeing Zulus. Without the availability of a single Imperial cavalry regiment in Southern Africa for the first invasion Chelmsford was forced to rely mainly on the services of a limited number of colonial volunteers and detachments of mounted infantry raised during the Ninth Cape Frontier War. Perceived as inexperienced and lacking the professionalism of the Imperial soldier the effectiveness of colonial mounted forces was continuously undermined at staff level where their reports were often dismissed or failed to be systematically checked.

The slow British advance into Zululand, dictated by the poor roads, flooded rivers and cumbersome ox-drawn transportation, provided ample opportunity for mounted reconnaissance yet all three offensive columns of the original invasion demonstrated a failure to perform adequate scouting. As a result commanders, with no accurate or advance knowledge of Zulu movements, were often unable to make tactical decisions until an enemy attack was imminent.

On the night of 21 January a force in excess of 6,000 Zulu warriors had been able to surround the camp of the Coastal Column undetected. Fortunately for Pearson the force, unsure of the exact British position, withdrew and it was only the following morning that the heavily trampled grass around the camp revealed their close proximity. Nevertheless, having been alerted to their presence, scouts still failed to locate the Zulu force which had taken up a position on Wombane Hill, overlooking the Nyezane River where the British would cross, and to the front and right of the track which led to Eshowe. It was not until a company of Native Contingent was dispatched to engage a small group of Zulus that the left horn of the main force was located just 400 yards to the front of the British advance. Sapper Cullern reported that 'we were taken by surprise in the bush',¹⁹ whilst Lieutenant Hamilton of the Naval Brigade, in a letter to his father, commented that 'we were exposed to fire from both sides, as the high ground on each side was occupied by the enemy'.²⁰

At Isandlwana, Chelmsford was outmanoeuvred by the Zulus because of his failure to locate their main army. Whilst mounted forces reconnoitred to the south and east up to a distance of twelve miles, the territory north beyond the Nqutu heights was neglected other than a small cursory patrol east towards Silutshana and Isipezi mountains. Whilst vedettes were placed along the Nqutu plateau by Inspector George Mansell of the Natal Mounted Police, they were withdrawn by Major Clery on the grounds that they 'served no useful purpose'.²¹ The Zulu army was eventually discovered whilst it was

¹⁹ Greaves, *Crossing the Buffalo*, p229.

²⁰ Knight, *The National Army Museum Book of The Zulu War*, p57.

²¹ Greaves, *Crossing the Buffalo*, p119.

forming its attack on the British camp, not by scouts from the offensive Centre Column, but by the mounted troops of the No. 2 Column acting independently under Colonel Durnford. The Duke of Cambridge was to enquire of Chelmsford after Isandlwana:

“As your Lordship had a considerable number of mounted men...it should be stated what steps were taken.... to reconnoitre and thoroughly search the country on your flanks – it seems difficult to understand how a large Zulu army could have massed itself.... within attacking distance of your camp without some evidence of its proximity having been afforded?”²²

Wood claimed that since December 1878 he had native scouts reconnoitring up to twenty miles to the front of his Northern Column and had mounted patrols six miles out an hour before daylight. However, whilst extracting the defecting Prince Hama and his people from Zululand on 10 March 1879, the extraction force had unknowingly passed within one day of a large Zulu force that could have proved disastrous. No thorough reconnaissance had been performed prior to the expedition against Mbilini’s stronghold on Hlobane. The exact routes up and down the mountain had only been guessed at after distant viewing, whilst the ridge connecting the two levels of Hlobane and Ntendeka, where the expedition suffered its worst casualties, was assumed to be an easy route. Then, on the night of the actual attack, Wood’s scouts failed to locate the main Zulu army of over 20,000 warriors camped only five miles from the mountain stronghold. When unintentionally discovered by members of the colonial Border Horse, Wood denied its presence commenting, ‘Nonsense, I have had my men out yesterday, there is no Zulu impi about’.²³

The arrival of the 17th Lancers and King’s Dragoon Guards in Natal in April 1879 eased the cavalry shortage experienced during the first invasion although both Imperial regiments proved unsuited to reconnaissance and lacked the competence of their colonial counterparts. Nevertheless, the absence of adequate scouting during the first invasion had been recognized. From the beginning of April and throughout the second invasion a greater volume of scouting and reconnaissance was performed and at much further distances than previously. When Louis Napoleon, the exiled heir to the Bonapartist throne, was ambushed and killed on 2 June the patrol he had accompanied was ten miles further inside Zululand than the Second Division’s camp. Meanwhile scouts screening the Flying Column and Second Division discovered Zulu forces directly along the intended route of advance on 4 June. With such early warning, a mounted detachment was able to eliminate any potential threat posed by Zulu forces the following day at eZungeni Hill, without exposing the main column to attack.

More significantly, from April 1879, the fact that adequate scouting was performed ensured that British forces were prepared for any Zulu attack. Unlike the Coastal Column’s engagement with a Zulu force in the Nyezane valley, the scouts of the Eshowe Relief Column were aware of the Zulu approach on the night of 1 April, ensuring that the British position at Gingindlovu was ready for the Zulu attack the following day. Meanwhile on the final advance on Ulundi, mounted scouts had been able to select the optimum location for the British square to face the impending Zulu attack.

²² Lock & Quantrill, *Zulu Vanquished*, p129.

²³ Greaves, *Crossing the Buffalo*, p271

With regards to the defensive arrangements of columns within Zululand, Chelmsford had been advised by the Afrikaner pioneers Gert de Jager, James Gregory and Paul Kruger on the use of wagon laagering every night, the standard Boer defense in African warfare. Indeed, a booklet entitled *Regulations for Field Forces in South Africa* issued in November 1878, specified that ‘horses should be picketed and oxen placed in a wagon laager’²⁴ and ‘the camp should be partially entrenched on all sides’.²⁵ Whilst the Northern and Coastal Columns fortified their advanced supply depots as instructed, all three offensive columns failed to implement these regulations and make adequate arrangements for the defense of their temporary camps during the first invasion. Laagering had not been considered necessary during the Ninth Cape Frontier War and the neglect of regulations in Zululand reflected an underestimation of the Zulu fighting capacity and an arrogance of over-confidence amongst the British staff officers. The most notable examples of the disregard of the November regulations were those of the Centre Column, the very column that Chelmsford effectively commanded which, during its advance from the borders of Natal, failed to fortify its supply depot at Rorke’s Drift and its camps on either side of the Mzinyathi crossing, in the Batshe valley and at Isandlwana.

The Centre Column had intended to use an old wagon track for its advance to Ulundi, although certain sections were deemed unfit for use by the transport wagons. Major William Dunbar of the 2/24th, with a small detachment, had been tasked with the repair of this track in the Bathe valley and was ordered to camp in bushes, beneath a rock outcrop, and with no clear field of fire. When Dunbar, the most experienced combatant officer of his regiment, expressed his view that the camp was completely exposed, his reservations were dismissed by Chelmsford’s Assistant Military Secretary, Lieutenant Colonel John Crealock, who arrogantly commented that ‘if Major Dunbar is afraid to stay there, we could send someone who was not’.²⁶ Dunbar was so offended that he resigned his commission and it required Chelmsford’s personal intervention to persuade him to reconsider.

The Centre Column established its intermediate camp at Isandlwana on 20th January 1879 and even junior officers commented upon the lack of defensive arrangements in place. The suggestion by an officer of the Natal Mounted Police that the camp was susceptible to attack from the rear, was dismissed by Chelmsford, commenting that ‘my troops will do all the attacking’.²⁷ Even Lieutenant Teignmouth Melvill, Adjutant of the 1/24th remarked ‘These Zulus will charge home, and with our small numbers we ought to be in laager, or, at any rate, be prepared to stand shoulder to shoulder’.²⁸ Whilst in fairness the ground was too rocky and hard for preparing an entrenched position, Colonel Glyn’s recommendation of laagering was rejected by Chelmsford on the grounds that ‘It is not worthwhile, it will take too much time, and besides the wagons are most of them going back at once to Rorke’s Drift for supplies’.²⁹ That same day, it was only the rapid fortification of the Centre Column’s supply depot at

²⁴ Knight, Ian, *Zulu*, (Windrow & Greene, 1994), p40.

²⁵ Knight, *Zulu*, p40.

²⁶ Greaves, Adrian, *Isandlwana*, (Jonathan Ball, 2001), p93.

²⁷ Lock & Quantrill, *Zulu Victory*, p134.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p134.

²⁹ Knight, *Zulu*, p43.

Rorke's Drift that prevented a further defeat for the British Army. This action highlighted the effectiveness of prepared defensive positions against Zulu attacks.

As a direct consequence of the events of the 22nd January, the defensive arrangements for offensive columns in Zululand changed. In revised *Field Force Regulations* issued in February, Chelmsford instructed that all camps should be fortified by earthworks and that wagons should be laagered. This change of tactics was initially exhibited, albeit incompetently, at Ntombe. Here the laager had been formed by the column escort whilst the river was in flood, but no alteration to these arrangements was made to compensate for the gaps between the wagons and the riverbank once the waters had subsided. Major Charles Tucker, in charge of the garrison at Luneberg, had already noted that the wagons were not adequately adjoined but failed to insist on any correction. Consequently the Zulu attack was able to exploit these weak points with devastating effect and completely overrun the British position. The first full-scale implementation of the new laagering regulations was demonstrated by the Eshowe Relief Column. Every night during its advance the column laagered into a square, each side 130 yards comprising of thirty wagons butted together. A shelter trench was dug 15 yards in front of the laager's sides with the earth piled to form a solid rampart in front of the wagons. The use of this formation as a matter of course ensured that the British camp was already prepared to receive the Zulu attack at Gingindlovu on the morning of 2 April 1879. Meanwhile, Wood ensured the Flying Column was familiar with the newly enforced laagering procedures. During its progress south from Khambula to rendezvous with the Second Division, the column practiced its laagering, formed by two wagon laagers 500 yards apart, and was able to complete the formation in 35 minutes. Despite its disastrous initial deployment at Ntombe, laagering proved an adequate defensive arrangement for British forces in the field and one that was never breached by a Zulu attack.

As an additional protection for the lines of supply and communication, Chelmsford also ordered each division to construct a chain of fortified supply depots during their advance. Each division constructed four permanent forts and accumulated supplies before advancing further. The introduction of this new tactic demonstrated a far more cautious approach for the second invasion but it was a strategy that proved excessive, slowing the British advance and consequently prolonging the length of the war.

Prior to the Zulu campaign, Chelmsford had amassed as much information as possible concerning the fighting capabilities of the enemy and issued a pamphlet to his officers detailing their organization and tactics. Orders were then issued to each column commander on 23 December 1878, which addressed the tactical conduct of British forces in the event of the engagement with the Zulu army. Despite advice received identifying the Zulu as a very different type of native enemy to the Cape Xhosa, Chelmsford's battle strategy was still dictated by the low opinion he had formed of the capabilities of massed attacks by natives during the Ninth Cape Frontier War. Initially, therefore, he relied heavily on the same tactics employed at the conclusion of this war. Here, a combination of in-depth reconnaissance and ruthless skirmishing flushed the native enemy out from surrounding bush into the open and into the awaiting firing line. Both infantry and mounted troops would engage the enemy by volley fire, supported by the artillery positioned to the front to permit the use of case shot. Mounted troops would then follow up the attack by pursuing the broken enemy in flight.

The General Orders issued in December, illustrated by an explanatory diagram, stated that the formation best adapted to meet a Zulu attack was an extended front line of British infantry with artillery guns at the centre and forefront of this line. Native Contingent auxiliaries and mounted troops were to be positioned to the rear and on each flank. The implementation of these tactics can be seen in the simultaneous formations adopted in the initial battles of the Zulu War at Nyezane and Isandlwana. Despite differences in terrain there is a clear correlation between the deployment of the forces of No. 1 Column at Nyezane and No. 3 Column at Isandlwana on 22 January.

The Coastal Column was attacked whilst fording the Nyezane River. Zulu warriors had emerged from the hills overlooking the column's route which rose up along a spur away from the river towards Eshowe. Pearson's response was to advance the column's two Royal Artillery 7-pounders and the Naval Brigade up the spur to a knoll facing north-east and meet the immediate threat developing from the Zulu left horn. Coordinating the defense himself from this central vantage point, Pearson ordered two companies of Buffs, in skirmishing order, to support the artillery on either side. As the engagement developed, two companies from the Royal Marine Light Infantry with its Gatling gun advanced further up the spur and facing north dispersed the threat posed by the Zulu chest. To the right flank of Pearson's position, two further companies of Buffs, one of Royal Engineers and a detachment from the 99th Regiment, supported by mounted troops, advanced and cleared the high ground. Mounted volunteers already acting as vedettes on the far left of Pearson's line had prevented any attack developing from the Zulu right horn. Albeit tailored to the topographical constraints, the Coastal Column's deployment had been in accordance to Chelmsford's orders and proved sufficient to repel the un-coordinated Zulu attack.

At Isandlwana, Pulleine's response to the Zulu attack was to deploy the two Royal Artillery 7-pounders 400 yards to the front left of the camp facing the Nqutu plateau to the north from where the main threat appeared to be developing. Initially, only two companies of Imperial infantry were deployed in support of the artillery, adopting an extended formation on either side of the guns. As the battle developed, so the remaining Imperial companies were redeployed on either side of this original central position and the mounted colonial troops and companies of Native Contingent incorporated themselves on either flank. Isandlwana demonstrated that an attack by overwhelming numbers along a large enough front could break through or around the skirmishing line formation that Chelmsford had advocated. Despite modern firepower the extended line had been proven inadequate and consequently the tactic was never again used during the Zulu War.

Following the events of 22 January, Chelmsford reverted to the traditional British tactics that had been successful for Cunynghame, Chelmsford's predecessor, at the battle of Centane Hill on 7 February 1878 in the Ninth Cape Frontier War. Mounted troops were used to encourage an attack by the enemy onto a fortified position or square of Imperial infantry supported by artillery guns. Once the attack had been broken, mounted troops and native auxiliaries would be used to pursue the enemy and ensure it was thoroughly routed. Its success was one of the reasons why Chelmsford implemented mainly a mopping up operation against the amaXhosa. The strategy was based upon the European infantry square used against cavalry. In the colonial theatre, this formation was still effective when facing highly mobile and numerically superior enemies. Against a

Zulu army a large, closed ranks, deployment of troops would not only maximize the effectiveness of British firepower but also prevent Zulu warriors closing to close quarters, essential for their style of combat, but would not suffer significantly from the vulnerability of enemy gunfire that had made the tactic obsolete in Europe.

The implementation of this revised strategy was first demonstrated by Wood at Khambula. The fortified camp was comprised of one main entrenched laager, a smaller cattle laager and a redoubt. All three structures were defended whilst artillery guns occupied the space between the main laager and the redoubt. When the movement of the Zulu advance suggested that it might bypass the camp towards Utrecht, Wood ordered the mounted troops to advance and provoke the Zulu right horn. The battle lasted for four hours but the attacks from the 20,000 warriors forming both horns and the chest were sufficiently checked and repelled by the concentrated fire from the main laager, the artillery and the redoubt. When, finally, the Zulu momentum faltered, the mounted troops were dispatched to chase down the retiring Zulus.

The Eshowe Relief Column fought from the laagered position it had prepared the night prior to the Zulu attack. When the Zulus advanced on the morning of 2 April, the Imperial infantry formed square in the gap between the parapet and the wagons whilst the Naval Brigade and its artillery pieces were positioned at the corners and the mounted troops and Native Contingent in the centre of the laager. The Zulu army of over 12,000 warriors converged on the square from two columns but the adequacy of the closed rank firepower prevented them from closing to close quarters and, as soon as the Zulu attack wavered, the Mounted Infantry and Volunteers were dispatched to ride down the retreating warriors.

For what would prove to be the final battle of the war, the combined force of the Second Division and the Flying Column abandoned the security of an entrenched wagon laager and deployed in a hollow square. The sides were formed of ranks of infantry, four deep, with the artillery at the corners and along the sides, and the mounted troops and Native Contingent inside the protective box. The square was marched out onto the Mahlabatini plain and halted at a predetermined position on high ground. When the Zulu advance of over 15,000 warriors slowed, as it neared the British position, mounted troops were dispatched to provoke the Zulu attack. Unable to penetrate the massed concentration of volley fire from the infantry and artillery, the Zulu attacks were repelled from each side of the square and began to falter within half an hour. Mounted troops were then released to pursue, kill and thoroughly disperse the retreating Zulus.

Chelmsford's revised combat strategy was never successfully challenged by any Zulu army following Isandlwana. The tactics proved completely adequate to deal with any size of Zulu army and sufficient to inflict maximum carnage when attacked.

Before Chelmsford had left for South Africa, General Sir John Mitchel had commented, 'Yours, my dear Thesiger, is a command of great danger to you reputation...'³⁰ Enemies in colonial wars were unpredictable in military style and any campaign fought at distance from a permanent base in unfamiliar territory necessitated an adaptability of tactics. Chelmsford's initial strategy had been devised on the expectation of a quick and easy victory against an enemy not considered capable of pressing home a sustained attack. In spite of this, the use of three 'just sufficient' invasion columns was, in

³⁰ Lock & Quantrill, *Zulu Victory*, p50.

principle, adequate to fulfil the invasion objectives. However, staff officers had taken to the field with an overconfident belief in the supremacy of the British soldier's professionalism and firepower over numerical superiority. An arrogant neglect for regulations and colonial advice prevented the key tactical elements of scouting, column defense and battlefield deployment from being implemented adequately enough to fulfil the military objectives during what would be known as the first invasion.

Following the British defeat at Isandlwana, Chelmsford could not afford to take any chances. Certainly from April, the adequate implementation of scouting and defensive arrangements, coupled with the revised battlefield tactic, ensured that the British were able to satisfy the military objectives for the invasion of Zululand. However, it would appear that he overcompensated with his reinvasion strategy. Effectively doubling the size of each column used for the second invasion, due to the volume of reinforcements dispatched, proved excessive and unnecessary. The enemy had already shown a willingness to face the invading foe and only one decisive battle was required to ensure the final destruction of an already ravaged Zulu army. Chelmsford's deployment of two cumbersome columns, each with its associated logistical problems and fortification programme, delayed the final confrontation between the two armies. The war was consequently prolonged and the fulfilment of the military objectives delayed.

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For the men of Number 4 Column, part of a British invasion force in the Zulu kingdom, it had not been a peaceful night. The previous day, they had made a reconnaissance in force to the nearby enemy stronghold on Hlobane Mountain. What should have been a simple operation had turned into a nightmare. At a critical moment in the engagement, the abaQulusi and Khosa (prince) Mbelini kaMswati's renegade Swazi defenders were joined by a Zulu impi (army) of some 20,000 warriors, and the British and Colonial forces under the command of Brevet Colonel Henry Evelyn Wood were routed. Almost 200 British, Colonial and loyal African troops had perished in the debacle. The British-Zulu War begins as British troops under Lieutenant General Frederic Augustus invade Zululand from the southern African republic of Natal. In 1843 Boers, also known as Afrikaners, were the descendants of the original Dutch settlers who came to South Africa in the 17th century. Zulus, a migrant people from the north, also came to southern Africa during the 17th century, settling around the Tugela River region. In 1838, the Boers, migrating north to elude the new British dominions in the south, first came into armed conflict with the Zulus, who were under the rule of King Dingane at the time. The European migrants succeeded in overthrowing Dingane in 1840, replacing him with his son Mpande, who became a vassal of the new Boer republic of Natal. The Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift. G.A. Chadwick, B.A., B.Com. It is not necessary to discuss the causes of the Anglo-Zulu War but it should be remembered that when relations between Britain and the Zulus became strained during the latter half of 1878, Lord Chelmsford, K.C.B., the Lieut. General commanding the British Forces in South Africa, transferred his headquarters from the Cape Colony to Pietermaritzburg the capital of Natal, while steps were taken to strengthen the British forces there, including the transfer of both battalions of the 24th Regiment from the eastern frontier. Famous for the bloody battles of Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift, the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 saw over 15,000 British troops invade the independent nation of Zululand in present-day South Africa. The build up to the war started in 1877 when Sir Henry Frere, a British colonial administrator, was sent to Cape Town with the task of uniting South Africa under a single British confederation. However, Frere soon realised that uniting the Boer republics, independent black states and British colonies could not be realised until the powerful Zulu kingdom on its borders had been defeated. Knowing that London did not want a war with the Zulus (they were too... The discipline of 20,000 Zulu warriors, held them in their Impi and moved them against the guns until the British companies could not feed their guns fast enough and the 24th Battalion was completely overrun. That meant that informing the British people became mandatory. But Zulu success was to prove their downfall. The crushing defeat Cetshwayo and Ntshingwayo Khoza (his principal General) imposed on the British at Isandlwana could not be borne and had to be avenged. Veteran unit reinforcements flowed to Zululand from nearby India where they had been fighting the 2d Afghan War. they made rather short work of the Zulu, who had been badly mauled in winning their two ,small victories.