



The Battle of Isandlwana, shown in a contemporary illustration from the *Illustrated London News*

Never Such a Disaster!

An Analysis of the British Defeat at Isandlwana



By Captain Christine Keating

“Never has such a disaster happened to the English army.”

—Unknown British officer in a letter describing the battle of Isandlwana

On 22 January 1879, British colonial forces clashed with native Zulu warriors at the mountain of Isandlwana in Zululand. Though armed with far superior weaponry, the British were vastly outnumbered and could not overcome the Zulu enemy, dying almost to a man in valiant last stands along the sloping plains at the base of the mountain. However, the defeat was not a simple case of being outnumbered. Commanders on both sides made critical leadership decisions that contributed to the outcome. For the Zulu, these were good decisions; for the British, fatal ones. The resounding victory for the Zulu at the Battle of Isandlwana demonstrates how the proper employment of the military principles of mass and surprise can contribute to military success. The outcome of the battle also exhibits a failure of the British leadership to adhere to the principles of mass and unity of command.

In the late 19th century, Zululand (located along the east coast of present-day South Africa) was situated

between two British colonial territories—Natal to the south and Transvaal to the west-northwest. Following the discovery of diamonds in South Africa years earlier, the geographic location of Zululand made it a highly desirable prize for the British Empire.¹ Therefore, in December 1878, Sir Henry Bartle Frere, a powerful British colonial officer in Natal, issued an ultimatum to King Cetshwayo kaMpande, the Zulu king: Abolish the Zulu *amabutho* (conscription system) and accept a British imperial presence at the Zulu royal homestead—or face occupation by force.² The king refused; and on 11 January 1879, Lieutenant General Frederick Thesiger, Second Baron Chelmsford—commander of the British “Centre Column”—marched 4,500 troops across the Mzinyathi River, which divided Natal from Zululand.³ British aggression against Zulu sovereignty had begun.

After crossing into Zululand, Lord Chelmsford had his 2d Column, under the command of Brevet Colonel

Anthony Durnford, remain at the river crossing at Rorke's Drift, while Lord Chelmsford himself pressed inland with the rest of the Centre Column.⁴ He reached the mountain of Isandlwana on 20 January. There, he paused to set up camp, rest his men, and reconnoiter the surrounding area. Because Lord Chelmsford planned only a temporary stop at Isandlwana, he made no effort to fortify the camp or set up a laager with the wagons.⁵ However, he took steps toward gathering intelligence by sending mounted police, under the command of Major John Dartnell, to reconnoiter Hlazakazi Ridge and Mangueni Gorge to the south, where Chelmsford believed they would encounter the enemy.⁶ There, Major Dartnell's mounted troops spotted a band of several hundred Zulu warriors. He sent word back to camp about what he had discovered and requested reinforcements. Chelmsford, believing that the main body of the Zulu army had been located, personally set out with the reinforcements in the wee hours of the morning on 22 January.⁷ Even this anticipated encounter with the Zulu army was treated lightly; several nonessential staff officers who accompanied Lord Chelmsford had "just come out for a ride."⁸ Chelmsford left the camp under the charge of Lieutenant Colonel Henry Pulleine, one of his battalion commanders who had joined the unit only days before. He also sent orders to Brevet Colonel Durnford to bring his troops forward to Isandlwana.⁹ When the battle began, there were only about 1,700 British troops at Isandlwana, including a few hundred Natal Native Contingent soldiers—native Africans fighting for the British.

The roving band of warriors that Lord Chelmsford's scouts had seen was actually only a portion of King Cetshwayo's planned diversion; his main body was camped further east. The king had recognized the implied threat of Sir Bartle Frere's ultimatum and had begun mustering his citizen-soldiers. Under the Zulu system, there was no standing army; but each military-aged male was trained and belonged to a local militia group that could be called upon to fight.¹⁰ When British forces penetrated Zululand, King Cetshwayo's army, under the command of *inkhosi* (General) Ntshingwayo kaMohole (a seasoned battle veteran and longtime advisor to the king), stood ready



King Cetshwayo kaMpande

at 25,000 warriors.¹¹ Cetshwayo was clearly prepared to adhere to the principle of mass (defined in the current Field Manual [FM] 3-0 as the "[concentration of] the effects of combat power at the decisive place and time"),¹² reserving his entire force—minus scouts and skirmishers—to strike at once. Even after sending roving parties of a few thousand warriors (including the troops that Major Dartnell had located) to divert British attention, Cetshwayo was still able to dedicate more than 20,000 Zulu warriors to one fight, rather than split them up to pursue the various British elements. The result was that the Zulu overwhelmingly outnumbered the British (nearly 20 to 1) when the battle began.

The battle itself began earlier than Lord Cetshwayo and General Ntshingwayo had planned. For religious reasons, the Zulu attack was to take place on the morning



From left: Sir Henry Bartle Frere, Lord Chelmsford, Brevet Colonel Durnford, Major John Dartnell, and Lieutenant Colonel Henry Pulleine

of the 23d, following the new moon on the night of the 22d.¹³ However, upon reaching Isandlwana with the 2d Column on the morning of the 22d, Brevet Colonel Durnford sent some of his troops to perform a reconnaissance; one of the troops (Lieutenant Charles Raw) stumbled upon the sleeping Zulu camp while pursuing a small group of Zulu cattle herders.¹⁴ As it turned out, Chelmsford's initial scouts had not thoroughly reconnoitered the surrounding area and, thus, had no idea that the Zulu army was there. The waning moon had provided a deep cover of darkness for King Cetshwayo's remarkably disciplined army; during the nights preceding the battle, the Zulu warriors slept in complete darkness and silence, with no fires for cooking or warmth.¹⁵

The strict noise-and-light discipline enabled King Cetshwayo to use the element of surprise (defined in FM 3-0 as "[striking] the enemy at a time or place or in a manner for which he is unprepared") against the British.¹⁶ Had it not been for Lieutenant Raw's accidental discovery, the British forces would likely have remained oblivious to the 20,000 warriors camped just a few miles away. Upon being discovered, the Zulu army again demonstrated a high level of discipline—the obvious result of rigorous training and the thorough dissemination of the battle plan. The surprised Zulu soldiers immediately swarmed the startled British scouts and began pursuit back toward Isandlwana, organizing their battle formations on the run.¹⁷ Zulu commanders rapidly regained control of the rushing, disarrayed army, forming their units into their signature "buffalo" formation in which forces divided into right and left "horns," with the bulk of the force comprising the "chest" in the center. Because the attack had not been anticipated, the British camp at Isandlwana was vulnerable and woefully unprepared for the sudden enveloping swarm of Zulu that descended upon it.

Although Lieutenant Raw sent runners back to warn Lieutenant Colonel Pulleine of the pending attack,¹⁸ there was little the defenders could do in the short time before the Zulu warriors were upon them. Chelmsford's decision to divide his forces, born of his gross underestimation of Zulu capabilities, had left the camp with arrantly insufficient manpower and artillery. This decision to split the British forces directly contradicts the enduring military principle of mass. Chelmsford clearly believed that a portion of his force could handle the Zulu threat—a belief formed partially by Major Dartnell's report that only a few hundred Zulu had been sighted and partially by the arrogant, but widely accepted, colonial wisdom of the day that the British could not be defeated by a native force. Incomplete intelligence, coupled with Chelmsford's faith in the apparent superiority of British weaponry and fighting capability, caused him to discount the value of mass—one of the most timeless military principles. Had the entire Centre Column been present at Isandlwana when the Zulu army attacked, the resultant increase in manpower and the rate of fire could probably have

stayed a complete rout at least and crushed the lesser-equipped Zulu force at most.

When he chose to leave Isandlwana, Lord Chelmsford also failed to ensure that the unity of command (defined in FM 3-0 as "unity of effort under one responsible commander") was preserved at the camp.¹⁹ He ordered Lieutenant Colonel Pulleine to remain at the camp and protect it with his battalion. He simultaneously issued vague orders to Brevet Colonel Durnford to "march to [Isandlwana] at once with all the force you have," without specifying the purpose for Durnford's presence at the camp.²⁰ As a result, Durnford arrived at Isandlwana unsure of whether he was expected to follow on after Chelmsford's main body in anticipation of battle or if he was to remain at the camp. Additionally, since Durnford outranked Pulleine, Durnford expected to take command upon his arrival. For his part, Pulleine was specifically instructed that the camp and its security were his responsibility, and he had no intention of relinquishing his command or supplementing Durnford's column with his troops.²¹ This confusion over who was truly in charge prevented either man from establishing command and control and inhibited efforts to establish security and a clear logistical support structure.

Having no unity of command had a direct negative effect on combat units once the fighting began. Lieutenant Colonel Pulleine's quartermasters were unprepared to support the increase in the number of troops resulting from the addition of Brevet Colonel Durnford's column. Because quartermasters were reluctant to distribute ammunition to soldiers outside their units, many crates of ammunition went unopened during the battle.²² Meanwhile, soldiers ran out of ammunition on the lines. And the fighting was soon reduced to hand-to-hand combat, where the practiced Zulu warriors—with their short spears and clubs—had the advantage. The British "fought there till their ammunition was exhausted, and then [were] surrounded and slaughtered."²³ The technological superiority of the British Martini-Henry rifles was completely negated once fighting closed to spear and bayonet range.

The final outcome of the battle was devastating to the British. Of the original 1,700 troops, the few hundred Natal Native Contingent soldiers fled at the outset of the battle; among the British, only five officers and about fifty soldiers survived.²⁴ Lord Chelmsford's failure to mass his forces and ensure the unity of command through clear orders left the troops at Isandlwana with inadequate defenses. The result was "the most improbable military defeat in British colonial history."²⁵ King Cetshwayo successfully used the element of surprise and the overwhelming mass of his army to catch the British off guard and effectively neutralize their advantages. He exploited Chelmsford's decision to split the British force by attacking and destroying the lesser force left in the rear. Despite sustaining nearly 1,000 casualties of their own,²⁶ the Zulu had won an undeniable victory over a better-equipped aggressor.

The principles of mass, surprise, and unity of command illustrated at Isandlwana are as relevant in the current operating environment as they were during colonial wars in 1879. The enduring lessons of the Battle of Isandlwana can be easily transferred to the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan. Commanders must always ensure that they have adequate forces to strike decisively whenever and wherever the mission dictates. They must never underestimate their opponents' capabilities or be lulled into a false sense of security by the assumption of technological superiority. And they must ensure that their orders are clear, precise, and enforced. A failure on any one of these points could lead to a situation that echoes the events of Isandlwana. In modern terms, a poor, ill-equipped guerrilla or insurgent force could easily overcome a stronger, professional, military force that disregards the principles of war.

The success of the Zulu quickly turned bitter. The defeat at Isandlwana only inflamed the British colonial fervor, raising massive, popular support for the war and inciting a deep passion for revenge on the Zulu. Only hours later, a similarly outnumbered, but better-prepared, British force at Rorke's Drift decimated the attacking Zulu.²⁷ Within months, King Cetshwayo's forces were ultimately defeated and Britain gained control over the entire southern cape of Africa.²⁸ However, during the Battle of Isandlwana itself, the two opposing commanders proved how the proper application of the principles of war—or callous disregard for those same principles—can lead to the most unlikely of victories. Whether in nineteenth-century Africa or on today's urban battlefields, a commander's respect for the principles of war can be an unparalleled combat multiplier on the road to victory.

Endnotes:

¹Ian Knight, *Isandlwana 1879: The Great Zulu Victory*, Osprey Publishing, Oxford, Great Britain, 2002, p. 10.
²Ibid, p. 11.
³Ibid, p. 35.
⁴Ibid, p. 31.
⁵Ibid, p. 37.
⁶Donald R. Morris, *The Washing of the Spears: A History of the Rise of the Zulu Nation*, Simon and Schuster, Inc., New York, 1965, p. 332.
⁷Ibid, p. 339.
⁸Charles L. Norris-Newman, *In Zululand With the British Throughout the War of 1879*, W. H. Allen and Company, London, 1880, p. 54.
⁹Morris, p. 337.
¹⁰Knight, p. 23.
¹¹Ibid, p. 13.
¹²FM 3-0, *Operations*, 27 February 2008.
¹³Knight, p. 51.



Monument to the fallen Zulu warriors at the battlefield. The mountain of Isandlwana is in the background.

¹⁴Robert B. Edgerton, *Like Lions They Fought: The Zulu War and the Last Black Empire in South Africa*, Free Press, New York, 1988, p. 83.
¹⁵Knight, p. 51.
¹⁶FM 3-0.
¹⁷Morris, p. 363.
¹⁸Ibid.
¹⁹FM 3-0.
²⁰Morris, p. 338.
²¹Knight, p. 46.
²²Norris-Newman, p. 63.
²³Ibid, p. 61.
²⁴Knight, p. 86.
²⁵Edgerton, p. 1.
²⁶Knight, p. 86.
²⁷Edgerton, p. 96.
²⁸Morris, p. 596.

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