

# The Battle of Isandlwana

The Western way of war  
by Justin W. Williamson

The principles of the Western way of war have been victorious on countless battlefields throughout history, but modern military planners must bear in mind that it is not an exact formula to win a battle and can be fatal if wrongly applied or if individual principles are weighted too heavily during a conflict. The Western way of war rests upon five pillars: the superiority of Western weapons and technology to make up for inferior numbers; discipline of forces; an aggressive military tradition; the ability to constantly adapt and improve; and the ability to finance large armies and wage war.<sup>1</sup> However, simply blindly following these principles, regardless if done unintentionally or by design, invites disaster as the 1879 British catastrophe during the Battle of Isandlwana demonstrates.

In 1878, the English High Commissioner in Southern Africa, Sir Henry Bartle Frere, attempted to form a British confederation among the various territories in Southern Africa. But the Zulu kingdom, under King Cetshwayo kaMpande, did not want to cede to British territorial demands; Frere then determined that war was necessary to defeat the Zulus.<sup>2</sup> Frere and his Commander in Chief, Lieutenant General Lord Chelmsford, believed the numerically superior army of Zulus could be quickly defeated in their homeland of 15,000 square miles by a series of swift maneuvers converging on the Zulu capital at Ulundi.<sup>3</sup> Confident of an easy victory, Chelmsford crossed the Buffalo River into Zulu territory with his mixed force of 17,000 troops on 11 January 1879.<sup>4</sup> King kaMpande calculated that the key to victory involved drawing the British

forces into his lands and then destroying the central column converging on Isandlwana.<sup>5</sup> Chelmsford, based on his own military experience and history of wars in the region, completely miscalculated the capabilities of his army and that of the 35,000 strong Zulu army.<sup>6</sup>

Part of his miscalculation stemmed from Chelmsford's belief that British troops, reinforced by a series of reforms in discipline, training, and equipment since the war in Crimea, were inherently superior to any African natives.<sup>7</sup> While unemployment was still a primary motivation to join the British army, the quality of troops

had improved leading up to the Zulu campaign. Isolated from civilian life in their barracks and encampments, they were generally well fed and discipline problems were declining. Nevertheless, the lash remained at the ready just in case, with 545 soldiers being flogged during the Zulu campaign.<sup>8</sup> For a shilling a day, and inspired by stories of war, they were prepared to travel to far-flung regions of the globe to fight for the six years of the enlistment contract.<sup>9</sup> Yet, desertion rates in 1878 were nineteen percent.<sup>10</sup> Despite the British Army Cardwell Reforms from 1868 to 1874, which abolished the sales of

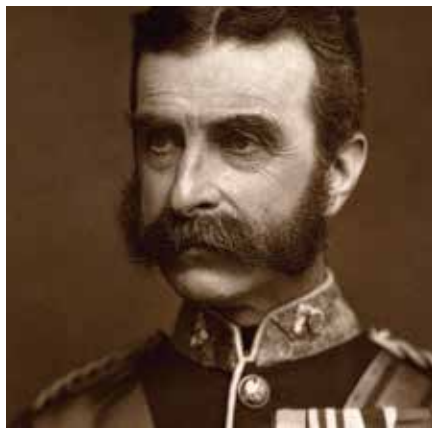
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*"The Battle of Isandlwana." (Painting by Charles Fripp, National Army Museum.)*



**Cetshwayo, King of the Zulus (d. 1884).** (Painting by Carl Rudolph Sohn, 1882.)



**LtGen Lord Chelmsford.** (Photo undated.)

officer ranks, most of the officers had earlier bought their way into their positions and had little formal training on tactics and strategy.<sup>11</sup>

In weapons, the British enjoyed obvious superiority. British troops were armed with the Model 1871 Martini-Henry single-shot, breach-loading rifle, firing a .45 caliber bullet. Used in volley fire, British troops could engage targets up to 800 yards and individuals could hit targets with a degree of accuracy up to 400 yards.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the British possessed eighteen canons (six and seven pounders), five rocket batteries (nine pounder), and even a Gatling gun.<sup>13</sup> The three-foot rockets were hopelessly inaccurate, but they were considered a great psychological weapon against the supposed primitive natives.<sup>14</sup>

Knowing his Zulu army could not withstand the withering fire of the massed British forces on their own terms, kaMpande planned to draw the British into Zululand where he could take advantage of the deep ravines to mask his forces and rapidly close and attack British forces, thus negating his opponent's advantage in weapons technology. The Zulus were armed primarily with a stabbing spear that had a twelve-to eighteen-inch blade and had only leather shields for protection. Although lacking modern weapons and equipment, the Zulus' ability to live off the land gave them a great deal of mobility and speed.<sup>15</sup>

As Chelmsford split his forces in pursuit of the Zulus, kaMpande maneuvered to attack with the traditional

“impondo zankomo” or “beast horns” tactic. The main force of the Zulus would meet enemies head on while left and right forces, the horns, would curve around and attack the enemy flanks.<sup>16</sup> On 22 January, the head of the beast was heading right at the central British column of 1,774 men encamped at the base of Isandlwana, a jagged rocky

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hill. Normally, British doctrine called for fortifying encampments and positioning wagons in defensive positions whenever they bivouacked. However, officers and NCOs in the encampment, observing Chelmsford's dismissal of these precautions, also assumed they could outfight any Zulus approaching and did not take the initiative to prepare better defensive positions.<sup>17</sup> Here, overconfidence in their weapons and training reached a zenith. Absolutely sure the firing-arc and rapid-fire capability of their Martini-Henry rifles could easily defeat any attacking Zulu forces, the British forces deployed up to a mile in front of the main encampment and ammunition supplies.<sup>18</sup> In command of the encampment at Isandlwana, Lieutenant Colonel Henry Pulleine's over-

confidence in the Martini-Henry rifles to decisively defeat the Zulus placed him at a severe disadvantage in tactical planning.<sup>19</sup>

In the ensuing battle, any advantage the invaders thought they had quickly dissipated as the Zulus were able to use the dominant terrain of ravines to approach the British forces faster than expected with the horns of their attack formation outflanking the main body of the British. The Zulus were far too numerous and too fast. The British defensive setup was poorly suited to the terrain and enemy they faced, and they were quickly overwhelmed.

British riflemen, while doing their best to remain calm and keep formation, soon found themselves running out of ammunition. Each soldier had a basic load of only 70 rounds with few engagements ever needing this amount of ammunition, but extra ammunition always came with the supply trains.<sup>20</sup> Approximately 480,000 rounds of ammunition for the troops remained back at the wagons and was being rigidly controlled, per regulations, and in secure boxes nearly impossible to open without the right tools. Survivors testified that the quartermaster demanded accountability of each round issued and stubbornly held to a strict unit distribution system, even making units out of ammunition wait their turn in line.<sup>21</sup> Chaos further increased as the thick, black smoke and noise of volley fire enveloped the troops, leaving them firing blindly into the advancing Zulus. Even the cannons, scoring direct hits on Zulu formations with case shot rounds, were swarmed over within minutes.<sup>22</sup> By the time the last of the defenders made a desperate escape, 862 British soldiers and 500 native allies were dead.

Despite the Isandlwana catastrophe, the British were able to eventually win the war, but the battle highlights the flaws of assuming the Western way of war can carry the day. It is doubtful, in the face of overwhelming odds, the British would have lasted much longer had their officers engaged in better planning and recognized the advantages the Zulus held, but maybe more would have survived an organized withdrawal or last long enough for reinforcements to

arrive. Modern military planners will be keen to remember the Battle of Isandlwana and take away three key lessons about the application of the Western way of war.

Primarily, overconfidence and the seeking of a quick decisive battle can be very dangerous if commanders allow their own hubris to blind them to strategic considerations and ignore the fact the enemy may be maneuvering their own forces to spring their own trap. As the British found out, the separation of forces, in a vain attempt to find and destroy the Zulus, left their forces isolated and vulnerable to a Zulu leader who knew how to fight the English deep in his own territory. Secondly, planners must remember that over reliance on technology to win a battle or war can be fatal. Modern weapons will not defeat a seemingly inferior enemy unless properly employed and in conjunction with a combined arms force. Finally, strict adherence to regulations and rigidity in battle must sometimes give way as events unfold on the ground to allow troops to take their own initiative. For the British at Isandlwana, the failure to follow their own doctrine of preparing defensive positions overnight because the officers did not order it meant they were completely exposed. The rigidity of the ammunition distribution meant troops could not unleash their full volleys as rapidly as they should have.



**Sketch of Lord Chelmsford before the battle of Ulindi, July 1879. (Sketch by an unknown officer who was present at the battle.)**

Western way of war can work against them if they do not take an unbiased look at their plans and capabilities of the enemy. Commanders must keep an open mind about their plans or, like

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Isandlwana showed a modern army, against an inferior enemy that can decisively bring their own forces to bear at the right time and place with maximum power, can be defeated despite their advantages. Modern planners must remember that the underpinnings of the

Lord Chelmsford, be confronted with specter of a modern, well-armed army defeated by spears.

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#### Notes

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7. Donald Morris, *The Washing of the Spears*, (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1965).
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21. Ibid.
22. *Crossing the Buffalo*.

