

## Was Lord Chelmsford Decoyed?

The Missing Five Hours having for the present run its course, I would like to introduce a subject, not only dear to my heart but also one I anticipate will stir lively debate and fill the void left by TMFH: Was Lord Chelmsford Decoyed?

Think on the following: what was Lord Chelmsford's mindset on the eve of the invasion; what was his strategy and what intelligence did he have of the territory he was about to invade?

Having successfully concluded the 1878 9<sup>th</sup> Frontier War he was extremely overconfident. As early as July 1878, he wrote to Sire Bartle Frere "*... If we are to fight with the Zulus, I am anxious that our arrangements should be as complete as it is possible to make them – half measures do not answer with natives – they must be thoroughly crushed to make them believe in our superiority.*"

In November 1878 he wrote to Col. Evelyn Wood; "*I am inclined to think that the first experience of the power of the Martini Henrys will be such a surprise to the Zulus that they will not be formidable after the first effort.*"

At about the time No. 3 Column was departing Helpmekaar for Rorkes Drift, Chelmsford wrote "*I am inclined to think we may possibly induce him [Cetshwayo] to attack us which will save us a great deal of trouble.*"

The day following No. 3 Column's success at Sihayo's stronghold he wrote to Sir Bartle Frere: "*I am in great hopes that the news of the storming of Sihayo's Stronghold and the capture of so many of his cattle may have a salutary effect in Zululand and either bring down a large force to attack us or else produce a revolution in the country.*"

In a further communication to Sir Bartle Frere on the 16<sup>th</sup> January, he wrote "*These combined moves [Chelmsford's proposed strategy] will, I hope, have the effect of removing any dangerously large body [of Zulus] from the border ... from a military point of view I am convinced that it is the only practical one at this time of the year ... we shall oblige Cetewayo to keep his army mobilized, and it is certain that his troops will have difficulty in finding food. If kept*

*inactive, they will become dangerous to himself; if ordered to attack us he will be playing our game.”* Chelmsford concluded his communication to Frere by stating *“When Cetshwayo has either surrendered or been defeated, which can only take a few more days to decide ...”*

With the exception of No. 4 Column which was to have an independent command in the north, Chelmsford’s strategy, the “combined moves” referred to above, was that the remainder of the invasion force would, in various columns, cross the Tugela and Buffalo rivers at different drifts, of which there were at least twenty between Fort Pearson and Rorkes Drift. Colonel Pearson’s No. 1 Column, after crossing the Tugela, would advance towards Eshowe; Col. Durnford’s No. 2 Column would cross the Tugela at Middledrift and Col. Glen’s No. 3 Column at Rorkes Drift .

The combined moves he confided to Sir Bartle Frere would, he hoped, have the effect of removing any dangerous body of Zulus from the Natal Border. What, in fact, he hoped to achieve with little more than eleven thousand troops of whom 8000 were Natal Native Contingent (NNC), was to occupy a corridor of land, consisting mostly of rugged wilderness, 120 miles long, leave an army of occupation therein, and then, with the remainder of his depleted force, push on to seek the Zulu Army. As will be seen later, fortunately fate, in the form of Henry Francis Fynn, inadvertently intervened to save Chelmsford’s army from a disaster that would have been, perhaps, greater than Isandlwana. He also anticipated that No.3 Column would be at the Zulu capital within a week. In December 1878 he wrote to Colonel Wood:

*“I find on reading Chase’s History of Natal, that in 1838 Andries Pretorius, with a commando of 400 men, took only six days to march from Rorkes Drift to the hill where Retief and his party were massacred [12 miles from Ulundi]. They entered Zululand on 13 December during the rainy season ... the road Pretorius took is the same as Glynn’s column will move along.”*

He went on to say that he had spoken to an ancient Boer who had accompanied Pretorius and who confirmed the route to be hard and open all the way to the White Umfolozi. However, Chelmsford was mistaken, Pretorius did not cross the Buffalo at Rorkes Drift, but at Landsman’s Drift on the Ncome River, some distance beyond present day Dundee, and instead of the Rorkes

Drift route being hard and open, Chelmsford was soon complaining: “No.3 Column cannot possibly move forward even eight miles until two swamps into which our wagons sink up to the body, have been made passable.”

Accurate maps of the territory ahead were non-existent and Chelmsford would realize that his intelligence department, if it can be so called, consisting of two civilians, the Hon. William Drummond and Henry Longcast, could be improved upon. He complained to the Duke of Cambridge ;

*“I have already pointed out to Your Royal Highness how impossible it has been to obtain really reliable information regarding the country even from those who ought to know it well. They have never been accustomed to look at any of the roads from any but a trading point of view, and are therefore quite unable to give the detailed information which is so important where movements of troops are concerned.”*

It was therefore with great eagerness that Chelmsford sought to conscript Henry Francis Fynn, the magistrate of Msinga, an administrative post with a stone courthouse close to Helpmekaar, approximately fifteen miles above Rorkes Drift. If anyone knew the Zulu and their language, it was Fynn, whose father, also Henry Francis Fynn, had been the first Englishman to have visited the Court of King Shaka. Thereafter he had resided in Zululand/Natal for the rest of his life. His son, brought up amongst the Zulu, spoke isiZulu like a Zulu and as an indication of the esteem in which he was held on both sides of the border, he had been given the name “Gwalawala’, the “Red Feathers of the Lurie Bird,” a distinction of the highest honour. He had also been present at the coronation of King Cetshwayo. Chelmsford was eager to have this man on his staff but he required the sanction of Sir Henry Bulwer, the Governor. Chelmsford in his eagerness overrode this formality advising Frere that without Bulwer’s permission he had conscripted Fynn to his staff.

Shortly after No. 3 Column had crossed the Buffalo at Rorkes Drift, Colonel Durnford arrived from Kranskop, above Middledrift, to confer with Chelmsford. He then returned with the orders mentioned above, to break his column into three units, one to remain at Kranskop ready to invade across Middledrift, the 2<sup>nd</sup> to move to Msinga ready to cross at the kwaMahamba Drift whilst Durnford and his cavalry were to proceed to Rorkes Drift and await orders. However, on

arrival at Kranskop exciting news awaited Durnford. Bishop Schreuder , a missionary who had lived for many years in Zululand, brought news of an impending Zulu invasion across Middledrift. Without seeking corroboration, and no doubt it would have been difficult to do so – the impulsive Durnford, disregarding Chelmsford’s orders, prepared to counterattack and sent Lt. Shepstone post haste to Chelmsford advising his intent. But before he could cross the drift, Shepstone, having galloped 120 miles, using post horses along the way, returned carrying Chelmsford’s reprimand that Durnford was to obey orders. I contend the possibility that Schreuder’s news was fed to him as a deliberate ploy, attempting to draw Durnford and his column into Zululand on a wild goose chase. The first Zulu attempt to decoy the invaders?

Fynn, now on the staff, had also received information of a Zulu plan that would have its army descend the Mangeni Valley of the Hlazakazi Mountain and take cover in the Qudini Forest until No. 3 Column advanced sufficiently, then to work round from the Mangeni Valley into the Buffalo River and so cut off the column ‘in the rear and close upon it’; the Chief Matshana Mondisa was to be tasked with guarding the area between Qudini, Mangeni and Malakatha . But had Fynn, perhaps like Schreuder, been fed false information? Is it possible Fynn had a double agent, or several on his payroll? Yes, I think it is highly likely. In 1867 the Zulu population of Natal was estimated at 170 000 of whom many were refugees from the battle of nDondakusuka fought in 1856 between Cetsh wayo and his brother Mbuyazi. But was it likely that such people, the menfolk of whom would form the bulk of the NNC, would betray their British masters? Yes, it would seem so. In August of 1878 Chelmsford had written to Frere:

*If all the young blood amongst the Natal Zulus are separated into three distinct Corps and mixed up with the European parties of our army, any danger of their rising against us, which by some is considered not only possible but probable, would be at once removed.*

Fynn joined Chelmsford on the morning of the 20<sup>th</sup> January and with the General and his staff rode east from Isandlwana Camp:

*“I proceeded with Lord Chelmsford to show him where the Zulus were concealed in the Mangi [sic] Valley, an immense basin of precipitous depths.*

*From the edge of the Hlazakazi the cattle on the broad circular plains below looked like ants. There were lots of bush and other shelter there, but no dense forest ... glasses were put to use, but only a few cattle were discernible. That the Zulus were there, there were no doubts expressed, however. “ (writer’s emphasis)*

Fynn’s party then departed to Mangeni where the site for the next camp was selected. Fynn continued to describe how that evening orders were given for Commandant Lonsdale with the bulk of the NNC, supported by Major Dartnell and the colonial cavalry on the high ground, to proceed at dawn the next day, the 21<sup>st</sup>,” down the valley to the south of Isandlwana, past the kraal of Chief Gamdana, and the “west side of the Malakata’s precipitous rocky hill” to follow the Buffalo River and to “follow it down to the Mangeni plain and then beat up to the top.” A study of the terrain as reflected on a present day 1: 50 000 contour map, reveals the near impossibility of Lonsdale’s task.

During the same day Fynn guided Chelmsford and his staff to the kraal of Chief Gamdama, “only to find he was hiding in the Buffalo River, fearing the Zulus as well as European forces”. However, on returning to camp it was not long before Gamdama arrived accompanied by another old chief, both bringing an assortment of ancient guns as a token of surrender. Later it was inferred by Col. Crealock of Chelmsford’s staff, that the real purpose of their visit was to spy on the camp and report on its defences to the Zulu army.

While Chelmsford and his staff had spent the day in the belief that the Zulu army was hidden in the Mangeni Valley it had, in fact, bypassed the valley eight miles to the north east on the previous day on its way to Isipesi Hill where it had bivouacked for the night. I contend that at some time during that day, the 20<sup>th</sup>, the Zulu command made physical contact with Chief Matshana to discuss the further deception of the British Army if and when the opportunity arose; that communications, “Calling Posts” shouting from hill to hill, had been established between Matshana and the Zulu command and that an element of the Zulu army had been left to support Matshana at Mangeni.

The following day, at the same time as Lonsdale and Dartnell had embarked on their futile search, the Zulu army left its bivouac at Isipesi and stealthily made its way through the undulations of the Isandlwana plain to a place of

concealment in the Ngwebini valley, seven miles from the British camp at Isandlwana Hill.

What then, at that time, was the plan or intent of Ntshingwayo kaMahole the Zulu commander? The answer is, of course, we do not know. He most likely considered three options.

1. Cut off the British as they moved forward and close upon them.
2. Attack the camp the following day or the day after.
3. Await events.

I contend Ntshingwayo opted for the latter.

As the Zulu vanguard began to settle in the Ngwebini Valley, Lord Chelmsford, having dismissed Gamdama, decided to reconnoiter the Nqutu Plateau in the very direction of the Zulu army's place of concealment. Later that afternoon Chelmsford and his staff, having reached the highest point of the Plateau, looked north and, at a distance of four miles, saw a party of 14 mounted Zulus. Both groups observed each other and departed. It was at about that moment messengers from Dartnell arrived with news that he and Lonsdale had joined forces and "... had come up with the enemy in considerable force." Lt. Milne, RN, of Chelmsford's staff later wrote;

*Major Dartnell sent in for instructions as to what he was to do; in the meantime if no orders were sent, he intended to bivouac on the ground he had taken up and watch the enemy. Orders were immediately sent to Major Dartnell to attack if and when he thought fit. Food was also sent for his force.*

The situation then would seem to be working out along the lines that Fynn's spies had forecast: the Zulu army had come out of hiding but before it could close upon the British and "take it in the rear" it had found itself confronted by Dartnell and Lonsdale's troops to whom Chelmsford had now given the order to attack as and when seen fit to do so. But what was the actual strength of the British force at Mangeni? Lonsdale's NNC amounted to sixteen companies totaling 1600 men including, say, 150 white officers and NCO's. The rank and file were armed one rifle and ten rounds of ammunition per every tenth man, the rest armed with spear and shield. The white officers and NCO's could have

been armed with anything from hand guns to rifles. The exact number of Dartnell's mounted colonials is not known. There were a total of 366 mounted men with No. 3 column, including 120 Imperial Mounted Infantry, of whom a fair number would have remained in camp for vedette and other duties. Say 200 with Dartnell armed with carbines and 50 rounds of ammunition apiece. The detachment had no food and no water, and no reserve of ammunition, darkness was approaching and reinforcements were ten miles away. Not an impressive force with which to attack what was anticipated to be the main Zulu army emerging from the Mangeni Valley. Was it Chelmsford's over confidence or his contempt of his enemies ability that prompted him to authorize Dartnell to attack?

Fortunately Dartnell was a soldier of considerable experience. Late in the afternoon a large force of Zulus had been encountered, their numbers steadily increasing. Dartnell, keeping a small valley between him and the enemy would not be drawn to attack. Instead, his combined force took up a position on a small plateau; the NNC behind the horsemen. In an attempt to estimate the strength of the enemy, Dartnell called for volunteers to force the opposition to show its hand. As the troopers rode forward suddenly:

*From one end of the ridge to the other ... rose a long line of black warriors advancing at the double in short intervals of skirmishing order. It was a magnificent spectacle that no British Regiment could excel in keeping their distances in skirmishing order at the double. They uttered no sound.*

Not Matshana's local warriors, I contend, but an element of a disciplined Zulu regiment left in support.

Dartnell decided to sit out the night while news of his encounter, as we have seen, was sent post haste to Chelmsford.

I further contend that Ntshingwayo would have been aware of the encounter at Mangeni and believing it was a situation which could evolve to his advantage gave orders to Matshana or the Zulu commander, not to press an attack but to keep Dartnell surrounded in anticipation that British troops would be sent to the rescue. Thus the situation evolved to Ntshingwayo's advantage. Chelmsford did march to Dartnell's support the following morning and was

decoyed further as his force was led on a will o' the wisp chase into the Pindo Hills. Ntshingwayo, when satisfied that Chelmsford's column was too scattered and far enough from base to be a threat, descended on the British camp. The rest is history.