

The war-readiness and military effectiveness of the Zulu forces in the 1879 Anglo-Zulu War

The stunning and unexpected success of the Zulu army over the British at the battle of Isandlwana on 22 January 1879 forced the invading British drastically to reassess Zulu military capability and brought Zulu military prowess dramatically to the attention of the British public. The death of the ill-fated Prince Imperial of France in Zululand on 1 June 1879 while out on patrol further cemented internationally the reputation the Zulu already enjoyed in southern Africa as a warrior people who were a constant threat to the security of their neighbours. More than that, it ensured that their reputation has survived to this day as the quintessential warrior race.

Yet is this military reputation entirely deserved? So often a commonly held perception turns out to be essentially a

myth created (whether unconsciously or by design) and nurtured until it is accepted as fact. With regard to the Anglo-Zulu War, have assumptions about the war-readiness of Zulu fighting-men been sufficiently questioned, and has the effectiveness of the Zulu army been considered critically enough?

In south-eastern Africa the reputation of the victorious Zulu army goes back to the 1820s when King Shaka kaSenzangakhona was consolidating the Zulu kingdom by incorporating or displacing his enemies, and was sending raiding armies far to the north and south. Already in the Eastern Cape the British authorities were aware that Zulu raids close to their borders might destabilise the region, and that the Zulu kingdom was a power to be reckoned with. The Portuguese came to the same conclu-

sion when in 1833 King Dingane kaSenzangakhona sent an army to Delagoa Bay to assert his dominance over the traders there. When the Voortrekkers invaded the Zulu kingdom in late 1837 seeking land on which to settle, they were very wary of the power of the Zulu state and initially sought to negotiate a territorial grant. The subsequent hard-fought war of 1838 between the Voortrekkers and the Zulu made the Zulu far more widely known across southern Africa. The Zulu destruction of many of the Boer encampments in the foothills of the Drakensberg on 16–17 February 1838 and the rout of Boer commandos at eThaleni on 10 April 1838 and the White Mfolozi on 27 December 1838 confirmed the reputation of the Zulu as warriors to be greatly feared, as did their crushing of the Port Natal settlers allied to the Boers at the battle of the Thukela on 17 April 1838 and their sacking of their trading settlement at Port Natal (Durban) between 24 April and 3 March 1838.

Thereafter, Zulu campaigns against the Pedi in 1851 and the Swazi until the early 1850s kept apprehension among their neighbours alive, as did the civil war of 1856 and its destabilising repercussions for both the kingdom's settler neighbours, Natal and the South African Republic (SAR). Genuine British concern about Zulu military potential only surfaced in the mid-1870s when the imperial drive for the confederation of South Africa under the Crown gathered pace. The continued existence of an independent and belligerent Zulu kingdom was seen as stumbling block to the process not only because of the existing territorial dispute between the SAR and the Zulu kingdom that the British inherited when they annexed the Transvaal Territory (formerly the SAR) in 1877, but also because the Cape Colony (the most important piece in the confederation puzzle) was wary of becoming part of

a confederation that might involve it in an unwelcome Zulu war. Consequently, the High Commissioner, Sir Bartle Frere, who was driving the confederation process, decided that he must break Zulu military capacity. To persuade the British government that it was necessary to risk war to do so, he made it his determined business to exaggerate and hammer home the threat the Zulu military system posed to the security of the neighbouring colonies of Natal and the Transvaal, and to claim that the Zulu were putting themselves at the head of a 'black conspiracy' aimed at driving the British out of South Africa. As a result, for the first time the British government and public consciously conceived of the Zulu as a dangerous military nation, and Frere's lurid characterisation of the Zulus as a 'frightfully efficient man-slaying war-machine' caught the British imagination.

Yet the commander of the British troops preparing in late 1878 for the invasion of Zululand, Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford, as well as his staff, entertained a rather different view of the enemy they were to fight. On the one hand, Chelmsford employed the Natal Border Agent, Frederick Fynney, to prepare for distribution to his officers his detailed booklet called *The Zulu Army and Zulu Headmen* outlining the sophisticated Zulu military organisation and capability the British were about to face; while on the other, the general and his staff remained caught up by their recent experiences fighting the Gceleka and Ngqika Xhosa in the Ninth Cape Frontier War and presumed (despite Fynney's booklet) that they would defeat the Zulu as handily as they had the Xhosa. It was because Isandlwana so unexpectedly overthrew this fatal but pervasive under-estimation of the Zulu army, and because it was highly unusual and deeply shocking for British troops to be routed and massacred in one of Queen

Victoria's routine 'small wars' of imperial conquest, that Zulu military ability became so notorious. After all, only the very best warriors in the world could have defeated a British army, so their military skills simply had to be astounding. That is what made the British defence of Rorke's Drift so magnificent, and warranted the award of eleven Victoria Crosses.

The subsequent Zulu defeat in the Anglo-Zulu War once the British had adjusted their tactics appropriately to make proper use of their overwhelming fire-power in all-round defensive positions like laagers and infantry squares, was consequently cried up as a hazardous and laudable achievement by British arms over a truly formidable foe. Disastrous Zulu defeats such as at Khambula on 29 March 1879 and Gingindlovu on 2 April 1879 were not therefore presented as Zulu strategic and tactical failures so much as noteworthy British successes against heavy odds. And this is the position that has endured in much of the literature of the Anglo-Zulu War, for where would the drama be if the war was really nothing but a predictable British military promenade through Zululand, punctuated by a few careless lapses that gave the Zulu some unexpected and undeserved victories?

It is not the intention here to detract in any way from the undoubted courage of Zulu fighting-men or the skill of their commanders. Nevertheless, by probing the conventional wisdom regarding the Zulu military performance in 1879, problems with Zulu battle-preparedness will be brought to light, and it will be suggested that Zulu irregulars were more successful in facing the British than were the *amabutho* (age-grade regiments) of the conventional military system.

Consider first Zulu battle-preparedness. In early January 1879 the *amabutho* mobilised fully in the Mahlabathini plain in order

to repel the British invasion that began on 11 January once Frere's ultimatum with its impossibly stringent demands expired. Prior to that, in September 1878, several *amabutho* had been mobilised to stage mock hunts along the Natal-Zululand border as a show of strength during the escalating crisis that culminated in the delivery of the British ultimatum on 11 December 1878. In October 1878 King Cetshwayo kaMpande had mobilised much of the Zulu army believing that war was imminent, but had let it disperse again in November when the British took no action. Seventeen years prior to that, in mid-1861, the Zulu army had partially mobilised against the Transvaal Boers who were making incursions into north-western Zululand, and these military precautions had set off the so-called Zulu 'Invasion Scare' in Natal. Yet not one of these three mobilisations before the final one in January 1879 preceded actual hostilities against either the Boers or the British. In that sense, they were no different from the annual mustering of the *amabutho* in the Mahlabathini plain for the *umKhosi* (first-fruits ceremony) when the army was ritually strengthened. In fact, the last mobilisation that had resulted in an actual campaign against whites had been in December 1838 during the Voortrekker-Zulu War, 40 years before.

And what was the Zulu military record in wars against other African polities in the 40 years between the Voortrekker-Zulu War and the Anglo-Zulu War? Taking advantage of the Voortrekker defeat of the Ndebele on the highveld in 1836–1837, the Zulu raided the Ndebele between June and September 1837, although with disappointingly limited success. After the Boer victory at Ncome on 16 December 1838 in the Voortrekker-Zulu War, King Dingane attempted to carve out a new kingdom north across the Phongolo to put space between him and the Voortrekkers. In the

winter of 1839 he made a serious attempt to conquer the southern half of the Swazi kingdom, but the Swazi defeated four of his *amabutho* at the battle of Lubuye and forced him to abandon the project.

A dynastic dispute in Swaziland in the mid-1840s gave King Mpande kaSenzangakhona a fresh opportunity for Zulu intervention. One claimant, Prince Mswati waSobhuza, who in July 1846 had secured the military assistance of the Ohrigstad Boers (in what would later be part of the SAR) defeated Prince Malambule waSobhuza, the claimant supported by Mpande, and pursued him into northwestern Zululand. This gave Mpande his *casus belli* and his *amabutho* invaded Swaziland in early 1847. Baffled by Swazi irregular warfare and Boer firepower, the Zulu withdrew in July 1847. In 1848 Mpande invaded again. This time Mswati had no Boer support because they had switched it to another royal claimant, Prince Somcuba waSobhuza, and expediently submitted to Mpande, paying tribute for a while. But Mpande had to stop short of outright conquest because the British in Natal were concerned at the growth of Zulu power and threatened military intervention. In 1852 Mswati rose up against Zulu control, and Mpande responded with a major raid that swept the country clean of cattle. Fearing a massive influx of Swazi refugees, the Natal government put pressure on Mpande to withdraw, and Mswati was able to start consolidating his hold over his kingdom. Mpande contemplated new raids in 1858 and 1862, but internal unrest in Zululand and British disapproval prevented him.

On his accession in 1872 King Cetshwayo was ardent for a fresh Swazi campaign to blood his younger *amabutho* and to acquire booty to reward their loyalty. But Swazi power had grown in the 20 years since the last Zulu invasion, and many of his councillors advised against a new

attempt. Most importantly, they were concerned that the British were consistently opposed to wars that might destabilise the region, and they hoped to secure British support in the longstanding standoff over the Disputed Territory with the Boers of the SAR. Consequently, when Cetshwayo planned Swazi campaigns in 1874, 1875 and 1876, his council dissuaded him on every occasion.

Self-destructively, the Zulu fought each other too. In the First Zulu Civil War of 1840 Prince Mpande, who in September 1839 had fled with his adherents to the Boers of the Republic of Natalia for fear of being liquidated by his half-brother, King Dingane, returned in January 1840 and defeated Dingane's army at the Maqongqo Hills. Each side at the Maqongqo Hills fielded about 5 000 men who faced each other armed with spears and shields and arrayed in traditional chest and horns formation.

The Second Zulu Civil War was fought in 1856 when Prince Cetshwayo and his half-brother Prince Mbuyazi kaMpande fought for the right to succeed their father, King Mpande. On 2 December between 15 000 and 20 000 uSuthu (as Cetshwayo's adherents were known) routed 7 000 of Mbuyazi's iziGqoza at the battle of Ndongakusuka, killing 5 000 warriors and slaughtering some three-quarters of the thousands of non-combatants sheltering with them. Ndongakusuka thus saw the heaviest casualties in any one battle ever fought by the Zulu.

The two sides were again arrayed in traditional formation, but what was new at Ndongakusuka was a contingent of 35 Natal frontier police and 100 African hunters and some white hunter-traders under John Dunn placed on the iziGqoza left horn. With their firearms these iziNqobo, or 'Crushers', did considerable execution before the collapse of the iziGqoza's right

horn precipitated the rout that engulfed the iziNqobo.

If we discount the incident at the *umKhosi* on 25 December 1877 when a fracas between jealous *amabutho*, primarily the uThulwana and iNgobamakhosi, resulted in some 60 deaths, Ndongakusuka was the last time the Zulu fought a battle before Isandlwana, some 23 years later – a gap (to put it into familiar perspective) two years longer than that between the First and Second World Wars, or three years longer than the gap between the Anglo-Zulu War and the Anglo-Boer South African War. Rather a long hiatus in active service, one might say, for such an apparently ferocious warrior nation.

Naturally, a gap of 20 years between battles does not mean that many individuals who had fought in earlier campaigns did not do so again in 1879. Of the Zulu commanders at Isandlwana, for example, Chief Ntshingwayo kaMahole Khosa, who was born in about 1823, had probably fought in some of the Swazi campaigns; Chief Mavumengwana kaNdlela Ntuli, born in about 1830, definitely took part in the invasion of Swaziland in 1847 and probably fought at Ndongakusuka – as had King Cetshwayo himself. Prince Dabulamanzi kaMpande, who commanded at Rorke's Drift, was born in 1839 and likely was present at Ndongakusuka.

Four of the *amabutho* who fought in the Anglo-Zulu War (namely the iSangqu, uThulwana, iNdlondlo and uDloko) were aged between 41 and 47. They had been formed before the Second Zulu Civil War of 1856 and all had fought at Ndongakusuka. It was the practice to incorporate newly formed *amabutho* with favoured aging ones such as the 33-year-old iNdluyengwe with the 45-year-old uThulwana to keep up their strength, but during the Anglo-Zulu War other veterans of Ndongakusuka like the iNdabakawombe and uDlambedu

(who were aged 58 and 56 respectively) were mainly kept in reserve in the Mahlabathini plain to protect the king. Small, local contingents of superannuated *amabutho* might still take the field as did the uDlambedu and the 55-year-old izinGulube at the battle of Nyezane on 22 January 1879, but their contribution was a minor one. Otherwise, not one of the remaining twelve *amabutho* who fought in the Anglo-Zulu War had seen the field of battle: this was to be their very first campaign. Even the most prominent *amabutho* in the war – the uMbonambi, uMcijo, uMxhapho, iNgobamakhosi and uNokhenke – were previously unblooded warriors between their mid-20s and mid-30s.

This is not to deny that they were desperately eager to face the British in battle and were completely confident in their ability to beat them. But that is precisely the problem. Who among them had any experience in facing disciplined soldiers armed with modern breech-loading rifles? It is true that the four *amabutho* who had fought at Ndongakusuka had all been on the right horn and had faced the firepower of the iziNqobo, and some had probably been fired upon by Boers in the Swazi campaign of 1847. Yet those firearms were flint-lock muskets, not nearly as effective as breech-loading Martini-Henry rifles. Moreover, they were fired by men in open skirmishing order. Now it is true that at Isandlwana the British, relying on their experience in the Ninth Frontier War, were also deployed in skirmishing order, but only one of the four veteran *amabutho* of Ndongakusuka (the iSangqu) formed part of the Zulu attack on the British camp when they advanced as part of the outflanking right horn. The other three veteran *amabutho* (the uThulwana, iNdlondlo and uDloko, plus the iNdluyengwe incorporated with the uThulwana) were part of the uncommitted reserve at Isandlwana

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and went on to attack Rorke's Drift. And here they fought the sort of battle no Zulu had faced since their fathers were broken before the Voortrekker laagers at Veglaer (emaGebeni) on 13–15 August 1838 and Blood River (Ncome) on 16 December 1838, and no veteran *amabutho* of that war were with the Zulu army in January 1879. Attacking an all-round defensive position at Rorke's drift defended by desperate men armed with modern rifles and bayonets was therefore an entirely novel experience for all elements of the Zulu army operating in 1879. It was an encounter in which remarkable courage and tenacity could not make up for the inadequacies of tactics based on traditional hand-to-hand combat.

And here we encounter the intractable problem of the paralytic in Zulu tactical

thinking. Isandlwana had been a victory because the British were in an extended linear formation with flanks that could be turned in accordance with traditional Zulu tactics that depended on swift manoeuvre and envelopment in the open field. At the battles of Khambula, Gingindlovu and Ulundi the fort, laagers and infantry square put the Zulu in the same disadvantageous situation they had encountered at Rorke's Drift: they had to throw themselves in waves against prepared, all-round defences bristling not only with rifles and artillery but, at Ulundi, with Gatling guns as well. What had not succeeded at Rorke's Drift in considerably more favourable circumstances in terms of numerical odds and surprise had even less chance of doing so in these later set-piece battles. Yet the



Men of the uNokhenke ibutho photographed in c. 1879. Photo courtesy of the Cecil Renaud Library, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg.

Zulu command and the rank-and-file of the *amabutho* could apparently not conceive of any alternative to tactics that had repeatedly failed. As the Duke of Wellington said of the French at Waterloo, they came on in the same old way and were sent back in the same old way.

Yet tactical alternatives were available and some Zulu saw that. By 1878 there were about 12 000 inferior, obsolete firearms like muzzle-loading flintlock muskets in Zulu hands, as well as some 7 500 percussion-cap rifles and 500 breech-loading rifles reserved for men of higher status. However, most Zulu tended to employ firearms as secondary weapons in place of throwing-spears, to be cast aside when (in their minds) the hand-to-hand fighting ensued with the iconic stabbing-spear. In any case, *amabutho* were untrained in the effective use of their mainly inferior firearms and marksmanship was consequently very poor.

Yet by the 1870s several hundred Zulu were familiar with modern firearms through contact with white hunters, traders and adventurers in Zululand. The Zulu snipers posted on Shiyane during the battle of Rorke's Drift posed a genuine threat to the defenders.

Once the 800-odd Martini-Henry rifles captured from the British at Isandlwana were distributed into skilled hands they were used effectively at Khambula where Zulu marksmen posted in the rubbish heaps above the camp discomfited the British with enfilading fire and drove back a British sortie.

Some of the younger Zulu commanders were more innovative than their very conventional seniors. Zibhebhu kaMaphitha, the ambitious Mandlakazi chief who was born in about 1841, grasped the effectiveness of combining guns and horses in Boer commando style. In the Third Zulu Civil War of 1883–1884 that followed the Brit-

ish break-up of the Zulu kingdom, he applied the tactics of mounted infantry with devastating effect against his conventional uSuthu adversaries. During the Anglo-Zulu War he played his part as a senior *induna* of the uDloko in conventional operations, but the day before Isandlwana his mounted scouts effectively masked the movement of the Zulu army from Siphezi to the Ngwebeni valley from British patrols. On the eve of the battle of Ulundi his mounted men adroitly lured Lieutenant-Colonel Redvers Buller's reconnaissance-in-force across the Mahlabathini plain into an ambush from which they were fortunate to break free.

A war of manoeuvre was the antidote to the conventional set-piece battles conservative commanders, both Zulu and British, preferred. Here Zulu commanders seem to have lost sight of the lessons of the Voortrekker-Zulu War where at eThaleni and at the White Mfolozi the Zulu caught the Boers outside their laagers and defeated them in running fights. Surely Chief Godide kaNdlela Ntuli, who was nearly 70 years old in 1879 and most probably had fought the Voortrekkers in 1838, had this lesson in mind when he attempted to ambush the British at Nyezane (Wombane) while they were strung out on the march. This certainly was the sensible and appropriate tactic and failed largely because he was in command of second-rate troops (all the crack *amabutho* were with the army fighting at Isandlwana the same day) who could not effectively co-ordinate their movements and had not the stomach to press home the attack.

The truly great mystery of the war is why the Zulu never again attacked a British column while vulnerable on the line of march, but waited until they were installed behind their defences as the Boers had been in 1838 at Veglaer and Ncome. It is true that it was Cetshwayo's

plan that Colonel Evelyn Wood be lured out of his fortified camp at Khambula by a feint towards Utrecht, and that this sensible strategy was ruined by the younger *amabutho* who insisted on an immediate, direct attack to prove their mettle. But this does not explain why Chelmsford was not attacked on the march before Gingindlovu and again before Ulundi. Certainly, that is what he expected and feared.

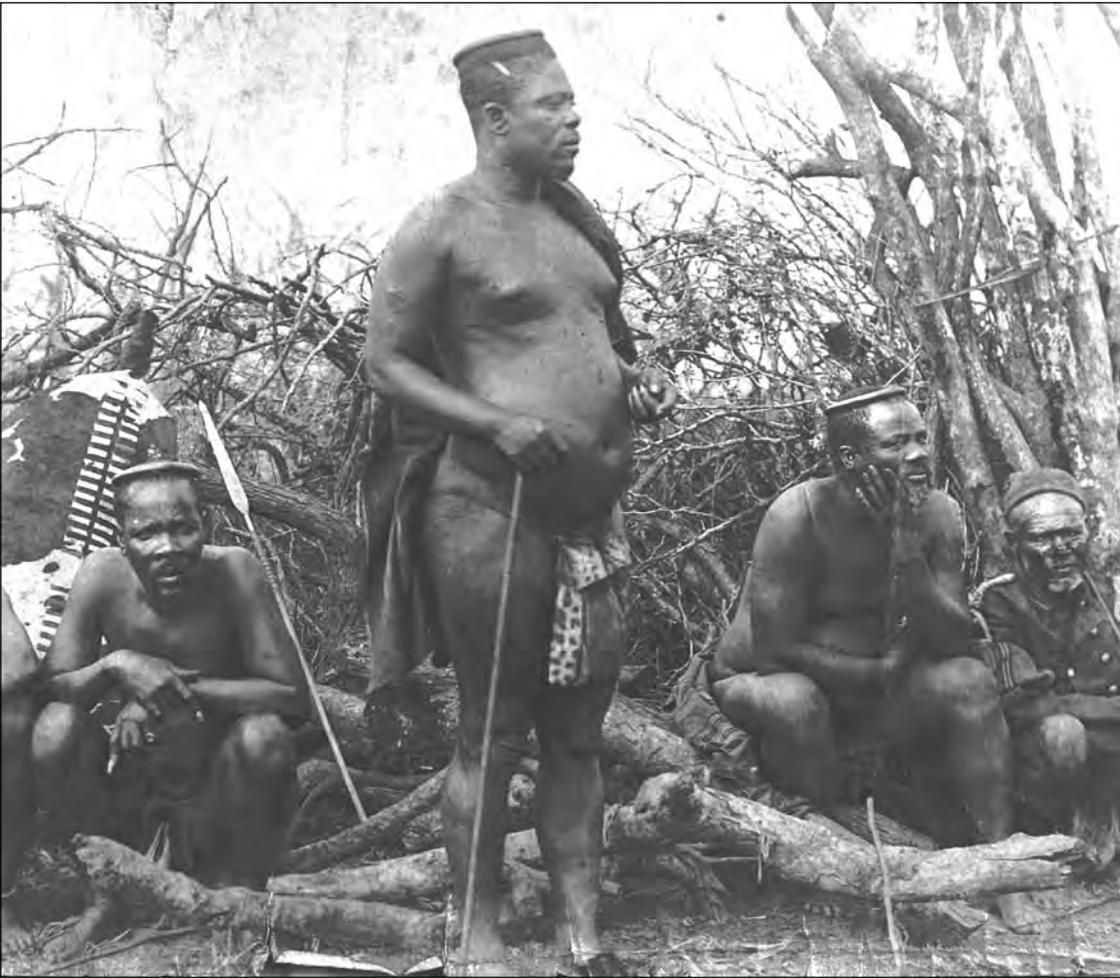
Is it sufficient to explain this lack of pragmatic innovation in terms of a conservative Zulu military culture that valued the prowess of hand-to-hand fighting above all things, and put more store on the vindication of individual masculine honour in combat than in victory itself? After all, there would have been much more opportunity for this form of toe-to-toe fighting in ambushing and overwhelming a column on the march than there was in hurling oneself with spear and shield against an impenetrable wall of fire directed from firm defences.

After Rorke's Drift, why replicate tactics that repeatedly failed? Isandlwana had been a victory because of faulty British dispositions that in the dispersal of units and the presentation of vulnerable flanks were reminiscent of an escorted convoy or column on the march. Was not the lesson clear? After all, expert Zulu scouting and intelligence gathering (so superior to the invaders' fumbling efforts) kept them in close touch with every move the enemy made. Moreover, as Isandlwana and Nyezane demonstrated, they had the capability of bringing up large forces undetected by the British. Undoubtedly, therefore, they had the ability to attack a column on the march before it could form laager? So why was the ambush at Nyezane the only attempt to adopt this obvious line of attack?

Interestingly, Zulu lack of tactical flexibility and innovation seems to have been

confined to the regular *amabutho* and most, but not all, of their usually elderly commanders. It has already been noted how the innovative Zibhebhu broke the conventional mould in his ambush of Buller's reconnaissance patrol the day before Ulundi; the performance of the unknown commander of the Zulu forces stationed at eZulaneni under Zungeni Mountain was no less adroit. On 5 June 1879 his 300 men, most of them carrying firearms, successively repulsed 300 British irregular horse and then 500 regular cavalry through employing effective skirmishing and enfilading tactics and making the best use of the broken terrain and dense cover.

The most successful practitioners of this form of irregular warfare were in north-western Zululand. There Mbilini waMswati, a Swazi prince who had lost a succession dispute in 1865 and had given his allegiance to Cetshwayo with his adherents, emerged as the most successful commander in the region along with Sikhobobo kaMabhabhakazana, an abaQulusi *induna*. Mbilini swooped down on an unprepared British convoy encamped at the Ntombe River on 12 March and overran it; while on 28 March he and Sikhobobo cut off and routed the British under Colonel Wood raiding Hlobane Mountain, inflicting casualties second only to Isandlwana in their severity. For months the Kubheka people under Manyonyoba kaMaqondo waged a very effective campaign from their caves in the Ntombe valley, bottling up the Luneburg garrison and surviving a series of mounted sorties intended to subdue them. Wood's forces never succeeded in entirely pacifying the region, and the abaQulusi and Kubheka were the last Zulu units to remain active in the field once the regular *amabutho* dispersed after Ulundi, the Kubheka only finally surrendering on 8 September 1879, two months after the battle.



*Chief Zibhebhu kaMaphitha standing centre. Photo C. 740 courtesy of the
KwaZulu-Natal Archives (Pietermaritzburg Repository).*

Perhaps it was precisely because the abaQulusi were not part of the regular *ibutho* system, and Mbilini's and Manyonyoba's adherents were refugees and renegades cobbled together on the furthest margins of the Zulu kingdom that they were so successful in engaging the British in hit-and-run, skirmishing tactics from secure mountain fastnesses. Certainly, Mbilini gained his military apprenticeship in Swaziland where precisely this mode of fighting was the norm.

It is no coincidence that African states in the vicinity of Zululand that best resisted white conquest were those of the Pedi and Sotho who relied increasingly on firearms, who used their broken terrain effectively against the invaders and who, in the case of the Sotho, early adopted horses and fought when appropriate like mounted infantry. Those Zulu who resisted most successfully in 1879 did the same. We must not be seduced by the spectacular success of the conventional Zulu army

at Isandlwana into believing (along with the British public and white settlers at the time) that the regular *amabutho* best represented the fighting spirit and military skills of the Zulu. Zibhebhu's mounted scouts drawing the British into an ambush on the Mahlabathini Plain, Mbilini's irregulars firing from behind the rocks of their stronghold on Hlobane: these skilled and daring combatants were at least as valiant as the regular *amabutho* and certainly possessed a far better, much more modern notion of how to fight back successfully against the British.

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