

A ZULU VICTORY

The Story of the Battle of Isandlwana, Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa

The night was inky, a few stars twinkled overhead and a new moon swam across the sky. A hush had fallen over the land. In the darkness of the valley 24 000 Zulu warriors crouched, waiting, expectant, no one slept. No cooking fires were lit and talking came in hushed whispers. The occasional clink as spears knocked together were the only sounds to be heard. The warriors shivered in their skins but their trust in the sangoma (witchdoctor) was implicit. He had predicted that the might of the Zulu empire would overcome the British. He had reassured them that King Cetshwayo would reign supreme over the Zulu Kingdom. He had given them muthi (medicine) to protect them from British bullets. It was the night of the 21st of January 1879.

On his succession King Cetshwayo had set about building up the Zulu Kingdom which had been viewed as a threat by the British colonists of Natal. An ultimatum had been served to the Zulu indunas (headmen) to retreat, but as this had been ignored, the British troops had begun massing to invade the Zulu capital of Ulundi. The Zulus were a proud nation and immediately set about defending their land. Under the expert command of Ntshingwayo and Mavumengwana the main body of warriors had set up position in a valley north of the Nqutu escarpment, near the hill of Isandlwana.

The British had divided into five columns, one would advance from the coast, two from northern Natal and two would patrol the Transvaal and Natal borders. The two columns invading Zululand, were commanded by Colonel Glyn and the Commander-in-Chief, Lord Chelmsford. They had encountered little resistance along the way and had set up a temporary camp at the base of Isandlwana hill. On the 22nd of January Lord Chelmsford left the camp and about 1 700 men in the charge of Colonel Pullein to assist another column of British soldiers who had come into contact with what they believed to be the main Zulu army. As no one expected an attack the camp was not entrenched and the wagons had not been used to create a defensive laager (encampment). Later that day Colonel Durnford arrived with five troops of the Natal Native Horse, but did not stay in camp and set out immediately to clear the plateau of scattered parties of Zulus.

At midday British troops gave chase to a group of Zulus and on reaching the top of the escarpment looked down on the entire Zulu army, sitting in silence. On being discovered an induna raced up and down the Zulu lines shouting “uhalmvana mlilo kashono njalo,” (the little branch of leaves that extinguished the flames did not order this). En masse the Zulus rose, the battle cry was sounded and, plumes waving and spears glinting in the sun they rushed forward. A truly intimidating sight, they formed the characteristic horn formation devised by the great fighter, King Shaka.

Messengers were immediately sent to warn Durnford and Pullein. In camp the British soldiers frantically reached for ammunition, which was already low, and formed a half square facing north and northeast and strung

out over a mile and a half. The Zulu army approached quickly, the horns closing in on the trapped men. Durnford's force fell short of ammunition and retreated to camp. The Natal Native Horse, although having fought bravely had also run out of ammunition and galloped away.

Suddenly, just before noon, amidst the smoke and confusion of the battle, everything turned dark. It was a solar eclipse. Through the eerie half-light the battle raged on, the Zulu warriors whooping and stabbing. By early afternoon it was all over, Isandlwana had been overrun. Lord Chelmsford and his men cautiously returned to the battle site on hearing of the defeat and spent an uncomfortable night amongst the bodies of the dead. According to Zulu tradition the bodies of the fallen were ripped open to release their spirits. This was to be the biggest defeat ever by native troops over British soldiers. Losses on both sides were heavy with 1 357 British and approximately 3 000 Zulu soldiers killed. On hearing the news, King Cetshwayo said, "Alas, a spear has been thrust into the belly of the nation."

The Zulu nation may have won the battle, but they had lost the war. The British forces regrouped and inflicted a series of defeats on the Zulu defences. This culminated in the Battle of Ulundi on 4th July 1879 and the capture of King Cetshwayo.

Every year a re-enactment of the Battle of Isandlwana is held at the base of the famous hill. The Zulu people enthusiastically take part, dressing in traditional costume and carrying spears and the great nguni (local cattle) hide shields. A small traditional village has been built nearby and a sangoma throws the bones to predict the outcome of the battle. A handful of Dundee residents take the part of the redcoats and hoist the Union Jack amidst much fanfare. As the Zulus were triumphant in this particular battle, the spectacle is very popular with the local people and busloads pour in to witness the scene. Nearby Isandlwana Lodge offers trips to the battlefield and overseas tourists mingle with the crowds. A small entrance fee is charged and the atmosphere is festive and everyone seems to enjoy themselves hugely. At least this is a positive legacy to a battle in which so much human life was lost.

If you wish to witness the re-enactment which takes place on the closest weekend to January 22nd every year, contact Tourism KwaZulu-Natal South Africa on +27 31 366 7500 or e-mail tkzn@iafrica.com. Nearby Isandlwana Lodge offers excellent accommodation and can be reached on +27 34 271 8301 or e-mail isand@icon.co.za.

List of Captions:

1. The Zulu impi is addressed by the indunas.
2. A sangoma (witchdoctor) predicts the outcome of the battle.
3. The impi stirs itself up into a warlike frenzy
4. The Zulu impis are an impressive sight carrying traditional weapons and cowhide shields.

5. The Zulu warriors congregate at the base of Isandlwana Hill.
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7. The British troops group on the battlefield.
8. The British troops group on the battlefield.
9. The battle ensues between the British and Zulu forces.
10. The young warriors prepare for battle.
11. The battle ensues between the British and Zulu forces.
12. The impi stirs itself up into a warlike frenzy
13. A Zulu headman – his position is denoted by the leopard skin kaross he wears.
14. The Zulu impi is addressed by the indunas.
15. A Zulu impi is an impressive sight with plumes waving in the air.
16. These traditional shields are still made from the nguni cattle hide and are very strong.
17. A small traditional Zulu village is built near Isandlwana and these Zulu women are displaying the clay headdresses that denote their married status.
18. The battle ensues between the British and Zulu forces.
19. The royal sangoma emerges from the beehive hut.
20. The battle is won and the Zulu warriors return victorious.