

Three Years and Two Continents Apart:
A Comparative Study of the Great Sioux War and Anglo-Zulu War

by

Cameron Winter

A thesis

presented to the University of Waterloo

in fulfillment of the

dissertation requirement for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

History

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2021

© Cameron Winter 2021

Examining Committee Membership

The following served on the Examining Committee for this thesis. The decision of the Examining Committee is by majority vote.

External Examiner	Elizabeth Elbourne, Associate Professor, History and Classical Studies, McGill University
Supervisor(s)	Dan Gorman Professor, History, University of Waterloo
Internal Member	Susan Neylan Associate Professor, History, Wilfrid Laurier University
Internal-external Member	Brian Orend Professor, Philosophy, University of Waterloo
Other Member(s)	Andrew Hunt, Professor, History, University of Waterloo

Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

In 1876 and 1879, the American and British armies suffered extremely similar disasters at, respectively, the Battles of the Little Bighorn and Isandlwana. Though these two colonial reversals have often been compared to one another in passing, no serious comparative work on them has been done. This paper aims to change that, while placing both battles within the larger frameworks of their respective wars and arguing that it was the similarities in American and British perceptions of their Indigenous foes that led to the defeats at the Little Bighorn and Isandlwana, as well as the other difficulties that both campaigns encountered. It will be argued that both the American and the British battleplans relied upon the assumption that their enemies would flee from an army of white men and planned accordingly, a belief that led to catastrophic reversals when the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Zulu instead took offensive action. Only by overcoming this detrimental prejudice and adjusting their plans accordingly were the colonial powers able to conquer their Indigenous enemies.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge the support and assistance of Professors Gorman, Neylan, and Hunt, who reviewed the dissertation from its earliest drafts to the very end, of his mother and father, who always believed he could do this, and of his lovely wife, Amanda Saunders, who put up with having Philip Sheridan and Lord Chelmsford as guests at the dinner table for more than four years.

Table of Contents

Introduction: Reversals and Scapegoats	page 1
Literature Review	page 7
Chapter 1: Imperial Armies and Frontier Generals	page 24
Chapter 2: Underrated Adversaries	page 83
Chapter 3: Warning Signs	page 118
Chapter 4: Last Stands	page 173
Chapter 5: The Reaction at Home	page 260
Chapter 6: Further Failure	page 288
Chapter 7: Lessons Learned?	page 348
Conclusion: Due to the Victors—and the Vanquished	page 405
Bibliography	page 414

Introduction: Reversals and Scapegoats

At the end of June 1876, Lieutenant-Colonel George Armstrong Custer, the famed “Boy General” of the American Civil War, died near a bend in the Little Bighorn River. He and six hundred troopers of the 7th Cavalry Regiment were detached from his superior officer, Brigadier-General Alfred Terry’s column and sent out with orders to hunt down the Hunkpapa Lakota medicine man Sitting Bull, who acted as a spokesman for those Native Americans who opposed American expansion into the Black Hill country. Custer found Sitting Bull, all right, but he also found 3000 Lakota and Northern Cheyenne warriors—far more than his single regiment could handle. Commanded by some of the most famous names on the Northern Plains, including war-chief Gall of the Hunkpapa Lakota, war-chief Two Moons of the Northern Cheyenne, and an enigmatic Oglala Lakota war-leader named Crazy Horse, this Native American force destroyed half of the 7th Cavalry before the battle was over. Custer was killed alongside his brothers, his nephew, his brother-in-law, and all the men who had fought under his immediate command.¹

On January 22nd, 1879, Brevet Colonel Anthony Durnford of Great Britain’s Royal Engineers rode into the 24th Infantry Regiment’s camp at Isandlwana, a few miles beyond the frontier of British South Africa. He was told to take charge of the camp from Lieutenant-Colonel Henry Pulleine, commanding officer of the first battalion of the 24th. A few hours later, Durnford, Pulleine, and a majority of the men of the 1/24th were dead. Killed alongside them were a company of the 2/24th, several units of South African Volunteer Cavalry and Border Police, and hundreds of African auxiliaries. Unknown to either Durnford or Pulleine, an army of

¹ Note on terminology: as few scholarly sources can make up their mind as to whether “Indigenous” or “Native American” is the more appropriate term, both have been used here interchangeably. The slur of “Indian,” has been avoided, save in quotes, as has the name “Sioux,” which was given to them by their Indigenous adversaries. As far as the individual names of the Indigenous combatants go, the author has used those with which an audience is most likely to be familiar, though critiques of these names are offered where it was felt necessary.

20 000 Zulu, led by the aristocratic general Ntshingwayo kaMahole, had slipped through the British scouts, and concealed themselves only a few miles from Isandlwana. On the morning of the 22nd this host enveloped the plains around the British camp, engulfing most of the soldiers left to hold it. Over 1300 men were killed, as were all but five of their officers. When the news was brought to Lord Chelmsford, Commander-in-Chief of the British forces in South Africa, he initially refused to believe it could have happened.

The Battles of the Little Bighorn and Isandlwana were not the worst reversals ever endured by the colonial armies of the United States and Great Britain, but they are undoubtedly the most famous. Greater disasters, like Saint Clair's Defeat on the Wabash or Britain's nightmarish retreat from Kabul, have faded from popular memory, but the Little Bighorn and Isandlwana remain cultural touchstones. In the United States Custer's name remains synonymous with foolishness and defeat and more books have been written on (and more bad movies made about) his Last Stand than the nation-defining Battle of Gettysburg. If Isandlwana is not quite as important in the British consciousness, it is not far behind and is regularly revisited in the popular and scholarly press, as well as film and television. Asides comparing the two battles are not uncommon in the literature and one scholarly work, *The Dust Rose Like Smoke*, attempted to contrast the two directly, though with decidedly flawed results.²

Given the wealth of sourcing available, their chronological closeness to one another, and their prominence within the public consciousness a scholarly military comparison of the two battles is long overdue. George Custer's career and his treatment in the press after his demise, should be compared to the career and treatment in the press of Anthony Durnford, his immediate counterpart in rank, and in tragedy, at Isandlwana. Meanwhile, Lord Chelmsford, as

² James Gump, *The Dust Rose Like Smoke*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016).

Commander-in-Chief of British South Africa should be contrasted with Philip Henry Sheridan, Lieutenant-General Commanding the Division of the Missouri, and the mastermind behind the Great Sioux War. Likewise, not only the Little Bighorn and Isandlwana, but the whole of the Great Sioux War and the Anglo-Zulu War need to be analysed, to better determine whether any similarities between the two battles that may be uncovered are simply coincidental or are products of broader trends shared across both conflicts. Testimony from Custer and Durnford's Indigenous foes, the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne, and the Zulu must be incorporated into such a project as well, and the Native American and African militaries subject to the same comparative scrutiny as their Anglo-American contemporaries.

What emerges from such a comprehensive study of these two wars is this: the inescapable conclusion that neither Custer, byword for military incompetence that he may have become, nor Durnford, still subject to resounding criticism in the secondary literature, was the author of his own defeat. Both men were far nearer the bottom of the chain of command than the top and were acting on orders handed to them by superior officers, some of whom were, in turn, acting on the commands of their own superiors. Custer, at the Little Bighorn, adhered to Terry's instructions to attack any Lakota or Cheyenne encampments he found before they could scatter, while Terry himself was only passing along the outline of the campaign as conceived by Sheridan. Durnford was told to take over a camp that Chelmsford, and subsequently, Pulleine, failed to fortify, and his death at the hands of the waiting Zulu Army was even less his own fault than was Custer's. When news of the defeats became public, Sheridan and Chelmsford sought to avoid responsibility for disaster by foisting the blame onto Custer and Durnford, who, being dead, could not defend themselves. In this objective, Sheridan succeeded spectacularly, while Chelmsford, unable to evade all the culpability himself, forced Durnford to share it with him.

This pattern of behaviour is not atypical for imperial projects that have suffered embarrassing reversals in conflicts with enemies too “primitive” to earn their respect. In doing so, colonial empires are able to refrain from reassessing their opponents or admitting that they may be able to produce generals every bit as capable as their own. The Lakota-Cheyenne coalition that dominated the Northern Plains had in their ranks many experienced war-leaders, of whom the aforementioned Crazy Horse, Two Moons, and Gall were the most prominent. In Zululand, Chief Ntshingwayo kaMahole was a man with a forty-year military career behind him and led the army of an imperial people as expansionist and professional as any in Europe. The stories of the Little Bighorn and of Isandlwana, and of the Great Sioux and Anglo-Zulu Wars as a whole, are replete with other great Indigenous military commanders as too, including Gall’s compatriot Crow King, a fierce Northern Cheyenne warrior named Yellow Nose, an elderly Southern Cheyenne war-chief called Lame White Man, and Prince Mbilini waMswati, a rogue member of Swaziland’s royal family. Just how competent all these men were was obscured by Sheridan and Chelmsford’s spin doctoring, and their efforts to persuade the historical record that only a particularly inept white officer could be beaten by “primitives.”

In reality, it was Sheridan and Chelmsford’s perception of the likes of Crazy Horse and Ntshingwayo as their racial and cultural inferiors that ensured the defeats at the Little Bighorn and Isandlwana—and all the other defeats of the wars as well. One of the better kept secrets of the Great Sioux and Anglo-Zulu Wars, at least outside of the scholarly community, is the fact that American and British arms were beaten not once, but multiple times. American columns under Brigadier-General George Crook were bested at the Battles of the Rosebud and Slim Buttes, while Zulu forces destroyed a British company at Ntombe Drift and killed hundreds of British and auxiliary cavalrymen at the mountain fortress of Hlobane. Crook, who served ably in

the American Civil War, and put an end to the first round of Apache Wars in Arizona, was not a stupid or inexperienced officer. Neither were Sir Evelyn Wood and Sir Redvers Buller, commanding the ill-fated expedition to Hlobane. In fact, none of the leading officers who served under Sheridan and Chelmsford were obviously lacking in talent. Neither, for that matter, were Sheridan and Chelmsford themselves.

The problem, as a clear reading of the primary sources reveals, was not inadequate military ability, but an abundance of Victorian Era racism, which blinded Sheridan and Chelmsford to the possibility of facing skilled Indigenous generals. Steeped in the colonial reasoning of the day, both Lieutenant-Generals assumed their Indigenous enemies were too cowardly to stand and fight and devised plans based on preventing escape by small Native bands, rather than battling sizeable Indigenous armies that were prepared to risk a head on confrontation. Sheridan never believed his columns would face more than a few hundred Lakota or Cheyenne and was stunned when he learned that nearly 3000 Native American warriors had faced Custer at the Little Bighorn. Chelmsford, who saw his career damaged when he could not easily capture the guerilla forces of the Xhosa bush fighters, was equally shocked when he realised that 20 000 Zulu had struck Durnford and Pulleine at Isandlwana. Both generals should have—and could have—known better but discarded any information that contradicted their ideas about how Native Americans or Africans would make war. Having engineered their respective wars for what were essentially personal, rather than military, reasons, Sheridan and Chelmsford left their subordinates entirely unequipped to prosecute those wars against the enemy as they actually existed outside the generals' imaginations. Even the vaunted technological superiority of the Anglo-American armies could not attain victory when deployed in service of plans entirely ill-suited for confrontations with lethally efficient Indigenous militaries.

When American and British arms finally achieved success, it was by throwing out Sheridan and Chelmsford's original schemes and coming up with new plans that worked against the enemy as they were rather than as they were supposed to be. Here the differences between Sheridan and Chelmsford are perhaps the strongest: Lord Chelmsford overhauled his own plans, while Sheridan's subordinates, most notably Colonel Nelson Miles, went behind his back and overhauled them for him. Yet the tactics employed by Miles and Chelmsford were remarkably similar, and moreover, grounded in a hard-won respect for the capabilities of the Lakota-Cheyenne alliance and the Zulu Army. These plans maximised the advantages American and British soldiers derived from their technological edge, creating a gap in military effectiveness that their Indigenous adversaries could not cross on tactical or strategic skill alone and posed interesting questions about what the formula for a successful colonial military campaign was.

The Great Sioux War and the Anglo-Zulu War are stories of military blundering caused not by the unique incompetence of any individual officer, but by colonial bigotry that pervaded nearly the whole of the American and British Armies at the institutional level. They are also the stories of brilliant Indigenous generals like Crazy Horse and Ntshingwayo who constantly frustrated and defeated white opponents who did not take them seriously because of their perceived cultural inferiority and the colour of their skin. They are stories that deserve to be told in their entirety, shorn of the racially motivated propaganda that has so often distorted how they are remembered, and that must be examined in detail in order to draw conclusions about the nature of colonial military operations and the ways in which the thinking of the day could handicap them. This dissertation is an effort to do precisely that.

Literature Review

Both wars have attracted the attention of noteworthy academics. Robert Utley, dean of Western historians, did some excellent work on the Great Sioux War, and the characters involved with it, while Ian Knight, Adrian Greaves, and John Laband are among the most distinguished scholars to examine the Anglo-Zulu War. The fact remains, however, that both subjects have, for years, been the stomping grounds of primarily amateur historians. While some of these writers have done good work, many have not, and sifting through the wreckage that some of them have left in their wake can be an agonising process.

To this day one can still purchase books on the Great Sioux War that utilise not the concealed or even unconscious bigotries that sometimes distort academic works, but overt racism towards the Lakota and Cheyenne. One recent book on the life of Custer, printed by a mainstream publisher, goes so far as to openly call the Lakota and Cheyenne ‘savages’ and ‘primitives’ and to opine that they should have been destroyed by the government.³ More insidiously, the figure of Custer himself continues to dominate discussions of the Great Sioux War to a detrimental effect. Writers on the Great Sioux War can be divided into the categories of “Custerphobes” and “Custerphiles,” the former taking the stance that Custer was a bad person and a bad general, the latter that he was a competent officer and, at least by the standards of the day, a relatively decent human being. *Glory-Hunter*, written in 1933, after Custer’s widow Libbie had died, and one could criticize the Lieutenant-Colonel without being threatened with a lawsuit, was one of the first Custerphobic books to see print, and the vitriol that it directed towards Custer, painting him as an insubordinate, a coward, an egomaniac, and a criminal lunatic, has influenced almost every work in that camp, for good or ill. The above-mentioned

³ The deeply uncomfortable book in question is Thom Hatch’s *The Last Days of George Armstrong Custer* (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 2015).

series is in turn, a particularly venomous example of Custerphilic literature, with its bile towards the Indigenous population stemming from the author's open hero worship of Custer. Neither attitude is healthy (for the author or the discourse), and the works cited in this paper will come from more tempered places. Still, the worst material is out there, and everything published about the Great Sioux War, is published with that kind of hackery lurking in the background.

Even the best secondary material remains deformed by the obsession with Custer, to the detriment of the other figures involved in the Great Sioux War. As long ago as the 1950s, these problems were recognized as infecting the discourse around Custer and the war. William Alexander Graham in his book, *The Custer Myth*, stated that "To those persons who think that Dis-solution of the Custer Myth is easy, and particularly to those who are quite sure they have Di-solved it, This work is dedicated (with malice aforethought, express and implied)."⁴ Graham's bitter joke reflected a life spent trying, and often failing, to sift through the mythologizing that had grown up around the figure of Custer. Graham's work in the field was pioneering; his *The Story of the Little Bighorn*, which went through four print runs between 1926 and 1952, is probably the oldest secondary source that can be relied upon, while *The Custer Myth*, described in his own words as "a sourcebook of Custeriana," remains a valuable collection of primary material, including newspaper articles, statements from military experts, and a number of interviews with Lakota and Cheyenne combatants and Custer's few surviving scouts. It can fairly be said that Graham was the first author who tried to take an objective look at Custer, and most books written since the 1950s in his debt.

Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, first published in 1970, was not specifically about Custer, but the book, never out of print, reignited discussion around the US

⁴ *The Custer Myth*, edited by W.A. Graham (New York: Bonanza Books, 1953).

Army's role in the subjugation of the Native American population and prompted renewed discussion of Custer and the Little Bighorn, positioning the Lakota and Cheyenne as victims of the American government, rather than enemies to be heroically subdued. Of the books written in its wake, the works of Robert Utley are an obvious standout, as is Stephen Ambrose's *Crazy Horse and Custer*, which attempted a comparative study of Custer and one of the men who killed him. Utley and Ambrose's writings are hardly free of bias, but they were among the first modern works to draw attention to the fact that the battle was not only lost by Custer but won by his Native American opponents. Ambrose offered a reconstruction of the battle that tried to show how not only errors on the part of Custer, but intelligent decisions on the part of Crazy Horse, influenced how events played out.⁵ His description of the battle is echoed in Nathaniel Philbrick's *The Last Stand*, and James Donovan's *A Terrible Glory*, likely the two best recent works on the Little Bighorn, and among the secondary sources which were most important to this study due to their nuanced examinations of both Custer and his Indigenous adversaries.⁶

It is when one steps away from the Little Bighorn and into the historiography of the rest of the Great Sioux War that the damage the Custer obsession has done is made clear. Where there are dozens of biographies of Custer, far less has been written on the other American officers involved in the conflict. Biographies of Sheridan typically focus on his Civil War service, while George Crook, Nelson Miles, and Ranald Mackenzie have been fortunate to attract biographers at all. If biographies of Alfred Terry or John Gibbon have been written, they have not long remained in print, and information on the careers of these two men is best gleaned from the primary documentation or studies of the Civil War battles that they participated in. On the

⁵ Stephen Ambrose, *Crazy Horse and Custer: The Parallel Lives of Two American Warriors* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1975): 446-447.

⁶ James Donovan, *A Terrible Glory* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2008).
Nathaniel Philbrick, *The Last Stand* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010).

Native American side, lives of Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse are common enough but are often shot through with the assumptions of the white authors, reliant on Anglo-American sources, or filled with gaps where no such sources exist. *The Journey of Crazy Horse*, by Lakota historian Joseph Marshall III is probably the best of the biographies of the Oglala Lakota war-leader, drawing on Oglala oral tradition and the existing documentation to compile as accurate a view of Crazy Horse's life as can probably be reconstructed, a view that places the famous warrior in all of the necessary contexts, both American and Native American.⁷ Other Lakota and Cheyenne leaders, such as Gall, Crow King, and Two Moons await the same treatment.

In the same way men not named George Custer have suffered from his pride of place in the historiography, so too have battles at which Custer was not involved—which is to say every battle other than the Little Bighorn itself. When the Powder River and the Rosebud are discussed, it is usually as preludes to the Little Bighorn, when Slim Buttes, Cedar Creek, or Wolf Mountain come up, it is as codas to it. Jerome Greene's book on Slim Buttes, first published in the 1980s remains the only full-length monograph on that engagement, and it is a severely flawed work that privileges American propaganda over Native American perceptions to a detrimental degree.⁸ Recently, the Powder River, the Rosebud, and Bad Hand Mackenzie's attack on Dull Knife have each received a full-length book, welcome additions to the field that, nevertheless, must be used with care because of the lack of anything to compare them with. No such books have been written on Cedar Creek or Wolf Mountain, whose best analyses are found in Nelson Miles' lone modern biography, *A Hero to His Fighting Men*.⁹ Studies of the whole of

⁷ Joseph Marshall III, *The Journey of Crazy Horse: A Lakota History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

⁸ Jerome A. Greene, *Slim Buttes, 1876: An Episode of the Great Sioux War* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982).

⁹ Peter R. DeMontravel, *A Hero to His Fighting Men: Nelson A Miles, 1839-1925* (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 1998).

the Great Sioux War, placing each battle in the broader context of the war, are all but unheard of. For anyone who hopes to use the secondary literature on the Great Sioux War as a gateway to the primary sources, disappointment awaits. If Custer and the Little Bighorn are not involved, the hunt is liable to turn up empty.

This is a shame, because primary sources on the Great Sioux War are readily available to anyone who wishes to access them. Sheridan authored an autobiography, and most of his surviving papers (many were destroyed in the Chicago Fire) are available through the Library of Congress, including, most vitally, his annual reports for each year that he was Commanding Officer, Division of the Missouri. Nelson Miles wrote not one, but two sets of memoirs, in which he not only gave his own opinions, but reprinted numerous Army documents relating to the conduct of the wars he was involved in, including the Great Sioux War.¹⁰ George Crook's autobiography was abandoned partway through, but has been supplemented from his letters. Crook's aide de campe, John Gregory Bourke published his own memoir, *On the Border with Crook*, which is an invaluable source for the general's career, as are Bourke's two volume diaries.¹¹ Charles King, who served with Crook and Bourke at Slim Buttes left a memoir as well, entitled *Campaigning With Crook*.¹² The field diaries of Alfred Terry and Richard Irving Dodge (the infantry commander during Crook's Dull Knife campaign), and several collections of the writings of John Gibbon have all been published, and the papers of Ulysses S. Grant, President during the opening stages of the war, have been edited and released in a multivolume set. W.A. Graham, as noted previously, included both Native American and Anglo-American testimonials

¹⁰ Nelson A. Miles, *Personal Recollections of General Nelson A. Miles* (Chicago: Werner and Company, 1896); Nelson A. Miles, *Serving the Republic* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1911).

¹¹ John Gregory Bourke, *On the Border with Crook* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971); John Gregory Bourke, *The Diaries of John Gregory Bourke* Volumes 1 & 2, edited by Charles M. Robinson (Denton: University of North Texas, 2003).

¹² Charles King, "Campaigning with Crook," in *Campaigning with Crook and Stories of Army Life* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms Inc, 1966).

about the Little Bighorn in his *Custer Myth*, while Jerome Greene edited two separate collections, one consisting of documents pertaining to each major engagement of the Great Sioux War, the other a companion volume of Lakota and Cheyenne eyewitness accounts of those same battles. Further Native American views of the Little Bighorn itself can be found in the three volumes worth of interviews with Lakota and Cheyenne witnesses edited by Richard Hardorff.

The primary difficulty with Great Sioux War historiography then, lies not in the material that is available, but in the ways that material has been used, and which sources have been privileged. The overwhelming focus on Custer, for instance, has resulted in writers hunting through Indigenous testimony for evidence of what happened to the Lieutenant-Colonel personally, even though Custer would have been just another anonymous officer to the Lakota and Cheyenne participants. The men who collected that testimony in the first place were plagued by many of the same issues, and consequently, the Native American record is littered with contradictory statements about what happened to Custer—as is only to be expected when a beaten foe is interrogated about questions that they cannot possibly answer by a captor who has the power of life or death over them. These contradictions in turn, fuel the already present (and very bigoted) notion that Indigenous accounts are of lesser value than those of white eyewitnesses, and the entire body of Lakota and Cheyenne evidence about not only the Little Bighorn, but the whole Great Sioux War, is often distrusted. With Custer's immediate command having no survivors, writers have had to use Indigenous testimonials for the Little Bighorn, but have done so in haphazard fashion, picking and choosing whatever stories will fit their version of Custer; when it comes to the other battles of the Great Sioux War, the Lakota and Cheyenne commentaries are ignored even more often than the battles themselves.

Even authors who extensively use Indigenous sourcing, tend to do so in a manner that aims more to discredit the witnesses than support them. W.A. Graham included Indigenous material in his collection, but did so for the sake of “completeness,” outright telling his audience to trust none of it.¹³ *Lakota Noon*, a book that attempts to reconstruct the play-by-play of the Little Bighorn from Native American accounts, opens by telling its audience that the material is all terribly flawed and that they must trust the (white) author to reinterpret it all for them; one wonders why he bothered to write the book in the first place.¹⁴ Yet an openminded reading of the Lakota and Cheyenne interviews reveals that, when they were not being asked unanswerable questions about Custer personally, their accounts line up remarkably well with one another. Individual details may differ, but that is normal; one can hardly expect, after all, that a description of Waterloo or the Somme or the Battle of the Bulge based entirely on the testimony of privates and low-ranking officers would be comprehensive or void of contradictions, yet it is those very contradictions that Anglo-American academics have indicted their Lakota and Cheyenne witnesses for. By reading through the sources first, without a preconceived idea about Custer, or the Little Bighorn, or the inherent unreliability of oral Native American accounts in mind, one can easily reconstruct not only the general outlines of the battle, but also the Indigenous chain of command, such as it was, and from this, figure out whose stories should be given the most weight. That few writers have tried to do so is a travesty.

Then again, Anglo-American historians have often failed to take full advantage of even the US testimony they have access to. Jerome Greene’s work on Slim Buttes, for instance, takes John Bourke and Charles King’s claims about having won a great victory over Crazy Horse at

¹³ Graham, *The Custer Myth*, 3-4.

¹⁴ Gregory Michno, *Lakota Noon: The Indian Narrative of Custer’s Defeat* (Missoula: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 1997).

face value, but spends comparatively little time looking at how the movements described by Bourke and especially King, give the lie to both their boasts of an unqualified triumph. Perhaps no source, however, has been as thoroughly ill-treated as the memoirs of Nelson Miles, used, if at all, to discuss the battles that Miles himself was involved with, and then ignored. Miles, probably the US Army's most effective frontier general, did not confine himself to writing about his own personal experiences, but offered a number of critical comments about the conduct of the war and its operations, identifying that problems on the ground began not with any of the officers present but with Sheridan's outline for the campaign. Miles' reflections—and the similarly caustic comments made by John Gibbon in a series of magazine articles—are not simple grouching, but the cogent observations of an experienced field commander and 'Indian' fighter, baffled by the instructions he was getting from the top. Miles' analysis of the Little Bighorn battle maps well onto the best modern outlines of the disaster, and demonstrates in detail how poor decisions by Terry, Sheridan, and at times, their boss, William Sherman, limited Custer's choices, and reduced his agency, to the point where his calls were a nonfactor in the unfolding catastrophe. Since Miles was the officer who ultimately won the Great Sioux War for the government it seems safe to say that he knew what he was talking about, and his criticisms of the war as conceived by Sheridan need to, and will be, given full consideration here.

The historiography of the Anglo-Zulu War has, thankfully, attracted a higher percentage of professional historians than the Great Sioux War, which in turn has ensured that a higher degree of professionalism in works by their non-academic colleagues. Scholars like John Laband, Adrian Greaves, and especially Ian Knight have contributed a great deal to our understanding of both the war and the Zulu nation. Knight's *Anatomy of the Zulu Army* is not only key to understanding the Zulu military, but one of the few extant works to assume that it is

possible to analyse, in depth, the structure of an Indigenous army.¹⁵ Non-academics like Ron Lock have also done much to advance the study of the Anglo-Zulu conflict, with Lock's writings on Isandlwana and Hlobane giving the Zulu more tactical credit than even Knight's work does.¹⁶ However, many of the same issues that trouble the historiography of the Great Sioux War remain in play here. Anthony Durnford is not nearly as polarising a figure as Custer, and Lord Chelmsford never escaped the blame for Isandlwana in the way that Phil Sheridan evaded responsibility for the Little Bighorn, but the slurs that Chelmsford threw at Durnford remain entrenched in the literature and still turn up in descriptions of the battle. Knight and Lock, on opposite sides of a debate about whether Isandlwana was an opportunistic attack or a deliberate ambush, make almost identical criticisms of Durnford's leadership, with Lock, whose assertions about the British high command being taken in by a Zulu deception plan do not require Durnford to be incompetent, being the harsher of the two.¹⁷ Despite the well-informed disregard that both historians have for Chelmsford's generalship, they both still draw on comments from his defenders when looking to criticize Durnford, speaking to how deeply engrained the notion that white officers must be buffoons in order to be defeated by Indigenous peoples truly is.

More importantly, while the scholarship on the Anglo-Zulu War lacks a personality as destructive to objectivity as George Custer, it has been just as deformed by the British propaganda surrounding the skirmish at Rorke's Drift. Lionised by Chelmsford as saving Natal from a Zulu invasion, the stand of a hundred and fifty British soldiers at a trading post has become the most recognisable, and for many, the most important battle of the war. Films have

¹⁵ Ian Knight, *The Anatomy of the Zulu Army* (London: Greenhill Books, 1995).

¹⁶ Ron Lock, *Isandlwana: The Revelation of a Disaster* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2017).
Ron Lock, *Blood on the Painted Mountain: Zulu Victory and Defeat Hlobane and Kambula, 1879* (London: Greenhill Books, 1995).

¹⁷ Lock, *Isandlwana: The Revelation of a Disaster*, 184.

been made about it, and it outpaces even Isandlwana itself when it comes to recognition and the number of popular works written about it. Most academics in the field know better, yet they still cannot help being affected by the mythology surrounding Rorke's Drift. Ian Knight rightfully describes the battle as being of little importance to the Zulu, yet still devotes the latter portion of his book *Zulu Rising* to a detailed analysis of it.¹⁸ Full histories of the war, of which there are many, do the same, and this enables Rorke's Drift to retain its inflated import in the scholarship, even when those same authors subject its status to rightful criticism.

In contrast, most of the other battles of the Zulu War are virtually unknown. Adrian Greaves' book *Forgotten Battles of the Zulu War*, encompassing Nyzane, Ntombe Drift, Hlobane, Khambula, Gingindhlovu, and Ulundi, as well as many lesser skirmishes, was very on point in its title.¹⁹ While full histories of the Anglo-Zulu War are plentiful (in contrast to the near nonexistence of full histories of the Great Sioux War), they all tend to say similar things about these less famous battles, rarely differing from one another in anything other than minor details. Ian Castle and Ian Knight's *Fearful Hard Times*, examining the Siege of Eshowe, and the battles at the Nyzane and Gingindhlovu that bookended it, is an exception to these rules, as is Ron Lock's *Blood on the Painted Mountain*, the only full monograph dedicated to the twin battles of Hlobane and Khambula. Both are valuable works, but with nothing to compare them to, must be used carefully. That the Zulu War's officers are not nearly as well known as those of the Great Sioux War is another weakness in the scholarship; there are no modern academic biographies of Anthony Durnford, Lord Chelmsford, Charles Knight Pearson, or even Evelyn Wood and Redvers Buller, both of whom had distinguished careers after the war. The closest substitute is *Victoria's Generals*, a compilation of miniature biographies that includes Wood, Buller, and

¹⁸ Ian Knight, *Zulu Rising: The Epic Story of Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift* (London: Pan Books, 2010).

¹⁹ Adrian Greaves, *Forgotten Battles of the Zulu War* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2012).

Chelmsford; the chapter on Chelmsford is by John Laband, showing again that the personalities of the war are not well known outside of it.

As with the Great Sioux War, these difficulties are exacerbated not by an absence of primary sources, but by an overreliance on certain ones. Perhaps no primary source has exercised a greater influence on the historiography of the Anglo-Zulu War than *From Midshipman to Field Marshal*, the two volume memoirs of Field Marshal Evelyn Wood, who served in the Anglo-Zulu War as a colonel, and one of Chelmsford's most trusted subordinates.²⁰ That Wood was an incurable egotist who had many reasons to obfuscate details of the war is readily admitted to by most researchers, and in *Blood on the Painted Mountain* Ron Lock demonstrates, in convincing and excruciating detail, the ways in which Wood, after the reversal at Hlobane, twisted the casualty figures in order to suit the narrative he wished to present. Yet for all Wood's acknowledged mendacity on this front, his claim to have singlehandedly won the war at Khambula has largely gone unexamined. Knight, Lock, and Greaves all accept Wood's characterisation of Khambula as a one-sided battle that he could never have lost, and his boast that after Khambula, all the fight went out of the Zulu—though this assertion flies in the face of Knight's own work on Gingindhlovu. Only John Laband breaks from this orthodoxy, noting that Ulundi, the final battle of the war was a strongly contested action, in which the Zulu fought incredibly bravely, and came close to breaching the British square.²¹ Even then, Laband does not dispute Wood's assessment of Khambula as a great triumph and the key battle of the war, only the colonel's claims about its effect on the Zulu army's overall resolve. A consultation of other primary documents, many of them made available by Laband and Knight themselves in their

²⁰ Evelyn Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Volumes 1 & 2 (Pickle Partners Publishing, 2013).

²¹ John Laband, *Kingdom in Crisis: The Zulu Response to the British Invasion of 1879* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).

Archives of Zululand project, would quickly call almost everything Wood says into question, yet this has not been done. Wood's portrait of Khambula—rather like Crook's positioning of Slim Buttes—is taken as received wisdom, even by those who should know better.

This is not to suggest that scholars have relied solely on Wood, but rather that they have allowed him to guide the narrative of Khambula and have then gone to find other sources that verify him. This has been easy enough to do, since most veterans of that battle—of whom Sir Redvers Buller, Wood's cavalry commander, and Commandant Schermbrucker of the Kaffrarian Rifles are the most prominent—felt, as Wood did, that they had achieved something great. Buller and Schermbrucker did not, however, feel the need to alter their recollections to the extent Wood did, and reading their descriptions of the battle, rather than their feelings about it after the fact, one quickly reaches the conclusion that the action was much harder fought, and the threat of a Zulu triumph far more realistic, than anyone involved wanted to consider. This again makes for a strong parallel with Bourke and King's memoirs of Slim Buttes and point to one of the major dangers when investigating any military action: the threat of taking a witness' feelings at face value, even when those emotions conflict with the facts as laid out by that same witness. This danger is, perhaps, amplified still more when dealing with colonial military actions, as the prejudices of the witness are liable to be all the stronger; not only must defeats at the hands of Indigenous foes be flukes, but victories over those same foes must be crushing. That logic drove Evelyn Wood, and it has driven those historians who have come after him, and who have allowed his thinking to cloud their perception, even as they dispute individual details.

Fortunately, other primary sources on the Anglo-Zulu War are easily accessed. Mention has already been made of *Archives of South Africa-Zululand*, a series of five voluminous tomes containing vast numbers of government documents relating to the war. Included within these

volumes are reports from officers to both Lord Chelmsford and Sir Bartle Frere, correspondence between Chelmsford, Bartle Frere, and the Colonial Office and War Office in London, the minutes of Parliamentary debates, and articles published by veterans of various battles. John Laband, who was the series editor for *Archives of South Africa-Zululand* also published his own primary source collection, comprising Lord Chelmsford's outgoing correspondence during the Zululand campaign. While Chelmsford himself did not write a memoir, his aides William Molyneux and Henry Hallam Parr, and his pet reporter, Charles Norris-Newman did.²² Loaded with colonialist language, and written with an eye to exonerating their patron, Molyneux, Hallam Parr, and Norris-Newman's books echo the excuses used by Chelmsford and Sir Bartle Frere at the time and provide an important glimpse into the coterie of sycophants that surrounded Lord Chelmsford. Writing years after Isandlwana, Molyneux, Hallam Parr, and Norris-Newman were still searching for scapegoats, and their attempts at fixing the blame to Durnford mimic those of their chief, showing just how tight a grip Lord Chelmsford continued to exercise on his men long after the war. More positively, these autobiographical works, when compared with one another and with Lord Chelmsford's correspondence, offer a slanted, but important look into Chelmsford's decision-making process. Molyneux especially kept careful track of how many troops Chelmsford had available and the condition they were in, making him an important resource when it comes to assessing the strength of the Lieutenant-General's invasion columns.

Another important memoir comes from Commandant George Hamilton-Browne, an Irish soldier-of-fortune whose outsider perspective is invaluable when trying to pick apart the closed

²² Henry Hallam Parr, *A Sketch of the Kafir and Zulu Wars* (London: C. Keegan Paul and Co., 1880). William Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt* (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd, 1896). Charles Norris-Newman, *In Zululand with the British Throughout the War of 1879* (London: W.H. Allen and Co., 1880).

world of the British officer class.²³ Hamilton-Browne's claims of seeing service in New Zealand before the Anglo-Zulu War have been called into question, but his honesty about what happened on the ground in South Africa has never been in doubt, and he has seen regular use by historians when looking for details on Isandlwana and Gingindhlovu, both battles he was present for. The mercenary's perspective on the men he served with has been less frequently utilised; here it will be given fuller consideration. Whatever his real antecedents, Hamilton-Browne was still a professional soldier, and his critique of Lord Chelmsford's staff is well-worth incorporating. Much the same might be said for the *Narrative of Field Operations Connected with the Zulu War*, compiled at the War Office by Captain J.S. Rothwell in the 1880s, with the goal of figuring out what had gone wrong in the field.²⁴ While the *Narrative* is mostly a dispassionate summary of the available facts, the opinion of the author, and therefore of the War Office, often bleeds through, revealing Rothwell, and his patron, the Duke of Cambridge (commander-in-chief of the British Army, and cousin to Queen Victoria), largely shared Hamilton-Browne's opinion of Lord Chelmsford's staff officers. The *Narrative* and Hamilton-Browne's *A Lost Legionary in South Africa* overlap a great deal in their examination of the failure at Isandlwana, with Hamilton-Browne providing the perspective of an auxiliary field officer and the *Narrative* the opinion of the top brass. One would not necessarily expect Hamilton-Browne, an Irish expat and soldier-for-hire, and Rothwell, proxy for a royal scion like Cambridge, to agree on much, and their shared opinions go a long way towards legitimising one another as sources.

Perhaps the most underutilised of the major primary sources for the Anglo-Zulu War, however, is one of the oldest. *The History of the Zulu War and Its Origin* first appeared early in

²³ George Hamilton-Browne, *A Lost Legionary in South Africa* (Drifffield: Oakpast Ltd, 2012).

²⁴ J.S Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations Connected With the Zulu War of 1879* (London: Greenhill Books, 1989).

1880, less than a year after the end of the war.²⁵ Its author, Frances Ellen “Nell” Colenso, was the daughter of the Bishop of Natal, and had a close relationship with Anthony Durnford, a relationship that some characterize as romantic. Colenso reacted strongly to Bartle Frere and Chelmsford’s attacks on Durnford and with the assistance of his brother Edward, published her own book defending the deceased colonel. Drawing on state documents, newspapers, personal interviews with soldiers, and her family’s longstanding connections in Zululand, Colenso mounted a furious attack on Bartle Frere and Chelmsford, establishing their guilt for not only the defeat at Isandlwana, but for conspiring to start the war in the first place. While Colenso’s book is usually mentioned by historians, there is a tendency to write her off as biased, and therefore of limited use, a tendency which may sadly stem from ill-concealed sexism, rather than any genuine basis. All the primary sources for the Anglo-Zulu War are biased, some more than others, and whatever her relationship with Durnford may have been, Colenso was certainly no less objective than Evelyn Wood, or the likes of Molyneux, Hallam Parr, and Norris-Newman. Hamilton-Browne considered Colenso’s book to be extremely accurate, and in his own memoirs, referred his readers to it, noting that Colenso could say things in it that he wished to, but could not. The War Office *Narrative* does not mention Colenso by name but uses many of the same primary sources that she does, many of which would not have been readily available in Great Britain; evidently the Horse Guards considered her a worthy authority on what had happened at Isandlwana. There is little reason that a modern historian should not do the same.

With that in mind, this dissertation draws heavily on Colenso’s investigation into the outbreak of the war and her criticism of Lord Chelmsford and Sir Bartle Frere’s coverup after Isandlwana, as well as her reconstruction of events at Isandlwana itself, which rivals the War

²⁵ Frances Ellen Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1880).

Office *Narrative* and exceeds that of most eyewitness accounts when it comes to summarising the battle. Only a very few Zulu were ever interviewed about Isandlwana, and those same few depositions consequently appear across most sources that wish to consider the Zulu viewpoint. Colenso, however, was able to offer commentary on these Zulu interviews that others were not, drawing on her family's personal relationship with King Cetshwayo, and her assessment of his character, to provide important contexts that white writers then and now have often missed. Likewise, soldiers and staff officers who were too afraid to speak out against Chelmsford or Bartle Frere publicly, were willing to talk to Colenso, and these private exchanges allowed her to pinpoint the worst sources of malfeasance and misconduct in Chelmsford's staff. Her description of the action at Isandlwana therefore not only equals or exceeds that of the War Office *Narrative* in detail but grants insight into the decisions made by Durnford and by the Zulu that are missing from the *Narrative*, and from the individual testimony of survivors like Hamilton-Browne. The *Narrative* itself, as noted above, clearly drew heavily on Colenso in its sections on Isandlwana, and Hamilton-Browne outright told his readers that if they wanted to understand the battle, they needed to read *The History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*. The current author has taken their advice, and Colenso's work is given its due weight in the pages that follow.

In light of all the historiographical problems outlined above, it should not be a surprise that the only previous effort at a full comparison of the Great Sioux and Anglo-Zulu Wars, James Gump's *The Dust Rose Like Smoke*, was severely flawed. Like most historians looking at the Great Sioux War, Gump was unable to put Custer in his proper place as a Lieutenant-Colonel and commander of a single unit, and instead ended up attempting a one-for-one comparison between the roles of Custer and Lord Chelmsford, a Lieutenant-General, and the man in charge of the entirety of Britain's South African forces. Neither Phil Sheridan nor Anthony Durnford

featured in a major way in *The Dust Rose Like Smoke*, even though a proper comparison of the officers involved can only be done by contrasting Sheridan with Chelmsford, and Custer with Durnford. *The Dust Rose Like Smoke* likewise engaged with few of the debates in the field of either war, missing the chance to note the overlap between those debates, and instead accepting the most general consensus as being all that was needed to found a comparison on. This is not to say that Gump's work lacks value: it is an excellent social history, and his use of the similarities between the conflicts to launch an assault on the idea of American exceptionalism is worth the time of any reader who wishes to see that academic dead end appropriately aerated. His book, however, offers almost nothing to the military historian, saying little about the tactics employed on all sides, and giving only a cursory look at the coverup and press response.

There are lessons to be learned from a comparative study of the Great Sioux War and the Anglo-Zulu War, lessons about the nature of colonial warfare, lessons about the impact of bigotry on military planning, lessons about how empires reacted to defeat in the nineteenth century, lessons about what tactics were most effective against Indigenous adversaries and which were not. There are lessons to be learned on the other side too, about what enabled some Indigenous polities to stand up to their would-be conquerors, about the organisation of the military in non-white societies, and how those militaries were able to defeat, however briefly, technologically superior opponents. These lessons, however, cannot be learned from *The Dust Rose Like Smoke*, or even from most of the existing secondary literature on the two wars. A new study that puts both the Great Sioux War and the Anglo-Zulu War side by side as military campaigns first and foremost is needed. This work hopes to provide that needed service.

Chapter 1: Imperial Armies and Frontier Generals

Few men could, at first glance, have as little in common as Lieutenant-Generals Philip Henry Sheridan and Sir Frederic Augustus Thesiger II. The first was the working-class son of poor Irish immigrants to the United States and rose to power through a combination of good luck, patronage, and a talent for the application of brute force without empathy. The American Army's most dedicated proponent of total war, he had little time for social or military niceties. The second was the cultured, classically educated son of German-English nobility, who wore a monocle, played the clarinet, and viewed war as a gentleman's sport with clear rules of conduct. He was a personal friend of Queen Victoria, staged amateur theatricals for the amusement of his men, and on the death of his father, ascended to the rank of Baron, becoming the Right Honourable Lord Chelmsford. Given their respective class, ethnic, and military backgrounds, it is fair to surmise that, had Phil Sheridan and Lord Chelmsford ever been forced to endure one another's company, they would have taken an instant and hearty dislike to one another.

Yet for all their differences in background, military experience, and moral outlook, Phil Sheridan and Lord Chelmsford played much the same role in their respective wars. Both acted as the supreme military authorities in their area of operations: Sheridan as Commanding Officer of the Division of the Missouri, Chelmsford as Commanding General South African Forces. Moreover, both men served in political, as well as military capacities, and were not only responsible for waging wars against their nation's indigenous enemies but were at the heart of the conspiracies to start those wars. The Great Sioux War was Phil Sheridan's pet project, which he began working toward from the moment he assumed control over the Division of the Missouri, his conflicts against other Plains tribes serving as testing grounds for the war he truly wanted to fight. The Anglo-Zulu War, likewise, came about as a product of Chelmsford's desire

for military glory, which saw him conspire with Sir Henry Bartle Frere and Sir Theophilus Shepstone to bring about an invasion of Zululand. Sheridan and Chelmsford, in wading into these politicised waters, show how integrated the military elite was into the ruling class of American and British society, as well as demonstrating the power that a frontier general could unilaterally wield in his theatre of operations. Any checks and balances meant to stop the army from interfering in civilian affairs were decidedly absent in the American West or the South African borderlands, and Sheridan and Chelmsford could, and did, assert their authority over civilian (and military) opponents with relative impunity.

More interestingly still, once Sheridan and Chelmsford were able to launch their wars they conducted them according to what was, for all intents and purposes, the same plan of campaign. The two generals shared a fear that their non-white enemies were too cowardly and weak to meet Anglo-American soldiers in conventional, head-to-head warfare, and that they might therefore be in for a long, grueling guerilla war, a situation they wished to avoid at all costs. Both were involved in previous counterinsurgency campaigns against Native American or African adversaries, and both were afraid of the expenses and bad press such operations generated, and the time they wasted. Trying to allay these concerns, the American and the British general came up with operational schemes that relied on using small, theoretically self-sufficient columns to run down fleeing enemies. As future chapters will demonstrate, it was this disposition of forces that created the circumstances under which American and British officers would be beaten at the Rosebud, the Little Bighorn, Slim Buttes, Isandlwana, Ntombe Drift, and Hlobane.

That Sheridan and Chelmsford came up with the same mistaken notion for their campaigns says a great deal about the bigotry and colonial reasoning that pervaded both the American and British officer class in the 1870s. With little in their personal histories that would

have resulted in their thinking being so aligned, one must look to the institutions the two generals were part of, and the ideas that were prevalent in those institutions to explain their actions.

Neither Sheridan nor Chelmsford were fools, and neither, despite the claims of some historians, were their subordinates. As brief summaries of their careers will show, Phil Sheridan and his field commanders, of whom the most important were George Crook, Alfred Terry, John Gibbon, and George Armstrong Custer, were all veteran American Civil War officers with records ranging from the solidly competent to the outright spectacular. Similarly, Lord Chelmsford, Charles Knight Pearson, Sir Evelyn Wood, Sir Redvers Buller, and Anthony Durnford were all veterans of either the Crimean War or of Britain's many colonial wars around the world. None of these men were particularly or uniquely incompetent, and none had anything in their personal histories to suggest that their behaviour in the field would be anything other than exemplary.

The problems that these officers experienced lay not in their personal failings, but in the system they were a part of and the limits it placed on their capacity for reasoned decision making. Imperial armies, which is what the American and British militaries were in the 1870s, before they were anything else, put serious restraints on the ability of officers to engage with reality, providing them with a set of stereotypes about indigenous foes that were to be used in place of military intelligence. Some officers bought into this way of thinking wholeheartedly while others were more suspicious, but so long as the men at the top accepted these ideas, the ability of men further down the totem pole to push back against them was badly impaired. Sheridan and Chelmsford, at the start of their respective wars, were both true believers in this style of colonial reasoning, and they imposed their way of thinking on the men below them, forcing otherwise capable officers to behave in ways they might not have on their own.

*

From 1868 onward, the man who most influenced American “Indian” policy was Philip Henry Sheridan, Lieutenant-General and Commanding Officer of the Division of the Missouri. Responsible for administering a military fiefdom stretching from Montana, Wyoming and the Dakotas down to the Texas border, Sheridan’s domain included more than 300 000 of those Native Americans who had not yet been confined to reservations. It was a situation rife with the potential for conflict, as Sheridan—“Little Phil” to his admiring men—owed his entire career to his ability and willingness to inflict violence on others. The son of Irish-Catholic immigrants to the United States, Sheridan grew up impoverished, his father, a manual labourer, barely able to provide for his large family. While the senior Sheridan did improve his lot somewhat, becoming a freelance contractor with paid employees, he never held onto the money for long, and this financial instability left a definite mark on his younger son. By the time Phil Sheridan was in his early teens, he was already afflicted with the legendarily bad temper that became a hallmark of his military career, rendering the boy unsuited for life at the bottom of the social ladder in small town Ohio. Dropping out of school, Sheridan found work as a clerk in a dry goods store, where the teenager struck up an unlikely friendship with the local Congressman. Exploiting this relationship, eighteen-year-old Sheridan wrangled himself a place at the United States military academy at West Point in 1848, escaping from Somerset, Ohio for good, and bringing only his new uniform and a great deal of emotional baggage with him.

West Point was established in the 1790s, after a string of embarrassing reversals in the Northwest Indian War of 1790-1795 persuaded the government the country needed a professional army and officer corps. Despite its origins, West Point’s curriculum offered little in the way of an education in unconventional warfare, preferring instead to focus on classical military history and, by the time Sheridan got there, the campaigns of Napoleon Bonaparte.

Between the year of its foundation and Sheridan's arrival in 1848, the American Army was involved in dozens of operations, both large and small, against Indigenous adversaries, with even its two conventional wars—the War of 1812, and the Mexican War—folding in, respectively, lengthy campaigns against the Shawnee Confederacy and the Comanche and Apache. Yet the emphasis remained on warfare against European-style enemies with the academy's top graduates owing their high placements to the memorisation of Napoleonic stratagems and tactical ploys, rather than material that might be relevant to the foes they were most likely to face in the field. Robert E. Lee and several other future Confederate generals were typical of the kind of graduates West Point was looking for and got top marks, while Ulysses S. Grant, whose embrace of a modern strategy of attrition defeated Lee and his compatriots in the coming Civil War, consistently placed in the bottom of his class.

Retrospectively, it was a strange outlook for an army and an academy that owed their very existence to colonial wars on the frontier. In the immediate aftermath of the American Revolution, George Washington and the other Founding Fathers aimed to disband the American Army, viewing permanent militaries as instruments of tyranny, rather than defense. The protection of the nation, they thought, would rest with militia companies who could be raised when needed and dismissed afterwards. The Northwest Indian War, which saw American militiamen and volunteer generals brutally defeated by Shawnee and Miami fighters, taught the Americans they needed a standing army and a professional officer corps, though even then, they tried to keep this force as small as possible. The militia had to fail the United States several more times, most notably in the War of 1812, before the USA considered enlarging the army, and increasing the number of admittees to West Point. These reforms remained insufficient, however, and in the Mexican War the regular troops were augmented with significant numbers of

Volunteers, a process that played out again in the American Civil War. This vicious cycle, wherein the army was strengthened in the immediate aftermath of disaster or difficulty, then reduced in size once peace was made, is the subject of numerous books and scholarly articles and is largely outside the purview of this study. It is mentioned here, however, to provide context for the education which Sheridan and his peers received at West Point in the 1840s and 1850s.

Admittedly, educating Sheridan proved to be of immense difficulty for most of the professors at West Point. Arriving angry and agitated, Sheridan left much the same way, having accumulated one hundred eighty-nine demerits—eleven short of the number needed for permanent expulsion. His grades were consistently in the bottom third of the class, and he only just barely scraped together enough of an average to graduate. These lacklustre grades may be explained by the fact that Sheridan was too busy fighting with other students to study—many of those demerits were awarded for fistfights, assaults, and other acts of violence against fellow members of the student body. When the short, surly Ohioan was graduated in 1853, the best that West Point Superintendent Robert E. Lee could say of him was that he was “well qualified for all corps.” Sheridan was immediately shipped out West, where less than 7000 soldiers were tasked with guarding half the continental United States.

From 1853 until the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, the newly commissioned Second Lieutenant Sheridan served in the Pacific Northwest where his interactions with discontented Native Americans shaped his perceptions of frontier warfare for years to come. The early pages of Sheridan’s memoirs are littered with invective against the Pacific peoples, whom he repeatedly described as “cruel,” “treacherous” and “savage.”²⁶ In an 1855 expedition against the Yakima, Sheridan, leading a party of mounted infantry, struck at a Yakima campsite, but only

²⁶ Sheridan, *The Personal Memoirs of P.H. Sheridan* Vol. 1, 43.

destroyed part of the Yakima food supply, the tribesmen making good their escape. Days later, Sheridan encountered a body of Yakima warriors, yet could not induce them to stand and fight against his dragoons; in his memoirs he complained that “all our efforts were in vain, for as we advanced, they retreated, and as we drew back they reappeared and renewed their parade and noisy demonstrations.”²⁷ Unable to bring the Yakima to battle, Sheridan fell back and rejoined the infantry under Brigadier-General Rains, who Sheridan felt had been of little use in the fighting.

The next day Sheridan begged Rains to let him charge a Yakima war-party that was harassing their advance but Rains’ “extreme caution led him to refuse the suggestion.”²⁸ Later Rains did permit Sheridan to drive the Yakima from a nearby hill, but then immediately ordered him to fall back, allowing the Yakima to retake the hill. In the end, the Yakima fled before Rains’ advance, yet Sheridan was again not allowed to pursue, a fact that bothered the aggressive young officer for years afterward. In his memoirs Sheridan denounced Rains as incompetent and the expedition as a “dismal failure”, one that could have been rectified if only he and his mounted men had been allowed to attack the Yakima.²⁹ On the former point, he may have been onto something; shortly after the expedition’s conclusion Rains and Captain E.O.C. Ord, Sheridan’s immediate superior, charged one another with incompetency, with courts-martial of both falling through because of a lack of officers with which to form a jury to try them.³⁰

Sheridan blamed Rains for subsequent difficulties with the tribes of the Cascades region, believing Rains’ inability to bring the Yakima to heel encouraged other tribes to turn hostile. Sheridan was involved in skirmishes against bands of Cascades and Yakima, and after the war,

²⁷ Sheridan, *The Personal Memoirs of P.H. Sheridan* Vol. 1, 58.

²⁸ Sheridan, *The Personal Memoirs of P.H. Sheridan* Vol. 1, 59.

²⁹ Sheridan, *The Personal Memoirs of P.H. Sheridan* Vol. 1, 66.

³⁰ Sheridan, *The Personal Memoirs of P.H. Sheridan* Vol. 1, 68.

in the sentencing of Cascades he believed guilty of murdering settlers.³¹ Left in charge of a post at Rogue River, Sheridan spent the next several years of his career adjudicating tribal disputes and trying to suppress local traditions relating to “witch-doctors”. Relegated to this most backwater of backwater duties, Sheridan’s respect for the Indigenous tribes of the Pacific did not increase, and his remembrances of this period are filled with contempt for the “senseless and monstrous practices” of the Rogue River bands.³² When considering Sheridan’s future attitudes towards the Lakota and Cheyenne and the plans he drafted for battling them, these formative experiences in the Pacific Northwest should be kept in mind. While far from the most congenial or likeable of men, Phil Sheridan was not incompetent, and as his Civil War record demonstrates, was an immensely successful officer in his own milieu. He was never, however, able to move past his initial impressions of what he believed all Indigenous peoples were like, and this had important ramifications for his future frontier campaigns.

It was the American Civil War that propelled Phil Sheridan to the heights of power. Before it broke out he was a Second Lieutenant in a remote post with little chance of promotion. When it ended he was a Major-General, and even more importantly, the third ranking man in the American Army behind only Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman. Sheridan was not the only officer to achieve rapid promotion during the Civil War—the Army expanded by orders of magnitude, and the defection of many of West Point’s aristocratic best to the newborn Confederate States of America, meant trained Union officers were in short supply. Men who began the war as Lieutenants and Captains often finished it as Brigadier-Generals and Major-Generals, and new officers with no prior military employment could end up commanding tens of

³¹ Sheridan, *The Personal Memoirs of P.H. Sheridan* Vol. 1, 73-82.

³² Sheridan, *The Personal Memoirs of P.H. Sheridan* Vol. 1, 108.

thousands of men by 1865. Every American officer of import to this study was a Civil War veteran, and they all rose from obscurity as a product of their service therein.

Even by these standards Sheridan's rise was meteoric and unlike many of his contemporaries, he kept his new position after the war was over. In order to deal with the influx of new recruits, the Union armies created a two-track system with the Regular Army maintaining its prewar structure while new units were funnelled into the Volunteer Army, which existed solely for the duration of the Civil War. Officers assigned to the Volunteer units ran the gamut from former soldiers returning to duty like Grant, to new hires with no formal military experience like Alfred Terry, to Regular officers like Sheridan who were seconded to the Volunteer formations. Those who had been Regulars before the war, or who intended to stay in the Army after the war was over, accordingly held two separate ranks: their rank in the Volunteers, which they kept for the war, and their rank in the Regulars, which they reverted to during the postwar downsizing. When the war was over most of the men who held general officer status were reduced in rank by at least one grade, and sometimes by many more. This situation fueled rivalries in the postwar army as Regular officers found themselves serving under men who held equivalent rank to them in the Volunteer Army. Sheridan, however, finished the Civil War a Major-General of Volunteers and a Major-General of Regulars, something that few other officers save Grant and Sherman accomplished. How Sheridan achieved this is a fascinating story in its own right, and provides insight into his future approaches to warfare.

Within weeks of the South's secession Sheridan was promoted to First Lieutenant and then to Captain, all without firing a shot. Sheridan was intended to serve as a Captain in the 13th United States Infantry, but never reached his regiment, being pulled for duty as a quartermaster and commissary by Major-General Henry Wager Halleck, commanding the bulk of Union

operations in the West. Sheridan's teenage experience as a clerk came in useful here and the new Captain eventually found himself as Halleck's Chief Quartermaster. In his memoirs, Sheridan recalled that Halleck always treated him well but that he chafed to get into action.³³ He got his chance on May 27, 1862, when a letter arrived from the Governor of Michigan, appointing Sheridan as Colonel of the 2nd Regiment Michigan Volunteer Cavalry. Sheridan was never sure how his name was sent to the Governor in the first place but there is a solid chance that then Brigadier-General William Sherman, whose wife Sheridan knew as a child, and who previously tried to get Sheridan a position as Colonel of an Ohio regiment, had something to do with it.³⁴

The appointment to the 2nd Michigan was a turning point in Sheridan's career, with accolades and promotions soon following. In a raid into Confederate territory around Booneville, Sheridan's Union cavalry busied themselves with wrecking Confederate railway communications "by tearing up the track, bending the rails, and burning the crossties."³⁵ While Halleck's army drove on Corinth, Sheridan raided Confederate supply lines and railroad depots, taking only minimal losses and inflicting significant damage to Confederate General P.G.T. Beauregard's army in the process. "The results of the expedition," Sheridan remembered, "were important; the railroad being broken so thoroughly as to cut off all rolling stock north of Booneville, and to place at the service of General Halleck's army the cars and locomotives of which the retreating Confederates were now so much in need. In addition, we burned twenty-six cars containing ten thousand stand of small arms, three pieces of artillery, a great quantity of clothing, a heavy supply of ammunition, and the personal baggage of General Leonidas Polk. A large number of prisoners, mostly sick and convalescent, also fell into our hands."³⁶ As the

³³ Sheridan, *The Personal Memoirs of P.H. Sheridan* Vol. 1, 126-135.

³⁴ Sheridan, *The Personal Memoirs of P.H. Sheridan* Vol. 1, 141.

³⁵ Sheridan, *The Personal Memoirs of P.H. Sheridan* Vol. 1, 147.

³⁶ Sheridan, *The Personal Memoirs of P.H. Sheridan* Vol. 1, 149-150.

Confederates pulled out of Corinth, Sheridan harassed their rearguard; years later he wondered why Halleck did not allow a more aggressive pursuit, believing that “it would largely have aided in disintegrating his [Beauregard’s] forces, and I could never quite understand why it was not ordered.”³⁷ When Sheridan’s immediate superior was promoted, command of the brigade fell to him, and after a series of skirmishes with the Confederate cavalry, the District Commander, William Rosecrans recommended Sheridan for promotion to Brigadier-General. Sheridan, transferred on Rosecrans’ suggestion to Louisville, did not find out about his new title until he arrived there and his new superior, Major-General “Bull” Nelson, ordered him to change the insignia on his shoulder straps and to take charge of his new division.³⁸

As a divisional commander, Sheridan fought with Don Carlos Buell at Perryville, and with William Rosecrans again at Murfreesboro, Bridgeport, and Chickamauga. At Murfreesboro, Sheridan’s Division held the line when Braxton Bragg’s Confederates launched a surprise assault that sent all the rest running. Sheridan lost all four of his brigade commanders and a third of his men and shot away almost all his ammunition before Rosecrans stemmed the bleeding and sent up reinforcements to stabilise the front.³⁹ It was probably this incident that led Rosecrans to promote Sheridan to Major-General and to send Sheridan to cover Major-General George Thomas’ withdrawal from Chickamauga several months later. Of the 4000 men and officers Sheridan had at the start of the action at Chickamauga, he lost 1517, including two of his new brigade commanders. Retreating inside Chattanooga alongside Thomas’ command, Sheridan endured the Confederate siege of the town, relying on his attached cavalry to smuggle food into the entrenchments for his men.⁴⁰ Soon after, Ulysses S. Grant, fresh from his triumph at

³⁷ Sheridan, *The Personal Memoirs of P.H. Sheridan* Vol. 1, 152.

³⁸ Sheridan, *The Personal Memoirs of P.H. Sheridan* Vol. 1, 184.

³⁹ Sheridan, *The Personal Memoirs of P.H. Sheridan* Vol. 1, 229-231.

⁴⁰ Sheridan, *The Personal Memoirs of P.H. Sheridan* Vol. 1, 284-296.

Vicksburg and newly appointed to command of all forces in the Western theatre, took over operations around Chattanooga and replaced Rosecrans with Thomas. Sheridan, a favourite of Rosecrans', survived the transition due to the services he rendered Thomas, and came to Grant's attention during the breakout from Chattanooga, when his division not only took the Missionary Ridge defensive positions from the Confederacy, but scaled the entire mountain. Reinforced by Grant before the breakout, Sheridan assaulted Missionary Ridge with 6000 men, losing 1181, and the young officer's eagerness to fight and willingness to endure high casualties caught Grant's eye.⁴¹

No officer Sheridan served with or under had a greater effect on his worldview than Ulysses Grant did. A failure and an alcoholic in civilian life, Grant reinvented himself as the Union's most capable general during the Civil War, throwing aside all he learned of Napoleonic wars of maneuver at West Point, and engaging the Confederacy in a grinding war of attrition he knew the Union would eventually win. While neo-Confederate historians have tried their best to obscure this point, Grant was not callous with the lives of his men, nor did he sustain especially high casualties in relation to other officers, Union or Confederate. Rather, Grant understood, as many previous Union officers had not, that high casualties were inevitable in a war as technologically and tactically transformative as the American Civil War, and that they were not a reason to call retreat. Where his contemporaries deceived themselves into believing the Confederacy was not taking anything like the casualty rates the Union was, Grant knew they had to be, and that unlike the Union, the Confederacy did not have the manpower or the resources to make up the losses. Rather than trying to take the enemy's cities, Grant focussed his war effort

⁴¹ Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant: The Complete Annotated Edition*, edited by John F. Marszalek (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017): 446-447; Sheridan, *The Personal Memoirs of P.H. Sheridan* Vol. 1, 313-319.

on the physical destruction of the Confederate armies, aiming to bring the conflict to a close by terminating the CSA's ability to make war. Those closest to Grant, of whom Sherman and Sheridan were undoubtedly the two he trusted most, absorbed much of his philosophy of war and refined it according to their personal dispositions and the situations they found themselves in.

When Grant was promoted to General-in-Chief Sheridan was one of the officers he brought East with him. Sheridan was made chief of the Army of the Potomac's cavalry, and his aggressive personal style saw the Union horsemen win their greatest victory over their Confederate counterparts at Yellow Tavern, where the infamous Southern cavalier J.E.B. Stuart was killed by troopers under George Custer. Some historians have criticized this operation, writing that it was of little practical value to the Union's war goals, but there is no denying that it revitalised the spirits of the Northern cavalry which, up to that point, had been flagging low indeed.⁴² It also convinced Grant that Sheridan could be trusted with an independent command, and on August 1, 1864, Sheridan was transferred again, sent to the Shenandoah Valley to consolidate the region's multiple commands into a single Army of the Shenandoah.

Sheridan was not Grant's first choice for the job. When he first got news that Robert E. Lee had sent his henchman, Jubal Early, to raid the Shenandoah Valley and that Early was getting the best of the Valley's disunited defenders, Grant had thought to send Major-General George Gordon Meade, commander of the Army of the Potomac. These intentions lasted until Grant was made aware of *how* Early was conducting his march up the Valley. A slaver and a social pariah in civilian life, Jubal Early was never overly burdened with scruples, and his Shenandoah campaign was characterised by what can best be described as aimless brutality.

⁴² Even Eric J. Wittenberg, whose work is hardly complimentary of Sheridan, grants that with him in charge the Potomac cavalry always believed they could win, regardless of their actual win/loss ratio. Stephen Sears echoes these conclusions in his book *Lincoln's Lieutenants*, which studies the high command of the Army of the Potomac.

Early's men robbed towns, lynched or enslaved African-Americans, and burned homesteads seemingly at random.⁴³ Lee, it would seem, let Early off his leash, with orders to cause as much pointless atrocity as possible, in the hopes it would force the Union into diverting resources to protect the Valley's civilians. Grant, thoroughly displeased with Lee's tactics, decided to reply in kind, wanting someone who would match Early transgression for transgression, in order to teach Lee this sort of behaviour would not be tolerated by the new Union leadership. Grant suspected that Sheridan, with his history of violent behaviour and his demonstrated willingness to torch Confederate infrastructure, might be the man for this task. "In pushing up the Shenandoah Valley," he told Sheridan, "as it is expected you will have to go first or last, it is desirous that nothing should be left to invite the enemy to return. Take all provisions, forage, and stock wanted for the use of your command. Such as cannot be consumed, destroy."⁴⁴

Sheridan vindicated Grant's trust in him, burning the Shenandoah Valley to the ground and, almost as an afterthought, smashing Early's army while he was at it. One of the Civil War's most controversial campaigns, Sheridan's rampage through the Valley attracts defenders and detractors in equal numbers. The latter, repelled by Sheridan's self-serving memoirs and his continuously abusive treatment of his subcommanders, have often tried to give all credit for the triumph in the Valley to those subordinates. They have also tended to insist that Sheridan was only victorious because of his vast superiority in numbers and that Early outgeneralled Sheridan at every turn.⁴⁵ These assessments, however, are reliant on the recollections of Early himself, and

⁴³ As Confederate Brigadier-General Bradley Tyler Johnson's report on the burning of Chambersburg, contained in the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* shows, even some of Early's own officers were uncomfortable with the orders he, and his right-hand man John "Tiger" McCausland were giving.

⁴⁴ Sheridan, *The Personal Memoirs of P.H. Sheridan* Vol. 1, 486. Copies of the same order can be found in the *Official Records*.

⁴⁵ Wittenberg offers this exact assessment of the Shenandoah Valley campaign in *Little Phil*, attributing all the victories to George Crook—in sharp contrast to Crook's biographer, Paul Magid, who saw Crook's performance in the Valley as among his worst moments.

if Sheridan is to be deemed untrustworthy, Early is doubly so. After the war was over, Early became a 'historian' in name, if not in fact, and helped to create the myth of the Lost Cause, which deified Robert E. Lee and the other Confederate leaders, downplayed the role of slavery in starting the war, and tried to paint all Union generals as incompetents and buffoons. Not content with perpetuating a historical fraud, Early also lent his name to the corrupt Louisiana Lottery system which bilked thousands of his fellow Southerners out of millions of dollars during the Reconstruction years. Tellingly, Lee, who Early attempted to raise to sainthood and who was perennially incapable of publicly criticizing the character of any of his officers, always seemed faintly disgusted by Early, describing him as "my old, bad man."

Sheridan never doubted that he won a great victory over Early and boasted of it in his memoirs. He was not shy about the material destruction he wreaked in the Valley, and was, if anything, downright proud of it. "I endorsed Grant's programme," Sheridan wrote, "for I do not hold war to mean simply that lines of men shall engage each other in battle, and material interests be ignored. This is but a duel, in which one combatant seeks the other's life; war means much more, and is far worse than this. Those who rest at home in peace and plenty see but little of the horrors attending such a duel, and even grow indifferent to them as the struggle goes on, contenting themselves with encouraging all who are able-bodied to enlist in the cause, to fill up the shattered ranks as death thins them. It is another matter, however, when deprivation and suffering are brought to their own doors. Then the case appears much graver, for the loss of property weighs heavy with the most of mankind; heavier often, than the sacrifices made on the field of battle. Death is popularly considered the maximum of punishment in war, but it is not; reduction to poverty brings prayers for peace more surely and more quickly than does the destruction of human life, as the selfishness of man has demonstrated in more than one great

conflict.”⁴⁶ It was a description of what we would now term ‘total war’, in which no distinction is made between civilians and military personnel, and all parts of a society become legitimate targets. When Sheridan left the Shenandoah Valley it was a smoking crater. He would try to apply the same stratagems against the Plains tribes years later.

With the Valley campaign over, Sheridan returned to the Army of the Potomac and resumed control of its cavalry, seeing out the rest of the war under Grant. As the Confederate States fell apart and Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia collapsed in the face of relentless pressure from Grant, it was Sheridan who led the pursuit of Lee, his vanguard hounding the Confederate general and not allowing his army a minute’s rest, until Lee, trapped at Appomattox, was left with no choice but to surrender to Grant. During those last weeks, Sheridan was everywhere, regularly exposing himself to fire, and galvanising his men into action through sheer force of personality. On one occasion a Union Private, fatally shot through the throat, followed Sheridan’s bellowed command to “Pick up your gun, man and move right on the front,” and staggered forward several steps before keeling over dead.⁴⁷ Eric J. Wittenberg, an anti-Sheridan historian who wrote an entire book debunking the general’s career nevertheless admitted that Sheridan’s pursuit of Lee was his finest moment. “During the war’s final campaign,” Wittenberg wrote, “Sheridan showed that he could effectively command a combined arms operation. The cavalry, along with infantry corps from two different armies, led the chase across the Virginia countryside. The coordination and logistics of such an effort required skill, and Sheridan demonstrated that skill successfully.”⁴⁸ Quoting another historian hostile to Sheridan, Wittenberg added, ““there is no finer instance of a pursuit than that of Lee’s army by Sheridan in 1865.””⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Sheridan, *The Personal Memoirs of P.H. Sheridan* Vol. 1, 487-488.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Eric J. Wittenberg, *Little Phil* (Washington: Brassey’s Inc, 2002): 162.

⁴⁸ Wittenberg, *Little Phil*, 165.

⁴⁹ Wittenberg, *Little Phil*, 161.

In the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, Sheridan spent three unhappy years as the military governor of Reconstruction Texas, battling Comanche raiders and Confederate diehards while trying to protect the local African-American population from the Klan. It was bitter, unfulfilling work, and prompted Sheridan to declare that “If I owned Texas and Hell, I would rent Texas, and live in Hell.”⁵⁰ Sheridan’s willingness to hang both members of lynch mobs and those who tried to protect them endeared him to elements of the African-American community, but earned him the hatred of local whites, and led President Andrew Johnson to demand Sheridan’s transfer out of the state. He was sent to the Department of the Missouri, where, despite the recent cessation of hostilities between the United States government and a Native American alliance led by the Oglala Lakota Red Cloud, tensions continued to run high. Sheridan’s solution to these ongoing problems was to mount a winter campaign against the Southern Cheyenne, using George Armstrong Custer’s 7th Cavalry as his main striking arm. The resultant attack on a friendly Southern Cheyenne encampment under Black Kettle on the banks of the Washita River was a success insofar as the Americans killed a large number of Cheyenne while taking few losses themselves, but was a failure in all the respects that actually mattered. Black Kettle, who was killed in the assault, was a peace chief, albeit one of the most victimized in the history of the United States; the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre, where several hundred of Black Kettle’s followers were murdered by US Volunteers under John Chivington helped to inaugurate the hostilities that Sheridan was supposedly trying to put an end to now. Never one for admitting to a mistake, Sheridan insisted that Black Kettle only pretended to be friendly to the United States, and that the Battle of the Washita was an unqualified victory, a sentiment that

⁵⁰ *The Independent*, April 19, 1866, 4.

was echoed in the Western press.⁵¹ Eastern papers, traditionally more friendly to Native Americans than their frontier counterparts, decried it as another massacre in the tradition of Sand Creek.

Battle or Massacre, the Washita was the last time Sheridan took the field. In 1869, Ulysses S. Grant became President of the United States, William Tecumseh Sherman became General-in-Chief of the Army, and Phil Sheridan became the Lieutenant-General Commanding the Division of the Missouri. Encompassing the Departments of the Platte, the Dakotas, the Missouri, Texas, and, eventually, Arizona, the Division of the Missouri was the largest and most active of the United States' military Divisions. It was also among the most independent. The Districts, Departments, and Divisions of the United States Army were, in many ways, near feudal fiefdoms in which the Commanding Officer, whatever his rank, enjoyed considerable leeway to implement whatever policies he saw fit, constrained only by whatever influence the officer immediately above him cared to exercise.

In Sheridan's case, the only officer above him was William Sherman, who, after quickly embroiling himself in a feud with Grant's Secretary of War, functionally abdicated his responsibilities as General-in-Chief, moving his headquarters to Saint Louis and limiting his role in making policy. With the Grant administration preoccupied with issues of civil rights and Reconstruction, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs plagued by scandals, Sheridan gathered increasing amounts of power into his own hands. Sheridan's close personal relationship with President Grant helped him immensely in this respect: while Grant was personally sympathetic to Native Americans, he trusted that Sheridan knew what he was doing, and regularly ordered his Secretaries of the Interior and Commissioners of Indian Affairs to suspend their own judgement

⁵¹ Philip Sheridan, "Report of Operations of the Campaign Against Indians in the Department of the Missouri in the Winter of 1868 to 1869," (Library of Congress mss39768 reel 86): 52.

and do what Sheridan told them to.⁵² Thus, while Grant officially advocated for a Peace Policy, in which Native Americans would be “civilised” by Quakers and other missionaries, in practice, the Division of the Missouri became an active warzone for most of Sheridan’s tenure as Commander.

Sheridan went to war with the Southern Cheyenne in 1869, the Apache in 1871, and the Comanche, Kiowa, Southern Arapaho and Southern Cheyenne again in 1874 through 1875. Between these officially declared wars there were a lengthy series of skirmishes, raids, and massacres, with Sheridan turning a blind eye to, or even endorsing, genocidal actions on the part of his subordinates. In 1870 an expedition under the alcoholic Major Eugene Baker butchered three hundred friendly Piegan tribesmen when they could not find the hostile Piegans they were after. Sheridan obfuscated the nature of Baker’s activities in his reports while accusing those who criticized Baker of wanting whites to be slaughtered instead.⁵³ Throughout these years, Sheridan constructed and refined his strategy for defeating hostile tribes, creating a military formula he insisted on having followed through thick and thin. Using the Battle of the Washita as a template, Sheridan determined the best way to defeat Native Americans was to strike them in the winter, when snow impeded their mobility. Cavalry, he believed, had to be the arm of decision, since no infantry force could ever catch up with swift moving Native horsemen. Moreover, to best limit the ability of the Natives to flee, this cavalry force needed to be broken into small columns that would converge on a central point, cutting the enemy off from their lines of retreat. Camps were to be burned, and supplies destroyed, leaving the Indigenous peoples of

⁵² Grant’s changing attitudes towards his own Peace Policy, and Sheridan’s role in it, are documented in excerpts from correspondence in *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* Vol. 26, pages 68-1163.

⁵³ Peter Cozzens, *The Earth is Weeping*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016): 117.

the Plains destitute and starving through the severe Western winters. This would confront the independent Native American tribes with two choices: submit to the US government or starve.

It is easy to see the influence of Sheridan's Valley campaign, with its destruction of Confederate resources and food stock on his thinking here. It is equally easy to see the influence of the Yakima wars of the 1850s, especially in Sheridan's belief, which was unwavering, that the greatest threat facing the US Army was their enemies getting away, drawing out the campaign and turning it into an expensive failure. Throughout his service in the 1850s Pacific, Sheridan was frustrated when he was prevented from pursuing fleeing Yakima, and, in his mind at least, deprived of the opportunity to bring them to battle and inflict a decisive defeat on them. Fusing these ideas with his experience of total war in the Shenandoah Valley, Sheridan created his rubric for winter campaigning, which he first tried at the Washita. His mission at the Washita, Sheridan wrote, was to disabuse Native Americans of the idea that winter provided them with any protection from the American government, shattering their morale while they were at their most vulnerable.⁵⁴ Convinced this test run vindicated his theories, Sheridan instituted them throughout the Division of the Missouri, and was again—at least in his mind—proven right to have done so when Colonels Ranald "Bad Hand" Mackenzie and Nelson Appleton Miles crushed the Comanche, Kiowa, and Southern Cheyenne in the 1874-1875 Red River War, trapping the Indigenous warbands between their units.⁵⁵ True, the Comanche and Kiowa had recently been devastated by smallpox, and Miles did the bulk of his fighting using infantry, but Sheridan did not see that. He saw only that his notions for frontier warfare had again paid off, and that a once-

⁵⁴ Sheridan, "Report of Operations of the Campaign Against Indians in the Department of the Missouri in the Winter of 1868 to 1869," 32.

⁵⁵ Philip Sheridan, "Headquarters Military Division of the Missouri, October 1, 1874," in *Philip Henry Sheridan Papers* (Library of Congress mss39768 reel 86): 3-4.

powerful alliance of southern tribes had been brought to heel. He expected, therefore, that this same strategy would be equally effective in a war with the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne.

And a war with the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne was something that Phil Sheridan very much wanted. Sheridan came to the Great Plains at the end of 1868, just after the closing of Red Cloud's War, in which the Lakota-Northern Cheyenne coalition beat the Civil War weary US Army and won a peace on their own terms. To Sheridan's way of thinking, this was a disastrous outcome, one that weakened not only the position of the white race vis-à-vis the 'red' but that weakened the power of the federal government, and with it the state's ability to impose its will on everything from other Native American tribes to recalcitrant neo-Confederates in the Reconstruction South. His report on the Washita campaign specifically cited the need to reinforce settler confidence in the federal government as a primary reason for launching the attack. Railroads and ranches must be defended, he said, and the Western tribes reduced to a remnant on the reservations.⁵⁶ In his first annual report as Commanding Officer, Division of the Missouri, published November 1, 1869, Sheridan declared that the Lakota—or Sioux as he, and most American officers of the day called them—needed to be punished for defying the government the previous year. Despite the ongoing violence on the Southern Plains, Sheridan insisted the Washita campaign had silenced Southern Cheyenne opposition to the American state, and that similar measures needed to be taken on the Northern Plains to bring the Lakota in line. Complaining that the Natives were being given “special treatment” by being confined to reservations he considered too large and comfortable for them, or worse yet, being left unconquered altogether, Sheridan demanded additional troops so he could take the war to the

⁵⁶ Sheridan, “Report of Operations of the Campaign Against Indians in the Department of the Missouri in the Winter of 1868 to 1869,” 27.

Lakota. He also began a programme of building blockhouses throughout his Division, and especially in the Dakotas, which he saw as having been under siege by the Lakota for years.⁵⁷

Sheridan spent 1870 and most of 1871 observing the Franco-Prussian War in Europe, but when he returned to the Division of the Missouri in 1872, he again began beating the drums of war against the Lakota. War, he maintained in his annual report for that year, must be made upon the Lakota so they could be taught the difference between right and wrong. He also bragged about the construction of railroads through their territory and the amount of Native land absorbed by the state in the process.⁵⁸ Modern historians may debate whether the American Army of the 1870s was a colonial or imperial force, but Phil Sheridan would not have. He unequivocally saw himself as an agent of American colonial expansion, and Native American lands as new imperial acquisitions to be annexed to the growing domains of the United States. His 1873 report continued this theme, detailing the construction of the Northwest Pacific Railroad and the expeditions he mounted into Native territory along the Yellowstone to find depots for the railroad. This, Sheridan wrote, was part of his duty to civilisation and the United States. An advocate for transferring control of the Native American reservation system from the Department of the Interior to the Army, Sheridan wanted permission to attack any Indigenous persons found off the reservation. He also suggested the government should construct fortresses in the Black Hills, which were guaranteed to the Lakota as inviolable territory in the treaty ending Red Cloud's War.⁵⁹ In 1874, even as Miles and Mackenzie battled the Comanche and Kiowa on the

⁵⁷ Philip Sheridan, "Headquarters Military Division of the Missouri, November 1, 1869," in *Philip Henry Sheridan Papers* (Library of Congress mss39768 reel 86): 2.

⁵⁸ Philip Sheridan, "Headquarters Military Division of the Missouri, October, 1872," in *Philip Henry Sheridan Papers* (Library of Congress mss39768 reel 86): 1-2.

⁵⁹ Philip Sheridan, "Headquarters Military Division of the Missouri, October 27, 1873," in *Philip Henry Sheridan Papers* (Library of Congress mss39768 reel 86): 1-3.

Southern Plains, Sheridan sent George Custer into the Black Hills to scout out places for these forts, forts that, according to treaty and current policy, he was not supposed to be building at all.

When Custer's expedition discovered gold in the Black Hills, Sheridan made sure to not only mention it in his 1874 report, but to insist the amount of gold found there—at the time entirely unknown—was of national importance.⁶⁰ At Sheridan's connivance Custer, whose own report was significantly more restrained than his boss', informed the press of the gold in the Black Hills, and the American public, desperate for money after the economic crash of 1873, demanded Grant seize the Black Hills.⁶¹ Grant did not want to do it, as outlined in his personal letters, but public outcry gave him little choice, particularly with Sheridan, whom he still trusted implicitly, joining it.⁶² Sheridan's letters to Grant (and to Sherman) echoed the public clamour for the opening of the Black Hills, and Grant, against his own better judgement, pressed Lakota leaders Spotted Tail and Red Cloud to name a price for the sale of the Black Hills.⁶³ While these negotiations dragged on, white settlers illegally flooded into the hills. Departmental Commanders George Crook and Alfred Terry, did their best to evict these outlaw miners from what was still legally Lakota territory, but Sheridan granted them little support, while continuing to write to Grant on the urgent need for the Black Hills to be mined. When Red Cloud and Spotted Tail stalled the negotiations and hostile leaders like Sitting Bull made it clear they would fight for the Black Hills rather than cede them to the US Army, President Grant reluctantly realised it was going to come to war. On November 1-2 of 1875, Sheridan and his favourite Departmental Commander, George Crook, came to the White House to meet with Grant, the

⁶⁰ Sheridan, "Headquarters Military Division of the Missouri, October 1, 1874," 2.

⁶¹ George Armstrong Custer, "Black Hills Expedition, General Custer's Report, August 3, 1874," in *Philip Henry Sheridan Papers* (Library of Congress mss39768 reel 86): 20-21.

⁶² Philip Sheridan, "Headquarters Military Division of the Missouri, November 20, 1875," in *Philip Henry Sheridan Papers* (Library of Congress mss39768 reel 86): 1-3.

⁶³ "Speech to Sioux Delegation, May 26, 1875," in *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* Vol. 26, ed. John Y. Simon, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003): 119-120.

Secretary of War and the Secretary of the Interior to lay plans for seizing the Black Hills.⁶⁴

William Sherman, who despised Native Americans but was a stickler for obeying the letter of the law, was not at this meeting, and noted sourly in his own correspondence that he was kept out of the loop for the duration of the war, with orders from the Secretary of War and Grant going directly to Sheridan and bypassing Sherman.⁶⁵ With Grant's blessing, Sheridan sent an ultimatum to the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne bands on the Great Plains, ordering them to confine themselves to the reservation by January of 1876 or face an armed response.

With the American Army downsized after the Civil War, and much of its remaining forces on duty in the Reconstruction South or monitoring a very ugly federal election season, Sheridan had to fight the Great Sioux War with the troops at his own disposal in the Division of the Missouri. The Lieutenant-General, who had sought to provoke this war for years, was entirely fine with that. Anticipating most of the fighting would be in the Departments of the Platte and the Dakotas, Sheridan instructed the Departmental Commanders, George Crook and Alfred Terry, to make ready for a winter campaign against the unconquered Lakota.⁶⁶ Crook, who was at the November meetings in the White House and knew for sure that the war was coming, was already making his preparations. A West Point classmate of Sheridan, Crook served with him in the Pacific against the Yakima and under him in the Shenandoah Valley. A taciturn man who, in his heart, was far more sympathetic to Native Americans than his friend and boss, Crook would one day fall out with Sheridan over a range of issues including, but not limited to, which of them deserved the most credit for their victories in the Shenandoah and whether Native

⁶⁴ *New York Times*, November 2, 1875, quoted in *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* Vol. 26, ed. John Y. Simon (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003): 257.

⁶⁵ "William Sherman to John Sherman, March 10, 1876," in *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* Vol. 27, ed. John Y. Simon (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005): 77.

⁶⁶ Philip Sheridan, "Headquarters Military Division of the Missouri, November 25, 1876," in *Philip Henry Sheridan Papers* (Library of Congress mss39768 reel 86): 8.

Americans ought to be granted the same rights as white men (Crook, a member of the Indian Rights Association, firmly believed they should). At this point, however, Crook was still Sheridan's most loyal subordinate, and was widely regarded as the Army's best "Indian" fighter.⁶⁷

Crook's Civil War record was solid, with some embarrassing blunders but also some incredible highlights. At the Battle of Cedar Creek, Virginia (not to be confused with a similarly named battle of the Great Sioux War), then Major-General Crook amply demonstrated both these aspects of his personality. Poor scouting on his part enabled Jubal Early to launch a surprise attack that threw the entire Army of the Shenandoah into disarray, yet it was Crook's courage under fire and unwavering determination to hold fast that got not only his men, but those of Sheridan's other corps commanders, to get back in line and hold out until Sheridan could return with reinforcements.⁶⁸ After the Civil War, Crook returned to his prewar rank of Lieutenant-Colonel but was, in 1871, surprised with a promotion of two grades to Brigadier-General. This sudden jump in rank came courtesy of Sheridan, who wanted to make his old friend the Commanding Officer of the newly created Department of Arizona, believing Crook's experience against the Yakima and his extensive study of Native American warfare made him the perfect man to put an end to the Apache war raging there. The decision earned Crook few friends in the army, where peacetime promotion was based on seniority rather than merit; Colonel Nelson Miles in particular never forgave Crook for jumping the line and taking a place meant for more senior (and in Miles' opinion, more talented) men. Still, Sheridan's violation of military protocol

⁶⁷ Sheridan's oscillating attitude toward Crook is captured in his memoir of the Valley Campaign, in which he alternates between crediting Crook's brilliance, and offloading the blame for failure onto him.

⁶⁸ Paul Magid's *George Crook: From the Redwoods to Appomattox* offers an admirably even-handed account of Cedar Creek. Crook and Sheridan's takes on it can be found in their respective autobiographies, and in Sheridan's report in the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*.

proved seemingly justified as Crook did not disappoint his one-time classmate; his campaign against the Apache, using small companies of men to run down and corner the warbands loyal to Cochise and other Apache war-leaders, proved very successful, and may have further reinforced Sheridan's idea that this was the proper, and indeed, only way, to fight Native Americans. Crook was praised in the Western papers for his suppression of the Apache marauders, and in the Eastern press for the humane way he dealt with the surrendered Apache after the shooting was over; all the positive attention catapulted Crook into the forefront of the Army's list of perceived "Indian" experts and made his opinion on the topic of frontier campaigning much sought after. When Sheridan began gearing up for the Great Sioux War he brought Crook to the Northern Plains and gave him the Department of the Platte. Between his good service in the Civil War and his exemplary performance in Arizona, there was no reason to think Crook would be anything less than successful in his new endeavour.⁶⁹

Brigadier-General Alfred Terry, Sheridan's other chief subordinate, has often been written off by historians sympathetic to George Custer and other "fighting generals" as little more than a desk soldier and bureaucrat.⁷⁰ In doing so, they fundamentally misunderstand who Alfred Terry was. A lawyer and self-taught military historian before the Civil War, Terry, one of Connecticut's richest men, raised a Volunteer regiment on his own dime and was commissioned as its Colonel, rising to Major-General of Volunteers over the course of the war. Ulysses S. Grant rated him as the finest Volunteer soldier in the American Army.⁷¹ In 1865, Terry, who spent most of the war to that point assisting in the siege of Confederate cities, was given his first independent command by Grant: he was to seize Fort Fisher, the Confederate bulwark protecting

⁶⁹ Bourke's *On the Border with Crook* provides a lengthy list of the acclamations Crook received after the Apache campaign.

⁷⁰ Ambrose, Donovan, and Philbrick all subscribe, in varying degrees, to this view of Terry.

⁷¹ Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 755.

their last free port. It was a complex operation, requiring Terry collaborate closely with Rear-Admiral David Dixon Porter, as the Navy's ships were vital to the assault on Fort Fisher. To this point in the Civil War most Union generals, barring Grant himself, struggled to cooperate with the Navy, and previous efforts to take Fort Fisher had foundered because of that.⁷²

Terry not only cooperated with Porter and the Navy, he integrated their commands so closely that at times he, a Major-General, was giving orders to gunboats while Porter and his Captains were commanding troops on the ground. The speed and efficiency of Terry's attack took the Confederates entirely off guard, and in a bloody day's worth of fighting in which almost all of Terry's regimental commanders became casualties, Fisher fell.⁷³ Terry was awarded the rank of Brigadier-General in the Regular Army, a signal honour for an amateur soldier.

Remaining in the Army after the war, Terry did duty in the Reconstruction South and on the Great Plains and was one of the authors of the Fort Laramie Treaty that ended Red Cloud's War.⁷⁴ One might question Sheridan's wisdom in sending a siege engineer to pursue Indigenous cavalry across the Plains, yet it is not at all hard to see why Sheridan liked Terry who, as a quiet man who treated his troops and his enemies respectfully, was otherwise his total opposite: at Fort Fisher, Terry showed he was a hard fighter and that was what Sheridan respected.

While Crook kept his men close at hand, two of Terry's subordinates had important independent commands during the Great Sioux War. The first of these was Colonel John Gibbon, who, as a Major-General during the Civil War held the Union centre against Pickett's Charge

⁷² Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 662.

⁷³ Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 662-665. David Dixon Porter's *The Naval History of the Civil War* is similarly complimentary of Terry, showing the deep respect that the Admiral had for his Army counterpart.

⁷⁴ John Bailey's *Pacifying the Plains: General Alfred Terry and the Decline of the Sioux, 1866-1890*, first published in 1979 by Westport's Greenwood Press is the only extant biography of Terry, and provides a solid analysis of his role on the Plains prior to the Great Sioux War.

during the last apocalyptic day at Gettysburg.⁷⁵ Cold and austere, Gibbon earned a reputation for “telling the truth, no matter whom it hurts,” a fact that makes his writings on the Great Sioux War a very useful resource to the historian.⁷⁶ A veteran of several years on the frontier, Gibbon was the only officer in the Department of the Platte or the Department of the Dakotas to express doubts about Sheridan’s plan of campaign. Unlike Sheridan, Gibbon had grave concerns about the ability of white troops to fight Native Americans head on. Three years after the Great Sioux War, in an article entitled “Arms to Fight Indians,” Gibbon expressed his opinion that the postwar United States Army was not up to the task of combatting Native Americans effectively. He had a point. Following the Civil War, the American Army was downsized to 25 000 men who had to occupy the Reconstruction South and confront Native Americans in the Division of the Missouri and the Division of the Pacific. Worse yet, most of the Civil War veterans among the troops mustered out after the war, and the bulk of the men available to frontier officers were those who could not find reliable employment in civilian life. Add to this a refusal by the Quartermaster’s Corps to allocate ammunition for practice, and the Army’s ability to fight Indigenous enemies was, in Gibbon’s view severely curtailed. When the results of the Great Sioux War led some to insist the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne must have somehow obtained better guns than their white foes, Gibbon scoffed, “the principle superiority in using them [guns] will be found to reside in the character and skillful attainments of the men who handle them.”⁷⁷

Gibbon wrote those words regarding the ability of the infantry to fight Native Americans. Concerning the cavalry, which Sheridan saw as the arm of decision in frontier warfare, he was

⁷⁵ Gibbon’s memoir, *At Gettysburg and Elsewhere* is considered essential reading for anyone wishing to understand that battle.

⁷⁶ “Theodore Lyman to Wife, May 20, 1864,” quoted in Stephen W. Sears, *Lincoln’s Lieutenants: The High Command of the Army of the Potomac* (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017): 651.

⁷⁷ John Gibbon, “Arms to Fight Indians,” in *Adventures on the Western Frontier*, edited by Alan and Maureen Gaff (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1994): 232.

outright caustic. “Any Indian from twelve years of age and upwards,” he said, “can ride, *without saddle or bridle* [italics in original], or at most with nothing more than a rope tied around the lower jaw of his horse, or at *full speed* [italics in original] alongside of a buffalo, and, generally at the first shot, from revolver or carbine, kill or mortally wound his game, picked out at pleasure from the running herd. The men in any one of our cavalry regiments who can do this can be counted on the fingers of one hand, and with the average white hunter it is ludicrous to look on and witness his frantic efforts to reload his firearm when once emptied.”⁷⁸ The cavalry, Gibbon said, would never be as effective as their Native counterparts, and the only solution to this was to give them a good gun and drill them relentlessly; “unfortunately,” he complained, “the number of our troops is not great enough to enable the authorities to withdraw even a small part from active service in the field long enough to give this instruction, and we will probably continue to fight the Indian with inadequate means as often as the encroachment of the white settler and the impositions practiced upon him by agents of the government force him into rebellion.”⁷⁹

How much of Gibbon’s attitude was the product of the Great Sioux War, and how much of it he held beforehand we cannot know for sure, but his writings offer a critical, if scathing, glimpse into the frontier army Sheridan planned to send against the Lakota and Cheyenne. “The day, then, for our troops to meet these warriors when outnumbered ten to one is past,” Gibbon said. “Nay, more than that, they cannot contend against them successfully man for man, except under the most favourable circumstances, and then only by adopting the improved tactics of the Indians themselves.”⁸⁰ Gibbon was convinced the only way for the American Army to decisively defeat Native Americans was for the whites to have the advantage of numbers. At the start of the

⁷⁸ Gibbon, “Arms to Fight Indians,” 233-234.

⁷⁹ Gibbon, “Arms to Fight Indians,” 235.

⁸⁰ Gibbon, “Arms to Fight Indians,” 230.

Great Sioux War, as Gibbon later admitted, he and most other officers, assumed, as Sheridan had told them, that they had that advantage in numbers. As Custer discovered, they were wrong.

That, of course, then brings us to the subject of Terry's other, more famous subordinate: George Armstrong Custer. Custer's defeat and death in the Great Sioux War made his name a shorthand for incompetence and many authors have gone through his Civil War record, trying to find evidence of his supposed inability during the early days of his career. These efforts have mostly fallen flat, because Custer, while undoubtedly flamboyant and eccentric, had a Civil War record that was perfectly good, and better than many. A newly commissioned Lieutenant when the Civil War began, Custer ended it a Major-General of Volunteers, and one of the Union Army's most decorated cavalry officers. It was Custer's brigade that, at Gettysburg, broke an entire Confederate cavalry division with a charge dead into their centre, shattering the overextended Confederate line and stopping J.E.B. Stuart from flanking Major-General George Gordon Meade's Army of the Potomac. It was Custer's men who led Sheridan's assault on Yellow Tavern the following year, killing Stuart and wrecking the morale of the Confederate cavalry. It was Custer who, with classmate Wesley Merritt, spearheaded Sheridan's drive through the Shenandoah, doing incalculable damage to the Confederate state's ability to make war in the Valley. Along the way he showed that, despite his portrait as a hard-charging cavalier, he was not willing to be callous. Much of his reputation for insubordination stemmed from his repeat refusals in 1863 and 1864 to follow suicidal orders from Judson "Kill-Cavalry" Kilpatrick, who was as much a menace to Custer's men as the Confederacy. When the war ended, Sheridan told Custer's wife, Libbie, that no one had done more than her husband to close it out.⁸¹

⁸¹ See *Custer's Trials* for some of the most recent, and best, scholarship on Custer during the Civil War years.

Following the Civil War, Custer, the youngest Major-General in Union service, was reduced to his Regular Army rank of Captain. Sheridan, who saw Custer as something of a protégé, promoted him to Lieutenant-Colonel and gave him a post in the 7th Cavalry Regiment. With the 7th's Colonel consistently deployed on detached service, Custer was the *de facto* commanding officer of the Regiment. Bored on the frontier, Custer earned several reprimands and was suspended from duty when he abandoned a fruitless scouting mission to visit his wife. He also, however, gained a reputation as a great “Indian” fighter, which, while untrue in many of the details, did reflect his knowledge of the area. Custer saw action at the Battle of the Washita, where he served as Sheridan’s striking arm, and, unlike his commanding general, tried to limit the loss of non-combatant life.⁸² During the Yellowstone and Black Hills expeditions of 1873, 1874, and 1875, he blazed new trails through unmapped frontier territory, struck up working relationships with friendly Native American tribes, and had a series of increasingly menacing skirmishes with the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne.⁸³ In all these operations he made considerable use of Native American scouts, another point on which he differed with Sheridan, who disliked the Army dependence on Native American auxiliaries and tried to discourage their use. For all their differences, Sheridan still saw Custer as a useful tool and Terry believed in him wholeheartedly; when Custer’s political differences with the Grant administration made it look as if he might not be available for the Great Sioux War, Sheridan and Terry both requested his return to his regiment.⁸⁴

⁸² George Custer, “Report of Lt. Col. G.A. Custer, 7th Cavalry, Bv. Maj. Gen. etc of the Attack on Black Kettle’s Camp,” in *Philip Henry Sheridan Papers* (Library of Congress mss39768 reel 86): 2.

⁸³ Custer, “Black Hills Expedition, General Custer’s Report, August 3, 1874,” 1-21.

⁸⁴ “Sheridan to Townsend, May 7, 1876,” in *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* Vol. 27, ed. John Y. Simon, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005): 73.

As these brief biographies show, none of the officers in Phil Sheridan's Division of the Missouri were incompetent. Neither, for all the unpleasantness of his personality, was Sheridan himself. He, Crook, Terry, Gibbon, and Custer were all Civil War veterans, with personal military histories indicating they should give good to great service in future conflicts. What then, stopped these men from being as successful against Native Americans as they were against the Confederacy during the Civil War? What for that matter stopped Sheridan and Crook, who fought Native Americans many times in their careers, from accomplishing as much this time? Some of the problem, as will be demonstrated in coming chapters, had to do with the exceptional capabilities of the Native American leadership they were confronting. Sitting Bull's growing coalition of hostile Lakota and Northern Cheyenne had access to the very best chiefs and war-leaders the Great Plains had to offer, and in them, the likes of Crook and Custer met their match. But there were other problems, closer to home, that handicapped Sheridan's campaign before it started. To narrow it down to one cause would be disingenuous but it is unavoidable that many of Sheridan's difficulties stemmed from his belief that all Native Americans fought the same way.

Scholars on British interactions with the Natives of South Africa have used the term "colonial reasoning" to describe the ways in which British officers and administrators reinterpreted African behaviours to fit the stereotypes they already had in mind. A particular military facet of this colonial reasoning, explored below, was an assumption that all Africans, whether Xhosa, Zulu or otherwise, would go into battle in the same manner.⁸⁵ A similar type of thinking was at work on the American plains. Neither Sheridan, nor any of his subordinates, had served in Red Cloud's War or the frontier battles of the Civil War, the last time American soldiers battled the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne on a grand scale. Sheridan had not come to

⁸⁵ See Richard Price, *Making Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) for an exploration of this phenomenon.

the Plains until the fighting with Red Cloud was over, and his understanding of that conflict was coloured by his own ensuing “defeat” of the Southern Cheyenne at the Washita. Crook was in Idaho and Nevada during Red Cloud’s War, and had since spent all his time in Arizona, battling the Apache. Terry arrived on the Plains at the end of Red Cloud’s War, but in the capacity of diplomat and peacemaker, not soldier. Only Gibbon and Custer had *any* practical experience warring with the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne, and even theirs stemmed from after 1868, in the endless series of raids that characterised the Army’s interaction with the hostile tribes before 1876. As a Colonel and a Lieutenant-Colonel they were not consulted by Sheridan anyway; the whole of the planning for the Great Sioux War was done by Sheridan and George Crook, with Terry and the men under him being handed the plan after the fact and told to go along with it.

Phil Sheridan’s conception of the Great Sioux War rested on the premise that the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne were no different from the Yakima he fought in his youth—or from the Paiute and Apache George Crook fought in Idaho, Nevada, and Arizona. These tribes, while far from identical to one another, fought, to Sheridan and Crook’s eyes, in much the same way: in small raiding parties that sought to avoid contact with large numbers of American troops, waging guerilla wars that sapped American time and resources but killed comparatively few soldiers. Crook bested the Apache bands by using company sized formations to pursue them over the badlands and Sheridan was sure the same methods would have worked against the Yakima in the 1850s. That Crook’s accomplishments were aided by Apache auxiliaries whom he turned against the hostile forces, was something Sheridan ignored, and, extrapolating from Crook’s experience he decided a similar strategy would work against the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne. Combining details of Crook’s Arizona campaign with his own efforts at the Washita, Sheridan created a template for war against Native Americans, one that he was sure had been integral to the winning

of the Red River War in 1874 and 1875. In reality Nelson Miles and Bad Hand Mackenzie significantly modified Sheridan's instructions to meet the realities of that war, but Sheridan, from his perch at Division headquarters in Chicago, did not see that. He saw what he wanted to and did not care that it was not reflective of what combat against the Southern Cheyenne, Kiowa, and Comanche had been like. It was not reflective of what war against the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne would be like either, as the American Army would soon learn.

*

Sir Frederic Augustus Thesiger II, the future Lord Chelmsford, hailed from German stock, his family emigrating to England when the House of Hanover became Kings of England. His father, also Frederic Thesiger, was made First Baron of Chelmsford in recognition of his loyal service to the Crown as a hardline Conservative Member of Parliament. This elevation to the peerage allowed the first Lord Chelmsford to become a member of the House of Lords, from which he secured a position as England's Lord Chancellor. With an estate worth more than four million pounds at the time of his death, the senior Lord Chelmsford did extremely well for himself and could assist his son and heir in doing extremely well in turn.⁸⁶

The younger Frederic Thesiger entered the British Army in 1844, using his father's money to purchase a position as a Second Lieutenant in a Rifle Brigade. Promotion at the time was dependent not on seniority or merit, but on purchase: officers were promoted when they could gather enough funds to sell off their old rank and buy one a rung higher up the social and military ladder. The younger Thesiger, hereafter referred to as Lord Chelmsford for the sake of simplicity, served long enough to see the day purchase was abolished, but reached the senior

⁸⁶ John Laband, "Lord Chelmsford," in *Victoria's Generals* ed. Steven J. Corvi & Ian F.W. Beckett. (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2009): 94.

branches of the service under the old system, spending a great deal of money in the process. A year after joining the Army, Chelmsford purchased an exchange into the elite Grenadier Guards, with whom he saw action in the Crimean War, though not before first buying his way into a captaincy. Brevetted Major after the Siege of Sebastopol, at which he was mentioned in despatches, Chelmsford sold his position in the Grenadiers to become Lieutenant-Colonel of the 95th Foot Regiment in 1858, seeing the last moments of the Indian Rebellion in the process.⁸⁷

Lord Chelmsford remained in India for several years, serving as Deputy Adjutant General of the Bombay Presidency and then Adjutant General of the Indian Army, both signs of the esteem the high command held him in. Between these appointments he was Deputy Adjutant General on Sir John Napier's Abyssinian Expedition of 1868, where he was again mentioned in despatches. This deployment to Ethiopia was Chelmsford's first taste of campaigning in Africa, though what, if any, impact it had on his thinking remains blurry. Napier was extremely grateful to his DAG for his assistance in overcoming the logistical hurdles of the operation, which proved far more of an impediment to the British soldiers than the disorganised Ethiopian military.⁸⁸ Chelmsford saw combat at the capture of the Ethiopian city of Magdala, which earned him accolades from Napier, and secured the promotion to Adjutant General on his return to India.⁸⁹

Lord Chelmsford went back to England in 1874 and held a succession of increasingly senior posts as Colonel, Brigadier-General, and finally, Major-General. During this period purchase was abolished, and obtaining a Major-Generalship was the product of seniority and the patronage of his superiors rather than his fiscal resources. Though Chelmsford had not seen a great deal of action, that was typical for senior British officers of the era: outside of the Crimean

⁸⁷ Laband, "Lord Chelmsford," 95.

⁸⁸ By the time of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in the 1890s, this situation was much changed.

⁸⁹ Laband, "Lord Chelmsford," 96.

War and the Indian Rebellion, the wars in which Queen Victoria's Army involved itself were small scale affairs. In fact, between his service in the Crimea, the last days of the Indian Mutiny, and Napier's Abyssinian venture, Chelmsford was under fire more times than many of his contemporaries, and his peers and superiors alike awarded him high marks for bravery in the face of danger. If most of his service was as a staff officer, adjutant, aide, or subordinate, rather than in independent command, that too was normal for the colonial British Army. From the fall of Napoleon to the outbreak of World War I, the only general European conflict was the Crimean War, which did not last long, and involved far less manpower than the Napoleonic Wars. During this period, the British Army was geared towards small scale operations in Britain's overseas possessions, limiting the opportunities for officers to hold independent commands against strategically threatening foes. Therefore, when the need for a new General Officer Commanding in South Africa came up in 1878, Lord Chelmsford was a logical choice for the job. Promoted Lieutenant-General, Chelmsford was shipped off to South Africa with a selection of handpicked staff officers and instructions to terminate the ongoing guerilla campaign in the Cape Colony.⁹⁰

The Ninth Frontier War, as it came to be known, was the last in a lengthy series of conflicts between white settlers and the Xhosa tribesmen of the Cape Colony region. The early wars were between the Xhosa and the Dutch Boers, the latter viewing the former as not only impediments to their 'civilisation' of the area, but as subhuman animals. For a time, Sunday afternoon 'Kaffir hunts' and other barbaric practises were a norm in the Cape, as the Boers sought to enslave or exterminate the whole of the Xhosa people.⁹¹ The British annexation of the Cape put an end to the worst of these atrocities and drove many of the Boers further inland, but

⁹⁰ Laband, "Lord Chelmsford," 97.

⁹¹ See Richard Price's *Making Empire* for the best extant examination of the relationships between the Xhosa, the Boers, and the British Empire.

did nothing to reduce the tensions between the white colonial elite and Xhosa tribesmen who adamantly did not wish to be colonised—a problem that worsened after the discovery of the region’s mineral wealth. The character of the Cape Colony became more British than Boer, yet the fighting with the Xhosa ground on, as Boer irregulars, English settler Volunteers, Cape policemen, African Mfengu auxiliaries, and the occasional unit of British regulars battled Xhosa bush warriors for control over the Cape borderlands. Chelmsford’s predecessor at the Cape, Sir Arthur Cunynghame managed to knock one of the belligerent tribes out of the war, but a final solution to the conflict eluded him. Now Chelmsford and his Special Service officers, who included Sir Evelyn Wood, Sir Redvers Buller, his Assistant Military Secretary John North Crealock, and his aides William Molyneux and Henry Hallam Parr were tasked with restoring order in South Africa.⁹² The campaign had a marked effect on Lord Chelmsford and his officers, and, more than any other war, influenced their expectations of the Anglo-Zulu War.

Chelmsford and his Special Service officers arrived in the Cape Colony knowing next to nothing about the Xhosa or how the war was progressing. As William Molyneux recalled, “we learned what we could of the history, the language, and the manner of the country we were bound for, but I am afraid that it was not very much...”⁹³ In the absence of detailed intelligence, the British officers were free to absorb the local colonists’ opinions of the Xhosa undiluted, and Molyneux, Wood, and Hallam Parr’s memoirs all brim with stereotypes about the Xhosa. Rather than accepting that the Xhosa tribes had fluid leadership with chiefs beholden to numerous special interest groups within their society, colonists, be they Boer or British, chose to portray the Xhosa chiefs as despots, with any changes in policy or inability to meet British demands positioned as evidence of their duplicitous nature, rather than the result of chiefs having to

⁹² Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*, 19.

⁹³ Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*, 19.

mediate internal disputes in order to hold onto their status. This portrait of the Xhosa leadership is present in Molyneux, Wood, and Hallam Parr's writings, with all three men taking a very dim view of the Xhosa as both human beings and soldiers.⁹⁴ This distrust of Africans was extended to Britain's Mfengu auxiliaries; Hallam Parr granted that the Mfengu were necessary to help British forces track down the Xhosa, but Molyneux and Wood considered the Mfengu cowards who were more hindrance than help.⁹⁵ This attitude did nothing to aid the British in winning the war, for without them, white troops were left extremely vulnerable to ambush by Xhosa forces.

Chelmsford's war against the remnant of the Xhosa resistance dragged on for the better part of a year and left the Lieutenant-General and his aides deeply frustrated. Molyneux, in trying to explain the facility with which the Xhosa moved through the bush, surprising British forays, resorted to biological racism, claiming that "The fellow has a hide like a rhinoceros; the wait-a-bit thorn that tears pieces out of your clothes, merely makes a white scratch on his bronze or reddened skin."⁹⁶ The war saw few significant battles, and the longer it wore on, the smaller the battles became. Complained Hallam Parr, "the operations during the remainder of May dwindled down to a succession of small combats between the troops and parties of half-starved and desperate men, who would not give themselves up, but who only fought when they could neither hide nor escape."⁹⁷ Wood agreed with this assessment, and his memoirs of this time period are essentially a list of skirmishes with Xhosa bands, in which his men rarely caught the Africans, and Redvers Buller's horsemen had to run them down.⁹⁸ Chelmsford had to divide his force into ever smaller units to cover the whole of the territories in dispute, the single greatest

⁹⁴ Hallam Parr, *A Sketch of the Kafir and Zulu Wars*, 37; Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*, 34-35; Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 1, 318.

⁹⁵ Hallam Parr, *A Sketch of the Kafir and Zulu Wars*, 43; Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*, 56-58; Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 1, 324.

⁹⁶ Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*, 37.

⁹⁷ Hallam Parr, *A Sketch of the Kafir and Zulu Wars*, 94.

⁹⁸ Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 1, 331, 335, 337-343.

difficulty of the war being preventing the Xhosa from fleeing once an encounter went against them.

All three of Chelmsford's subordinates were annoyed by the refusal of the Xhosa to fight them in the open. Molyneux said that when any sign of the Xhosa was spotted, the only thing to do was "to go straight at him into the bush with a cheer. You are then both in semi-obscurity and on more even terms, and he is almost sure to run."⁹⁹ Said Wood, "to enter the Bush boldly in the face of Kafirs [sic] is not only the most efficacious, but the safest method."¹⁰⁰ Hallam Parr described a battle between forty Connaught Rangers and seven hundred Xhosa, in which "Major Moore, whenever the Kafirs [sic] got unpleasantly near the position, ordered bayonets to be fixed, and charged out with his gallant little band of redcoats, amongst whom were some of the more sombrely clad frontier police; and the Kafirs [sic], with their traditional dread of coming to close quarters with the 'red devils,' drew back each time a charge was made."¹⁰¹ Hallam Parr also thought that the new Martini-Henry rifle made it impossible for the Xhosa to stand up to the British at range, writing "Since the Kafirs [sic] have found out the difference between Brown Bess and the Martini-Henry, they say it's no good fighting, as the soldiers can 'shoot them out of another world'—alluding to the long range and the new weapon."¹⁰² The trio concurred that the Xhosa could never stand up to British riflery or bayonet charges and that it was pinning the Xhosa down before they could run that was the challenge. Once the Africans were cornered, Hallam Parr, Molyneux, and Wood all recorded that they were easily beaten.

The Ninth Frontier War ended with the deaths of the leading Xhosa chiefs in a series of skirmishes; once these firebrands were gone, the war burned itself out. It was not the kind of

⁹⁹ Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*, 37.

¹⁰⁰ Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 1, 344.

¹⁰¹ Hallam Parr, *A Sketch of the Kafir and Zulu Wars*, 79.

¹⁰² Hallam Parr, *A Sketch of the Kafir and Zulu Wars*, 80.

campaign that Lord Chelmsford envisioned for his first independent command. There was little in this border raiding and skirmishing to add lustre to his reputation; while Molyneux, Hallam Parr, and Wood all wrote admiringly of the energy and organisational ability Chelmsford brought to the operations, the government back home noted mostly the length of the war and the costs it ran up, an opinion shared by many of the Cape's colonial civilians.¹⁰³ The war did, however, introduce Lord Chelmsford to a figure who played a key role in the events of 1879: Sir Henry Bartle Frere, High Commissioner for South Africa, and the prime political mover and shaker behind the prosecution of the Xhosa conflict. Having made his name in the foreign service in India, Bartle Frere came to South Africa with the objective of unifying the colonies of the Cape, Natal, and newly annexed Transvaal into a single South African Confederation, not unlike the one recently established between the Canadian territories of British North America. It was a plan that did not have a place in it for independent African polities like the Xhosa tribes or Zululand, and as Chelmsford finished off the Xhosa War, he and Sir Bartle Frere began forming an alliance with one another and with Sir Theophilus Shepstone, Governor of the Transvaal, with the end goal of destroying Zululand and achieving Bartle Frere's plans for South African Confederation.

Each of the three conspirators had his own motivation for pursuing a war against the Zulu Kingdom. Bartle Frere, in the twilight of his career, sought a final triumph to retire upon, and saw the Zulu presence as the primary obstacle in his path. In letters to Colonial Secretary Michael Hicks Beach, Bartle Frere said that the African population would never be reconciled to British rule while the Zulu King Cetshwayo was free to give them hope, and that the Boers of the recently acquired Transvaal would only acquiesce to Imperial designs if the British assisted them

¹⁰³ Hallam Parr, *A Sketch of the Kafir and Zulu Wars*, 93; Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*, 70; Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 1, 318.

by eradicating their old enemies, the Zulu.¹⁰⁴ Shepstone, who arranged for the seizure of the Transvaal, and whose future career was dependent upon it becoming a compliant British possession echoed these same positions in his own correspondence; he and Bartle Frere regularly referenced one another, and both took up the line that all Boer/Zulu boundary conflicts must be resolved in favour of the Boers, a stance Shepstone, formerly a supporter of the Zulu, never held before becoming the Transvaal's governor.¹⁰⁵ Shepstone also nursed a set of deeply personal (and deeply petty) grudges against Cetshwayo for refusing to relinquish his independence and decision-making powers to Shepstone. In 1873, when Cetshwayo succeeded his father, Mpande, to the throne of Zululand, Shepstone presented the Zulu King with a tinsel crown ordered from a theatre company in London. In Shepstone's head, this translated to his owning Cetshwayo, and the Zulu King was therefore obligated to run all his decisions past Shepstone. When Cetshwayo did not do so—there having never been a pact between them to that effect—Shepstone was embarrassed, and lobbied his superiors to remove Cetshwayo, insisting the Zulu King was backing out of their nonexistent deal.¹⁰⁶ Sir Bartle Frere echoed Shepstone's lies, telling Hicks Beach the Zulu King had transgressed a solemn treaty with the British government, and citing clauses Cetshwayo supposedly violated. Bartle Frere consistently cited Shepstone as an expert in Zulu affairs and told Hicks Beach the governor's stances must be accepted as the absolute truth.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ "Governor the Right Hon. Sir H.B.E. Frere, Bart., G.C.B., G.C.S.I., to the Right Hon. Sir Michael Hicks Beach, Bart., November 5, 1878," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 1, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 125-129.

¹⁰⁵ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 128-129.

¹⁰⁶ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 10-15.

¹⁰⁷ "Governor the Right Hon. Sir H.B.E. Frere, Bart., G.C.B., G.C.S.I., to the Right Hon. Sir Michael Hicks Beach, Bart., December 2, 1878," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 1, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 220.

As for Lord Chelmsford, his motivations were the simplest of all. He wanted a war that would bring him more renown than the Ninth Frontier War. He also accepted uncritically the claims of Bartle Frere and Shepstone that the Xhosa War was started by Zulu spies as part of a pan-African plot orchestrated by Cetshwayo to destroy white power in South Africa. This supposed scheme appeared in Chelmsford's letters to the Secretary of War, and filtered down to his subordinates, with Hallam Parr, Molyneux, and Wood all dutifully repeating it in their memoirs.¹⁰⁸ In correspondence with Bartle Frere and Shepstone, Chelmsford elaborated on the need to demonstrate white superiority over Africans by removing the Zulu.¹⁰⁹ In letters to the Secretary of War, he insisted the Natal frontier would never be secure against marauding Africans as long as Zululand maintained its independence.¹¹⁰ Exaggerating the threat from the Zulu, who had no hostile intentions towards the British, Chelmsford repeatedly asked Secretary Stanley for more men to defend Natal from the Zulu hordes.¹¹¹ As proof of the Zulu menace, he passed along many of Bartle Frere and Shepstone's supposedly cogent political insights into the Zulu situation; at the same time, Bartle Frere and Shepstone cited Chelmsford's military opinions to prove their political analyses were correct.¹¹² Together the triumvirate built a tautology where

¹⁰⁸ Hallam Parr, *A Sketch of the Kafir and Zulu Wars*, 97, 100-114; Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*, 93, 105; Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 2, 15.

¹⁰⁹ "Lieutenant-General the Honourable F.A. Thesiger to Sir Theophilus Shepstone, July 21, 1878," in *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 5.

¹¹⁰ "Lieutenant-General the Honourable F.A. Thesiger to Colonel F.A. Stanley, September 28, 1878," in *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 12-13.

¹¹¹ "Lieutenant-General the Honourable F.A. Thesiger to Colonel F.A. Stanley, September 14, 1878," in *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 10.

"Lieutenant-General the Honourable F.A. Thesiger to Colonel F.A. Stanley, September 28, 1878," 12.

"Lieutenant-General the Honourable F.A. Thesiger to Colonel F.A. Stanley, November 25, 1878," in *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband, (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 35.

¹¹² "Governor the Right Hon. Sir H.B.E. Frere, Bart., G.C.B., G.C.S.I., to the Right Hon. Sir Michael Hicks Beach, Bart., November 11, 1878," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 1, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 131.

the political situation in Zululand showed the Zulu military was menacing Natal, and the Zulu military menace was demonstrative of political instability in Zululand. In a masterclass in projection the trio openly discussed their imperial ambitions for South Africa, while continuing to tell Hicks Beach and Stanley they were only making defensive preparations in the event of a Zulu attack.

Not everyone fell for the triumvirate's deception plan. Hicks Beach pushed back against Bartle Frere, sending memorandum after memorandum reminding the High Commissioner that Britain had a friendly relationship with King Cetshwayo, and that he had no authority to start a war in Zululand.¹¹³ Hicks Beach never changed his opinion on this, and Bartle Frere, in the end, started the war without obtaining the Secretary's permission. Sir Henry Bulwer, Governor of Natal, protested openly against the drive to war, telling Sir Bartle Frere it would cost them far more than it would gain and declining to allow Chelmsford to raise auxiliary troops from among Natal's African population.¹¹⁴ When Bulwer's objections became too obstructive for Bartle Frere's taste, he sent Chelmsford to Natal with orders to supersede Bulwer as the *de facto* governor and raise a Natal Native Contingent and as many colonial Volunteers as he could from the populace.¹¹⁵ The strongest voice in opposition to the conspiracy was from Bishop Colenso of Natal, who held, for the day, liberal views on the rights of Africans and knew Cetshwayo well enough to see through most of Bartle Frere, Chelmsford, and Shepstone's claims about the danger he posed. The Bishop's daughter, Frances Ellen "Nell" Colenso, later authored a book

¹¹³ "The Right Hon. Sir Michael Hicks Beach, Bart., to Governor the Right Hon. Sir H.B.E. Frere, Bart., G.C.B., G.C.S.I., December 18, 1878," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 1, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 135.

¹¹⁴ "Sir H. Bulwer to Sir H. B. Frere, Bart., August 12, 1878," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 1, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 115-117.

¹¹⁵ "Minute on the Report of the Special Commission appointed to inquire into and report upon the Boundary in dispute between the Zulus and the Transvaal," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 1, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 140-144.

denouncing the invasion, and correctly identifying Sir Bartle Frere, Lord Chelmsford, and Sir Theophilus Shepstone, as the conspirators behind the fiasco. Jeering at the excuses offered by the triumvirate, Colenso put forth that none of the Zulu “crimes” were any worse than anything the British themselves had done, be it in Africa or elsewhere, and that the conflict stemmed from the incompetence of three men out to make a name for themselves whatever the cost in lives.¹¹⁶

Unfortunately, she, her father, and most others who opposed the war were easily written off by Bartle Frere, Chelmsford, and Shepstone who, as the most powerful men in South Africa, could stifle dissent in the colonies while treating instructions from London as little more than guidelines. Sir Henry Bulwer and Bishop Colenso were described in the trio’s correspondence as being soft on Africans and hopelessly naïve as to the imperialist intentions of the Zulu Crown. Eventually, the testimony of men like Bulwer and Colenso brought down the conspiracy, but for the moment, their commentary was kept out of the public eye, as the triumvirate readied for war.

The only thing Bartle Frere, Chelmsford, and Shepstone now needed was an excuse for war. They hoped to obtain it through the findings of the South African Boundary Commission, created to resolve border disputes between the Boers of the Transvaal and Zululand. Since Shepstone’s brother, John, and Lord Chelmsford’s subordinate, Brevet Colonel Anthony Durnford, were on the Commission, it was anticipated they would find in favour of the Boers and that this outcome could be used to provoke the Zulu into taking hostile action. Instead, the Commission found in favour of the Zulu, reducing Bartle Frere to trying to force Cetshwayo’s hand by awarding him the land only on the condition he meet a list of British demands which included, ludicrously, the disbanding of the Zulu Army.¹¹⁷ Cetshwayo would not do this, but

¹¹⁶ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 5, 17.

¹¹⁷ “Governor the Right Hon. Sir H.B.E. Frere, Bart., G.C.B., G.C.S.I., to the Right Hon. Sir Michael Hicks Beach, Bart., December 2, 1878,” 221.

while he began preparations for a British invasion, he did not oblige Bartle Frere by taking aggressive action against Natal. Finally, when Mehlokazulu kaSihayo, son of one of Cetshwayo's leading chiefs, launched a cross border raid to capture a pair of women who fled his father's harem, Bartle Frere decided he had his *casus belli*, never mind that these kinds of pursuit actions had been commonplace along the Natal/Zululand border for decades and that the British had, as Nell Colenso observed, taught the Zulu this was acceptable behaviour. Bartle Frere ordered Cetshwayo to turn Mehlokazulu over for punishment, and when Cetshwayo demurred, offering instead to pay a fine, Bartle Frere declared a state of war now existed between Zululand and British South Africa and gave Lord Chelmsford permission to launch his invasion.¹¹⁸

Chelmsford had spent months transferring troops from the Cape to Natal, raising the Natal Native Contingent, and recruiting Volunteer cavalry. His plan of attack, clearly modeled on his experience with the Xhosa, was for five separate columns to enter Zululand and, working in tandem with one another, prevent the Zulu from escaping. Circumstance and distrust of some of his subordinates saw this plan overhauled, with the columns in the field reduced from five to three, as the men meant to be under Colonel Hugh Rowlands were reassigned to Evelyn Wood, and the decision was made to utilise Anthony Durnford's column, comprising mostly NNC troops, as a reserve, rather than a part of the active field force.¹¹⁹ Chelmsford himself travelled with the Centre Column, and his penchant for micromanagement reduced Richard Glyn, Colonel of the 24th Infantry Regiment and the column's ostensible commanding officer to little more than a member of Chelmsford's staff—and not an especially prominent one either, given Assistant Military Secretary John North Crealock's dislike of Glyn, which Chelmsford soon came to share.

¹¹⁸ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 196-200.

¹¹⁹ "Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel H.E. Wood, February 23, 1879," in *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 114-115.

Considering the deleterious effect that Crealock's dislikes had on the campaign, one would like to know more about the man and his relationship to Chelmsford, yet sources are silent on the matter. We know he was the younger brother of Major-General Henry Hope Crealock, a Companion of the Bath who served in the Opium and Crimean Wars. We know John Crealock followed his brother into the army and saw service in the Indian Rebellion, where he was wounded in combat. We know he served with Lord Chelmsford at Aldershot when the general was briefly assigned there in the 1870s, and we know that when he wrote to Chelmsford, asking to accompany him as AMS, Chelmsford rather diffidently agreed to bring him along. We know he and his brother were both talented painters, and that his journals on the Indian Rebellion and the Ninth Frontier War (though alas, not the Anglo-Zulu War) are valuable primary sources. Information on the rest of Crealock's early career, and why Chelmsford came to trust him implicitly, is not readily available. The only other things that can be known for sure about Crealock are that he came from a middle-class background, affected an aristocratic lisp that drove the rest of Chelmsford's officers to distraction, and was cordially—and at times uncordially—detested by about as diverse a group of human beings as could be imagined. Evelyn Wood considered him incompetent.¹²⁰ Irish mercenary George Hamilton-Browne saw him as the rot at the heart of Chelmsford's staff.¹²¹ Nell Colenso accused him of actively engineering the defeat at Isandlwana by concealing information from Chelmsford.¹²² Sir Henry Bulwer blamed his influence over Chelmsford for causing the war.¹²³ Truly, Crealock seems to have had a unique and incomparable talent for uniting people who would otherwise agree on

¹²⁰ Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 2, 7.

¹²¹ Hamilton-Browne, *Lost Legionary*, 100.

¹²² Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 290.

¹²³ Quoted in W.B. Bartlett, *Zulu: Queen Victoria's Most Famous Little War*, (Stroud: The History Press, 2010): 207.

nothing in shared dislike for him—which perhaps says more about his character and qualifications than any amount of biography could.

With Glyn sidelined by Crealock and Rowlands relieved of command, only three of Chelmsford's column commanders and one of his cavalry officers were of sufficient rank to have an important impact on the campaign. The most famous of these was undoubtedly Colonel Evelyn Wood, whose Number 4 Column was meant to move into the Zulu borderlands controlled by the abaQulusi (a group of mixed Zulu and Swazi descent) and the renegade Swazi Prince Mbilini waMswati. Of Chelmsford's immediate subordinates, Wood was the only one to have Chelmsford's full confidence, and letters between the two men reveal a trust and intimacy absent in Chelmsford's correspondence with his other field officers. Chelmsford confided in Wood, bringing him into the invasion planning early and providing him with a full outline of not only his own invasion route, but of the routes of the other columns.¹²⁴ The micromanagement that characterised Chelmsford's memoranda to Charles Pearson and Anthony Durnford, his other column leaders, is absent in his conversations with Wood, and during the early days of the campaign, Chelmsford made a point of riding from his column to Wood's to confer with his favourite underling face-to-face.¹²⁵ Wood played along with Chelmsford's assumption of friendship, responding to his letters with equal warmth, but, when the time came to make or break reputations, was only too happy to promote his own career at the expense of Chelmsford's. Wood's memoirs, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal*, are a monument to egotism, and the sections on the Anglo-Zulu War, which award himself all the credit for every victory in the conflict are too often taken at face value. Wood's account, even more than most memoirs, aimed

¹²⁴ "Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel. H.E. Wood, December 16, 1878," in *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 44-45.

¹²⁵ "Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel H.E. Wood, January 16, 1879," in *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 70-71.

at painting himself in the best possible light and frequently disagrees with both the testimony of other Zulu War veterans, and with his own contemporary reports. Reading Wood becomes an exercise in academic caution, as the researcher attempts to prise out the relevant information from the claws of Wood's apparently inexhaustible supply of narcissism.

In fairness to Evelyn Wood, he did have a lot to be narcissistic about. As the title of his memoir indicates, Wood was originally a midshipman in the British Navy until his bravery in the Crimean War, serving with the Naval Brigade, brought him to the attention of Lord Raglan, the British Commander-in-Chief during that conflict. Raglan nominated Wood for the Victoria Cross, and while the naval officer failed to win it, he obtained something even more valuable: Raglan's patronage, which enabled his transfer from the Navy into the Army. Joining the 17th Lancers, Wood went to India, where his bravery in the Rebellion earned him a second Victoria Cross nomination, which he won. Wood's performance in the Crimea and India marked him as an officer to watch out for, and his ability to win patronage for himself did not end with Lord Raglan.¹²⁶ When Sir Garnet Wolseley was putting together his staff for the Second Anglo-Asante War of 1873-1874, Wood was one of the Special Service officers assigned to accompany him. Despite a predilection for illness that suggests a compromised immune system, and an accident proneness that enters the realm of the comical (he once reported for duty with his arm in a sling and his finger held together with bandages after being losing a battle with a folding chair), Wood performed well in the Asante conflict, leading a unit of Fanté auxiliaries that came to known as Wood's Irregulars. Wolseley, in despatches at the time and the memoirs he wrote years later, spoke highly of Wood, and made him a part of the army clique known as the "Wolseley Ring."¹²⁷ These types of "Rings" were common in the British Army of the 1880s, with factions

¹²⁶ Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 1, 38-264.

¹²⁷ Garnet Wolseley, *The Story of a Soldier's Life* Vol. 2, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903): 283, 298.

of junior officers forming around a single senior officer who dispensed patronage and promotion to them. During the era of purchase, these patrons often lent their acolytes money to defray the costs of buying their way into their next rank; later they provided a means of bypassing promotion by seniority, allowing talented young officers to gain advancement on the strength of their patron's recommendation.¹²⁸ Wood was one of the officers who accompanied Chelmsford to South Africa on Special Service, and led numerous patrols and columns in skirmishes with the Xhosa, earning Chelmsford's permanent respect and a key role in the Lieutenant-General's scheme for the Anglo-Zulu War. Admired, if not always liked, and with years of experience in battling Africans, he seemed an inspired choice as a column commander.

If Wood was Chelmsford's main confidante among the Special Service officers, his cavalry commander, Sir Redvers Buller, was Wood's. Buller occupies an interesting place in the Zulu War: never a column commander or holder of an officially independent command, yet held in too high esteem by Chelmsford and present for too many of the war's most important actions to be relegated to secondary status. As Wood's chief of Volunteer cavalry, Buller was a vital part of the counterinsurgency effort that No. 4 Column waged against Prince Mbilini and the abaQulusi. At the catastrophic Battle of Hlobane it was Buller whose cavalry bore the brunt of the fighting, and at Khambula it was he who served as the decoy to draw the Zulu Army into Wood's trap. During the final invasion of Zululand, it was Buller who guided Chelmsford's entire army and Buller who pursued the Zulu after Chelmsford's ultimate victory at Ulundi. His importance, out of proportion to his rank, is borne out by Chelmsford's correspondence with Wood, which contains numerous messages that the Lieutenant-General wanted passed onto Buller. When the situation was at its darkest for Chelmsford, in the days immediately after

¹²⁸ See *The Seven Ages of the British Army* for a detailed examination of the Rings and the culture around them.

Isandlwana, it was on not only Wood, but on Buller that he placed his hopes for repairing the situation; a great deal of confidence for a commanding general to repose in a Lieutenant-Colonel. Chelmsford and Wood, however, thought Buller warranted that trust.¹²⁹

The son of a Member of Parliament, Buller opted to join the Army instead of following his father into politics. He did his first tour of duty in China during Britain's seizure of Hong Kong before being transferred to Canada. As a Captain, Buller joined the 1870 Red River Expedition, where he impressed his chief, Sir Garnet Wolseley, with his management of the 1200-mile journey's logistical tangle. In 1873, when Wolseley was sent to the Gold Coast for the Second Anglo-Asante War, Buller was one of the officers he requested for Special Service. Appointed Deputy Assistant Quartermaster-General, Buller functioned as an intelligence officer, leading recon missions in the African jungle for Wolseley. In his memoirs Wolseley spoke in extravagant terms of Buller's performance against the Asante, stating his belief that the young officer would "brush off lightning bolts," and that his triumph in one of the war's most important battles hinged on intelligence brought to him by Buller.¹³⁰ Now a full-fledged member of the Wolseley Ring Buller was promoted to Major, and in 1878, was chosen by Lord Chelmsford for Special Service in the Ninth Frontier War. Buller raised a detachment of Volunteer cavalry known as the Frontier Light Horse who became famous throughout the Cape Colony for their daring pursuits of Xhosa guerillas, and established a firm friendship with Evelyn Wood. Wood's autobiography, like Wolseley's, singles Buller out for substantial praise as one of the best officers Wood ever fought alongside.¹³¹ On Chelmsford's recommendation, Buller was promoted Lieutenant-Colonel and brought east to Natal, where his Frontier Light Horse joined Wood's

¹²⁹ "Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel H.E. Wood, February 3, 1879," in *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 90

¹³⁰ Wolseley, *The Story of a Soldier's Life* Vol. 2, 279, 337.

¹³¹ Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 2, 30.

column. Like Wood, he was a veteran colonial soldier, and the two of them had more varied an experience of Africa under their belts than any of Chelmsford's other officers.

The commanding officer of the Coastal Column, Colonel Charles Knight Pearson, is less well-known to historians than Wood, his lack of a self-aggrandizing autobiography hurting his chances of earning their recognition in the same way as Wood. He was, however, another competent veteran officer with years of campaigning behind him. He came from a military family, his father a Commander in the British Navy and a veteran of the Napoleonic Wars. Like Chelmsford and Wood, he first tasted battle in the Crimean War, participating in the Siege of Sebastopol and the taking of Redan. He was mentioned in despatches during the latter, and earned medals from the British and the Ottoman governments for his bravery against the Russians.¹³² Whether he met Chelmsford or Wood during his time in the Crimea is unknown, but his record there would certainly have drawn their attention to him and marked him, like them, as an officer who had not only participated in colonial wars but had gone up against a "civilised" European enemy in the only general war of the mid-nineteenth century. Officers who had been through the Crimea together tended to look out for one another and sought to bolster one another's careers—a good thing for an officer like Pearson, who was not a member of one the Army Rings and therefore did not possess the same sort of powerful patron as Wood and Buller.

Pearson spent the years after the Crimea steadily, if not rapidly, climbing the ranks by way of purchase. When his regiment was sent to South Africa in 1876, Pearson, now its Colonel, went along with them. Along the way their ship ran aground, stranding Pearson and his men on a remote Cape Colony beach for two days while the authorities in the colony struggled to find them. Pearson was commended for his calm manner in handling the accident and it paved the

¹³² Ian Castle and Ian Knight, *Fearful Hard Times: The Siege and Relief of Eshowe*, 1879, (London: Greenhill Books, 1994): 31

way for his receiving further responsibilities from the colonial government. In November of that year, Pearson was pulled from his regiment and made Commandant of Natal, responsible for the militia defense of the colony, a task at which he remained for two years until transferring back to his regiment just before the Anglo-Zulu War.¹³³ As someone who had been in South Africa and even more importantly, on the Natal/Zululand border for two years, Pearson was an obvious choice to lead one of the invading columns, as one of the few officers available to Chelmsford who had both the rank and the knowledge of the terrain. While Pearson did not gain the notoriety of a Wood or a Buller he was well-thought of in the British Army, and Chelmsford's letters to and about him, while not especially warm, demonstrate full confidence in his competency.

That leaves only the last, and the most controversial of Lord Chelmsford's leading subordinates: Brevet Colonel Anthony Durnford, the loser at, and soon after the scapegoat for, Isandlwana. Durnford's career was by all accounts one of the unluckiest in the history of the British Army. Born to a family of minor Irish gentry who had served in the Royal Engineers since 1759, Durnford's career was set out for him from birth. Commissioned into the engineers in 1848, he spent several years building roads in Sri Lanka before requesting a posting to the Crimean War. Illness, however, prevented him from reaching Russia until the fighting was over. He also entered a deeply unhappy marriage, marred by fighting and the deaths of two of their children; in order to escape a relationship he knew was over, Durnford asked to be sent to Gibraltar in 1860 and spent several years there, avoiding his wife. This cost him the chance for service in the Maori Wars or the Northwest Frontier in India; he applied for a posting on General Gordon's expedition to China but fell sick on route and again missed out. In 1871, he volunteered for South African duty, not in hopes of seeing action there, but because it was as far

¹³³ Castle and Knight, *Fearful Hard Times*, 31.

away as he could be sent from anyone who knew him without stepping off the edge of the world.¹³⁴

Durnford spent two years in the Cape Colony before being promoted to Major and sent to Natal to command the Royal Engineers at Fort Napier. As a new arrival in an incestuous frontier society, he attracted the attention of the colonial elite, including then Governor Sir Theophilus Shepstone, Bishop Colenso of Natal, and the Bishop's daughter Nell, who formed a close and possibly romantic, relationship with Durnford. Durnford was with Shepstone at Cetshwayo's coronation; brought along to map the routes into Zululand he found the crowning as silly as Cetshwayo himself did. In 1873, Durnford was sent with a unit of the Natal Carbineers to stop the rebellion of the amaHlubi people, who had revolted when one of Shepstone's deputies stupidly tried to confiscate their guns. Durnford faced the amaHlubi at Bushman's River Pass where, save for five junior officers and a lone African auxiliary, his men, all Volunteers from Natal's civilian population, abandoned him to face the oncoming tribesmen alone. Durnford lost the use of his left arm in the skirmish and all respect for Shepstone and the people of Natal when they sought to punish a different tribe for the amaHlubi's revolt; his defense of innocent Africans from unfair colonial retribution making him an outcast in Natal's high society.¹³⁵

Durnford's stand did win him friends amongst Natal's Africans however, and when the time came to raise the Natal Native Contingent (NNC) he was one of the officers placed in charge of the effort. Durnford not only proved an able recruiter, but an innovative one; in addition to the hundreds of men he persuaded to join the NNC, he also created the Natal Native Horse, an auxiliary cavalry force of mounted Basuto tribesmen who regarded him as a friend and a benefactor. Unlike many British officers of the day, Durnford actively attempted to prevent his

¹³⁴ Knight, *Zulu Rising*, 102-106.

¹³⁵ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 27-29.

white officers from abusing their men, telling one prospective lieutenant (sent to him with a recommendation from John North Crealock) that if he made good on his threats to whip his African troops, “if you’re not stabbed by your own men, you will deserve it.”¹³⁶ Neither Shepstone nor Chelmsford especially trusted Durnford, whom they saw as having “gone Native”, with his sympathy for Africans on both sides of the border, an impression his role in the awarding of the disputed territories to the Zulu did nothing to alleviate. Evelyn Wood, however, thought Durnford a good soldier and a brave man, and given Wood’s usual self-centredness, that Durnford managed to make such an impression spoke well of him.¹³⁷

If Lord Chelmsford’s officers were not quite as distinguished as their American counterparts, they were certainly not, aside from John North Crealock, a pack of incompetents, and neither was Chelmsford himself. He, Wood, and Pearson all served in the Crimea, the largest war of the mid-nineteenth century, and acquitted themselves excellently, while Wood and Buller had fought against the Asante, and thus knew what it was like to face a powerful African empire in the field. Pearson had not fought Africans before, but he had been in South Africa for two years, and knew the Natal terrain as well as anyone. Durnford had led men against the amaHlubi and with eight years in South Africa (six of them in Natal) was uniquely positioned to inform Chelmsford about the territory. Chelmsford, Wood, Buller, and Crealock had just completed the last of the Xhosa Wars, ending a conflict that had been a bleeding wound in the Cape Colony’s side for decades. Surely then, these men, with all their collective years of experience were ideal to lead the British Army in South Africa. Surely, with the possible exemption of Crealock, a more qualified group of men could not have been assembled

¹³⁶ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 254.

¹³⁷ Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 2, 39.

It would most definitely have been a challenge for Chelmsford to put together a more solid coterie of officers. Indeed, the problems that would so upend the invasion in its first months had little to do with the competency of any of these officers (save, again, Crealock). The problem lay instead with how Lord Chelmsford, and those around him, viewed Africans. Lord Chelmsford's plan to invade Zululand, with its reliance on detached columns of men with which to pursue mobile guerilla bands was not a strategy for invading Zululand: it was a strategy for fighting the Xhosa again. The Zulu Army, as will be explored next chapter, was not an insurgent force. It was a regimented army of heavy infantry that confronted its enemies in the open and sought to crush them in pitched battle. Yet in all of Chelmsford's letters to Stanley, Bartle Frere, Shepstone, and Wood, there was no mention of any worry that his divided columns might be overrun by a Zulu attack. Instead, the anxiety that appeared time and again, defining Chelmsford's concerns about the operation he was about to embark upon, was that the Zulu would not stand and fight at all. It was assumed by Lord Chelmsford, and by Sir Bartle Frere and Sir Theophilus Shepstone, that the British Army, with its Martini-Henry rifles and disciplined infantry, would easily overcome the Zulu if they dared to fight the British in the open, and that therefore the Zulu would not fight the British in the open, or would only do so once. It was anticipated they would run, and the chief thing Chelmsford needed to plan for was a way to stop them from getting away, and dragging out the war the way the Xhosa had.

Anthony Durnford could have told Chelmsford better. He had been stationed in Natal for six years and knew how the Zulu fought. But Durnford's loyalties were suspect in Chelmsford's eyes, and his known sympathy for the Zulu made it easy to treat his opinion as designed to protect Cetshwayo. Evelyn Wood and Redvers Buller, who had combatted disciplined African troops in the Second Anglo-Asante War could have told Chelmsford that all Africans did not

fight the same way, but they, and Wood in particular, were too busy denouncing their own African auxiliaries for cowardice to push back against the idea that *every* African was a coward. To say otherwise might have meant Wood needed to re-examine his own leadership of the Fanté and Mfengu levies he had commanded in the past. Bishop Colenso and his daughter, Nell, Sir Henry Bulwer, and various Natal Border Agents could, and did, try to tell Chelmsford better, but were not listened to because they were opponents of the conspiracy. As the date for the invasion of Zululand came closer, Chelmsford, Bartle Frere, and Shepstone rejected all information that did not fit their backwards ideas about what Africans were like, and how the Zulu could be expected to resist them. It was a decision their men would end up paying for.

*

Phil Sheridan and Lord Chelmsford could not have been more different from one another in personal background or attitude. Yet they held the same anxieties regarding their opponents, fearful not of Lakota and Cheyenne or Zulu military prowess, but that the Natives might run away, and in doing so, turn their plans for swift conquests into drawn out guerilla stalemates. Sheridan's writings, and those of his subordinates, contain a word, "scatteration" that comes up time and again as something to be avoided more than anything else. Chelmsford's letters, likewise, are filled with doubts as to the Zulu willingness to engage in pitched battle and a nagging terror of having to waste time and money catching them. Both men, therefore decided that the thing to do was to break up their armies into small, independent commands under the subordinates they trusted most and to use those commands to converge on the enemy's perceived location, crushing their Native adversaries between multiple forces before they had a chance to get away. In drafting these schemes, Sheridan relied heavily on his early experience fighting the

Yakima, and on George Crook's battles with the Apache; Chelmsford drew on his earlier campaign against the Xhosa, which he anticipated repeating in Zululand.

Both Sheridan and Chelmsford should have known better. They were the ones who pushed for war in the first place and one would have expected them to know their enemies well. Sheridan deliberately sabotaged Grant's Peace Policy and from almost the minute he arrived on the Great Plains was determined to stir up a war against the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne to secure the land needed for further development by white colonists. Chelmsford joined forces with Bartle Frere and Shepstone to manufacture a nonexistent Zulu threat and achieve South African Confederation and military glory in one fell swoop. Sheridan and Chelmsford were not neutral military men suddenly handed an assignment they were unprepared for; they were both deeply entrenched members of the imperial political and military establishment using their positions and the power that came with them to neutralise opposition to war on the frontier and force a conflict into being through sheer willpower. Both collaborated with or suborned cooperation from other civil and military authorities to realise these ambitions and both knew from the start that war was going to be the result of their activities. How is it then, that neither man was truly prepared for the war he was going to wage?

It was not because they lacked access to expert advice. George Crook was an acknowledged expert on Native American affairs, as was John Gibbon, and Sheridan had the cooperation of the Department of the Interior and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, both of which had plenty of information on the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne. He also had the opportunity to speak to officers like Nelson Miles and Bad Hand Mackenzie about how they prosecuted the Red River War. Yet Crook went along with Sheridan's assumptions and Gibbon, never consulted by the generals, made the error of assuming they knew what they were doing, while Miles and

Mackenzie's experience was left untapped until far later in the war. Similarly, Chelmsford had, in Anthony Durnford, an officer who was on the Zulu frontier for six years. He also could have talked to Sir Henry Bulwer or Bishop Colenso and received from them detailed analyses of Zulu capabilities. Chelmsford, however, saw Bulwer and Colenso as enemies and Durnford's loyalty to the imperial military as dubious at best, and thus relied on his own stereotypes about the Xhosa to inform him about the Zulu. Wood and Buller, who had fought the Asante as well as the Xhosa, were, at least in theory, aware that not all Africans made war in the same way, but were too distracted by their own bigotry to contradict Chelmsford who does not seem to have ever asked about the Asante campaign, or if he did, never folded any lessons from it into his own.

None of these men were stupid. They were all veterans and about as able a group of officers as the American and British Armies of the day could produce. Yet none of them could comprehend the reality of their situation or see past the notion that Indigenous people were Indigenous people and that Yakima and Lakota or Xhosa and Zulu must fight in the same manner. The issues lay, not in the individual personalities of the men involved (though those interacted with the broader problem in all manner of counterproductive ways), but in the institutional thinking of the militaries they belonged to. As frontier organisations the American Army in the Division of the Missouri and the British Army in South Africa were gripped by colonial thinking and their top officers saw the Indigenous world through that prism, and forced subordinates who might have other ideas to go along. Colonial thought permeated the political and military establishment of the United States and Great Britain and it placed restrictions on the power of even capable officers to see things the institutions did not wish to see. It was a serious, unexamined problem in both the Great Sioux War and the Anglo-Zulu War: especially when the

Lakota, Northern Cheyenne, and Zulu proved unwilling to play the parts Sheridan and Chelmsford scripted for them.

Chapter 2: Underrated Adversaries

Phil Sheridan and Lord Chelmsford both believed they were going to war against primitives. It is an ugly word and an uglier sentiment, but one that must be engaged with to properly comprehend how both generals' calculations went so disastrously awry. It was that assumption of primitivism on the part of their enemies that underwrote Sheridan and Chelmsford's ideas about who the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Zulu were, and made them believe that if you had fought one Native American tribe or African people you had, in effect, fought them all. The Yakima and Apache, Sheridan thought, were a fine template for facing the Lakota and Cheyenne. The Xhosa, Chelmsford was convinced, were an appropriate test run for making war upon the Zulu. For with all Native Americans and Africans being 'primitives' they must share a culture and an approach to warfare that would differ only in the minor details.

Spotting the bigotry that informed this line of thinking is not difficult, but what made that bigotry so toxic to Sheridan and Chelmsford's chances for success was the ways in which it caused them to draft plans that bore no resemblance to observable reality. Had the Lakota and Cheyenne fought like the Yakima or Apache, Sheridan's prejudice would not have been detrimental to his war-effort. Had the Zulu been just a slightly tougher version of the Xhosa, Chelmsford's beliefs about Africans would never have mattered. It was the refusal of Sheridan and Chelmsford's Indigenous enemies to conform to the white generals' expectations, in ways both small and large, that made their racism dangerous to their own troops, rather than simply a regrettable character flaw, or a sign of the times that they lived in.

Sheridan should have known that his skirmishes with the Yakima and Crook's bush war with the Apache were not rubrics for going to war with the Lakota or Cheyenne. Neither tribe was a stranger to the American Army, and as Lieutenant-General Commanding the Division of

the Missouri, Sheridan had easy access to all the army records relating to previous battles against the peoples he now proposed to go to war with, peoples who, between 1866 and 1868 won a war against the American government and forced concessions from it. The Army had no shortage of veterans of those campaigns, and it is a curious thing that Sheridan did not employ any of those men in his scheme for conquering the Northern Plains.

Chelmsford's British Army had not fought the Zulu anything like the number of times that the Division of the Missouri had engaged the Lakota and Cheyenne, but Chelmsford still benefitted from an extensive regional intelligence network and from the advice of local administrators, Boer commandos, and allied African auxiliaries about how to best take on the Zulu Empire. Before the war, Chelmsford commissioned an intelligence report that, in a tribute to the data collecting ability of the Victorian Era British Army, provided a largely accurate history of the Zulu military and correctly identified some of its regiments by name. Yet almost none of the information in this report was incorporated into Chelmsford's campaign plan; it was as if, having read the report, he could not bring himself to believe it.

Had Sheridan or Chelmsford done their research, they would quickly have realized that they were proposing to make war on complex societies with highly sophisticated military systems. The Lakota and Cheyenne, while nomadic and lacking a central government, were possessed of a strong sense of unity, and were led by chieftains and war-leaders who, rather than being hidebound traditionalists, were perfectly capable of innovating new tactics and strategies as the situation called for them. Some of these war-leaders had defeated American soldiers in the past and were perfectly capable of doing so again. The Zulu King Cetshwayo, in the meantime, was the ruler of an imperial society that made him the commander of a vast army that was much more disciplined, and much more daunting to face, than the disunited Xhosa tribesmen

Chelmsford battled in the Ninth Frontier War. Neither Indigenous polity lacked the ability to respond to the colonial adventuring of the Americans or the British at the societal level, and when they did so, Sheridan and Chelmsford were caught completely off guard.

Neither should have been. The relevant details were readily available to Sheridan and Chelmsford had they ever bothered to look. Colonial reasoning intervened, however, and stopped the generals from using the data points available to them to question their predetermined beliefs. The ‘primitives’ they had set out to subjugate would surprise them again and again, not because of what they were unable to know, but because of what they had chosen in advance not to know.

*

By the time Phil Sheridan took command of the Division of the Missouri in 1869, the United States Army already had a great deal of experience in warring against the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne—almost all of it bad. Relations between the US federal government and the two Native American nations, friendly enough in the 1850s, degenerated into a series of increasingly violent episodes in the 1860s, that saw significant casualties on all sides. During the American Civil War, the Union and the Confederacy fought not only one another, but the Native American tribes occupying the border regions between the United States, the Confederate States, Canada, and Mexico, in a little remembered sideshow that killed far more civilians than it did Union or Confederate soldiers or Native American warriors.

In Union New Mexico and Confederate Arizona, Apache bushwhackers waged a guerilla struggle against whichever American Army occupied their territory at the time, while in Texas the Comanche and Kiowa knocked the frontier back more than a hundred miles, leaving a swathe of torched homesteads and ambushed pioneer wagons across the northern part of the state. The Comanche patronage and trade network encompassed the Southern Cheyenne and Southern

Arapaho as well, and they too were dragged into the ongoing border wars with the United and Confederate States of America as Native polities took advantage of the white collapse to regain lost territories and drive out unwanted settlers. Both Washington and Richmond, needing their regular troops elsewhere, responded by deploying quickly raised mobs of ill-trained militia Volunteers, whose heavy-handed tactics, bitter hatred of Native Americans, and sheer blundering stupidity all conspired to make the situation worse, rather than better.

Until 1864, the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne largely sat the fighting out. The most powerful tribe on the Northern Plains, the Lakota, or “Sioux” as the Americans usually referred to them, were comparatively recent immigrants to the territory, arriving as part of a westward migration in the early 1800s. Their relatives, the Dakota and Nakota settled further east, becoming semisedentary farmers and hunters, but the Lakota continued west, pushing out onto the Plains and adopting the nomadic, horse-borne lifestyle already entrenched there. Their livelihood tied to access to the herds of American bison roaming the Plains, the Lakota—now subdividing themselves into the seven subgroups of Brulé, Oglala, Hunkpapa, Sans Arcs, Miniconjou, Blackfeet, and Two Kettles—fought many wars with the Crow, Shoshone, Arikara, Arapaho, and Cheyenne tribes that ruled the Plains before them, capturing the best hunting grounds for themselves. The Lakota onslaught earned them the permanent enmity of the Pawnee, Arikara, Shoshone, and Crow who regarded them as usurpers, but won them allies in the Northern Cheyenne and Northern Arapaho who, seeing the way the wind was blowing, threw in with the new hegemony of the Northern Plains. The Southern Cheyenne and Southern Arapaho, unable to reconcile themselves to having the Lakota as overlords, broke off from their Northern

relatives in the 1840s and moved southward, falling into the Comanche and Kiowa orbit instead.¹³⁸

In contrast to the Comanche, who treated the Mexican and American settlers of New Mexico and Texas as enemies from the get-go, the Lakota initially had no interest in opposing the United States and the first hostilities between the tribes and the US government were initiated by the American Army. In 1854, Lieutenant John L. Grattan, a young, ambitious, and frighteningly dimwitted officer, decided the appropriate response to the theft of a cow was to order the bombardment by artillery of a nearby Brulé Lakota camp. That the camp's headman, Conquering Bear, was friendly to the government and had already offered to pay restitution for the cow, did not matter to Grattan, who swore he could defeat the entire Lakota nation with one company and a few cannons. As it turned out, he could not, and his ill-considered actions succeeded only in mortally wounding Conquering Bear and getting himself, and twenty-nine of his soldiers killed by the rightfully incensed Brulé. The American government, deciding this was the fault of the Brulé, sent out Colonel William S. Harney to avenge Grattan; in 1856, Harney overran a Brulé camp, earned himself the nickname "Woman-Killer" and convinced the Brulé to sue for peace. After that, all was quiet—until another thuggish officer stepped onto the scene.¹³⁹

In 1862, as the Civil War raged further east, several bands of Dakota and Nakota, brought to the brink of starvation by government policy on the reservations, went up in revolt. They killed several hundred settlers before the army brought them to heel and spread panic and paranoia throughout the American West. Governor Evans of Colorado and his chief military advisor, the preacher-turned-soldier, Colonel John Chivington, saw an opportunity to exploit this

¹³⁸ Cozzens, *The Earth is Weeping*, 18-19.

For an analysis of Comanche/settler relations, see Pekka Hämäläinen's *Comanche Empire*

¹³⁹ Cozzens, *The Earth is Weeping*, 21.

paranoia to their own ends, and in 1864, invited Southern Cheyenne peace chief Black Kettle to a parlay, then waylaid and murdered most of his party near Sand Creek. Chivington, a committed *genocidaire*, ordered his men to kill every Southern Cheyenne they found, down to the infants, on the premise that “nits make lice.”¹⁴⁰ His men paraded through Denver with the genitals of their victims harpooned on their bayonets; these grisly trophies were subsequently displayed in the town theatre for all to see. Chivington and the Volunteer cavalymen of the “Bloody Third” left Union service soon after, but the damage was permanent: the Southern Cheyenne declared war on the state of Colorado, destroying hundreds of miles of telegraph lines and raiding every stagecoach and wagon train they could find. Invoking old alliances, the Southern Cheyenne called the Northern Cheyenne into the war, and the Northern Cheyenne, in turn, brought in the Lakota tribes who swore to “raise the battle-axe until death,” to avenge Black Kettle.¹⁴¹

John Pope was the officer sent to take over the Division of the Missouri and fix the wreckage Chivington and Evans left in their wake. Pope’s plans for extensive campaigning against the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne foundered, however, in the face of inadequate resources, bad weather, and the discovery that one of his chief subordinates, Brigadier-General Patrick Connor, was an exterminationist and aspiring *genocidaire* in the same vein as Chivington. When Connor ordered his men to kill every ‘Indian’ they encountered over the age of twelve, Pope countermanded these instructions, informing Connor his career would come to a quick end if anything resembling his original orders were carried out. Connor—who later won infamy ordering his own men shelled with cannister—took the field against the Lakota in 1865, but his expedition floundered in the snow, was encircled by Lakota outriders, and only narrowly

¹⁴⁰ Morse Coffin with Alan Farley, *The Battle of Sand Creek*, cited in Christopher Rein, “‘Our First Duty Was to God and Our Next Was To Our Country’: Religion, Violence, and the Sand Creek Massacre,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (Summer 2014): 234.

¹⁴¹ Quoted in Cozzens, *The Earth is Weeping*, 27.

avoided annihilation.¹⁴² Pope's other subordinates, Henry Sibley and Alfred Sully did not fare much better. In 1864, Sully skirmished with the Lakota at Killdeer Mountain, but failed to corner them; during his retreat back to his line of supply he was harassed the entire way by Lakota horsemen, who picked off stragglers and raided his wagon trains. Sibley's experience was much the same; weather permitting it was a rare occasion when he could even find the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne, let alone force them to fight. In 1865, with the army downsizing and the Division of the Missouri passing from Pope to Sherman, American efforts to make war against the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne petered out without any kind of victory being obtained.¹⁴³

If the first full scale war between the United State Army and the Lakota nation was inauspicious, the second was flat out embarrassing. Through the early 1860s, even as they fought against white encroachment into their turf, the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne completed the final phase of their own expansion, driving the Crow nation from the rich hunting grounds along the Powder River. This was land the United States government, fresh from the Civil War and aiming to rebuild the Union, wanted for the new states and territories emerging in the American West. Under William Sherman, the American Army conceived of a program of fort construction in the Powder River country, intent on opening the passage that became known as the Bozeman Trail to pioneer families moving West from the rapidly urbanising North and the economically and physically devastated South. It was a project the Johnson administration, which drew what little political support it had from poor landless whites, looked upon as being of considerable importance, and which the Army, needing to justify its own existence in the face of Johnson's opposition to Reconstruction, went along with eagerly enough.

¹⁴² Richard N. Ellis, *General Pope and U.S. Indian Policy* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1970): 77. Ellis quotes numerous letters between Pope and Connor on this topic.

¹⁴³ Cozzens, *The Earth is Weeping*, 28.

In 1866, the Army and the Bureau of Indian Affairs met with some of the leading chiefs of the Lakota subdivisions, hoping to persuade them to sell the Powder River country. Amidst the negotiations, however, a group of Lakota scouts rode into the meeting and informed the Oglala war-chief Red Cloud, then emerging as the leading man amongst the Native American chieftains who opposed selling the land, that white surveyors were already engaged in mapping out the topography. Red Cloud stormed out of the negotiations, though not before accusing the government of negotiating in bad faith and trying to steal the land out from under the Lakota. The bulk of the other chiefs went with Red Cloud, but one or two minor dignitaries remained behind and were convinced to sign the treaty. Sherman, Grant, and eventually, President Johnson, were told these lesser men spoke for the whole Lakota nation and an agreement to sell had been finalised. Sherman, who envisioned a new role for the Army in “civilizing” the West (a belief he passed onto Sheridan), immediately ordered the start of construction on the Bozeman Trail forts. As Stephen Ambrose noted in the 1970s, “Sherman evidently believed that the Indians would sit and watch while he established forts, reorganized the Army, raised new cavalry regiments for Indian warfare, and then attacked the Sioux in their villages at a time of his own choosing.”¹⁴⁴ This analysis holds up fifty years on; more than anything else, what blinded Sherman to the nature of the task ahead was the idea that the Army, not the Lakota, held the initiative.

In making this assumption, Sherman underestimated Lakota resolve and badly underestimated Red Cloud. The Oglala war-chief was not someone who could be safely written off, yet that was precisely what the Army and the Bureau of Indian Affairs tried to do, dismissing him as the leader of a small band of malcontents. In truth, Red Cloud was one of the preeminent

¹⁴⁴ Ambrose, *Crazy Horse and Custer*, 228.

men amongst the whole Lakota people, his status as a war-chief of the Oglala (along with the Brulé the largest of the Lakota subdivisions) and the *de facto* leader of the Bad Face band giving him a great deal of social power, even in a society that lacked authoritarian leadership. His own careful diplomacy added to his prestige, and his position; among his strongest allies were Sitting Bull, medicine man of the Hunkpapa Lakota and leader of the Strong Hearts and Midnight Eaters societies, Young-Man-Afraid-of-His-Horses, widely regarded by Lakota and white men alike as a rising star within the Oglala, and the young men of the Shirt-Wearers society who if they had a leader, it was probably a quiet, strangely intense twenty-something named Crazy Horse.¹⁴⁵ This gave Red Cloud a basis from which to work, but it was not enough for the Bad Face chief who grasped better than any of the Lakota chiefs before him the strength the white men could bring to bear. Red Cloud was a young man when Woman-Killer Harney descended onto the Lakota and was one of the Oglala who went south to fight alongside the Cheyenne during the border wars of 1864-1865. He understood the American Army, while easily lost and misdirected on the Great Plains, was enormous and that he needed more men. He sent runners to all the Lakota subdivisions, to the Northern Cheyenne and Northern Arapaho, the Southern Cheyenne and Southern Arapaho, and even their traditional enemies, the Crow, to try recruiting allies. The Crow declined, but warriors from all the Lakota subtribes and from the Cheyenne and Arapaho, Northern and Southern alike, turned out in support of Red Cloud. It was a major diplomatic stroke on Red Cloud's part, and one all too often misunderstood by non-Indigenous historians.

Despite the best efforts of American authorities and historians to assign someone to the role, there was no one chief of all the Lakota, or even of the Oglala, the Hunkpapa, or the other tribal subdivisions. The same held true for the Northern Cheyenne, who, while having notable

¹⁴⁵ The Midnight Eaters derived their name from their custom of holding feasts under cover of darkness.

cultural differences from the Lakota, adhered to much the same system of tribal government. Chiefs were tied to their bands, rather than the other way around, and only held power as long as their followers granted it to them. A chief who proved inept or a tyrant quickly lost support, and eventually, his band, as the constituent members drifted apart and joined up with the bands of more capable or enlightened leaders. The size of these bands varied immeasurably as well, with some consisting of only a dozen people, while others encompassed hundreds of families. Further complicating matters, bands might have more than one chief: the Bad Faces, one of the largest Oglala Lakota bands, answered to the cheerful and amiable Old Smoke during peacetime, but turned to Red Cloud as war-chief when their enemies threatened them. This system of leadership was one of the things that allowed Indian Bureau officials and Army officers to misrepresent the power and authority of the Native American leaders they encountered to suit their own personal ends: minor chiefs with bands of a few dozen could sign away territory belonging to Lakota who had never heard of them, while a man like Red Cloud was misconstrued as having no following, a statement that was technically true in peacetime, but not when it came to war.¹⁴⁶

The lack of political unity among the Lakota and Cheyenne could be, and sometimes was, a problem when it came to organizing for war. Just as there were no chiefs with absolute power, there were no generals with the inherent military authority to enforce discipline among the warriors. A man like Red Cloud might hold the position of war-chief within a band, but he could not force other men to follow him in the manner that Grant, Sherman or Sheridan could, by using rank and the threat of punishment to compel obedience. Rather, Red Cloud's power as a war-

¹⁴⁶ Most secondary histories of the wars on the Plains will include a summary of this information. For the best of those by white historians, see *The Earth is Weeping*. For a version that incorporates Lakota oral tradition as well, see *The Journey of Crazy Horse*. As an aside one might note that the cultural blindness here has to have been deliberate on the part of the American leadership: it was not as though the United States was not thoroughly familiar with the concept of having one set of leaders in wartime and another in peacetime.

chief, like Old Smoke's power as a peace chief or Sitting Bull's power as a medicine man stemmed from the moral authority he wielded over those who knew him and were attracted to his personality. When a warband or raiding party was put together, the man leading it might not even be a war-chief. There were plenty of examples of war-parties spontaneously assembling themselves with no one clearly in charge or being pulled together by the magnetic personality of a leading warrior who, while possessed of a great reputation, did not hold any official rank. At the Battle of the Little Bighorn the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne opposition to George Custer's attack came together around Gall and Crow King, both Hunkpapa Lakota war-chiefs, Lame White Man, a visiting Southern Cheyenne elder and former war-chief, Two Moons, a Northern Cheyenne chief, and the Northern Cheyenne Yellow Nose and the Oglala Lakota Crazy Horse, who while famous war-leaders, held no official positions—Crazy Horse had, in fact, lost his status as a Shirt-Wearer for trying to run off with another man's wife.

This is not to say there was no military organisation whatsoever among the Lakota or Northern Cheyenne. Young men were typically mentored by older warriors who tried to make sure they got out of their first skirmishes alive. Warriors kept careful running counts of their great deeds, of the scalps they had taken and, most importantly, of the coups (touching a live enemy with a hand or a stick) they had counted, which helped to determine their standing in society. Warriors who earned impressive reputations often clubbed together to form elite secret societies with elaborate initiation processes and rituals. These were common among the Lakota and approached the level of governmental institution among the Cheyenne, with the infamous Dog Soldiers being best known among the whites. Not all of these societies had long lives—the Shirt-Wearers imploded and were then abolished after Crazy Horse was kicked out—but while they lasted they provided a source of leadership, and unified leadership at that, for their people,

particularly given that membership stretched across bands, and at times, tribes. There were also aspects of formal military organisation that simply were not relevant to the Lakota and Cheyenne. Their American enemies needed to be taught to ride a horse and shoot a rifle, but Plains tribesmen (and women) were all but born on horseback and learned how to shoot from a young age. John Gibbon considered Plains horsemen to be the best natural light cavalry in the world and one-for-one thought them more than a match for even crack American troops.¹⁴⁷

It was at the higher levels of warfare, then, that Native American leadership could break down, and at times there were real problems. Keeping a Lakota and Cheyenne army in the field was an act of willpower on the part of its leaders, who had to generate a consensus among themselves about what course of action to take and persuade their followers, whether by fast-talking or force of personality, to go along with it. Coalitions were held together not by treaties or national feeling, but by the loyalty of each band member to their leaders, and the loyalty of those leaders to one another and the broader cause. Often the death of an important war-leader could see the Lakota or Cheyenne break off from an action, or even end a conflict entirely, as the animating force behind the war effort was lost. In this context any defeat, however minor could be devastating, if it persuaded the leader of a warband to surrender or convinced his followers to abandon him. Books on Lakota and Cheyenne warfare are filled with anecdotes about how the tribes, despite their fearsome reputations, lacked staying power and abandoned combats if they lasted too long, and even when winning refused to go in for the kill for fear of losing too many of their own. To an extent these statements are true, and some US Army officers, most notably Nelson Miles, made full use of these traits of Native American military command, exploiting them to end battles and wars with a minimum of casualties on either side.¹⁴⁸ These issues were,

¹⁴⁷ Gibbon, "Arms to Fight Indians," 233-234.

¹⁴⁸ For Miles' contemporary analysis of Lakota and Cheyenne strengths and weaknesses see Chapter 7, below.

in many ways, natural products of a decentralized society and should be taken as such, rather than as evidence of weakness of moral character among Native Americans.

What often goes unsaid—or even unexamined—however, is that the nature of Native American leadership could produce precisely opposite effects to those listed above. Under gifted war-chiefs and war-leaders who understood how to motivate the warriors and keep a coalition together, the Lakota and Cheyenne could defy Army expectations. Warbands that purportedly feared taking casualties and would not press their advantages might suddenly push home a charge under near suicidal circumstances if given the proper motivation. At the Battle of Beecher Island in 1869, Southern Cheyenne war-leader Roman Nose leapt over a barricade and plowed through the defenses beyond it, trampling over the soldiers who got in his way before he was finally downed in a hail of bullets. The horsemen who followed him ran when he died—but up to that point they willingly charged right into the barrels of the Americans’ rifles, seemingly heedless of life and limb.¹⁴⁹ At the Grattan Massacre of 1854, the death of Chief Conquering Bear did not knock the fight out of the Brulé Lakota, but instead spurred them onward, resulting in the deaths of Lieutenant Grattan’s whole command at the hands of the enraged warriors. And when enough chiefs gathered with one goal in mind, the level of tactical and strategic sophistication displayed by the allied war-parties could grow by leaps and bounds. Such concentrations of personality were rare, but when they happened, the Army could and sometimes did find itself physically and strategically outmatched by the assemblage of Native American talent.

Such an assemblage happened from 1866 to 1868, in what became known to Anglo-Americans and Native Americans alike as Red Cloud’s War. For two years, Red Cloud kept the

¹⁴⁹ Cozzens, *The Earth is Weeping*, 89.

Bozeman Trail forts under a state of permanent siege. This was not something Native Americans were supposed to be able to do, but no one told Red Cloud this, and with as many as two thousand Lakota and Cheyenne warriors answering his call to arms, he had the manpower to do it. Telegraph lines were cut for hundreds of miles in every direction. Foraging parties from the forts were attacked on setting out, and both the Army and the local settlers lost hundreds of cows and horses to Native raiders, who made a point of leaving no stock that could feed their foes. Wagon caravans attempting to move through the Powder River country were waylaid and attacked, pioneers and settlers killed, wagons burned, and goods made off with. Before the end of 1866, all travel along the Bozeman Trail had halted, with civilians too fearful to chance it and the Army powerless to protect them. When Colonel Henry B. Carrington, commander of Fort Phil Kearny and the highest-ranking officer in the Powder River region, led a sortie from his stronghold, he was driven back into the fort by hundreds of Lakota and Cheyenne warriors who descended on him from seemingly out of nowhere. Adding insult to injury, Red Cloud's marauders made fifty-one separate forays against the fort itself, stealing livestock from its pens, burning outlying buildings, and otherwise making nuisances of themselves.¹⁵⁰

Carrington's second-in-command was a young Captain named William Fetterman. A Civil War veteran who failed to earn the promotions he thought he deserved, Fetterman insisted that "with eighty men I could ride through the entire Sioux nation." After petitioning Carrington one too many times for the right to prove it, Fetterman with three officers, seventy-six soldiers, and two civilian volunteers was allowed to ride out into the December snow in search of Red Cloud, whose scalp he promised to Carrington. Soon after leaving the fort they caught sight of a band of Native outriders, apparently fleeing from them. With his mixed group of infantry and

¹⁵⁰ Cozzens, *The Earth is Weeping*, 32-46.

cavalry struggling after him, Fetterman and an even more impetuous cavalry officer named Grummond set off after the Lakota and Cheyenne. The men they were chasing, however, were decoys, led by Crazy Horse, and including his fellow Shirt-Wearers American Horse, Young-Man-Afraid-of-His-Horses, and He Dog, the latter of whom was perhaps Crazy Horse's closest friend. Two more of Crazy Horse's associates, Lone Bear and High Back Bone, and the Northern Cheyenne warriors Wolf Left Hand and Little Wolf joined the Shirt-Wearers, who had orders from Red Cloud to draw Fetterman away from the fort and deeper into the snow.¹⁵¹ Sheridan later spent a great deal of time trying to hit the Lakota and Cheyenne in the winter, when he thought them vulnerable, but here it was Red Cloud who used the season to his advantage. When Crazy Horse pulled Fetterman far enough from the fort, one thousand Lakota and Cheyenne horsemen appeared on the Captain's flanks. Outnumbered more than ten to one, Fetterman's soldiers were slain to a man. Fewer than a dozen Native Americans were killed, mostly by friendly fire.¹⁵²

News of the "Fetterman Massacre" provoked outrage in the Western press, and Sherman sent additional troops to the frontier to break the siege of the Bozeman Trail forts. Congress, however, was controlled by the Radical Republican peace party, which, in the aftermath of the Civil War, wanted to downsize the Army still further and put an end to the violence for good. Denied the funding and he needed to strengthen his forces, Sherman was unable to get through to Fort Phil Kearny and its neighbours, which remained under siege for two years, the soldiers inside battling Native patrols just to get food and water into the forts. Sherman's soldiers did

¹⁵¹ Little Wolf, on the basis of his performance here, would be a Northern Cheyenne war-chief by the time of the Great Sioux War. See *The Journey of Crazy Horse* for more on the Lakota war-leader's role here and on that of his friends.

¹⁵² "Chronological list of actions &c. with Indians from January 1866, to January, 1891," in *Indian Battles and Skirmishes on the American Frontier 1790-1898*, edited by Joseph P. Peters (New York: Argonaut Press Ltd, 1966): 4.

score one minor victory, at the so-called Wagon Box Fight, when a convoy of wagons repelled several hundred of Crazy Horse's Oglala, but that minor triumph did not relieve the siege or otherwise impact the outcome of the war. In 1868, as Johnson was being pushed from office, and Grant, a Radical Republican and proponent of the peace policy was moving in, the Army surrendered to Red Cloud.¹⁵³ The Bozeman Trail forts were destroyed, a massive reserve of land was set aside for Native American use, and Red Cloud moved onto a reservation, promising not to go to war again. Red Cloud, who was taken east on a train to meet with Grant, and thus saw the size of the United States, kept that promise. The white men did not keep theirs.

One might have expected that Red Cloud's War, as the last major conflict between the Army and the Lakota-Northern Cheyenne coalition, would have been a topic of serious study by Sheridan and his compatriots during the leadup to the Great Sioux War, yet it was not. Sherman chose to view Red Cloud's War as an aberration, brought on when the government refused to back the Army properly, and instead made a deal with its foes behind its back. Sheridan, who was not yet on the Great Plains during Red Cloud's War, remembered it the same way, and insisted that the government giving into Red Cloud was the main reason why the rest of the tribes did not simply surrender to the Army on sight.¹⁵⁴ In the Washita Campaign of 1869, Sheridan aimed to demonstrate to the Lakota and Cheyenne that they had not bested anything like the full strength of the United States. By striking out at the hostile tribes in the winter, Sheridan thought he would show them he could do what they could not, waging war in the deep snow.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Grant's campaign slogan was literally "Let Us Have Peace."

¹⁵⁴ Sheridan, "Report of Operations of the Campaign Against Indians in the Department of the Missouri in the Winter of 1868 to 1869," 9.

¹⁵⁵ Sheridan, "Report of Operations of the Campaign Against Indians in the Department of the Missouri in the Winter of 1868 to 1869," 10, 27, 31-34.

That the Fetterman Massacre, as the Army called it, took place during the winter was something Sheridan did not take under consideration. Nor did he truly examine the results of his own Battle of the Washita. The destruction of the friendly Southern Cheyenne camp at the Washita did nothing to placate the Lakota or Northern Cheyenne, who were angered rather than frightened, by the assault on their ally. The Battle also failed to demonstrate the overwhelming might of the US Army in the way Sheridan wanted it to, for, immediately after sacking Black Kettle's camp, he and Custer were forced to retreat by the arrival of significant Southern Cheyenne, Kiowa, and Comanche reinforcements, drawn from the actual hostile encampments further down the Washita River.¹⁵⁶ Rather than ending Lakota and Northern Cheyenne resistance to American expansion, Sheridan's prized Battle of the Washita inaugurated a new round of fighting with the Southern Cheyenne, Kiowa, and Comanche, one Sheridan did not put an end to until 1875, when disease and the efforts of Ranald Mackenzie and Nelson Miles forced the Lords of the Southern Plains onto the reservations.

The Lakota and Northern Cheyenne, in sharp contrast to Sheridan, took lessons from Red Cloud's War. They learned that, when they put factionalism aside and fought as one, they could defeat Anglo-American soldiers. Red Cloud himself might have retired to the reservations after the war, but a generation of Lakota and Cheyenne leaders emerged from the conflict with enhanced reputations that were not confined to their own bands or subdivisions, but were known across the whole of the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne territories. Sitting Bull (more properly, Tatanka-Iyotanka, 'Great Buffalo Bull Who Resides Among Us'), the Hunkpapa Lakota medicine man who served as one of Red Cloud's chief advisors from 1866 to 1868, filled the void in the Lakota political world left by Red Cloud's retirement. American sources from the

¹⁵⁶ Custer, "Report of Lt. Col. G.A. Custer, 7th Cavalry, Bv. Maj. Gen. etc of the Attack on Black Kettle's Camp," 3.

time often describe Sitting Bull as the head chief of the Sioux, a title that, according to most Native American testimony could not possibly have existed (though some rather humorous Lakota accounts do suggest they allowed the whites to *think* Sitting Bull was the ‘head chief’ if only to stop the endless queries about who the leader of all the Lakota was).¹⁵⁷ The truth was Sitting Bull did not need to hold an official position any more than Red Cloud had. Respected by all the Lakota subtribes and their Cheyenne allies, Sitting Bull was the man around whom further resistance to the invaders coalesced, with a general consensus that he should be the face of the coalition emerging among the leaders who were opposed to the American settlers and the Army. Through the 1870s, Sitting Bull’s following grew immensely, as lodges of not only Hunkpapa, but of Oglala, Brulé, Miniconjou, Sans Arc, Black Feet, and Two Kettles Lakota, and even some Northern Cheyenne attached themselves to his band. During wartime, the number of lodges gathered around him expanded even more, as his allies brought their own followers to his camp.

Those allies are worth considering now, for Sitting Bull, as a middle-aged medicine man who walked with a pronounced limp, had left his days as a war-leader behind him. While he served as the coalition’s primary orator and diplomat, the actual fighting of the Great Sioux War was done by younger men, many of whom first came to prominence during Red Cloud’s War. The most famous of these Lakota and Northern Cheyenne war-leaders was undoubtedly Crazy Horse, who while little known to the Americans at this juncture, had a standout reputation amongst the Lakota as the bravest of the brave. Distantly related to Red Cloud, Crazy Horse led the decoys at the Fetterman Massacre, and, at the Wagon Box Fight, witnessed firsthand how American fortifications and concentrated weapons’ fire could repel large numbers of Indigenous

¹⁵⁷ Utley offers a summary of the machinations that led to Sitting Bull being ‘declared’ head chief in his biography of the Hunkpapa leader, though he takes Sitting Bull’s precedence more seriously than many of his sources seem to. A quote from Wooden Leg on page 89, accurately summarizes the real situation.

cavalrymen. Widely regarded as a bit of an eccentric—his Oglala bandmates affectionately referred to him as “Our Strange Man”—Crazy Horse eschewed the physical trappings of status, disdainful of warbonnets and elaborate body paint, and instead riding into battle with a single feather in his hair and a coating of dust over himself and his horse. A vision told Crazy Horse that, so long as he followed the Great Spirit’s directives to refrain from vanity, he would always be victorious in war, and the thirty-five-year-old warrior’s reputation bore out his embrace of this vision and its accompanying rituals. Expelled from the Shirt-Wearers for his theft of fellow warrior No Water’s wife, and never made a chief, Crazy Horse nevertheless amassed a major following among the younger Lakota warriors and their Northern Cheyenne allies. Much of this admiration stemmed from his personal bravery—he once rode his horse off a cliff to escape an enemy patrol—and his individual prowess in combat—he counted more coups than any other living Lakota warrior—but some of it was also attributable to his personality, and indeed, his intellect. A quiet man who rarely spoke unless it was necessary, Crazy Horse was possessed of a keen mind and he saw better than perhaps any other Lakota leader that the threat posed by the American Army and the settlers it guarded, would require a complex military response.¹⁵⁸

A cultural and religious traditionalist, Crazy Horse was a military innovator, a distinction that past historians like Stephen Ambrose and Robert Utley have—even while paying tribute to his abilities—struggled to make. The portrait of Native American warfare as an essentially changeless institution does not easily survive contact with Crazy Horse’s actual career, during which he consistently undertook military actions Lakota were not supposed to be capable of. He Dog recalled wryly that his friend was one of the few Lakota leaders to prize accuracy over mobility, leading Crazy Horse to fire his rifle dismounted to aim more precisely and waste less

¹⁵⁸ See Ambrose’s *Crazy Horse and Custer* for the classic Anglo-American view of Crazy Horse. See *The Journey of Crazy Horse* for a view more strongly rooted in Lakota oral tradition.

ammunition.¹⁵⁹ Favouring a repeating rifle for long-range fighting and a classic Lakota warclub for close-up work, Crazy Horse combined traditional Lakota warfare with Anglo-American novelties in both his person, and his tactics. The Fetterman Fight, where the Lakota forwent their usual reluctance to exterminate an enemy force, seems to have left its mark on Crazy Horse, for at the Battles of the Rosebud, the Little Bighorn, and Slim Buttes he enacted variations of his and Red Cloud's Fetterman strategy, dividing enemy commands from one another before attempting to encircle and destroy them. We know little about what, if any, internal debates on strategy and tactics were held within the hostile coalition, but a simple examination of how he fought singles out Crazy Horse as the Lakota's leading proponent of the battle of annihilation—a form of warfare that, according to American military thinking of the day, was entirely beyond Lakota or Cheyenne capabilities. How Crazy Horse's approach to warfare worked out in practise and the assistance he required from men like the Northern Cheyenne chief, Two Moons, and the Hunkpapa Lakota war-chiefs Gall and Crow King, will be relayed below, but for now the key thing to understand is that as Sheridan was laying the groundwork for the Great Sioux War, he had no conception that anyone on the other side was thinking in those terms at all.

The Army recognized Sitting Bull as the leading hostile, but it failed to appreciate the extent of his influence and the number of his friends and allies. They knew the name "Crazy Horse," but nothing about the man himself or the military techniques that he and other veterans of Red Cloud's War were liable to utilise. Sheridan's estimates of Lakota numbers never exceeded a few hundred, and his strategy was constructed on assuming the Native American forces would flee rather than fight. Army records show that, following the military's violation of the Black Hills treaty zone, skirmishes between Anglo-American and Native American forces

¹⁵⁹ Quoted in Ambrose, *Crazy Horse and Custer*, 134.

increased rather than falling in number, yet Sheridan remained committed to his preconceptions. There is no evidence Sheridan ever examined Red Cloud's War, or even spoke to its veterans in any kind of detail. Red Cloud recruited 2000 warriors to attack the Bozeman Trail forts, yet Sheridan assumed Sitting Bull had only a few hundred men. Red Cloud kept his force on the offensive for two years, yet Sheridan expected his enemies to flee at the sight of the bluecoats. Red Cloud and Crazy Horse ambushed Fetterman and defeated him in detail, yet Sheridan anticipated that Native American leadership could not take offensive action against his columns, let alone engage them in a battle of annihilation—despite Red Cloud's protégé, Crazy Horse, being one of the key players in Sitting Bull's camp. How could Sheridan, one of the Civil War's most successful generals, know so little about the people he was about to fight?

The answer that emerges is that he did not know much about them because he did not *want* to know much about them. Sheridan was drafting plans for a rerun of his Washita Campaign on the assumption that the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne were just like the Yakima, the Apache, and the pacifist elements of the Southern Cheyenne, and was not looking for information that contradicted that premise. His disdain worked its way down the ranks and affected most of the other officers in his employ—a primary example of this was John Bourke, George Crook's aide de campe, who was normally highly sympathetic to Native Americans, yet wrote about Sitting Bull and the Lakota in starkly racist terms. Bourke was an ethnographer by nature, and wrote extensively on Apache customs, yet took little interest in the Lakota or Cheyenne whom he regarded as barbarians, an attitude that appears in his journals and memoirs when the Great Sioux War begins and vanishes just as abruptly when it ends.¹⁶⁰ Sheridan made a tautology, wherein the Lakota and Cheyenne could not defeat the Army because they were

¹⁶⁰ Bourke, *The Diaries of John Gregory Bourke* Vol. 1, 224.

cowards and the Army had to avenge its defeat by the Lakota and Cheyenne in Red Cloud's War, because the Lakota and Cheyenne were cowards. Sheridan was not searching for a way to break that tautology, and most of the men under him dutifully followed along with his thinking, whatever private doubts that some might have had. When hostilities commenced in 1876, the American Army knew nothing about its enemies, and knew that nothing entirely by choice.

*

Where Sheridan was warring against an old enemy of the American Army, Sir Bartle Frere, Lord Chelmsford, and Sir Theophilus Shepstone were hellbent on embroiling the British Empire in a conflict with its oldest friends in South Africa. British adventurers first made contact with the Zulu Kingdom, then under the rule of its founder, Shaka kaSenzangkhona (better remembered to history as simply Shaka Zulu) in the early 1800s, and established a friendly trading relationship between the new Natal Colony and Shaka's growing empire. This friendship was briefly ruptured in the 1830s, when the settlers at Natal unwisely joined the Boer Republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State in their war against Shaka's brother, King Dingane, a move which earned the British nothing and saw Natal sacked by the Zulu monarch's warriors. From thereon out, peaceful coexistence between Natal and Zululand became the order of things, and to the day that Shepstone annexed the Transvaal, the official policy of Britain's High Commissioners in South Africa was always to use the Zulu as a counterweight to the Boers, exploiting the enmity between the Dutch expatriates and the African empire as a means towards bloodlessly expanding British influence. When Shepstone took over the Transvaal, British military policy in South Africa, previously aimed at containing Boer expansionism, was left somewhat adrift—at least until Shepstone persuaded Sir Bartle Frere and Lord Chelmsford to

adopt the Boers' old grudges against the Zulu as their own, and begin preparations for war against an enemy the British Army in South Africa never expected to fight.

Neither Lord Chelmsford nor any of his subordinate officers had any experience of battling the Zulu. The Volunteer units recruited from the Cape Colony and Natal were likewise inexperienced in Zulu warfare; those officers who had seen action previously had either fought against traditional local enemies like the Boers and the Xhosa, or seen service overseas against Britain's foes in India and Oceania. This does not, however, mean information on the Zulu military was difficult to come by. Chelmsford might not have had access to any British sources on the Zulu, but the Boers and the black Africans of the Natal had fought the Zulu many times, and could provide Chelmsford with valuable data on the enemy he had chosen, had he asked.

Zululand, as it was commonly known, was founded in the 1810s by Shaka, the son of a regional chief named Senzangkhona. Through a series of coups d'état and military conquests, Shaka united first his father and mother's tribes and then almost all the other local powers into a single imperial state encompassing a population of several hundred thousand people. In doing so, he radically altered the ethnic makeup of South Africa, with refugees from his campaigns fleeing south into what would become Natal, east into Portuguese Mozambique, and as far north as Kenya, Tanzania, and the Congo. Early monographs on the Zulu state (with Donald Morris' *The Washing of the Spears* being a particularly well-known example) tend to paint this as an extraordinarily violent and bloody process, with a body count in the tens of thousands or higher. More recent historians have been more restrained, with Ian Knight especially suggesting that early white settlers deliberately blackened Shaka's name, painting him as a tyrant to justify their participation in various court intrigues against him.¹⁶¹ The extent to which Shaka's reforms were

¹⁶¹ Knight, *Zulu Rising*, 49.

specific to Zululand has also generated a lively debate; older material tends to portray him as a unique innovator, while more recent writings have suggested he was a part of a wider trend towards military revolution that took in much of South and Central Africa. What is not in dispute, however, is the efficacy with which Shaka deployed these alterations in warfare in the construction of his new Zulu Empire.

Shaka's half-brother Dingane overthrew and murdered him in 1824, but the systems put in place during Shaka's era survived him and were adopted by his brothers, Dingane and Mpande kaSenzangkhona, and by his nephew, Cetshwayo kaMpande. Prior to the nineteenth century, or so the stories go, warfare in South Africa was a comparatively harmless affair in which the participants lined up, exchanged javelins, and occasionally participated in heroic single combats. Shaka, the oral traditions of the region claim, changed all that, replacing the light throwing spears or javelins that were the primary weapons of the local warriors, with a short, broad-bladed stabbing spear the British dubbed an *assegai* and that the Zulu themselves called an *iklwa*, an onomatopoeic rendering of the sound it supposedly made when pulled out of an enemy's body. Lighter javelins became secondary weapons, hurled at the enemy line as the Zulu warriors charged in, with the bulk of the killing being done at close quarters with the *iklwa*, or with the *iwisa*, a heavy club (usually called a 'knobkerrie' in British accounts) carved from a single piece of wood and used in precisely the manner one expected: as a bludgeon with which to beat out an adversary's brains. Both the *iwisa* and the *iklwa* were made to high standards of craftsmanship and neither was the product of a Stone Age society. The blades of the *iklwa* were made of steel, forged by smiths at armories across Zululand, while the ball head of the *iwisa* was frequently set with metal studs or hollowed out and filled with molten metal. In addition to his spear or club

and his supply of javelins, each Zulu warrior was also outfitted with a cowhide shield as tall as he was bearing the markings of the regiment to which he belonged.¹⁶²

These 'regiments' or 'impis' (as the British sources sometimes called them) proved to be the most important of the nineteenth century reforms. Before Zulu hegemony was imposed over their corner of South Africa, it was common practise for local chiefs and headmen to organise their young men into loose units based on their date of birth. These units of youths, known as *amabutho* (singular: *ibutho*) could be called up by the chiefs when they needed assistance with the harvest or constructing new homesteads, and also acted as the *de facto* militia. Shaka formalised this system, assigning an official name to each *ibutho* and reserving the right to call them up for himself. While on active duty, the *ibutho* regiments were quartered at Shaka's royal homesteads which acted not only as residences for the king, but as barracks or *amakhanda* (singular: *ikhanda*) for the young warriors in his service. This not only gave Shaka a far larger and more impressive army than was possessed by his local rivals, but also granted him much greater control over Zululand's labour pool than had been held by any hegemon before him.¹⁶³

Unwilling to let that kind of power slip away from him easily, Shaka kept the regiments on duty much longer than was traditional. Previously, young men left the service of their chiefs when they were married and could establish homesteads of their own. Shaka, accordingly, dictated that none of his warriors were to marry without his permission. Organising Zululand's unmarried girls into *amabutho* of their own, Shaka typically waited until the men in one of his regiments had reached their thirties, then selected a female *ibutho* containing girls in their twenties and allowed the warriors to select their wives from amongst it. In yet a further alteration to the original system, however, Shaka did not disband a regiment once its men had married and

¹⁶² Knight, *Anatomy of the Zulu Army*, 100-113.

¹⁶³ Knight, *Anatomy of the Zulu Army*, 32-35.

left to found their own homesteads: instead, these senior regiments of married men formed Zululand's military reserves; they were not called upon to perform manual labour or police work, as was often the case for the younger *amabutho*, but could still be mustered for the defense of the kingdom in times of crisis. Competition for honours among contemporary *amabutho* was often fierce, the rivalries between the married and unmarried regiments even more so, and during the Anglo-Zulu War, it would, contrary to some expectations, be the units of senior men who served as the Zulu monarchy's shock troops, regularly incurring frightening casualties in their drive to show up the younger generation.¹⁶⁴

Shaka's army quickly became the most effective and disciplined indigenous military in his corner of South Africa. His regiments all had unique dress uniforms and were sufficiently drilled to fight in formation, something the Xhosa, the Swazi, and the other local powers of South Africa did not usually do. The favourite formation of the Zulu, supposedly invented by Shaka himself, was a pincer movement known as the 'Horns of the Buffalo,' in which the two wings, or horns, of the Zulu force tried to envelop the enemy from the flanks and the rear while the Zulu centre (sometimes called the 'chest,' other times dubbed the 'boss' after the central join of a buffalo's horns) held the foe in place or pressed home a charge. Additional units, referred to as the 'loins' might be deployed in the rear of the boss as a tactical reserve, and it was reported Shaka often had them sit with their eyes facing away from the battle so that they would not become too excited or worn out before entering combat.¹⁶⁵ Victorious over most of their black African adversaries, the Zulu military was supreme in eastern South Africa until the 1830s, when

¹⁶⁴ Knight, *Anatomy of the Zulu Army*, 32-35.

¹⁶⁵ "Precis of Information Concerning the Zulu Country," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 1, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 447.

a flood of Boer trekkers migrated from the Cape Colony, recently annexed by England, into the South African interior.

The conflicts between the first Boer settlers and King Dingane of Zululand entered into local tradition as myth. Most Boer accounts eulogise the heroism of their ancestors in fending off Dingane's endless Zulu hordes and record it as a victory for the white man over the treacherous and savage Dingane. Zulu oral tradition, conversely, recalls the conflict as a victory for the Zulu, with the Boers being forced out of Zululand and into the territory of Dingane's enemies further into the interior of South Africa, where they eventually founded the Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State. A glance at the skirmishes, for there were few large-scale battles in this conflict, shows the Boer-Zulu Wars were closer to a draw than anything else. The Boer habit of forming their caravans into wagon circles or 'laagers' often confounded the Zulu who were unused to siege warfare and did not have a ready-made plan for how to assault a mobile fortress. In the open veldt however, Boer commandoes, even mounted on horseback, made easy prey for Dingane's warriors, most of whom were veterans of decades of campaigns and were led by experienced generals like Ndlela kaSompisi, Dingane's right-hand man.

It was against the Boers that the Zulu first faced white men armed with guns, and when the Zulu attempted to force their way through a Boer laager, as they did at the infamous Battle of Blood River, they were driven off by concentrated musketry. Ndlela, recognising this problem, countered through traps, suborning the Boers' black scouts and using Dingane's cattle herds as bait to lure would-be Boer rustlers out of their laagers and into ambushes. It was in one of these ambushes that Zulu forces slew Boer leader Piet Uys and destroyed his men; in another ambush, sometime after Blood River, the Zulu wiped out a unit of Port Natal settlers who came to aid the Boers. In his chapter on Ndlela in *Great Zulu Commanders*, Ian Knight identifies the elements of

a classic Zulu ambush as practised by Ndlela: “talkative scouts, difficult ground, and a vulnerable herd of cattle.”¹⁶⁶ These tactics, used by Ndlela against the Boers and their few English allies, were used by Zulu commanders against the British during the Anglo-Zulu War with similar results.

The Boer-Zulu Wars came to an end not with victory by either side, but when a revolt by King Dingane’s brother, Mpande, threw Zululand into a civil war. Mpande, who briefly took refuge with the Boers when he was in disfavour with his brother, ended the conflict with the trekkers, and over the course of his thirty-year reign Zululand was largely at peace with the Boers, the British, and their black African neighbours. Having ceded significant power to local chiefs to win their support against Dingane, Mpande spent most of his rule rebuilding the power of the royal house in hopes of passing on a united Zululand to his son and heir, Cetshwayo, and in this he was largely successful. While Cetshwayo and one of his brothers fought a civil war, it took place during Mpande’s reign and was limited to the personal retinues of the two princes, with the bloody defeat of the pretender firmly establishing Cetshwayo as Crown Prince of Zululand. During the last years of Mpande’s kingship, the elderly monarch began transferring power to Cetshwayo who ruled alongside him as a junior king. When Mpande died in his bed—the only son of Senzangkhona to do so—Cetshwayo was the logical choice to succeed him.¹⁶⁷

The Zululand Cetshwayo ruled was different in a few ways from the Zululand of Shaka and Dingane’s day. Neither he nor his father held the full autocratic power enjoyed by Shaka or Dingane. The civil war between Dingane and Mpande undid the idea that any one man could rule Zululand unchallenged; the subordinate Zulu chiefs knew they had the power to play kingmaker and were not about to give that up. Being practical men, neither Mpande nor Cetshwayo forced

¹⁶⁶ Knight, *Great Zulu Commanders*, 37.

¹⁶⁷ Colenso, *The History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 8.

the issue. Instead, they welcomed the greatest of the chiefs into their inner circle, making them members of the royal council that advised the monarch on all important matters of state and granting them military commands in times of war. Oaths of personal fealty were sworn between the great chiefs and the king, and between lesser chieftains and the great chiefs who outranked them. Local rulers regained a great deal of their autonomy, including the authority to call up some of the *amabutho*, though they were expected to do so only at the king's request or if their own territory was invaded. What emerged in Zululand was, in many respects, a feudal society in which various homesteads owed their loyalty to a chief, that chief owed his loyalty to a great chief, and the great chiefs, finally, owed their loyalty to the king. Some British observers, recognising similarities between this system and the one that dominated Europe's Middle Ages, referred to the greatest of the Zulu chiefs as the "Zulu barons" which was about as accurate a term as any ever used by a colonial power to understand its Indigenous neighbours.¹⁶⁸

Cetshwayo's army was similar, but not identical to the one Shaka bequeathed to Dingane. It totalled perhaps 40 000 men, of whom 20 000 to 25 000 could be mobilised at any given time without having an undue negative impact on Zululand's economy. Size wise, this made the Zulu army's manpower comparable to that of some contemporary European states, and significantly greater than that of the medieval European states to which its organisation and equipment might best be compared. Its men were still organised into *amabutho* regiments and still had unique dress uniforms they wore when appearing before the king. They were still armed primarily with the *iklwa* spear and *iwisa* club, though many Zulu warriors had chosen to replace their javelins with guns. Shaka and Dingane did not have a high opinion of firearms, but Mpande and Cetshwayo did, and thousands of guns were imported into Zululand from Natal, the Transvaal,

¹⁶⁸ Knight, *Anatomy of the Zulu Army*, 37-41.

and Portuguese Mozambique, while royal armourers at the *amakhanda* barracks added the manufacture of ammunition and black powder to their skill sets. The Zulu army that faced the British at Isandlwana contained more than 6000 firearms of various makes and manufactures, and if the Zulu were not always the most accurate of shots (a difficulty which has often been reported to stem from their imperfect understanding of the sightings on their weapons), they made for enthusiastic ones, and the air on both sides of the Anglo-Zulu War's battlefields was filled with black powder smoke. Shields were still carried by Zulu warriors, though some of these had shrunk in size from Shaka's day, large enough to still turn aside a sword, spear, or bayonet thrust, but small enough to avoid hindering the warriors when evading enemy gunfire.¹⁶⁹

The most valuable resource available to Cetshwayo, however, was his generals. While the Zulu King was himself a most able warrior (his triumph over his brother during their brief civil war being incredibly one-sided), he did not take the field during the Anglo-Zulu War as his presence was needed on the throne to determine overall strategy and provide the Zulu army with the mystical aid required to triumph over his enemies. Whether Cetshwayo resented these limitations on his participation in the field is unknown; the Zulu King and his advisors were rarely asked about their strategies or personal feelings once the war was over. There was nothing unusual about his remaining on the throne; since Shaka's death that had become the rule rather than the exception for Zulu Kings, and both Dingane and Mpande made war through their subordinates rather than on their own. Just as Dingane had Ndlela to conduct his campaigns for him, Cetshwayo too had a very capable body of surrogates to draw from, of whom the two most important were Chief Ntshingwayo kaMahole, and Prince Mbilini waMswati.

¹⁶⁹ Knight, *Anatomy of the Zulu Army*, 41-42, 100-101, 168-169.

Ntshingwayo's early career is something of a blank, but it has been posited by Ian Knight that he first saw service under Ndlela during the Boer-Zulu conflict and may even have been a protégé of that famous Zulu general. Surviving the transition between Dingane and Mpande's regimes, Ntshingwayo, who was one of the greatest of the Zulu barons, became close friends with Mpande and a mentor to his son, Cetshwayo. When Mpande passed away in 1872, Cetshwayo confirmed Ntshingwayo's old position as a senior member of the royal council and made the older man, now pushing seventy, his chief military advisor. Ntshingwayo gave his monarch little cause to regret this decision. He defeated the British at Isandlwana and Hlobane and ran them close at Khambula and Ulundi, proving himself one of the greatest Indigenous African generals of the nineteenth century. A traditionally minded Zulu general, Ntshingwayo nevertheless made it clear that, like Ndlela, he understood the danger posed by European firearms, and in all of his battles he did what he could to minimise their threat to his men.¹⁷⁰

Cetshwayo's other chief military surrogate, Prince Mbilini, was not a Zulu. A renegade member of the Swazi royal family, Mbilini fled Swaziland after a coup d'état against his father, the king, failed. Offered protection by Cetshwayo, Mbilini settled his followers along the Zulu/Swazi border, established a close working relationship with Manyanyoba, chief of the half-Swazi abaQulusi Zulu, and made himself infamous for his raids into Swazi and Boer territory. The Boers, especially, came to hate Mbilini, and repeatedly demanded that Cetshwayo hand him over to them for execution, but Cetshwayo always declined saying he had given his word to protect Mbilini and could not go back upon it. He did, however, grant the Boers permission to try to capture Mbilini, which led to one of the Transvaal's greatest military fiascos, in which

¹⁷⁰ See Knight's chapter on Ntshingwayo in *Great Zulu Commanders* for the best extant reconstruction of the Zulu chief's military career.

Mbilini's Swazi guerillas routed a Boer commando that significantly outnumbered them.¹⁷¹

Grateful to Cetshwayo for his support, Mbilini answered the King's call to arms in 1879 with a force of Swazi raiders that became the nemeses of Chelmsford's No. 4 Column under Colonel Evelyn Wood. Having beaten the Boers for years, Mbilini also beat the British at Ntombe Drift and Hlobane. Captain Tommasson, who fought under Wood and against Mbilini, dubbed him a "savage chief of freebooters," but also, "one of the most dashing of all the Zulu generals."¹⁷²

The question then becomes how much of this information did Lord Chelmsford have access to? Surprisingly, the answer is almost all of it. During the leadup to the war Chelmsford commissioned a massive intelligence report on the Zulu Army which drew from British, Boer, and black African sources alike. In an era in which the British Army often struggled with intelligence gathering, the results were well above the normal standard and could have told Lord Chelmsford a great deal. The report placed the effective strength of the Zulu Army at 40 400 fighting men, with 22 500 between the ages of twenty and thirty, 10 000 between thirty and forty, 3400 between forty and fifty, and 4500 between fifty and sixty.¹⁷³ It acknowledged the existence of the Zulu officer corps, noting that each regiment had a senior staff comprising a commanding officer, his second-in-command, and the commanders of the left and right wings, and that each company of fifty men was officered by a captain and between one and three junior officers.¹⁷⁴ The intelligence officers who compiled the report even looked into Zulu drill, noting that "in the ordinary acceptance of the word, drill is unknown in the Zulu army. They, however, perform a few simple movements with some method, such as forming a circle of companies or regiments, breaking into companies or regiments from the circle, forming a line of march in

¹⁷¹ Colenso, *The History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 203-204.

¹⁷² Knight, *Great Zulu Commanders*, 118.

¹⁷³ "Precis of Information Concerning the Zulu Country," 443.

¹⁷⁴ "Precis of Information Concerning the Zulu Country," 443.

order of companies, or in close order of regiments. The officers, however, have their duties and responsibilities according to their rank, and discipline is most rigidly enforced.”¹⁷⁵ Referencing the opinion of naval officer Commodore Sullivan, the report concluded this section by adding that, “He states that the regiments are so well disciplined that the men never fall out of the ranks on the march under any pretext; they march at the double, and are said to keep up from 50 to 60 miles daily, carrying their own provisions.”¹⁷⁶

The report included a list of Zulu regiments, identified (at times accurately) by name and accompanied by estimates of their strength and the average age of the men in each unit.¹⁷⁷ The report also went into considerable detail on Zulu tactics and strategy, correctly identifying the ‘Horns of the Buffalo’ formation as their principle mode of attack and noting the role of the ‘boss’ as both a decoy and to deliver the final hammer blow once the horns pinned an enemy in place.¹⁷⁸ Drawing on testimonials from the Boers, the report also made note of the usual Zulu ambush tactics, describing how they would “hide a large force in the bush and then show a few solitary individuals to invite an attack. When the troops enter the bush in pursuit of the latter the hidden men rise and attack them,” or how, when targeting cavalry, they used cattle to lure the horsemen into advancing too far ahead of the main army where they could be cut off and eliminated by the Zulu infantry.¹⁷⁹ In light of what happened during the Anglo-Zulu War, one has to wonder whether any of the British officers, including Chelmsford himself, read the report.

The report praised the discipline of the Zulu, yet Lord Chelmsford believed they would flee at the first sight of Martini-Henry fire. The report stated the Zulu preferred to meet their

¹⁷⁵ “Precis of Information Concerning the Zulu Country,” 443.

¹⁷⁶ “Precis of Information Concerning the Zulu Country,” 443.

¹⁷⁷ “Precis of Information Concerning the Zulu Country,” 448-451.

¹⁷⁸ “Precis of Information Concerning the Zulu Country,” 447.

¹⁷⁹ “Precis of Information Concerning the Zulu Country,” 453-454.

enemies in open combat, yet Chelmsford planned a bush war in the vein of his Xhosa campaign. The report described all the warning signs of a Zulu ambush, yet British officers repeatedly blundered into those same ambushes, with Sir Evelyn Wood and Sir Redvers Buller's attempted cattle raid on Hlobane mountain a particularly obvious and tragic example. The report, in its totality, described the Zulu Army as a formidable, well-led, and highly regimented force, equivalent to most medieval or early modern armies, yet Chelmsford conducted his campaign as if he were facing 'primitive' bushmen. There may be no greater example of the damage colonial reasoning and bigotry wrought on Chelmsford's planning than the short-sightedness that caused the Lieutenant-General to ignore his own intelligence report. Chelmsford and his officers were told what the Zulu military was capable of. He chose not to believe it and his men paid for it.

*

Phil Sheridan went into the Great Sioux War almost entirely blind to his enemy's capabilities. Lord Chelmsford entered the Anglo-Zulu War the same way. Neither man had to. The American Army boasted many veterans of battles against the Lakota and Cheyenne and Sheridan could have taken advice from any one of them about how to conduct his campaign. He chose not to do so. Lord Chelmsford *did* interview veterans of fighting against the Zulu and constructed an admirable report on the strength of the Zulu Army, but then decided the report did not meet his preconceived ideas about how Africans fought, and tossed the report aside, basing his plans on his own personal experience against the Xhosa, and not the information his intelligence chiefs worked so hard to gather for him.

Sheridan and Chelmsford both fell into the trap of prioritising their own experiences—and the ways prejudice coloured their memories of those experiences—over the hard facts in front of them. A cursory examination of Red Cloud's War would have told Sheridan these were

not the Yakima or the Apache he was preparing to fight and that he needed a different strategy to handle them. An even briefer reading of his own intelligence report would have told Lord Chelmsford the Zulu would not fight the way the Xhosa had and that his scheme for the campaign was fatally flawed. Neither man, however, could break free of the colonial worldview they subscribed to; when the data they received did not fit the narrative they had already constructed for themselves, it was the data, rather than the narrative, that was dismissed.

This would be a dangerous mistake against any enemy, but it was especially so against the Lakota-Cheyenne coalition and the Zulu Army. Both indigenous polities had long warrior traditions and significant reserves of manpower to draw upon. Both were led by capable generals, who were easily the intellectual matches of their Anglo-American counterparts. Both had access to at least some firearms and possessed the political will to confront the colonial invaders head on, and neither was overly familiar with defeat. The Lakota and Northern Cheyenne bested the Crows, the Arikara, the Shoshone, the Pawnee, and all the other tribes that contested with them for control of the northern plains. The Zulu built an empire encompassing a sizeable portion of modern South Africa, defeating or subjugating all the other Bantu speaking peoples and penning the Swazi up in the mountains. They also won their share of victories over the white men: the Lakota and Cheyenne beating the Americans during Red Cloud's War, while the Zulu resisted the Boer incursions and burned Port Natal in their one clash with the British settlers. The Lakota and Cheyenne and Zululand were ready for war, and neither was a foe to underestimate. Yet in their colonial hubris that was exactly what Sheridan and Chelmsford did.

Chapter 3: Warning Signs

If there was a key flaw that bedeviled Phil Sheridan and Lord Chelmsford's campaigns, it was an inability to improvise. Sheridan and Chelmsford, as detailed over the last two chapters, based their assumptions about the capabilities of their Indigenous enemies not on military intelligence, but on preconceived, racialized notions about how "primitives" fought. Terrified their targets would scatter rather than face white men in direct combat, Sheridan and Chelmsford divided their forces into small columns, spread out across the Great Plains and the South African veldt, intent on preventing the Lakota and Cheyenne or Zulu from escaping their nets. Having disregarded what tangible evidence they had on their foes, the two generals had no doubts about the willingness of the Native American and African militaries they faced to play along. Sheridan and Chelmsford were sure they knew what their adversaries would do, and, in fact, that there was nothing else they *could* do. The Natives would flee from the white armies, to find themselves entrapped between converging columns with nowhere to run. It was, according to the colonial reasoning that governed both officers' thinking, the perfect strategy.

When the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Zulu refused to do what they were expected to do, Sheridan and Chelmsford were caught flatfooted, unable to change their plans of campaign to match newly revealed realities. This ossification was the product of not only bigotry, but of the very plans that had been outed as unworkable. Strung out over vast areas of space, Sheridan's Departmental Commanders and Chelmsford's column leaders were severely limited in their capacity to communicate with one another or their superiors. The integrity of the operations was at the mercy of the honesty of individual field commanders who often disguised reversals as triumphs. Even when officers were honest with their bosses, delays in communications meant crucial data might not be disseminated until it was far too late.

In the United States, George Crook's March campaign against the Lakota was a miserable waste of time and resources whose only results were a court-martial and the hardening of Lakota and Cheyenne resolve. Crook obscured these facts by claiming to have attacked and defeated Crazy Horse himself, an untruth that was accepted by Sheridan and the rest of the army higher-ups at face value. Several months later, Crook encountered the real Crazy Horse at the battle of the Rosebud and endured the first strategic defeat of the war, the Lakota war-leader halting Crook's army dead in its tracks. Crook swore in his after-action report that he won the Battle of the Rosebud, misconstruing the facts of the matter to safeguard his own career. Even had Crook been more forthcoming about events, his report did not reach Sheridan until a week later, by which point Custer and the 7th Cavalry were already on their way to the Little Bighorn.

In South Africa, Lord Chelmsford won a small skirmish at the homestead of Chief Sihayo and relished in the glory this accomplishment brought him, ignoring what the incident might have told him about Zulu intentions or competency. A week later, and only hours before Durnford found himself defending Isandlwana, Colonel Charles Pearson of the Coastal Column faced Zulu Chief Godide at Nyezane River, and found out for certain just how hard the Zulu were prepared to fight. By the time Chelmsford read Pearson's report, the Battle of Isandlwana was long over, and Durnford and most of the 1/24th Infantry were dead. Had Chelmsford kept Pearson closer to him, the colonel's despatch might have arrived in time for the general to make some use of it; as things stood, Chelmsford believed he would never need to be in close contact with Pearson—or Durnford for that matter—and information arrived too late to be of use.

These circumstances were the result, directly and indirectly, of Sheridan and Chelmsford's assumptions about Native American and African armies. Since the enemy would not fight, he would need to be run down. Since the enemy would need to be run down, the

American and British armies would have to operate in separate columns. Since the American and British armies would have to operate in separate columns, communications between those columns would be impaired. It could have been an acceptable risk, had the Lakota and Cheyenne and Zulu not been entirely willing to fight. The battle readiness of Native American and African forces cut the legs out from under Sheridan and Chelmsford's plans but the generals, sure in their prejudices and deprived of critical data, did not see this. Their blindness, stemming from both ingrained preconceptions and battle plans that prevented the dissemination of information, had disastrous results for their subordinates in the weeks that came after.

*

Phil Sheridan's one contribution to the annals of frontier warfare was the winter campaign. The 1868 Washita campaign was Sheridan's first foray into "Indian" fighting as a general officer, and in his mind, was a tremendous success. That Black Kettle's band was friendly to the United States, and that Sheridan and Custer attacked him by mistake was beside the point, and something Sheridan immediately went into denial about. In his reports and memoirs both, Sheridan ascribed the "victory" at the Washita to his own innovation of striking at the Southern Cheyenne during the winter when the snow immobilised them and food was scarce enough to prevent them recovering from the destruction of their supplies. There was a logic to Sheridan's thinking, though he seemed unaware of the fact his chosen arm for the job, the US Cavalry, would be every bit as impeded by the snow as their enemies.

Sheridan's outline for the 1876 campaign was a virtual repeat of his 1868 campaign: converging columns, led by his Departmental Commanders and their immediate subordinates would set out into the winter to find and eliminate the camps of the hostile Lakota and Northern Cheyenne. It was the commanding general's intention that George Crook in the Department of

the Platte, and Alfred Terry in the Department of the Dakotas, lead these columns themselves, and that by moving in tandem with one another, finish the Lakota and Cheyenne by spring. Unlike in 1868, Sheridan himself would not take the field; having gotten his war, the Commanding General of the Division of the Missouri remained in Chicago, to oversee the war effort, preparations for the centennial and the 1876 election. Crook and Terry would keep in touch with each other, and with Sheridan, through despatches and telegrams. How Sheridan anticipated this system would be enough to help Crook and Terry coordinate their movements in the field is not known; his orders told the generals to cooperate but left little notion as to how that cooperation should be achieved aside from a promise to cable Crook about Terry's movements whenever possible.¹⁸⁰ The Departments of the Platte and the Dakotas were separated by miles of rough, snowbound country, making communication between Crook and Terry, and between the two generals and Sheridan, extremely complicated. It may be that Sheridan's experience of the Civil War, in which hundreds of thousands of men were kept moving in tandem with each other by means of telegraph lines and railroads, kept him from seeing that the situation was very different out on the frontier. Telegraph lines were sparse, the railway unfinished, and the territory in question vast and thinly populated. Alternately, Sheridan's disregard for Lakota and Cheyenne military strength may have let him assume that *any* cooperation between Crook and Terry would be enough to overawe the disparate warbands and familial parties he predicted they would encounter. Regardless of his reasoning, Sheridan's plans for the winter campaign saw his Departmental Commanders divided from one another and himself and struggling with communications problems for which there were no easy answers.

¹⁸⁰ Sheridan, "Headquarters Military Division of the Missouri, November 25, 1876," 13.

Crook and Terry's ability to communicate with one another became a moot point when Terry's foray failed to get off the ground. Terry was not nearly as sold as Sheridan on the concept of winter campaigning and found the inclement weather prevented him, and his leading subordinate, John Gibbon, from assembling the resources they needed to succeed. When the snows stopped them from putting together a supply system for the men, Terry cancelled the expedition, refusing to expose his soldiers to conditions he could not adequately prepare them for. Just the act of assembling soldiers for the expedition led to multiple cases of severe frostbite, and for Terry that was enough evidence that a full scale march into the winter would produce numerous casualties to little result.¹⁸¹ With Terry and Gibbon out of the picture, Sheridan's call for converging columns could not be answered, yet George Crook was not recalled and told to cancel his own expedition. Instead, Sheridan decided any winter attack was better than none, and expected Crook to find the Lakota and Cheyenne on his own.

George Crook was deeply involved in Sheridan's planning of the Great Sioux War, and had a reputation, unequalled in the army at the time, as an expert in Indigenous warfare. During his sojourn in the Department of Arizona, Crook spent months, and even years at a time in the field, leading small units of soldiers in tracking renegade Apache bands. Crook was used to long, physically punishing pursuits of Indigenous quarry, and the fighting in Arizona conditioned him to view bad weather, inhospitable climates, and broken terrain as obstacles to be overcome. Crook fully agreed with Sheridan's strategic concept and, based on his time hunting the Apache, helped his academy friend fine-tune it—a decision that, given the differences between the Department of the Platte and the Department of Arizona, should have been more open to question than it was. In his diary, Crook's aide de camp, biographer, and veritable alter-ego, John

¹⁸¹ Sheridan, "Headquarters Military Division of the Missouri, November 25, 1876," 16.

Gregory Bourke, observed that in the Platte Crook was lacking the things that made him so successful in Arizona: namely, familiarity with the territory and compliant Indigenous guides.¹⁸² During the war for Apacheria, Crook enlisted scouts from one Apache band to help him track down the members of another, a policy he and Bourke both believed instrumental in pacifying Arizona.¹⁸³ The Lakota and Northern Cheyenne were not nearly as divided as the Apache, however, and Crook had no luck recruiting scouts from their reservations. Bourke was still optimistic though, reminding himself that Crook was the master of “Indian” warfare.¹⁸⁴ That there might be more than one kind of “Indian” warfare, was not a thought that seems to have crossed Bourke’s mind. It did not appear to cross Crook’s mind either, or the mind of Philip H. Sheridan.

In justice to Crook he was not entirely unfamiliar with the rigours of winter warfare. In 1866 and 1867, while still a lieutenant-colonel, Crook led troops in a string of skirmishes with the Paiutes of northern Nevada and Idaho, where the weather was cold enough that “his pack-trains had been obliged to break their way through snow girth deep, and his whole command had been able to make but thirty-three miles in twelve days.”¹⁸⁵ Winter in Nevada and Idaho was a far cry from winter in Montana and Wyoming though,. Accompanying the Brigadier-General into the snow were five companies of the Second Cavalry, another five companies of the Third Cavalry, two companies of the 4th Infantry, and a train of scouts, packers, and teamsters for a total of eight hundred eighty-three soldiers and civilians. In keeping with Sheridan’s orders and the orthodoxy of the day, it was expected that the cavalry, rather than the infantry, would do the

¹⁸² Bourke, *The Diaries of John Gregory Bourke* Vol. 1, 213.

¹⁸³ Bourke, *The Diaries of John Gregory Bourke* Vol. 1, 213. See *General George Crook: His Autobiography* and Bourke’s *On the Border with Crook* for full outlines of their campaign in Apacheria.

¹⁸⁴ Bourke, *The Diaries of John Gregory Bourke* Vol. 1, 213.

¹⁸⁵ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 253.

fighting when the Lakota and Cheyenne were caught. On the march, Crook gave command of this force to Colonel Joseph J. Reynolds, a former Brevet Major-General of Volunteers and Crook's one-time superior officer in their Civil War days. Reynolds, breveted for gallantry during the Civil War, lost much of his reputation in an 1871 scandal when Colonel Ranald "Bad Hand" Mackenzie accused him of fraudulently awarding army contracts. According to Bourke, Crook wished to give Reynolds the opportunity to redeem himself, and thus placed the colonel in charge of the expedition.¹⁸⁶ Crook himself officially accompanied the column as an observer only and spent most of his time riding alongside the motley array of white and mixed-race scouts he had hired on for the expedition. In his memoirs Bourke spoke highly of these men, whose ranks included such fantastical characters as "Big Bat" Pourrier, "Little Bat" Garnier, and Frank Grouard, a Native Hawaiian who was once captured by the Lakota and spent some years living among them.¹⁸⁷ In theory, these woodsmen knew the Platte river region as well as any of the Lakota and Cheyenne; in practise they all failed Crook at crucial moments in the endeavour.

Crook's column left camp on March 1, 1876, and quickly found itself bogged down in the snow. They first encountered the Lakota in the early hours of March 3, when a war-party stole into their camp and critically wounded one of the civilian herders before making off with some of the cattle. Another brief skirmish with Lakota outriders on March 5 wounded one of Crook's corporals and put the whole command on alert for a half an hour before it was determined the Natives had left the area.¹⁸⁸ Despite Sheridan and Crook's assumptions that the winter would paralyse them, the hostile Lakota were clearly out and about and far more mobile than the soldiers; in the aftermath of both raids, Crook and Reynolds decided against mounting a

¹⁸⁶ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 270.

¹⁸⁷ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 255.

¹⁸⁸ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 256-258.

pursuit, as it could only result in their men getting lost in the snow. On March 7, the column reached the Crazy Woman Fork of the Powder River and Crook, frustrated by the slow pace, decided some changes were in order. According to Bourke, Crook instructed his officers “we should now leave our wagons behind and strike out with the pack-trains; all superfluous baggage must be left in camp; every officer and soldier should be allowed the clothes on his back and no more; for bedding each soldier could carry along one buffalo robe or two blankets; to economize transportation, company officers should mess with their men, and staff officers or those ‘unattached,’ with the pack-trains; officers to have the same amount of bedding as the men; each man could take one piece of shelter tent, and each officer one piece of canvas, or every two officers one tent fly. We were to start out on a trip to last fifteen days unless the enemy should sooner be found, and were to take along half-rations of bacon, hard tack, coffee, and sugar.”¹⁸⁹ The infantry was also cut from the expedition and, under Captain Edwin Coates, detailed to escort the wagons and teamsters back to Fort Reno.

The decision to abandon the wagons sped Crook and Reynold’s advance, but it also led to incredible suffering among the men of the Powder River expedition. Confined to half rations and deprived of shelter and firewood, the soldiers came down with hypothermia and frostbite. Robert Strahorn of the *Rocky Mountain News*, recalled “every few minutes some poor fellow would drop into the snow, ‘just for a minute, you know,’ and when at once shaken up by his more determined comrades, would make all sorts of excuses to be allowed to enter that sleep which, if undisturbed, would know no waking. Officers were everywhere on the alert to keep their men upon their feet, and, thanks to this general watchfulness, no cases of amputation are yet known to be necessary on account of freezing, although nearly all of us are now nursing frostbitten feet,

¹⁸⁹ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 259.

faces, or ears.”¹⁹⁰ Despite the cold, Crook denied the men permission to “enkindle a single fire, however small, on account of the danger of alarming the foe,” which only increased the rate at which the cold injured his men.¹⁹¹ John Bourke’s diaries and memoirs dutifully recorded the falling temperatures endured each day until the night of March 10 when his thermometer froze, the mercury having “passed down into the bulb and congealed into a solid button.”¹⁹² From that point on, the only thing Bourke and the rest of the command knew about the temperature was it was lower than minus thirty-nine degrees Fahrenheit: the temperature at which mercury freezes.

On the same day Bourke’s thermometer froze, Crook and Reynolds’ scouts uncovered the remnants of an Indigenous camp. Frank Grouard, a favourite of both Crook and Bourke, informed them this meant the Lakota were camped on the Powder River. It was at this point that one of the major misconceptions of the Powder River expedition became locked in. During the planning phase of the campaign, Sheridan told Crook he was to go after Crazy Horse while Terry was expected to locate Sitting Bull. Crook, after a week and a half of fruitlessly searching the frozen wilderness for Crazy Horse, now believed it was indeed Crazy Horse whose trail they had found. Bourke and the other members of Crook’s staff likewise believed it was Crazy Horse they were trailing, and Grouard and the other scouts, eager to please Crook, confirmed this belief. The idea it was Crazy Horse, once lodged in the minds of Crook’s officers could not be easily dislodged. Crook, in his after-action reports, told Sheridan it was Crazy Horse they struck at the Powder River, and repeated this claim in newspaper interviews and his aborted autobiography.

¹⁹⁰ Robert Strahorn, “The Battle of Powder River, March 17, 1876,” in *Battles and Skirmishes of the Great Sioux War*, ed. Jerome A. Greene (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993): 7.

¹⁹¹ Strahorn, “The Battle of Powder River,” 7.

¹⁹² Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 263.

Bourke, *The Diaries of John Gregory Bourke* Vol. 1, 235.

Bourke declared in both his private diaries and public memoirs it was Crazy Horse they attacked, and Robert Strahorn of the *Rocky Mountain News* printed it was Crazy Horse in his paper.¹⁹³

Alas, it was not Crazy Horse. Neither he nor Sitting Bull were camped at the Powder River. Neither were Dull Knife, Little Wolf, Lame White Man, Gall, Crow King, or any of the other leading men among the hostile Lakota and Cheyenne. Instead, the camp at the Powder River belonged to a band of neutral Northern Cheyenne under the aging peace chief Old Bear, and their Oglala Lakota allies led by He Dog, a notable Oglala warrior and close friend of Crazy Horse. Old Bear and He Dog hoped to stay out of the war entirely, but, following the army's ultimatum in January, decided their best course of action was to come into the reservations, at least until the violence was over. Slowed by the winter weather, Old Bear and He Dog's people were gradually making their way towards American territory and the Red Cloud and Spotted Tail Reservations, intending to turn themselves in to the army.¹⁹⁴ Unfortunately for Old Bear and He Dog, neither Crook, nor Reynolds, nor any of their scouts, could tell the difference between a hostile war-party and a peaceful band—a recurring problem in the American frontier army, as shown by the Battle of the Washita and the Marias Massacre. Lost in the snow, with Sheridan's campaign plan riding on their success, Crook and Reynolds needed a triumph so they could turn around and go home. So Old Bear and He Dog became Crazy Horse in their minds and in their reports and nothing anyone said would ever dissuade them in that belief.

On March 16, Crook's outriders, under Colonel Stanton, spotted, in Bourke's crude terminology, "two young bucks who had been out hunting for game, and, seeing our column

¹⁹³ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 270.

Bourke, *The Diaries of John Gregory Bourke* Vol. 1, 259.

George Crook, *General George Crook: His Autobiography*, ed. Martin F. Schmitt (Borodino Books, 2017): 239.

Strahorn, "The Battle of Powder River," 10.

¹⁹⁴ "Kate Bighead," in *Lakota & Cheyenne* ed. Jerome A. Greene (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994): 12.

advancing, had stationed themselves upon the summit of a ridge, and were watching our movements.”¹⁹⁵ Crook halted the column, and ordered the men into camp, intending the watching Natives should believe the expedition was not aimed at them. That night, he instructed Reynolds to take six companies of cavalry and, led by Frank Grouard and the other scouts, track the Indigenous observers back to their camp and strike it. Bourke accompanied Reynolds and Grouard as an observer and brought along Strahorn to report on the glorious victory the Army expected to win. Strahorn, who did not know any better, was filled with praise for Grouard’s tracking skills, and wrote rapturously of the “unfailing celerity” with which Grouard uncovered “Crazy Horse’s” trail.¹⁹⁶ Early in the morning of March 17, Grouard returned to the strike force and informed Reynolds he had located the Native encampment, only a few miles from where they were standing. Reynolds immediately divided his command into three units under Captains Moore, Noyes, and Mills, and made ready to win the army their first laurels of the war.

Reynolds’ plan of attack relied on overwhelming Old Bear and He Dog’s camp with strikes from his three ad hoc battalions of cavalry. “Noyes’ battalion,” Bourke remembered, “was to make the first move, Egan’s company, with its revolvers, charging in upon the village, and Noyes’ cutting out and driving off the enemy’s herd of ponies. Mills was to move in rear of Noyes, and, after the village had been charged, move into and take possession of it, occupy the plum thicket surrounding it, and destroy all the ‘tepis’ [sic] and plunder of all kinds. These battalions were to descend into the valley of the Powder through a ravine on our right flank, while Moore, with his two companies was to move to the left and take up a position upon the hills overlooking the village, and receive the flying [sic] Indians with a shower of lead when they started to flee from their lodges, and attempted to get positions in the brakes or bluffs to annoy

¹⁹⁵ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 269.

¹⁹⁶ Strahorn, “The Battle of Powder River,” 5-6.

Egan.”¹⁹⁷ Thanks to their night march, the Lakota and Cheyenne did not yet know of Reynolds’ presence, and it was expected the sudden charge by all three sections would catch the Native warriors completely by surprise. Bourke and Strahorn both accompanied Noyes’ battalion, and rode alongside Egan’s company in the subsequent engagement, providing two eyewitness accounts to a piece of the battle, but obscuring historians’ views of the remainder of the action.

The sudden charge of Egan’s unit certainly caught Old Bear and He Dog by surprise, though given the nonviolent intentions of the two leaders, this becomes less of an accomplishment on the part of the American forces. Wooden Leg, an eighteen-year-old Northern Cheyenne warrior, recounted how the camp dissolved into chaos: “Women screamed. Children cried for their mothers. Old people tottered and hobbled away to get out of reach of the bullets singing around the lodges. Braves seized whatever weapons they had and tried to meet the attack.”¹⁹⁸ Old Bear was unprepared for any sort of altercation, and few of his people were well-armed. Wooden Leg, better prepared than most, grabbed Old Bear’s pony, mounted up, and rode out to meet the whites. He was one of the few who could do so. “A few other Cheyennes,” he said, “did the same as I had done. But most of them remained afoot. I shot arrows at the soldiers. Our people had not much else to shoot. Only a few had guns and also ammunition for them.”¹⁹⁹

Black Eagle, another Northern Cheyenne, was one of those who fought alongside Wooden Leg. Years later, he described the battle to anthropologist George Bird Grinnell. While his wife and father-in-law, Brave Wolf, evacuated the camp, Black Eagle remained behind and fought a rearguard action against Captain Egan’s grey-horsed troopers. “He got behind a tree,” Grinnell wrote of Black Eagle’s experience, “He was shooting and turned the soldiers a little to

¹⁹⁷ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 272.

¹⁹⁸ “Wooden Leg,” in *Lakota & Cheyenne* ed. Jerome A. Greene (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994): 5-6.

¹⁹⁹ “Wooden Leg,” *Lakota & Cheyenne*, 6.

one side and presently four more young men began shooting and turned them still more. He did not leave camp but the soldiers swerved off and fell in line and rode back to the main command. His wife coaxed her father to the rest of the people who had already thrown up breastworks.”²⁰⁰ Bourke, on the other side of that same fight, credited Black Eagle’s small band of warriors with being crack shots: “the Indians did not shoot at our men, they knew a trick worth two of that: they fired deliberately at our horses, with the intention of wounding some of them and rendering the whole line unmanageable.”²⁰¹ Strahorn echoed Bourke’s analysis of Black Eagle’s shooting, saying “the beautiful grey horses were a splendid mark for the Indians, and four or five dropped before we got through the village, Captain Egan’s own animal being among the number. Then, with the desperate foe pouring in bullets from behind every convenient cover in the shape of rocks, trees, thickets, etc., we were ordered to dismount, turn our horses over to every fourth man, and continue the fight with our carbines.”²⁰² Driven from the main camp, Old Bear and He Dog’s fighters took up covered positions in the surrounding terrain and fired on Noyes’ and Egan’s detachments. “Bullets and casualties were then bestowed upon us with a will,” Strahorn said ruefully, “that showed plainly we were not to sweep the field without paying a penalty.”²⁰³

Clearing the camp of the hidden Native gunners and archers proved a much harder task than Reynolds’ plans envisioned. Captain Moore, expected to ride to the support of Noyes, failed to do so, for which Bourke and Strahorn roundly condemned him.²⁰⁴ Noyes did capture the Cheyenne horse herd, but it was only with the aid of Colonel Stanton and Captain Anson Mills, the latter of whom was supposed to be cleaning up after Noyes’ charge had already succeeded,

²⁰⁰ “Black Eagle,” in *Lakota & Cheyenne* ed. Jerome A. Greene (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994): 9.

²⁰¹ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 274.

²⁰² Strahorn, “The Battle of Powder River,” 12.

²⁰³ Strahorn, “The Battle of Powder River,” 12.

²⁰⁴ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 275.

Strahorn, “The Battle of Powder River,” 13.

that the campsite was cleared of enemy snipers. Bourke especially was furious about what he saw as Moore's misconduct, saying "the Indians, under fire from Stanton and Sibley on our left, and Egan's own fire, had retired to the rocks on the other side of the 'tepis' [sic] whence they kept plugging away at anyone who made himself visible. They were in the very place where it was expected that Moore was to catch them, but not a shot was heard for many minutes; and when they were it was no help to us, but a detriment and a danger, as the battalion upon which we had relied so much had occupied an entirely different place—one from which the fight could not be seen at all, and from which the bullets dropped into Egan's lines."²⁰⁵ Egan was now caught in a crossfire between Moore's battalion, and those Northern Cheyenne who remained within shooting distance. Wooden Leg, and his compatriots Bear Walks On A Ridge and Two Moons were among those still fighting. "We centered an attack upon one certain soldier. Two Moons had a repeating rifle. As we stood in concealment he stood it upon end in front of him and passed his hands up and down the barrel, not touching it, while making medicine. Then he said 'My medicine is good; watch me kill that soldier.' He fired, but his bullet missed. Bear Walks On A Ridge then fired his muzzle-loading rifle. His bullet hit the soldier in the back of the head. We rushed upon the man and beat and stabbed him to death."²⁰⁶ Along the line, small, intimate and ugly encounters like this played out between Egan and the Cheyenne as the Battle of Powder River lost cohesion and became a series of skirmishes up and down the edges of the camp.

Reynolds technically had possession of Old Bear's camp, but casualties among his cavalymen were mounting, and not just from Cheyenne bullets and arrows. Friendly fire, like that dropped by Captain Moore into Captain Egan's lines, caused its share of injuries. So did the weather. "In order to make the charge as effective as possible," said Bourke, "we had disrobed

²⁰⁵ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 275.

²⁰⁶ "Wooden Leg," *Lakota & Cheyenne*, 7.

and thrown to one side, upon entering the village, all the heavy or cumbrous wraps with which we could dispense. The disagreeable consequence was that many men had feet and fingers, ears and noses frozen.”²⁰⁷ Five hours of fighting in temperatures below thirty-nine degrees, it turned out, had a negative effect on the health of the soldiers, and much of their stocks of iodine were used up rubbing frozen limbs back to life and trying to avert amputations. Reynolds, deciding in Strahorn’s phrasing, that “the more the engagement was prolonged after the prime object of the expedition was accomplished, the more serious and useless were our losses,” withdrew, though not before firing the contents of the camp the troops could not carry away with them.²⁰⁸ Bourke could not comprehend how this order was given and fumed about Reynolds’ decision, “that no man can explain,” in his diary and again in *On the Border with Crook*.²⁰⁹ Those soldiers killed in action were left behind on the battleground, and so too, rumour had it, was a wounded soldier, who “fell alive into the enemy’s hands and was cut limb from limb.”²¹⁰ Whether this was true, Bourke told his readers, he could not say, “I can only say that I believe it to be true.”²¹¹ Crook believed it was true too, saying in his autobiography “our troops left so precipitously that our wounded men were left to fall into the hands of the Indians.”²¹² Also lost in the retreat were the Cheyenne’s stores of dried meat, which were burned instead of being carried along, despite Crook having specifically requested Reynolds capture them for the starving men.

The retreat from the Powder River camp was soon marred by the same army blundering that characterised the battle—and the rest of the campaign—thus far. Reynolds’ force captured more than seven hundred ponies from the Cheyenne, leaving the Natives unhorsed and without

²⁰⁷ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 275-276.

²⁰⁸ Strahorn, “The Battle of Powder River,” 13.

²⁰⁹ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 275.

Bourke, *The Diaries of John Gregory Bourke* Vol. 1, 253-254.

²¹⁰ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 279.

²¹¹ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 279.

²¹² Crook, *Autobiography*, 240.

transport. Reynolds, however, failed to post a guard on the horses, and the first night out from the battle site a band of Cheyenne warriors, including Wooden Leg, slipped into the army camp and stole almost all the horses back.²¹³ Strahorn excoriated Reynolds for this in his article, mad that the Colonel had not only neglected to guard the horses, but that, “when at daylight, this morning, the ponies were reported as being driven off by the Indians, the general declined sending a force in pursuit, although they could easily have been recovered.”²¹⁴ Bourke was as angry as Strahorn, though he at least tried to explain Reynolds’ choice not to pursue Wooden Leg and company, as “the cold and exposure had begun to wear out both horses and men, and Doctor Munn had now all he could do in looking after the numerous cases of frostbite reported in the command; my recollection is that there were sixty-four men whose noses, feet, or fingers were more or less imperilled by the effects of the cold. Added to these were two cases of inflammatory rheumatism, which were almost as serious as those of the wounded men.”²¹⁵

When Reynolds’ battalions of walking wounded limped into Crook’s camp, their commander was greeted not as a conquering hero, but as a blithering idiot. His subcommanders fared no better, with Crook, likely at the behest of Bourke, accusing Reynolds, Moore, and Noyes of misconduct in the field. Crook, working off partial information, believed Reynolds nearly had Crazy Horse in his grasp, only to allow him to get away. Yet, with all the injured from the battle and his dearth of supplies, there was nothing Crook could do to rectify Reynolds’ mistakes. He abandoned the expedition, making a ninety-mile march to Fort Reno, where his force was disbanded. On Crook’s orders, Reynolds, Moore, and Noyes were court-martialled for

²¹³ “Wooden Leg,” *Lakota & Cheyenne*, 8.

²¹⁴ Strahorn, “The Battle of Powder River,” 15.

²¹⁵ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 279-280.

Bourke, *The Diaries of John Gregory Bourke* Vol. 1, 257. Bourke was nowhere near as kind to Reynolds in his diaries as he was in his memoirs, accusing the Colonel of being incapacitated and comparing him to Edward Braddock, the British Major-General who was killed alongside much of his command by the Shawnee, Miami, et al. at the Battle of the Monongahela.

“misbehavior before the enemy.”²¹⁶ Crook told Sheridan the mission would have succeeded but for the incompetence of his subordinates, which Sheridan took as true and put down in his annual report for 1876, describing the Powder River affair as “barren of results,” but sparing Crook and himself from any criticism.²¹⁷ The entire problem was with Reynolds, Noyes and Moore, not with Sheridan’s strategy or Crook’s execution of it. Reynolds certainly had not covered himself in glory, and Moore’s performance at the Powder River was abysmal (Noyes seems to have been court-martialled for little reason beyond Crook needing a third victim) but the truth was the whole expedition was wrongheaded from the start. Crook headed into territory he did not know with incapable guides, insufficient supplies, and zero support from Terry. He went after the wrong Natives, and the bulk of the injuries his men sustained were not from enemy action but from frostbite and hunger. He did this because Sheridan wanted his winter campaign and because both men presumed any action against the Lakota and Cheyenne during these months, even unsupported by Terry, would be enough to end the war. Sheridan and Crook were wrong on all counts, and Reynolds, Moore, and Noyes paid the costs of those bad decisions.

When Sheridan said the battle was “barren of results,” he was not entirely correct. The Powder River engagement had important consequences for the war—all of them bad for the army. Old Bear and He Dog had planned to sit out the Great Sioux War, but Reynolds’ burning of their camp forced them to seek help from Crazy Horse, the very man Crook sought to destroy. Kate Bighead, a Northern Cheyenne survivor of the Powder River, summarised the political and military outcomes of the battle succinctly: “The Oglalas gave us food and shelter. After a few days the two bands together went northward and found the Hunkpapa Sioux, where Sitting Bull was the chief. The chiefs of the three bands decided that all of us would travel together for the

²¹⁶ Crook, *Autobiography*, 240-241.

²¹⁷ Sheridan, “Headquarters Military Division of the Missouri, November 25, 1876,” 15.

spring and summer hunting, as it was said that many soldiers would be coming to try to make us go back to the reservations.”²¹⁸ Rather than weakening Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull’s position, the Powder River expedition strengthened their hand. Old Bear, once a peace chief, was now hostile by necessity, and He Dog was again riding alongside his old friend Crazy Horse. Psychologically speaking, the battle also furthered the belief among the hostile Lakota and Cheyenne that the soldiers could be beaten. From their point of view, Old Bear’s unprepared followers had repelled Reynolds’ cavalry from their camp and then recovered their horses, despite having only a fraction of the whites’ numbers.²¹⁹ A determination spread amongst the Lakota and Cheyenne leaders to not only resist the Americans, but to defeat them.

Neither Sheridan nor Crook saw the problems that plagued the Powder River expedition as the result of anything other than the unique incompetence of Joseph John Reynolds. They did not re-examine their assumptions about the Lakota and Cheyenne and they did not tell any of the other officers in the Division of the Missouri there was any cause for concern. Instead, Crook prepared to renew his offensive in the spring, an undertaking Sheridan instructed Alfred Terry to join him in. Sheridan still believed the greatest threat confronting his command was that the Natives might scatter to the four winds, so his plan for the spring of 1876 was much the same as his plan for the previous winter: two main columns, under Crook and Terry, and another, smaller column under Terry’s subordinate John Gibbon, were to scour the Departments of the Platte and the Dakotas for the hostile Lakota and Cheyenne. By advancing on the Lakota territories from differing angles, these three columns would block off escape routes and stop the Natives from running. In Sheridan’s thinking nothing had changed—a strange conclusion for him to come to,

²¹⁸ “Kate Bighead,” *Lakota & Cheyenne*, 12-14.

²¹⁹ “Black Eagle,” *Lakota & Cheyenne*, 12; “Kate Bighead,” *Lakota & Cheyenne*, 14; “Wooden Leg,” *Lakota & Cheyenne*, 8.

when one considers that nearly everything had changed. It was spring now, not winter, and the Lakota and Cheyenne again had free rein to roam over their territories as they saw fit. Their camps were no longer snowbound, their horses no longer starved from lack of forage during the winter. If they truly did not wish to fight, they would have an almost unlimited ability to flee.

Moreover, Sheridan, and Crook for that matter, ignored the most important revelation from the Powder River campaign: namely, the Lakota and Cheyenne, when pushed, were perfectly willing to fight. Old Bear's following was made up of Cheyenne and Oglala Lakota who wished to remain neutral in the conflict with the whites, but when they found themselves under attack by Reynolds' cavalry their warriors, led by the likes of Black Eagle and Wooden Leg, made a fierce stand. Still more impressively, the day after the battle Wooden Leg's war-party slipped into the campsite of a far larger American force and stole back all their lost horses, an act that showed just how brave and militarily capable the Northern Cheyenne were. Sheridan and Crook, however, did not see it that way. In their colonial worldview, the Cheyenne horse-raid was a product of Reynolds' imbecility, not fine-honed Indigenous expertise. So long as Crook and Terry's new armies did not contain anyone named Reynolds, the plan would succeed; to their way of looking at the world, only the decisions of white men could affect the operation.

The decisions of Native American leaders would have a powerful effect on the operations of the American Army, even if the army could not see it. For instead of fragmenting into smaller bands, as Army orthodoxy said they would in the face of superior force, the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne were coming together. As the snows thawed, winter rolled into spring, and spring began to roll into summer, warbands belonging to all the subdivisions of both tribes slipped away from the reservations and rode out to join Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Dull Knife, Little Wolf, and the other notable resistance leaders. Whites at the time attributed this to Native perfidy, while

modern historians have credited it to restlessness among the young men of both tribes forced to sit in idleness on the reserves at a time when their culture said they should be fighting their first battles.²²⁰ The latter probably was a motivating cause for some of the younger tribesmen, but often overlooked are the very real grievances the “agency Indians” had with their American overlords. Spotted Tail and Red Cloud did not want to fight the US government, but they also did not want to sell the Black Hills and only agreed to do so under duress. Many of their followers, offended by the treatment of the two chiefs and by the government’s attempts to steal their spiritual refuge, chose to fight against the occupation of the Black Hills, their prior desire for peace notwithstanding. Others were angered by the attack on Old Bear and He Dog and saw in Reynolds’ actions the evidence that neutrality, or even allegiance to the US government, was not enough to save them. Still others found reservation life itself an intolerable insult; the abuses of the reservation system were well-known even at the time, and when John Bourke denounced the US Indian Agents at most of the reserves as thieves and argued that it was their criminality that was to blame for the war, he was far from being wrong.²²¹

Added to all these stressors were the diplomatic efforts of Sitting Bull and his allies who aimed to persuade as many agency Lakota and Cheyenne as possible into abandoning the reserves and joining up with the free bands on the Great Plains. The Hunkpapa medicine man declared that later that summer his following would host the greatest Sun Dance ever held on the Plains and invited not only the other subdivisions of the Lakota but their Northern Cheyenne allies to attend. The Sun Dance, a vital part of the Lakota religion, was normally open only to

²²⁰ Ambrose’s *Crazy Horse and Custer* is typical of the older scholarship when it comes to assigning motivations to the Indigenous warriors. While more recent works, including those of Donovan and Philbrick, ascribe to a more nuanced view of things, these same suppositions nevertheless make an appearance.

²²¹ Robert Utley was one of the few members of the old guard of Western historians to recognize the extent to which the outrageous nature of the government demands added fuel to Sitting Bull’s fire. Bourke, *The Diaries of John Gregory Bourke* Vol. 1, 207. His opinions of Indian Agents also pervade the whole of *On the Border With Crook*.

members of the tribe, so Sitting Bull's offer to the Northern Cheyenne was a signal honour, and one the Cheyenne leadership appreciated. Most of the hostile Lakota and Northern Cheyenne warbands came, as did many of their agency brethren, and even a few parties of Southern Cheyenne and Northern Arapaho who wished to honour their old pacts with the Northern Cheyenne. By the time of the Sun Dance in June, Sitting Bull had gathered the greatest living chieftains and war-leaders of the Lakota and Cheyenne tribes. These men did not swear fealty to Sitting Bull: he was not a feudal lord, or chief of all the Lakota, but they did agree with him, in a general sense, about what needed to be done, and allowed themselves to be guided by his vision for Lakota and Cheyenne resistance. At the height of the Sun Dance festival, Sitting Bull cut fifty pieces of flesh from his arms, and in a rapture of agony declared he had a vision of the white soldiers falling into the hands of the gathered Lakota and Cheyenne. As Crook and Terry were retrofitting their commands for the new campaign season, Sitting Bull too, was gathering an army.²²²

Army intelligence was good enough to recognise the number of Lakota and Cheyenne in the hostile camps was increasing, and Sheridan, Crook, and Terry all realised that reinforcements from the reservations were playing a role in bolstering the warriors available to Sitting Bull and his allies. Army estimates of Lakota and Cheyenne strength, however, still tended to be too low. It was an article of the faith in the army high command that the Plains tribes could only put a few hundred warriors at a time into the field as no warband or encampment could successfully feed or control more than that number at a time. This belief, required that the army ignore the evidence of Red Cloud's War, where somewhere in the neighbourhood of 1000 warriors gathered under Red Cloud for the Fetterman Fight and hundreds more participated in the

²²² Sitting Bull's actions at the Sun Dance are described in Ambrose, Donovan, Philbrick, Utley, and every other major account of Lakota activity before the Little Bighorn.

skirmishes, sieges, and raids that characterised the rest of that conflict. As the last major war against the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne, Red Cloud's War should have been a case study for Sheridan, Crook, and the other planners of the Great Sioux War.

Ignoring Red Cloud's War was, however, easy enough for Phil Sheridan and George Crook to do. The army had spent a decade writing off the Fetterman Fight as a product of Fetterman's own, unique incompetency and structuring the Lakota victory as resulting from cowardice and exhaustion on the part of Andrew Johnson's post-Civil War government. Sheridan, who had not come to the Plains until after Red Cloud's War was over, had no experience with battling large Lakota or Cheyenne warbands. The Washita campaign struck a camp of a few hundred Southern Cheyenne, while the Red River War of 1874 to 1875 was fought against tribes devastated by recent smallpox epidemics. The largest force the Comanche and Kiowa were able to put in the field was about eight hundred at the Battle of Adobe Walls, a far cry from the thousands strong Comanche war-parties that once devastated New Spain. Crook, fresh from the skirmishes of the war for Apacheria, had even less experience with large warbands than Sheridan, and the Powder River expedition had not made him re-evaluate his assumptions. Terry was less sure than Sheridan or Crook about Lakota numbers, but bowed to their supposedly superior experience in frontier warfare. In the whole of the Division of the Missouri the only officer of any rank to suggest that the Lakota and Cheyenne numbers might run into the thousands was, ironically enough, George Custer, who told Terry that Sitting Bull might have as many as 1500 men to draw upon, a claim no one else was willing to credit.²²³ In the months to come, Custer proved his point, under the most tragic circumstances possible.

²²³ Ambrose, *Crazy Horse & Custer*, 444.

Bourke's memoirs again provide a glimpse into the thinking of the army leadership as preparations for the spring campaign were made. Crook, Bourke said, "expressed himself freely in regard to the coming campaign, but said that while the Sioux and Cheyennes were a brave and bold people, from the very nature of the case they would never stand punishment as the Apaches had done. The tribes of the plains had accumulated much property in ponies and other things, and the loss of that would be felt most deeply."²²⁴ Crook still believed the plans he and Sheridan had concocted were the best possible for dealing with the Lakota and Cheyenne, and Bourke, two decades after the war was over, still defended the generals on that count, saying "it needed no profoundly technical military mind to see that with two or three strong columns in the field seeking out the hostiles, each column able to hold its own against the enemy, the chances of escape for the Sioux and Cheyennes would be materially lessened, and those for the success of either column, or both, perceptibly increased."²²⁵ Like his boss, Bourke thought it was the lack of support from Terry and the employment of a talentless failure like Reynolds that stopped the Powder River campaign from defeating the Lakota. With Terry and Gibbon intending to take the field that spring, and with Reynolds no longer in the picture, he assumed the war would swiftly conclude. The only thing Crook wanted to do differently this time was to secure the assistance of scouts from the Lakota and Cheyenne reservations, so his command would not get lost again.

Securing that assistance, unfortunately, proved beyond Crook's talents. Only three elderly chiefs assented to listen to Crook when he visited the reserves, and none of them loaned him their warriors. Crook, and therefore Bourke, blamed this on the Indian agent at the reservation, alleging the Bureau of Indian Affairs was obstructing the campaign and had

²²⁴ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 286.

²²⁵ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 283.

convinced the Native leaders they would be punished if they assisted Crook.²²⁶ While the Bureau *was* notoriously corrupt, and its agents frequently incompetent if not outright criminal, there is no evidence that in this specific case they had anything to do with Crook's difficulties. The Apache were always divided and their clans often warred on one another long before Crook ever came to Arizona. The Lakota and Cheyenne may have lacked a unified government, and different factions and bands did not always concur with one another on policy, but their cultural identity was much more cohesive than that of the Apache and fighting between the tribal subdivisions was kept to a minimum. The peace chiefs did not want to go to war with the white men, but they were unwilling to make war on their own people on the white men's behalf, and Crook, unable to wrap his head around the fact the Lakota and Cheyenne were not the Apache, blamed the Indian agents rather than alter his perspective. Crook did gain the support of the Lakota's enemies, the Shoshone and the Crow, but their familiarity with Lakota territory was only somewhat better than that of the white and mixed-race trackers he worked with in March. Crook also hired Frank Grouard again, still convinced of the Hawaiian ranger's abilities.²²⁷

Crook took charge of his new command on May 28, 1876. His new army was larger than the one he led in March but had substantially the same structure, made up of five companies from the 4th and 9th Infantry and fifteen companies from the 2nd and 3rd Cavalry. Lieutenant-Colonel William Royall was Crook's number two man, and served as commander of the cavalry detachments which, as in March, were expected to be the army's chief weapon against the Lakota and Cheyenne. The column, totalling around 1500 men once mule drivers and teamsters

²²⁶ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 286-287.

²²⁷ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 289-291. Bourke is also, albeit unintentionally, an excellent source for the differences between Apache and Lakota organization. His chapters on Crook's Arizona campaigns spell out the divisions between the Apache in graphic detail, while his sections on the Great Sioux War are filled with frustration about their inability to turn the Lakota on one another.

were counted, set out on May 29, searching for the great Lakota encampment on the Tongue River that Crook's scouts told him about.²²⁸ The Crow and Shoshone auxiliaries had yet to arrive, and Crook's intention was to meet up with them on the march. In the meantime, their absence was felt as Frank Grouard, and the other non-Indigenous guides once again demonstrated they were inadequate to the task of properly guiding Crook's army or alerting him to danger. On June 9, a war-party of Lakota skirmishers launched a lightning attack on Crook's encampment, driving his cavalry pickets back into the bivouac and then firing into the tents, wounding two soldiers, killing three horses and two mules, and wrecking many of the tents. The Lakota disappeared before Crook could respond and Bourke described the encounter as, "only a bluff on the part of 'Crazy Horse' to keep his word to Crook that he would begin to fight the latter just as soon as he touched the waters of the Tongue River."²²⁹ While the skirmish may indeed have been such a display of resolve on the part of the Lakota war-party, it was also evidence that while Crook did not yet know where the hostile Natives were based, the hostiles knew full well where he was.

On June 14, Crook was joined by his Indigenous scouts, counting one hundred seventy-six Crows and eighty-six Shoshone. The Crows brought news of the enemy tribes and of the location of their main camp between the Tongue and Yellowstone Rivers, and Otter Creek. Later that evening Crook decided that, encumbered by the wagons, his column would move too slowly to get to this campsite before the Lakota and Cheyenne moved again. As he did in March, Crook gave the order for his expedition to cut loose from their wagons, which were left in the care of the bulk of the infantry. Those infantrymen with some equestrian experience mounted spare horses and mules and journeyed with the cavalry and the auxiliaries to attack the Lakota camp.

²²⁸ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 289-291.

²²⁹ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 296.

Out of the five companies of infantry with Crook, one hundred seventy-five men were found who could make this transformation into *ad hoc* dragoons, while the rest were left with the wagons. Each man carried four days' worth of food, one blanket, and a hundred rounds of ammunition; Crook did not believe they would have far to travel before they found the enemy.²³⁰

In one respect, Crook was right. The army would not have to travel far before they encountered the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne, but that meeting would not take place under the circumstances Crook envisioned. The clash on June 9 alerted the hostile coalition that Crook was searching for them in the area and scouts were dispatched to keep an eye on the oncoming general. The night of June 16, a group of Northern Cheyenne outriders rode into the camp saying they had found Crook's vanguard, and a council of chiefs was convened to determine what to do about him. "Three Stars," as the Lakota dubbed Crook (a reference to his rank as a Brigadier-General, with a star on each shoulder of his uniform, and one on his hat), could not be allowed to find the great camp gathered for Sitting Bull's Sun Dance. It was decided, therefore, that a large force of cavalry, variously enumerated at between seven hundred fifty and a thousand men, would ride out to intercept Crook and bring him to battle before he came too near the camp. It was the largest war-party the Northern Plains had seen since Red Cloud's War, and the men leading it were among the most distinguished warriors and commanders the Lakota-Cheyenne coalition had to offer: Gall, Two Moons, Lame White Man, Comes In Sight, He Dog, Bad Heart Bull, Wooden Leg, and Sitting Bull's nephews One Bull and White Bull are just a few of the famous names present in the war-party. Sitting Bull himself rode along as well, and though he would not participate in the physical fighting, he would be on hand to loan his spiritual powers to the cause. Given the Lakota and Cheyenne traditions of collective leadership no overall

²³⁰ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 302-303, 305.

commander was appointed, but when Indigenous participants were asked who was in charge, the majority answered it was Crazy Horse who gave most of the orders and acted as first among equals.²³¹

Crook's soldiers left their bivouac at six am on the morning of June 17 and marched up the Rosebud in the direction they believed the Lakota were encamped. Two hours later, the Crow recon team, which rode out of the camp hours before the troopers were ready to march, returned and informed Crook they had spotted Lakota warriors in the area. In Crook's laconic words, "some of our scouts came in, said they had discovered some hostiles not far in advance, and asked me to halt while they went ahead to reconnoiter. So we halted and dismounted, and the cavalry took the bridles out of their horses' mouths."²³² The command obeyed Crook's instructions, and dismounted, stretching out along two bends in the Rosebud, while they awaited the return of the Crows and readied themselves for a battle they thought would be fought later that day.

"Later that day," turned out to be within a half hour. At eight thirty, the Crow scouts came running back to the camp, hollering that the Lakota were right behind them. Crook shouted to Captain Anson Mills, across the river and directly in front of the fleeing Crows, to mount up his men and get ready for battle. As Mills tried to obey additional Crows hurried to the aid of their fellow tribesmen, the Shoshone close behind. Outnumbered three or four to one by the oncoming Lakota and Cheyenne, the Crows and Shoshone nevertheless bought valuable time for Crook, letting him shake out his infantry into a line along the foot of a northern slope, and giving

²³¹ "Lazy White Bull," in *Lakota & Cheyenne* ed. Jerome A. Greene (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994): 17.

"Little Hawk," in *Lakota & Cheyenne* ed. Jerome A. Greene (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994): 25.

"Young Two Moons," in *Lakota & Cheyenne* ed. Jerome A. Greene (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994): 26.

²³² Crook, *Autobiography*, 242.

the American horsemen the chance to get on their mounts. Frank Grouard, Crook's favourite ranger, was sure the Crows and Shoshone saved the entire command, saying it was only the heroism of the auxiliaries that kept them all alive. Without the Native scouts, he said, "the Sioux would have killed half of our command before the soldiers were in position to meet the attack."²³³

The Crows and Shoshone could not hold the line forever, though, and it was only a matter of minutes before the Lakota and Cheyenne riders broke through. Crazy Horse had ridden his followers hard, covering twenty-two miles under the cover of darkness to reach Crook's position, and neither he, nor any of the other chieftains and war-leaders who rode with him, was going to be stopped for long. It is often asserted by historians that the warriors of the Plains tribes fought entirely as individuals with no coordination between leaders, a claim that is usually backed up with the individualistic nature of Indigenous testimony.²³⁴ Certainly, each Plains warrior was primarily concerned with events taking place around him, but that is hardly different, in most respects, from the accounts of battles taken from private soldiers in any European or American army. In any case, the supposed lack of organisation among the Lakota and Cheyenne did not prevent them from achieving a high level of tactical coordination at the Rosebud. Multiple attacks were made up and down Crook's lines, with any weaknesses in the defenses promptly exploited. Soldiers reported seeing Lakota and Cheyenne leaders signalling to one another with mirrors as they directed their men (and in a few cases, women), and the assault had a coherency to it that belies the notion Native American warriors were simply a mob.²³⁵ There may have been

²³³ Quoted in Paul Hedren, *Rosebud, June 17, 1876: Prelude to the Little Bighorn* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019): 190.

²³⁴ See Hedren, *Rosebud*, 277 for an examination of this tendency in the record.

²³⁵ Northern Cheyenne warriors Little Hawk and Young Two Moons both testified that Buffalo Calf Road Woman, or Brave Woman, sister of war-chief Comes-In-Sight not only accompanied the war-party to the Rosebud, but rode into battle alongside them. See "Little Hawk," *Lakota & Cheyenne*, 25, and "Young Two Moon," *Lakota & Cheyenne*, 27.

no one general commanding the Lakota and Cheyenne, but with all their greatest warriors assembled in one place the Plains tribes had, for the first time, something resembling an officer corps and the courage of men like Crazy Horse, Lame White Man, and Two Moons inspired all those who rode with them and on occasion, even their enemies. Baptiste Pourier, one of Crook's white scouts, said "you can call it medicine or anything you want to, but I saw Crazy Horse at the Rosebud Creek charge straight into Crook's army, and it seemed every soldier and Indian we had with us took a shot at him and they couldn't even hit his horse."²³⁶

Crook had the bulk of his men mounted by the time Crazy Horse punched through the Crow and Shoshone screen, but the Lakota war-leader's assault still inflicted serious damage to Crook's command, not in casualties, but in the cohesion of the expedition. As Crook's junior officers scrambled to react to the Lakota offensive, they found themselves cut off from one another, while Crook, unable to see the entire field, struggled to maintain command and control. In the absence of direct orders from Crook, Anson Mills, William Royall, and other lower ranking officers had to conduct their parts of the battle alone, moving in isolation from Crook and from one another. Royall, gathering several companies of the 3rd Cavalry to himself, launched a counteroffensive on the western section of the line that seemed to drive back the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne, only to find the Lakota throwing a skirmish line between him and the rest of the army, severing Royall from support. In the centre, Crook's troopers, after hurrying to the relief of the Native auxiliaries, found themselves in a game of charge and countercharge with the Lakota and Cheyenne. First the infantry, then the cavalry, bulled their way uphill towards the Native force, who appeared to disperse before them only to fall back a hundred and fifty yards, rally, and open fire. Over the six hours of the Rosebud battle, this

²³⁶ Quoted in Hedren, *Rosebud*, 278.

pattern repeated itself numerous times, until Crook, recognising the danger these repeated charges posed of overextending his line, ordered them halted and the troops pulled back to the hills...a decision Crazy Horse met by massing up again and nearly overrunning Crook's line; only a nigh-suicidal countercharge by the Shoshone stopped the Lakota and Cheyenne offensive from cracking through Crook's beleaguered defenders. The Lakota and Cheyenne, rolling with this sudden shift, immediately moved to surround the outnumbered Shoshone who were withdrawn by Crook who could not otherwise offer them any support for fear of friendly fire.²³⁷

The most hotly engaged of Crook's units was the 3rd Cavalry under Royall who, severed from the main body of the army, were virtually on their own on the left. Reuben Davenport, a reporter from the *New York Herald*, rode with Royall and the article he published afterward gives an idea of how entrapped Royall was beginning to feel. "After checking the advance behind a friendly crest behind which his soldiers lay while pouring into the Sioux a hot answering fire, Colonel Royall was expectant of seeing the advance on his right resumed, as the latter were then apparently beginning to feel a panic. Seeing the long, gallant skirmish line pause, however, they dashed forward on the right and left, and in an instant nearly every point of vantage within, in front, and in the rear, and on the flank of the line, was covered with savages, wildly circling their ponies, and charging hither and thither, while they fired from their seats with wonderful rapidity and accuracy."²³⁸ Royall, unsure if he was meant to continue his advance and if any support was coming, fell back before the oncoming Lakota and Cheyenne, but made several more abortive efforts at resuming the offensive before Crook's aide Azor Nickerson reached him and gave the order to fall back. Royall conducted a fighting retreat from ridge to ridge, finding he could not

²³⁷ Bourke, *The Diaries of John Gregory Bourke* Vol. 1, 326-327.

²³⁸ Reuben Davenport, "The Battle of Rosebud Creek, June 17, 1876," in *Battles and Skirmishes of the Great Sioux War*, ed. Jerome A. Greene (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993): 29.

reconnect with Crook as ordered because “to retreat into the hollow on the right, which would be necessary in order to form a junction with the centre, was to risk the certain loss of nearly the whole battalion,” to the circling Lakota and Cheyenne.²³⁹ Royall had to take the long way around the line to rejoin Crook, while his Indigenous pursuers drew ever closer, and the fire got hotter.

Royall asked for infantry support from Crook to cover his retreat, but the men could not be put in place in time, and it was the Lieutenant-Colonel’s rearguard that took the brunt of the Lakota and Cheyenne shooting. A high percentage of Crook’s casualties, both dead and wounded, were concentrated in that rearguard and several stragglers had to be abandoned; reported Davenport, “six were killed at one spot. A recruit surrendered his carbine to a painted warrior, who flung it to the ground, and cleft his head with a stroke of the tomahawk.”²⁴⁰ “The Sioux,” he said, “rode so close to their victims that they shot them in the face with revolvers and the powder blackened the flesh.”²⁴¹ Once again, the Shoshone auxiliaries came to Royall’s rescue, driving the foe from Royall’s rear and letting him make good his escape. White Bull, Lakota warrior and nephew of Sitting Bull, paid tribute to the Shoshone after the battle, saying “of all the enemies I have fought the Shoshonis [sic] are the bravest and the best warriors.”²⁴²

Royall’s was not the only command to have a narrow escape. Lakota and Cheyenne riders rode around the rear of the column and struck at the baggage train, making off with many of the troopers’ horses and killing the Shoshone boy left to guard them. Lieutenant James Foster tried to retrieve the horses, but his company was immediately encircled by the Lakota and Cheyenne and had to run, joining up with Royall on the left and becoming part of his retreat.

²³⁹ Davenport, “The Battle of Rosebud Creek,” 31.

²⁴⁰ Davenport, “The Battle of Rosebud Creek,” 33.

²⁴¹ Davenport, “The Battle of Rosebud Creek,” 33.

²⁴² “Lazy White Bull,” in *Lakota & Cheyenne* ed. Jerome A. Greene (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994): 20.

Crook, in an effort to relieve some of the pressure on Royall, ordered Anson Mills, on the right of the line, to take several companies of cavalry and ride out in the direction they assumed the Native encampment was in; by attacking it Crook aimed to draw off Crazy Horse's warriors and split the Lakota-Cheyenne force. Since their camp was, however, more than twenty miles away, the Natives did not go after Mills, but instead ramped up the pressure all down the front; it was while Mills was absent that Royall's retreat nearly became a rout, and a whole portion of the command was almost swallowed up. Azor Nickerson once more acted as Crook's messenger boy and rode his horse near to collapse catching up with Mills and ordering him back to the column. Mills' return, coupled with the Shoshone counteroffensive, likely saved Royall from annihilation, but that he needed to return at all spoke to the limits of Crook's control over the battlefield. Unable to see the entire fight progressing, Crook was left giving orders to his units piecemeal, unable to predict how the action on any part of the field would affect what happened elsewhere. It was a chaotic situation, and one Crook barely had any command over.²⁴³

Crazy Horse and the other Lakota and Cheyenne war-leaders did not have Crook's problems. They were used to having a divided command and the fluidity of the Battle of the Rosebud did not dismay them to nearly the extent it did Crook. Historians have often doubted that there was ever such a thing as a Native plan of attack, and continue to insist that the Plains tribes did not fight battles of annihilation (the Fetterman Fight and the Little Bighorn being, in this version of events, freak accidents), yet a study of the movements at the Rosebud reveals a consistent series of tactical moves on the part of the Lakota and Cheyenne aimed at drawing individual portions of Crook's expedition away from the rest of the army and encircling them. Since one does not generally encircle a foe one has no intention of destroying in detail, it is fair

²⁴³ Davenport, "The Battle of Rosebud Creek," 37-38.

to surmise that at the Rosebud, Crazy Horse and the other leading men were attempting to surround and destroy, in whole, or in part, Crook's command. The seeming anarchy on the battlefield was the result of a pattern of Lakota and Cheyenne tactics in which a part of their force would pull back before the Americans, luring the white men on, before turning about and trying to overwhelm the overextended soldiers. It was a plan, in some senses, a decade in the making. At the Fetterman Fight, Crazy Horse acted as the bait, drawing Fetterman into the jaws of Red Cloud's ambush. Now at the Rosebud he used his entire war-party as bait and trap both, splitting Crook's army, separating them from one another, and trying to wipe them out a piece at a time. Fortunately for Crook, Crazy Horse did not have the resources to pull his ambitious plan off: with only 1000 warriors he was outnumbered by Crook's 1500, and was never quite able to single out a portion of Crook's force that was small enough for him to slaughter. It was a bold effort though, and it was only the Americans' numbers and the resourcefulness of Crook's junior officers that kept Crazy Horse from doing to Crook at the Rosebud what he would do to Custer at the Little Bighorn a week later. The Rosebud was a trial run, a first attempt at something the Lakota and Cheyenne had not yet perfected. In the years that followed, Crook offered many explanations for what happened at the Rosebud but was never able to hit on the true solution: that he had the bad luck to be in command of the army opposing Crazy Horse on the day the latter invented (among the Lakota and Cheyenne) the full-scale battle of annihilation.

The Battle of the Rosebud ended at two-thirty in the afternoon when the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne abruptly broke off the engagement and rode back the way they came. The fight lasted six hours and saw the Natives, who were supposed to lack endurance and to be unable to stand and fight against a superior foe, launch repeated assaults on a larger white army. Casualties were comparatively light on both sides, running to around twenty-five dead and

wounded for both parties. On the premise he was the one holding the ground at the end of the battle, Crook claimed victory; as historian Stephen Ambrose wryly observed, “the United States government would soon go broke if the Army won many such victories.”²⁴⁴ Crook’s men fired twenty-five thousand rounds and killed a mere twenty-five Native Americans. At that rate, Ambrose calculated, the Battle of the Rosebud cost the federal government around a million dollars per dead Lakota or Cheyenne.²⁴⁵ His ammunition spent and his resolve horribly shaken, Crook turned around and retreated to Goose Creek, where he remained, immobile, for months to come. His Crow and Shoshone scouts, who more than anyone, had kept him alive, were disgusted by the retreat and abandoned Crook, returning to their reservation to mourn their dead.

Crook did not report to Sheridan for several days. When he did, he insisted he had won the battle. Sheridan allowed that Crook had, but in his annual report described the Rosebud, like the Powder River, as “barren of results.”²⁴⁶ Both men bloated the number of Lakota present in their reports until, in Bourke’s memoirs, written twenty years later, there were 6500 Lakota and Cheyenne present at the Rosebud; where previously the army had underestimated the Native numbers to denigrate the danger they posed, they now overestimated them to justify reversals without having to credit Lakota or Cheyenne generalship as a factor.²⁴⁷ The reality was Lakota and Cheyenne generalship was exactly the thing that beat Crook. Crazy Horse’s goal in attacking Crook was to stop him from reaching the larger hostile encampment, and in that objective, he succeeded admirably. Crook might have survived Crazy Horse’s efforts to defeat him in detail, but he used up his ammunition reserves, exhausted his horses, and was forced to retreat from

²⁴⁴ Ambrose, *Crazy Horse and Custer*, 423. This position is echoed, if not quite as quotably, by many recent writers, including Donovan, Hedren, and Philbrick.

²⁴⁵ Ambrose, *Crazy Horse and Custer*, 423.

²⁴⁶ Sheridan, “Headquarters Military Division of the Missouri, November 25, 1876,” 20.

²⁴⁷ Bourke, *On the Border With Crook*, 311.

Lakota territory. Put another way, Crook may have held the battlefield at the end of the fight, but Crazy Horse was the one holding the entire theatre of operations. It was a strategic victory for the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne, and one they achieved by outsmarting and outmaneuvering Crook. By splintering the larger American expedition into smaller, more manageable parts, Crazy Horse and his compatriots neutralised Crook's advantage in numbers and cost the general control of the field, turning the battle into a chaotic melee in which their own, more fluid tactics gave them the initiative. They never relinquished it and that was why they won the battle.

That night, as Crook tried to figure out what he was going to tell Sheridan, victory songs were sung in the hostile camp, and stories of brave deeds relayed to those who were not there. One story that became especially popular among the Northern Cheyenne was the tale of how Chief Comes In Sight, the first Cheyenne into the American camp, was unhorsed by the enemy auxiliaries and had to be saved by his sister, who rode into the throng of battle and pulled him out on her horse; in Northern Cheyenne oral tradition it is recalled as the battle "Where the Girl Saved Her Brother."²⁴⁸ Among the Native veterans of the Rosebud, there was no doubt they had beaten Crook. "This was one of the hardest fights White Bull ever saw," the Lakota warrior's biographer wrote after interviewing him, "It lasted all day, but when it was over, 'Three Stars' took his troops and hit the trail back to his base."²⁴⁹ It was an auspicious beginning for Sitting Bull's alliance of warbands and caused even more warriors to flock to his standard. The American attack on the Powder River was avenged, and a white army turned around. Sitting Bull's prophecy seemed more and more believable; the Plains warriors were not only relishing their defeat of Crook but anticipating further victories to come.

²⁴⁸ "Little Hawk," *Lakota & Cheyenne*, 25.

²⁴⁹ "Lazy White Bull," *Lakota & Cheyenne*, 21.

Within days, newspapers were arguing about whether Crook had, as he claimed, won the battle, or been humiliatingly defeated, with Reuben Davenport leading the proponents of the latter.²⁵⁰ The news would not, however, reach Alfred Terry or John Gibbon, for several weeks. This was a shame. Had Terry heard what happened at the Rosebud—even Crook’s distorted version of events—he might have made different choices in the days ahead. The Rosebud made it apparent that the Lakota and Cheyenne, contrary to predictions, were not only ready for a head on fight, but were in fact spoiling for it. It also made it apparent that even a column of 1500 men could be thwarted by a Native attack, so long as that attack was well-led and made with determination. Had Terry known these things, it would doubtless have influenced his decision making. He might have kept his men together for safety, or, as he did in March, decided Sheridan’s plan was not going to work and fallen back. Thanks to the distance between him and Crook, and him and Sheridan, though, Terry did not know these things. Still operating on prewar calculations, Terry was getting ready to divide his expedition into two separate units, one under himself, and one under George Custer, so they might cover more ground. Blissfully unaware of what had gone down at the Rosebud, Alfred Terry was, just as the Lakota and Cheyenne were proving they could handle an army of 1500 soldiers, preparing to send Custer and his six hundred cavalry troopers out onto the Plains alone.

*

Lord Chelmsford’s Zululand campaign got off to a better start than Phil Sheridan’s Lakota operation did. Where George Crook spent weeks floundering about the Plains, searching

²⁵⁰ Davenport, “The Battle of Rosebud Creek,” 39-40. Amusingly, Davenport’s initial report still claimed Crook had crippled the Lakota and Cheyenne. His criticism of Crook’s generalship, however, and refusal to consider the battle an untarnished victory, earned him Crook’s ire, which steadily pushed the *Herald* reporter into the camp of the Brigadier-General’s enemies.

in vain for the Lakota and losing to them when they cared to mount a response, Chelmsford and his subordinate Charles Pearson quickly encountered and defeated two separate Zulu forces. At first glance, this gives Chelmsford the appearance of being the better strategist of the two commanders, a notion that is rather hard to swallow in light of his and Sheridan's records. Beneath the surface, however, the early days of Chelmsford's invasion of Zululand were plagued by many of the same handicaps and deficiencies that had so retarded Crook's progress against the Lakota and Cheyenne, problems that shortly thereafter came to a head at Isandlwana. Like Sheridan, Chelmsford underestimated his non-white enemies, and like Sheridan, he proved all but immune to evidence that contradicted his built-in prejudices. Also like Sheridan, Chelmsford's operational plan, conceived on false premises, worked against him, insulating him from important information that might have changed how he approached his war.

An even cursory glance through Chelmsford's letters from the waning days of 1878 shows the primary problem he was grappling with was logistical rather than strategic. Along with Sir Bartle Frere and Sir Theophilus Shepstone, Lord Chelmsford spent months intriguing towards starting a war with Cetshwayo, but his preparations for supplying that war had been lax. Between the regiments of British regulars, the Volunteer colonial cavalry, and the auxiliary battalions of the Natal Native Contingent, the Lieutenant-General did not lack for troops, but his ability to feed, clothe, and arm these men was another matter altogether. In letters to Bartle Frere, Pearson, and Evelyn Wood, Chelmsford made frequent complaints about, and comments on, the inadequacy of the logistical situation and the need to obtain more wagons and establish additional depots. Supply was an issue for Chelmsford during the Ninth Frontier War as well, when the inability to keep an army in the field for any length of time greatly aided the Xhosa,

dragging out the conflict and leaving Chelmsford embarrassed.²⁵¹ It appears one of Chelmsford's major concerns was a repeat of his experience with the Xhosa, and he saw the breakdown of his supply lines as a much more immediate threat to his command than the Zulu themselves—and the absence of adequate resources would certainly be a problem for the Lieutenant-General's columns. In a missive to Commissary-General Strickland dated January 13, and posted after Chelmsford went into the field, the general was still unsatisfied with the logistical arrangements, writing that unless the supply depots were brought up to the standard he wanted his columns would be unable to move; "it will be a sad disgrace to the Commissariat," he said, if the column "is obliged to halt short of its destination for want of supplies."²⁵²

Chelmsford did his best, but there were some issues with supply, that were beyond his power to solve. In the same letter to the War Office in which he appraised Colonel Stanley of his plan of campaign, Chelmsford lamented the condition of the roads leading into Zululand, and how "with bad roads and slow transport, 10 miles must be looked at as the longest march it will be possible, or even safe to make."²⁵³ These references to the roadways appear in several other letters from Chelmsford to Stanley as well as to Pearson and Wood; no one offered Chelmsford a solution to this difficulty as there was none to offer. Zululand's roads were under Cetshwayo's control and the British could hardly cross the border and undertake work on them without alerting the Zulu to the invasion. Likewise, they could not request Cetshwayo keep his roads in better repair so invading his country might be more easily facilitated. All Chelmsford could do was try to keep his oxen and wagons moving as quickly as possible and hope he caught up with

²⁵¹ Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*, 59.

²⁵² "Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Commissary-General E. Strickland, January 13, 1879," in *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 67.

²⁵³ "From the Lieutenant-General Commanding Her Majesty's Forces in South Africa to the Right Hon. the Secretary of State for War, War Office, S.W., November 11, 1878," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 1, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 134.

the Zulu before they “scattered.” With repairs on the Zulu roads impossible to undertake until after the invasion began, Chelmsford admitted he would be marching his columns into broken country that would hamper his supply chain, and could do nothing about it.

Given the want of supply, and the ongoing problems with organising the entire expedition, one might wonder why Chelmsford went through with his invasion of Zululand at all. The answers to that question remain easy to discern: Chelmsford viewed the supply situation as his *only* real problem to overcome. With an army totaling 17 173 men Chelmsford assumed he could easily defeat the Zulu in open combat, so long as they were prepared to stand and fight, rather than running.²⁵⁴ Writing to Wood the previous November, Chelmsford assured the Colonel his column would be all but invulnerable to a Zulu attack, stating that “With two British regiments, 6 guns, and Bullers [sic] lot—I should be sorry for the Zulu army if they attacked you,” later adding that “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.”²⁵⁵ Wood’s Left Column, given as 2278 men strong by Chelmsford’s aide, William Molyneux, was the smallest of the three main prongs of Chelmsford’s advance with the Right Column under Pearson having 4750 men and the Centre Column, led by Richard Glyn and Chelmsford himself, having 4709. Another 1500 men under Colonel Rowlands remained near Luneberg while Anthony Durnford with 3871 troops, most of them Native African auxiliaries, acted as Chelmsford’s reserve and guarded their lines of communication.²⁵⁶

With five separate forces either invading Zululand or waiting on the Natal side of the border as reinforcements, those lines of communication were of the highest import to

²⁵⁴ Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*, 111.

²⁵⁵ “Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel H.E. Wood, November 23, 1878,” in *Lord Chelmsford’s Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 31.

²⁵⁶ Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*, 111.

Chelmsford's advance. As the general explained to Pearson and Wood, he wanted simultaneous advances by the Centre, Right, and Left Columns to pressure the Zulu on all fronts and deny them the chance to escape his net. In a letter to Wood, Chelmsford explained he did not want Wood to advance so far Glyn could not provide him support and vice-versa; the same document has Chelmsford attempting to micromanage Wood and Glyn's communications with one another, urging Wood repeatedly to send out scouts so he and Glyn could remain aware of one another's movements.²⁵⁷ Given the distance that separated the columns from one another, these were not easy instructions for Glyn, Wood, or Pearson to follow. Writing to Pearson, Chelmsford told him to use Durnford to keep lines of communication with Glyn open, and to make use of "the border police to send information from your end of the line to the others."²⁵⁸ As systems for communication went, it was a fragile one, insufficient for the role Chelmsford had in mind for it.

Chelmsford's first target upon crossing the border into Zululand was the homestead of Chief Sihayo, father of Mehlokazulu and, at least in theory, the man who started the war by refusing to hand his sons over to face British colonial "justice." Neither Sihayo nor his sons were at home; the Chief himself was at Cetshwayo's side, advising him, while Mehlokazulu and his brothers reported to the regiments in which they served as junior officers. A majority of Sihayo's sworn men had likewise been called up for military service and were mustering with their regiments at various royal homesteads-cum-barracks, leaving only a few men to guard Sihayo's home and herds. Chelmsford intended to make an object lesson of Sihayo for defying British power, and while he gave strict orders that Zulu women and children were not to be harmed, the

²⁵⁷ "Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel H.E. Wood, January 8, 1879," in *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 56.

²⁵⁸ "Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel C.K. Pearson, December 15, 1878," in *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 42-43.

Chief's property was considered fair game. On January 12, Chelmsford ordered an advance on Sihayo's homestead with the intent of burning it to the ground.

The brief skirmish that ensued was short, fierce, and though Chelmsford did not yet know it, a portent of things to come. The advance into Sihayo's was led by the 1st Battalion of the 3rd Regiment of the Natal Native Contingent, under Commandant George Hamilton-Browne, an Irish mercenary who claimed (potentially untruthfully) to be a veteran of New Zealand's Maori Wars. After the battle was over, Chelmsford reported to Sir Bartle Frere and the Secretary of War that the NNC performed well in their first engagement; Hamilton-Browne, whose distinguishing personality traits were his egotism and his unbounded hatred of his own men, begged to differ. Describing his men's advance on Sihayo's, Hamilton-Browne sneered, "we moved onto the *Krantz* in what might be called a line, but a very crooked one, as a South African native cannot walk in a line, draw a line, or form a line, and if placed in a line will soon mob himself into a ring."²⁵⁹ While Chelmsford informed his superiors of the NNC's courage under fire and the casualties they sustained in close-quarters combat with the Zulu, Hamilton-Browne recorded that all the deaths were from friendly fire, saying, "I found that my beauties had bagged thirty-two of themselves, but I could well spare them."²⁶⁰ He also said the NNC broke and ran and were only herded back into combat by the advance of a company of the 24th Regiment, with bayonets lowered.²⁶¹ Which of the officers' accounts should be believed is a matter of some contention: Chelmsford, obviously, had every reason to portray his first outing against the Zulu as a resounding success, while Hamilton-Browne, a bigot even by the standards of the Victorian

²⁵⁹ Hamilton-Browne, *Lost Legionary*, 80-81.

²⁶⁰ Hamilton-Browne, *Lost Legionary*, 85.

²⁶¹ Hamilton-Browne, *Lost Legionary*, 83.

"Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Sir Bartle Frere, January 12, 1879," in *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 60-61.

Era, was so filled with loathing for his black troops as to make his memoirs read as those of a man deranged. Most likely the answer lies somewhere in between their accounts, with those men of the NNC whose officers treated them well holding firm, while those led by the likes of the despotic Hamilton-Browne quickly found somewhere else to be.

However, his men comported themselves, Hamilton-Browne's advance pushed the few Zulu defenders of Sihayo's into caves in the nearby hills. Chelmsford brought up several companies of regulars and charged them into the caves, where they overran the outnumbered Zulu in hand-to-hand combat. The British *Narrative of Field Operations Connected with the Zulu War*, compiled by Captain J.S. Rothwell for the army high command two years after the war, put the casualties from this action as thirty dead Zulu, with four wounded and ten captured, in exchange for two deaths and twelve injuries among the men of the NNC; one white officer and one white NCO were also wounded.²⁶² Chelmsford, in his communications with Sir Bartle Frere and the War Office, reduced his casualties to only two killed, and four wounded, and praised the performance of both his Regular soldiers and the Native Contingent. Regarding the Zulu, he told Sir Bartle Frere, "I am in great hopes that the news of this storming of Sirayo's [sic] stronghold and the capture of so many of his cattle (about 500) may have a salutary effect in Zululand. Sirayo's men have, I am told, always been looked on as the bravest in the country, and certainly those who were killed today fought with great courage."²⁶³ Writing Wood the following day, Chelmsford deplored that so few of Sihayo's men had been there to oppose him, and worried about having to hunt for the Chief's warriors in the mountains and hills.²⁶⁴ Obviously, the Lieutenant-General was still afraid the Zulu would flee from his army and refuse to give him

²⁶² J.S Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 27.

²⁶³ "Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Sir Bartle Frere, January 12, 1879," 61.

²⁶⁴ "Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel H.E. Wood, January 13, 1879," in *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 65.

a stand-up fight—a fear one might have thought would be lain to rest by the bravery the few Zulu warriors left at the homestead showed in defense of the Chief’s property. A few dozen men, armed with spears and obsolete muskets, stood up to four companies of the 1/24 and the whole of the 1/3 NNC, and managed to make a fight of it for half an hour, before being overwhelmed. As Chelmsford himself acknowledged, this showed the bravery of the Zulu, yet it somehow did not change his mind about how they were likely to fight.

Chelmsford spent the next several days engaging in road work, the state of the roads into Zululand proving even worse than he feared. “The country,” he wrote Bartle Frere, “is in a terrible state from the rain, and I do not know how we shall manage to get our waggons [sic] across the valley near Sirayo’s [sic] *kraals*; a large working party will start to-morrow to dig deep ditches on each side of the road which runs across a broad swamp, and I hope that under this treatment it may consolidate.”²⁶⁵ Chelmsford also told the High Commissioner he needed more oxen, as many of his were already dead or worn out, and that teams of sixteen were insufficient ; he would need twenty, at least, per wagon.²⁶⁶ Writing to Pearson on January 13, he continued on this theme, saying, “I have already discovered that if our advance into Zululand is to be made without very serious delay, we must have strong working parties on the roads,” and urged Pearson to detail some men—drawn from both the NNC and his own Regulars—to clear the roads in front of him.²⁶⁷ “The sooner our troops understand that our success depends upon our supplies coming up and that depends upon the roads being in good order, the better. In fine weather improve them, in bad weather mend them.”²⁶⁸ Nowhere in his messages to Bartle Frere,

²⁶⁵ “Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Sir Bartle Frere, January 12, 1879,” 61.

²⁶⁶ “Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Sir Bartle Frere, January 12, 1879,” 61.

²⁶⁷ “Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel C.K. Pearson, January 13, 1879,” in *Lord Chelmsford’s Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 62.

²⁶⁸ “Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel C.K. Pearson, January 13, 1879,” 62.

Pearson, or Wood did Chelmsford ever hint the fight at Sihayo's showed the Zulu were possessed of greater mettle than he anticipated; his concerns remained almost entirely with road work, and problems of supply. Certainly, the bad roads were an issue that needed addressing, but the competency of the Zulu Army was also something that should have been taken under consideration. Chelmsford, however, saw only what he wanted to see, and did not warn his subordinates they needed to lose any sleep over the possibility of a Zulu assault.

Colonel Charles Pearson, leading the Coastal Column, discovered the Zulu's mettle for himself ten days later. Since crossing the Tugela River on January 12, the same day Chelmsford was skirmishing with Sihayo's house guards, Pearson knew there were large Zulu forces in his vicinity, but not what they were about. Chelmsford had, after all, told Pearson and Wood both that there was no reason they should fear an attack on their columns. Chelmsford's plan assumed the Zulu would have to be entrapped or provoked into coming after the British; it did not account for the possibility the Zulu Army might, absent of any British provocation beyond the invasion itself, try to strike at one of the prongs of the Lieutenant-General's pincer movement.

Chelmsford, in fact, believed Zulu loyalty to Cetshwayo was threadbare and their march would provoke mass surrenders and defections from these groups, with steps needing to be taken to handle the expected flood of refugees.²⁶⁹ As Pearson pushed farther up the coast there were no defections but increasing signs of Zulu militancy abounded. On several occasions, Pearson found Zulu scouts shadowing his column; when several of these people were captured, they informed Pearson they were local homesteaders who had remained behind to observe his movements while

²⁶⁹ "Memorandum by Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford, October 30, 1878," in *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 24-26.

the rest of the populace evacuated.²⁷⁰ If Pearson was troubled by this, no concern made its way into his official correspondence. Perhaps, surrounded 2/3rd Regiment (aka “The Buffs”), six companies of the 99th Foot, two battalions of the NNC, and the Naval Brigade, Pearson felt invincible. Equipped with two 7-pounder guns and a 9-pounder rocket tube of the Royal Artillery, two 12-pounder guns, a Gatling gun, and two 24-pounder rocket tubes from the Naval Brigade, and a squadron of Mounted Infantry to act as his vanguard, Pearson had reason to believe he was up to any challenge the Zulu might send his way.²⁷¹ Assuming, of course, they sent a challenge his way, which in Chelmsford’s calculations, they were not going to do.

The Zulu, however, were reluctant to conform to Chelmsford or Pearson’s, expectations. Cetshwayo had not wanted a war with the British, but now that war had come to him he was not going to take Chelmsford’s aggression lying down. Since the British ultimatum, the Zulu King had been meeting with his advisors, calling up his levies, and mustering his troops for battle with the British. Far from the untutored savages Chelmsford and Bartle Frere portrayed them as, the Zulu aristocracy was well-aware of the power of the British military and of their limited ability to oppose it. They were not, however, prepared to simply give up, and despite Chelmsford’s expectations that support for Cetshwayo would crumble as the invasion progressed, the exact opposite occurred, with Chiefs who had previously counselled Cetshwayo to do whatever it took to make peace with the British now falling in line firmly behind the throne. There was no Zulu High Command as there was in the British Army, yet the council of elderly chieftains and royal appointees who surrounded Cetshwayo were all military men, many of them possessing far more direct combat experience than their British counterparts, and they worked out a strategy that, in

²⁷⁰ “From Colonel Pearson, Lower Tugela, to Deputy Adjutant-General, January 15, 1879,” in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 1, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 596.

²⁷¹ Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*, 110-111.

the coming weeks, crippled Chelmsford's invasion and set his timetable back by months. There are no papers to go through, as there are in the British Army, but a combination of Zulu testimony and the simple fact of what happened, reveals Cetshwayo's grand design for the campaign and how near it came to succeeding completely.

By splitting his force into three separate columns, Chelmsford played into Cetshwayo's hands. The Zulu King did not think he could defeat the whole of Chelmsford's army at once, but he did believe he had a chance to best the columns one at a time. Identifying Chelmsford's Centre Column as the main threat to his own homestead of Ulundi, Cetshwayo sent Chief Ntshingwayo kaMahole with the majority of his levies to confront and, if possible, destroy, Chelmsford's detachment. At the fringes of Zululand where Evelyn Wood was leading the Left Column, the renegade Swazi Prince Mbilini waMswati used all his expertise in guerilla raiding to delay, confuse, and otherwise impede Wood's advance (earning Wood's eternal enmity in the process). To the coast, where a reliable surrogate like Mbilini was lacking, Cetshwayo sent the seventy-year-old Godide kaNdlela of the Ntuli clan, a long-time friend of Cetshwayo's father Mpande, a member of one of Zululand's most powerful aristocratic families, and the son of Ndlela kaSompisi, King Dingane's leading general. With Godide were 3500 warriors, detached from the main army under Ntshingwayo. Their job was to raise the coastal Zulu and their subject tribes against the British and provide a disciplined core around which the coastal levies and tribal auxiliaries could rally. In Godide's ranks were 2600 men of the uMxhapho regiment, in their mid-thirties, and nine hundred veteran warriors from the uDlambedlu and izinGulube regiments, in their late fifties. Godide did not disappoint his liege, and by the time Pearson crossed the Tugela and entered Zululand, the elderly chieftain had recruited another 6000 local men with

whom to contest the Colonel's advance. Pearson did not know it yet, but he was walking into a Zulu ambush, as Godide aimed to strike at his vanguard with almost 10 000 men.²⁷²

Pearson could have taken more preparations to meet Godide than he did. On January 18 one of Britain's border agents became aware of Zulu movements and informed his superiors in Natal that 10 000 Zulu had been sent from Ulundi to attack Pearson. These numbers were inflated but were accurate enough and were cabled to Pearson. Pearson acknowledged receipt of the information the following day, but otherwise displayed a thoroughly blasé attitude towards the possibility of a Zulu attack.²⁷³ On January 21, Pearson observed several Zulu scouts watching from the hills, but did nothing about it as they were not close enough to his troops to alarm him.²⁷⁴ Whether appearing in his own reports or the in the *Narrative of Field Operations* compiled at the Horse Guards after the war, the Charles Pearson of January 21 is a passive figure, taking no action beyond the continuation of his march. If there was any sense of danger among his staff or the troops of his column, it has not survived in the records.

At eight o'clock in the morning on January 22, Pearson called for his column to halt and take a moment's rest, having just crossed the Nyezane River. Spotting some Zulu scouts over the hillside, Pearson sent a company of the NNC to run them off. It was a good thing he did. "The waggons [sic]," Pearson told Sir Bartle Frere's military secretary, "had already begun to park when the leading company of the Native Contingent, who were scouting out front—personally directed by Captain Hart, staff officer to the officer commanding that regiment—discovered the enemy advancing rapidly over the ridges in our front, and making for the clumps of bush around

²⁷² Ian Castle and Ian Knight's *Fearful Hard Times*, the only full study of the Nyezane through Gingindhlovu, provides these stats.

²⁷³ "From Major Walker to Deputy Adjutant-General, January 18, 1879," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 1, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 596.

²⁷⁴ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 23.

us.”²⁷⁵ The men of the NNC, having successfully dispersed the initial Zulu scouts, now found themselves before of Godide’s vanguard as the Zulu chief sprang his trap. “The Zulus,” Pearson reported, “at once opened a heavy fire upon the men of the company who had shown themselves in the open, and they lost one officer, four non-commissioned officers, and three men killed, almost immediately after the firing began.”²⁷⁶ The white officers sounded the retreat, but the African auxiliaries, only one in ten of whom had a gun, instead firmly stood their ground in the face of the Zulu fire. Rather than viewing this as suicidal courage or disobedience of orders, Pearson, perhaps rightly, put it down to language difficulties within the NNC. “Unfortunately,” he wrote, “owing to scarcely any of the officers or non-commissioned officers of the Native Contingent being able to speak Kafir, and some not even English (there are several foreigners among them), it has been found most difficult to communicate orders, and it is to be feared that these men who lost their lives by gallantly holding their ground did so under the impression that it was the duty of the contingent to fight in the first line, instead of scouting only, and, after an engagement, to pursue.”²⁷⁷ After several more volleys of fire from the Zulu hit home, the NNC’s officers got their men to withdraw, and the Battle of Nyezane officially began.

Whatever its cause, the NNC’s refusal to retreat bought Pearson a few precious moments to make his decisions. The Colonel was caught in one of the worst positions a commander can be in for an ambush: on the march, with his men strung out in a column and unable to properly support one another. Moving quickly, Pearson ordered a company of “The Buffs,” under Captain Jackson and Lieutenant Martin, and the bulk of the Naval Brigade, under Commander H.

²⁷⁵ “From Colonel Pearson, commanding No. 1 Column, to the Military Secretary to His Excellency the High Commissioner, January 23, 1879,” in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 2, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 38.

²⁷⁶ “From Colonel Pearson, commanding No. 1 Column, to the Military Secretary to His Excellency the High Commissioner, January 23, 1879,” 39.

²⁷⁷ “From Colonel Pearson, commanding No. 1 Column, to the Military Secretary to His Excellency the High Commissioner, January 23, 1879,” 39.

Fletcher Campbell, to take up position on a knoll overlooking the road and stall the Zulu advance. Campbell, describing the Zulu attack said: “they boldly advanced to within 150 yards in extended order, rushing from bush to bush and firing with great rapidity. Two 7-prs. R.A. and two 24-prs. Naval Brigade rockets were placed on a knoll at the foot of the pass, but commanding the valley from which the flank attack was proceeding; these supported by two companies of the Buffs and A and B companies of Naval Brigade, opened a heavy fire on the enemy, checking their advance.”²⁷⁸ Pulling two more companies of the Buffs from guard duty halfway down the column, Pearson ordered a charge into the bush where, with covering fire from the knoll, they dislodged the Zulu and pushed them into the open, “which again exposed them to the rockets, shells, and musketry from the knoll.”²⁷⁹ This action freed up the remaining men in the centre of Pearson’s column, letting him bring up his mounted volunteers, the Royal Engineers, and additional companies from the Buffs and the 99th Light Infantry, funneling much needed reinforcements to the frontline.

The frontal assault was only part of Godide’s plan. Even as Pearson strengthened his front, Zulu skirmishers appeared on his left flank, moving through the hills and threatening to strike his now unguarded supply wagons. The Zulu also occupied an abandoned homestead four hundred yards from Campbell’s position, and fired onto the knoll from the other side. A rocket from the knoll set the homestead aflame and forced the Zulu out, but the shooting continued, as did the forward movement of the Zulu right, inching steadily closer to the British line. Pearson, with his column in a tangle, did not have any men to direct towards this new threat, and concentrated on neutralising the Zulu to his front while hoping the fire from the men in the

²⁷⁸ H. Fletcher Campbell, “Letter of Proceedings, January 24, 1879,” in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 2, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 42.

²⁷⁹ “From Colonel Pearson, commanding No. 1 Column, to the Military Secretary to His Excellency the High Commissioner, January 23, 1879,” 39.

centre and rear of the column—primarily NNC, supported by a company of the 99th and the Durban Mounted Rifles—would be enough to stall the Zulu right. The Zulu kept up a fire on the British from the front and left, and casualties climbed among the ranks of the European soldiery.²⁸⁰

It was the arrival of the Naval Brigade's Gatling gun, commanded by Lieutenant Coker, that turned the tide. Despite the artillery and rocketry raining on them from the knoll, the Zulu in Pearson's front were massing in increasingly greater numbers, apparently gearing up for a final charge to take the knoll and break Pearson's line. Coker changed all that when he parked his gun near the knoll and opened up. "I immediately opened fire on them," Coker recalled, "they retiring into the bush. I ceased firing, having expended almost 300 rounds, and stationed my men to try and pick off a few natives who were annoying us consistently."²⁸¹ How many Zulu Coker killed is unknown, but the Gatling forced Godide to abandon his attack on Pearson's frontline and let Pearson reposition his soldiers and sailors to meet the offensive developing on his left.

Deciding that merely defensive measures were not cutting it, Pearson and Commander Campbell decided that a counterattack on the left flank was the only thing that would stop the Zulu and regain control of the battlefield. The Naval Brigade, supported by the NNC, charged up the hill and into the burning homestead, forcing the Zulu from the hilltop with cutlasses and bayonets. As the Zulu abandoned their position, Campbell requested Pearson allow him to continue the attack and, further reinforced by a company of the Buffs "two other hills were carried as soon as the men had recovered breath, thus breaking through and driving back the right horn of the Zulu army, dispersing it in all directions, and clearing the road to Ekowe

²⁸⁰ "From Colonel Pearson, commanding No. 1 Column, to the Military Secretary to His Excellency the High Commissioner, January 23, 1879," 39.

²⁸¹ "Lewis C. Coker to H.F. Campbell, January 23, 1879," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 2, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 44.

[sic].”²⁸² Godide, with his both his thrusts stymied, withdrew after Campbell’s charge, leaving some three hundred Zulu dead behind. According to Campbell, the Zulu ambush killed eight soldiers and wounded another sixteen, some of them mortally. It also shook the Naval officer’s confidence in the innate superiority of white soldiers over Africans. In his after-action report to his superior officer, Commodore Sullivan, Campbell (who was promoted to Captain for his actions at Nyezane) wrote: “the force lately beaten by the 1st Division of the column are said to be assembled in the bush at the Umlatoo [sic] river, there to attack us on our advancing; it seems probable that they will not be dispersed without some loss on our side, the Zulus seem adepts at skirmishing, always in extended order; they rush from one bush to another, delivering their fire, and then retiring under cover to load, it requires a good marksman to bring them down.”²⁸³ The British won at Nyezane but they learned, at least in Campbell’s opinion, that the Zulu were not an adversary to trifle with. Godide’s strike on the Right Column came very near to taking Pearson completely unawares; had the Colonel not chosen at the last moment to send out the NNC to reconnoiter, his column might have been taken in the flanks while still on the march.

Pearson too, seemed rattled by what happened at Nyezane. He marched his men hard that afternoon and evening, making for the old British mission station of Eshowe. Arriving there on the morning of the 23, the Colonel set about converting the missionary post into a fortress, digging trenches, adding gun emplacements, and reinforcing the walls. Godide was still out there, and while his losses were more severe than Pearson’s, they did not make much of a dent in his army. Pearson, wary of being struck again, decided the appropriate thing to do was to fort up and wire for instructions. His report on the action at Nyezane was sent to Natal on January 23.²⁸⁴

²⁸² Campbell, “Letter of Proceedings, January 24, 1879,” 42.

²⁸³ Campbell, “Letter of Proceedings, January 24, 1879,” 43.

²⁸⁴ “From Colonel Pearson, commanding No. 1 Column, to the Military Secretary to His Excellency the High Commissioner, January 23, 1879,” 40.

This was, unknown to Pearson, one day too late to save the lives of Anthony Durnford and the men of the 1/24 who died alongside him at Isandlwana. Only hours after Pearson repelled Godide's ambush, the Ntshingwayo's Zulu force seized and destroyed the Isandlwana camp and killed almost every man defending it. Chelmsford, who was several miles away with most of his column, did not react to the news of the attack until far too late; as will be demonstrated in the following chapter he did not seem to believe it possible the Zulu could have attacked his campsite. If the Lieutenant-General had heard from Pearson about the battle of Nyezane a few hours earlier, he might have been more inclined to listen to what the 24th's officers tried to tell him, but Pearson's message could not be sent until the day after, a predictable outcome of an operational plan that scattered multiple columns across the breadth of Zululand.

Once he got over his surprise, Charles Pearson handled his men well at Nyezane. He fended off a Zulu army that exceeded his own in size, and at the cost of the lives of comparatively few of his men. Clearly the assessment of him as a brave, conscientious, and capable officer held by his superiors, subordinates and peers, was accurate. Yet if that was the case, why had Pearson, who knew the Zulu were about and in substantial numbers, not done a better job of preparing for the possibility of an ambush? Either the men who served with Pearson were wrong about his abilities or the Colonel was blinded to the possibility of the Zulu taking action against him by his belief that Africans would never attack a British army, an opinion supplied to him by Lord Chelmsford himself. The commanding general's misguided opinion of the Zulu had filtered down the ranks, where it interacted with the typically Victorian attitudes of his officers to create a false sense of invulnerability in Pearson and his men. Pearson's beliefs about the Zulu were shaken at Nyezane, but Chelmsford, miles away and out of touch with his Right Column commander, had yet to have such an experience. To his mind, the fight at

Sihayo's had proven not that the Zulu were willing to fight, but that if they did fight the British would smash them. He still thought Pearson was marching up the Coast and that his own camp at Isandlwana was perfectly safe, no matter how many African warriors might be in the region. Colonial reasoning provided the lens through which Chelmsford saw the skirmish at Sihayo's homestead, while his distance from Pearson stopped him from learning of, let alone learning from, the lessons of Nyezane until it was hours too late. With racism and the poor planning it engendered, Chelmsford braided a noose. On January 22, Pearson managed to slip through it, but a few hours later, Durnford and the 24th Infantry hanged in it.

*

The opening phases of the Great Sioux and Anglo-Zulu Wars should have given Phil Sheridan and Lord Chelmsford cause for thought. Their plans of campaign, predicated on the notion that Native Americans and Indigenous Africans would not fight white men in straight up, man-to-man combat, had been shown to be riddled with errors of assumption. The Lakota and Cheyenne and the Zulu were fully prepared to confront the invaders head on, with Crazy Horse defeating Crook at the Rosebud and Godide bloodying Pearson at the Nyezane. While Crook lost his fight and Pearson won his, the preparedness of both their adversaries was far greater than Sheridan or Chelmsford had expected. The early battles of both wars were a warning that neither the Americans nor the British could afford to ignore.

Yet the lessons of those first encounters were ignored, for a variety of similar reasons. In North America, George Crook could not bring himself to tell Sheridan the truth about the Rosebud, or about his earlier failure at the Powder River when he attacked the wrong band of Cheyenne. In Africa, Chelmsford drew all the wrong conclusions from the skirmish at Sihayo's, seeing the victory as evidence he was right, and the Zulu would easily fall to his white soldiers.

Slaves to their own prejudices, Sheridan and Chelmsford saw what they wanted to see, and in Sheridan's case, were told what they wanted to hear by their subordinates. Native Americans and Africans could not beat, or even threaten, white European troops, so the evidence in front of them was made to fit their theories, rather than the other way around.

Sheridan and Chelmsford's bigotry harmed the campaigns in indirect ways as well. Since the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Zulu were not expected to put up serious fights, and it was the pursuit of the fleeing refugees that was expected to be the most onerous part of the campaigns, Sheridan and Chelmsford both divided up their commands and spread them over the breadth of the Great Plains and the South African veldt. With the primitive methods of communication available in 1876 and 1879, and with the poor travelling conditions on the frontier, any messages between columns would take days to travel, days that were not always available when warnings needed to be given or rapid decisions made. Sheridan was not made aware of what occurred at the Rosebud until days after it happened and it took still longer for the information to reach the Department of the Dakotas, leaving Alfred Terry, John Gibbon, and fatally, George Custer, to make their calls in the absence of important information about the enemy's strength and tenacity. Chelmsford did not hear from Pearson about the Battle of the Nyezane until January 23, a day too late to save Durnford and 1/24th who went to their deaths at Isandlwana just hours after Pearson saw off Godide. While the technology of the day limited army's abilities to quickly disseminate information, Sheridan and Chelmsford compounded these difficulties by spreading their forces out so thin, a decision they made not based on cold military logic, but on Victorian Era prejudice.

Sheridan and Chelmsford's inability to change their plans was a natural outcome of the plans themselves, and those plans were premised on a racialized and inaccurate portrait of the "primitives" both generals thought they were fighting. Having ignored, dismissed, or rationalised

away all the information on Lakota and Zulu military prowess they could access before the wars, Sheridan and Chelmsford concocted strategies that by their nature insulated them from any bad news that might allow them to adjust those strategies on the fly. The consequences of this were that the American and British armies were left strung out across immense enemy territories, unable to support one another, or even to advise their superiors of what was taking place in front of them. It was a situation that all but ensured disaster should the Lakota, Cheyenne, or Zulu ever concentrate their forces against one of these isolated units.

Chapter 4: Last Stands

When empires lose battles to enemies they hold in contempt scapegoats are necessary, and no one makes a better scapegoat than a dead man. Where a living person may resist taking the blame for someone else's mistakes, the dead are acquiescent, their actions and decisions easily twisted to meet their accusers' narrative. This is especially true when those who saw the scapegoat in action are also dead and therefore cannot provide any explanation of or defense for their behaviour. When a military operation falls apart, blaming the dead becomes extremely tempting for their superiors, who may need to cover up their own mistakes or camouflage the ways their assumptions handicapped their subordinates. By shifting the blame to the deceased, generals and politicians avoid paying the penalty for their errors, while providing the public with the catharsis of knowing the "guilty party" has already paid the ultimate price for failure.

History is replete with examples of imperial projects who, when confronted with failure in the field, ignored the need to address structural problems or acknowledge the competency of previously despised foes by attributing the defeats to the unique incompetence of a specific field general. Examples can be found as far back as the Battle of Carrhae, in 54 BCE when the Romans chose to blame the senility of the Roman general, Marcus Licinius Crassus, rather than the brilliance of the Persian commander, for the defeat.²⁸⁵ The Dutch government did the same in the 1600s after the loss of their Taiwan colony to the Chinese, holding their governor responsible for failing to fend off 200 000 Chinese troops with the few hundred men at his disposal.²⁸⁶ The British and the Americans employed a similar narrative when Major-General Edward

²⁸⁵ See Plutarch's "Life of Crassus" for the traditional narrative upon which most subsequent accounts were based. See Gareth Sampson, *Defeat of Rome: Crassus, Carrhae, and the Invasion of the East*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2008) for a revisionist examination of Crassus' military career before and during his expedition to Persia and a highly positive analysis of Surenas' generalship.

²⁸⁶ See Tonio Andrade, *Lost Colony: The Untold Story of China's First Great Victory Over the West* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011) for the only full length English language treatment of this topic.

Braddock's column was slaughtered by France's Indigenous allies on the Monongahela River during the Seven Years' War, and both nations would adapt those tropes to fit future defeats.²⁸⁷ George Washington, a veteran of the Monongahela, applied the Braddock narrative when Major-General Arthur Saint Clair was obliterated by the Shawnee and Miami at the Battle of the Wabash, while the British did the same in the aftermath of colonial disasters in Afghanistan and the African Gold Coast.²⁸⁸ The pattern, in each of these cases, was the same: the white officers were entirely responsible for the defeat, and the decisions of the Persian, Chinese, Native American, African, and Afghani generals were dismissed as unimportant.

The advantages of this framing for colonial powers are twofold. On one hand, it enables other participants in the endeavour to exculpate themselves of any responsibility for the catastrophe. On the other, it allows the colonial state to carry on without re-examining its assumptions about the capabilities of its adversaries. If only the general in charge had been more capable, the argument goes, the imperial army would have been automatically victorious on the basis of its innate superiority. Any advantages the enemy might hold can be written off or relegated as of secondary importance to the inability of one white man. It centres the conversation on the imperial side of the conflict, precisely where the empire wishes the attention to be, while simultaneously avoiding holding the broader empire to account for losing.

²⁸⁷ There are many worthwhile monographs on the Battle of the Monongahela, but the best, and most recent, is David Lee Preston, *Braddock's Defeat: The Battle of the Monongahela and the Road to Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Unlike most previous books on the topic, Preston makes a significant effort to understand the French and Native American sides of the battle, drawing extensively on overlooked French-language archives to do so.

²⁸⁸ Colin Calloway, *The Victory With No Name: The Native American Defeat of the First American Army* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) provides a detailed examination of Saint Clair's Defeat from the American and Native American points of view, and, as is hinted at in the title, seeks to examine the processes by which Americans sought to forget the battle. Robert Edgerton, *The Fall of the Asante Empire: The Hundred Year War for Africa's Gold Coast* (New York: The Free Press, 1995) and Diana Preston, *The Dark Defile: Britain's Catastrophic Invasion of Afghanistan 1838-1842* (New York: Walker and Company, 2012) are solid examinations of the British failures against the Asante Empire and the Afghan tribes respectively.

The Battle of the Little Bighorn and the Battle of Isandlwana are case studies in the ways this narrative can be employed to obscure the truth of what happened on the ground. Lieutenant-Colonels George Armstrong Custer and Anthony Durnford, killed commanding the white forces at the two battles, have been ridiculed for incompetence, with Custer's name in particular becoming a byword for hubris. Studies of both battles focus overwhelmingly on the decisions made by the white officers who were on the scene, and even those that attempt to exonerate Custer and Durnford tend only to recontextualize their actions, demonstrating why the decisions both men made were reasonable in the moment and on the basis of the information they had available to them. While monographs incorporating Lakota, Cheyenne, and Zulu perspectives and ability into their explanations are hardly uncommon, they still tend to assume that, had Custer and Durnford done something differently, they could have snatched victory from the jaws of defeat. Similarly, even researchers who blame Sheridan and Chelmsford for the fiascos, remain prone to examining Custer and Durnford's tactical decisions, and identifying moments where they could have acted differently, and supposedly achieved success despite their superiors.

It will be contended here that there was *nothing* George Custer or Anthony Durnford could have done to win the Battles of the Little Bighorn and Isandlwana. Both officers were hamstrung from the start by the colonial reasoning of their bosses and by the bigoted assumptions that underpinned those bosses' campaign plans. Moreover, they were outmatched, tactically and numerically, by far larger enemy forces under the direction of intelligent and experienced Indigenous commanders like Crazy Horse and Ntshingwayo kaMahole. Throughout both fights, it was the Indigenous armies, not the white ones, that maintained better unit cohesion and battlefield control, and it was because of their superiority in this regard that they were victorious. Once battle was joined, Custer and Durnford became extremely constrained in the

options that were available to them and lost most of their ability to alter the outcome of the engagement. In fighting at all, Custer and Durnford lost.

This is not to suggest that either man fought a perfect battle or made no tactical errors. There were certainly things that Custer and Durnford could have done to improve their chances of surviving longer, or in Custer's case, escaping the battlefield to fight another day. Actually *winning* either battle, however, as opposed to merely living through it, was never an option and, as will be shown, it is only the belief that white men should, as a matter of course, win fights with indigenous opponents that has seen their decisions picked over as much as they have been.

*

George Crook's withdrawal from the Rosebud and the communications blackout that followed left Alfred Terry and John Gibbon blind. Messages between their columns and Crook's, whether sent directly or routed through Sheridan had always struggled to get through, but the possibility at least had been there. Crook's retreat from Lakota and Cheyenne territory and his reluctance to admit to his humiliation took his column out of the equation, and removed one possible source of information on Native American movements from Terry and Gibbon's arsenal. Whether Crook *could* have sent a runner to Terry or Gibbon and alerted them to the willingness of the Lakota-Cheyenne alliance to fight is an open question; what is relevant is that he did not even try—and neither did Sheridan.²⁸⁹ Terry did not learn of Crook's defeat and retreat until July 7, 1876, three weeks after the engagement.²⁹⁰ Even more embarrassingly, the information came to Terry not through any official military channel, but through a party of Crows whom Gibbon encountered that day, and who learned of the Rosebud reversal from some

²⁸⁹ John Gibbon, "Hunting Sitting Bull," in *Adventures on the Western Frontier*, edited by Alan and Maureen Gaff (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1994): 154.

²⁹⁰ Gibbon, "Hunting Sitting Bull," 154.

of the Crow scouts who left Crook after the withdrawal to Goose Creek.²⁹¹ Until this chance meeting, Terry and Gibbon continued to operate on the presumption that Crook was still in the field, actively seeking a confrontation with the Lakota and Cheyenne. By the time they had been disabused of this notion, George Custer had been dead for several weeks.

The point must be stressed that in the week between the Rosebud and Little Bighorn battles, Alfred Terry, in his capacity as both a column leader and Commanding Officer Department of the Dakotas, was making his decisions based entirely on what scraps of information were available to him. With no word from Crook or Sheridan, Terry had to assume Crook was still in the field, any engagements he might have had with the hostiles had been successful, and Sheridan's orders to find the Lakota and Cheyenne before they could "scatter" stood unchanged.²⁹² So far as Terry knew, the hunt for Sitting Bull and the other Lakota and Cheyenne war-leaders was still on, and it was still his job to cut off their path to the north while Crook blocked the route south. Without looking at the situation in this light, it is not possible to truly make sense of Terry's choices, or the choices of George Custer.

Further complicating matters was Terry's own lack of experience campaigning on the Plains. As previously noted, the accusation that Terry was a desk soldier with no field duty under his belt is untrue; as a veteran of the Union's campaigns up and down the Confederate coast, and the commanding officer during the final assault on Fort Fisher, Terry had seen more action—and led more successful actions—than many of the army's professional soldiers.²⁹³ As a self-taught siege engineer and logistician, Terry had few, if any, equals in the Union army, during or after the Civil War, and there was a reason why Ulysses Grant rated him the best amateur soldier of

²⁹¹ Gibbon, "Hunting Sitting Bull," 154.

²⁹² John Gibbon, "Last Summer's Expedition and Its Great Catastrophe," in *Adventures on the Western Frontier*, edited by Alan and Maureen Gaff (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1994): 130.

²⁹³ Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 755.

the conflict.²⁹⁴ Terry's skill set did not, however, easily translate to hunting for hostile Lakota and Cheyenne along the Western frontier. As author of the Fort Laramie Treaty, Terry saw a fair amount of the Plains, but he did so in his capacity as a lawyer, government representative, and *ad hoc* diplomat, rather than as the General Commanding the Department of the Dakotas. Between Red Cloud's War, which the Fort Laramie Treaty closed out, and the inauguration of the Great Sioux War, most actions on the northern plains were comparatively small scale, and no expeditions requiring the personal presence of the Departmental Commander were mounted.²⁹⁵

Terry was well aware of his deficiencies in this area, and his initial plan of campaign anticipated the two columns from his Department would be led not by himself, but by John Gibbon and George Custer.²⁹⁶ Custer's political clash with the Grant administration, however, saw him temporarily removed from command by the Secretary of War. To keep the expedition on track, Sheridan instructed Terry to take command of the Fort Abraham Lincoln column originally entrusted to Custer; Terry was so distressed by this state of affairs he wrote to Sheridan requesting Custer be granted clemency and allowed to join the operation.²⁹⁷ Sheridan forwarded the request to Sherman, who then passed it along to Grant; after much back and forth, Custer was allowed to rejoin the column, but as Lieutenant-Colonel of the 7th Cavalry alone. Terry was retained as the titular head of the expedition, much to his own displeasure.²⁹⁸

Custer may have been more familiar with the Lakota and Cheyenne territories than Terry was, but that was not necessarily saying much. As John Gibbon, commanding both the Fort Ellis

²⁹⁴ Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 755.

²⁹⁵ See Sheridan's "Record of Engagements with Hostile Indians Within the Military Division of the Missouri, from 1868 to 1882," in *Indian Battles and Skirmishes on the American Frontier 1790-1898*, edited by Joseph P. Peters (New York: Argonaut Press Ltd, 1966), pages 35 to 49 for a list of engagements fought during Terry's time at the Department of the Dakotas.

²⁹⁶ Alfred Terry, "The Official Report of General A.H. Terry," in *The Field Diary of General Alfred H. Terry, Yellowstone Expedition 1876*, edited by Michael Koury (Bellevue: The Old Army Press, 1970): 1.

²⁹⁷ "Terry to Sheridan," *Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* Vol. 28, 74.

²⁹⁸ Alfred Terry, "The Official Report of General A.H. Terry," 1.

column and the District of Montana, observed in an article written after the war, none of the white officers truly had any understanding of what they were doing or where they were going. Discussing the Lakota holdings Gibbon observed, “Of the geography of this region the troops are almost completely ignorant, and are not infrequently entirely at the mercy of incompetent guides, not only in their movements, but in the discovery of what is absolutely necessary to the success of such movements—water.” Gibbon went on to write admiringly of the Native American system of espionage, which he maintained kept the enemy war-leaders well-aware of American troop movements at all times. In contrast to this, Gibbon stated that the soldiers “move along almost without eyes, nothing beyond a very short distance from the moving column being seen or known, and the game is carried on very much on the principle of ‘Blindman’s Bluff.’” Gibbon had no answers for how these deficiencies in knowledge of the terrain were to be made up for, save through the same solutions recommended by Sheridan: converging columns and winter campaigning. Both solutions would be shown by the Great Sioux War to be inadequate to the needs of the army, something Gibbon, unlike Sheridan, was later prepared to admit.²⁹⁹

Alfred Terry left no memoirs for posterity, but his field diary and his official after-action report to Sheridan give a good indication of the strain the Brigadier-General found himself under in the spring of 1876. Where Crook was willing to starve his command to follow Sheridan’s instructions, Terry was not, and he spent much of the early spring building up his supply chain. A steamer was used to ferry supplies up the Yellowstone River, creating supply depots Terry and Gibbon’s columns could utilise as need be. According to Terry, “no train of pack-mules has ever been organised in this department, and the marching columns were necessarily dependent on wagons for the transport of their supplies.” Terry did bring two hundred fifty saddles with him,

²⁹⁹ Gibbon, “Hunting Sitting Bull,” 171-173.

with which he might create an impromptu mule train if need be, but he did not favour the notion, preferring to rely on his wagons and on the advance depots he had set up by steamer. With all these arrangements to make, it took Terry until May 17 to leave Fort Lincoln; Gibbon, by this point, had been in the field since April 3. Wiring Gibbon of his departure, Terry told his subordinate he would meet up with him along the Little Missouri River, where reports told him the main body of “hostile Sioux” were located.³⁰⁰

It took Terry until May 29 to reach the Little Missouri, loaded down as he was with his wagon train. The weather was of no help, with rains turning the roads to mud and hampering Terry’s progress still further. Scouting by a portion of the 7th Cavalry, led by Custer, revealed no recent Native American trails; the journey to the Little Missouri it seemed, was a goose chase. Having yet to contact Gibbon, Terry resumed his march on May 31, only for a late spring blizzard to leave his expedition snowbound through June 1 and 2. On June 3, Terry came to Beaver Creek, where he met despatches from Gibbon and from the steamer, *Far West*, which delivered his supplies. Gibbon had not found any trace of the Lakota or Cheyenne either; Terry told him to suspend further movements while he worked out a means for them to meet up. After several more days of marching, Terry reached the Powder River on June 7; on June 9 he boarded the *Far West* and journeyed up the Yellowstone to meet Gibbon.³⁰¹

Gibbon’s own travels through the Department of the Dakotas had been as joyless as Terry’s, his account of the expedition bemoaning the snow and rain that repeatedly slowed him up. The Crow scouts accompanying Gibbon had no more luck finding the Lakota and Cheyenne than those with Terry, though the Lakota had, on several occasions, found Gibbon. During their first raid on his encampment, the Lakota plundered the Crow horse herds, leaving many of the

³⁰⁰ Terry, “The Official Report of General A.H. Terry,” 2.

³⁰¹ Terry, “The Official Report of General A.H. Terry,” 2-3.

Colonel's auxiliaries dismounted and disheartened. Efforts to trail the thieves failed. Two weeks later, on May 23, two of Gibbon's cavalymen, accompanied by a civilian teamster, went absent without leave from camp. When Gibbon went searching for these deserters he discovered they had been waylaid and slain by Lakota outriders. The Colonel tried to track the killers, but "when the cavalry reached the top of the bluffs not an Indian was to be seen," and Gibbon's wanderings became increasingly aimless before he received new marching orders from Terry.³⁰²

The following anecdote from Gibbon reveals just how hard it was for those marching orders from Terry to get through to him. On the morning of June 8, Gibbon's scouts found an abandoned sack whose contents indicated to them that there were white men, rather than hostile Native Americans, about.³⁰³ At two o'clock the following morning, Gibbon was awakened by the arrival of a despatch from Terry, carried by a white soldier and an indigenous scout. During the ensuing conversation, Gibbon was informed his own scouts correctly identified the contents of the sack: it had belonged to a pair of white men whom Terry sent to find Gibbon the day before.³⁰⁴ These men, "had seen from a distance our Crow scouts, had taken them for Sioux, and had fled back to report the country filled with hostiles, and lose a reward of two hundred dollars which had been promised them if they got through to me [Gibbon] with their despatches..."³⁰⁵ These difficulties were hardly unique to this one communique between Gibbon and his superior; after the Little Bighorn, Gibbon and Terry struggled for weeks to locate Crook, sending out multiple different parties of both white soldiers and Crow scouts, who became lost in the unfamiliar plains, were neutralised by Lakota or Northern Cheyenne warbands, or found Crook only to flee in terror from—or be chased away by—the Native scouts attached to the Department

³⁰² Gibbon, "Last Summer's Expedition and Its Great Catastrophe," 122-125.

³⁰³ Gibbon, "Last Summer's Expedition and Its Great Catastrophe," 126.

³⁰⁴ Gibbon, "Last Summer's Expedition and Its Great Catastrophe," 127.

³⁰⁵ Gibbon, "Last Summer's Expedition and Its Great Catastrophe," 127.

of the Platte.³⁰⁶ Gibbon's recollections include numerous occasions in which Crow, Shoshone, or Arikara auxiliaries were misidentified as Lakota or Cheyenne, both by white troopers or by one another, and were chased away or even killed by friendly fire.³⁰⁷

At their conference on June 9, Gibbon and Terry pooled their information and discovered, to the irritation of both, that neither had anything constructive to report. Terry had not found any Lakota, Gibbon had endured two raids but had not been able to give chase, and neither officer had heard anything from George Crook. "The existence of any large camps of hostile Indians in this region," Gibbon recorded, "was now more than ever a matter for doubt."³⁰⁸ It was decided that Terry would organise a reconnaissance of the confluence of the Tongue and the Rosebud; Gibbon, in the meantime, would take his men to the mouth of the Rosebud and wait there for Terry.³⁰⁹ The two of them together would guard the Yellowstone and prevent any hostiles Crook might have encountered from fleeing northward. Since Terry had (in Gibbon's opinion) no competent guides with him, Gibbon lent him the mixed-race scout Mitch Boyer, then set about returning to his column and getting it moving towards the Rosebud.³¹⁰ A sudden rainstorm, however, delayed Gibbon considerably, as "the whole alkali flat around us became one immense quagmire, and a gulch back of our camp, which was dry when we came, was soon a torrent ten or twelve feet deep."³¹¹ With bridges washed out and fords overflowing, it took Gibbon until June 14 to reach the mouth of the Rosebud and set up camp.³¹²

³⁰⁶ Gibbon, "Hunting Sitting Bull," 161.

³⁰⁷ Gibbon, "Hunting Sitting Bull," 151.

³⁰⁸ Gibbon, "Last Summer's Expedition and Its Great Catastrophe," 127.

³⁰⁹ Gibbon, "Last Summer's Expedition and Its Great Catastrophe," 128.

³¹⁰ Gibbon, "Last Summer's Expedition and Its Great Catastrophe," 128.

³¹¹ Gibbon, "Last Summer's Expedition and Its Great Catastrophe," 128.

³¹² Gibbon, "Last Summer's Expedition and Its Great Catastrophe," 128.

Terry had his own problems with delays. On June 11 he sent six companies of the 7th Cavalry out on a scouting mission of the Tongue River.³¹³ They were under the command of Major Marcus Reno, Custer's second-in-command and a man who was heartily disliked by nearly every other officer in the regiment. A deeply depressive personality, made more so by the recent death of his wife, Reno was reviled for his moodiness, sarcasm, and alcoholism in roughly equal measure. George Custer and his younger brother, Captain Tom Custer, egged on by Custer's teetotaling wife, Libbie, found Reno's frequent bouts of drunkenness especially distasteful, while Captain Frederick Benteen, often positioned by historians as the leader of the 7th's anti-Custer faction, had once threatened Reno with violence after the Major insulted him one time too many.³¹⁴ The events of the next several days added Brigadier-General Alfred Terry to Reno's list of enemies, as Reno believing he had discovered a Native trail, vanished from contact for more than a week. None of the ranking officers in the Department of the Dakotas learned where Reno was until June 18, when Gibbon's scouts discovered him, and it was not until the following day, June 19, that one of Reno's despatches reached his actual superiors, Terry and Custer.³¹⁵ Terry, extremely frustrated by this time, had to send out Custer with another six companies of the 7th Cavalry to retrieve the major, which was accomplished on June 21.³¹⁶ Reno had almost nothing to show for his adventuring; he found evidence the Lakota had been in the region at some point in the not-too-distant past, but precious little else.

³¹³ Terry, "The Official Report of General A.H. Terry," 3.

³¹⁴ See Donovan, *A Terrible Glory*, 140-141 and Philbrick, *The Last Stand*, 74-75, 223 for second-hand summaries of Reno's troubled relationships within the 7th Cavalry. For firsthand accounts of his alcoholism and the men's distaste for him, see Charles Windolph, *I Fought with Custer* (New York: Scribner, 1947): 50 and Charles White, "The Sergeant Charles White Diary," in *Indian Views of the Custer Fight* edited by Richard G. Hardorff (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005): 17, 21.

³¹⁵ Gibbon, "Last Summer's Expedition and Its Great Catastrophe," 129.

Alfred Terry, "The Field Diary of General A.H. Terry," in *The Field Diary of General Alfred H. Terry, Yellowstone Expedition 1876*, edited by Michael Koury (Bellevue: The Old Army Press, 1970): 22.

³¹⁶ Terry, "The Field Diary of General A.H. Terry," 23.

Based on the limited evidence found by Reno and by their entire failure to find the Lakota and Cheyenne anywhere else, Terry determined the hostiles had to be camped along the Yellowstone. Later on June 21, Terry, Gibbon, and Custer held a conference aboard the *Far West* to work out their plans. The decision was made to divide their forces to increase their chances of encountering their enemies. Custer would separate from Terry, and, with the loan of Mitch Boyer and six of Gibbon's Crow scouts (Custer's own Arikara auxiliaries were fierce enemies of the Lakota, but lacked a working knowledge of their territories), range ahead with orders to track down and pursue the hostiles.³¹⁷ Terry's report, and his written instructions to Custer, state the plan was for Gibbon to take up position along the Yellowstone and Bighorn Rivers, while Custer felt along the Rosebud and Little Bighorn Rivers for the hostiles' camp. Once Gibbon was in place, Custer was to strike the Lakota and Cheyenne, whom Terry expected were somewhere on the Little Bighorn, driving them towards Gibbon or south towards Terry and, presumably, Crook.³¹⁸ Here one can again see the ways in which the inability of the Departmental Commanders to communicate with each other undermined their plans. Terry and Gibbon still thought Crook was out there, ready to act as a blockade against the Lakota and Cheyenne making a run for the south. In truth, the way south was wide open, and Terry's Dakota columns were the only American military forces still in the field—something Terry had no way of knowing.

Monographs like *Glory-Hunter*, which subscribe to the notion that Custer disobeyed Terry's orders have made much of the Brigadier-General's suggestion Custer stick to the Rosebud and not head down the Little Bighorn until he could be sure Gibbon was in place, yet the tone of Terry's written orders, often used against Custer, makes it apparent that these were suggestions, not commands. This was made clear in the opening lines of Terry's instructions,

³¹⁷ Gibbon, "Last Summer's Expedition and Its Great Catastrophe," 130-131.

³¹⁸ Gibbon, "Last Summer's Expedition and Its Great Catastrophe," 130.

where Custer was told, “It is, of course, impossible to give you any definite instructions in regard to this movement; and were it not impossible to do so, the department commander places too much confidence in your zeal, energy, and ability to wish to impose upon you precise orders, which might hamper your action when nearly in contact with the enemy.”³¹⁹ In those two sentences Terry gave Custer field command over the 7th Regiment, informing the Lieutenant-Colonel he was to use his own judgement rather than deferring to instructions from Terry. He also made it apparent that, should Custer find the camp, he was not to break off contact.

Terry would later claim he had not wanted Custer to engage with the Lakota and Cheyenne alone, but his own order gives the lie to that statement. As Custer’s colleague and friend, Colonel Nelson Miles commented after the fact, Terry’s orders would have left Custer open to censure had he found Sitting Bull’s camp and not attacked it.³²⁰ Custer has also been blamed by historians, including Stephen Ambrose, for not taking Gatling guns with him and for refusing to take any cavalry units from outside the 7th Regiment, but these criticisms are again, unfair. Custer was ordered to locate and attack Sitting Bull’s camp, not to defend a fortified position. Terry expected the 7th Cavalry to move quickly, and Gatling guns, or any other form of wheeled artillery, would have impeded his advance; Terry noted Custer’s handing over the Gatling guns to Gibbon without adding any critical comments.³²¹ As to the notion that he could have accepted aid from another unit of cavalry—or any other unit in the army, for that matter—Terry’s own report indicates that decision was out of Custer’s hands. “It was believed,” Terry told Sheridan, “to be impracticable to join Colonel Gibbon’s column to Lieutenant-Colonel Custer’s force; for more than one-half of Colonel Gibbon’s troops were infantry, who would be

³¹⁹ Terry, “The Official Report of General A.H. Terry,” 4.

³²⁰ Miles, *Personal Recollections of General Nelson A. Miles*, 206.

³²¹ Terry, “The Official Report of General A.H. Terry,” 4.

unable to keep up with cavalry in a rapid movement; while to detach Gibbon's mounted men and add them to the Seventh Cavalry would leave his force too small to act as an independent body."³²² It was Alfred Terry, not George Custer, who arranged the disposition of the Department of the Dakotas' forces on the eve of the Little Bighorn, and he did so according to the theory of frontier warfare laid out by Phil Sheridan. Terry and Gibbon's infantry and artillery, being too slow to catch horse-borne Native Americans would lie in wait, while the cavalry, under Custer, chased the Lakota and Cheyenne towards them. The columns would then converge on the hostiles, preventing "scatteration" and ensuring they were all killed or captured. It was a badly flawed plan but its conception and execution lay not with Custer, but with his Departmental and Divisional superiors. As Custer set out for the Little Bighorn he was not carrying out his own scheme, but was adhering to Sheridan's stratagems as implemented by Terry.

Indeed, Custer, despite what his detractors have claimed about him, had a better idea of what he was getting into than Terry did. During the June 21 meeting, he, Terry, and Gibbon had hazarded their best guesses as to how many hostile Lakota and Cheyenne were out on the Great Plains. Terry and Gibbon, assuming that since they had not found any Native Americans there could not be many to find, put the number at a few hundred, in line with Sheridan's prewar assertions. Custer, however, as alluded to in the last chapter, disagreed, stating that with reinforcements coming off the agencies, there might be as many as 1500 hostiles roaming the Lakota territories. As US Army estimates of Native American numbers went, that was not a bad call. The highest modern estimates for the number of warriors with Crazy Horse at the Rosebud top out at around 1500, while the lowest estimates for those present at the Little Bighorn

³²² Terry, "The Official Report of General A.H. Terry," 4.

encampment begin at that same number. Custer's mistake, inasmuch as it was his mistake to make at all, was in thinking, like Terry and Gibbon, that those warriors had to be travelling in separate bands and would never be found all camped together. Certainly, several war-parties or family groups might meet up or even travel together for a time, but all the hostiles being in one place at the same time? It was a notion that never occurred to Custer, just as it never occurred to Gibbon, Terry, or Sheridan. Of those men, only Gibbon was able to own up to it, speculating, "I do not suppose there was a man in the column who entertained for a moment that there were Indians enough in the country to defeat, much less annihilate, the fine regiment of cavalry which Custer had under his command."³²³ Custer did not suppose it either, at least at first, though there were some among the 7th Cavalry who recalled that as they neared their quarry, the Lieutenant-Colonel's outlook grew ever more downcast—some of them suggested Custer had a premonition of his coming doom.³²⁴ Perhaps he had. Or perhaps this was merely a case of hindsight being perfect, and those troopers who came out alive editing, consciously or unconsciously, their recollections. Regardless, the matter was out of Custer's hands. Terry ordered him to find the hostiles, and with the recent trouble Custer had been in with Grant and Terry's role in bailing him out of it, Custer could hardly disobey his commander.

This is not to say that all the blame rests with Terry either. The Brigadier-General's bet that the Lakota were camped in the Little Bighorn River valley proved to be a good one. Working with limited resources, a paucity of guides, and no information from Crook or Sheridan, Alfred Terry had, through process of elimination and some clever guesswork, figured out the rough location of the primary hostile encampment. It was a solid bit of deductive reasoning, and one that Terry is rarely given credit for. Just as Custer's problems stemmed from

³²³ Gibbon, "Last Summer's Expedition and Its Great Catastrophe," 134-135.

³²⁴ "General Godfrey's Narrative," in *The Custer Myth*, edited by W.A. Graham (New York: Bonanza Books): 135.

Terry's orders rather than a lack of military skill on his own part, Terry's mistakes were a product not of insufficient martial talent, but of lack of data and the military-colonial framework in which he was operating. As the events of the previous winter's campaign showed, Terry was not a fool, and was perfectly willing to buck orders when he felt they were inappropriate—his refusal to participate in Sheridan's plans for that winter without sufficient provision for his men amply demonstrates this aspect of his character. Had Terry known about the Battle of the Rosebud and how many hostiles Custer was liable to encounter, he might well have acted differently. John Gibbon certainly thought he would have; writing of his June 18 encounter with Reno's lost reconnaissance team, he said, "Could we have known what had taken place only twenty-four hours before on the head waters of the very stream at whose mouth we stood, the information would have been invaluable to us, and probably have given a different shape to our whole subsequent operations. As it was, we were still groping in the dark in regard to the location of the hostile camps, and had every reason to believe that the Sioux with their women and children were solicitous only to avoid us."³²⁵ Knowing about the Rosebud would have told Terry, Gibbon, and Custer their enemy had concentrated in far greater numbers than expected and was willing to take an offensive posture. They did not, however, know about the Rosebud, and their ignorance was a direct result of Sheridan's operational scheme which placed Terry and Crook's forces so far apart communication became nigh impossible.

While Terry and Gibbon were searching for them, the Lakota-Cheyenne coalition continued to grow. The news that Crazy Horse had repelled Crook, which would have been so important to Terry, traveled quickly amongst the free tribes of the Great Plains. Additional recruits from the reservations rode out to swell the ranks of the alliance, while family groups and

³²⁵ Gibbon, "Last Summer's Expedition and Its Great Catastrophe," 129.

warbands that had already been planning to join with Sitting Bull but had not arrived in time for the Rosebud, hurried to make sure they did not miss the next fight. The precise size of the camp, and the number of warriors in it is unlikely to ever be known; the Lakota and Cheyenne did not have a formal military system, and there was no individual who was in a position to count every fighting man present, let alone measure the length of the camp. Modern estimates, drawing on Native American testimony, archaeological research, and the statements of the surviving members of the 7th Cavalry, place the number of warriors in the camp at anywhere between 1500 and 5000, with totals between 2000 and 3000 being the most frequently reported.³²⁶ Even using the lowest estimates leave Custer's six hundred troopers outnumbered by two-and-a-half to one, while the highest estimates put the ratio at over eight to one. Every Lakota and Northern Cheyenne subdivision and warrior society was present, as were token war-parties of Southern Cheyenne and Northern Arapaho, and with them came every famous chief or war-leader who opposed the sale of the Black Hills. The Rosebud battle had seen the greatest assemblage of Lakota and Cheyenne military talent to date, but the Little Bighorn saw still more, and this is yet another point that must be taken into account when exploring the turns the battle took. American officers were used to facing war-parties led by only one or two experienced leaders; these men could not be everywhere at once, and if killed in action, their men would typically break. At the Little Bighorn as at the Rosebud before, there were dozens of war-chiefs and leaders, all experienced in Plains warfare, and all capable of directing the response to Custer's attack.

³²⁶ Sheridan's *Record of Engagements with Hostile Indians*, based on the testimony of Major Reno and Captain Benteen places the total number of Lakota and Cheyenne at 2500. Some of the white veterans would make claims as high as 7000 though these are generally discounted in the modern secondary literature. Native American testimony typically estimates the number of lodges rather than the number of warriors, unless prompted by white interviewers to provide a number; 1000 lodges is a fairly standard estimate, which would total 5000 to 7000 people and anywhere between 1500 and 3000 warriors depending on how one does the counting.

White historians often dismiss Native American testimony on the Little Bighorn on the basis that it is contradictory, one common criticism being the Lakota and Cheyenne veterans could not even agree on who was leading them.³²⁷ Given the Native American tradition of cooperative leadership, however, this discrepancy is entirely to be anticipated: different warbands answered to their own chiefs and war-leaders, and depending on where they were on the field, came under the supervision of different members of Sitting Bull's inner council of friends, advisors, and allies. What is remarkable about the Native American testimony, given the chaotic nature of the battle, is how well much of the testimony lines up, with one another, with the archaeological evidence, and with the accounts of the surviving soldiers. Even more interestingly, while the Lakota and Cheyenne witnesses might disagree with one another on the role of one warrior or chieftain, the same few key names recur again and again throughout the documented literature, making it quite easy to identify who the important players were. The insistence of some American historians that what happened at the Little Bighorn can never be known because none of Custer's personal command survived is simply untrue and relies on a refusal to accept Native American testimony as having value without corroboration from white witnesses. The reconstruction of the battle that follows, though informed by some of the best of the secondary literature, draws heavily upon the Lakota and Cheyenne statements about the engagement, and uses their commentary to build a portrait of a fast-paced, high intensity clash in which the Native American leadership brought order to chaos, achieved battlefield command and control, and destroyed the better part of an American regiment that was losing all of those things.

When Custer reached the Little Bighorn camp, some of the Indigenous commanders already knew he was coming. Historians have wrangled back and forth over this fact, insisting

³²⁷ William Graham's *The Custer Myth* provides an early demonstration of this attitude; Gregory Michno's *Lakota Noon* a more recent one.

that since some of the Native accounts say they were aware of Custer's presence, while others say they were caught entirely by surprise, one party or the other must be lying. This ignores the fact that since the Native American army at the Little Bighorn was a conglomeration of separate warbands, some war-leaders can have known that Custer was on his way while others were still in the dark. The size of the camp, which has been put at anywhere from three to seven miles in length, also ensured that even if those who were in the know tried to tell the others, the message could take hours to travel from one end of the camp to the other. Further reinforcing this point is the fact that most of those who say they were aware Custer was coming were Northern Cheyenne, with those Lakota who corroborate this story all being camped near them. Shortly after the Rosebud, it seems, the Northern Cheyenne chief Little Wolf stole away from the Red Cloud reservation with a band of newly recruited followers, an act he repeated several times over the course of the war.³²⁸ On his way to the Little Bighorn camp, Little Wolf came across Custer's trail, and, assuming it was Crook coming back for revenge, began shadowing the 7th Cavalry, using runners to keep some of the other Cheyenne leaders apprised of their movements.³²⁹ John Stands-in-Timber, grandson of both the Southern Cheyenne war-chief Lame White Man (alias Rabid Wolf), and the Northern Cheyenne warrior Wolf Tooth, said on June 24, the day before the battle, "village criers announced that no man was to leave camp, and that night the warrior societies held dances and the chiefs agreed on a plan of battle. The warriors prepared ritually. When the Indians knew that the soldiers were coming, the three Cheyenne soldier societies— Crazy Dogs (60 members), Elks (60 members) and Foxes (60 members), each led by eight

³²⁸ "The Bull Hump and White Bird Interviews," in *Cheyenne Memories of the Custer Fight* edited by Richard G. Hardorff (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995): 86.

³²⁹ "The Bull Hump and White Bird Interviews," 86.

leaders—began taking turns watching the soldiers.”³³⁰ The Northern Cheyenne American Horse (not to be confused with the Lakota leader of the same name) concurred they knew Custer was in the area from the day before, as not only Little Wolf’s band, but several outriders sent to follow Crook to Goose Creek, reported the 7th Cavalry’s presence to the Cheyenne chiefs; American Horse also said a party of Oglala Lakota under Black Bear had intended to return to Red Cloud Agency but, after spotting Custer’s fires, came back to the camp and alerted him again.³³¹ Other Cheyenne veterans said their forewarning was brief, coming only minutes before the battle, when one of Little Wolf’s warriors rushed into the camp to tell them the soldiers were coming.³³²

These accounts are sometimes positioned as mutually exclusive, but in truth are anything but, and the statements of Chief Two Moons of the Northern Cheyenne and Crow King (more accurately translated as Father Crow or Patriarch Crow), a Hunkpapa war-chief, unite the two versions of events quite coherently. Two Moons said the Cheyenne were surprised by *when* the attack was made and the direction it came from, but that they had known since the day before that Custer was nearby.³³³ Crow King said nearly the same thing, telling the *Leavenworth Times*, “we were in camp, not thinking there was any danger of a battle, although we had heard that the long-haired chief had been sent after us. Some of our runners went back on our trail, for what purpose I do not know. One came back and reported that an army of white soldiers was coming, and he had no more reported when another runner came in with the same story, and also told us that the command had divided and that one party was coming around to attack us from the

³³⁰ “The John Stands-in-Timber Interview, 1956” in *Cheyenne Memories of the Custer Fight* edited by Richard G. Hardorff (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995): 167-168.

³³¹ “The American Horse Interview,” in *Cheyenne Memories of the Custer Fight* edited by Richard G. Hardorff (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995): 27.

³³² “The Tall Bull Interview,” in *Cheyenne Memories of the Custer Fight* edited by Richard G. Hardorff (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995): 75.

³³³ “The Two Moons Interview,” in *Lakota Recollections of the Custer Fight* edited by Richard G. Hardorff (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991): 134-135.

opposite side.”³³⁴ Assume these men were not deliberately distorting the truth and what comes out of it all is this: the highest placed leaders among the Cheyenne and their closest allies among the Lakota were aware Custer was nearby from the day before and accordingly placed the warrior societies, their elite military, on alert, but chose not to panic the camp by making the news general. During the early hours of June 25, the scouts then either lost contact with Custer or with their chiefs for a period, with communication restored only a short while before the attack. When the runners came into the northern end of the camp, the war-leaders in that area, already on high alert, began rallying their men to meet Custer’s assault. Further down the camp, the message became distorted or did not reach at all, and at the southern end, where the first part of Custer’s pincer movement landed, no one knew until the first white soldier appeared across the river.

Custer’s plan for June 25 was, on paper, a virtual repeat of the 1868 Battle of the Washita. By dividing his regiment into three sections under himself, Major Marcus Reno, and Captain Frederick Benteen, he intended to strike the Lakota encampment from multiple sides, taking Sitting Bull and his war-leaders off guard and preventing any retreat. Custer and Reno each had a battalion with them and would hit the northern and southern ends of the Little Bighorn Valley as simultaneously as possible, while Benteen, with the remaining battalion, rode around the valley, cutting off escape routes and making sure there were no other Lakota bands nearby who might come to Sitting Bull’s assistance. Splitting his command this way was, as nearly every historical commentator has observed, inherently risky, but it was the only way he could meet Sheridan’s requirements. Preventing the Natives from scattering was the paramount goal of the campaign, and Custer, while familiar with the terrain of the Great Plains, did not have

³³⁴ “The Crow King Interview,” in *Indian Views of the Custer Fight* edited by Richard G. Hardorff (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005): 67-68.

enough experience fighting the Lakota and Cheyenne to recognise the problems with Sheridan's directions. Since 1868, Custer's battles with the tribes of the northern plains had been almost entirely defensive in nature, protecting government surveyors, railroad men, and cartographers from attack. The Washita battle, which he fought not only on Sheridan's orders, but under Sheridan's direct command, was the last time Custer took the offensive against Plains warriors, and it should not surprise anyone he used it as a prototype for his assault at the Little Bighorn. The Washita worked in large part, of course, because it was an unprovoked attack on a friendly band but that was not how Sheridan chose to memorialise it or how Custer remembered it.

Custer might, of course, have chosen to act differently had he been aware of just how big the Lakota and Cheyenne force was, but at the time he was making his decision, that information was not available to him. Since parting company with Terry, Custer, with his Crow and Arikara scouts, had been following a Lakota trail but had yet to see any of the hostiles.³³⁵ When Custer told Benteen to swing round the valley, he had sufficient evidence to believe Sitting Bull was there, but had not clapped eyes on the camp itself. When he separated from Reno shortly after, he caught a glimpse of the camp, but the bluffs and the turning of the Little Bighorn River conspired to keep the bulk of the hostiles' position out of view. As several of Reno's officers later recalled, Custer knew there was a large camp up ahead, but had no idea just *how* large it was—and with his vision blocked by the landscape, and Sheridan and Terry's insistence there could not be more than a few hundred Lakota and Cheyenne on the whole of the Northern Plains, Custer did not know, and had little reason to suspect, he was outnumbered.³³⁶ Once more, the costs of Sheridan's converging columns strategy and the inability for information to get from Crook to

³³⁵ William Jackson, "The Battle of the Little Bighorn, June 25-26, 1876," in *Battles and Skirmishes of the Great Sioux War, 1876-1877* ed. Jerome A. Greene (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993): 43.

³³⁶ Jackson, "The Battle of the Little Bighorn," 45.

Terry is apparent. Had Custer known about the Battle of the Rosebud, he might have realised his own previous suspicions about Native numbers were correct, and Sheridan, Terry, and Gibbon were wrong. What he might have done with that information is open to speculation, but it certainly would not have hurt him to have it. Sheridan and Grant ridiculed Custer for going in blind at the Little Bighorn, but he truly did not have any other options: his orders and the dearth of military intelligence fixed the blinders to his eyes and he had no choice but to operate with that handicap.

Reno struck first, his Arikara scouts in the lead, his cavalry following behind, as they crossed the river, rode up through the timber to the south of the camp, and then drove into the tipis. Before the soldiers or their enemies had fired a shot, the Arikara, led by the half-Hunkpapa Lakota Bloody Knife, got in amongst the Lakota civilians and carried out the first atrocity of the day against non-combatants, killing six Lakota women and children.³³⁷ Among the dead were two wives and three children of the Hunkpapa war-chief Gall. When they were young, Gall relentlessly tormented the adolescent Bloody Knife, and the half-Arikara took his revenge by proxy now, fully expecting, at least according to mixed race scout William Jackson, to be killed later that day.³³⁸ Based on testimony from Jackson, and several other survivors, Reno had little control over Bloody Knife and the Arikara, or over his own men for that matter.³³⁹ Rumours the alcoholic major was drunk during the battle have always circulated, though the evidence is insubstantial; given Reno's depressive outlook and the swiftness with which the battle plan fell apart, the major may not have required any chemical assistance to give in to panic.

³³⁷ "The Moving Robe Woman Interview," in *Lakota Recollections of the Custer Fight*, edited by Richard G. Hardorff (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991): 93-94.

³³⁸ Jackson, "The Battle of the Little Bighorn," 44.

³³⁹ Jackson, "The Battle of the Little Bighorn," 49.

The Lakota and Cheyenne reacted swiftly to Reno's attack. Warriors rushed out of their lodges, grabbed whatever weapons they could find and hurried along the river to the scene of the fighting. At the sight of the Native warriors massing against him, Reno temporarily called a halt, and it is at this moment that many witnesses, Indigenous and white alike, believed the chance of his charge succeeding went from a longshot to an impossibility. Rather than rushing into the camp, Reno took up position outside and fired into it, striking tents and tepees, but killing comparatively few Lakota.³⁴⁰ Several Lakota and Cheyenne witnesses commented on the poor accuracy of Reno's shooting at this time; Crow King suggested Reno stopped too far from his targets, saying, "the whites commenced firing at about four hundred yards distance", well outside accurate range for a cavalry carbine.³⁴¹ "The Indians," Crow King added, "retreated—at first slowly, to give the women and children time to go to a place of safety. Other warriors got our horses. By that time we had warriors enough to turn upon the whites and we drove them to the hill, and started back to camp."³⁴²

Two Moons, then a young Northern Cheyenne war-chief, described the chaos that engulfed the camp as Reno began his assault and the efforts made by himself and the other war-leaders to impose some semblance of order. Two Moons was outside the camp, watering his horse herd, when he "noticed a heavy cloud of dust up the river and made up his mind that the soldiers had arrived. He hastily collected what warriors he could and started in the direction of the fighting, which had already begun between Gall and Reno."³⁴³ The same scene played out across the Lakota and Cheyenne base, as leading men gathered their warbands and went hurtling

³⁴⁰ "The Moving Robe Woman Interview," 93.

³⁴¹ "The Crow King Interview," 68.

³⁴² "The Crow King Interview," 68.

³⁴³ "Camp's Copy of Throssel's Interview with Two Moons," in *Cheyenne Memories of the Custer Fight*, edited by Richard G. Hardorff (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995): 125.

towards Reno's gunline, forcing him from the camp and back into the timber from which he initially emerged.³⁴⁴ As the Lakota and Cheyenne surged forwards, their leaders barked orders at them, transforming an angry mob into a disciplined war-party that advanced on foot towards the timber, firing at Reno as they went. Leading the initial thrust was Gall, the Hunkpapa Lakota war-chief who had already lost so much to Reno's Arikara auxiliaries. The deaths of his wives and children, "made my heart bad," Gall grimly remembered. "I then fought with the hatchet."³⁴⁵ Two Moons, who enjoyed recalling his own leading role in the fight, always made sure to credit Gall with being the first to respond to the soldiers' appearance.³⁴⁶ On Reno's side, one of the first men killed was Bloody Knife, his brains blown out and into Reno's eyes, causing the unstable major to, in the eyes of many of his troopers, lose what nerve he had left.³⁴⁷

As the Native American forces were coming together, Reno's command was falling apart. Describing the retreat to the timber, William Jackson wrote "Several hundred of the enemy went thundering past the outer end of our line, and, swinging in, began attack upon our rear; others were starting to cut us off from the river, and more and more arrivals from the camp swarmed in front of us."³⁴⁸ The retreat was sounded as "Reno, hatless, a handkerchief tied around his head," clambered up on his horse and "waving his six-shooter he shouted something that I couldn't hear, and led swiftly off, up out of the depression we were in. We all swarmed after him, and headed back up the way that we had come."³⁴⁹ Sergeant Charles White accused

³⁴⁴ "Hamlin Garland's Interview with Two Moons," in *Cheyenne Memories of the Custer Fight*, edited by Richard G. Hardorff (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995): 101.

Jackson, "The Battle of the Little Bighorn," 48.

³⁴⁵ "The Story of War-Chief Gall of the Uncpapas," in *The Custer Myth*, edited by W.A. Graham (New York: Bonanza Books): 89.

³⁴⁶ "Camp's Copy of Throssel's Interview with Two Moons," 125; "Hamlin Garland's Interview with Two Moons," 102.

³⁴⁷ W.A. Graham, *The Reno Court of Inquiry: Abstract of the Official Record of the Proceedings* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, 1995): 94.

³⁴⁸ Jackson, "The Battle of the Little Bighorn," 48.

³⁴⁹ Jackson, "The Battle of the Little Bighorn," 49.

the whole of the officer corps of being drunk, saying, “the only officer who maintained self-control and acted like an officer should was [Captain Thomas] H French,” of M Company, whose men the initial gunline was centred upon.³⁵⁰ According to White, Reno’s order to retreat to the timber was when he “lost his men, for the soldiers were not instructed as to the movement to be executed before starting. The men rode pell-mell through the timber and as soon as they got outside of it they were met by the Indians and shot down like buffalo.”³⁵¹

White maintained that, had Reno stood in the timber they could have fended off the entire Lakota and Cheyenne force.³⁵² Some Native American veterans agreed with this sentiment, remembering they could never understand why Reno, after pulling back into the safety of the timber, so quickly abandoned that position.³⁵³ Other Lakota and Cheyenne participants, however, disagreed, saying they had more than enough men available to force Reno out of the timber had it come to that. Which of these opinions was the correct one would never be tested, because Crazy Horse, absent to this point, was about to take a hand in the battle. After meticulously preparing his medicine for the day, the Oglala war-leader rode south through the camp, drawing mounted men into his wake and shouting that it was a good day to die. By the time he reached the timber he had several hundred warriors with him, including his brother-in-law Red Feather, and noted fighters Iron Hawk, Flying Hawk, and Kicking Bear.³⁵⁴ Reno, his control over his men (and, from the sounds of things, his own emotions) all but dissolved by this point, called for

³⁵⁰ White, “The Sergeant Charles White Diary,” 17.

³⁵¹ White, “The Sergeant Charles White Diary,” 18.

³⁵² White, “The Sergeant Charles White Diary,” 19.

³⁵³ “Brave Wolf,” “Soldier Wolf,” in *Lakota & Cheyenne*, ed. Jerome A. Greene (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994): 46, 51.

³⁵⁴ “The Flying Hawk Narrative,” in *Indian Views of the Custer Fight*, edited by Richard G. Hardorff (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005): 124; “The Iron Hawk Interview,” in *Lakota Recollections of the Custer Fight*, edited by Richard G. Hardorff (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991): 64; e Red Feather Interview,” in *Lakota Recollections of the Custer Fight*, edited by Richard G. Hardorff (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991): 83.

retreat once again when Crazy Horse and his Lakota warriors—and Two Moons and his Cheyenne, who seem to have had much the same idea as Crazy Horse—suddenly appeared on their flanks.³⁵⁵ The soldiers hurriedly fled the timber, abandoning any who could not keep up.³⁵⁶

The Lakota Iron Hawk, whose warriors played a large part in forcing Reno from the timber, believed the Major made the right decision in running and that had he stood to face Crazy Horse's charge, he would have been wiped out.³⁵⁷ "The Indians," he told an interviewer, "were so thick that Reno's men would have been run over and could not have lasted but a short time if they had stood their ground in the woods."³⁵⁸ Flying Hawk, discussing Crazy Horse's leadership and the pursuit of Reno, said, "The dust was thick and we could hardly see. We got right among the soldiers and killed a lot with our bows and arrows and tomahawks. Crazy Horse was ahead of all, and he killed a lot of them with his warclub; he pulled them off their horses when they tried to get across the river where the bank was steep. Kicking Bear was right beside him and killed many, too, in the water."³⁵⁹ Reno's retreat became a rout, and the majority of his forty-nine dead were lost here, as the men withdrawing from the timber and trying to cross the river found themselves in the path of Crazy Horse's vanguard. Elaborating on the slaughter, Flying Hawk said, "they got off their horses and tried to climb out of the water on their hands and knees, but we killed nearly all of them when they were running through the woods and in the water."³⁶⁰

Between them, Crazy Horse and Gall (and the other war-leaders who accompanied them) executed a textbook hammer and anvil maneuver, Gall holding Reno in place while Crazy Horse turned the soldiers' flank. They would do so again over the course of the battle, demonstrating a

³⁵⁵ "The Red Feather Interview," 83-84.

³⁵⁶ White, "The Sergeant Charles White Diary," 21.

³⁵⁷ "The Iron Hawk Interview," in *Lakota Recollections of the Custer Fight*, edited by Richard G. Hardorff (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991): 65.

³⁵⁸ "The Iron Hawk Interview," 65.

³⁵⁹ "The Flying Hawk Narrative," 124.

³⁶⁰ "The Flying Hawk Narrative," 124.

level of tactical awareness and command and control that historians all too often insist Indigenous armies did not have. At the same time they were doing so, command and control, and indeed, all discipline in Reno's battalion, broke down entirely, making it that much easier for the two Lakota leaders and their allies to get them on the run. Crazy Horse and Two Moons led the pursuit, crossing the river and keeping on Reno's heels as he fell back into the hills.³⁶¹ As Reno's men took up defensive positions along the line of bluffs, Crazy Horse broke off and wheeled about, taking most of his force back in the direction of the encampment. Word of Custer's assault on the northern end of the camp had reached the Oglala war-leader, and he persuaded his men to leave off their pursuit of a fleeing enemy and return to camp to face one that was still on the offensive. Two Moons followed suit, though not before posting a guard of eager, though inexperienced, young warriors to watch Reno and ensure that he did not rejoin the fighting.³⁶² Both the Cheyenne chief and the Lakota warrior knew they needed their veteran men for the confrontation with the second American force.

Custer descended into the valley shortly after Reno began his attack. From his original vantage point atop the bluffs, he could see Reno's charge strike home and the Lakota apparently fleeing before the cavalry. Once he was in the valley, however, Custer lost sight of Reno. As Miniconjou Lakota leader High Back Bone (often rendered into English as "Hump") later observed, once the battle began, Custer and Reno did not know where one another were.³⁶³ Neither of them knew where Benteen was either, and Benteen did not know where Custer and Reno were. What must have become apparent, however, was the actual size of the Lakota camp

³⁶¹ "The Two Moons Narrative," in *Indian Views of the Custer Fight*, edited by Richard G. Hardorff (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005): 109.

³⁶² "J.M. Thralls' Interview with Two Moons," in *Cheyenne Memories of the Custer Fight*, edited by Richard G. Hardorff (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995): 109.

³⁶³ "The Hump Interview," in *Indian Views of the Custer Fight*, edited by Richard G. Hardorff (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005): 58.

and that if Custer were to take it, he would need every man with him. A messenger was sent to find Benteen, urging him to join Custer and bring all the spare ammunition packs.³⁶⁴ The messenger found Benteen, but Benteen never found Custer; circling around the valley to the south of the battlefield, he linked up with Reno on the bluffs. The arrival of Benteen and his soldiers did a great deal to restore order in Reno's shattered battalion, but did nothing for Custer and his troopers who, as Reno and Benteen tried to deduce where he was and whether fighting through the Cheyenne guards to join him was possible, was already in the fight of his life.³⁶⁵

Custer's first charge into the encampment carried him a long way, especially in the early minutes, when the Lakota and Cheyenne were occupied with repulsing Reno. The opposition Custer encountered was mostly made up of elderly, retired warriors defending their families, and men who had not been able to find their horses and were left behind when Reno was chased into the hills.³⁶⁶ Most of them were Cheyenne, although a few Oglala under He Dog also stayed in the vicinity of what is now called the Medicine Trail, and engaged with Custer's troops.³⁶⁷ Once Reno was running, however, Custer's easy ride through the camp came to an abrupt halt. Crow King, Gall, and the other Hunkpapa war-leaders who blunted Reno's first charge, had not bothered to give chase once the major fled the timber, leaving that to Crazy Horse and Two Moons. Turning around, they streamed back into camp, some clambering onto their horses, others remaining afoot, while all the while, latecomers came running to link up with them. Crow King's warband of eighty Hunkpapa were among the vanguard of the Lakota force. "We turned against this second party," he told a newspaper. "The greater portion of our warriors came

³⁶⁴ Frederick Benteen, "A Transcript of Benteen's Narrative," in *The Custer Myth*, edited by W.A. Graham, (New York: Bonanza Books): 180; Miles, *Serving the Republic*, 189.

³⁶⁵ White, "The Sergeant Charles White Diary," 19.

³⁶⁶ "The Tall Bull Interview," 76.

³⁶⁷ "The He Dog Interview," in *Lakota Recollections of the Custer Fight*, edited by Richard G. Hardorff (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991): 75.

together in their front and we rushed our horses on them.”³⁶⁸ Almost all Indigenous witnesses agreed the army gathered around Gall and Crow King was the largest on the field that day; some expert estimates have put the number as high as 1500, while even lower estimates do not drop much below 1000.³⁶⁹ Moving up the centre of the camp, Gall and Crow King’s warriors pushed Custer back onto the ridgeline to the north. Armed with everything from bows and arrows to modern repeating rifles, the warriors kept Custer’s men penned up with long range fire, repelling his efforts to get back into the camp.³⁷⁰

The way south was lost to Custer; soon the way to the west would be too. Lame White Man, an elderly Southern Cheyenne chief, had been in a sweat lodge when the fighting began. Wrapping himself in a blanket—and subsequently a stolen blue uniform—this tribal elder grabbed a rifle and joined the fighting with many young Northern Cheyenne warriors rallying alongside this venerable ally.³⁷¹ Any westward movement by Custer’s right wing was blocked by this Cheyenne force, which was soon strengthened by the arrival of Two Moons, fresh from repelling Reno and looking to get back into the fight.³⁷² As Gall drove Custer up onto the ridgeline, Lame White Man struck east along the ridgeline, trapping Custer’s right wing under Captain Myles Keogh between them.³⁷³ With that development, the battle was now obviously

³⁶⁸ “The Crow King Interview,” 68.

³⁶⁹ Ambrose puts Gall’s force at 1500, Donovan and Philbrick 1000. Most Native American accounts do not specify numbers; Crow King mentions the eighty men of his own warband and describes the rest as being “plenty as the leaves on the trees,” Gall that they were “as many as the grass.”

³⁷⁰ “Camp’s Copy of Throssel’s Interview with Two Moons,” 127. All of Two Moons’ interviews emphasise a heavy exchange of fire between the white soldiers and the Lakota, the latter of whom he states were much better armed than his Cheyenne. “The Red Feather Interview,” in *Lakota Recollections of the Custer Fight* and “The American Horse Interview,” in *Cheyenne Memories of the Custer Fight* concur with Two Moons and provide details of the back and forth sniping between Custer, Calhoun, and Keogh’s troops and their Lakota opponents; Gall himself in “The Story of War-Chief Gall of the Uncpapas,” stated that the soldiers were “shot down in a line where they stood.”

³⁷¹ “The John Stands-in-Timber Interview, 1956,” 170.

³⁷² “Hamlin Garland’s Interview with Two Moons,” 102.

³⁷³ “The John Stands-in-Timber Interview, 1956,” 170.

going against Custer, and the only thing for him to do was to retreat the way he had come, by the northeast. Even that doorway, however, was about to close, as Crazy Horse re-entered the fray.

While Gall was attacking Custer head on and Lame White Man was flanking him from the west, Crazy Horse and his followers swung wide around the camp, then came back in from the north, closing off Custer's escape route. Recognising Captain Keogh's defensive line was anchored on the ridge, and that a narrow gap in the rock split that ridgeline in two, Crazy Horse, with Sitting Bull's nephew White Bull at his side, rode his horse through the gap, with several hundred Lakota and Cheyenne (some sources put it as high as 1000) right behind him.³⁷⁴ It was a surgical strike by the Oglala war-leader that dissected Keogh's command in two and sent the remaining shards of it flying into the path of either Gall, who was continuing to fan out in front of the ridgeline, or Lame White Man, who was working his way eastwards along the bluffs, picking off any soldiers who could not retreat.³⁷⁵ As Crazy Horse's charge broke Keogh's command in half, Lame White Man launched a full-scale assault over the ridge, killing Keogh and most of his officers, and effectively ending Custer's right-wing as any kind of coherent fighting force.³⁷⁶ The men on the other side of the right-wing fell back along the bluffs towards the left-wing under Custer himself; in the face of the Cheyenne's numbers and evident determination to finish the assault, there was little else they could manage. The Cheyenne themselves sustained their first serious casualties of the day, including Lame White Man himself, who was killed, possibly by friendly fire, while leading the charge against Keogh.³⁷⁷

³⁷⁴ "The He Dog Interview," 75; "The White Bull Interview," in *Indian Views of the Custer Fight*, edited by Richard G. Hardorff (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005): 166.

³⁷⁵ "J.M. Thralls' Interview with Two Moons," 110.

³⁷⁶ "The Little Wolf Interview," in *Cheyenne Memories of the Custer Fight*, edited by Richard G. Hardorff (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995): 90; "The John Stands-in-Timber Interview, 1956," 170.

³⁷⁷ "The John Stands-in-Timber Interview, 1956," 170.

Often, in the past, Plains warbands fell apart with the death of their leader. At the Battle of Beecher Island, for instance, the Southern Cheyenne's willingness to confront the Americans collapsed with the death of the famed war-leader Roman Nose; in Cheyenne history the battle is recalled as simply, 'The Place Where Roman Nose Was Killed.'³⁷⁸ At the Little Bighorn, however, there were too many famous chiefs and war-leaders present for the death of any one man to have that kind of impact on Native American morale. Lame White Man might have died, but there were others who could lead in his place with war-chief Two Moons and the fierce warrior known as Yellow Nose quickly filling the void. Yellow Nose, an Ute by birth, was adopted into the Northern Cheyenne at the age of four after being captured in a raid, and rose to become one of their most formidable combatants. He was one of those who had fallen in line behind Lame White Man early in the battle and, in a scene recalled in many Lakota and Cheyenne testimonials, not only captured the 7th's regimental flag from the officer carrying it, but proceeded to count coup on the man, using the flag as an outsized coup stick.³⁷⁹ In the eyes of many it was the greatest stunt of the day, and it stuck in the memories of those who witnessed it for years after. Now, with Two Moons cheering him on, Yellow Nose led his adopted tribe in a rush up the ridgeline, towards the landmark that has gone down in history as Last Stand Hill.

Gall and Crow King had done their work well: Custer and the surviving members of his battalion were trapped on the top of a hill with nowhere to go. Rather than risking lives needlessly, Gall ordered his warriors to snipe away at the bluecoats with their rifles, muskets,

³⁷⁸ Cozzens, *The Earth is Weeping*, 90.

³⁷⁹ "The Brave Bear Interview," in *Indian Views of the Custer Fight* edited by Richard G. Hardorff, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005): 85; "The Yellow Nose Interview," in *Indian Views of the Custer Fight*, edited by Richard G. Hardorff (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005): 98, 102; "The White Shield Interview," in *Cheyenne Memories of the Custer Fight* edited by Richard G. Hardorff, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995): 53.

"Little Hawk" in *Lakota & Cheyenne* ed. Jerome A. Greene, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994): 64.

and bows, whittling down their numbers one shot at a time.³⁸⁰ Some of Custer's men likely hoped to escape down the back of the hill, but while they did not yet know it, that pathway was already being shut off. After breaking Keogh, Crazy Horse swung north again, skirting the ridges, and coming in back of the camp. He was moving in a wide circle about the rear of the valley before cutting in and making for the back of Last Stand Hill.³⁸¹ A week earlier, at the Rosebud, Crazy Horse tried his hardest to surround and annihilate part of Crook's command. Thanks to insufficient numbers, he was not able to do so. Now, however, he was presented with a smaller body of white troops and a vastly larger body of Native Americans with which to surround them. With Gall and Crow King in their front, and Two Moons and Yellow Nose at their sides, all Crazy Horse had to do was close off the way out to the north and east. He did so now, even as Yellow Nose and Two Moons, determined to end the battle without further delay, launched an attack up over the ridgeline and onto the top of Last Stand Hill.³⁸²

All the Indigenous accounts agreed that Custer died bravely. Yellow Horse said "Custer fought and Reno did not; Custer went in to die, and his fighting was superb. I never saw a man fight like Custer did."³⁸³ Sitting Bull told the *New York Herald* in 1877 that a group of young Hunkpapa Lakota told him Custer died laughing.³⁸⁴ What is odd about these accounts is that, by the time Yellow Nose went over the top of Last Stand Hill, George Custer was likely already dead. When his body was found several days later, there was a rifle wound directly under his heart, and a revolver shot through his temple, fired at close enough range that the powder had

³⁸⁰ "The Red Feather Interview," 87; "The Story of War-Chief Gall of the Uncpapas," 89; "The Story of Chief Gall," in *The Custer Myth*, edited by W.A. Graham, (New York: Bonanza Books): 91.

³⁸¹ "The Crow King Interview," 69; "The Flying Hawk Interview," 125-126.

³⁸² "The Yellow Nose Interview," 103.

³⁸³ "Yellow Horse Interview," Ricker Tablets, Nebraska State Historical Society, reproduced in Ambrose, *Crazy Horse & Custer*, 442.

³⁸⁴ "The Sitting Bull Interview," in *The Custer Myth*, edited by W.A. Graham (New York: Bonanza Books): 73.

burned the skin.³⁸⁵ What happened is obvious, though it would have been taboo to suggest at the time: as the fighting around him degenerated into a brutal melee, Custer, mortally wounded and unable to take part in such a combat, committed suicide.

Yet the Native American statements that ‘Custer’ died fighting bravely may well be at least technically true, for with the death of the Lieutenant-Colonel, command on the hilltop fell to Captain Tom Custer, George’s younger brother and a two-time winner of the Medal of Honour during the American Civil War. With a reputation for reckless bravery that made his brother seem downright tame by comparison, Tom often worried George, who feared his little brother would die before him. At one point during the Civil War, George Custer was obliged to place his brother under arrest when Tom tried to go back into combat despite a bleeding neck wound he had sustained capturing the Confederate colours.³⁸⁶ Now, with his older brother dead at his feet, and his younger brother, Boston Custer, and their nephew, Autie Reed, attempting to lead some of the troops to safety down the back of the hill, Tom Custer appears to have fought a rearguard action against the Lakota and Cheyenne, buying time for Boston to escape and doing what he could to avenge George.³⁸⁷ Dressed in the same white buckskin suit George Custer favoured, and with blond locks that matched the description of “the Long Hair” better than George (who had recently shaved his trademark hair) did, Tom Custer may well have been mistaken for his brother, especially since none of the warriors present had met Custer before.

Tom Custer’s death was worthy of a dime novel. While pursuing the soldiers to Last Stand Hill, the Cheyenne warrior Yellow Nose was fired on by a bareheaded officer in a white suit, at such close range that “his eyes and face are still speckled with the powder. The bullet

³⁸⁵ Philbrick, *The Last Stand*, 275.

³⁸⁶ Ambrose, *Crazy Horse & Custer*, 199.

³⁸⁷ Philbrick, *The Last Stand*, 276.

missed Yellow Nose, wounding his horse in the neck. Yellow Nose was struck a heavy glancing blow across the forehead with the gunsight, blinding him for a moment and filling his eyes with blood.”³⁸⁸ When they reached the top of the hill, Yellow Nose found the same officer standing guard, with about thirty men gathered around him. Yellow Nose concluded that it was only this man’s bravery that was keeping the soldiers from breaking, and that “to kill him would be a feat of more than ordinary prowess.”³⁸⁹ Drawing an old cavalry sabre he had been gifted, Yellow Nose charged the officer, whose men ran, leaving him alone. The officer fired at Yellow Nose, whose horse bolted at the gunshot. Getting his pony back under control, Yellow Nose again charged the officer, who fired again, spooking the horse once more. When Yellow Nose rushed him the third time, however, the soldier could do nothing: “the pistol was not fired,” the last time, Yellow Nose recalled, “it was empty.”³⁹⁰ Closing with this last man standing, Yellow Nose cut him down with his sabre. After the battle was over, a number of Yellow Nose’s fellow warriors feted him as the man who killed Custer, an honour Yellow Nose was never sure he was due. The honorific may have been more accurate than Yellow Nose knew; based on Yellow Nose’s description and the condition of the bodies afterwards, many historians have concluded that the courageous officer who died so hard was almost certainly Tom Custer.

Tom Custer’s last stand was in vain. The men retreating down the back of the hill, who included George and Tom’s younger brother Boston and their nephew Autie Reed were all caught and killed by Crazy Horse.³⁹¹ The Custers’ brother-in-law, Lieutenant James Calhoun, was killed in action earlier, during the Cheyenne drive up the ridgeline, making June 25 a terrible day for the Custer family. It was a terrible day for the 7th Cavalry as well: army records put

³⁸⁸ “The Yellow Nose Interview,” 104.

³⁸⁹ “The Yellow Nose Interview,” 104.

³⁹⁰ “The Yellow Nose Interview,” 104-105.

³⁹¹ “The Flying Hawk Interview,” 126.

Custer's dead at two hundred sixteen officers, men, and civilian volunteers, while Reno lost another forty-nine.³⁹² In total, the Battle of the Little Bighorn cost the regiment two hundred fifty-five of its six hundred men, almost fifty percent casualties. In contrast, fewer than forty Native Americans were killed.³⁹³ Gall, Crazy Horse, Crow King, Lame White Man, Two Moons, Yellow Nose, and the other Lakota and Cheyenne leaders present conducted a brilliant defense, coordinating the many moving parts of their force far better than Custer, Reno, or Benteen managed theirs. Gall knocked the fight out of Reno, then moved north to join Crow King in halting Custer. Crazy Horse and Two Moons broke Reno's command and made him retreat into the hills. Lame White Man rallied the Cheyenne and put Custer on the defense, then eliminated Keogh after Crazy Horse broke his wing in half. Two Moons and Yellow Nose took over when Lame White Man was slain, and finished off Custer, while Gall and Crow King held him still, and Crazy Horse cut off the last lines of escape.

Despite persistent myths about how Native Americans did or did not fight, at the Little Bighorn the Lakota and Cheyenne fought a nearly perfect battle of annihilation, splintering, surrounding, and then exterminating Custer's command. Crazy Horse is the one who is most often given credit for this, and his role was vital: on three separate occasions he flanked the soldiers, making their encirclement and destruction possible. However, the roles of the other leaders should not be overlooked: Lame White Man, and subsequently Two Moons and Yellow Nose, did most of the killing against Custer's battalion, their warriors a spear that punched through Custer's side and turned the refuge of the hilltops into a deathtrap. As for Gall and Crow King, their huge blocking force was the reason Custer was in position for Crazy Horse to trap

³⁹² "Chronological list of actions &c. with Indians from January 1866, to January, 1891," 39.

³⁹³ Different Native American accounts provide different numbers of fatalities among the attacking warriors, but the most commonly repeated numbers are between thirty and forty.

him and for the Cheyenne to finish him off. The two Hunkpapa war-chiefs were the anvil against which the hammers of Crazy Horse, Lame White Man, Two Moons, and Yellow Nose beat Custer to death. Now all that was left to do was decide what to do about Reno and Benteen.

With Reno in no emotional state to take charge, Captain Frederick Benteen was left in command of the men who fled to the bluffs. Whatever his quarrels with Custer and Reno, Benteen came through for his men at this juncture, reorganising the tattered remains of Reno's battalion into a fighting force that could hold off probing attacks from the Lakota and Cheyenne left to watch the hills.³⁹⁴ Many of the surviving soldiers testified to Benteen's courage under fire, and both Sheridan's annual report and the official "Record of Engagements with Hostile Indians," give nearly sole credit for the survival of the force to Benteen, praising him for keeping the men on the hilltop where their guns could hold off any Lakota or Cheyenne advance up the bluffs.³⁹⁵ Throughout the rest of the afternoon, Benteen's command of three hundred or so men dug in, using earthworks and their guns to repel a series of increasingly severe sorties from the Indigenous warriors below, until the coming of night brought a respite. Their rest, however, promised to be brief, for on the plains beneath them they could see more campfires springing up as more and more Lakota and Cheyenne, having recuperated from the fight with Custer, assembled under the hills. William Jackson, attempting to make his way back to Reno's camp after being separated from him during the fighting, overheard Lakota sentries discussing Gall's plans to seize the hills.³⁹⁶ The stage was set for another fierce engagement the next morning.

Historians often accuse the Lakota and Cheyenne of lacking a 'killer instinct' and being unwilling to finish off an enemy once he was beaten. If such a reluctance ever existed among the

³⁹⁴ White, "The Sergeant Charles White Diary," 19.

³⁹⁵ "General Godfrey's Narrative," 144; Sheridan, "Headquarters Military Division of the Missouri, November 25, 1876," 25; Windolph, *I Fought With Custer*, 99; "Record of Engagements with Hostile Indians," 54-55.

³⁹⁶ Jackson, "The Battle of the Little Bighorn," 57.

two Plains tribes, it was absent in the aftermath of the Little Bighorn. Crow King, in an interview, stated it was his intention, and the intention of the other Lakota and Cheyenne war-leaders, to take Reno Hill and eliminate the last remains of the 7th Cavalry.³⁹⁷ The conversation Jackson overheard, which places Gall with Crow King at the foot of the hills readying for an attack, supports the Lakota leader's contention.³⁹⁸ It was Custer's Crow scouts, not anything Reno or Benteen did, that prevented that plan from coming to fruition. After fleeing the scene of the battle on the afternoon of June 25, the Crows tracked down Gibbon and Terry, who had reunited to discuss transportation difficulties. Neither Terry nor Gibbon was sure they believed the Crows' reports that "Custer's command had been entirely cut to pieces by the Sioux, who, said the interpreter, 'were chasing our soldiers all over the hills and killing them like buffalo,'" but they decided they could not ignore them.³⁹⁹ In a forced march that exhausted their commands, Terry and Gibbon went in the direction Custer had gone, reaching the Little Bighorn battlefield and a very relieved Reno and Benteen, early on June 26.⁴⁰⁰ Lakota and Cheyenne scouts caught wind of both columns' coming, and at Sitting Bull's suggestion, the coalition forces withdrew from the area, not wishing to risk an encounter with Terry's 2000 men.⁴⁰¹ Crow King believed that, had Sitting Bull not given this order, they could have dealt with Reno and Benteen before Terry got there. "If this command had not been given," he said, "we could have cut Reno's command to pieces, as we did Custer's."⁴⁰² Sergeant Windolph, who fought under Benteen at Reno Hill, agreed with the Hunkpapa chieftain's assessment.⁴⁰³

³⁹⁷ "The Crow King Interview," 69.

³⁹⁸ Jackson, "The Battle of the Little Bighorn," 57.

³⁹⁹ Gibbon, "Last Summer's Expedition and Its Great Catastrophe," 133.

⁴⁰⁰ Gibbon, "Last Summer's Expedition and Its Great Catastrophe," 138.

⁴⁰¹ "The Crow King Interview," 69.

⁴⁰² "The Crow King Interview," 69.

⁴⁰³ Windolph, *I Fought With Custer*, 101.

The Battle of the Little Bighorn has been refought in the pages of history books and articles more than any American battle save perhaps Gettysburg. Many criticisms have been levelled at Custer's leadership, some of them fairly, some far less so. The charge that Custer would have saved his own life, and those of the men in his detachment by bringing along Gatling guns is fanciful at best, disingenuous at worst. Gatling guns were a defensive weapon, not an offensive one. They were slow, cumbersome, and required significant setup to use effectively. Certainly, the presence of a Gatling gun on Last Stand Hill could have made a difference during the last desperate moments, but Custer would never have had a Gatling gun on that hill, even had he brought one with him to the Little Bighorn. Custer's orders from Sheridan and Terry were to assume an offensive posture, and he would never have gone charging into the encampment while trying to drag an artillery piece behind him. He would have left it outside the camp and the resultant battle would have played out much the same way as it did in real life—provided, of course, that the camp was still there for Custer to charge. Given how much the transport of Gatling guns slowed down a cavalry column, it is not at all unreasonable to speculate that the only way they would have saved Custer's life was by making him arrive too late to the Lakota campsite. In any case, for Custer to have Gatling guns with him at Last Stand Hill would have required he be aware he was going to be forced on the defensive and to have attacked anyway. Put another way, had Custer possessed sufficient information to know he needed the Gatling guns, he would have also had sufficient information to avoid attacking in the first place.

The suggestion from some authors that it was Custer's decision not to bring the 7th Cavalry's sabres along that doomed him is, if anything, even sillier than the debate around the Gatling guns. Almost no cavalry units still carried their sabres with them on the Western frontier. In the eyes of the army high command, sabres were a shock weapon, meant for massed close

quarters combat, as there had been in the Civil War, and of comparatively little value on the Great Plains. Sheridan's concept of frontier warfare envisioned high speed pursuits over the plains and sudden dashes into unsuspecting Native camps with the foe overwhelmed through volume of small arms fire. Cavalry sabres had no place in this conception, and most of Sheridan's subordinates stopped carrying them, viewing them as deadweight and a source of unwanted noise that might spoil an ambush. As Colonel Nelson Miles stated in his memoirs, "Swords, bayonets, knapsacks, cartridge boxes were regarded as obsolete. What the troops really needed were strong clothing, good food, rifles, and plenty of ammunition in cartridge belts. The experienced soldier relied upon his rifle, and knew how to use it most effectively."⁴⁰⁴ Even if Custer had bucked this trend and ordered his men to bring their swords, it is not clear what the theory's proponents think this would have accomplished. Most of the fighting at the Little Bighorn took place at long range, with two brief moments of intense melee combat, first during Crazy Horse's pursuit of Reno and then during Two Moons and Yellow Nose's drive up Last Stand Hill. In the first action, Reno's men were already running by the time Crazy Horse bore down on them and no change in weaponry could have saved the fleeing troops from the tomahawks, warclubs, and lances of the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne. In the second action, the troopers gathered around Tom Custer on Last Stand Hill were the broken remnants of an already shattered battalion, surrounded and outnumbered by a confident and victorious enemy. Cavalry sabres might have let the soldiers last a little longer in the close-in fighting at the end, and perhaps would have let Tom Custer take Yellow Nose with him, but they would hardly have changed the outcome. Tom's men were never going to withstand a determined charge by the

⁴⁰⁴ Miles, *Serving the Republic*, 141.

force accompanying Yellow Nose and Two Moons, and even if they somehow repelled that first assault they would have been gunned down by Gall and Crow King's riflemen minutes later.

The final charge historians have usually made against Custer is that by dividing his regiment into three separate battalions he made it easier for the Lakota and Cheyenne to defeat him in detail. And there is certainly some truth to these suggestions. Custer and Reno essentially fought separate battles, failing to support one another as the 7th Cavalry fell apart piecemeal. Benteen was even less of a factor in the primary engagement at the Little Bighorn, arriving only after Reno's repulse and contributing nothing to Custer's end of the battle. In *Crazy Horse and Custer*, Stephen Ambrose was adamant it was the splitting of his forces that got Custer killed, stating that had it been six hundred against 3000, the superior discipline of the American troopers would have seen off the Lakota, but that with 3000 against the two hundred odd of Custer's battalion, victory became impossible.⁴⁰⁵ Ambrose was hardly alone in taking this position and many historians have echoed him over the years. Yet when examined closely, this claim hardly merits the consideration it has been given. Had Custer kept his men together, the odds against him would still have been, by Ambrose's own reckoning, five to one.⁴⁰⁶ American soldiers faced similar odds on the plains and emerged triumphant, but always when fighting from defensive positions their Indigenous adversaries could not take by assault. Looking back over the history of the Plains wars, it is impossible to find a scenario in which an American cavalry force *attacked* a warband five times their own size and won. Custer himself routed forces of *white* soldiers significantly larger than his own during the American Civil War, most notably at Gettysburg, when his regiment shattered a Confederate brigade during an inspired counterattack.⁴⁰⁷ The key

⁴⁰⁵ Ambrose, *Crazy Horse & Custer*, 444.

⁴⁰⁶ Ambrose, *Crazy Horse & Custer*, 444.

⁴⁰⁷ T.J. Stiles, *Custer's Trials*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015): 103.

word there, however, is *counterattack*. During that engagement, the Confederates were on the offensive and Custer lured them on, drawing them back until their lines thinned out and he could break them in two with a countercharge.⁴⁰⁸ Knowing when to charge was always Custer's strong suit, and there is no better demonstration of that than in the encounter at Gettysburg.

At the Little Bighorn, however, there was no appropriate time to charge. Key leaders within the hostile camp were aware of Custer's presence and had readied some of their warriors for a defensive action. By the time Custer and Reno hit the encampment, Cheyenne scouts had already told Crow King and his confederates not only that Custer was attacking, but what his dispositions were.⁴⁰⁹ Keeping his troopers together would not have changed these facts. Little Wolf's Cheyenne would still have been watching Custer the day before the battle. Lakota or Cheyenne outriders would still have gone running into the camp to tell Crow King or Gall or Crazy Horse or Lame White Man or any of the other notable war-leaders of the Plains that Custer was attacking and where he was coming from. Those same famous fighters and war-chiefs would have rallied their people against Custer's coming and, unlike in real life, would not have had to divide their own forces to confront attacks at both ends of the camp. Instead of Gall and Crow King holding the line against Custer while Crazy Horse chased out Reno and Lame White Man and Two Moons pulled the Cheyenne together, the hostiles would have been able to concentrate all their warriors against Custer's single thrust—and it seems unlikely that, under those circumstances, the 7th Cavalry would have gotten very far into the camp. Granted, the greater firepower available to Custer under such conditions might have let him shoot his way *out* of the Lakota camp, retreating to fight another day, but surviving is hardly the same as winning.

⁴⁰⁸ Stiles, *Custer's Trials*, 103.

⁴⁰⁹ "The Crow King Interview," 68.

See also: "The Story of Chief Gall," 91; Gall backs up Crow King's statement, saying that "both Reno and Custer had been watched for some hours before they separated to make their respective attacks."

When Oglala Lakota warrior He Dog was asked if Custer and Reno could have won by staying together, “he replied that there were too many Sioux there. They could not have succeeded no matter what they did.”⁴¹⁰ It does not seem there was a way for Custer to emerge the victor at the Little Bighorn. Badly outnumbered, the best Custer could have hoped for was to get away safely. There was no choice he could have made once the battle was joined that would have seen him drive the hostiles from their camp. In choosing to fight at all, Custer lost.

Nelson Miles, who finished the Great Sioux War on behalf of the government, and who one day rose to become Commanding General, United States Army, examined the Little Bighorn battlefield after the war, and came to the conclusion that Custer had done everything he could reasonably have been expected to do to save his command. In his two memoirs, *Personal Recollections of General Nelson A. Miles*, and *Serving the Republic*, Miles defended Custer’s decisions and pushed back against what he saw as smears against his dead colleague. A close friend of Custer’s, Miles was hardly an impartial witness, but he was also one of the best military minds to come out of the American Civil War and as will later be shown, an extremely competent frontier officer. In both his memoirs, Miles was harshly critical of Sherman and Sheridan for implementing a strategy that relied on sending divided, inferior forces into the field against an enemy whose true strength was unknown. “The government authorities greatly underestimated the strength of the hostile Indians,” Miles wrote.⁴¹¹ “They had little knowledge of the character of the country, and sent weak exterior columns, five hundred miles apart, into the field without concert of action against a superior body.”⁴¹²

⁴¹⁰ “The He Dog Interview,” 79.

⁴¹¹ Miles, *Serving the Republic*, 185.

⁴¹² Miles, *Serving the Republic*, 185.

Confronting those who accused Custer of disobeying Terry's orders, Miles contended Terry "placed at least fifty miles of rough country and an impassable river between the two columns, necessitating the granting of discretionary authority to the commander of the column thus isolated and moving into a country known to be occupied by a powerful body of Indians."⁴¹³ Reproducing Terry's orders, Miles emphasized Custer "was expected to *pursue the Indians* and to *come in contact with them*," (italics in original) and that Terry's claims after the fact that he had not ordered Custer to fight the hostiles were ludicrous.⁴¹⁴ Quoting Sherman, Miles added, "Up to the moment of Custer's defeat there was nothing, official or private, to justify an officer to expect that any detachment would encounter more than five hundred or eight hundred warriors."⁴¹⁵ John Gibbon concurred with Miles, who quoted him as saying, "When these various bands succeeded in finding a leader who possessed tact, courage, and ability to concentrate and keep together so large a force, it was only a question of time when one or the other of the exterior columns would meet with a check from the overwhelming numbers of the interior body."⁴¹⁶

Miles also blamed Reno and Benteen for not reinforcing Custer.⁴¹⁷ Reno in particular deserves no accolades for his performance at the Little Bighorn; whether intoxicated, as often alleged, or simply out of his depth, he failed to provide his men with any real leadership and made the breaking of his battalion all the easier for Gall, Crazy Horse, and Two Moons. Yet as Miles and Gibbon both alluded too, the real problem was on the other side. Robert Utley, one of the great Western historians, once commented "the army lost largely because the Indians won.

⁴¹³ Miles, *Serving the Republic*, 186.

⁴¹⁴ Miles, *Serving the Republic*, 187.

⁴¹⁵ Miles, *Personal Recollections of General Nelson A. Miles*, 200.

⁴¹⁶ Miles, *Personal Recollections of General Nelson A. Miles*, 200.

⁴¹⁷ Miles, *Serving the Republic*, 187.

To ascribe defeat entirely to military failings is to devalue Indian strength and leadership. The Sioux and Cheyennes were strong, confident, united, well led, well-armed, outraged by the government's war aims, and ready to fight if pressed. Rarely had the army encountered such a mighty combination in an Indian adversary. Perhaps no strategy or tactics could have prevailed against Sitting Bull's power."⁴¹⁸ Stephen Ambrose, despite his belief Custer could have and should have come out the winner, also acknowledged the important role of Native American leadership and particularly that of Crazy Horse, in the outcome, stating: "Custer was not only outnumbered, he was also outgeneraled."⁴¹⁹

Both Utley and Ambrose (and Gibbon and Miles) were right in this regard. At the Little Bighorn, Custer was confronting not a lone warband led by a single well-known chief or warrior, but the best and the brightest military minds of all the free Lakota and Cheyenne bands. One week before, at the Rosebud, Crazy Horse attempted to wage a battle of annihilation against Crook, splintering his force and trying to encircle and swallow up the individual shards. He failed there due to possessing insufficient men to pull it off. At the Little Bighorn, facing a smaller American force and with not only more warriors at his own disposal, but with allies like Gall, Crow King, Lame White Man, Two Moons, and Yellow Nose to rely on, he got it right, and devoured Custer's command in a short and bloody engagement that stamped both their names into American history. Sent out to fight an enemy his superiors knew nothing about, separated from anyone who could have helped him, and opposed by competent and numerous foes, Custer died not because of his own incompetency, but because under the circumstances he found himself in he could not do anything else.

*

⁴¹⁸ Robert Utley, *Custer: Cavalier in Buckskin*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001): 156.

⁴¹⁹ Ambrose, *Crazy Horse & Custer*, 447.

Following the skirmish at Sihayo's, Lord Chelmsford's column had little contact with the Zulu. With his advance obstructed by terrible road conditions, the Lieutenant-General was forced to halt for several days while his logistical train was brought up, parties of soldiers were detailed to clear the roads, and an extended reconnaissance of the nearby terrain was carried out. The War Office's *Narrative* summarized these five days of immobility as follows: "From the 14th to the 19th January the two portions of the column remained in the same positions, and during this time wagons and stores continued to be brought up from Helpmakaar and ferried across the Buffalo, and bad places in the road were rendered passable by strong working parties."⁴²⁰ Realizing the use of the word "road" might confuse some readers about the infrastructure in place, the *Narrative* noted, "It must be observed that though footpaths and cattle tracks led through Zululand roads did not exist. The only wheeled transport which had previously traversed this region was the wagon of an occasional trader or sportsman, and the old grass-covered ruts which these had left were the sole guides in selecting the route for a line of advance."⁴²¹

This was the countryside Sir Bartle Frere, Lord Chelmsford, and Sir Theophilus Shepstone conspired to invade, and it proved itself nearly as great an impediment to their plans as the Zulu army. Chelmsford's plans called for his columns to move quickly, or at least as quickly as was possible for forces comprised mainly of infantry, in order to prevent the Zulu from fleeing beyond his reach as the Xhosa had for the better part of a year. Yet at every turn the lack of proper roads and the insufficiency of transport blocked him. That he chose to undertake his conquest of Zululand in the midst of the rainy season was also a part of the problem, as Nell Colenso, expressed in her book on the war. "We must hold," she quipped, "that no 'competent

⁴²⁰ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 27.

⁴²¹ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 27.

military critic' would recommend invading an enemy's country during the rainy season, when rivers are in flood, plains are in many cases marshes, and roads almost impassable; especially if the invading force were required to move with a ponderous waggon-train."⁴²² Sir Bartle Frere and Lord Chelmsford tried to defend the timing of their invasion, but Colenso had none of it, reprinting excerpts from several of Chelmsford's own letters on the subject of transport and terrain, in which the Lieutenant-General himself disclosed his worries about the weather, including the one from January 12 in which he confessed to having no idea how they would get across the river near Sihayo's homestead.⁴²³ Drawing on another letter from Chelmsford, this one written on January 14, Colenso laid out in detail how the rains ruined the general's hopes of a speedy advance. "Between this camp and Greytown alone, a distance of some seventy miles, three rivers are now impassable, and waggons have to cross by ferries, a laborious operation requiring more skilled labour than we at present have available."⁴²⁴ What roads there were, Chelmsford complained, were washed out and "in some parts the heavy rain frequently dislodges huge boulders from the hill-sides overhanging the roadway, and in many places water-courses become torrents after an hour's rain."⁴²⁵ Add a higher than expected mortality rate among the column's oxen, which Lord Chelmsford admitted to and Nell Colenso preserved for posterity, and any chance of moving rapidly became impossible.⁴²⁶

On January 17, Lord Chelmsford rode with his scouts as far as Isandlwana hill, where he determined there was firewood available for a campsite.⁴²⁷ On January 20, with his wagon trains more or less caught up to him and with the roads, such as they were, clear enough to travel on, he

⁴²² Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 264.

⁴²³ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 265.

⁴²⁴ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 265.

⁴²⁵ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 265.

⁴²⁶ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 265.

⁴²⁷ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 27.

and the Centre Column set out for Isandlwana, which he intended to use as their main base camp in the region.⁴²⁸ Chelmsford's reasons for choosing the Isandlwana campsite were for the sake of convenience rather than defense. With wood on site, his men would be able to construct campfires without being entirely dependent upon the wagons for fuel.⁴²⁹ Given that the roads were still so boggy a third of the wagon train fell behind on the march and could not catch up for the better part of a day, Chelmsford's concerns on this front were understandable.⁴³⁰ The need for firewood, however, should not have overcome the need for encampments to be made in defensible positions, and the Isandlwana campsite was, as events soon showed, not very defensible at all. The War Office's *Narrative* described the land before Isandlwana as "an open plain extended to a distance of some 8 miles. This plain, which is much intersected by waterways is about 4 miles wide, and is bounded on the south by the 'Ndhlazagazi range, and on the north by rolling hills of no great height connected with the 'Ngutu range, which lies a few miles behind. Thus, while the view from the camp towards the front was extensive, it was limited on either side by the crests of these two nearly parallel ranges of hills between which the plain lies."⁴³¹ Archibald Forbes, war correspondent for *The Daily News* and one of Lord Chelmsford's harshest critics, went further than this, calling Isandlwana the perfect place for an ambush. "Had the world been searched," he said, "for a position offering the greatest facility for being surprised, none could have been well found to surpass it. The position seems to offer a premium on disaster, and asks to be attacked. In the rear laagered wagons would have discounted its

⁴²⁸ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 27.

⁴²⁹ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 27.

⁴³⁰ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 28.

⁴³¹ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 28.

defects; but the camp was more defenceless than an English village. Systematic scouting could alone have justified such a position, and this too clearly cannot have been carried out.”⁴³²

The possibility of being ambushed by the Zulu does not seem to have occurred to Lord Chelmsford. It has not occurred to many historians of the war either, with the historiography on Isandlwana divided between those like Ian Knight, who believe that the Zulu attack was purely opportunistic, and those like Ron Lock, who believe the Zulu deliberately set in motion a plan to render the camp vulnerable and then assault it.⁴³³ Of the two, Lock’s position seems the more defensible. There was a great deal of clandestine Zulu activity around Isandlwana in the days before January 22nd, so much so that to write it all off as coincidence seems more a product of colonialist thinking on Zulu strategic sophistication than a reasonable conjecture. Moreover, the claim that it was not an ambush heavily rests on the testimony of several Zulu foot soldiers and junior officers who stated they would never have attacked on January 22nd because an eclipse was scheduled to take place that day, and this would have brought them terrible luck.⁴³⁴ Knight and others assume this superstition was as common among the Zulu high command as among the rank and file; if it was, someone apparently forgot to tell Chief Godide, who struck Pearson’s marching column at the Nyezane on the same day Chief Ntshingwayo made his move at Isandlwana. Testimony from a number of other Zulu sources runs directly counter to the “eclipse” theory, putting forth tactical and strategic reasons for why they did not originally intend to attack on the 22, or, stating they always intended to attack on the 22.⁴³⁵

⁴³² Archibald Forbes, “Visit to the Battlefield of Isandhlwana,” in *Zulu 1879* edited by DCF Moodie, (Driffield: Oakpast Ltd, 2006): 77.

⁴³³ Knight, *Zulu Rising*, 332, 392.

Lock, *Isandlwana: The Revelation of a Disaster*, 64,76.

⁴³⁴ Knight, *Zulu Rising*, 394.

⁴³⁵ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 413.

Where modern historians have failed to reconcile conflicting Zulu testimonials and actions, Nell Colenso experienced no difficulty. Her assumption, based on both the evidence and her family's extensive contacts with King Cetshwayo, was that "In all probability they *left the king* with such orders—that is to say, to make terms if possible, but to fight if forced to it, and if the English intentions were plainly hostile."⁴³⁶ Chelmsford's behaviour in the days immediately prior to Isandlwana, Colenso posited, would have been more than enough to confirm his 'hostile intentions' to both the local Zulu chiefs and Ntshingwayo, and they and the commanding general would have laid their plans accordingly⁴³⁷. Mehlokazulu kaSihayo, whose execution of his father's adulterous wives provided Bartle Frere and Chelmsford with an excuse for starting the war, concurred with Colenso. A junior officer in the Zulu Army, Mehlokazulu's status as both the son of an important aristocrat and a pageboy to the King gave him greater access to the Zulu high command than was enjoyed by most of his rank. In a postwar interview, Mehlokazulu said, "he was sent with three other indunas (mounted) to see what the English were doing. On reporting to [Ntshingwayo], he said, 'All right, we will see what they are going to do.'" Soon after, Mehlokazulu added, "I heard [Ntshingwayo] give orders for the Tulwana [sic] and Ngyaza [sic] regiments to assemble. When they had done so, he gave orders for the others to assemble and advance in the direction of the English camp."⁴³⁸ Mehlokazulu's story, which was corroborated in whole or in part by several other Zulu officers, does not suggest an army or a general that were anything other than ready for combat on January 22.⁴³⁹ Rather they suggest, as Colenso and advocates of the ambush theory do, that Ntshingwayo positioned himself to attack

⁴³⁶ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 318.

⁴³⁷ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 318.

⁴³⁸ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 413.

⁴³⁹ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 407-414.

the British at the first possible opportunity, and was waiting not for a favourable moon or any other omen, but for Chelmsford to make a foolish move he could exploit to his advantage.

In his *General Orders* for the campaign, Chelmsford instructed his subordinates to laager whenever they entered camp. However, once the war was underway, the Lieutenant-General ignored his own advice and that of Colonel Richard Glyn and several of his Boer auxiliaries, who tried to tell him he would need to laager to be defended against Zulu strikes.⁴⁴⁰ During his first week in Zululand Chelmsford laagered none of his camps, and took no other precautions to prevent ambush; as the War Office *Narrative* reports, “Nothing of the nature of an entrenchment was formed for the defence of the camp, which was guarded by a chain of vedettes from 2 to 3 miles distant, and by an infantry outpost line closer in.”⁴⁴¹ When Glyn argued a laager should at least be erected at Isandlwana, which was meant to be an important base of operations, Chelmsford overruled Glyn, saying “It would take a week to make,” and he did not intend to refrain from taking the offense for that long.⁴⁴² After Isandlwana, Chelmsford, Bartle Frere, and their defenders in the British Parliament turned to the General Order to laager as evidence Chelmsford told the men how best to protect the campsite, but the officers left behind disobeyed his instructions. Nell Colenso found the suggestion that Chelmsford’s subordinates should have been expected to make defensive preparations he himself refused to ridiculous, as did many of Chelmsford’s Parliamentary critics. “He says,” Colenso snarled, “‘Had the force in question but taken up a defensive position in the camp itself, and utilised there the materials for a hasty entrenchment;’ but he does not point out how the ‘force in question’ was to know of the near approach of the Zulu army, he himself having neglected to search the country where that army

⁴⁴⁰ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 294.

⁴⁴¹ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 28.

⁴⁴² Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 294.

lay. He had prepared no ‘defensive positions;’ but he had selected a fatal spot for his camp, which, covering a front of about half a mile, was utterly indefensible as it stood; and he had ‘pooh-poohed’ the suggestion of taking defensive precautions when made by Colonel Glyn.”⁴⁴³

Lord Chelmsford subsequently disputed Colenso’s depiction of his defensive preparations, but his own writings tell against him. Secure in his notions of racial and cultural superiority over those he was up against, the English nobleman still viewed his Zululand campaign as little more than a matter of marching. In a letter to Evelyn Wood, written on January 16, Chelmsford amply demonstrated his reserves of self-confidence when he blithely assured his subordinate and confidante he would be moving to Isandlwana and would shortly thereafter obtain “the submission of the chiefs and Headmen residing in that District. Having settled that part I shall move onto ground between the Isepezi and Umhlabmkosi but nearest to the latter were there is wood—If you are then at Ingwee we might have another meeting somewhere between our two camps and again talk over the situation. The effect of two forces meeting has, I am sure, a good moral effect.”⁴⁴⁴ There is no hint in this letter, or in any of his other writings from the same period, that the Zulu might actually take the offensive against him. When presented with the possibility by one of the Natal government’s border agents, Chelmsford dismissed the notion. “I do not believe Mr Fannin’s report about a large force in the Inkandla bush,” he wrote to Sir Bartle Frere on January 21st. “Mr Fannin like a good many other Natal officials is an alarmist, and, not being able to appreciate what an enemy can do and what he cannot do, sees danger where there really is none.”⁴⁴⁵ With his belief that Africans would only

⁴⁴³ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 294.

⁴⁴⁴ “Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel H.E. Wood, Headquarter Camp Zululand Near Rorke’s Drift, 16 January 1879,” 71.

⁴⁴⁵ “Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Sir Bartle Frere, Headquarter Camp, Insalwana Hill, Zululand, 21 January 1879,” in *Lord Chelmsford’s Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband, (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 75.

ever run from white men firmly fixed in his head, Chelmsford was entirely unwilling to even consider the possibility that the Zulu might try to attack his column. Any suggestion he might want to see to his defenses, whether made by Boer colonists, experienced Natal border agents, or professional soldiers like Richard Glyn, was treated with aristocratic disdain.

When the Zulu attack came on January 22nd, Lord Chelmsford was not even in the camp to meet it. On the night of January 20th, Chelmsford began to receive reports of Zulu movement southeast of the camp, near the hilltop stronghold of the local Zulu baron, Matshana. The Mounted Volunteers, elements of the Border Police under Major Dartnell, and two battalions of the NNC under Commandant Lonsdale, were sent out into the hills to search for Matshana's agents, and, upon locating them, to determine what they were up to.⁴⁴⁶ Dartnell and Lonsdale encountered stiff resistance on the 21, and halted their advance, with Dartnell sending messengers to Lord Chelmsford to ask for reinforcements. Chelmsford initially declined to give him any, but changed his mind when, late on 21, another message from Dartnell arrived saying the number of Zulu he could see from his bivouac was so large "he and Commandant Lonsdale did not consider the force at their disposal sufficient to attack, and [requested] that a reinforcement of two or three companies of the 24th might be sent out to them next morning."⁴⁴⁷ Instead of acceding to Dartnell's request as written, Chelmsford, seeing a chance to ambush and destroy a significant Zulu force, decided not only to go to Dartnell himself, but to take more than half the army with him. Early in the morning of January 22, even as Pearson, miles away, was having his first battle with Godide at the Nyezane, Chelmsford took four artillery pieces, six companies of the 2/24th, and the whole of the Mounted Infantry and Native Pioneers with him

⁴⁴⁶ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 30.

⁴⁴⁷ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 30-31.

into the hills.⁴⁴⁸ To hold the camp he left five companies of the 1/24th, one company of the 2/24th, four companies of the NNC, and a few Mounted Volunteers, under the auspices of Lieutenant-Colonel Henry Pulleine, commanding officer of the 1/24th. He also sent orders to Brevet Colonel Anthony Durnford at Rorke's Drift, to "advance at once to Isandhlwana [sic] with all his mounted men and the rocket battery, and as senior officer to take command of the camp."⁴⁴⁹

Lord Chelmsford's advance into the hills accomplished nothing beyond leaving the camp at Isandlwana even more vulnerable. Ron Lock and the other historians who view Isandlwana as a preplanned ambush, take the stance that Matshana had been asked by Ntshingwayo to stage a demonstration in the hill country with the intent of drawing out part of Chelmsford's Centre Column, and enabling the attack on Isandlwana by Ntshingwayo's army to proceed.⁴⁵⁰ Over the past several days, Ntshingwayo's command, consisting of nearly 20 000 Zulu warriors, filtered into the region around Isandlwana in small detachments and patrols. Zibhebhu kaMaphitha, who had charge of Ntshingwayo's reconnaissance, mapped out the British zones of patrol, and the Zulu moved between them, taking refuge in a valley only a few miles from Isandlwana⁴⁵¹ So stealthily had they approached, none of Chelmsford's scouts noticed their arrival; all reports to the Lieutenant-General indicated the only bodies of Zulu present in the area were to the southeast of him, in Matshana's territory. Either Matshana just happened to be moving his own troops at the same time Ntshingwayo was positioning himself for a thrust against the Centre Column, or the proponents of the ambush theory are correct and the two chiefs had worked out a strategy meant to deceive Lord Chelmsford into dividing his army, making it all the easier to crush him.

⁴⁴⁸ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 31.

⁴⁴⁹ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 31.

⁴⁵⁰ Lock, *Isandlwana: The Revelation of a Disaster*, 64,76.

⁴⁵¹ Ian Knight provides detailed examinations of Zibhebhu's role as master of scouts in both *Zulu Rising* and the chapter on Zibhebhu in *Great Zulu Commanders*. If any scholars have disputed his analysis, it is not known to this author.

Matshana's behaviour lends credence to the second theory, for when Chelmsford reached Dartnell, the Zulu baron's men neither fled nor stood their ground, but instead made a fighting retreat that drew Chelmsford ever further into the hill country.⁴⁵² Zulu warriors would take a position and make as if to hold it, then retreat before Chelmsford, presenting the British general with the very thing he feared to encounter in Zululand: an enemy who, like the Xhosa, would not stand and fight.⁴⁵³ Nell Colenso, for one, fully believed Lord Chelmsford had fallen victim to a Zulu deception, writing that "The only person deceived by a 'simulated retreat' was Lord Chelmsford himself, whose troops *during three hours* had advanced 'against a Zulu force that fell back from hill to hill...giving up without a shot most commanding positions.'"⁴⁵⁴ Her stance was supported by the evidence of Uguku, a Zulu officer who said Matshana was explicitly acting on Ntshingwayo's orders, and the decision to mobilise for battle that day was made when they "heard the firing of the English advance guard who had engaged Matshana's men."⁴⁵⁵ Chelmsford's own descriptions of the skirmishing in the hills, while disputing Colenso's characterisation, and insisting he beat Matshana, largely agree with her on the facts of the case.⁴⁵⁶ Matshana, it appears, made himself into a lure Chelmsford could not resist taking hold of, tricking the British commander into abandoning half his column in an indefensible campsite and setting him up for the body blow Ntshingwayo was about to deal to his plans.

Horace Smith-Dorrien, a lieutenant with the Quartermaster's Corps, was the officer sent to inform Colonel Durnford of his new orders. One of the very few officers who survived the

⁴⁵² Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 39.

⁴⁵³ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 39.

⁴⁵⁴ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 295.

⁴⁵⁵ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 411.

⁴⁵⁶ Lord Chelmsford, "From Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford, K.C.B., to the Right Honourable the Secretary of State for War, Pietermaritzburg, Natal, January 27, 1879," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 2, edited by John Laband and Ian Knight, (London: Archival Publications International Limited, 2000): 30.

clash at Isandlwana, Smith-Dorrien went on to have a storied career in the British Army, rising to the rank of full General, and was still in service when World War I broke out in 1914. In his memoirs, Smith-Dorrien recalled the youthful energy with which he carried Chelmsford's message to Durnford, writing: "It ought to have been a very jumpy ride, for I was entirely alone and the country was wild and new to me, and the road little better than a track; but pride at being selected to carry an important dispatch and the valour of ignorance (for I only realised next day that the country was infested with hostile Zulus) carried me along without a thought of danger."⁴⁵⁷ He found Durnford just as the Colonel was "moving off with his levies towards Sandspruit (away from Isandhlwana [sic]), but on reading the dispatch, which conveyed directions to move up to reinforce the Isandhlwana [sic] camp (as Lord Chelmsford, with the main body of the force, leaving the camp standing, was moving out some miles to the east to attack the Zulu army), he at once changed the direction of his march."⁴⁵⁸ Historians have often speculated on what went through Durnford's mind when he received his new orders from Chelmsford. Everything from the belief this was his chance to gain some military glory to a weary annoyance at yet another change in instructions has been suggested, but there is little concrete evidence to support any of the possible interpretations. However, given Durnford's manifest sympathies for the Zulu people and his belief that the war was being undertaken for all the wrong reasons, it must be said that those who see him as being out to salvage his reputation through battle honours do not have much of a leg to stand upon. Besides, it is only with the benefit of hindsight that we know Durnford was going to see combat that day. All Chelmsford's despatch asked of Durnford was that he come to the camp and take control of it while Chelmsford fought the actual battle in the hills to the southeast. Together with the African

⁴⁵⁷ Horace Smith-Dorrien, *Smith-Dorrien: Isandlwana to the Great War*, (Drifffield: Oakpast Ltd, 2009): 21.

⁴⁵⁸ Smith-Dorrien, *Smith-Dorrien*, 21.

auxiliaries of his Natal Native Horse, Durnford rode out for Isandlwana, telling his wagons and NNC battalions to catch up with him when they could.

The distances and the terrain being what they were, Anthony Durnford did not reach the Isandlwana camp until sometime between 10:00 and 11:00 that morning.⁴⁵⁹ By the time he got there and assumed command, the Battle of Isandlwana had already been lost, though as of yet, not a single British officer was even aware it had begun. Since eight o'clock that morning, Lieutenant-Colonel Pulleine had been receiving scattered reports from his cavalry outriders and infantry pickets of increased Zulu activity in the area. The first message came in at 8:00 sharp, when "a report was sent in by a few mounted men posted some 2,000 yards to the north, that a body of the enemy was in sight approaching from the northeast."⁴⁶⁰ Pulleine dutifully sent a despatch to Lord Chelmsford to apprise him of this information and drew up a body of troops in skirmish line in front of the camp in the direction from which the enemy were reported to be coming. He did not, however, send out more scouts, or ask for reinforcements from Chelmsford—Pulleine appears to have feared, not unjustifiably, that any request for help would cause Chelmsford to label him an "alarmist" like the unfortunate border agent Mr. Fannin. The next contact with the Zulu came at nine o'clock, "when a small number were seen on the crests of the hills, apparently coming from the direction reported. These withdrew almost immediately, and about the same time the party on the heights sent in word that the enemy were in three columns of which two were retiring, and that the third had passed out of sight, moving in a north-westerly direction."⁴⁶¹ Pulleine had no idea what he was seeing and would not figure it out for

⁴⁵⁹ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 32.

⁴⁶⁰ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 31.

⁴⁶¹ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 32.

some hours to come. When Durnford rode into camp and asked for an update on the situation, all Pulleine could tell him was they had numerous sightings of the Zulu, but no serious contacts.⁴⁶²

What took place around the Isandlwana encampment was as follows: early that morning, some of Pulleine's scouts had stumbled onto the valley where Chief Ntshingwayo was holed up with his army. They had seen only a part of the Zulu force before retreating; in doing so, they had also been seen by the Zulu, and leading elements of several of the younger regiments surged up out of the valley, intending to catch the British spies before they could report back to Pulleine.⁴⁶³ Ntshingwayo and his senior officers moved to swiftly reimpose discipline on the unruly young men, and as their orders made their way down the ranks to the junior officers, the regiments were screamed back into order. His original order of battle shot, Ntshingwayo did not try to return to it and adapted his plans, reorganising his army so that while the regiments he had intended for his right were now in his centre, his centre on his left, and his left on the right, they were again set up in the classic "horns of the buffalo" formation the British would shortly learn to hate.⁴⁶⁴ With his soldiers now ready to execute a pincer attack, Ntshingwayo gave the command to advance, and was already in the process of surrounding Isandlwana. What Pulleine's vedettes had seen and failed to comprehend was Ntshingwayo's reorganising of his army, and the subsequent movements as the Zulu warriors fanned out over the plain, encircling Isandlwana mountain and the British camp at its base. Not a shot had been fired and not a man was yet dead, but Durnford and Pulleine were already losing the Battle of Isandlwana. Chief Ntshingwayo's trap might have been sprung earlier than he intended it to be, yet it was still all

⁴⁶² Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 32.

⁴⁶³ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 409.

⁴⁶⁴ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 409.

going according to plan, and it would be at least another hour before either of the British officers worked out that they were in the Zulu net at all.

With Henry Pulleine having failed to make sense of the Zulu movements his vedettes had witnessed, it was left to Anthony Durnford to interpret the reports he was being given, and it is only justice to Durnford to remember he had seen none of the Zulu activity himself. All the information Durnford had and upon which he based his subsequent movements came to him by way of Pulleine; any missing details are therefore on Pulleine, rather than Durnford's, head. For all the flak Durnford has absorbed, both from Chelmsford and his acolytes, and from modern historians, his only real error was trusting Pulleine had done a thorough job of intelligence gathering, and that the data he was being handed was substantially accurate. Deciding, as Pulleine had apparently not, that something was afoot, Durnford sent one of his troops of Natal Native Horse back to his column with orders to protect the ammunition wagons and to bring them up as quickly as they could.⁴⁶⁵ Another two troops were dispatched "to the heights on the left flank to reconnoitre, while he himself advanced into the plain in front with the remaining two troops of mounted natives, the rocket battery, and one company of the 1/1st Natal Native Contingent."⁴⁶⁶ Durnford also asked Pulleine if he could spare two more companies of British troops to accompany him on his reconnaissance mission, but Pulleine demurred, saying it would violate his instructions from Chelmsford to protect the camp and only the camp. Horace Smith-Dorrien, who viewed this meeting from a distance, thought it an acrimonious one, but Lieutenant Cochrane, who was actually in the tent, believed it was anything but, and described Durnford and

⁴⁶⁵ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 32.

⁴⁶⁶ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 32.

Pulleine as parting on amicable terms.⁴⁶⁷ With a total of about one hundred men, Durnford, in the words of the War Office *Narrative* “left the camp about 11 a.m., and advanced along the plain in front with the object of preventing the columns of the enemy, reported as in retreat, from joining the force with which Lord Chelmsford was at the time believed to be engaged.”⁴⁶⁸

Knight and Locke have both decried Durnford for splitting the forces available to defend the camp, but such accusations are made entirely with the benefit of hindsight—and with scant appreciation, it seems, for the minimal difference the two hundred fifty or so men of the NNH would have made against the 20 000 Zulu who were on their way. Pulleine told Durnford his men had spotted, at most, six hundred to eight hundred Zulu, moving away from the camp, in the direction of Lord Chelmsford’s expeditionary force. Under these circumstances it was entirely natural for Durnford to presume, as the War Office *Narrative* understood, that the Zulu were endeavouring to trap *Lord Chelmsford*, rather than Pulleine or himself.⁴⁶⁹ Durnford did not abandon the camp in some sort of mad dash for glory, intent on hurling his meagre body of men against thousands of Zulu, but in the belief that a few hundred Zulu warriors were trying to take Lord Chelmsford’s force in the back and needed to be delayed while Lord Chelmsford was warned. Had Pulleine’s reports been correct, Durnford’s *ad hoc* force might well have been enough to prevent Chelmsford from being flanked. His cavalry could have harassed the Zulu or moved past them to establish contact with Chelmsford, while his rocket battery had the potential to inflict serious casualties on an army of less than a thousand Zulu. In the event he ran into greater difficulties, he could fall back to one of the surrounding hills, and have the NNC

⁴⁶⁷ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 281; “Supplement to the London Gazette of Friday, 21st of March,” in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 2, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 121; Smith-Dorrien, *Smith-Dorrien*, 23.

⁴⁶⁸ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 33.

⁴⁶⁹ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 33.

company, preferably reinforced by the two British companies he had asked Pulleine to lend him, hold off any charges by small Zulu units. Durnford was not an irrational man, making incomprehensible decisions. He was a competent, professional soldier taking appropriate measures to meet the enemy he expected to face. The failure of intelligence was not on Durnford's part, but on Pulleine's, and on Lord Chelmsford, whose misguided orders Pulleine insisted on adhering so closely to.

In a set of orders written about border raiding during the Xhosa Wars, Lord Chelmsford stated that a force that remains “on the passive defensive, without endeavouring by means of scouting in small bodies or by raiding in large ones, to discover what the enemy is doing in its immediate front, it deserves to be surprised and overpowered.”⁴⁷⁰ During the early hours of the Isandlwana it was Durnford, not Pulleine, who was adhering to that maxim. Of course, Pulleine's reluctance to scout or to take the danger from the Zulu seriously should not be overly surprising, given Lord Chelmsford's manifest refusal to obey his own suggestions and do those same things. Chelmsford first became aware of the Zulu presence near his camp at 9:30 that morning, when the rider Pulleine sent to him reached his bivouac in the hills. Pulleine's note was short and to the point: “Staff Officer—Report just came in that the Zulus are advancing in force from left front of the camp.”⁴⁷¹ Chelmsford sent Lieutenant Milne of the Royal Navy up a nearby hill with a spyglass, but Milne, in the words of Chelmsford's Assistant Military Secretary (and *de facto* chief of staff), Lieutenant-Colonel John North Crealock, said only that “the cattle had been driven into camp.”⁴⁷² Milne later realised his error, saying that “it is just possible that what I took to be the cattle having been driven into camp may possibly have been the Zulu ‘impi’.”⁴⁷³

⁴⁷⁰ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 317.

⁴⁷¹ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 39.

⁴⁷² Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 288.

⁴⁷³ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 288.

Crealock and Chelmsford did not question Milne's initial misreading of the scene, however, and decided Pulleine must be seeing things. As Crealock later said, "our own attention was chiefly bent on the enemy's force retiring from the hills in our own front"; the sight of fleeing Africans was apparently so enticing to Chelmsford and his staff they could not tear their eyes from it, even to consider their own camp might be in danger.⁴⁷⁴ Chief Matshana was showing the British officers what they wanted to see, and they were still being taken in by it.

Concerned Pulleine was being "alarmist," Chelmsford and Crealock decided the Lieutenant-Colonel and his men should be brought up to join their column as soon as possible. The Irish mercenary, Commandant George Hamilton-Browne, and his battalion of the NNC were ordered by Crealock to "return at once to camp and assist Colonel Pulleine to *strike camp and come on here.*" (Italics in original) Hamilton-Browne, who had had misgivings about the expedition into the hills from the beginning, was horrified. "I nearly fell off my horse," he remembered. "Could these men know of the proximity of the enemy? Were we all mad or what? However I was only a poor devil of a Colonial commandant and as a simple irregular not supposed to criticize full blown staff officers, so I saluted and said, 'If I come across the enemy?'" If the soldier-of-fortune hoped for a reassuring answer from Chelmsford's AMS, he did not get it. "'Oh,' said he, 'just brush them off and go on,' and with that he went back to his breakfast." Hamilton-Browne, realising the futility of arguing with Crealock, got his battalion together and marched for Isandlwana, in spite of his bad feeling about what he might find. Early in his progression, he captured a Zulu scout, who told him Cetshwayo's army was on their way to Isandlwana, news that made the hardened soldier-for-hire all but panic. He sent a message to Chelmsford, saying, "I have just captured a Zulu scout who informs me the Zulu army is behind

⁴⁷⁴ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 288.

the range of hills on the left flank of the camp. Will push on as fast as possible. The ground here is good for the rapid advance of men and guns.” Chelmsford said he never got Hamilton-Browne’s message, or any of the other messages the Commandant sent to him over the next several hours. Hamilton-Browne strongly suspected this was John Crealock’s work; given Crealock’s antipathy towards Hamilton-Browne and his expressed opinion that a single battalion ought to be more than enough to brush the Zulu off, this cannot be said to be out of character.⁴⁷⁵ Widely hated by the men under Chelmsford’s command, Crealock apparently thought it was his job to keep Chelmsford from being ‘bothered’ by news that went against the Lieutenant-General’s expectations, an attitude that made him an object of loathing among the other officers of the command. Normally obnoxious, Crealock’s dedication to protecting his position as Chelmsford’s main source of information may have led to casualties at Isandlwana.

Aided by Crealock, Lord Chelmsford’s ignorance of what was happening in his camp remained unchallenged until later that afternoon. Henry Pulleine’s ignorance, on the other hand, finally fell apart around noon. Before Durnford left, he told Pulleine to have a company of the 1/24th “move to the heights some 1,500 yards north of the camp.”⁴⁷⁶ Pulleine sent one company, under a Lieutenant Cavaye, then “the rest of the troops who had been drawn up returned to their private parades, and were broken off.” The relative peace that descended over the camp was broken, however, at noon, when firing was heard from the hill where Cavaye’s men were posted. Lieutenant Charles Raw’s unit of the Natal Native Horse, which Durnford sent to reconnoitre the left flank, had, after a ride of three or four miles, “seen the Zulu army, about a mile off advancing in line, and extending towards its left.” Captain George Shepstone (son of Theophilus Shepstone) and civilian volunteer Mister Hamer, who had accompanied Raw, hurried back to

⁴⁷⁵ Hamilton-Browne, *Lost Legionary*, 96-101.

⁴⁷⁶ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 33.

camp to tell Pulleine, while “the troop of Basutos fell back before the enemy,” fighting as they went. Raw, one of the few officers to stand with Durnford at Bushman’s Pass in 1873, was not one to turn tail and run. Cavaye’s company saw this engagement and as the Zulu right horn moved into the valley it “came under the fire of Cavaye’s company, which was on the ridge overlooking this valley. The Zulus, however, did not turn aside to attack the company; but passing its front at a distance of about 800 yards streamed onwards in loose order to carry out their usual encircling movement.”⁴⁷⁷

Pulleine immediately discarded all the expectations Lord Chelmsford had impressed on him and began taking action to defend the campsite. A second company of the 1/24th under Captain Mostyn and a company of the NNC were ordered to the heights to back up Cavaye and the NNH. Five minutes later, Pulleine realised the position on the heights could not be held and gave the command for all the troops located there to retreat to the camp; “This retreat was carried out in good order,” the War Office *Narrative* reported, “and a fresh line was formed facing the heights, and about 400 yards from them, the two companies of the 1/24th being supported by a third (Captain Younghusband’s) was drawn up in echelon on their left, and like them in extended order.” Units of the 1/1st and 2/1st NNC were ordered out as pickets along the left, until Pulleine’s available troops were stretched out before the camp in a long, thin skirmish line, ready to receive the Zulu.⁴⁷⁸ A square or another massed formation would have allowed Pulleine to deliver a greater weight of fire into the Zulu, but would have left the way into the camp open from the front. Besides, experience in the Xhosa War had taught Lord Chelmsford, and through him, Pulleine, that British troops in extended skirmish order, armed with Martini-Henry rifles were more than capable of fending off charges from Indigenous Africans. That the Xhosa were

⁴⁷⁷ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 33-34.

⁴⁷⁸ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 33-34.

bush fighters whose charge had nothing on that of Zululand's shock infantry was a lesson no British officer—save Charles Pearson, who was too far away to warn the others—had learned yet, and the teaching of that lesson would be a vicious affair indeed.

From his position, George Hamilton-Browne could see many of the things Pulleine could not—including just how many Zulu were now en route to Isandlwana. Contrary to many artistic depictions of the battle, the Zulu army was no stranger to firearms, and the host Ntshingwayo led to Isandlwana had as many as 6000 guns among them, though many of these were badly outdated or in poor repair; many would have been Napoleonic era muskets sold off from British stores over the decades that followed.⁴⁷⁹ Having loaded their weapons with an exotic variety of homemade ammunition, including broken metal legs from cooking pots, nails and roughly hammered lead bullets, Zulu marksmanship was not particularly accurate, but it could still fill the air with a lot of projectiles. Hamilton-Browne relayed his first sight of Zulu musketry in his memoirs saying, “I saw a puff of smoke rise from the hills to the left of the camp. It was followed by another. They seemed to come from a huge black shadow that lay on the hills.” It took Hamilton-Browne a moment to recognise what he was looking at: the Zulu army, firing at, and being fired upon by Pulleine's men. While Chelmsford had taken most of the artillery with him on his wild goose chase in the hills, Pulleine still had two guns with him positioned in front of his line, and these presently opened up on the Zulu. Hamilton-Browne, on seeing this, sent a second message back to Chelmsford. “The Zulu army is attacking the left of the camp,” he wrote hurriedly. “The guns have opened on them. The ground here still suitable for guns and mounted men. Will push on so as to act as support to them.” Hamilton-Browne's NNC men, however, were not eager to come to grips with the Zulu, and it took all the mercenary's considerable

⁴⁷⁹ The 6000 figure is taken from Ian Knight, who provides it in both *The Anatomy of the Zulu Army* and *Zulu Rising*.

reserves of brutality, and, in his own words, “all the muscular persuasion of my officers and all the dauntless blackguardism of my non-coms to kick a crawl out of them.”⁴⁸⁰

Hamilton-Browne was not the only one trying to get in touch with Chelmsford. The general, deciding the Commandant was taking too long to reach Pulleine, sent out one of his staff officers, Captain Alan Gardner to ride to Isandlwana and convey the order to Pulleine to come up. Gardner reached Pulleine just as Captain Shepstone came racing into the camp to tell the Lieutenant-Colonel they were under attack.⁴⁸¹ Gardner decided to stay and help Pulleine defend the camp, and both he and Pulleine sent riders into the hills to notify Chelmsford “our left was attacked by about ten thousand of the enemy.”⁴⁸² If either of these messages got through to Chelmsford there was no record of it. Hamilton-Browne, who was still pushing his much abused auxiliaries towards Isandlwana, sent a third message to Chelmsford that read, “the camp is being attacked on the left and in front, and as of yet is holding its own. Ground still good for the rapid advance of guns and horses. Am moving forward as fast as I can.” Minutes later the second messenger the Commandant sent for Chelmsford returned to the battalion, and told Hamilton-Browne “he had delivered my note to a staff officer and had received orders for me to push onto camp.”⁴⁸³ If this story is accurate, the mercenary’s denunciations of Chelmsford’s staff as a pack of incompetents may not be far off the mark, for at least one of the Lieutenant-General’s aides was deliberately refusing to inform his superior of the calamity unfolding only a few miles away. Where Hamilton-Browne could only insinuate that he knew which staff officer it was, Nell Colenso—whose book Hamilton-Browne referred readers who wished to know more to—was unafraid to say it out loud. “One message only is mentioned by the General or his military

⁴⁸⁰ Hamilton-Browne, *Lost Legionary*, 98.

⁴⁸¹ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 284.

⁴⁸² Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 284.

⁴⁸³ Hamilton-Browne, *Lost Legionary*, 99.

secretary as having been received from the camp. But an officer (of rank) *who had seen them*,” (italics in original) she swore, “says that five or six messages were received from the camp during the day by the General or his staff; and he says distinctly that the messages were in the possession of Lieut.-Colonel Crealock.”⁴⁸⁴

Hamilton-Browne’s fourth and final message to Lord Chelmsford was sent just before the camp’s defenses failed completely. “For God’s sake come with all your men,” it read, “the camp is surrounded and will be taken unless helped.”⁴⁸⁵ This message was intercepted at 1:15 by Lieutenant-Colonel Harness of the Royal Artillery, who was sent by Chelmsford to find a new camp. Harness immediately decided to move towards Isandlwana with his guns, hoping to lend support to the camp, though not before sending one of his subordinates, Major Gosset back to Chelmsford with Hamilton-Browne’s message.⁴⁸⁶ In the meantime, a man described as “a native”—possibly one of Hamilton-Browne’s NNC men—reached Chelmsford, and told him how badly the battle was going for Durnford and Pulleine. Chelmsford mounted a nearby hill and looked at the camp through his spyglass but could see nothing amiss. He determined “this report and a similar one which had previously been received from another native source were alike unfounded.”⁴⁸⁷ It was not until Major Gosset arrived with his messages from Hamilton-Browne and Harness that Chelmsford realised something might actually be wrong and decided to head back to Isandlwana to see for himself.

Even then, Chelmsford did not seem able to take the situation seriously. A rider was sent to Harness to tell him that his message had been received, but also to demand that he abandon his

⁴⁸⁴ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 290; Hamilton-Browne, *Lost Legionary*, 100-101.

⁴⁸⁵ Hamilton-Browne, *Lost Legionary*, 99.

⁴⁸⁶ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 297.

⁴⁸⁷ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 41.

effort to move to the rescue of the men at Isandlwana and rejoin Chelmsford's column.⁴⁸⁸

Hamilton-Browne and Nell Colenso both found this order baffling at the least, with Colenso noting that despite Harness' testimony to having received such an order, there was no mention of it in any of Chelmsford's correspondence; Hamilton-Browne implied, though he did not outright state it was Crealock who told Harness to come back and Chelmsford was covering for his Assistant Military Secretary.⁴⁸⁹ It was not until after 2:00 pm that Chelmsford actually got his column moving towards Isandlwana. Along the way he met Hamilton-Browne and the 1/3rd Natal Native Contingent, who were beating a fighting retreat from Isandlwana in the wake of the defenders' collapse. Chelmsford was very surprised by this meeting, exclaiming "What are you doing here, Commandant Browne? You ought to have been in camp hours ago." The Commandant tried to tell the General the camp had fallen, but Chelmsford could not believe it. "How dare you tell me such a falsehood," he snapped at Hamilton-Browne, "Get your men into line at once and advance."⁴⁹⁰ Chelmsford subsequently apologised to the NNC commander for his rudeness, accepting Hamilton-Browne believed what he was saying when he said the camp had been seized. Chelmsford himself still had doubts though, which were not fully assuaged until they reached Isandlwana itself. By that point all the men left to hold it had been dead for hours.

From the start there was very little Anthony Durnford or Henry Pulleine could have done to alter the outcome of the battle. Between them, the two British leaders had sixty-seven officers and 1707 men, of whom only twenty-one officers and five hundred eighty-two men were British regulars.⁴⁹¹ The rest were Natal Native Contingent, Natal Native Horse, and several companies of Border Police and Natal Carbineers who were left in the camp when Chelmsford marched out

⁴⁸⁸ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 297; Hamilton-Browne, *Lost Legionary*, 100.

⁴⁸⁹ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 298; Hamilton-Browne, *Lost Legionary*, 100.

⁴⁹⁰ Hamilton-Browne, *Lost Legionary*, 101.

⁴⁹¹ Numbers given in Knight, *Zulu Rising*.

on January 21. Such a force was never going to prevail against Chief Ntshingwayo's 20 000 man host, especially in open battle, without any entrenchments or earthworks to hide behind. Worse yet, by the time Durnford and Pulleine recognised they were under attack, Ntshingwayo was already in the process of surrounding them. There was nothing either of them could do with the forces and resources available to stop the Zulu general from completing his encirclement. That meant that Durnford, Pulleine, and most of their men were, in essence, already dead at nine o'clock that morning. All that occurred in the hours afterwards was mere detail.

Their brief conference in Pulleine's tent was the first and last time he and Durnford would meet. While Pulleine tried to get the men in line to defend the centre of the camp, Durnford was fighting his own battle miles away on Pulleine's right, against Ntshingwayo's left horn. Durnford was five miles out from the camp with his two troops of Natal Native Horse when a patrol of Natal Carbineers on extended picket duty ran into him and informed him the Zulu were attacking Pulleine, rather than Chelmsford.⁴⁹² Minutes later, the leading regiments of Ntshingwayo's left pincer came in view and Durnford gave the order for the men to retire towards the camp. "This," the War Office *Narrative* applauded, "was carried out steadily, fire being maintained by alternate troops," as Durnford did what he could to slow the Zulu advance, and buy the men in camp time to defend themselves.⁴⁹³ Zulu veterans concurred with the War Office's assessment, voicing their frustration at Durnford's delaying tactics. His men would ride several hundred yards, dismount, fire their carbines into the oncoming Zulu, then remount and ride another few hundred yards, before repeating the procedure. In this way, Durnford bought the camp perhaps twenty minutes to a half an hour, time that would be insufficient to salvage the situation for the British, but proved crucial to the few men who survived the coming massacre.

⁴⁹² Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 282.

⁴⁹³ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 34.

Durnford could not stop the whole of the Zulu left by himself, though, and as his men retreated it slowly became clear to him just how outnumbered and surrounded they were. As Durnford's cavalry troopers fell back in the direction of Isandlwana, they passed by the wreckage of the rocket battery that had followed after them. Zulu musketry had driven off the battery's NNC escort and frightened away the mules who were supposed to tow it. "The Zulus now rushing in, a hand-to-hand fight ensued, in which Major Russell, R.A., who commanded the battery, 5 of the 8 men, and the mule drivers were killed."⁴⁹⁴ Durnford repelled the Zulu attackers and saved the three surviving artillerymen who told him they had only been able to fire a single rocket towards some Zulu on a nearby ridgeline before the Zulu skirmishers he had just driven away appeared from a ravine only one hundred yards off.⁴⁹⁵ With the British defenses all but nonexistent and Durnford and Pulleine fighting separate battles, Ntshingwayo's warriors had managed to infiltrate behind Durnford's lines taking out the rocket battery, and pushing on towards Isandlwana. With the cavalry vedettes in disarray, Pulleine busy in the centre, and the Zulu in increasing control of the battlefield, Durnford and his small force of Natal Native Horse were the only thing standing between the left horn and the Isandlwana campsite. Retreating again, Durnford made "a determined stand at the watercourse in front of the camp, where they were supported by those of the mounted infantry and Volunteers who had remained behind when the column had marched out that morning."⁴⁹⁶

Jabez Molife, a Basuto war-leader and non-commissioned officer in the Natal Native Horse, described the whirlwind of violence that enveloped the NNH and those of the Natal Carbineers and Newcastle Mounted Rifles who, under Captain Bradstreet, chose to stand with

⁴⁹⁴ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 34.

⁴⁹⁵ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 34.

⁴⁹⁶ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 34.

them. “There were not very many of us,” he remembered proudly, “but because of the way we were handled by our leader we were enough to stop the Zulus on that side for a long time.”⁴⁹⁷ The auxiliary horseman was filled with praise for Durnford whose bravery, he believed, was the main thing that kept the men going despite the odds being utterly stacked against them. “The Colonel rode up and down our line continually, encouraging us all, talking and even laughing with us—‘Fire away, my boys!’ ‘Well done, my boys!’ he cried. Some of us did not like his exposing himself so much, and wanted him to keep behind, but he laughed at us and said, ‘All right, nonsense.’ He was very calm and cheerful all the time.”⁴⁹⁸ Durnford’s crippled arm prevented him from joining in the fighting himself, yet Molife recalled the Colonel still found a way to help. “Sometimes, as he passed amongst us, one or another of the men brought him his gun with the old cartridge sticking, and he dismounted, and taking the gun between his knees, because of having only one hand with strength in it, he pulled the cartridge out and gave back the gun.”⁴⁹⁹ Officers like Hamilton-Browne and Evelyn Wood, who firmly believed African auxiliaries could not fight, would have struggled mightily with this scene, as Basuto horsemen, backed by only a minimal number of Boer and English colonial volunteers, singlehandedly delayed the Zulu left. Raised, armed, and trained at Durnford’s own expense, the Natal Native Horse were deeply attached to their Colonel, who treated them as soldiers rather than as cannon fodder. “Now we say that we shall always remember him by his commanding voice, and the way in which he gave us all some of his own spirit as he went along our line that day,” was Molife’s epitaph for his friend and superior.⁵⁰⁰

⁴⁹⁷ Jabez Molife, “A Native of the Natal Contingent Recalls Colonel Durnford of the Royal Engineers,” in *Zulu 1879* edited by DCF Moodie (Drifffield: Oakpast Ltd, 2006): 51.

⁴⁹⁸ Molife, “A Native of the Natal Contingent,” 51.

⁴⁹⁹ Molife, “A Native of the Natal Contingent,” 51.

⁵⁰⁰ Molife, “A Native of the Natal Contingent,” 51.

At last, however, the NNH ran out of ammunition, and on Durnford's instigation fell back again, this time all the way to Isandlwana, with the intention of obtaining more cartridges. It was at just the right moment too, for the Zulu, unable to shift Durnford from his position by force, "extended their left, and crossing the watercourse still lower down outflanked the mounted men, and threatened to cut off their retreat."⁵⁰¹ The NNH avoided the trap and made it to Isandlwana just ahead of the Zulu and only minutes before Pulliène's centre gave way. This was the moment Ntshingwayo's subcommanders had been waiting for. "While we were getting our ammunition," Molife said, "the Zulu army swept down right round the upper camp, shutting us out, but our leader was within, and we saw no more of him."⁵⁰² The Basuto trooper always regretted that he and the men had not forcibly taken Durnford from the field earlier that day, but knew Durnford would never have allowed it.⁵⁰³ Even now, as officers on horseback began to run from the camp, Durnford, who was mounted and a very capable horseman, refused to do so. Together with a few British regulars, Volunteer cavalrymen, and African auxiliaries who had not managed to get clear of Isandlwana, Durnford made his last stand in front of the right corner of the camp. In one of the war's supreme ironies, the majority of those who chose to remain with Durnford in his final act of defiance were members of the Border Police and Natal Carbineers, the latter of whom had abandoned him at Bushman's Pass six years earlier. Some historians, among them Ron Lock, have suggested Durnford ordered the Carbineers to remain with him and share in a deliberate attempt at martyrdom, but the highly independent nature of the Volunteer horsemen does not bear this out, and some of them were seen actively fighting their way towards Durnford when they could easily have vacated the camp. Wrote Archibald Forbes on seeing the

⁵⁰¹ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 37.

⁵⁰² Molife, "A Native of the Natal Contingent," 52.

⁵⁰³ Molife, "A Native of the Natal Contingent," 51.

ring of dead men about Durnford, “Clearly they rallied around Durnford in a last despairing attempt to cover the flank of the camp, and had stood fast from choice, when they could have essayed to fly for their horses.”⁵⁰⁴

The suggestion that Durnford forced anyone to stand with him was never made at the time, even by those who were most determined to make the blame for the defeat his, and his alone. Colonel Evelyn Wood, after talking to survivors of Isandlwana, wrote in fine Victorian purple prose of the courage of Durnford and his small band. “There comes a one-armed man, who, having shortly fallen back before the ever increasing foe is now determined to die. ‘Save yourself. As for me, I shall remain.’ He thus dismisses a staff officer and Hlubi’s black soldiers, who vainly urged the great chief to seek safety with them. Recognising his commanding courage, around him gather some twenty kindred spirits, who, nobly disdaining death, resolved to cover the retreat of the guns and die with him.”⁵⁰⁵ Wood’s writing was saccharine, but he captured the basic point well: by standing where he did, Durnford bought time for those still in the camp to get away. His efforts against the Zulu left kept the pincer trap from closing completely and opened a narrow pathway for Isandlwana’s few survivors to make their getaway through.

Mehlokazulu kaSihayo saw the end. Serving as a junior officer in the left horn, he was part of the force that finally killed Durnford. “It was a long time before they were overcome,” he said, “before we finished them. When we did get to them, they all died in one place, altogether. They threw down their guns when their ammunition was done, and then commenced with their pistols, which they used as long as their ammunition lasted; and then they formed a line, shoulder to shoulder and back to back, and fought with their knives.”⁵⁰⁶ In another interview, the Zulu

⁵⁰⁴ Forbes, “Visit to the Battlefield of Isandlwana,” 76.

⁵⁰⁵ Evelyn Wood, *Winnowed Memories*, (London: Cassell, 1918): 239.

⁵⁰⁶ Norris-Newman, *Through Zululand With the British*, 80.

warrior added, “When we closed in we came on to a mixed party of mounted and infantry men, who had evidently been stopped by the end of our horn; they numbered about a hundred. They made a desperate resistance, some firing with pistols, and others using swords. I repeatedly heard the word ‘fire’ given by someone, but we proved too many for them, and killed them all where they stood. When all was over I had a look at these men, and saw an officer with his arm in a sling, and with a big moustache, surrounded by Carabineers, soldiers, and other men that I didn’t know.”⁵⁰⁷

Durnford’s final stand came even as the last of Pulleine’s defensive efforts were flying apart. Supported by two cannons and by the NNC battalions, Pulleine’s British infantry and the Volunteer and auxiliary horsemen with them subjected the Zulu centre, or ‘boss’, to withering rifle fire, repeatedly halting the enemy infantry’s advance. The Zulu did not, however, take nearly as many casualties as the British expected they would. Contrary to its portrayal in films like *Zulu* and *Zulu Dawn*, Ntshingwayo’s warriors did not advance in a single massed horde, but in loose skirmish order in sections of five or ten under junior officers like Mehlokazulu, keeping wide spaces between them through which British rifle fire could pass harmlessly. The cannons, which might have been expected to break up the Zulu rush, were unable to do so for, as one survivor told it, the Zulu understood only too well how the artillery pieces were operated. “The cannon here began to fire harder than ever,” he wrote, “but the Zulus kept on pouring down in front and on our flank; those in front of the cannon when they saw the gunners stand clear would either fall down flat or divide in the middle, so as to leave a lane, and when the shot had passed would shout out ‘Umoya!’ (only wind). There was no confusion or hurry in these movements of

⁵⁰⁷ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 38.

theirs, but all was done as though they had been drilled to it.”⁵⁰⁸ They may well have been.

Ntshingwayo’s military record is harder to research than it should be, but it is probable he served in King Dingane’s army during the Zulu ruler’s battles against the Boers. He would have understood how dangerous firearms were and may well have taken precautions against them.

One thing Ntshingwayo definitely did, and which Durnford and Pulleine could not, was exert direct personal control over the battle. Together with Cetshwayo’s advisor Mavumengwana kaNdlela—brother of Chief Godide and son of the general who faced the Boers in 1838 under Dingane—who was appointed as his second-in-command (and *de facto* political officer) and the group of hereditary chieftains and royal appointees who comprised, in a very real sense, his senior staff, the Zulu general climbed the iNyoni cliff-face, providing himself with a vantage point from which he could view the entire engagement. While the vast bulk of the Zulu army was made up of foot soldiers, the men with Ntshingwayo were all mounted, and horsemen regularly rode down from the iNyoni to the various subcommanders and chiefs who were leading the Zulu regiments in the field. This meant that shortly after the armies came to grips with one another, Ntshingwayo had command and control over his army, while Durnford and Pulleine, separated from each other by miles, did not. Pulleine may not even have been at the firing line with his men; very few of Britain’s Isandlwana veterans could honestly say they knew where Pulleine was at any given time and his movements are much more difficult to track than Durnford’s. Where Ntshingwayo was, conversely, was known to his whole army, and they were getting a steady stream of orders from him. The advantage this gave the Zulu is best exemplified by one key moment in the battle when the Zulu boss, confronting Pulleine’s skirmish line, stalled. Three hundred yards from the British, the Zulu were unable to advance any farther as the enemy riflery

⁵⁰⁸ “A Survivor’s Account: The Battle of Isandhlwana,” in *Zulu 1879* edited by DCF Moodie (Driffield: Oakpast Ltd, 2006): 37.

was becoming too accurate, and the men took shelter in depressions in the ground waiting for the British to run low on ammo. Ntshingwayo, not wanting his assault slowed, sent one of his senior advisors, Mkhosana kaMdvundlana to get the centre moving again. Descending the cliffs, Mkhosana stood before the regiments and harangued them all for cowardice while bullets flew all around him but did not touch him. Shamed, the Zulu warriors rose and rushed at the British once more, even as a bullet took Mkhosana between the eyes and slew him.⁵⁰⁹ His sacrifice was not in vain, for once the Zulu centre started moving again, it did not stop.

It was just after one o'clock in the afternoon. The NNC troops holding Pulleine's left broke and ran when the Zulu got within two hundred yards of their position. In the words of the War Office *Narrative* "A gap in the line was thus left into which a mass of Zulus poured , and in an instant all was confusion. Before Mostyn's and Cavaye's companies of the 24th, which were extended on the left, had time to rally, or even fix bayonets, the Zulus were among them, and slaughtered them to a man."⁵¹⁰ The rest of the line imploded at this point, with Captain Younghusband's company retreating up the cliffs and the rest of the men fleeing into the camp. Younghusband eventually led his men in a suicide charge down the hills, and his whole command was gunned down by Zulu musketeers, who described the action to British traveller Bertram Mitford a few years later.⁵¹¹ The two artillery pieces, "after discharging a few rounds of case into the dense advancing mass of the enemy, limbered up," and were cut down by the Zulu as they tried to cross a river.⁵¹² As for the men who made it back into the camp itself, they would find no shelter there. While Pulleine fought the Zulu boss, and Durnford delayed the left horn, the Zulu right horn, with no one to stop it after Pulleine withdrew Cavaye and Mostyn from the

⁵⁰⁹ Bertram Mitford, *Through the Zulu Country: Its Battlefields and Its People* (London: Greenhill Books, 1992): 27.

⁵¹⁰ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 36.

⁵¹¹ Mitford, *Through the Zulu Country*, 30-31.

⁵¹² Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 36.

hilltops, circled round the back of the valley, and entered the campsite through its rear. When the British troops retreated into their campsite, they found it already occupied by the enemy.

The butchery that ensued has been described at length in many secondary sources and in the memoirs of those who survived. Horace Smith-Dorrien, who later commanded men in the bloodbaths of the First World War was still horrified when he wrote about it years later.⁵¹³ So was Hamilton-Browne, who inspected the site the night after the slaughter and whose mercenary career might have been expected to toughen him against all but the most appalling of sights. “In their mad rush into the camp,” he recollected in shocked tones, “the Zulus had killed everything. Horses had been stabbed at their picket lines. Splendid spans of oxen were lying dead in their yokes, mules lay dead in their harness and even dogs were lying stabbed among the tents. Ripped open sacks of rice, flour, meal and sugar lay everywhere. They had even in their savage rage thrust their *assagais* [sic] into tins of bully beef, butter, and jam. Among all this debris, singly and in heaps, or rather in groups of two or three, lay the ripped and mutilated bodies of the gallant 24th, showing how, when their formation was broken, they had stood it out, and fought back to back or in groups until they had been run over and destroyed.”⁵¹⁴ Those men who could get out did, their retreat covered by Durnford’s Natal Native Horse who, rather than running when cut off from their Colonel, instead did their best to help the infantry and the officers in the camp get out. Not all of those who got out made it very far, for the Zulu mounted an intensive pursuit and the men of the NNH could only fend off so many of Ntshingwayo’s warriors. Lieutenants Melvill and Coghill, endeavouring to save the Queen’s Colour from the Zulu, were among those who did not make it, cut down as they tried to cross a river. That there was even a chance for them to get away was thanks to Durnford, whose final act of defiance prevented the

⁵¹³ Smith-Dorrien, *Smith-Dorrien*, 32.

⁵¹⁴ Hamilton-Browne, *Lost Legionary*, 105.

Zulu left from linking up with the right as quickly as intended. Once he was dead, the left horn, like the right horn, flooded into the rear of the camp and escape became an impossibility.

Of the men killed in the camp, the Zulu remembered the officers best for, armed with revolvers and swords, they were able to make a better fight of it in the melee that ensued as Ntshingwayo's host stormed the British camp. Norris-Newman, the newspaper correspondent who accompanied Chelmsford, was told by a Zulu veteran that "two officers with pieces of glass in their eyes came forward shooting at him with their revolvers. One fell dead from a gunshot, and the other kept firing his revolver at the *induna*, a bullet grazing the right side of his neck, another grazing his left side, and another entering his leg. The *induna* flung an assegai which entered the officer's breast. The officer, with supreme effort, almost succeeded in pulling out the weapon (here the Zulu writhed his body in pantomime of the efforts of the officer), but the *induna* fell on him and instantly finished his dreadful work with another assegai."⁵¹⁵ Norris-Newman surmised that the officers in question were probably Lieutenants Austin and Pope of the 2/24th, for they were the only officers in the regiment who perpetually wore monocles.⁵¹⁶ Another Zulu relayed the story of how an unarmed soldier tackled him to the ground and tried to choke him to death before being speared. Several remembered a tall man who resisted savagely in front of the wagons before being shot. His description does not match that of any of the regiment's commissioned officers; he may well have been an NCO whose description would not have been recognisable by Chelmsford and his coterie.⁵¹⁷

As for Henry Pulleine, no one could say how he died. Some veterans thought they saw him cut down when the skirmish line disintegrated, but could not say for sure.⁵¹⁸ The Zulu told a

⁵¹⁵ Norris-Newman, *Through Zululand With the British*, 240-241.

⁵¹⁶ Norris-Newman, *Through Zululand With the British*, 241.

⁵¹⁷ Norris-Newman, *Through Zululand With the British*, 83.

⁵¹⁸ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 286.

different story. A warrior named Maqedinbaba told how when he entered a tent, searching for loot, he found an officer seated at a table inside who “plucked out a little gun and shot me through the cheek. I staggered, but found myself still alive. So I sprang upon him and finished him with my spear. That is why I am called Maqedinbaba (He Who Finishes The Matter), because I killed the chief *induna* of the army.”⁵¹⁹ Some historians, including Ian Knight, have doubted Maqedinbaba could have known it was Pulleine he killed, for the Zulu would not have been able to read the officers’ ranks. Yet Mehlokazulu obviously knew the difference between soldiers and Carbineers, and recognised Durnford as an officer despite the Colonel being in his mess uniform where the only indicators of rank were his insignia. Horace Smith-Dorrien, who escaped largely because the Zulu ignored him, was told after the war that “they had been told by their King Cetywayo [sic] that black coats were civilians and were not worth killing. I had a blue patrol jacket on, and it is noticeable that the only five officers who escaped—Essex, Cochrane, Gardner, Curling, and myself—had blue coats.”⁵²⁰ Here is further evidence the Zulu had at least a working idea of British signifiers of rank and allegiance, only being confused by those who had more than one uniform type, as was the case for Smith-Dorrien in his dark blue patrol jacket. Pulleine was in uniform, and it is not at all impossible that Maqedinbaba, or one of his compatriots, was able to read his rank insignia and realise who the Zulu warrior had killed.

By two o’clock that afternoon the killing was over. The Zulu pillaged the campsite then left it, taking most of their dead with them. When Lord Chelmsford arrived in Isandlwana at six thirty that night, he found a scene of slaughter and a career ending fiasco in the making waiting for him. The Zulu, by their admission, lost around 1000 men in the engagement. In exchange they killed fifty-two white officers, eight hundred six white troops, and four hundred seventy-one

⁵¹⁹ Recorded in Wilkins, *The Story of the Blood Drenched Field of Isandlwana*, quoted in Knight, *Zulu Rising*, 488.

⁵²⁰ Smith-Dorrien, *Smith-Dorrien*, 28.

African auxiliaries, a total of 1329 men.⁵²¹ More officers were killed with Durnford and Pulleine at Isandlwana than died holding the line against Napoleon at Waterloo, a figure that would soon be on the front page of many British newspapers. Lord Chelmsford would seek a way to blame this most hideous of reversals on one of Durnford or Pulleine, but the blame in truth belonged to him, John North Crealock, and Ntshingwayo kaMahole.

It was Chelmsford who neglected to laager the campsite, who left no orders for anyone else to laager the campsite, and who fell for Matshana's ploy and led half his army into the hills to seek out a Zulu army that was, in reality, camped on his doorstep. It was Crealock who kept the news of the unfolding calamity at Isandlwana from Chelmsford, hiding evidence that the Lieutenant-General did not want to hear and ensuring that when the information at last did get through, Chelmsford would be even less inclined to believe it. And it was Chief Ntshingwayo who orchestrated a near-perfect ambush, slipping 20 000 warriors past Chelmsford's scouts, baiting the British general into leaving his camp improperly guarded, and then falling on it before Durnford or Pulleine knew he was there. Durnford's tactical decisions, and to a lesser extent, those of Pulleine, have been analysed to death by historians, yet the back and forth about whether Durnford should have led the cavalry out of camp or if it was a mistake to pull Cavaye and Mostyn off the hills, ignores the fact that by the time Durnford and Pulleine were making those choices, the battle was lost. There was nothing either officer could have done, with only 1700 odd men, to prevail over Ntshingwayo's 20 000 who were already enveloping the camp when their presence was uncovered. If anything, Durnford's recon with the Natal Native Horse and his following stand at the right corner of the camp saved lives, by keeping an exit open at the rear of the camp, and allowing the fewer than four hundred men who escaped to do so. Having

⁵²¹ Numbers given in Knight, *Zulu Rising*.

ridden into a disaster in the making, Durnford made the best of a bad situation, and every man under his command who got out alive owed him for their survival.

Ntshingwayo's victorious army broke up upon leaving Isandlwana, the soldiers finding their own ways back to Ulundi, where the chief and his senior officers would report on their success to King Cetshwayo. Part of the Zulu reserve, under Prince Dabulamanzi kaMpande, half-brother of Cetshwayo, took a more circuitous route than the rest of the army, stopping to attack the British supply station at Rorke's Drift, held by one hundred thirty-nine men under Lieutenants John Chard and Gonville Bromhead.⁵²² Prince Dabulamanzi's ill-thought out and poorly coordinated assault, comprising a series of piecemeal attacks on Chard and Bromhead's well-entrenched and fortified positions, was motivated not by strategic or tactical necessity, but by annoyance that he and the regiments under his command had not been committed to action at Isandlwana.⁵²³ In attempting to seize Rorke's Drift, Dabulamanzi aimed to prove that he was as great a warrior as his brother, father, and uncles, and to show that Ntshingwayo had been wrong to keep him out of the battle. In the end he proved only that he had a lot to learn about warfare before he could rank himself the elderly chief's military equal. The Battle of Rorke's Drift, which began in the afternoon of January 22nd and lasted into the morning of January 23rd, won Dabulamanzi nothing, and cost him three hundred Zulu warriors, nearly ten percent of the 3000 men he had with him. He returned to Ulundi not as a conquering hero, but as a chastened and humbled supplicant, throwing himself on his brother's mercy. Cetshwayo forgave Dabulamanzi—though not before reaming him out in front of the assembled warriors—and the Prince who, while impetuous was a quick learner, went on to serve his king far more ably at

⁵²² Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 45.

⁵²³ Ian Knight, who is probably the leading expert on Rorke's Drift, provides this analysis of Prince Dabulamanzi's motivations in both *Zulu Rising* and in the chapter on him in *Great Zulu Commanders*. It is echoed in an interview with Mehlokazulu, published by Norris-Newman in *Through Zululand With the British*, 84.

Eshowe where he put what he had learned about besieging British fortifications to good use. For all the attention the Western world has paid to Rorke's Drift, it was, for the Zulu, a minor affair.

Chard and Bromhead, in the meantime, were awarded Victoria Crosses for their defense of the fort and their feat of repulsing an army twenty times their size while taking only seventeen fatal casualties themselves. Five other Victoria Crosses would be handed out to Chard and Bromhead's subordinates, both in tribute to their obvious courage and as a means of lessening the sting of Isandlwana by drawing public attention to the skirmish at Rorke's Drift. Despite the undeniable bravery of those who had defended Isandlwana to the end, no VCs were handed out for that action—the reversal was simply too humiliating to acknowledge in such a way. A private was awarded the VC for saving the life of a fellow soldier during the retreat to Rorke's Drift, and the high command eventually announced that Lieutenants Melvill and Coghill, who tried to save the Queen's Colour, would have been recommended for the Cross had they lived (the medal could not, at the time, be given posthumously), but Isandlwana proper was not considered worthy of commemoration. Lord Chelmsford kept the focus on Rorke's Drift and on the gallantry of Chard and Bromhead's little band, rather than on the cataclysmic failure at Isandlwana. Together with Sir Bartle Frere, he worked to elevate Rorke's Drift into a major strategic victory, with the men being awarded not only for their bravery, but for stopping Cetshwayo from invading Natal—something Cetshwayo had never intended to do.⁵²⁴

Sir Garnet Wolseley, who took command of South Africa at the end of the war, saw through Chelmsford's ploy and viewed the utilisation of awards in this fashion as entirely

⁵²⁴ Chelmsford's letter to the Secretary of State for War, referenced in footnote 191, and Bartle Frere's letter to the Colonial Secretary, written the same day, and noted below, marked the beginning of this effort, of which more will be said in the next chapter.

Henry Bartle Frere, "Governor the Right Honourable Sir H.B.E. Frere, Bart., G.C.B., G.C.S.I., to the Right Honourable Sir Michael Hicks Beach, Bart, High Commissioner's Office, Pietermaritzburg, Natal, January 27, 1879," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 2, ed. John Laband and Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications International Limited, 2000): 24-25.

demeaning and disgraceful. “I am sorry that both of these officers,” he wrote of Melvill and Coghill, “were not killed with their men at Isandlwana instead of where they were. I don’t like the idea of officers escaping on horseback when their men on foot are killed. Heroes have been made of men like Melvill and Coghill who, taking advantage of their having horses, bolted from the scene of the action to save their lives, it is monstrous making heroes of those who saved or attempted to save their lives while bolting or of those who, shut up in buildings at Rorke’s Drift, could not bolt, and fought like rats for their lives which they could not otherwise save.”⁵²⁵

Wolseley’s comments were motivated at least in part by class animus—he would later describe both Chard and Bromhead as “stupid looking” fellows—but there was also contained within them the anger of a professional soldier at the ways in which Chelmsford was manipulating the awards system to obscure his failures at Isandlwana.⁵²⁶ The Duke of Cambridge, cousin to Queen Victoria and Commander-in-Chief of the Army, shared at least some of Wolseley’s concerns, observing that “we are giving the VC very freely I think.”⁵²⁷

With the Victorian press hungry for heroes, Chelmsford and Bartle Frere’s depiction of Rorke’s Drift won out over that of Wolseley and Cambridge, and a skirmish at a trading post involving only a fraction of the British and Zulu armies became the most talked about and remembered battle of the war, memorialised in art, books, films, and even modeling kits. The bravery of Chard, Bromhead, and the men under their command should not, however, be allowed to distract historians in the same way that it did the British public. Rorke’s Drift was not a major setback for Zulu strategy since the battle was not supposed to have been fought in the first place. The three hundred casualties that Dabulamanzi sustained in his defeat there were significantly

⁵²⁵ Garnet Wolseley, *South African Journal 1879-1880* (Cape Town: A.A. Balkema, 1973): 104.

⁵²⁶ Garnet Wolseley, *South African Journal 1879-1880*, 72.

⁵²⁷ Quoted in W.B. Bartlett, *Zulu: Queen Victoria’s Most Famous Little War*, 158.

fewer than the losses Ntshingwayo had taken from his triumph at Isandlwana. Dabulamanzi was not, as of yet, a particularly seasoned general and his inability to take Rorke's Drift said more about his lack of experience than it did about the overall capabilities of the Zulu military. Neither the Prince nor his older brother had ever had any intention of conquering Natal, and thus the only lives the men at Rorke's Drift saved were their own. Some historians have tried to claim Rorke's Drift at least demonstrated that the proper way to fight the Zulu was from behind barricades and earthworks, but this was already known to the British who had years worth of Boer reports on the importance of laagering in Zulu country. Moreover, if Rorke's Drift was such an important lesson, British officers were mighty slow to absorb it, for two months later, at Ntombe Drift and Hlobane, Captain David Moriarty and Colonel Evelyn Wood endured crippling defeats of their own when they ignored the need for proper defenses and instead fought the Zulu in the open.

It was Isandlwana, not Rorke's Drift, that truly mattered when it came to Chelmsford's future strategy in Zululand, and Isandlwana was one of the worst colonial defeats ever inflicted upon a British army. Only Braddock's Defeat, the First-Anglo Asante War and the First Anglo-Afghan War could compare with it in scale and Chelmsford, unlike Edward Braddock, Charles McCarthy, and William Elphinstone, was still alive to deal with the consequences. Recognising the potential ruination of his career when he saw it, Chelmsford began the process of shifting the blame to Durnford who, being accommodatingly dead, would not be able to offer much in the way of a defense. It was Chelmsford, however, who created the framework in which Durnford was operating, both by dividing his army in the face of a superior foe and more broadly by assuming the Zulu would, like the Xhosa, prove incapable of mounting an attack on his columns. Chelmsford expected all Africans to fight the same way, and sycophants like John North Crealock did all they could to make sure the Lieutenant-General's prejudices were never

challenged, even if it cost them the lives of officers and enlisted men. Sir Charles Ellice, Adjutant-General of the Army, encapsulated Chelmsford's errors and the Duke of Cambridge's opinion of them when he wrote: "HRH has come to the conclusion that the primary cause of the misfortune, and that which led to all the others, was the underestimate of the offensive fighting power of the Zulu Army. This was not unnatural as nowhere within Central or Southern Africa did such a powerfully organized, well disciplined, and thoroughly trained force of courageous men exist as lay at the disposal of the Zulu King."⁵²⁸

*

It is the easiest thing in the world to overestimate the power of the officer on the scene, and to assume all that goes right or wrong is a product of his choices. In reality, the decision-making powers of any field commander are always circumscribed by circumstances in which he finds himself, circumstances that are shaped and created by both enemy action and by the wider structuring of the campaign as envisioned by the high command. At the Little Bighorn and Isandlwana, Phil Sheridan and Lord Chelmsford invested a great deal of time, energy, and effort into creating situations that left George Custer and Anthony Durnford with little choice before them save to die as bravely as possible. In a very real way, both Custer and Durnford's reputations were victims of the same Anglo-American arrogance and imperialism as their Native American and African enemies.

Neither Sheridan nor Chelmsford believed their Indigenous adversaries would stand and fight, and both commanding generals constructed their operational plans accordingly. Both divided their men into small columns, intended not to fight major battles but to pursue an enemy they were certain was making preparations to flee. Both arranged for those columns to march as

⁵²⁸ PRO WO 30/129 S6316, quoted in Lock, *Isandlwana: The Revelation of a Disaster*, 196.

far apart from one another as possible, in theory so they could cover more ground, but in practise making it impossible for any one field force to come to the aid of another. Both badly underestimated the strength of the foe they were up against, not only in numbers, but in determination to fight. Neither made any real arrangements for the transference of information between columns and commands, ensuring that even when genuine information about the enemy was uncovered it could not be transmitted from one field general to the next. Lastly, both allowed their already insufficiently strong forces to become even more divided in the field: Sheridan issuing no orders that would have stopped Terry from splitting up the Dakota column, Chelmsford actively dividing the Centre Column in order to chase after Matshana. Deeply committed to the idea their enemies would fight only one way, Sheridan and Chelmsford never allowed for the possibility their enemies might concentrate instead of breaking apart, and that in doing so, might have enough power to overwhelm the isolated American and British units.

Custer and Durnford died because of their superiors' colonial hubris, and there was next to nothing either man could have done to change that. Custer was sent on a suicide mission to attack a Lakota and Cheyenne encampment no one had seen and no one knew the true size of. When he finally found it, his options were to retreat and face censure or attack it and die: he chose the latter, and took half of his regiment with him. Durnford had even less agency than Custer: ordered to Isandlwana to aid in packing up the campsite, he rode into a battle that had been lost before he ever got there, the Zulu having encircled the British position before Pulleine or any of the other officers even knew they were present. All Durnford could do once he realised what was happening was try to save as many lives as he could, and it was largely thanks to him that any British soldiers survived Isandlwana. For both Custer and Durnford, the only way to leave the Little Bighorn or Isandlwana alive would have been to find a way not to fight there in

the first place: and with Sheridan and Chelmsford's orders being what they were, that option was not on the table for either man. All they could do was try to make the best of a bad situation: one that, it must be stressed, was the product of their superiors' decisions rather than their own.

That said, it should be noted that even better planning by Sheridan and Chelmsford might have resulted in failure, for the Indigenous enemies they were up against were of a calibre no one on the Anglo-American side expected. At the Little Bighorn, Gall, Crow King, Crazy Horse, Lame White Man, Two Moons, Yellow Nose, and the other Lakota and Cheyenne war-chiefs and war-leaders put together a highly capable mobile defense that first repelled, and then wrecked, Custer's 7th Cavalry. At Isandlwana, Ntshingwayo kaMahole launched a near-perfect ambush against an unsuspecting enemy. Throughout both battles, Lakota, Cheyenne, and Zulu leaders enforced and maintained tight control over their men and their environs, always aware of their own dispositions and of those of their opponents, while the Americans and the British struggled with divided command structures and insufficient information. No matter what colonial reasoning might say, neither Custer nor Durnford were idiots. They did not have to be. Their Indigenous nemeses were brilliant, and that was more than enough to decide the matter.

Chapter 5: The Reaction at Home

The American and British publics of the 1870s were no one's idea of an audience that was likely to take a reversal well. Both the American and British presses were highly partisan and eager for scandal; 'yellow journalism' as a concept was very much born during this period. The news that a regiment of white men had been defeated by "primitives" was exactly the type of story the press of the day would latch onto, for the purposes of criticizing the officers involved and/or stirring up the public's desire for revenge. Information might have travelled slowly in the 1870s, but it did not travel slowly enough to let Phil Sheridan or Lord Chelmsford hide the magnitude of the setbacks they had suffered. The question for both generals then became how to manage the bad news without losing face.

Sheridan proved more successful than Chelmsford when it came to playing the press game. Already a Union war-hero, Sheridan had a degree of protection from criticism Lord Chelmsford did not enjoy. While the Eastern papers were notably hostile to the US Army and its plans for Native America, its fury tended to be undirected, lambasting the Army as a whole, rather than Sheridan personally. When Sheridan began the process of moving the blame for the failure to Custer, many of these papers ended up going along with him. Moreover, Sheridan's longstanding alliance with the Western papers, which, like him, wanted the Native American presence along the frontier eradicated, paid dividends when those papers came to his defense as they had many times before, changing the narrative from one of defeat to one of revenge. Sheridan was also aided by political division within the United States. At the time of the Little Bighorn, the USA was in the midst of one of its most bitterly contested elections and the outgoing Grant administration was embroiled in a series of scandals. The Republican press, friendly to Grant and his protégé Sheridan, was happy to hold the openly Democratic Custer

responsible for the massacre, while the Democratic press saw Custer's death as ammunition to use against Grant, rather than Sheridan. The public outcry that ensued saw the Army embarrassed, but Sheridan himself largely escaped censure.

Lord Chelmsford was nowhere near as lucky. The Cape Colony and Natal papers did not treat him well, and the papers in London were even more savage. Like Sheridan, he tried to blame his subordinates, particularly Durnford, and his allies in London did succeed in damaging the deceased Colonel's reputation. Both Chelmsford and Sir Bartle Frere's statuses as friends of Queen Victoria gave them a powerful ally, and who would help them when the time came to cast aspersions on the character of Durnford. However, Durnford was not a household name the way Custer was, and Sir Bartle Frere and Chelmsford's enemies in the British Parliament were only too happy to ensure at least some of the responsibility stuck with the South African High Commissioner and Commander-in-Chief. The topic of the Anglo-Zulu War would be debated hotly in the House of Commons and House of Lords both, and Bartle Frere and Chelmsford would both be the targets of attacks by politicians who—rightly—blamed the two men for starting a war without Parliamentary (or Royal) clearance. With government disapproval looming over his shoulder, Chelmsford knew his time as South Africa's top officer was limited.

However successful they were in their efforts, Sheridan and Chelmsford both managed to distort the historical record, creating numerous difficulties for the historians who have come after them. Sheridan saw to it that the Little Bighorn was permanently associated with Custer's name rather than his own, while Chelmsford at the least tricked generations of scholars into thinking anything Durnford did on the day of Isandlwana might have mattered. Their actions also had other, more immediate consequences, for their campaigns, as pressure from the press came to

influence the decisions officers were making in the field. To understand these developments, an examination of the public reaction to the Little Bighorn and Isandlwana must be made.

*

The coverup of the circumstances around Custer's death began soon after his corpse was discovered. Alfred Terry was only too aware that what he had on his hands could be a disaster for his career. Not only had a Lieutenant-Colonel and almost half his regiment died on Terry's watch, but the Lieutenant-Colonel in question was the former "Boy-General," George Custer, a media darling with strong family and political ties to the opposition Democratic Party. There was no way Terry could simply erase what had happened or pretend that it was anything other than a major setback for the Army. So it was that in his report to Sheridan on the matter, Terry did what he could to remove responsibility from himself and place it on Custer, and in doing so, provided Sheridan with a number of narrative threads the Lieutenant-General and his boss, William Sherman, would exploit in the coming weeks.

Terry's report did not outright blame Custer for the defeat. It did, however, insinuate it was Custer's decision to break up his force into three parts that ensured that defeat, with Terry remarking Custer was only able to attack the Lakota and Cheyenne encampment with the minimal force he had at hand.⁵²⁹ Terry included a copy of his instructions to Custer, emphasised there had been no order to attack, and implied that the decision to take the offensive had been entirely in Custer's hands, rather than his own...which of course meant the loss was Custer's fault, rather than Terry's. As related above, Nelson Miles eventually obtained a copy of Terry's orders to Custer, and concluded the Brigadier-General had, in fact, encouraged Custer to assault any Native American force that he might encounter; if one accepts Miles' analysis (and there is

⁵²⁹ Terry, "The Official Report of General A.H. Terry," 4.

little reason not to), Terry was being if not deceptive, at least disingenuous in his message to Sheridan. Terry also tried to save racial face by including in his report Major Marcus Reno's entirely baseless claim that "there were a number of white men fighting with the Indians."⁵³⁰ This single line in Terry's report shaped the upper brass' narrative, as Sheridan and others tried to mitigate the stigma of the reversal by suggesting their enemies were led by renegade white men.

Many of Terry's claims made their way almost verbatim into Sheridan's annual report, submitted to Army headquarters at the end of the year. In the opening pages of that document, Sheridan portrayed his own role as purely administrative, his task merely to support his Departmental Commanders with the resources they needed to be victorious.⁵³¹ Later in the report Sheridan gave the lie to his prior statements by providing a full outline of his strategy for the campaign and how he forced Crook and Terry to implement it; this shows Sheridan knew he was not being truthful about his role in the war but was rather shuttling blame down the line to Crook and Terry.⁵³² Custer, Sheridan wrote, expanding on the ideas provided to him by Terry, would doubtlessly have beaten the Lakota and Cheyenne if he had kept his regiment together or retreated to a defensible position.⁵³³ How Custer could have done either of these things, and how they would have allowed him to win, Sheridan did not detail. Instead he compared the Little Bighorn battle to the Rosebud, which he, like Crook, was now citing as a victory. Crook, Sheridan said, kept his detachment together where Custer had not, and thus beat the Lakota.⁵³⁴ Crook, of course, had not beaten the Lakota and had not kept his units together; as described in

⁵³⁰ Terry, "The Official Report of General A.H. Terry," 5.

⁵³¹ Sheridan, "Headquarters Military Division of the Missouri, November 25, 1876," 4.

⁵³² Sheridan, "Headquarters Military Division of the Missouri, November 25, 1876," 9-10.

⁵³³ Sheridan, "Headquarters Military Division of the Missouri, November 25, 1876," 29-30.

⁵³⁴ Sheridan, "Headquarters Military Division of the Missouri, November 25, 1876," 31.

Chapter 3, Crazy Horse broke Crook's party up into its constituent parts early in the encounter and eventually drove the Brigadier-General from the field. Sheridan did not directly reference Reno's lies about the enemy being led by white men, but he did state there were no leaders of any note among the hostile Lakota.⁵³⁵ Truth was not high on Sheridan's priority list in that report; preserving his reputation and to a lesser degree those of Terry and Crook was.

Long before he turned in that report in November of 1876, Sheridan spoke to both William Sherman and Ulysses S. Grant and gave them his and Terry's version of events. When the Senate, aghast at Custer's demise, demanded Grant submit papers relating to the defeat for their review, Grant gave them a report from Sherman that incorporated the best parts of both Sheridan and Terry's misrepresentations. The war, the report said, was started by the Lakota, not the Army, and the Army had only moved against the Lakota at the request of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Department of the Interior. The gold in the Black Hills was said to have nothing to do with the war; the Army was trying to conquer the Lakota because the reservation Lakota wanted them to. Like Sheridan, Sherman presented Crook's retreat from the Rosebud as a triumph and talked at some length about Crook's merit and experience as an officer.⁵³⁶ Sherman also upped the ante when it came to fixing the blame on Custer, writing "for some reason as yet unexplained, Genl Custer who commanded the 7th Cavalry and had been detached by his commander Genl Terry at the mouth of the Rosebud...attacked en route a large Indian village, with only a part of his force, having himself detached the rest with a view to intercept the Expected retreat of the Savages, and experienced an utter annihilation of his immediate Command."⁵³⁷ Here Sherman explicitly held Custer, and only Custer, culpable for the defeat, an

⁵³⁵ Sheridan, "Headquarters Military Division of the Missouri, November 25, 1876," 42-44.

⁵³⁶ "Sherman to Grant, July 8, 1876," in *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* Vol. 27, ed. John Y. Simon (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005): 170-172.

⁵³⁷ "Sherman to Grant, July 8, 1876," *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* Vol. 27, 171.

opinion suggested to him by Sheridan in a telegram two days earlier, when the latter wrote that “I deeply deplore the loss of Custer and his officers and men. I fear it was an unnecessary sacrifice due to misapprehension and superabundance of courage, the latter extraordinarily developed in Custer.”⁵³⁸ Grant also gave the Senate the part of Terry’s report with Reno’s story about white men commanding the enemy, further distorting the legislature’s image of what happened.

Not content to let Sherman and Sheridan do all the talking, Grant took a direct role in the Custer blaming that September. In an interview with *The New York Herald*, Grant declared “I regard Custer’s massacre as a sacrifice of troops, brought on by Custer himself, that was wholly unnecessary—wholly unnecessary.”⁵³⁹ Custer, Grant said, “was not to have made the attack before effecting the junction with Terry and Gibbon. He was notified to meet them on the 26th, but instead of marching slowly, as his orders required in order to effect the junction on the 26th, he enters upon a forced march of eighty-three miles in twenty-four hours, and thus has to meet the Indians alone on the 25th.”⁵⁴⁰ Like Sheridan and Sherman, Grant also took time to praise Crook, still in the field, as “the best, wiliest Indian fighter in the country,” thus suggesting Custer’s death was not much of a reversal.⁵⁴¹ Grant’s statements about Custer’s orders were, as has been shown, palpably untrue. Whether Grant himself believed it was another question. At the time, Grant was embroiled in the contested outcome of the 1876 election between Rutherford Hayes and Samuel Tilden and was having to consider the possibility of putting troops in the streets to head off another Civil War over the election results. How much attention Grant was paying to the events of the Great Sioux War is, accordingly, unknown. What is known is that

⁵³⁸ “Sheridan to Sherman, July 6, 1876,” *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* Vol. 27, ed. John Y. Simon (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005): 174.

⁵³⁹ “Ulysses S. Grant to *New York Herald*, September 2, 1876,” in *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* Vol. 27, ed. John Y. Simon (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005): 251.

⁵⁴⁰ “Ulysses S. Grant to *New York Herald*, September 2, 1876,” *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* Vol. 27, 251.

⁵⁴¹ “Ulysses S. Grant to *New York Herald*, September 2, 1876,” *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* Vol. 27, 251.

Grant had implicit faith in Sheridan, and Sheridan was not providing Grant or Sherman with the truth.

Within the Army, Sheridan's misinformation campaign worked out well. John Gibbon and Nelson Miles may have dissented from the party line, but Crook, Terry, and the rest of the officer corps dutifully repeated Sheridan's version of events. This subsequently trickled down to the lower ranking men as well. In his diary, Crook's aide, Captain John Bourke, wrote that Custer was a fool who attacked the Lakota with far too few men, and was then outgeneraled by the white renegades leading the Native American forces.⁵⁴² First Lieutenant Charles King, whose unit was sent to reinforce Crook, remained contemptuous of the Lakota, and sure of Sheridan's prowess as a strategist writing, "General Sheridan was right. Sitting in his distant office in Chicago, he was so thoroughly informed that he could order his cavalry to search out a region hitherto known only to the Sioux, and tell them just where they would find the highway by which the vast horde of hostiles under Sitting Bull were receiving daily reinforcements."⁵⁴³ When Colonel Wesley Merritt took command of King's unit, King assumed the Colonel's status as a former member of Sheridan's staff granted him unique powers when it came to locating the hostiles.⁵⁴⁴

Outside the Army, the general mood of the nation was one of revenge. Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan were inundated with offers from governors, former Civil War officers, random civilians, and even ex-Confederates who wanted to raise regiments of Volunteer Cavalry to go out and avenge Custer (an offer from Sheridan's former nemesis, Confederate war criminal John Singleton Mosby was, thankfully, among those turned down).⁵⁴⁵ Congress voted to allow

⁵⁴² Bourke, *The Diaries of John Gregory Bourke* Vol. 1, 368.

⁵⁴³ King, "Campaigning with Crook," 16.

⁵⁴⁴ Charles King, "Campaigning with Crook," 19.

⁵⁴⁵ Offers of troops can be found in *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* Vol. 27, pages 174-178, 252-253.

Sheridan to expand the size of the Regular Cavalry as well, with 2000 new recruits being inducted to reinforce the units at the frontier. Soldiers on guard duty in the Reconstruction South or monitoring the election activities were freed up by Grant and Sherman and sent West, giving Sheridan the increased body of men he always wanted.⁵⁴⁶ Newspapers in Chicago, Denver, and the rest of the West came to Sheridan's support, demanding Custer be avenged, and circulating racist rumours that Sitting Bull not only relied on white men to lead his warrior, but was himself a white man and a rogue graduate of West Point at that. One inspired conman made a killing selling "The Complete Works of Sitting Bull, in the Original French and Latin," to a credulous public that needed to believe a white enemy, not a 'red' one, bested Custer.⁵⁴⁷

The whole of the public did not, of course, give into the desire for revenge. Grant received letters from humanitarians as well as from exterminationists, the former begging him not to abandon his Peace Policy or use Custer's death as a reason to employ harsher measures of control against the Indigenous population. Bishop Henry Whipple, a notable reformer and an ally of Grant's in the effort to overhaul the reservation system, wrote to the President saying that "a nation which sows broken faith, injustice & wrong will reap a harvest of blood—Thousands cry for extermination—There is ONE who can exterminate, and a people who have more than half a million of soldier's graves within their borders ought to know that God is not blind."⁵⁴⁸ The Peace Policy, Whipple said, had never been understood by the public, but that was not a reason to back away from it or to give in to the calls to slaughter the Lakota and Cheyenne.⁵⁴⁹ While Grant never approved the most draconian of Sheridan's measures, the sad fact was the Peace

⁵⁴⁶ *U.S. Statutes at Large* quoted in *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* Vol. 27, ed. John Y. Simon (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005): 251.

⁵⁴⁷ See Donovan, 336, and Philbrick, 238, for a compilation of these rumours.

⁵⁴⁸ "Henry B. Whipple to Ulysses S. Grant, July 31, 1876," in *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* Vol. 27, ed. John Y. Simon (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005): 180.

⁵⁴⁹ "Henry B. Whipple to Ulysses S. Grant, July 31, 1876," *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* Vol. 27, 181-182.

Policy had been given up on years ago, when Sheridan's leash was slipped and the power of making Native American policy fell into his hands. Since the early 1870s, Sheridan had made war on every Plains tribe that fell under his jurisdiction, just as he was making war on the Lakota now, and would continue to make war on them until they were subjugated.

Given the late George Custer's ties to the Democratic Party, one might have expected them to take up his cause. Custer had, after all, formed close allegiances with the Democrats, and his testimony before Congress about corruption in the reservation system had embarrassed the Grant administration and won him further support from the Democratic opposition. There was even talk of his running for office on a Democratic ticket, with some historians, most notably Stephen Ambrose, suggesting that the office in question might well have been the Presidency (Custer supposedly told his favourite scout, Bloody Knife, that if he defeated Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse it would "make him the Great White Father."⁵⁵⁰ The Democrats absolutely made political capital out of Custer's death but given it was an election year, and it was Grant, not Sheridan, who was the face of the administration, it was towards Grant they expressed their ire. Custer, the Democratic argument went, was a victim of Grant's vacillating and weak-willed Peace Policy, which coddled and armed the 'savages' who killed the Lieutenant-Colonel and his men.⁵⁵¹ The Peace Policy and Grant's purported responsibility for Custer's death became campaign issues for Samuel Tilden, along with the repeal of Reconstruction and the reestablishment of white supremacy over much of the country. Tilden never pointed the finger at Sheridan, however, and the Lieutenant-General's continuation at his post was assured.

It was Custer's widow, Elizabeth Bacon Custer, who silenced her husband's critics during her lifetime. Devoting herself to clearing George's reputation, Libbie, as she was

⁵⁵⁰ Ambrose, *Crazy Horse and Custer*, 405-406.

⁵⁵¹ Donovan, *A Terrible Glory*, 324.

generally known, interviewed every officer of the 7th Cavalry, published books defending Custer, and helped the publication of other books and articles defending Custer. Nelson Miles and John Gibbon were among the officers she spoke to, and after Sherman stepped down from the Army, and Sheridan died a few months after that, Libbie led a successful pushback against the idea that her husband's death was all his own fault. Until her death in 1933, Libbie did all she could to enshrine Custer as a martyr; much of his mythical reputation for greatness stemmed not from anything said during his lifetime, but from things written by Libbie and her supporters after his death. Libbie could not, however, erase the things Sheridan and Terry said and Sherman and Grant repeated. Months after she passed away, the first 'revisionist' history of Custer, *Glory-Hunter*, was published, portraying him as a lunatic and a madman, and relying on the statements of Terry and Sheridan, and of embittered enemies of Custer's like Reno and Benteen, whose existence had been nearly forgotten while Libbie was alive, to smear him. It was from here on that the endless debates about Custer's competency have raged, and while the truth is readily available to those who want it, they continue to rage to this day.

Phil Sheridan would have been pleased. That current arguments continue to orbit the figure of Custer is evidence of the posthumous success of his efforts to pin all culpability on his dead subordinate. Sheridan's manipulation of the press, of his subordinates, and of Grant and Sherman kept him from getting in trouble for Custer's demise during his lifetime. The stories that he spread about Custer have kept the conversation on Custer, and away from Sheridan since. In doing so, Sheridan avoided having to examine his own role in the debacle, or the racial assumptions that underpinned his campaign plan. He would continue to prosecute the Great Sioux War as if it were the conflict that he had expected it to be, with serious repercussions for those of his officers who were still in the field.

*

Lord Chelmsford, like Sheridan, wasted no time disavowing his responsibility for the disaster that took place on his watch. Unable to admit to his mistake in withdrawing more than half his column from the encampment, and likewise incapable of acknowledging Ntshingwayo outgeneraled European officers, Chelmsford chose Anthony Durnford as his scapegoat. He did not make this decision alone: Sir Bartle Frere, High Commissioner for South Africa, also had a reputation to protect and, like Chelmsford, believed the late Durnford was a convenient target to fix the public's ire on. Whether the two men acted in concert or came to these conclusions independently is unclear. In Chelmsford's January 23rd, 1879 letter to Sir Bartle Frere, he did not specify Durnford was to blame and granted he and Pulleine equal status as commanding officers in the camp. Explaining the defeat, Chelmsford said only that "the camp had been defended with the utmost gallantry, but the soldiers had been beaten by much heavier numbers."⁵⁵²

By January 27th, and his letter to Colonel Stanley at the War Office, Chelmsford was relaying a different story. In this letter Chelmsford emphasised that Pulleine had been told to act on the defensive, and the defensive alone, then told the story, repeated by many historians since, of the alleged argument between Pulleine and Durnford as to whether Pulleine could or should support Durnford's reconnaissance.⁵⁵³ As already noted, this argument may have been altogether fictitious, and Nell Colenso was certainly able to find officers who would state unequivocally that it never happened. Chelmsford, however, made the argument sound like an irrefutable fact and, by playing around with his wording, even endeavoured to make it sound as if Durnford's

⁵⁵² "Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Sir Bartle Frere," in *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 77.

⁵⁵³ "Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel F.A. Stanley," in *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994):

recon was what brought the Zulu down on the camp. Chelmsford did credit Durnford's Mounted Basutos with considerable bravery, stating they "behaved remarkably well, and delayed the advance of the enemy for a considerable time."⁵⁵⁴ He did not, however, attribute their performance to Durnford's leadership, and omitted the story of the Colonel's last stand from his narrative.

On the same day Lord Chelmsford wrote to Stanley, Sir Bartle Frere sent a despatch of his own to the Colonial Secretary, the Right Honourable Sir Michael Hicks Beach. Hicks Beach had not given Bartle Frere his approval to start a war with the Zulu, and consequently the High Commissioner was even more eager than Chelmsford to save his own skin. Where Chelmsford merely implied to Stanley that the fault might have lain with Durnford, Bartle Frere openly blamed not only Durnford, but all the dead men, for bringing disaster upon themselves. In open contravention of the facts, Bartle Frere told Hicks Beach "in disregard of Lord Chelmsford's instructions, the troops left to protect the camp were taken away from the defensive position they were in at the camp," and that this was why they were killed.⁵⁵⁵ He repeated these assertions in further letters on February 3rd and 12th, and stuck to this story as late as June 30th.⁵⁵⁶ That no one disregarded Lord Chelmsford's instructions on defense more thoroughly than Lord Chelmsford

⁵⁵⁴ "From Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford, K.C.B., to the Right Honourable the Secretary of State for War," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 2, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 32.

⁵⁵⁵ "Governor the Right Hon. Sir H.B.E. Frere, Bart., G.C.B., G.C.S.I, to the Right Hon. Sir Michael Hicks Beach, Bart., January 27, 1879," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 2, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 24-25.

⁵⁵⁶ "Governor the Right Hon. Sir H.B.E. Frere, Bart., G.C.B., G.C.S.I, to the Right Hon. Sir Michael Hicks Beach, Bart., February 3, 1879," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 2, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 37.

"Governor the Right Hon. Sir H.B.E. Frere, Bart., G.C.B., G.C.S.I, to the Right Hon. Sir Michael Hicks Beach, Bart., February 12, 1879," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 2, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 119.

"Governor the Right Hon. Sir H.B.E. Frere, Bart., G.C.B., G.C.S.I, to the Right Hon. Sir Michael Hicks Beach, Bart., June 30, 1879," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 4, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 63-76.

himself was not something Bartle Frere informed Hicks Beach of. He did, however, claim Lord Chelmsford was not told of the attack until late in the day and the Lieutenant-General had reacted immediately, another untruth.⁵⁵⁷ The delays in Chelmsford's reaction time, occasioned according to George Hamilton-Browne and Nell Colenso by John North Crealock hiding communique from his boss, were not discussed with the Colonial Secretary.

Bartle Frere also tried to use the reversal as evidence that his policy of invading Zululand was the correct one. If Cetshwayo's army could defeat a British column, after all, it followed that it was a highly dangerous force and one that was "incompatible with the existence of any civilised community near him."⁵⁵⁸ Bartle Frere insisted to Hicks Beach that the Boers and other African tribes were watching the war closely, and defeating the Zulu would prove to these recalcitrant groups the invincibility of the British military. That said invincibility might be questioned after Isandlwana was something he admitted was a possibility but stated the only way to regain Britain's reputation was by continuing the war to victory, which he still said would be only a matter of time. Zulu power, Bartle Frere maintained, was brittle and could be broken easily.⁵⁵⁹ That he said this after Isandlwana says a great deal about the man's ego, a great deal more about his inability to accept responsibility, and most of all, perhaps, about his bigotry. This was not the only letter like this Bartle Frere mailed to Hicks Beach, either; he inundated the Secretary with a series of veritable essays on why the war was necessary and must be continued.

Bartle Frere was not the only member of his family engaged in a letter-writing campaign either. Mary Frere, Sir Bartle Frere's eldest daughter, sent a letter to Sir Henry Ponsonby, Queen Victoria's Private Secretary, knowing full well the Queen would see it. In her letter, Mary

⁵⁵⁷ "Bartle Frere to Hicks Beach, January 27, 1879," 24.

⁵⁵⁸ "Bartle Frere to Hicks Beach, January 27, 1879," 25.

⁵⁵⁹ "Bartle Frere to Hicks Beach, January 27, 1879," 25.

accused Durnford of being an incompetent whose entire unit had been killed under him at Bushman's Pass.⁵⁶⁰ As has been shown, Durnford suffered only three casualties in that engagement, himself one of them, before his men ran and abandoned *him*. Mary assured Ponsonby, and through him, Victoria, that the Army maintained absolute faith in both Lord Chelmsford and Sir Bartle Frere, and the fault for the defeat lay wholly with Durnford who, she claimed, "coming up to the camp and not entrenching it engaged the Zulus and summoned those in camp to his aid."⁵⁶¹ That Ntshingwayo was already encircling the camp, and that it was Durnford's reconnaissance that discovered the attack, was either something Mary Frere did not know or did not think the Queen needed to know. Friendly papers in Natal and the Cape Colony, urged on by Sir Bartle Frere and Theophilus Shepstone repeated variants of Mary's claims, trying to stamp their version of the narrative onto the consciousness of South Africa's white population before anything could emerge to challenge it. The *Natal Mercury* was a key ally in this, writing, "if the general orders had been obeyed, and had the wagons been formed into a laager, and everyone kept inside, all would have gone well."⁵⁶² Lord Chelmsford could not have put it better himself.

The primary means by which Lord Chelmsford attempted to gain control of public opinion, however, was by way of an inquiry into Isandlwana, set up by Chelmsford himself and chaired by Colonels Hassard, Harness, and Law, all associates of Chelmsford, and all beholden to him. The inquiry was, from the start, micromanaged by Chelmsford and intended to come to a simple and foregone conclusion: nothing that happened at Isandlwana was the Lieutenant-General's fault. The inquiry's lack of independence is best demonstrated by neither Chelmsford

⁵⁶⁰ Mary Frere, RA VIC/0 34/20 quoted in Lock, *Isandlwana: The Revelation of a Disaster*, 111.

⁵⁶¹ Mary Frere, RA VIC/0 33/67 quoted in Lock, *Isandlwana: The Revelation of a Disaster*, 113.

⁵⁶² "From a Letter Published in the *Natal Mercury*," in *Zulu 1879* edited by DCF Moodie, (Driffield: Oakpast Ltd, 2006): 57.

nor his Assistant Military Secretary, John North Crealock, being asked to testify. Instead, Chelmsford had Crealock's version of events privately transcribed and forwarded to the War Office independently of the inquiry results.⁵⁶³ Obtaining the transcripts of the inquiry for herself, Nell Colenso observed, "the evidence taken consisted of statements made by the above officers, not one of whom appears to have been questioned. The (so-called) inquiry seems to have been strictly limited to the occurrences at the camp, as we find Major Clery's evidence finish abruptly 'I saw the column out of the camp and accompanied it.' Colonel Glyn merely corroborated Major Clery's statement; and the other officers gave their respective versions of the occurrences at the camp."⁵⁶⁴ Colenso was not wrong in her conclusions; nowhere in the official inquiry did Chelmsford allow anyone to discuss the actual events of the battle.

In fact, Chelmsford did a great deal to muzzle those who could have talked about the battle, something not only Colenso, but the papers, South African and British alike, picked up on. Lieutenant-Colonel Harness, the officer who tried to go to Durnford and Pulleine's aid, only to be stopped by orders from Chelmsford and Crealock, was placed on the inquiry's panel of judges, where he was forbidden from telling his own story or asking any questions of the witnesses. *The Daily News* wrote that "Colonel Harness should not have sat as member of the court of inquiry. How could it have been supposed that an officer who had taken so prominent a part in the doings of the 22nd of January was a fit and suitable member of a court assembled even to take evidence merely is more than we can understand. Besides, the very fact of his being a member, we are told, precluded Colonel Harness from giving his own valuable evidence."⁵⁶⁵ *The*

⁵⁶³ "From Lieutenant-General Commanding, South Africa, to the Right Hon. the Secretary of State for War, February 9, 1879," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 2, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 100-102.

⁵⁶⁴ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 313.

⁵⁶⁵ Quoted in Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 314-315.

Natal Witness took Chelmsford's attempts to rig the inquiry as established fact, writing, "It is notorious that certain members of Lord Chelmsford's staff—there is no need to mention any name or names—came down to 'Maritzburg after the disaster, prepared to make Colonel Durnford bear the whole responsibility, and that it was upon their representations that the High Commissioner's telegram about 'poor Durnford's misfortune,' was sent."⁵⁶⁶ Nell Colenso quoted both *The Daily News* and *The Natal Witness* in her book, including their analyses alongside her own brutal critique of Chelmsford and his staff's behaviour during the inquiry.

"How a court of inquiry, assembled without the power, apparently, of asking a single question, was to throw much light on the causes of the disaster, does not appear," Colenso sneered. "Its scope was limited to the doings at the camp; and under any circumstances it could not well criticise the faults of the General. The proceedings of this court of inquiry can therefore only be considered as eminently unsatisfactory."⁵⁶⁷ Where Chelmsford tried to make the loss Durnford's fault, Colenso attributed it to "the fatal position selected for the camp, and the total absence of any defensive precautions," "the absence of systematic scouting, whereby an army of upwards of 20 000 Zulus was enabled to approach Isandhlwana on the 21st, and remained unobserved till 22nd," "the subdivision of the force, and the absence of proper communications by signalling or otherwise," and "the neglect of warnings given by the events of the day, and messages from the camp; also the withdrawal of a force actually on the march to the relief of the camp."⁵⁶⁸ "For these principal causes of the disaster," Colenso finished, "none of those who fell were responsible."⁵⁶⁹

⁵⁶⁶ Quoted in Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 315.

⁵⁶⁷ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 315.

⁵⁶⁸ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 318-319.

⁵⁶⁹ Colenso, *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*, 319.

That Nell Colenso had personal issues with Lord Chelmsford and Sir Bartle Frere over Durnford's death is unavoidable. However, her success in assembling as much evidence against the inquiry as she did speaks to Chelmsford's comparative failure to control the narrative within Natal and the broader expanse of the South African colonies. Some newspapers took Chelmsford's side, but others were prepared to speak against both the Lieutenant-General and the High Commissioner and to defend Durnford and the other dead from posthumous slander and libel. As has been demonstrated above, various officers, including Lieutenant Cochrane and the Irish soldier-of-fortune George Hamilton-Browne, refused to play along with the coverup. Their testimony, as well as the opinions of those independent newspapers, found their way into Nell Colenso's book. With her father, the Bishop of Natal, protecting her, there was little Lord Chelmsford or Sir Bartle Frere could do to prevent Colenso's compilation of her volume. When she left Natal in September of 1879, she was in possession of a formidable body of evidence against Lord Chelmsford and Sir Bartle Frere, evidence she converted into the first draft of her book during her voyage to England. *The History of the Zulu War and Its Origin* was released in England in January of 1880, where it stood as the principal piece of literature defending Durnford and indicting Sir Bartle Frere and Lord Chelmsford for conspiracy and incompetence. It found a public eager to read it, for in the meantime, neither the British papers nor the British Parliament had been silent on the topic of the Zulu War.

That public opinion ran decidedly against both Sir Bartle Frere and Lord Chelmsford was acknowledged by most of the Members of Parliament involved in the ensuing debates. Even those newspapers that supported the continuation of the war attributed few positive qualities to the men who had begun it. Sir Robert Peel, who emerged as one of the key Opposition leaders during the debates surrounding Bartle Frere and Lord Chelmsford's conduct observed, "I do not

remember before that public opinion has suddenly taken so great an interest in a question as it has in this. I never before saw the Press of the country take so extraordinary an amount of interest in a public question like this.”⁵⁷⁰ Peel, who sat in the House of Commons during the Crimean War and referenced the contention surrounding Lord Raglan’s command in that conflict in his own criticisms of Lord Chelmsford, knew what he was talking about.⁵⁷¹ *The London Gazette* took to publishing despatches from the front in its supplement, and these included Chelmsford’s admission of defeat at Isandlwana and the excuses he offered to Hicks Beach and Stanley afterwards.⁵⁷² War correspondent Archibald Forbes, writing for *The Daily News*, painted Chelmsford as an incompetent, and that opinion found firm echoes among the British man-on-the-street. Humour magazine *Punch* ran a string of satirical cartoons mocking Lord Chelmsford and the war effort in general, with one titled “A Lesson,” proving especially popular. It depicted a Zulu warrior writing “Despise not your enemy,” on a blackboard while John Bull looked on in apparent confusion and fascination.⁵⁷³

Sir Bartle Frere and Lord Chelmsford had their defenders in Parliament, but those defenders were divided amongst themselves. Friends of Chelmsford sought to pass the blame up to Bartle Frere, suggesting Chelmsford was guilty only of enacting the High Commissioner’s ill-considered policies. Friends of Bartle Frere tried to shift the culpability down the line to Chelmsford, implying the invasion had been a good idea badly executed by the bumbling Lieutenant-General. House Member Colonel Mure, friendly to both Bartle Frere and Chelmsford, blamed the Colonial Office for not sending the reinforcements the two men had requested, an

⁵⁷⁰ “Orders of the Day. South Africa—the Zulu War—Sir Bartle Frere, March 28, 1879,” in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 2, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 479.

⁵⁷¹ “Orders of the Day. South Africa—the Zulu War—Sir Bartle Frere, March 28, 1879,” 485.

⁵⁷² “Supplement to the London Gazette of Friday, 21st of March,” 121.

⁵⁷³ “A Lesson,” in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 2, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000).

argument that did nothing to endear him to the very government he was representing and, at least in theory, defending.⁵⁷⁴ Sir Michael Hicks Beach and Colonel Stanley were particularly comic in their defenses of the High Commissioner and the Lieutenant-General, as they were forced to argue that while the government had not wanted a war, it now needed to see it through to the end. Hicks Beach's rhetorical gymnastics must have been especially enthralling to witness in action as he contended that while Bartle Frere should not have started a war and did not have the authority to do so, he *thought* he had the authority to do so and was no doubt acting from the best of motives. The crux of Hicks Beach's position, when stripped of the contortionist antics around it, was that Bartle Frere should be censured for starting the war but maintained in his position until he could finish what he had begun.⁵⁷⁵

The one thing that Bartle Frere and Lord Chelmsford's spokesmen, regardless of the ardency of their support for the two South African officials could agree upon, was that Isandlwana would not have been nearly as great a calamity as it was if Anthony Durnford had done his job better. The idea that Durnford should have fortified the camp against a Zulu assault became the closest thing to a mantra that those taking Bartle Frere and Chelmsford's part could come up with. Durnford dividing his force and riding out of camp against Chelmsford's supposedly precise instructions was a topic repeated *ad infinitum* by those taking the Lieutenant-General's part, with their critiques of the deceased Colonel taking on a tone that readers of Chelmsford's letters or of the findings of his Court of Inquiry would find very familiar.⁵⁷⁶ It was not a very convincing argument, but it was, in many respects, the only one those who hoped to

⁵⁷⁴ "Motions. South Africa—the Zulu War—Sir Bartle Frere, March 27, 1879," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 2, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 442.

⁵⁷⁵ "Motions. South Africa—the Zulu War—Sir Bartle Frere, March 27, 1879," 462-465.

⁵⁷⁶ Colonel Stanley in fact referenced the Court of Inquiry directly when attempting to blame Durnford. See: "Motions. South Africa—the Zulu War—Sir Bartle Frere, March 27, 1879," 512.

help Chelmsford could employ. A British regiment had been soundly thrashed by ‘savages’ and to the colonial minds of the day that meant that some white man somewhere had made a fatal error in judgement. If they did not wish to hold Sir Bartle Frere or Lord Chelmsford responsible, they had two options: they could blame Sir Michael Hicks Beach and Colonel Stanley for not ‘properly supporting’ the war or they could blame one of the dead men. Some Members of Parliament did attempt to execute the former strategy, but it was one that was fraught with political peril, especially for members of Hicks Beach and Stanley’s own Conservative Party. Casting aspersions on Durnford or Pulleine was easier, and a great deal safer, and Bartle Frere and Chelmsford had already indicated in their correspondence that of the two dead officers, it was Durnford rather than Pulleine who should be the proverbial whipping boy. Irish rather than English, and a Royal Engineer rather than a Regular officer, he was a far easier target.

Modern historians typically see through the excuses Bartle Frere and Chelmsford’s allies made for them, yet still give credence to the slurs against Durnford. That Chelmsford failed his men by dividing the force and then marching out of camp is nearly universally acknowledged, but Durnford still comes in for criticism for further dividing the camp guards or for not helping Pulleine form a barricade around the camp.⁵⁷⁷ Pulleine, of course, had no intention of forming a barricade, and both he and Durnford were following practice as set out by Lord Chelmsford when they did not entrench or laager. George Hamilton-Browne and Nell Colenso could see this, as could the War Office in the final *Narrative* commissioned by the Duke of Cambridge. Opposition MPs could see through it too, with Sir Robert Peel remarking it was hardly fair to expect Durnford, in four hours, to erect the fortifications Chelmsford had not erected in forty-

⁵⁷⁷ Locke and Knight, fundamentally at odds when it comes to many details of Isandlwana, both hold Durnford responsible for dividing the command and not aiding Pulleine.

eight.⁵⁷⁸ Yet the stories of Durnford's supposed incompetence persist in the modern literature, perhaps as a product of simple repetition more than anything else. The government, the personal friends of Sir Bartle Frere, and the personal friends of Lord Chelmsford were not united in much, but they were bound together in their determination to make Durnford responsible, and their consensus on that point has seen it taken more seriously now than it was at the time, the lack of cohesion in the rest of their arguments notwithstanding.

Despite their best efforts, however, Bartle Frere and Chelmsford's faction could not entirely conceal the truth, particularly given how the Opposition's response was so much clearer than that of the government. They characterised the war as both illegal and unjust, with some even going so far as to express their personal sympathy for King Cetshwayo, who they saw as having been badly wronged by Bartle Frere and Chelmsford. MP E. Jenkins was the first to call for Chelmsford's resignation, demanding to know how the Lieutenant-General could possibly be continued in his command after Isandlwana.⁵⁷⁹ MP Chamberlain maintained censuring Sir Bartle Frere was not enough and the High Commissioner must be recalled to answer for his actions; he accused Bartle Frere of starting not only the Zulu War, but the Xhosa War as well, and stated his opinion that if the High Commissioner were left in his position, wars the other independent tribes of South Africa could not be far behind. Bartle Frere had not committed an error in detail, but of policy, and to prevent that policy from being enacted again, he had to be removed from his place at the head of the South African government.⁵⁸⁰ To the High Commissioner's defenders, who insisted Zululand was a threat to Natal, Chamberlain had this to say: "In a certain sense it was true the position of Cetewayo [sic] had been a standing menace to the Colony of Natal. It was

⁵⁷⁸ "Orders of the Day. South Africa—the Zulu War—Sir Bartle Frere, March 28, 1879," 485-486.

⁵⁷⁹ "South Africa—the Zulu War, Questions, March 25, 1879" in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 2, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 373-376.

⁵⁸⁰ "Motions. South Africa—the Zulu War—Sir Bartle Frere, March 27, 1879," 450.

true, in the sense that every powerful State was a standing menace to all of its neighbours with whom it might have a difference of opinion; and it was an argument, if it was an argument at all, against all strong neighbours.”⁵⁸¹ Regarding Bartle Frere’s demand that Cetshwayo disband his army, Chamberlain said “No doubt, disarmament was very desirable, not only in South Africa, but in Europe; and he did not suppose England proposed to force disarmament upon Europe by war, and without regard to time or opportunity.”⁵⁸² Chamberlain also noted Sir Theophilus Shepstone’s role in the conspiracy to begin the war, stating the conflict raised questions on a whole about the “new imperialism” that was contaminating British policy the world over.⁵⁸³

An MP by the unlikely name of Knatchbull-Hugessen, took up Chamberlain’s call, refuting Hicks Beach’s defense of Bartle Frere and Chelmsford on the grounds the government had yet to articulate any policy it could then subsequently defend and the House was well within its rights to chastise them for it. He also identified and condemned Bartle Frere and Chelmsford for their efforts to turn Anthony Durnford into a scapegoat saying, “he must altogether decline to follow Sir Bartle Frere in his endeavour to bury the faults of the living in the graves of the dead, and against that attempt on the part of a person in Sir Bartle Frere’s position he must record his indignant and solemn protest.”⁵⁸⁴ It was Mister Knatchbull-Hugessen’s considered opinion that Sir Bartle Frere “appeared to have attributed all Native misbehaviour in any part of South Africa to the machinations of Cetewayo [sic]; but there was no evidence to support such a theory. The only conclusion to be drawn from the facts was, as far as he could judge, that Cetewayo had been

⁵⁸¹ “Motions. South Africa—the Zulu War—Sir Bartle Frere, March 27, 1879,” 452.

⁵⁸² “Motions. South Africa—the Zulu War—Sir Bartle Frere, March 27, 1879,” 453.

⁵⁸³ “Motions. South Africa—the Zulu War—Sir Bartle Frere, March 27, 1879,” 453.

⁵⁸⁴ “Motions. South Africa—the Zulu War—Sir Bartle Frere, March 27, 1879,” 469.

to Sir Bartle Frere what ‘old Bogey’ was to naughty children. He appeared to have Cetewayo on the brain, and to have acted accordingly.”⁵⁸⁵

If Knatchbull-Hugessen’s opinions of Sir Bartle Frere might be characterised as “less than positive,” Sir Robert Peel’s were outright hostile. Bartle Frere’s policy, Peel said, “had at all events, this quality—it was bold, energetic, and determined, and it resulted in a most complete *fiasco*.”⁵⁸⁶ Peel’s impression of Lord Chelmsford was no higher; Sir Henry Bulwer, he said, “seems to be the only prudent man there.”⁵⁸⁷ Bartle Frere, Chelmsford, and Shepstone Peel said, acted less on behalf of the government than in the interests of the slaver Boers, and to keep Bartle Frere on as High Commissioner was to countenance the end of responsible colonial government. The accusation that the Zulu military made Cetshwayo a dangerous military despot was brushed off by Peel, who said “what is this but the law of conscription? It occurs in France, Germany, and Russia, and I believe it would be a good thing if it occurred in this country.”⁵⁸⁸ Bartle Frere’s demand that the Zulu adhere to English-style rule of law was equally silly, Peel said, “these regulations do not exist in Russia,” and he doubted Sir Bartle Frere would recommend invading that state to enforce them.⁵⁸⁹ Even Cetshwayo’s control over when his soldiers were allowed to marry, held up by Bartle Frere and Shepstone as evidence of his tyranny could not faze Sir Robert Peel; Britain’s soldiers could not marry whenever they liked either, Peel opined, and all Sir Bartle Frere was doing was offering “a bonus on improvident marriages.”⁵⁹⁰

⁵⁸⁵ “Motions. South Africa—the Zulu War—Sir Bartle Frere, March 27, 1879,” 470.

⁵⁸⁶ “Orders of the Day. South Africa—the Zulu War—Sir Bartle Frere, March 28, 1879,” 481.

⁵⁸⁷ “Orders of the Day. South Africa—the Zulu War—Sir Bartle Frere, March 28, 1879,” 481.

⁵⁸⁸ “Orders of the Day. South Africa—the Zulu War—Sir Bartle Frere, March 28, 1879,” 483.

⁵⁸⁹ “Orders of the Day. South Africa—the Zulu War—Sir Bartle Frere, March 28, 1879,” 483.

⁵⁹⁰ “Orders of the Day. South Africa—the Zulu War—Sir Bartle Frere, March 28, 1879,” 483.

Comparing Chelmsford to the generals who lost America, Peel called for his court-martial, using Chelmsford's own words against him. In a letter to the Secretary of War, Chelmsford asked for an officer of at least Major-General rank to be sent out with authority to replace both Chelmsford and Sir Bartle Frere if necessary. This, Peel said, showed Chelmsford's own want of confidence in himself, and was clear evidence he should be fired from his post and punished for "the gallant fellows who fell in that miserable affair at Isandlana [sic]—53 officers and nearly 1, 400 men—through the gross incompetence of a General upon whose head rests the blood of these men."⁵⁹¹ Chelmsford got more men killed than died in any battle of the Crimean War and lost more officers than fell at the far larger Battle of Inkermann during the Indian Mutiny.⁵⁹² For Peel that was more than enough reason to punish him.

One might expect the House of Lords to be more inclined to protect the conspirators, especially given Lord Chelmsford was a fellow aristocrat, yet the debates in that body were every bit as vituperative as those in the House of Commons. Friends of Sir Bartle Frere and Lord Chelmsford, most notably the Earl of Carnarvon, did their best to protect both appointees and made much of Durnford and the supposed Zulu threat, while the Opposition was every bit as savage as Sir Robert Peel and his faction had been in the Commons. Lord Stanley of Alderley dubbed Sir Bartle Frere a "military tyrant," and compared his conduct toward the Zulu to Napoleon's conduct against England.⁵⁹³ The Earl of Kimberley criticized both Sir Bartle Frere's judgement, and his reliance on the advice of Sir Theophilus Shepstone, whom Kimberley considered to be "more Boer than the Boers," to the detriment of Britain's relations with

⁵⁹¹ "Orders of the Day. South Africa—the Zulu War—Sir Bartle Frere, March 28, 1879," 485.

⁵⁹² "Orders of the Day. South Africa—the Zulu War—Sir Bartle Frere, March 28, 1879," 485.

⁵⁹³ "House of Lords, Tuesday, 25th March, 1879," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 2, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 410.

Zululand.⁵⁹⁴ Kimberley believed Sir Bartle Frere's despatches showed "a mind excited almost beyond belief, magnifying approaching danger in a most extraordinary way, and anticipating an immediate onslaught on the part of the Zulu King."⁵⁹⁵ Kimberley, like Sir Robert Peel, wanted Bartle Frere recalled on the basis that "I look upon the aggression upon Cetewayo as being unjust and impolitic, as being calculated to involve this country in disaster, and certainly to create a most unfavourable impression as to the nature of our rule in the minds of the Natives of South Africa, whom it ought to be our endeavour to conciliate."⁵⁹⁶

Lord Chelmsford fared little better than Sir Bartle Frere; several months later, during the discussion surrounding the death of the Prince Imperial of France in Zululand, Lord Truro delivered a blistering condemnation of Chelmsford's performance at Isandlwana, saying "He thought fit to go with proper security to ascertain what would be a proper and convenient ground for having a camp. It was said by competent military men that a more unfortunate position could not have been selected, and of that opinion the confirmation they had in the result was overwhelming."⁵⁹⁷ Despite the differences in social status, the conversation in the House of Lords much resembled that in the House of Commons.

In the end, the government got their way on Sir Bartle Frere, and the Opposition got their way on Lord Chelmsford. Sir Bartle Frere was retained as High Commissioner but was censured for disobeying orders. Lord Chelmsford got the reinforcements he sought so the war could be closed in Britain's favour, but Lieutenant-General Sir Garnet Wolseley was put on standby, with orders to supersede Chelmsford if the latter failed again. Chelmsford was aware of this, and the

⁵⁹⁴ "House of Lords, Tuesday, 25th March, 1879," 415.

⁵⁹⁵ "House of Lords, Tuesday, 25th March, 1879," 415.

⁵⁹⁶ "House of Lords, Tuesday, 25th March, 1879," 416.

⁵⁹⁷ "The Late Prince Imperial. Questions. Observations." in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 3, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 418.

knowledge he was working on borrowed time significantly influenced his conduct in future operations, as demonstrated below. Despite his best efforts neither he, nor his patron, Sir Bartle Frere, were able to exert sufficient control over public opinion to put all the blame on Durnford. Their partisans certainly blackened the deceased Colonel's good name, and their criticisms of his conduct made their way into future histories of the war, but so too would the opinions of Jenkins, Chamberlain, Knatchbull-Hugessen, and Peel on Bartle Frere and Chelmsford's conduct.

With the benefit of hindsight, one might well characterise Bartle Frere and Chelmsford's campaign against Durnford as the classic public relations war in which nobody won. Separated from Great Britain by thousands of miles of ocean and lacking the enthusiastic protection of the government they had disobeyed, the High Commissioner and the South African Commander-in-Chief could make Durnford look bad but could not succeed in making themselves look good. Too many negative stories from opponents like Sir Henry Bulwer, Archibald Forbes and Nell Colenso were already circulating in both South Africa and London, and despite their status within British society and the shield offered them by their friendships with Queen Victoria, they could not refute every allegation against them. Bloodied in the press and on the floor of Parliament, Sir Bartle Frere and Lord Chelmsford would have to turn their attention back to the war they had started and hope that they might salvage something from it.

*

Defeat at the Little Bighorn and Isandlwana left Phil Sheridan and Lord Chelmsford both scrambling to preserve their reputations from the resultant backlash. Both Lieutenant-Generals chose their deceased subordinates, Custer and Durnford, as the logical scapegoats for all that had gone wrong, gambling the press and their governments would prefer to blame the man on the spot, and that the two dead men could not, in any event, defend themselves from slander or libel.

In doing so they tainted the historical record and forced all those who have studied the subjects since to sift through a tissue of untruths in order to get at the reality of what happened.

Sheridan's efforts at spin were more successful than Chelmsford's. There were several reasons for this, including his own status as a hero of the American Civil War, the close relationships he had with the Western press, the turbulent election taking place at the same time, Custer's own exalted status, and the unconditional backing of the government he served. The papers wanted to know how an officer of Custer's calibre had been defeated, and that kept the conversation on Custer, not on Sheridan. Among Custer's friends and admirers, partisan politics kept their hostility focused on the Grant administration rather than Sheridan's own performance, with the general neatly sidestepping any negative coverage and allowing the ire that could have been directed at him to either flow up the chain of command to Grant or down it toward Custer. Grant's unwavering support for his friend Sheridan was invaluable, as General-in-Chief William Sherman and the President himself both made strong statements supporting Sheridan and condemning Custer, which further poisoned public opinion against Custer while forcing his defenders to engage with these two loftier figures rather than with Sheridan. The debates over Custer's competency that still pollute the historiography are largely the product of Sheridan's public relations campaign during this period and of the responses to it.

Lord Chelmsford was nowhere near as fortunate. Anthony Durnford was not a well-known enough figure to absorb the same kind of attention Custer had, and while Chelmsford himself was known to the public, he did not have the halo of national heroism Sheridan possessed. More importantly, though, both he and Sir Bartle Frere ended up learning an important lesson about the costs of disobeying one's superiors: unless your disobedience results in immediate and undeniable success, you can expect to lose the backing of the state. Michael

Hicks Beach and Colonel Stanley made only tentative efforts at defending Chelmsford and Bartle Frere, condemning their policies out of one side of their mouths while trying to save governmental face out of the other. These tepid, and at times contradictory, justifications for why Chelmsford and Bartle Frere should be kept in their positions fooled no one, forcing the two's more impassioned defenders—represented largely by their personal friends—into conflict with one another, as well as the Opposition. Said Opposition was, conversely, united and adamant in its desire to punish Sir Bartle Frere for violating his orders and to condemn Lord Chelmsford as a military ignoramus. Their careers narrowly survived the Parliamentary investigation, but Bartle Frere was still censured, Chelmsford was put on notice that he could be replaced at any time, and in the eyes of much of the public, they were both guilty.

The lies Bartle Frere and Chelmsford told however have, like the lies that Sheridan told about Custer, had a long afterlife. The misinformation that they spread about Durnford's performance entered the official record in the period immediately after Isandlwana, and still recur in modern histories, often with little analysis as to their connection to reality. Many of their claims were refuted at the time by the likes of Nell Colenso and Parliamentary critics like Chamberlain, Knatchbull-Hugessen and Peel, but the notion Durnford had done something wrong persists, driven by the fact that statements from Bartle Frere and Chelmsford's friends damning him are so easy to unearth. The claims Sheridan made about Custer are similarly available and still inform—or more accurately, *deform*—the way the Little Bighorn is discussed today. Misinformation, once released to the public, is nearly impossible to take back.

Chapter 6: Further Failure

The press furor in the metropolises had serious repercussions on the frontlines of both wars. Neither Phil Sheridan nor Lord Chelmsford, as we have seen, were apt to take criticism well, and both reacted in decidedly unproductive ways to the waves of outrage in their respective capitals. Sheridan had done a better job than Chelmsford of finding scapegoats for his failures, but criticism of the frontier army still stung him badly and sent him on a search for a victory that would silence the Eastern reporters. Chelmsford, less pugnacious than Sheridan and under far heavier fire from the papers, was paralysed, trapped beyond the borders of Natal, his confidence shaken, and unable or unwilling to take the field again without reinforcements. It fell to both men's subordinates to salvage something from the strategic disasters that befell their armies.

One might hope those subordinates had learned something from the reversals they had undergone, and that, going forward, they would endeavour to avoid their superiors' mistakes. Institutions are, however, slow to accept challenges to orthodox thinking and militaries, with their adherence to doctrine, are slower than most. That the details of what happened at the Little Bighorn and Isandlwana were not fully understood by the rest of the armies only complicated this process further, leaving Sheridan and Chelmsford's officers unsure of what, if any, tactical or strategic changes needed to be made. Sheridan and Chelmsford both spent significant time and effort holding Custer and Durnford responsible for the losses, and the structuring of defeats as a product of individual incompetence denied their subordinates any reason to ask if there were broader, structural issues within the campaigns that needed to be addressed. If Custer and Durnford were uniquely incompetent, then surely all that was needed to conquer the Indigenous threat was more capable leadership. Since no officer would grant that his own leadership was anything other than competent there was no reason to make any changes.

Some of the officers should have known better. Brigadier-General George Crook, who acted as Sheridan's primary lieutenant in the campaigning of August and September of 1876, had fought the Lakota and Cheyenne at the Powder River and the Rosebud, and should have understood their capabilities. Colonel Evelyn Wood, commanding the last column Chelmsford had in the field after January of 1879, was friendly with Durnford, and eventually wrote a defense of his leadership at Isandlwana lionising the deceased colonel for his heroism. Yet Crook and Wood both proceeded to make some of the worst blunders of the war and like their superior officers, resorted to distorting the truth to protect their reputations with Crook transmogrifying his defeat at Slim Buttes into a victory and Wood portraying the near-run Battle of Khambula as a resounding triumph of British arms.

The reasons for Crook and Wood's failures are varied, as are the reasons for the less discussed, yet no less notable failures of officers like Alfred Terry, John Gibbon, Charles Pearson, and David Moriarty. There were issues with supplies and logistics, inability to stand up to unreasonable superiors, and bad weather, to name but a few. The chief cause, however, was that even after the Little Bighorn and Isandlwana, the American and British officers still did not understand what kind of opponent they were up against or how to best them. How this ignorance manifested itself varied between the American and British cases: Crook, Terry, and Gibbon knew the Lakota and Cheyenne were dangerous but could not figure out how to alter Sheridan's strategy to effectively handle them, while Pearson, Moriarty, and Wood, still in the grip of colonial reasoning and racial bigotry, continued to underrate the Zulu threat to the detriment of their plans and the safety of their men. The outcomes of that ignorance, however, were the same, with the American and British armies flailing about blindly and accomplishing little beyond the

wastage of more time, money, and lives. It was an ignominious chapter in the histories of both frontier armies, though how ignominious has often been glossed over.

For the Indigenous foes of those armies, the exact opposite can be said. For the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne and the Zulu, the months immediately after the Little Bighorn and Isandlwana illustrated the capabilities of their warriors and warlords at their absolute finest. The Lakota and Cheyenne evaded Terry, Gibbon, and Crook with ease, inducing the latter to all but gut his own army in the infamous Horsemeat March. When Crazy Horse finally offered Crook battle, at Slim Buttes it was a near repeat of the Rosebud, as the Oglala war-leader again outfoxed the “Grey Fox” of Arizona. In South Africa, Zulu generals Mbilini waMswati and Ntshingwayo kaMahole butchered David Moriarty at Ntombe Drift, trounced Evelyn Wood at Hlobane, and came within inches of destroying Wood’s column at Khambula, while the coastal Zulu kept Charles Pearson penned up in Eshowe, under siege and out of action. In doing so they made it apparent the Little Bighorn and Isandlwana were not flukes, and the Indigenous military forces could do far more than the Americans or British were prepared to admit.

*

From the end of June through early July, there was no action, and for that matter, no movement in the Department of the Platte, as George Crook sat at Goose Creek, unwilling to risk his army by advancing. Sheridan did not take Crook’s inactivity well. As June became July, and July itself wore on, Sheridan barraged Crook with telegrams urging him to move against the Lakota and Cheyenne or, failing that, to find Alfred Terry and John Gibbon, both still in the field after the Little Bighorn and link up with them. Crook’s replies to Sheridan have a tenor of panic to them, with Crook reporting he was outnumbered three to one by the hostiles in his area of operations and could not move without endangering his whole command. In between these

expressions of terror Crook denounced Reuben Davenport of *The New York Herald* for “false reports” on the Rosebud and continued to assure Sheridan he had won a great victory there. More than ever, Crook needed the Rosebud to be a success so his current reluctance to resume campaigning could be viewed as something other than cowardice. Both his letters to Sheridan and Bourke’s summations of them in his diary became increasingly shrill the more time passed, and the more aggressively Sheridan demanded he strike out at the hostiles.⁵⁹⁸

What is notably absent from Crook and Sheridan’s correspondence is any discussion of changes in strategy after the Little Bighorn. The topic of Native American “scatteration” and how to prevent it still dominated the conversation, even as Crook requested more and more reinforcements from Sheridan. Sheridan eventually gave in, and at the end of July he, and General-in-Chief William Sherman, telegraphed Crook to inform him every available man in the Division of the Missouri was being sent to reinforce either Crook or Terry. They also told Crook to ignore the press, and especially *The New York Herald* and its harsh critique of the war and the senior officers involved. That both the Commander of the Division of the Missouri and the General-in-Chief of the Army felt the need to tell a Departmental Commander to disregard the papers was an acknowledgement the bad press was getting to them, just as the decision to send reinforcements to Crook and Terry was a *de facto* admission that Sheridan’s original plan of using small, fast moving columns to entrap the Lakota and Cheyenne had not worked. It was an admission Sheridan never verbalised, and the question of whether the Lieutenant-General ever understood there were problems with his strategy remains unanswered. He sent Crook more men and told him to junction with Terry but provided no new instructions on how the campaign

⁵⁹⁸ Bourke, *The Diaries of John Gregory Bourke* Vol. 1, 369, 374-387.

should be fought or how Crook and Terry were to locate their targets. With no insights coming from Division, the decision making was left to the Departments of the Platte and the Dakotas.⁵⁹⁹

Crook's main source of reinforcements was ten companies of the 5th Cavalry, under the auspices of Colonel Wesley Merritt, a veteran cavalryman who served under Sheridan in the Shenandoah Valley and Appomattox campaigns during the last two years of the Civil War. Previously assigned to Sheridan's personal staff, Merritt was given command of the 5th Cavalry on July 1, 1876, the same day the regiment was ordered to embark for the Department of the Platte. Given the circumstances, and Merritt's closeness with Sheridan, it is hard to avoid the conclusion Sheridan wanted a personal agent on the ground in the Great Sioux War, now that Custer was dead, and relations between himself and Crook ever more strained. Among Merritt's junior officers was First Lieutenant Charles King, who one day became a novelist of some renown and whose memoir, *Campaigning With Crook*, is one of the major sources for the events of August and September 1876. An unrepentant bigot who spoke of the Lakota and Cheyenne in the most degrading of terms, King's writing shows just how little the lessons of the Little Bighorn managed to penetrate the minds of American officers. For King the Indigenous peoples were still unsophisticated savages, incapable of intellectual competition with white men.⁶⁰⁰

Merritt's rendezvous with Crook was delayed slightly by the news that a band of two hundred Cheyenne had left their reservation and were heading out into the wilds intent on linking up with their brethren on the Great Plains. Merritt decided to stop this exodus before it could become a problem and moved to intercept the Cheyenne war-party, colliding with them at Warbonnet Creek on July 17. The skirmish that ensued was noteworthy mostly for its brevity;

⁵⁹⁹ Bourke, *The Diaries of John Gregory Bourke* Vol. 2, 35.

⁶⁰⁰ King made many demeaning comments about the Lakota and Cheyenne, but his rant on page 33 of "Campaigning with Crook," is the longest and most vitriolic.

Merritt's cavalrymen outnumbered the Cheyenne five to one and easily chased them back to the reservation. King, ever a storyteller, took great liberties with the details of the skirmish, and in his memoirs and an essay published in the *Denver Post* inflated the Northern Cheyenne numbers to more than eight hundred while reducing Merritt's to less than four hundred. He also invented, possibly out of whole cloth, the story of William "Buffalo Bill" Cody killing Cheyenne war-leader Yellow Hair in single combat, a story many of the papers repeated.⁶⁰¹ Northern Cheyenne recollections of the skirmish situate it far more accurately as the minor affair it really was, and state Yellow Hair was killed not in single combat, but in a hail of bullets from multiple cavalrymen all firing at once. They also emphasise the Cheyenne warband did not belong to Yellow Hair, as King claimed, but to the war-chief Little Wolf, who was out on the Plains again within weeks, leading a war-party of Northern Cheyenne to a juncture with fellow war-chief Dull Knife.⁶⁰² Merritt's repulse of the Cheyenne did not prevent the hostiles from receiving reinforcements; it merely delayed it.

Merritt and Crook joined forces on August 3 and Crook, with his command bolstered to over 2200 men at last decided he could delay no longer and broke camp. He abandoned his supply wagons and his wounded at Goose Creek; to quickly meet up with Terry, and from thereon, pursue the Lakota and Cheyenne, Crook believed he would need to travel light. Without the wagons the men could carry fourteen days worth of rations with them, and no more; Surgeon Bennett Clements had to limit his stock of medical supplies to what he could fit onto two pack mules. Crook (and Bourke) both believed these limitations on supply were necessary to catch the

⁶⁰¹ King, "Campaigning with Crook," 26-37; Charles King, "The Skirmish at Warbonnet Creek, July 17, 1876," in *Battles and Skirmishes of the Great Sioux War*, ed. Jerome A. Greene (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993): 79-91.

⁶⁰² "Beaver Heart," in *Lakota & Cheyenne* ed. Jerome A. Greene (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994): 81-83; "Josey Tangleyellowhair," in *Lakota & Cheyenne* ed. Jerome A. Greene (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994): 83-84.

Lakota and Cheyenne, but Clements had his doubts. Of particular concern to him was the lack of fresh fruit or vegetables; on a diet of nothing but hard bread, bacon, coffee, sugar, and salt he feared the men might soon be coming down with scurvy.⁶⁰³

On August 10, a week after leaving Goose Creek, Crook met up with Terry and Gibbon who had hung together since the Little Bighorn. Bourke's journals and memoir and King's writings are all rather contemptuous of Terry and his soldiers, who travelled with full supply wagons and were well-fed and dressed in fresh uniforms. To Bourke and King these men paled in comparison to the "real" soldiers of Crook's command, with their ragged clothes and starvation diet. They extended their comparison to Terry himself, who Bourke thought more of a scholar than a soldier, and who King believed to be making deliberately slow and overcautious advances when compared to Crook and his troops.⁶⁰⁴ What neither Bourke nor King could hide, however, was that for the duration of their time together, Crook's command was dependent upon Terry's for supplies of food and medicine—even as Crook (and Bourke and King) criticized Terry for the way the supply wagons slowed their advance. On August 26, after sixteen days of travelling together and finding no signs of Native life, Crook cut loose from Terry, and marched off into the badlands unencumbered by supply wagons and carrying, again, only fourteen days worth of rations and medicine. Said Surgeon Clements, "I procured a few ounces of quinine from General Terry's command and inasmuch as it was supposed that we would of necessity reach some point of supply at the expiration of the time for which we were now fully rationed—fourteen days—and as no estimation to the contrary was given, it was deemed unnecessary to

⁶⁰³ Bennet A. Clements, "The Starvation March," in *Battles and Skirmishes of the Great Sioux War*, ed. Jerome A. Greene (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993): 97-100.

⁶⁰⁴ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 351-352; King, "Campaigning with Crook," 79, 81-82.

make any further addition to the medical supplies.”⁶⁰⁵ What Clements did not know at the time was that Crook would keep the command in the field for not fourteen, but for forty days.

What precisely Crook’s thought process was in making this decision is not clear. Bourke and King both justified their commanding officer’s choice on the basis it was the only way they could hope to overtake the Lakota and Cheyenne warbands, and there was an element of truth to this. Terry and Gibbon, weighed down by their wagons, spent the next month searching futilely for the hostiles who easily stayed out of their reach; aside from a few scattered contacts, neither Terry nor Gibbon joined battle with the hostiles for the remainder of the campaign season. Yet Crook’s decision to abandon his supply line and march out into the unknown without a timetable, a preplanned route, or even a sense of where his enemies were, hardly seems like the appropriate counterpoint to Terry’s slow advance.

Mocked by the papers, hounded by Sheridan, and up against an adversary whose measure he had still not taken, Crook went in blind, searching for a strategy, any strategy, that would bring him to grips with the hostiles. When no brilliant way ahead revealed itself to him, Crook appears to have decided to put aside all common sense and take his command out into the wilderness on the gamble they would trip over Sitting Bull or Crazy Horse and allow him to score a victory that would end the grumbling at home. Crook’s correspondence—and Bourke’s hagiography—from this period offer little insight into the Brigadier-General’s inner life, but his actions have a sense of desperation to them. The Grey Fox, who had so decisively ended the Apache troubles in Arizona, looks to have had no idea what he was doing in Montana.

What he was doing for certain was wearing out his men. “The Horsemeat March,” as it soon became known, had a horrific effect on Crook’s soldiers and left many of them scarred for

⁶⁰⁵ Clements, “The Starvation March,” 99.

life, inside and out. Surgeon Clements' recollections were candid, relaying the medical officer's horror at the conditions the men endured and the utter lack of anything resembling good medical practice. As rations for the men and fodder for the animals gave out, Crook began killing cavalry mounts and pack mules to feed his men, earning the march its ominous moniker. The weather turned on Crook too, and of the forty days the command was in the field, twenty-two were marked by torrential rain. Since Crook left not only his supply wagons, but his tents, cooking utensils, and ambulances behind, the precipitation made the march a study in absolute misery, leaving sick and injured men trudging through mud and sleeping outside in the chilling rains.⁶⁰⁶

Clements had worried a diet of bacon and hardtack would produce scurvy among the troops. A diet of badly cooked horseflesh and mule meat did not serve their health any better. To make matters worse, the Indigenous scouts began to leave the force, through open desertion, or by applying to Crook for jobs as messengers. The auxiliaries did not know the Lakota territories well, but they knew them better than Crook did, and their absence left his expedition even more lost. "Under those unfavourable conditions," Clements said, "the command moved from its camp directly south on the morning of September 6, and marched thirty miles over a broken, rolling country, and camped at some alkaline water holes, without enough wood to even boil coffee with."⁶⁰⁷ More men sickened that night and on September 7 Clements remembered, "all the litters, nine in number, were in use this day; many entreaties of sick and exhausted men had to be resisted; many horses were abandoned, and men continued to struggle into camp until 10 pm."⁶⁰⁸ That same evening Crook officially began the process of issuing horsemeat to the troops, and a

⁶⁰⁶ Clements, "The Starvation March," 100-102.

⁶⁰⁷ Clements, "The Starvation March," 101.

⁶⁰⁸ Clements, "The Starvation March," 102.

scouting party under Captain Anson Mills was sent out to ascertain where the command was, and if there was anywhere nearby they could resupply from.

Bourke and King's remembrances of the Horsemeat March, while kinder to Crook personally than Clements was, paint an equally unhappy picture of the experience. Bourke observed that Crook shared the men's privations, and that his birthday celebration of September 8 was an especially forlorn affair "nothing to eat, nothing to drink, no chance to dry clothes, and nothing for which to be thankful except that we had found wood."⁶⁰⁹ King's recollections of the march are mostly descriptions of thunderstorms and hailstorms with the occasional interjection about Colonel Merritt punishing men who dared to violate orders by collecting firewood. Eleven days of unremitting rain played havoc with King and his fellow cavalrymen, and "three fourths of our cavalry, of the Second, Third, and Fifth regiments, had made the last day's march afoot. One half our horses were broken down for good, one fourth had fallen never to rise again, and dozens had been eaten to keep us, their riders, alive."⁶¹⁰ At the time of King's writing, Crook had not fought a single battle against the Lakota or Northern Cheyenne, yet his cavalry complement was already broken beyond repair.

On September 9 the dreary monotony of the Horsemeat March was broken by the arrival of a messenger, who informed Crook that Captain Mills had stumbled upon a Native encampment near Slim Buttes and was undertaking to attack it. Mills requested Crook bring the rest of the army to reinforce him and Crook hastened to comply. By the time Crook caught up, Mills had already launched his assault on the camp which, defended by only a few warriors under the minor war-leader American Horse, fell quite easily. Unable to hold onto their camp, the mortally wounded American Horse and his closest followers holed up in a ravine on the

⁶⁰⁹ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 368.

⁶¹⁰ King, "Campaigning with Crook," 103.

outskirts of the camp from where they sniped at Mills' company with impunity. Mills, not wanting to risk his own small force in a direct attack on the natural trench line of the ravine, stayed where he was and waited for Crook and the infantry to arrive; only once Crook had gotten there would they have the men needed to storm the ravine and root out American Horse. Unfortunately for Mills there was a time limit in play: some of the Lakota in the ravine had shouted to him that Crazy Horse was nearby and was already riding to their rescue. If Crook did not get there first, Mills and his company might easily go the way of Custer and the 7th Cavalry.⁶¹¹

Crook beat Crazy Horse to American Horse's encampment where, after several exchanges of fire, he succeeded in negotiating the peaceful surrender of American Horse's band. Working through white scouts who were fluent in Lakota, Crook was able to, in Bourke's words, persuade American Horse "that General Crook's promises were not written in sand."⁶¹² Crook first offered safe conduct to the women and children who were hidden in the ravine, and after his men had escorted the non-combatants to safety, continued to debate with American Horse who, seeing that he was outnumbered 2200 to thirty, surrendered to Crook. Crook kept his word to American Horse, and while the camp was ransacked by starving soldiers desperate for something to eat, none of the surrendered Lakota were hurt; Crook also made sure the confiscated food was used to feed the prisoners as well as his troops.⁶¹³ It was the first surrender of a Lakota warband the Great Sioux War had seen and Crook must have felt elated. Then Crazy Horse arrived.

American Horse's followers had not been bluffing. Crazy Horse was camped only a short distance away, with eight hundred or so of his Oglala Lakota warriors and their Northern

⁶¹¹ Anson Mills, "The Battle of Slim Buttes," in *Battles and Skirmishes of the Great Sioux War*, ed. Jerome A. Greene (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993): 114.

⁶¹² Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 373.

⁶¹³ *Ibid.*

Cheyenne allies. A rider named Burnt Thigh, carrying word from American Horse, reached Crazy Horse and the Oglala leader set out at once.⁶¹⁴ Arriving too late to stop Crook from occupying the encampment, Crazy Horse seized the bluffs around the camp using mirrors to signal to the disparate parts of his force and keep them acting tandem.⁶¹⁵ After an initial thrust down into the camp was blunted by concentrated fire from the carbines of Merritt's cavalry, Crazy Horse pulled back onto the bluffs and poured rifle and arrow fire into Crook's positions. Said Charles King, "That there are hundreds of Indians is plainly apparent from their rapid fire, but they keep five or six hundred yards away behind the ridges, peppering every exposed point of our lines."⁶¹⁶ Crook sent several battalions of infantry and dismounted cavalry charging up the ridgeline to meet Crazy Horse's men; rather than standing and fighting, the Lakota and Cheyenne flowed away from Crook's troops and struck at another part of the line. At one point, King counted two hundred fifty warriors assaulting five companies under the command of his friend Mason, and casualties in that detachment steadily rose until nightfall put an end to the first day's fighting.⁶¹⁷ As Northern Cheyenne war-leader Tall Bull tersely summarised "we attacked the soldiers and fought most of the day."⁶¹⁸ As the shooting stopped, Crook posted sentries along the part of the bluff he had taken while his men settled in for a restless night. Every so often the air was punctuated by gunshots, reminding the soldiers Crazy Horse was still nearby.

Crazy Horse did more that night than take the odd pot shot at the American troops. His men reoccupied much of the bluffs, and the next morning began firing into the camp again. At 9:00 am Crook ordered his men to take what they could carry and burn the rest of the camp as

⁶¹⁴ "Charger," in *Lakota & Cheyenne* ed. Jerome A. Greene (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994): 88.

⁶¹⁵ Mills, "The Battle of Slim Buttes," 115.

⁶¹⁶ King, "Campaigning with Crook," 128.

⁶¹⁷ King, "Campaigning with Crook," 129.

⁶¹⁸ "Tall Bull," in *Lakota & Cheyenne* ed. Jerome A. Greene (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994): 92.

they were leaving. To the disgust of Surgeon Clements, the soldiers burnt not only the bulk of the rations they had captured, but the tepees he hoped to convert into tents for the wounded.⁶¹⁹ As the Americans pulled out Crazy Horse went on the offensive again, flanking Crook's army and striking at their rear with his warriors. Where Bourke dismissed the attack, King provided a more honest account of the rearguard action which illustrated how hard fought it was. "All along the line," he said, "the attack has commenced and the battalion is sharply engaged—fighting afoot, their horses being already led away after the main column, but within easy call. Our orders are to follow, but to stand off the Indians. They are not wanted to accompany the march. It is one thing to 'stand off the Indians' and hold your ground—it is quite another to stand him off and fall back. They are dashing about on their nimble ponies, following up the line as it doggedly retires from ridge to ridge, far outnumbering us and all the time keeping up a rattling fire and a volley of aboriginal remarks at our expense."⁶²⁰ Several pages later, describing the last stages of the combat, King added, "But all the time Crook is marching away faster than we can back and follow him. We have to keep these howling devils beyond range of the main column, absorb their attention, pick up our wounded as we go, and be ready to give the warriors a welcome when they charge."⁶²¹ King, who later in the book would insist Slim Buttes was a victory, does not seem to have recognised he was describing, a fighting retreat.

As Crook withdrew from American Horse's camp, he was forced to turn most of the prisoners he had taken loose. Others took the chance to escape on their own initiative, while Lakota and Cheyenne raiders made forays against Crook's horse herd and pack train. Many Shields, a Sans Arc Lakota, was given a detailed description of the retreat by one of the escaped

⁶¹⁹ Clements, "The Starvation March," 103-104.

⁶²⁰ King, "Campaigning with Crook," 105.

⁶²¹ King, "Campaigning with Crook," 109.

prisoners. “When they overtook the cavalry a running fight took place, in which she made her escape. The cavalry trail appeared to be very large; found many dead horses on the trail with their hams cut out, as though the troops or the Indians had been subsisting on them. This squaw reports that the Indians recaptured from the troops about three hundred head of horses.”⁶²² Many Shields also spoke to one of Crook’s few remaining Native scouts, Man That Hurts Himself, who said there were no fewer than three running fights between Crook’s rearguard and Crazy Horse’s outriders, and the pursuit did not let up until Crook entered the foothills and escaped. Crazy Horse then salvaged what supplies he could from the wreckage of the camp and inducted the survivors of American Horse’s warband into his own.⁶²³ By the end of September 10 all the fighting was over and Crook and Crazy Horse had gone their separate ways.

In his despatches to Sheridan after the battle, Crook held up Slim Buttes as a resounding victory for the US Army. It was the same trick he pulled after the Rosebud and realistically, should have been subjected to the same level of ridicule. The oversight present at the Rosebud was not, however, present this time. Many reporters, including Reuben Davenport of the *New York Herald*, left Crook’s army partway through the Horsemeat March, and those remaining were among the Brigadier-General’s most devoted sycophants. They echoed Crook’s boasts, as have the majority of historians since. Jerome Greene, whose book *Slim Buttes, 1876*, remains the only full-length monograph on the battle, proclaimed Slim Buttes was one of the most important battles of the war marking the first time the US Army decisively beat the Lakota and Cheyenne, as well as the first time Crazy Horse was defeated in open combat. How, precisely, Crazy Horse was defeated, Greene remained hazy on, and he, like most other white historians

⁶²² “Many Shields,” in *Lakota & Cheyenne* ed. Jerome A. Greene (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994): 90.

⁶²³ “Many Shields,” *Lakota & Cheyenne*, 89.

who have written on the battle, struggled to explain what, if any advantage the Americans obtained from Slim Buttes. In his conclusion, Greene admitted that Slim Buttes, rather than shortening the war, likely prolonged it, an admission that undercut his entire thesis.⁶²⁴

In *The Journey of Crazy Horse*, Lakota historian Joseph Marshall III, put forth that Crazy Horse, rather than Crook, won the Battle of Slim Buttes.⁶²⁵ Based on the evidence, Marshall's argument has more legs under it than Greene's. With an inferior force, Crazy Horse compelled Crook to retreat from Slim Buttes and to give up the prisoners and supplies he had taken from American Horse's camp. When the battle came to an end it was Crazy Horse, not Crook, who controlled the ground over which the battle was waged, and Crazy Horse, not Crook, who had accomplished any of the goals he fought for in the first place. Crazy Horse went into Slim Buttes to save American Horse's followers from being taken prisoner, and he did so. Crook went into Slim Buttes to feed his men and capture American Horse's band, and failed to do either. He also failed to deal a crippling blow to Crazy Horse, which was the objective of not only Slim Buttes, but the entire campaign. Crazy Horse's ability to make war was unimpeded by Slim Buttes, while Crook lost more men and expended more calories to no gain.

The Battle of Slim Buttes over, George Crook's command went back to starving. What little food the men carried away from Slim Buttes lasted less than two days, and from then on it was back to a diet of undercooked horseflesh. Inevitably, scurvy, dysentery, and malnourishment caused the sick list to grow longer and longer. Since August 30, Crook had permitted hunting expeditions to secure food for invalids but the results were poor; Surgeon Clements stated on September 11 the only food secured was "two ducks and one leg of antelope," a testament to either the success of the Lakota in driving off game, the poor hunting skills of Crook's sickening

⁶²⁴ Jerome A. Greene, *Slim Buttes*, 1876, 115.

⁶²⁵ Joseph Marshall III, *The Journey of Crazy Horse*, (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2004): 234.

command, or both.⁶²⁶ By September 12, as the expedition slogged through a plain the rains had transformed into “a most tenacious quagmire,” the men were unloading saddles, bridles, and ammunition boxes to lighten the load, and “caching” them in the mud for retrieval at some unspecified future date.⁶²⁷ Only two percent of the army was excused from duty for reasons of ill health, but as Clements reported, this had less to do with the men’s actual health and more to do with the lack of facilities for the sick. “Had it not been known that there were no hospital tents or shelter for them, a very much larger proportion of men would have been reported sick. Hundreds of men remained ‘on duty’ during the latter part of the march to the Belle Fourche, who, under ordinary circumstances would have been excused and transported.”⁶²⁸

Clements, focussed on the physical health of his patients, did not touch on their mental health in his report, but that too, was under a constant strain. Lieutenant Walter Schuyler, who was attached to Crook’s staff, told his father in a letter, “I have told you what *I* experienced on this march, but you can gather from that no realization of the suffering of the men, particularly the Infantry. I have seen men become so exhausted that they were actually insane, but there was no way of carrying them except for some officer or mounted man to give them his own horse, which was done constantly. I saw men who were very plucky, sit down and cry like children because they could not hold out.”⁶²⁹ Dysentery, scurvy, starvation, and madness; Crook’s expedition visited no shortage of horrors on those entrapped in it.

The Horsemear March officially ended on September 16, when the command reached the vicinity of Custer City on the Belle Fourche. Crook transferred authority to Merritt, then left the

⁶²⁶ Clements, “The Starvation March,” 104.

⁶²⁷ Clements, “The Starvation March,” 105.

⁶²⁸ Clements, “The Starvation March,” 106-107.

⁶²⁹ Walter Schuyler, “Walter Schuyler to Father, November 1, 1876,” in *General George Crook: His Autobiography*, ed. Martin F. Schmitt (Borodino Books, 2017): 258.

column to report to Sheridan. The Departmental Commander put the best face he could on the expedition, but to any unbiased observer it was obvious the entire business was a fiasco from start to finish. While Crook lost only a few men, all in the Battle of Slim Buttes, the number of sick and injured ran into the hundreds. Every soldier who marched with Crook needed months to recuperate, and many were mustered out of the army, never to see combat again. The costs in monetary terms ran even higher: hundreds of cavalry horses and pack mules were slaughtered for food, or cut loose from the column to die, and had to be replaced at army expense. Most of the riding equipment and ammunition the men “cached” on the march to the Belle Fourche was never recovered, raising the price of the campaign still higher. The long-term damage to the army may have been even worse. In his memoirs, John Bourke reflected that, of the officers who accompanied Crook on the Horsemeat March, over fifty percent were either dead or no longer fit for active duty, despite only sixteen years having passed. “If any of my readers imagines that the march from the head of Heart River down to the Belle Fourche was a picnic,” Bourke wrote, “let him examine the roster of the command and tell of the scores and scores of men, then hearty and rugged, who now fill premature graves or drag out an existence with constitutions wrecked and enfeebled by such privations and vicissitudes.”⁶³⁰

George Crook wrecked his own army with only a little help from the Lakota and Cheyenne. With no real plan of advance and deserted by his Indigenous scouts, Crook spent forty days groping blindly about the Plains, and the one time he touched the Lakota, Crazy Horse slapped his hand away. Even historians like Jerome Greene, who see Slim Buttes as a triumph admit the rest of the campaign was a debacle, and the Army gained no strategic advantage over the Lakota and Cheyenne as a product of Crook’s efforts. If we accept Marshall’s contention that

⁶³⁰ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 378.

Slim Buttes was yet another defeat for the Army then Crook's leadership looks even worse. He may have had only a fraction of the men killed that Custer did at the Little Bighorn, yet when one begins to add up those troops who were permanently disabled by starvation and disease, the losses to the Army in able-bodied soldiers may exceed the Little Bighorn's death toll. For forty days Crook put his command through a rainy, muddy Hell, and all he had to show for it was a lost battle and hundreds of men who could never fight again. How could Crook, a veteran officer with a reputation as a great "Indian" fighter, allow this to happen?

The answer is Crook allowed it to happen because he had no other options, or at least none he could see. Sheridan's demands for action constricted Crook's opportunities and left him with few real choices if he wanted to continue his career. Crook helped Sheridan draft the strategy for the Great Sioux War in the first place, and if he were to candidly tell his boss he now had no idea how to proceed, he might very well have lost his job. Yet having no idea how to proceed was very much the position Crook was in after the Rosebud. He knew the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne did not fight the way the Apache had, but he had no notion how he could alter his strategy to beat them. Crook's immobility after the Rosebud was the paralysis of a man who knew nothing good lay ahead of him, and he put off making any decisions as long as he could until Sheridan forced his hand and inaugurated the chain of events that led, inexorably, to the life-destroying conditions of the Horsemeat March.

As the one in charge of the war effort, Sheridan should have been giving Crook strategic guidance. The only thing that came out of Chicago, however, were promises of reinforcements and telegrams demanding action. Sheridan could not or would not admit his original strategy was faulty, so he did nothing but feed more men into the warzone while providing Crook—and Terry and Gibbon for that matter—with no overall direction. Their commanding officer uninterested in

helping them, Sheridan's subordinates were left to make their own way, resulting in Terry finding nothing and Crook finding famine and further reversal. The upper echelons of the American Army had not absorbed the lessons of the Rosebud or the Little Bighorn and urged the Departmental Commanders onto victory without giving them a strategy for achieving it. The Departmental Commanders, knowing the strategy they were given was flawed but lacking the resources or information to come up with a better plan, improvised as best they could, but their best was far from good enough. With over 2000 men apiece, Terry and Crook's armies were too large to be dissected the way Custer's had been, but they were also too large and unwieldy to catch anything and required more supplies than their logistics systems grant them. Terry, chained to his supply wagons, kept his men healthy, but never caught any Natives. Crook, after ditching his cumbersome transports, was able to find the Natives, but with a force that, weakened by exhaustion, malnutrition, and sickness, was in no condition to fight them. With the high command mired in ignorance and the Departmental heads only somewhat more enlightened, no one in the US Army it seemed, had any idea how to beat the Lakota and Cheyenne. It would be another month before an officer came up with a viable strategy, and when that finally happened, it required he ignore everything Sheridan told him to do.

*

With Lord Chelmsford's withdrawal from Zululand, his surviving column commanders found themselves isolated and alone, cut off from one another and their leader by distance and the Zulu forces. Chelmsford's initial plans to get back in the field were repeatedly delayed by insufficient reinforcements, and by February it was apparent that Charles Pearson and Evelyn Wood would be left to their own devices for the foreseeable future. Chelmsford's instructions to both men were vague and left most of their decisions up to their own discretion, the one

overriding concern being that they maintain the integrity of their columns and take as few risks as possible. Chelmsford, despondent after the loss of Durnford, Pulleine, and the 1/24 at Isandlwana, was not prepared to let his remaining subcommanders take any serious chances. If the Zulu pounced on another of his columns Chelmsford might lose both the war and any further chances for promotion, prospects that daunted the Lieutenant-General. Accordingly, Pearson and Wood were ordered to refrain from undertaking any chancy operations, though if the chance to deal a serious blow materialised, Chelmsford expected them to take it.

For the Zulu, the situation was rife with opportunity. Despite the reversal at Nyezane and the high casualties sustained at Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift, Cetshwayo's overarching strategy of dividing and conquering the British columns was working well. The Centre Column, identified by the King and his councillors as the most existential threat to Zululand, had been badly damaged and sent running back to Natal, while the Coastal Column had obligingly trapped itself at Eshowe, which, with the removal of Chelmsford's column, was now well behind Zulu lines. So long as Wood could be prevented from advancing too far into Zululand, and he and Pearson kept from linking up with each other, Cetshwayo's plan for frustrating and delaying the British until they sued for peace could be kept in working condition.

How Cetshwayo's strategy was to be implemented was in the hands of his field commanders, and over the course of February and March 1879, two separate yet mutually supportive operations were undertaken by the King's officers and liegemen. At Eshowe a loose coalition of local chieftains and royal representatives, of whom Cetshwayo's brother Prince Dabulamanzi seems to have been first among equals, kept Pearson's men in a state of siege. No trench lines were dug and no earthworks erected around the fort, but through constant patrols and frequent raids against sentries, work gangs, and livestock, the Zulu denied Pearson the freedom

of movement he required to leave Eshowe. At the same time, Zulu irregulars, assisted by Swazi auxiliaries under the direction of the exiled Prince Mbilini waMswati, launched a succession of forays against British allies around Luneberg, killing British sympathisers, threatening mission stations, and bogging down Evelyn Wood, who had the largest British army in the area, in a game of raid and counterraid. In contrast to his Zulu patrons, whose tactics were built around open battle during daylight hours, Prince Mbilini and his Swazi were guerillas and night fighters, and their activities kept the border communities of Natal in a steady state of panic, fixing Wood's attention on the vicinity of Luneberg. Wood quickly came to loathe Mbilini, detailing men to sack Indigenous homesteads under the Prince's protection.⁶³¹ All along the front, the British and the Zulu found themselves in a stalemate—a situation that suited King Cetshwayo just fine.

For Colonel Charles Pearson a stalemate might as well have been a defeat. When Pearson chose to retreat behind the walls of Eshowe, it was on the assumption the Zulu could not maintain a proper siege. Over the seventy-two-day ordeal that followed, Pearson and his men discovered that Prince Dabulamanzi, having failed to take Rorke's Drift by storm, had given some thought to how to run a siege and quickly mastered the fundamentals. Zulu snipers harassed Pearson's sentries, outriders, and cattle drivers, with the former, as Pearson reported, finding themselves "constantly under fire; one was killed at his post; another, Private Carson, 99th Regiment, was attacked by about a dozen Zulus who crept up near him in the long grass. They shot off two fingers of his right hand; he had a bullet through each thigh, and another in his right arm. His horse was also assegaied [sic]."⁶³² On another occasion, the Zulu sprang upon an

⁶³¹ Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 2, 54.

⁶³² "From Colonel Pearson, commanding No. 1 Column, to the Military Secretary, etc, etc, Durban, April 9, 1879," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 3, ed. John Laband and Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications International Limited, 2000): 73.

unescorted herd of 1000 cattle, six hundred of them.⁶³³ Initially, Pearson was able to use horse-messengers and runners to keep Chelmsford apprised of his circumstances, but as the Zulu net tightened this became harder to do. “Very soon after our arrival at Ekowe [sic],” Pearson recalled, “we found ourselves being gradually cut off from all communication with Natal, though occasionally a native messenger was persuaded to run the gauntlet through the enemy.”⁶³⁴ By mid-February, Prince Dabulamanzi’s screen of patrols was fully in place and for nearly a month Pearson was unable to communicate with Chelmsford at all; in the Colonel’s own words, “Between 11th February and 2nd March we had no communication whatever with the Lower Tugela,” a statement that serves as a testament to the efficacy of the Zulu skirmishers.⁶³⁵ Pearson eventually found a workaround to this problem, using a heliograph to flash signals to British outposts in Natal, but communications remained uncertain for the whole of the siege.⁶³⁶

Still more troubling for Pearson was his entire dearth of knowledge as to Zulu intentions and movements; in his report after the siege he stated honestly that “Our information regarding the movements of the Zulus was absolutely nil.”⁶³⁷ Often Pearson only became aware of the Zulu presence when they opened fire on his men, as happened repeatedly to the work gangs improving the roads around the fort. In general, the Zulu allowed Pearson’s soldiers free rein for a few miles in each direction from the fort but reacted strongly to any efforts to push further into Zululand, or to re-establish links to Natal, tearing up roadwork during the night and turning out in force to oppose any advances. In the more than two months he was at Eshowe, Pearson was only once able to go on the offensive, sending a raiding party to burn one of Prince

⁶³³ “Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel H.E. Wood, February 3, 1879,” 90.

⁶³⁴ “From Colonel Pearson, commanding No. 1 Column, to the Military Secretary...April 9, 1879,” 73.

⁶³⁵ “From Colonel Pearson, commanding No. 1 Column, to the Military Secretary...April 9, 1879,” 73.

⁶³⁶ “From Colonel Pearson, commanding No. 1 Column, to the Military Secretary...April 9, 1879,” 73.

⁶³⁷ “From Colonel Pearson, commanding No. 1 Column, to the Military Secretary...April 9, 1879,” 74.

Dabulamanzi's homesteads on March 1. On that occasion, Pearson's marauders marched the seven miles to the homestead easily enough, but on their way back found themselves pursued by an ever-growing army of Zulu which chased them back into Eshowe. In his report Pearson tried to downplay the danger his men were in, but it is telling that in his remaining month at Eshowe he never again deigned to take the offensive.⁶³⁸ Interviewed after the war, Dabulamanzi stated his belief that he, rather than Pearson, got the better of the encounter, and the Zulu Prince may have been right.⁶³⁹ He lost a homestead, but Pearson lost what freedom of action was left to him.

The real danger to Pearson's troops was, in any event, not from Zulu fire, but from starvation and disease. Pearson did his best to prepare Eshowe for the siege, sending excess mouths back to Natal before the Zulu finished surrounding him and confiscating supplies from those so evacuated. Eshowe fortunately had its own water supply, so dehydration was not a concern, but that was the only front on which Pearson found himself lucky. Rot and infestations of weevils rendered ten percent of his stock of flour and biscuits inedible and required higher rations of meat be issued to make up the loss.⁶⁴⁰ The men soon ate through the herd of cattle that accompanied the Coastal Column to Nyezane, and in a decision reminiscent of George Crook's Horsemeat March, they began to eat the trek oxen that pulled their wagons. The meat from these animals was, unsurprisingly, almost too tough to chew and the troops experimented with numerous means of preparing it for human consumption including, apparently, frying it in boot polish and axle grease, a concoction that, according to those who tried it, did remarkably little to improve the taste or consistency of the meat.⁶⁴¹ Slowly, but steadily, malnutrition set in among the Eshowe garrison, with men losing weight or developing early symptoms of scurvy. Diseases,

⁶³⁸ "From Colonel Pearson, commanding No. 1 Column, to the Military Secretary...April 9, 1879," 74.

⁶³⁹ Mentioned by Ian Knight in his chapter on Dabulamanzi in *Great Zulu Commanders*, 106.

⁶⁴⁰ "From Colonel Pearson, commanding No. 1 Column, to the Military Secretary...April 9, 1879," 72.

⁶⁴¹ Castle and Knight, *Fearful Hard Times*, 135.

including typhoid and dysentery also started working their way through the garrison, and by April, nine officers and one hundred men were on the sick list, while four officers and twenty-one men were dead from illness. “The large percentage of deaths,” Pearson believed, “were probably due to the want of proper medicines and medical comforts.”⁶⁴² The unending rains did not help and Pearson attributed much of the sickness among his troops to “the constant wet weather, and the overcrowding of the fort, the work having been constructed for a much smaller garrison.”⁶⁴³ Prince Dabulamanzi never studied European siege tactics, but as Pearson’s report indicates, his efforts at Eshowe were enough to make the Coastal Column miserable.

Pearson said he always believed his men could hold Eshowe. Lord Chelmsford was not nearly so sanguine about their chances. In a communication with Pearson on February 2, Chelmsford asked the Colonel a series of questions about his ability to retreat from Eshowe to Natal, telling him if the Zulu attacked, Pearson’s job was to beat them, then immediately retire to the Lower Tugela where he could be more easily fed.⁶⁴⁴ In a letter to Evelyn Wood written the following day, Chelmsford told Wood “Pearson’s force will have to fall back upon the Umsindoosi river.” Revealing again the trust he placed in Wood, Chelmsford confided “[Pearson] cannot remain at Ekowe [sic] many weeks, as his food supply will not last—I do not see any advantage in his holding out there, as to feed him would require a bush fight, or battle of Inyazana [sic], every time supplies were sent, and we have not the number of men sufficient to escort the waggons.”⁶⁴⁵ Depressed after Isandlwana, Chelmsford all but gave up Eshowe as lost, telling Wood, “my idea is that our only chance of making any real impression in Zululand is to

⁶⁴² “From Colonel Pearson, commanding No. 1 Column, to the Military Secretary...April 9, 1879,” 73.

⁶⁴³ “From Colonel Pearson, commanding No. 1 Column, to the Military Secretary...April 9, 1879,” 73.

⁶⁴⁴ “Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel C.K. Pearson, February 2, 1879,” in *Lord Chelmsford’s Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 88-90.

⁶⁴⁵ “Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel H.E. Wood, February 3, 1879,” 90.

reinforce your column to the fullest extent with mounted men.”⁶⁴⁶ Locked in an ever more bitter battle with the press and his superiors in London, Chelmsford did not trust Pearson or, apparently, himself to reverse the course of the war. He did, however, trust Wood, and Wood’s cavalry commander, Sir Redvers Buller. “I wish I saw my way with honour out of this beastly country, and had you as my travelling companion,” Chelmsford signed off his letter to Wood. “Best love to Buller—You two will have to pull me out of the mire.”⁶⁴⁷

With only a single column and conflicting orders as to how many risks he was permitted to take, Wood’s odds for pulling Chelmsford out of the mire were less than stellar. Chelmsford knew this too, and in his correspondence with Colonel Stanley of the War Office did his best to present every minor raid perpetrated by Wood and Buller as a significant military achievement.⁶⁴⁸ Sir Bartle Frere, taking his cues from Chelmsford, did the same in his letters to Michael Hicks-Beach at the Colonial Office, and both branches of government were inundated with reports about how many Zulu homesteads Wood and Buller had burnt and how many Zulu cattle they had rustled.⁶⁴⁹ The actual facts were that these operations were of little more than annoyance to the Zulu and were repaid tit for tat by Prince Mbilini, whose guerillas marauded into territories loyal to the British, pillaging mission stations and setting collaborationist homesteads aflame. Local Africans friendly to the British were terrified they would be next on Mbilini’s list of targets, and Boer settlers in Luneberg and Utrecht, never excited about the war effort, became more reluctant to assist the British than they already were, wanting to keep their

⁶⁴⁶ “Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel H.E. Wood, February 3, 1879,” 91.

⁶⁴⁷ “Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel H.E. Wood, February 3, 1879,” 92.

⁶⁴⁸ “Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel F.A. Stanley, February 8, 1879” in *Lord Chelmsford’s Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 101.

⁶⁴⁹ “Governor the Right Hon. Sir H.B.E. Frere, Bart., G.C.B., G.C.S.I., to the Right Hon. Sir Michael Hicks Beach, Bart., February 10, 1879,” in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 2, ed. John Laband and Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications International Limited, 2000): 64.

men and guns at home in the event the renegade Swazi paid them a visit.⁶⁵⁰ The result of this back and forth terrorism between Wood and Mbilini was dozens of dead and a great deal of fear on both sides of the border, but little in the way of tangible military benefit. For Mbilini, who was fulfilling his obligations to Cetshwayo by keeping Wood busy, that was itself a victory. For Wood, an ambitious officer with high hopes for accolades and promotion, it was degrading work that earned him nothing.

Wood did create a diplomatic coup for the British when he secured the defection of Prince Hamu kaMpande, half-brother of Cetshwayo and a favourite of their late father. Hamu, who thought he should have been king instead of Cetshwayo, spent most of the latter's reign seeking to undermine his brother and improve his own position. He was against not only war with the British, but against even trying to resist their advance, and began negotiations with Wood and various of Wood's proxies in February. Found out by Cetshwayo's agents, Hamu and a few retainers raced across the border into Swaziland, narrowly avoiding capture by Mbilini, who was sent to intercept his party. Chelmsford and Bartle Frere both crowed about the importance of Hamu's defection in letters to Stanley and Hicks-Beach and predicted many Zulu chiefs would follow him. In this they were wrong: Hamu, who reached Wood's camp on March 10, was all but alone in his decision to switch sides and remained the lone chief of any prominence to side with the invaders until well into the war.⁶⁵¹ Still, his changing his allegiance to Wood did give the Colonel's No. 4 Column two hundred reinforcements in the form of his household warriors, a welcome addition given Wood was now the only British force in Zululand.

⁶⁵⁰ Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 2, 52-54.

⁶⁵¹ "Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel F.A. Stanley, March 16, 1879," in *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 122-127.

Shortly after Hamu's arrival, Wood was notified of another military catastrophe, this time at Ntombe Drift in his own area of operations. In fairness to Wood, it should be said he had no immediate control over the events that transpired on the banks of the Ntombe River and was unaware the action had taken place until after the fact. That it happened at all, however, did nothing for Wood's prospects of saving Chelmsford's campaign, or furthering his own career. The details were as follows: on March 5, a supply column from Luneberg abandoned a large portion of its wagons when they broke down in the mud (an article in the *Transvaal Argus* alleged the wagons were sabotaged by the Zulu, which, given Mbilini's predilection for guerilla tactics was just possible).⁶⁵² Two days later, a unit of one hundred six men and officers led by Captain David Moriarty was sent out from Luneberg to retrieve the wagons which had, in the meantime, been robbed several times by Prince Mbilini's Swazi. On March 11, Moriarty tried to move the wagons across the Ntombe River but, with the river swollen with floodwater, found it was impossible to get all of them across. Giving up after getting the first few over, Moriarty pitched camp on both sides of the river, his soldiers divided from one another by the waters of the Ntombe—a risky proposition, but one the Captain apparently saw as necessary for the protection of all the wagons. He did order both forces to laager, but gaps were left between the wagons and Moriarty only posted two sentries that evening, despite one of his wagon drivers recognising Mbilini himself conversing with one of the African porters and trying to warn first Sergeant Anthony Booth and then Moriarty an attack was imminent.⁶⁵³

What David Moriarty was thinking will never be known. It seems almost unrealistic that, in the aftermath of Isandlwana, a British officer could have encamped in Zulu territory without

⁶⁵² "A Detailed Account of the Intombi River Massacre from a letter in the *Transvaal Argus*," in *Zulu 1879* edited by DCF Moodie (Driffield: Oakpast Ltd, 2006): 110.

⁶⁵³ This story is repeated in most secondary scholarship on Ntombe Drift, including all the works of Adrian Greaves. The provenance of the story, however, is unknown; it may be apocryphal.

taking even the most elementary precautions against attack. It was not as though Moriarty were an inexperienced ‘base wallah’ either; he was a forty-two-year-old frontline officer in the 80th Infantry Regiment and a veteran of campaigns in India and South Africa both.⁶⁵⁴ Major Charles Tucker, commanding officer of the 80th and Moriarty’s immediate superior, visited the camp on March 11 and told Moriarty the wagons were too widely spaced for effective defense, yet did not instruct Moriarty to fix this problem. With no orders from Tucker to overrule his own decisions, Captain Moriarty decided his incomplete barricades were good enough—even though those on the south side, where only two wagons remained, could not form an entire wall, let alone a laager. With seventy-one men on the north/left bank of the river under Moriarty, and thirty-five on the south/right bank under Lieutenant Henry Harward, the British company was dangerously divided, with neither portion of the company able to adequately defend itself or come to the aid of the other. The War Office’s *Narrative of Field Operations* castigated Moriarty for his disposition of his forces but could not provide any insight into what was going through his mind.⁶⁵⁵ It may be this really was a case where the white officer *was* just plain stupid. Or it may be that Moriarty, who had not been with Chelmsford during the first invasion, was unwilling, in his colonial arrogance, to credit that the Zulu were any kind of menace to his troops.

Prince Mbilini waMswati was, unfortunately for the British, neither stupid nor (militarily) arrogant. He was also, by personal preference and cultural training, a master of nocturnal ambush, something the British had not yet come up against in Zululand. Indeed, it may have been his belief the Zulu did not attack at night that made Captain Moriarty so lax in his preparations. If so, British soldiers once more paid the price for their officer’s assumption that all Africans fought the same way. Early in the morning of March 12, Mbilini moved into position

⁶⁵⁴ Locke, *Blood on the Painted Mountain*, 105.

⁶⁵⁵ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 69-70.

on the north bank of the Ntombe with a force of eight hundred exiled Swazi warriors and local Zulu levies. Stripping naked and leaving their shields and muskets behind to be as stealthy as possible, the Prince's entourage carried only their spears and clubs as they swam across the Ntombe and slipped through the British lines. The lone sentry Moriarty posted on his side of the river was killed by Swazi infiltrators at 4:30 am, though not before getting off a shot which alerted the men on the south bank, but not, apparently, those on the north whom he was theoretically guarding. At 5:15, having infiltrated to within seventy yards of Moriarty's camp, Mbilini gave the order to charge.⁶⁵⁶ His warriors swarmed over the walls of the laager and killed almost every man inside as they slept, arming themselves with the very rifles Moriarty's wagons were transporting. Captain Moriarty rushed out of his tent naked, brandishing a revolver. His courage greatly exceeding his intelligence, he shouted for the men to rally to him and fired off three rounds, killing three of Mbilini's guerillas before they cut him down where he stood.⁶⁵⁷

Ntombe Drift was not a battle but a butchery; the only way Moriarty could have made things easier for Mbilini was if he had shot his men himself. Josiah Sussens, a wagon driver who survived Mbilini's storming of the camp, recalled the horror he witnessed in an interview with one of the Transvaal papers, saying: "Seeing I was powerless to do anything, having no arms of any kind, I ran down between the oxen, and made for the river, which was about 60 yards off. I found the Zulus shooting and stabbing the people in all directions. The sight was a most horrifying one, and never to be forgotten. I had to dodge about to save myself, and am now

⁶⁵⁶ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 70.

⁶⁵⁷ Greaves states in *Forgotten Battles*, *Crossing the Buffalo*, and *The Zulus at War* that the captain slew three of Mbilini's guerillas before being cut down. He does not provide a footnote. Moriarty's bravery, however, is not in question; Josiah Sussens (see below), a Boer waggoneer had no cause to compliment the late officer, stated that Moriarty's last act was to call out the guard and, after receiving a mortal wound, to shout "Fire away men, I am done!"

surprised to find that I managed to get through at all.”⁶⁵⁸ Sussens and a few others threw themselves into the river to escape the African raiders, only to find the Zulu and Swazi were better swimmers than the British. Sussens got away, but many others were shot or speared by Mbilini’s men who either dove in after the British or stood “on the banks, and at the edge of the river, as thick as thieves, throwing assegais and aiming their guns wherever they saw a head.”⁶⁵⁹ Sussens was saved by the soldiers on the south side of the river who, under Sergeant Anthony Booth, the senior NCO left alive in the camp, were just barely holding together; Booth, who was told by the waggoneer of Mbilini’s visit had been sitting up all night awaiting an attack and was consequently the only person in the camp ready for it when it came. Lieutenant Harward, in command on the south bank, was gone, fleeing on horseback and leaving his men to die.⁶⁶⁰

In an action that would (rightfully) earn him a Victoria Cross recommendation from Sir Garnet Wolseley, Sergeant Booth succeeded in extricating his soldiers from Ntombe Drift, beating a fighting retreat for Luneberg, harried much of the way by two hundred of Mbilini’s warriors, who swam across the river hoping to finish what they started on the north bank.⁶⁶¹ The rest of Mbilini’s troops set about looting the British camp which was stripped of ammunition, livestock, and anything else the renegade Prince felt was worth taking. Of the one hundred six men who accompanied Moriarty to Ntombe Drift, sixty-six were known to be dead. Many more were wounded or missing, their bodies lost to the river. The final body count, tallied up days later, was put at eighty-six British officers and men, and fifteen black African waggoneers; of the one hundred fifty personnel, soldiers and civilians alike, present at the Ntombe, over two-thirds

⁶⁵⁸ Josiah Sussens, “The Intombi River Massacre,” in *Zulu 1879* edited by DCF Moodie (Driffield: Oakpast Ltd, 2006): 113.

⁶⁵⁹ Sussens, “The Intombi River Massacre,” 113.

⁶⁶⁰ Sussens, “The Intombi River Massacre,” 114.
Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 70.

⁶⁶¹ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 70-71.

were dead. The supplies they were sent to retrieve were lost to the British for good, and included more than three hundred cattle, as well as several wagonloads of rifles and ammunition.⁶⁶² Major Tucker, seeking to protect his own reputation and that of Lieutenant Harward tried to cover up the entire business, but could not stop word from leaking out. Wood, when told of what happened, was aghast.⁶⁶³ Mbilini had embarrassed the Colonel again, and this time his victims had not been African converts or collaborators, but British soldiers, men who were not only under Wood's protection, but under his command. In the grand scheme of things, Ntombe Drift was a fairly small defeat, but it ratcheted up Wood's hatred of Mbilini another notch, and in doing so may have contributed to the next calamity that would befall the British, this time at Hlobane.

The other major contributing factor to the coming disaster at Hlobane was Evelyn Wood's hatred of Indigenous Africans. Paternalistic contempt for non-whites was a trait shared by the bulk of the British officer class, but in Wood's case it went deeper than that. Since the Second Anglo-Asante War and his appointment to Sir Garnet Wolseley's expedition to the Asante Empire, Wood had harboured a dislike for and disgust with Native Africans that decades of life would harden rather than erase. As one of Wolseley's Special Service officers, Wood was detailed to manage Britain's Fanté allies, arranging them into an auxiliary battalion that Wolseley dubbed "Wood's Irregulars"—a name Chelmsford reused for the portions of the Native Contingent commanded by Wood in the Xhosa and Zulu conflicts. The Colonel did not see this as much of an honour, and his recollections of the Asante War in his memoirs are less a description of the war and more a diatribe on the presumed racial failings of the Fanté. Wood

⁶⁶² Greaves, *Forgotten Battles of the Zulu War*, 61-62. These casualties differ somewhat from those of the War Office *Narrative*, which, on page 72, places the dead at seventy-nine out of one hundred and six. Either way, Moriarty's casualties were catastrophic.

⁶⁶³ Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 2, 46.

viewed his black troops as useless, saying they would only fight under threat from white officers and even then were prone to running. Wood blamed every Asante victory on the cowardice of the Fanté auxiliaries and insisted the only way to win was to utilise as many white troops as possible.⁶⁶⁴ In attributing all his and Wolseley's difficulties to Fanté perfidy, Wood also denigrated the battle prowess of the Asante Empire, which had crushed a previous British invasion, and gave Wolseley a hard fight this time around; Wood was of the opinion the sun was far more dangerous to British soldiers than the Asante warriors.⁶⁶⁵ Locked into the same colonial mindset that made Chelmsford assume the Xhosa and Zulu would fight the same way, Wood reapplied his descriptions of the Fanté and Asante to the Ninth Frontier War as well, structuring the Mfengu auxiliaries he led as cowards and incompetents and the Xhosa as dangerous only when hidden. Any failures Chelmsford endured in the Xhosa War were the fault of the Mfengu not following orders, any triumphs were due entirely to the white men and officers of the British Army.⁶⁶⁶

This is not to suggest Wood was unable to view Africans as human, or that his attitudes were uniquely monstrous—far from it. In the Asante War Wood threatened a white officer with deportation for unjustly striking his black troops and he struck up an enduring friendship with Fanté chief Essevie, whom Wood saw as personally brave, trustworthy, and intelligent.⁶⁶⁷ On his return to London the Colonel would, at considerable personal expense, purchase a top hat, walking stick, and umbrella for Essevie and ship them all the way to the Gold Coast so his friend would have clothes befitting a Victorian gentleman.⁶⁶⁸ After the Ninth Frontier War, when the

⁶⁶⁴ Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 1, 282-284, 286-287, 291, 299, 301.

⁶⁶⁵ Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 1, 281, 292.

⁶⁶⁶ Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 1, 324, 328-329, 340-341.

⁶⁶⁷ Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 1, 285, 288.

⁶⁶⁸ Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 1, 304.

Boer settlers advocated the extermination of the Xhosa, Wood spoke against them and assigned men to prevent any atrocities from taking place.⁶⁶⁹ His conviction African auxiliaries were cowards by nature were also far from uncommon—it was shared by no less a personage than Sir Garnet Wolseley, Wood’s commanding officer in the Asante War and a man widely regarded as Britain’s best colonial soldier of the nineteenth century. Wolseley told his superiors he needed more white troops because Africans would always fail him, and in his own memoirs harped on the ingrained cowardice and stupidity of the Fanté to a point that might have given even Wood pause.⁶⁷⁰ To Wolseley, the Fanté were not only cravens but liars, and scouting reports from black auxiliaries that were unconfirmed by white eyes could not, and should not be trusted, a notion Wood seems to have absorbed from his former chief.⁶⁷¹ The point, it must be emphasised, is not that Wood was a uniquely bigoted man, but that his bigotry, nurtured in the Asante and Xhosa Wars, and reinforced by comments from patrons like Wolseley, would have harsh consequences for his men in the Anglo-Zulu War. To Wood, Mbilini, as an African, could only be a rogue and a bandit, and his evasion of Wood to date a humiliation. The other facets of Mbilini: the Swazi royal pretender, the Zulu baron, the borderlands guerilla general, eluded Wood, and prevented him seeing the renegade Prince as anything other than a savage. The stage was thus set for Hlobane and the worst British defeat since Isandlwana.

In the last days of March, Lord Chelmsford sent Wood a letter requesting the Colonel stage a distraction to draw off Zulu forces from Eshowe. Pearson’s situation was desperate and Chelmsford meant to march to his relief but was reluctant to do so in the face of the whole Zulu army. Chelmsford wanted Wood to make a demonstration “about the 27th of this month, so that

⁶⁶⁹ Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 1, 336.

⁶⁷⁰ Wolseley, *The Story of a Soldier’s Life* Vol. 2, 292, 301, 306-307, 325, 352.

⁶⁷¹ Wolseley, *The Story of a Soldier’s Life* Vol. 2, 312.

the news of it may reach the neighbourhood of Ekowe [sic] by the 29th I think it might have a good effect.”⁶⁷² Chelmsford told Wood he was going to give similar orders to the officers at the border posts between Natal and Zululand and that he aimed for “demonstrations all along the line.”⁶⁷³ Wood took these instructions from Chelmsford as cause to seize Hlobane mountain, a Zulu fortress he had previously refrained from assaulting because “the position is stronger and more difficult to take than I anticipated.”⁶⁷⁴ This was an understatement: Hlobane was a towering escarpment of stone networked with caves and tunnels that the abaQulusi Zulu, a local, half-Swazi tributary of the larger Zulu Kingdom, used as a refuge for their cattle and non-combatants in times of war. The mountain came to two separate peaks: Hlobane proper and the slightly lower Ntendeka plateau which were joined by a steep, rocky pass that became known after the battle, as Devil’s Nek.⁶⁷⁵ Since early March, Hlobane had been used as a bastion by not only the abaQulusi, but by Prince Mbilini, whose Swazi enjoyed good relations with the abaQulusi and recruited many of their Zulu warriors from among them. Wood had pondered how to take Hlobane since mid-March, and by capturing it now aimed to not only provide Chelmsford with the distraction he required, but to take Mbilini and the abaQulusi out of the war. It was a bold plan, though one that had been insufficiently researched. Thanks to inconsistent testimony, whether Wood did no scouting before Hlobane, or sent out his African scouts and then ignored their reports, is debated by historians, but the answer is, in most respects, irrelevant: what matters is that Wood, either through a refusal to scout or a refusal to believe what his scouts told him,

⁶⁷² “Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel H.E. Wood, March 17, 1879,” in *Lord Chelmsford’s Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 128.

⁶⁷³ “Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel H.E. Wood, March 17, 1879,” 128.

⁶⁷⁴ “Military Secretary to His Excellency the High Commissioner, March 16, 1879,” in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 2, ed. John Laband and Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications International Limited, 2000): 331.

⁶⁷⁵ F. Schermbrucker, “Zhlobane and Kambula,” in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 3, ed. John Laband and Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications International Limited, 2000): 269-270.

was ignorant as to the true geography of Hlobane and to the strength of the forces holding it—or the strength of the forces deployed nearby.

On the 27 of March, Redvers Buller and Cecil Russell, with the bulk of Wood's cavalry and African auxiliaries, marched from their base at Khambula Hill to a position a few miles from Hlobane. As they settled in for the night, the men reported seeing three great fires springing to life atop Hlobane and Ntendeka.⁶⁷⁶ The British would not find out until after the war what those fires were for. Unbeknownst to Wood, a Zulu force more than 15 000 strong had left Ulundi on March 25 and was marching to the relief of the abaQulusi. Cetshwayo's leading counsellor, Chief Mnyamana of the Buthelezi, had charge of the army with Chief Ntshingwayo kaMahole, the victor of Isandlwana, as his *de facto* field commander. Prince Mbilini and the abaQulusi Chief Manyanyoba, aware that Mnyamana and Ntshingwayo were coming to join them, lit the fires to signal to the approaching Zulu host that Wood was finally making his move on Hlobane and their help would be needed on the morrow. Wood, though warned by Chelmsford that he might well find himself confronting the bulk of the Zulu military, had no idea Mnyamana and Ntshingwayo were even in the region.⁶⁷⁷ In his memoirs Wood said he knew the Zulu were gathering at Ulundi, but thought they would not be ready to march until the 27 and would not reach Hlobane until at least the 29, by which time he expected to have already conquered the mountain.⁶⁷⁸ No mention of this specific knowledge is made in Wood's correspondence with Chelmsford, and the line in *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* may well be self-serving distortion. Even accepting it, however, does not shine a good light on Wood's intelligence

⁶⁷⁶ "The Hlobane Massacre by a Correspondent with Colonel Wood's Column," in *Zulu 1879* edited by DCF Moodie (Driffield: Oakpast Ltd, 2006): 120.

⁶⁷⁷ "From Colonel Wood, Commanding No. 4 Column, to the Deputy Adjutant-General, March 30, 1879, (I)" in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 3, edited by John Laband and Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications International Limited, 2000): 241.

⁶⁷⁸ Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 2, 54-55.

gathering. On the eve of Hlobane, Wood did not know where the Zulu army was, while Mbilini, Manyanyoba, and now Mnyamana and Ntshingwayo knew exactly where Wood was.

At three in the morning on March 28, Wood and his staff officers rode out from Khambula to the base of Hlobane where they met up with the scouting force under Redvers Buller and Cecil Russell. Wood's scheme for Hlobane involved a two-pronged, rapid advance by his Volunteer cavalry and African auxiliaries, with Buller leading one wing of the assault up Hlobane proper while Russell led the other up Ntendeka, pushing the Zulu occupants of the mountains before them. If all went according to plan, Buller and Russell would pin the Zulu between them on Devil's Nek, where they could then be eliminated. Wood believed the bulk of the abaQulusi were away from Hlobane, and he only had to deal with Mbilini's immediate followers.⁶⁷⁹ That a cavalry charge up a mountain face went against basic principles of warfare does not seem to have occurred to Wood, or if it did, to have bothered him in the least. In neither his memoirs nor his letters to Chelmsford, did Wood explain why he relied on the cavalry and the auxiliaries to the extent he did at Hlobane—though an earlier section of his autobiography, extolling the accomplishments of Sir Redvers Buller and his Volunteer cavalry against the Xhosa may offer a glimpse into his thinking.⁶⁸⁰ Certainly, Wood thought of Buller as his most accomplished subordinate and the man he could most trust to handle an operation of this import. He may also have believed the members of Prince Mbilini's warband, be they Swazi or Zulu, would be as intimidated by the sight of a cavalry charge as the Xhosa were a year before. Giving Wood his due, it should be remembered that at Isandlwana, Durnford and a mixed force of colonial and Native cavalry held up a much larger Zulu army for quite some time, and that

⁶⁷⁹ Evelyn Wood, "Captain Ronald Campbell's Heroism in the Transvaal," in *Zulu 1879* ed. DCF Moodie (Driffield: Oakpast Ltd, 2006): 131.

⁶⁸⁰ Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 1, 341-342.

Wood, who defended Durnford from the worst of Chelmsford's accusations, may have drawn some inaccurate conclusions from that battle about the efficacy of massed cavalry against the Zulu. Whatever else Wood may have taken away from Isandlwana, he does not appear to have understood the salient lesson of the battle: namely that the Zulu had triumphed there because they understood the terrain and had far better battlefield control than the British did. Wood's plot for Hlobane built around two separate columns, operating in tandem, but isolated from one another physically, played directly into the enemy leadership's hands. The Swazi Prince and the Zulu Chiefs knew Hlobane and Ntendeka far better than Wood did and knew where one another were. Buller and Russell, conversely, would be moving in ignorance of one another, and their lack of detailed knowledge about the terrain of Hlobane proved a crucial weakness.

The Battle of Hlobane began with Sir Redvers Buller's charge up the side of the titular mountain, and at first all went as Wood hoped. Buller's command, comprising four hundred fifty white troops and five hundred Indigenous auxiliaries, bulled their way towards the summit of Hlobane, driving Mbilini's Swazi and Zulu warriors before them. In his after-action report, Buller attributed this initial success to the misty weather which concealed his men until the moment of their attack, allowing him to take Hlobane's defenders by surprise.⁶⁸¹ A firefight near the summit cost Buller two officers and one trooper, before Mbilini's men vanished into the caves pockmarking the mountain. Buller then set about rustling the abaQulusi Zulu's cattle which were left at the top of Hlobane for safe keeping.⁶⁸² Shortly afterwards, Russell reached the summit of Ntendeka (referred to as Lower Hlobane in Buller's report), where he discovered Devil's Nek was nearly impassable, and Wood's plan of pinioning Mbilini between Russell and

⁶⁸¹ "Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Redvers Buller to Deputy Adjutant-General, March 29, 1879," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 3, ed. John Laband and Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications International Limited, 2000): 252.

⁶⁸² "Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Redvers Buller to Deputy Adjutant-General, March 29, 1879," 252.

Buller was not practicable: not only was Devil's Nek partially blocked by a landslide (whether natural or manmade), but the Zulu, rather than allowing themselves to be cornered, disappeared into the caves and tunnels of Ntendeka, just as their compatriots had on Hlobane.⁶⁸³ The blockage of Devil's Nek made communication between Buller and Russell extremely difficult, with the lieutenant-colonels having to navigate a treacherous goat path just to speak to one another.⁶⁸⁴

The communication difficulties experienced by the British forces only became more convoluted as the day wore on. The Volunteer cavalry of the Border Horse, under Commandant Weatherly, were separated from Buller during the ascent of Hlobane and joined up with Wood who, with several of his staff officers, was following Buller's track to the summit of Hlobane.⁶⁸⁵ Near the top, Wood and Weatherly were fired on by Zulu (or more likely, Swazi) snipers hidden in the caves; their efforts to clear the caves cost them several men, including Wood's aide Lieutenant Lloyd and his friend Captain Ronald Campbell. Wood, overcome with grief, descended Hlobane, taking Weatherly's Border Horse with him, and held a funeral service for Lloyd and Campbell.⁶⁸⁶ In doing so, Wood cut himself off from easy contact with Buller and Russell and prevented Weatherly's Border Horse from linking up with Buller on the summit of Hlobane. The division of forces was then made permanent when a force of between 2000 and 3000 abaQulusi Zulu, whom Wood thought safely away from Hlobane, appeared on the plains before Wood. Some of the abaQulusi went after Wood and the Border Horse while others began

⁶⁸³ "Lieutenant-Colonel J.C. Russell to Deputy Adjutant-General, March 29, 1879" in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 3, ed. John Laband and Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications International Limited, 2000): 254.

⁶⁸⁴ "Lieutenant-Colonel J.C. Russell to Deputy Adjutant-General, March 29, 1879" 254.

⁶⁸⁵ "From Captain Dennison to Colonel Buller, March 29, 1879," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 3, ed. John Laband and Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications International Limited, 2000): 254.

⁶⁸⁶ Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 2, 57-59.

scaling Hlobane.⁶⁸⁷ As they did, Mbilini's warriors emerged from the caves and fired on Buller's troops. Recalled Buller, "I found that the Zulus had been largely reinforced and that, owing to the great size of the mountain, and the great difficulty of the path by which we had to retire, there was every probability of the enemy being able to assemble at one end of the fire, and then rush upon us as we retired."⁶⁸⁸ The peak of Hlobane, so easily taken by Buller, now became a deathtrap for the cavalymen and their auxiliaries. Mbilini and Manyanyoba were choking Buller off from Russell and Wood and pressing against his command from all sides. As Buller was trying to come to a decision about what course to take, he "observed a very large number of Zulus advancing in order across the flats on the south-east."⁶⁸⁹ Mnyamana and Ntshingwayo, with 15 000 Zulu warriors, were marching on Hlobane.

Russell's troopers saw the oncoming Zulu army as well. As Mnyamana and Ntshingwayo deployed their men about Hlobane and Ntendeka, threatening to surround the entire mountain with their warriors, Russell sent a runner to Wood asking what action to take. Wood ordered Russell to withdraw to Zunguin Nek; Russell, unclear on where that was, pulled all his men off Ntendeka and fled in the opposite direction from Wood.⁶⁹⁰ After the battle, there would be many recriminations between Wood and Russell, with Wood alleging Russell disobeyed his orders and Russell arguing Wood's orders had been unclear and unhelpful.⁶⁹¹ Russell initially tried to take the cattle his men had stolen along with them but "the Zulu army assumed such very large proportions and moved with such extreme rapidity that at about 10 A.M. I thought it necessary to abandon the cattle, as I did not see how I was to protect the large number of natives who were

⁶⁸⁷ "From Captain Dennison to Colonel Buller, March 29, 1879," 254.

⁶⁸⁸ "Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Redvers Buller to Deputy Adjutant-General, March 29, 1879," 253.

⁶⁸⁹ "Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Redvers Buller to Deputy Adjutant-General, March 29, 1879," 253.

⁶⁹⁰ "Lieutenant-Colonel J.C. Russell to Deputy Adjutant-General, March 29, 1879," 254.

⁶⁹¹ "From Colonel Wood, Commanding No. 4 Column, to the Deputy Adjutant-General, March 30, 1879, (I)" 242.

driving them.”⁶⁹² Russell’s retreat might not have been especially heroic, but it did save the lives of most of his troopers; of the British forces engaged on March 28, it was Russell’s who suffered the fewest casualties. Buller and Weatherly’s men were not nearly as lucky.

After coming down from Hlobane, Weatherly was dispatched to “push round the southern side of Thlabana [sic], as a large impi of the enemy had been seen on that side.”⁶⁹³ Weatherly’s men had not gone much more than a mile and a half when they ran into Mnyamana and Ntshingwayo’s army and were made to retreat, pursued by elements of both the main Zulu army and the local abaQulusi levies. Chased to the edge of a cliff by the Zulu, the majority of the Border Horse met a decidedly horrendous end when the pursuing Zulu rammed into the milling cavalry and shoved them off the cliff face to their deaths on the rocks below. Only a sliver of the Border Horse, led by Captain Dennison, lived to report their fate to Buller and Wood.⁶⁹⁴ Wood, who spent pages eulogising Lloyd and Campbell in his autobiography did not even mention the annihilation of the Border Horse in his chapter on Hlobane. Their demise is likewise absent from his March 30 despatch on Hlobane—a letter in which Wood had the audacity to claim that Hlobane was a victory (he reported it as the “Inhlobana Mountain was successfully assaulted and its summit cleared”) but not the humanity to acknowledge the sacrifice of an entire colonial unit.⁶⁹⁵ Wood himself was, by this point, in retreat to Khambula with his surviving staff officers and those troops who accompanied them. That left Buller alone to cut his way out from Hlobane, with no aid coming from Russell, Wood, or the now deceased Weatherly.

Sir Redvers Buller’s career would have many ups and downs, but the ignominious retreat from Hlobane may have been the future general’s finest moment. Recognising that he could not

⁶⁹² “Lieutenant-Colonel J.C. Russell to Deputy Adjutant-General, March 29, 1879,” 254.

⁶⁹³ “From Captain Dennison to Colonel Buller, March 29, 1879,” 254.

⁶⁹⁴ “From Captain Dennison to Colonel Buller, March 29, 1879,” 255.

⁶⁹⁵ “From Colonel Wood, Commanding No. 4 Column, to the Deputy Adjutant-General, March 30, 1879, (I)” 241.

go back the way he came, Buller led his troops down Devil's Nek to Ntendeka, and from there descended to the plains below. Describing the effort, Buller said "our line of retreat was most difficult, descending onto the plateau of the Lower Hlobana [sic] Mountain, which had earlier in the day been occupied by Colonel Russell, but which he had now left, by a narrow—almost perpendicular—cattle track down a Krantz some 120 feet deep, with scarcely room for three horses abreast, by rocky steps, in many cases only a few inches broad, and with jumps of three, four, and even five feet between them; and having crossed that plateau, we had then the mountain itself, very steep, rocky, and precipitous to descend."⁶⁹⁶ Mbilini's Swazi and the abaQulusi hounded Buller the entire way down, firing on his horsemen and at other points closing with their spears. "In such a descent," Buller stated, "a certain amount of confusion was unavoidable, and this was increased by the Zulus crowding on our rear and flanks, and commencing a heavy fire, which killed a large number of the horses."⁶⁹⁷ With a large portion of Buller's command composed of African auxiliaries, cases of mistaken identity abounded, and when a party of Zulu were mistaken for allied Natives, it resulted in a disaster: "they did cease firing, and in a moment the Zulus were among us. In the struggle that ensued we suffered heavily, losing 1 officer, 15 men, and Mr. Piet Uys, who had got down safely but returned to assist his son and was assegaied."⁶⁹⁸ Buller's cavalry, many of them now dismounted, were chased by the Zulu all the way back to Khambula, losing still more men in the process; as Buller himself confessed, the retreat came very close to being a rout. Buller, in contrast to Wood, acknowledged the deaths of Commandant Weatherly and his men in his report, and the decimation of a group of scouts under Captain Barton, who tried to go to Weatherly's assistance,

⁶⁹⁶ "Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Redvers Buller to Deputy Adjutant-General, March 29, 1879," 253.

⁶⁹⁷ "Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Redvers Buller to Deputy Adjutant-General, March 29, 1879," 253.

⁶⁹⁸ "Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Redvers Buller to Deputy Adjutant-General, March 29, 1879," 253.

“Captain Barton and 18 out of his 32 men, and Commandant Weatherly, with 44 of the 54 Border horse being killed.”⁶⁹⁹

Whether Hlobane was a spirited Zulu defensive effort or a deliberate ambush, with Mbilini drawing Wood’s men up the mountain so the abaQulusi and the army from Ulundi could entrap them, is a matter of some debate among historians. The number of casualties is also a matter of serious dispute, not helped by Wood’s casualty numbers shifting between reports, letters, and memoirs. A figure of two hundred dead, eighty of them British soldiers or white colonial volunteers and the other hundred and twenty of them Native auxiliaries is often given, but this is far from the highest number that has been offered.⁷⁰⁰ One of the Natal papers reported seven officers and four hundred men had been killed, a number that made its way to London and featured in a House of Commons debate.⁷⁰¹ Ron Lock, whose *Blood on the Painted Mountain* is the only full-length study of Hlobane, contends all these numbers are too low. Wood, Lock believes, lowballed the number of colonial volunteers who were killed, and entirely ignored the casualties among the African auxiliaries, knowing his superiors would never check those statistics. Lock’s estimates place Wood’s casualties at one hundred thirty colonial volunteers, one hundred of Prince Hamu’s retinue of warriors, and between two hundred and three hundred of Wood’s Irregulars, the latter number being the hardest to determine as virtually the entire unit deserted later that same day. In total, Lock believes Wood had between four hundred thirty and five hundred thirty men killed, out of a total army of around 3000; a sixth of his force.⁷⁰²

Commandant Schermbrucker of the Kaffrarian Rifles, who fought under Buller at Hlobane, gives

⁶⁹⁹ “Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Redvers Buller to Deputy Adjutant-General, March 29, 1879,” 253.

⁷⁰⁰ Greaves’ report of ten officers, eighty men, and “over 100” of Hamu’s Zulu, given in *Forgotten Battles of the Zulu War*, 67, is typical of the reporting in the secondary scholarship.

⁷⁰¹ “House of Lords, Tuesday, 22nd April, 1879,” in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 3, ed. John Laband and Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications International Limited, 2000): 259.

⁷⁰² Lock, *Blood on the Painted Mountain*, 175.

added weight to Lock's assertions, stating Buller's casualties alone included "125 Europeans and more than 300 Natives and over 300 horses."⁷⁰³ Add in the desertions from the Irregulars, and Wood had somewhat less than 2000 men with him at Khambula as March 28 rolled into the 29.

As to the question of defense versus ambush, that issue cannot easily be settled. As at Isandlwana, however, the evidence leans in favour of ambush.⁷⁰⁴ Indeed, if one accepts Isandlwana was an ambush, it becomes easier to accept Hlobane as one, given one of the key players at Hlobane, Ntshingwayo kaMabhele, was the commanding general at Isandlwana. Examining the two battles together, striking similarities in style emerge. At both battles local Zulu leaders staged distractions that divided the British armies, with Chief Matshana tricking Lord Chelmsford into chasing him into the hills and Prince Mbilini goading Wood into sending Buller and Russell up Hlobane while Manyinyane maneuvered his abaQulusi to keep them there. Both times, the British fell for the Zulu distraction tactics, chasing the decoys while missing the true threat lurking only miles away: Ntshingwayo, who only began moving once the British were too scattered to direct their firepower against his host. Even more interesting is the extent to which the Zulu played to British fears of a protracted guerilla campaign, Matshana and Mbilini acting the part of the raiders who would not stand and fight, encouraging the invaders to deploy for counterinsurgency work only for Ntshingwayo to force them into open battle with his shock troops. It is not hard to see Mbilini's two months of skirmishing with Wood as an elaborate con job, setting Wood up to think he was only dealing with marauders, when in truth he would be facing a frontal assault from Ntshingwayo as soon as Mbilini could separate the Colonel from his

⁷⁰³ Schermbrucker, "Zhlobane and Kambula," 347.

⁷⁰⁴ It should be noted at this juncture that Knight and Lock, on opposite sides of the debate on whether Isandlwana was an ambush, have both stated that Hlobane was, Lock in *Blood on the Painted Mountain* and Knight in his chapter on Mbilini in *Great Zulu Commanders*. Commandant Schermbrucker, a veteran of Hlobane, also believed it was an ambush and said so in his article for the *South African Catholic Magazine*.

cavalry. Wood's seemingly ludicrous decision to order a cavalry charge up a mountain becomes at least mildly less ridiculous when one considers he only expected to be facing night-raiding insurgents. There was nothing in the Colonel's experience that prepared him for the notion that one kind of African enemy might suddenly metamorphosis into another. If Hlobane was a deliberate trap, it was one that took full advantage of the British belief that Africans could only fight one way, with Mbilini's bush fighters, Manyanyoba's militia, and Ntshingwayo's heavy infantry seamlessly melding into a combined arms force that neither Evelyn Wood nor, perhaps, any other British officer of the day was emotionally or mentally equipped to expect.

The question of ambush aside, what is obvious is that at Hlobane, as at Isandlwana, the Zulu exercised far tighter control over the battlefield than the British did. Wood, Weatherly, Russell and Buller fought separate battles, split off from one another by the terrain, each officer having to act on his own for lack of information about the others. Mbilini, Manyanyoba, and Mnyamana and Ntshingwayo, in the meantime, were working in tandem, with the Swazi Prince holding the mountain, the abaQulusi Chief severing Buller and Weatherly's lines of retreat, and the Zulu generals fanning out to envelop the entire theatre of operations, securing Hlobane and nearly swallowing Wood's whole expeditionary force in the process. The Zulu also did all they could to magnify the communication difficulties between the whites: Mbilini and the geography of Hlobane separating Buller from Russell, Manyanyoba keeping Weatherly and Wood from Buller, and Ntshingwayo threatening to choke off all the forces at Hlobane from those at Khambula. This meant once Wood lost contact with his subordinates he had no ability to recover it. The links between him and his cavalry officers were blocked by the size of the Zulu army, which used its numerical advantage to not only overwhelm the British in individual clashes, but to assert authority over the whole battlefield. Aware of the threat British firearms posed to them,

the Zulu leadership used their manpower and knowledge of the terrain as an antidote, keeping Wood's commands apart and unable to concentrate their guns against one target. As the British high command disintegrated, the Zulu leaders kept a firm grip on the details of the battle and in doing so, routed an enemy that thought it could easily drive them from their greatest fortress.

On March 29, it was the turn of the Zulu to try to drive Wood from his fortress. It would not be an easy task. Wood had been camped at Khambula for weeks and had transformed the scenic hilltop into a formidable bastion. Two separate laagers had been constructed, one for the infantrymen and one for the livestock, the latter garrisoned by a company of the 13th Light Infantry, while the remainder of the 13th and Wood's own regiment, the 90th Light Infantry, held the former. An artillery redoubt was erected and equipped with two of the Royal Artillery's 7-pounder guns; there was room in the redoubt for Wood and his staff and for two more infantry companies to be stationed to protect the cannons. Four more 7-pounders were on standby between the redoubt and the main laager, ready to be redeployed at a moment's notice.⁷⁰⁵ How many men Wood had to defend Khambula is rather hazy, as are his numbers for the campaign as a whole: secondary historians, privileging different sources have put Wood's total manpower between 2000 and 3000 before Hlobane, and between 1500 and 2000 at Khambula.

Chelmsford's aide, William Molyneux, placed Wood's strength at 2278 men during the initial invasion of Zululand, comprising the 90th Light Infantry, the 1/13th Light Infantry, six 7-pounder guns in a Royal Artillery battery, a battalion of Wood's Irregulars, and Buller's Frontier Light Horse. Over the course of February and March, Wood's resources fluctuated: the Frontier Light Horse's term of service expired, a second battalion of Wood's Irregulars was recruited, and no fewer than eight units of Volunteer cavalry were hired to replace the departed members of the

⁷⁰⁵ Schermbrucker, "Zhlobane and Kambula," 278-279; Schermbrucker, "Zhlobane and Kambula," 66.

Frontier Light Horse. Estimates of the size of the irregular units vary too; Wood's Irregulars, for instance, are given as numbering anywhere from eight hundred to 1000 men (Wood himself put their number at 2000 in his memoirs, but as previously demonstrated, Wood is not particularly trustworthy on this topic). Still, by adding the more conservative estimates for the strength of these units to the initial figure of 2278, and throwing in Prince Hamu's two hundred warriors, one comes up with an army well in excess of 3000 strong prior to the engagement at Hlobane.

Hlobane cut the heart out of the colonial Volunteers, killed half of Prince Hamu's warriors, and prompted Wood's Irregulars to desert almost to a man. Ron Lock puts Wood's surviving army at Khambula at 1850 men: 1000 Imperial infantry, six hundred fifty colonials, and two hundred wagon drivers and livestock handlers, hastily armed from Wood's stores of spare rifles.⁷⁰⁶ Commandant Schermbrucker of the Kaffrarian Rifles gives a similar number, but with the proportions inverted: Schermbrucker guessed there were 1000 Volunteer cavalry, six hundred British regulars, and two hundred camp followers in Wood's lines, totalling 1800 men in all.⁷⁰⁷ The War Office *Narrative* assessed Wood's strength at 1998 men.⁷⁰⁸ Historian Adrian Greaves, a leading expert on the Anglo-Zulu War puts the total slightly higher, at 2086 men.⁷⁰⁹ For simplicity's sake, the defenders of Khambula will be counted as roughly 2000 in number, with the stipulation that a sizeable portion of that 2000 may well have been impromptu "volunteers" from among the teamsters, baggage boys, and cattle herders. Certain that Mnyamana and Ntshingwayo would strike at him on March 29, Wood spent the night of the 28 reinforcing his defenses: shelter trenches were dug within the main laager and ramparts of sod

⁷⁰⁶ Lock, *Blood on the Painted Mountain*, 184.

⁷⁰⁷ Schermbrucker, "Zhlobane and Kambula," 279.

⁷⁰⁸ Rothwell, *Narrative of Operations*, 81.

⁷⁰⁹ Greaves, *Forgotten Battles of the Zulu War*, 2086.

had been built under the wagons, their outer walls lined with mealie bags.⁷¹⁰ Wood knew the Zulu had been repulsed from Rorke's Drift and had not yet taken Eshowe. He had heard stories from Boer leaders about how their laagers fended off the Zulu in the past. Now he was banking on the fortifications at Khambula to save his army from a host of 15 000; for Evelyn Wood and the men of the Number 4 Column, it was do or die time.

Mnyamana and Ntshingwayo began their advance on Khambula at 11:00 the morning of March 29. Wood gave the order to strike the tents so they would not be damaged in the coming battle, and in doing so, gained the British their first advantage of the day. The leading regiments on the Zulu right, seeing the British tents disappear, concluded the invaders were about to retreat and hurried to catch them, outdistancing the rest of the host.⁷¹¹ Sir Redvers Buller, spotting an opportunity to interfere with Zulu command and control, asked Wood's permission to lead a sortie with his surviving horsemen aiming to provoke the Zulu right into an early charge. In his memoirs the ordinarily egotistical Wood granted Buller full honours for this plan, summarising: "When still 3 miles distant, 5000 men moved round to our Left and attacked the side held by the 90th Light Infantry, prior to the remainder of the Zulu Army coming into action. This fortunate circumstance was due to Colonel Buller's skilled tactical handling of the mounted men, whom he took out and dismounted half a mile from the Zulus. The Umbonambi regiment suffered a galling fire for some time, and then, losing patience, rushed forward to attack, when the horsemen, remounting, retired 400 yards, and, repeating their tactics, eventually brought on a determined attack from the Zulu right flank."⁷¹² Attacking by themselves, with no support from the distant left and centre of the army, the Zulu right was stopped dead by heavy rifle fire from the British

⁷¹⁰ Schermbrucker, "Zhlobane and Kambula," 280.

⁷¹¹ Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 2, 71.

⁷¹² Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 2, 67.

fortifications. As Wood described it “the Umbonambi followed up the horsemen until they were within 300 yards of the Laager, when their further advance was checked by the accurate firing of the 90th Light Infantry, greatly assisted by the enfilading fire poured in from the northern face of the Redoubt.”⁷¹³ By inducing the Zulu right into this premature assault, Wood and Buller disrupted not only Zulu discipline, but Ntshingwayo’s battle plan which must have called for simultaneous strikes on the right, left, and centre of the British position. Outnumbered somewhere between eight and ten to one, Wood needed the Zulu to attack him piecemeal, that he might deal with each part of their army as it came to him, rather than having to fend off the entire host at once.

Ntshingwayo still had control over his left and centre, and as the Zulu right found itself deadlocked against the 90th Light Infantry, the other regiments of the Zulu army swung into action. Braving the fire of the British artillery, which started barraging them from a range of 2500 yards, the Zulu surrounded Khambula from every side and closed the gap between themselves and the British, using depressions in the ground and other natural features of the terrain to avoid cannon fire and riflery alike. Schermbrucker paid tribute to the bravery of the Zulu, saying “nothing could excel the dash, *élan*, and fearlessness of the enemy.”⁷¹⁴ Zulu musketry, often poor, was notably better at Khambula than in any other engagement of the war, and Zulu snipers, operating from crevices in the hillside and behind Wood’s own refuse dumps took a steady toll on the British defenders. The sharpshooters behind the refuse dumps proved especially irritating to Wood, and “induced [him] to withdraw a company of the 13th, posted at the right rear of the cattle Laager, although the front was held by another half company for some

⁷¹³ Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 2, 67.

⁷¹⁴ Schermbrucker, “Zhlobane and Kambula,” 282.

time longer.”⁷¹⁵ This is the closest Wood, who authored his memoirs in exultation of his own genius, comes to acknowledging how dangerous the fighting at Khambula was. The beating he took at Hlobane shook Wood, and he knew if word of what happened got out, it would tarnish his sterling reputation. That was why his report on Hlobane took pains to pretend away the defeat and shave off casualties. It was also why he tried to obfuscate what happened next at Khambula.

At quarter past two the Zulu seized the cattle laager, and routed the men of the 13th Wood assigned to hold it. Schermbrucker could scarcely believe it: “Literally mowed down by the fire from the fort...by the small arm fire from the cattle laager and by the fire of two companies of the 13th Regiment, maneuvering outside the fort and laager, these splendid Zulu warriors came on again and again right up to the trenches of the redoubt on one side and to the enclosure of the cattle laager on the other, with such irresistible impetuosity that they actually succeeded in taking possession of several wagons, forcing the troops defending the cattle laager to retire.”⁷¹⁶ A correspondent for one of the Natal papers, writing on the same incident said, “The most desperate attempt was made on the cattle kraal; the troops defending it had to retire, and the Zulu took possession of several wagons, from which they opened fire on the laager at short range, and made an attempt to advance on the wagons.”⁷¹⁷ Lieutenant Alfred Blaine, in a letter to his cousin said “We all admire the pluck of the Zulus. I wish you could have seen it. Under tremendous fire they never wavered, but came straight at us. They got into the cattle kraal, which was only twenty yards outside the laager. A company of soldiers had to retire from there.”⁷¹⁸ With the

⁷¹⁵ Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 2, 68.

⁷¹⁶ Schermbrucker, “Zhlobane and Kambula,” 282.

⁷¹⁷ “The Hlobane Massacre by a Correspondent with Colonel Wood’s Column,” 123.

⁷¹⁸ “Hlobane and Kambula by Lieut. Alfred Blaine from a Letter to his Cousin,” in *Zulu 1879* ed. DCF Moodie (Driffield: Oakpast Ltd, 2006): 147.

cattle laager fallen, the Zulu massed within it and using the cattle laager as a springboard, launched two separate assaults on the main laager, briefly penetrating its defenses.

For the rest of his life, Wood denied the loss of the cattle laager and the very existence of a Zulu attack on the main laager. This results in Wood's accounting being deeply confusing to read at points. He describes how his friend Major Hackett lost both eyes and the bridge of his nose while leading a bayonet charge to drive the Zulu back into the ravine but does not say from where the Zulu were being driven.⁷¹⁹ In the version of events published in his memoirs Wood states the Zulu had to be pushed back into the ravine to prevent them massing in the ravine, a claim that makes no sense whatsoever.⁷²⁰ Testimony from other officers and the Natal papers clarifies the issue: Hackett's charge was made not into the ravine, but against the Zulu who were invading the main laager and, having successfully repelled them, continued on towards the cattle laager, as part of Wood's effort to retake it—an effort that also included a company of the 13th Light Infantry, which with bayonets fixed, drove into the Zulu force attacking the southwest corner of the laager. Schermbrucker and the Kaffrarian Rifles witnessed this clash and gave testament to its importance: “almost simultaneously with [Hackett's] sortie upon the Zulus at the cattle laager a similar occurrence happened at the south-western corner of the cavalry laager, unflinchingly and desperately held by the Kaffrarian Riflemen. A dense mass of Zulus with an impetuous rush came up almost near enough to grasp the guns of the defenders, when a company of the 13th Regiment sallied forth and drove them back at the point of the bayonet. This was about 3pm.”⁷²¹

⁷¹⁹ “From Colonel Wood, Commanding No. 4 Column, to the Deputy Adjutant-General, March 30, 1879 (II),” in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 3, edited by John Laband and Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications International Limited, 2000): 243.

⁷²⁰ Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 2, 68-70.

⁷²¹ Schermbrucker, “Zhlobane and Kambula,” 283.

The action by the company of the 13th was also witnessed by one of the reporters with Wood's column, who, like Schermbrucker, closely compared the incident to Hackett's sortie. "The Zulus," his paper reported, "made a similar attempt on the south-west corner of the laager, and were driven back at the point of the bayonet by a company of the 1-13th. Both these sorties were most gallant affairs, and many acts of heroism were performed by both officers and men, which no doubt will be mentioned in the despatches."⁷²² The paper was wrong on that last point: Wood spoke at some length of Major Hackett's bravery, and the gruesomeness of his wounding (which proved mortal), but the charge by the company of the 13th he wrote off in his report and memoirs both as a minor action, meant only to stop the Zulu from rustling cattle.⁷²³ The Zulu threat to the laager, in Wood's portrayal of the battle, never happened, and so a charge could not have been made to stop it. It was a shameful coverup of the extraordinary courage and sacrifice shown by not only Hackett, but by all the men of those companies of the 90th and the 13th, in one of the bloodiest actions of the Battle of Khambula. Hackett's two companies, after retaking the cattle laager, made the error of attempting to continue their charge into the ravine where they were shot to pieces by enfilading Zulu fire from the refuse dump, and from the huts that once housed Wood's Irregulars, and which were occupied by Zulu marksmen early in the battle. Not only Hackett, but forty-four of his officers and men were wounded or killed by Zulu musketry, and Wood was obliged to order their recall before both companies were entirely cut apart.⁷²⁴ Wrote one reporter of the scene "many of our troops were shot in the back by the enemy in the rear while firing at those in front, for the bullets whizzed across the camp like a perfect

⁷²² "The Hlobane Massacre by a Correspondent with Colonel Wood's Column," 123.

⁷²³ "From Colonel Wood, Commanding No. 4 Column, to the Deputy Adjutant-General, March 30, 1879 (II)," 243. Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 2, 70.

⁷²⁴ Lock, *Blood on the Painted Mountain*, 196.

hailstorm.”⁷²⁵ Dead and wounded officers and men piled up not only at the ravine, but within the main laager, and there were even casualties in the artillery redoubt, where Lieutenant Nicholson, manning the 7-pounders, was mortally wounded by a Zulu musket.⁷²⁶

Hackett’s charge and the Zulu retreat from the cattle laager did not mark the end of the battle, though anyone relying solely on Wood’s testimony might be forgiven for believing otherwise. Wood’s report ignored the next two and half hours of fighting, while in his memoirs he went even further and claimed Hackett singlehandedly ended the Zulu menace to Khambula.⁷²⁷ This was a gross misstatement, though one that can perhaps be attributed to Wood’s affection for his late friend, rather than deliberate malfeasance. The Zulu made multiple additional attempts to storm Khambula and there were many other close shaves. “Then followed,” said Schermbrucker, “with short intervals between each other, a series of fierce attacks and stern repulses for two hours; at one time the Zulus coming almost within grasp of the artillery horses, kept outside the fort in the open, and it was not until about 5 p.m. that it could be distinctly perceived that the attack was slackening.”⁷²⁸ Of the Zulu attempt to capture the artillery, Wood said next to nothing in his report, writing only “the horses of the other four guns, under Lieuts. Bigge and Slade were sent inside the laager when the Zulus came within 100 yards of them, but these officers with their men and Major Tremlett R.A., to all of whom great credit is due, remained in the open the whole of the engagement.”⁷²⁹ Just as the sortie by the 13th was meant to stop cattle rustlers, so too was the Zulu’s near seizure of his artillery a brief withdrawal

⁷²⁵ “The Hlobane Massacre by a Correspondent with Colonel Wood’s Column,” 123.

⁷²⁶ Schermbrucker, “Zhlobane and Kambula,” 282.

⁷²⁷ Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 2, 70.

⁷²⁸ Schermbrucker, “Zhlobane and Kambula,” 283.

⁷²⁹ “From Colonel Wood, Commanding No. 4 Column, to the Deputy Adjutant-General, March 30, 1879 (II),” 243.

into the laager; when Wood could not outright deny a mishap had taken place, he did all he could to diminish it.

The Zulu attack on Khambula finally came to an end at 5:30 pm. Sir Redvers Buller at last put a stop to the Zulu snipers in the refuse dumps, ordering his men to fire through the rubbish heaps instead of around them.⁷³⁰ The last Zulu presence within Khambula proper removed the battle wound down and the Zulu army, spent of energy, started to retreat. As the Zulu withdrew from the vicinity of the hilltop, Wood unleashed Sir Redvers Buller, Cecil Russell, and the rest of his still-living cavalry. Buller and Russell were eager for revenge after the grinding they took at Hlobane, and they gave no quarter in their pursuit of the departing Zulu, cutting down any who tried to surrender. In total the Zulu left around 1000 dead on the ground at Khambula, though many of those on the British side inflated those figures to 2000 or even 3000.⁷³¹ The Zulu host dispersed on its way back to Ulundi, having suffered their first defeat since the Battle of the Nyezane, three months earlier. Wood penned a report in which he gloated about his glorious victory, a theme he elaborated on at length in his memoirs. If *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* is to be believed, Khambula was a crushing, one-sided British triumph that singlehandedly broke the back of the Zulu Army.⁷³² Wood was hardly alone in this sentiment; Schermbrucker too claimed that, after Khambula, the Zulu were never the same kind of threat they had been before.⁷³³ These assertions are sometimes taken at face value, and not a few monographs turn Sir Evelyn Wood into the hero of the Anglo-Zulu War, finding in a Victoria Cross winner a protagonist far worthier of than the buffoonish Lord Chelmsford.

⁷³⁰ Greaves, *Forgotten Battles of the Zulu War*, 103.

⁷³¹ Greaves, Knight, and Lock all accept the figure of around 1000.

⁷³² Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 2, 71.

⁷³³ Schermbrucker, "Zhlobane and Kambula," 284.

The problem is Khambula was hardly the signal achievement Wood and other veterans wanted it to be. Months of hard-fought battles awaited the British. Just days after Khambula, Lord Chelmsford spent hours routing a Zulu army from Gingindhlovu near Eshowe, and the climactic Battle of Ulundi, fought in July of that year, saw another 20 000 Zulu take the field once more under the leadership of Chief Ntshingwayo. The Zulu lost the Battle of Khambula but they were not the beaten people Wood made them out to be, and they were still able to give the British more than a few scares in the months ahead. That men like Schermbrucker, who narrowly evaded death at Hlobane would make Khambula out to be more than it was is understandable; for Evelyn Wood to do it was the act of a careerist determined to protect his reputation at all costs. In this Wood succeeded; reports of his bungling at Hlobane were vastly outstripped by reports of his magnificent triumph at Khambula, and the news of both arrived in London at the same time, sparing him the criticism Chelmsford accrued after Isandlwana. Wood did not celebrate Khambula merely out of arrogance or to burnish his own star, but to hide what occurred at Hlobane, whitewashing his failure beneath a patina of victory.

That was why Khambula had to not only be a success, but an unrivalled success, unmarred by any risk of defeat. It was on this point that Wood and subordinates like Schermbrucker parted ways. Wood's reports, and the articles and memoirs he wrote years later, insisted there was never any danger of his army being beaten at Khambula. Schermbrucker, and others who served with Wood, were far more candid, describing the struggle for the cattle laager and the Zulu assault on the main laager as the desperate affairs they truly were. Reading their accounts, it is clear the Zulu could have, and nearly did, take Khambula from Wood, and that it may well be that only the disorder of their initial attack prevented Khambula from being a repeat of Isandlwana. Wood is often given credit for sending out Buller to provoke the Zulu into an

early charge, yet the converse—that the junior officers of Ntshingwayo’s right wing signally failed their commanding general—is rarely stated. Inflamed by the belief the British were about to run, the leading elements of the Zulu right had already broken with the rest of the army, and it was their incautious advance that gave Wood the idea to use Buller as a lure. Ntshingwayo quickly got control over his men again, but the damage was done; rather than a single great attack on all sides of the laager, Ntshingwayo had to settle for a two-pronged strike against the right and the centre, his own right wing having stalled before Wood’s left. Even then, Ntshingwayo’s warriors, afire with bravery and ably led by their general, took the cattle laager, pierced the walls of the main laager, and came within a hairsbreadth of taking Wood’s artillery. Khambula was not the walkover Wood said it was, but a very near-run thing, with Wood and Ntshingwayo trading ploy for ploy until after a four-and-a-half-hour battle the former won out.

Wood’s actions after the battle reflect this. Rather than pursuing the Zulu any farther, he remained in Khambula, and, after a few days passed, withdrew to Natal. His army was exhausted, supplies of almost everything were low, and his casualties too great to risk any further adventuring. Different sources again give differing figures for the casualties at Khambula, but all agree around a hundred men were killed or wounded, with much of the disagreement surrounding the proportion of dead to maimed. Unlike at Hlobane, Evelyn Wood’s casual relationship with the truth was not the sole cause of the confusion; a high proportion of those hurt at Khambula died of their injuries over the subsequent weeks and months which may well have complicated the counts of those attempting to work out the death toll. However, one balances the dead and the injured, what should be obvious is that Number 4 Column absorbed utterly catastrophic losses. Death, desertion, and crippling wounds reduced Wood’s command from more than 3000 able-bodied men to fewer than 1900. Over two days of fighting, Wood lost

more than a third of his force to Zulu bullets and spears, and those who were left alive were in no shape to prosecute the war any further. That Khambula was a triumph for Evelyn Wood is not in dispute, but the nature of that triumph should be. Wood did not crush the Zulu at Khambula, or even decisively beat them. He won a Pyrrhic victory and spent the rest of his life covering it up.

Evelyn Wood could have, and should have, performed better. He was a decorated soldier and a respected officer with years of experience in Africa. The Second Anglo-Asante War gave him ample opportunity to see a first-rate African military power in action, and he was aware, even before Isandlwana, that British arms could be surpassed by Indigenous African enemies. The Ninth Frontier War only added to Wood's resume of African warfare and showed him not all African armies fought the same way; having experienced both the guerilla tactics of the Xhosa tribes and the conventional gunpowder warfare of the Asante Empire, Wood had a deep reservoir of knowledge he could have drawn on when determining how to best battle the Zulu. Yet Wood's bigotry blinded him, not only to the competency of the Zulu, but to the lessons he might have taken from the Asante and Xhosa Wars. Prone to blaming black auxiliaries for every stumble made by British armies, Wood went into Hlobane without bothering to scout, trusting that a cavalry charge by white Europeans would put any African army on the run—even an army that had already twice defeated the British. Wood's arrogance cost him a third of his column and left him in the fight of his life at Khambula, where he emerged victorious only by the skin of his teeth. Wood's March campaign was cataclysmic for his troops and it was Wood's assumption, even after all he had seen in the Asante War, and all that had transpired at Isandlwana, that the Zulu were not a danger to him that was to blame.

Wood was not alone in these blunders. Sir Redvers Buller and Cecil Russell share the blame for Hlobane with him, as does Lord Chelmsford. Buller and Russell could have objected

to Wood's plan; Buller in particular was a friend of Wood's, and one of the few officers Wood reliably listened to. Neither of them did, however, indicating they both believed Wood had the right idea in ordering a mounted charge uphill, into the teeth of Mbilini's defenses. Chelmsford, for his part, gave Wood no strategic or tactical guidance, instead begging Wood (and Buller) to save his reputation for him. Pressure from Chelmsford and a belief he had to draw off as many Zulu as possible so Chelmsford's march to Eshowe could proceed unhindered, joined with Wood's bigoted assumptions about Zulu capabilities and the very real skills of Mbilini and Ntshingwayo to produce the catastrophe at Hlobane. Flush with victory from Isandlwana and led by chiefs who were every bit as experienced as their British counterparts, the Zulu military was too effective a fighting force to be safely underestimated. Wood's dismissal of what the Zulu could do left him vulnerable to being lured into an ambush, and that is precisely what Mbilini did, encouraging Wood, Buller, and Russell in their suicidal assault on Hlobane, then letting the abaQulusi and Ntshingwayo close the jaws of the trap. At Hlobane, Wood was not only outnumbered, but tactically overmatched, with the combination of Prince Mbilini, Chief Ntshingwayo, and abaQulusi potentate Manyanyoba, proving more than he could handle. The following day at Khambula it was a breakdown in Zulu discipline as much as any decisions made by Wood that prevented this formidable alliance of Zulu leaders from finishing the job.

Throughout February and March of 1879, the Zulu demonstrated that Isandlwana was not a fluke. Charles Pearson expected the Zulu to prove incompetent in maintaining a siege, then had to endure a seventy-two-day blockade of his fortress ably run by Prince Dabulamanzi. David Moriarty thought he could camp in Zulu territory without taking any proper defensive measures, and he and the majority of his command were eviscerated by Mbilini. Wood anticipated Hlobane would easily fall and endured the worst defeat of his career, then only narrowly escaped

Khambula with his life. When one discards Wood's lies about Khambula and examines the primary evidence on its own merits one fact looms large: for the two months after Isandlwana, the Zulu military thoroughly outfought and out-strategized the British Army.

*

Defeat is a painful thing for any army, and doubly so for a colonial force outfought by the locals it despises. In the months after the Little Bighorn and Isandlwana the American and British armies tried but failed to come to terms with what had happened to them, and as a product of that failure, found only further humiliation. Phil Sheridan and Lord Chelmsford, the men in charge of both wars, abdicated their responsibilities to their men, leaving the direction of the conflict in the hands of their subordinates. Neither man contributed anything to the war effort, beyond hectoring their underlings into rash moves that had more to do with fighting bad press than battling the Lakota and Cheyenne or the Zulu. In a sense, Sheridan and Chelmsford were both prisoners of their preconceived notions about Indigenous peoples and of the ramifications of those notions. Any reassessment of Lakota and Cheyenne or Zulu capabilities would require an admission that colonial reasoning could not explain everything there was to know about the "primitives" they were warring with, and that was not an acceptable outcome.

With their commanders out of the picture, George Crook, Alfred Terry, John Gibbon, Charles Pearson, David Moriarty, and Evelyn Wood had to fight the Great Sioux War and the Anglo-Zulu War to the best of their own abilities, with no strategic instructions from the men who were supposed to be issuing them. Each field officer thus had to examine the evidence available to them on their enemies and determine for themselves how to proceed. In the American case, Terry, Gibbon, and Crook understood Sheridan's plans were built atop faulty data, but they did not yet have any ideas of their own about what needed to change. Fearful of

ending up like Custer, Terry (and Gibbon) and Crook took full advantage of Sheridan's offer of reinforcements, building armies that were too large to be overwhelmed, but also too unwieldy to be sustained in the field without an enormous logistical train. Terry and Gibbon, reliant on their wagons, suffered few casualties but found no Native Americans; Crook, cut loose from his wagons, found Crazy Horse, but gutted his expedition in the process. In South Africa, Pearson, Moriarty, and Wood did not have the Americans' sense that something was wrong with the original plan and continued to operate on the premise that the Zulu were no different from the Xhosa. This thinking saw Pearson bottled up at Eshowe, Moriarty liquidated at Ntombe Drift, and Wood trounced at Hlobane. The parallels between Crook and Wood become especially fascinating here, as both officers dismantled their own armies through poor planning and underestimation of the risks at hand then tried to save their careers by lying about the results. Crook's reports turned the defeat at Slim Buttes into a victory, while Wood downplayed his loss at Hlobane and exaggerated Khambula into the most important triumph of the war. These obfuscations of the facts have tainted much of the historiography on both Slim Buttes and Khambula, and the degree to which Crook and Wood are still taken at their word is a tribute to both men's talents as spin-doctors, if not as commanders.

While Crook, Wood, and other Anglo-American officers were embarrassing themselves, Indigenous war-leaders like Crazy Horse, Dabulamanzi, Mbilini, and Ntshingwayo turned in some of their best performances of the war. At Slim Buttes Crazy Horse rescued American Horse's band from captivity and routed an army that was over twice the size of his own, cementing his place as one of the best light cavalry generals ever produced on the North American continent. In Zululand, Dabulamanzi showed that he could maintain a siege as well as any European, while Mbilini wiped out Moriarty at Ntombe Drift and baited Wood into

Ntshingwayo's path at Hlobane. Even the one undeniable Indigenous defeat at Khambula, still showcased Ntshingwayo's talents as a general. Despite a temporary loss of control at the start of the battle, his warriors punctured Wood's fortifications and nearly took Khambula several times over; it is very possible that had a couple of junior officers kept a tighter rein on their men, Ntshingwayo kaMahole, rather than Evelyn Wood, would have come out of Khambula the winner. The Lakota and Cheyenne and the Zulu confirmed they were as brave, as tactically sophisticated, and as well-led as any American or British army. For the colonisers to win their wars they were going to have to accept that fact and incorporate it into a winning strategy.

Chapter 7: Lessons Learned?

That the United States and Great Britain would ultimately prove victorious in the Great Sioux and Anglo-Zulu Wars is often taken for granted by historians. Just as the defeats of the Little Bighorn and Isandlwana are written off as flukes brought about by incompetence on the part of the officers in command, the eventual successful conclusion to both wars is taken as no more than the white man's due. The question of how the Americans and the British finally bested their indigenous adversaries is rarely asked, and in most studies of the conflicts occupies a secondary, if not tertiary place in the work. The nature of the final conquest of the Lakota and the Zulu is not widely seen as being worthy of detailed examination; it is portrayed as inevitable.

To an extent, this view is understandable. The American Republic and the British Empire possessed resources on a scale that neither the Lakota-Cheyenne confederation nor the Zulu monarchy could match. As long as the American and British governments remained committed to war, and continued to feed troops to Sheridan and Chelmsford, they stood a good chance of winning through simple attrition if nothing else. To the colonial powers, the losses of the Little Bighorn and Isandlwana, while distressing and rightly regarded as catastrophic reverses, were far from disabling to their military efforts. Both had immense reserves of manpower that could be drawn upon, while for the Native Americans and the Zulu alike, every man lost was irreplaceable. An argument can indeed be made that it was through sheer weight of numbers, rather than superior technology, better organization, or modern tactical and strategic thinking, that the two imperial projects subdued their native enemies.

However, such an analysis would ignore the fact that, despite their manifest advantages, the Americans and the British were repeatedly bested by their resource-poor opponents. The Lakota and Cheyenne halted Crook at the Rosebud, slaughtered Custer at the Little Bighorn, and

again drove Crook from the field at Slim Buttes. The Zulu destroyed Durnford and Pulleine at Isandlwana, wiped out Moriarty's command at Ntombe Drift and massacred Wood's advance force at Hlobane. Even the one undeniable British triumph at Khambula was nothing spectacular, while the Americans lacked any definitive victories over the hostiles, with only Crook's distortions about the Powder River and Slim Buttes fights to alleviate their sense of complete failure. The battles to this point may well have been exhausting to Sitting Bull and Cetshwayo's forces, yet battlefield victories had eluded Sheridan and Chelmsford both.

That was all about to change. The American Army would decisively beat the Lakota and Cheyenne at Cedar Creek, at Dull Knife's camp, at Wolf Mountain, and finally at Lame Deer's camp. British troops would likewise recover, smashing the Zulu at Gingindhlovu, reinvading Zululand and finally shattering the Zulu regiments at Cetshwayo's Ulundi homestead. These developments were not only the result of increased wear and tear on the Lakota-Cheyenne and Zulu forces—though these factors cannot, should not, and will not be overlooked—but of a complete tactical and strategic reorganization on the part of the American and British war efforts. Prior to, respectively, Cedar Creek and Gingindhlovu, both wars went against the colonists. After those battles, neither power was beaten again. The question remains: what changed?

The answer in the British case is comparatively simple: Lord Chelmsford, faced with an embarrassing and potentially career ending string of losses, overhauled his entire approach to the war. Gingindhlovu proved a testing ground for new ideas on Chelmsford's part, ideas he then refined and put into play in his second invasion of Zululand. On the American side, conversely, Sheridan never changed his opinions on the best way to defeat Native Americans. He continued on much as he had before, only for his ideas to be altered or even outright rejected by new subordinates, notable among them Nelson Miles and Ranald "Bad Hand" Mackenzie, who were

more interested in winning than following Sheridan's doctrine to the letter. Miles especially all but inverted Sheridan's philosophy of frontier warfare, creating an effective, war-winning strategy that brought the Lakota and Cheyenne to their knees. In doing so he hit on some, though not all, of the same ideas Chelmsford did three years later in Zululand, demonstrating in the process that there were general principles for success in nineteenth century colonial warfare, which can be observed in these two wars, and perhaps in many others.

*

The conclusion of Crook's summer campaign left the strategic situation on the Great Plains virtually unchanged. Large warbands of Lakota and Northern Cheyenne continued to roam across the territories the government claimed, unchecked by the American Army's efforts to corral them. Phil Sheridan's fear of "scatteration" on the part of the Natives, which his entire campaign plan was designed to prevent, had seemingly been realised. The great war-party that overwhelmed the 7th Cavalry at the Little Bighorn had split into a multitude of smaller, but still considerable, groupings. Only the tiny following of American Horse had been neutralised by the Army, while Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and the other major warlords of the Plains tribes remained undefeated. Sheridan had to do something to regain the momentum, lest the short, cheap operation he envisaged drag into the next year or longer.

Upon their return to their bases of supply Crook and Terry's expeditions broke up. Some units were disbanded or transferred out of the warzone while others were sent to occupy the reservations. Sheridan had at last received authorisation to occupy the reserves and disarm the agencies, and he set about doing so with rapidity, using Crook, Merritt, and the newly arrived Ranald Mackenzie as his instruments. With the reservations under military control, the Lakota

and Cheyenne could receive no further reinforcements from their agency brethren. Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse and the rest of the hostiles were now on their own.⁷³⁴

While the seizure of the reservations was an important step, it did not represent a major shift in Sheridan's thinking. Martial law on the reserves was part of his vision for the war from the beginning and was something he spent the prior seven years of his career arguing for. With Congress' belated assent to Sheridan's request, his concept for the Great Sioux War was now fulfilled, yet he was no closer to subduing the hostiles than he was in March. True, the lockdown on the reservations meant the free Lakota and Cheyenne could no longer replenish their numbers, but until Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, et al were crushed, it would not mean much.

With much of Crook's force invalidated out after the Horsemeat March, Sheridan again began the process of transferring new units to the Departments of the Platte and the Dakotas. Accompanying these fresh troops was a new group of younger field commanders Sheridan hoped would instill some backbone into Terry and Crook, whose inability to implement his flawed designs caused Sheridan to lose faith in them. As when he assigned Wesley Merritt to Crook's summer expedition, Sheridan expected the infusion of new blood to tilt the odds in the Army's favour and prevent the Lakota and Cheyenne from evading his clutches. In Sheridan's thinking, the only problem with his orders was Crook and Terry's apparent reluctance to carry them out. It was with this in mind that Sheridan now turned to Crook's two greatest rivals in the Army, Nelson Miles and Ranald Mackenzie, believing their presence would force his old friend into greater displays of aggressiveness. As it turned out, Mackenzie and Miles would fundamentally change the face of the Great Sioux War, though not necessarily the way Sheridan intended.

⁷³⁴ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 388.

Of the two new arrivals, Nelson Appleton Miles is easily the better known, and with good cause. Enlisting in the Union Army as a Lieutenant in the early days of the Civil War, Miles, a former crockery store clerk, was a Brevet Major-General of Volunteers by the time the war ended. Commissioned as a Colonel in the Regular Army, Miles, who had no formal military training, eventually rose to the rank of Commanding General, United States Army, where he masterminded the Spanish-American War, and publicly fell out with President Theodore Roosevelt over the subject of American colonialism in Asia. Along the way, he married Mary Hoyt Sherman, daughter of Judge Charles Sherman and niece to Senator John Sherman and General William Tecumseh Sherman, a move many saw as calculated to improve his career prospects. A controversial figure in his day and within the historiography, Miles left behind a legacy of significant military achievement and a reputation as a backbiting egotist fully prepared to backstab his fellow officers to increase his own chances for promotion.⁷³⁵

How much of Miles' image as a narcissistic martinet is true is open to question. Certainly he was a ruthless careerist and the two separate autobiographies he left behind, as well as various letters and personal writings, certainly track with the image of a man with a great deal of self-regard and an unshakeable belief he was surrounded by idiots. Yet it is also true that many of Miles' enemies in the Army reviled him not for his personal failings, but because of his refusal to close ranks and keep the Army's dirty secrets in-house. A devoted human rights activist in an era before human rights activism had the legitimacy it has today, Miles believed America's colonial enemies, be they Native American or Filipino, were human beings and were entitled to many of the same protections as the white man. On multiple occasions Miles jeopardised his career to investigate human rights abuses by his subordinates and call out those committed by his peers,

⁷³⁵ Peter DeMontravel's *A Hero to His Fighting Men*, the most recent modern biography of Miles, challenges many of these assertions about his character.

decisions that earned him the undying enmity of the Army's more reactionary factions. Miles' efforts to punish the perpetrators of the Wounded Knee Massacre, for instance, made him a target for criticism by John Schofield, then Commanding General, United States Army, while his attempt to protect Filipinos from war crimes committed by his own troops cost him his job during the Theodore Roosevelt administration.⁷³⁶

What is not controversial about Miles is his competency, or the respect and esteem in which his enlisted men held him. Sent out West after the Civil War, Miles first saw active service against Native Americans in the Red River War of 1874 to 1875 against the Comanche and Kiowa. Assigned command of the 5th Infantry, Miles led one of Sheridan's converging columns, and his defeat of a significant Comanche war-party at the Battle of the Staked Plains was a key moment in the American conquest of the Southwest. In his annual report for 1874, Sheridan credited Miles' active pursuit of Comanche and Kiowa warbands as instrumental to the subjugation of those tribes. Sheridan believed by staying in the field for as long as he did Miles denied the Comanche and Kiowa the opportunity to resupply and recuperate from their losses, and it was this steady attrition that eventually forced the surrender of both tribes.⁷³⁷ While commending Miles for his service, Sheridan did not examine precisely how Miles achieved these results, a theme that recurred during the Great Sioux War. Following the conclusion of hostilities in 1875, Miles dedicated the winter to arranging provisions for the captured Native Americans and relentlessly drilling his infantry.⁷³⁸ When Miles and the 5th Infantry were summoned north in late 1876, he was leading one of the most disciplined infantry regiments in the US Army.

⁷³⁶ Again, see DeMontravel for a summary of Miles' career.

⁷³⁷ Sheridan, "Headquarters Military Division of the Missouri, October 1, 1874," 3.

⁷³⁸ Miles, *Serving the Republic*, 133, 143.

If Nelson Miles was one of the post-Civil War army's greatest success stories, Ranald Slidell Mackenzie, better remembered to posterity as "Bad Hand" was one of its most profound tragedies. A member of the West Point class of 1862, Mackenzie and his classmates were graduated a year early and thrown into a Union war machine desperate for junior officers. By the end of the war Mackenzie was a Brevet Major-General in the Volunteers, a Colonel in the Regulars, and was described by no less a person than Ulysses S. Grant as "the most promising young officer in the army."⁷³⁹ He had also lost two fingers and the better part of his mental health, though the latter remained an invisible wound for some time to come.

Mackenzie's post-war service record was erratic, to say the least. Coming to Sheridan's attention during the war, Bad Hand became one of the Division Commander's favourite hatchet men, sent to do jobs too sensitive or, in some cases, too illegal, for Sheridan to trust to anyone else. In 1872 Sheridan ordered Mackenzie to pursue a Lipan Apache war-party across the border into Mexico, triggering an international incident when the Colonel not only attacked several Apache camps, but brutalised Mexican citizens to uncover their whereabouts. When Mackenzie's troopers discovered their mission was illegal, they mutinied, and it was only by holding them all at gunpoint that Bad Hand restored order and got his command back to the United States. Sheridan, nevertheless, saw this as a great accomplishment, and his report for 1873 credited the lack of hostilities in the Department of Texas to Mackenzie's raid.⁷⁴⁰ Deployed against the Comanche and Kiowa in 1874 through 1875, Bad Hand became notorious in both tribes, manhandling them at Palo Duro Canyon and running down the last free band of Qahadi Comanche under Quanah Parker. In a somewhat remarkable about face, Mackenzie and Parker

⁷³⁹ Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 755.

⁷⁴⁰ Sheridan, "Headquarters Military Division of the Missouri, October 1, 1874," 4.

became friends, and Bad Hand lent his support to the efforts of Nelson Miles and diverse others to keep the surrendered Comanche and Kiowa fed through the famine winter of 1875.⁷⁴¹

Bad Hand Mackenzie's oscillating attitude towards Native Americans, and his entire reputation as a brilliant but unstable officer, is something that is difficult to examine without touching on the subject of mental illness. Normally a tough but fair-minded officer, Bad Hand was subject to sudden outbursts of irrationality, and even violence, throughout his post-war service. As the years went by these bouts of instability became both more extreme and increasingly frequent, eventually resulting in his discharge from the army and his incarceration in an asylum due to "mental wounds sustained in service to his country." Mackenzie is a clear example of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder exacerbated by his continued involvement in military actions after the Civil War and a series of severe headwounds suffered during the Indian Wars.⁷⁴² How sick Mackenzie was at any given time, and the rate at which his illness progressed, is something we cannot know but accepting it was a major part of his makeup is key to grappling with how the same man who tortured Mexicans, massacred Apache villages, and threatened to summarily execute his own men could, when lucid, dedicate himself to feeding Native Americans who were on the verge of starvation. Regardless, it was not for his humanitarian qualities that Sheridan brought Bad Hand north; the decision to call Mackenzie into the war and assign him to George Crook's command shows how worried Sheridan was about the progress of the war, and how disillusioned he was with what he saw as Crook's lack of killer instinct.

On the surface, Nelson Miles and Ranald Mackenzie did not have much in common beyond belonging to the same generation. However, both men had qualities that proved

⁷⁴¹ See Charles M. Robinson's *Bad Hand* for the only modern study of Mackenzie's career.

⁷⁴² Robinson's *Bad Hand* is again the place to turn to for an examination of Mackenzie's slide into madness and the likely causes of it.

invaluable in the coming months. In contrast to Crook, who was used to pursuing tiny cadres of Apache across Arizona, and Terry, who was first and foremost, a siege engineer, Miles and Mackenzie had practical experience combating the Comanche and the Kiowa, large tribes of horse-borne warriors who were capable of, if not always willing to, engage the army in massed actions. Both also had extensive sympathy for Native Americans which, paradoxically, made them far more effective at battling indigenous forces than did Sheridan's contemptuous disregard. Miles especially had a high regard for the capabilities of Native American generals and a seething contempt for those who misconstrued what they could do. Writing in his memoirs, Miles observed "the art of war among the white race is called strategy, or tactics; when practiced by the Indians it is called treachery. They employed the art of deceiving, misleading, decoying, and surprising the enemy with great cleverness. The celerity and secrecy of their movements were never excelled by the warriors of any country. They had courage, skill, sagacity, endurance, fortitude, and self-sacrifice of a high order."⁷⁴³ "In vain," he said, "might we search history for the record of a people who contended as valiantly against a superior race, overwhelming in numbers, and defended their country until finally driven toward the setting sun, a practically annihilated nation and race."⁷⁴⁴ Armed with the knowledge they were facing competent opponents, neither Miles nor Mackenzie felt beholden to Sheridan's plan, and Miles outright turned it on its head.

When Nelson Miles arrived in the Department of the Dakotas, he found neither Phil Sheridan nor Alfred Terry's plans for him and the 5th Infantry were particularly expansive. With the government having granted him permission to construct forts in Lakota territory, Sheridan instructed Miles to build a cantonment at the mouth of the Tongue River and to garrison it until

⁷⁴³ Miles, *Serving the Republic*, 117-118.

⁷⁴⁴ Miles, *Serving the Republic*, 117.

the spring, while larger commands under Crook and Mackenzie undertook the job of actively campaigning during the winter. Miles, who thought Sheridan's entire approach to the Great Sioux War wrongheaded, chafed at this inaction and at the continuation of an operational plan that had, up to this point, singularly failed. Miles had been close friends with George Custer, and held Sheridan, and his boss William Sherman, responsible for Custer's death. Both of Miles' memoirs contain lengthy dissections of Sheridan's strategy, and he harshly critiqued the Divisional Commander for underestimating the numbers and fighting ability of the Lakota and for dividing his forces into weak columns that could not overpower Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse's warbands.⁷⁴⁵ Likewise, Miles saw Sheridan's reliance on fodder-dependent cavalry as a serious error. The Red River War persuaded Miles that infantry, rather than cavalry, was the proper arm of the military to battle the horse tribes with, thinking that flew in the face of army orthodoxy. During a conversation with Terry, Miles vainly tried to bring the Departmental Commander around to his way of thinking, insisting, "if he would give me supplies and a reasonable command I would clear a zone of that country of hostiles before spring."⁷⁴⁶ Lacking official authorisation for his plans, Miles set out to implement them anyway.

During the Red River War Miles set up a spy ring inside various Southwestern Indian Agencies, and used informants to keep him apprised of Comanche and Kiowa movements. He now organised a similar system on the Red Cloud and Spotted Tail Reservations and was rewarded with detailed information about the movements of Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse's factions of the great Lakota army from the Little Bighorn.⁷⁴⁷ Upon hearing Sitting Bull was moving north of the Yellowstone towards the valley of the Big Dry, Miles put together an

⁷⁴⁵ Miles, *Personal Recollections of General Nelson A. Miles*, 198-211; Miles, *Serving the Republic*, 185-192.

⁷⁴⁶ Miles, *Serving the Republic*, 146.

⁷⁴⁷ Miles, *Serving the Republic*, 126, 147.

expeditionary force of three hundred ninety-four men of the 5th Infantry, equipped, in his own words, “as if they were going to the arctic regions.”⁷⁴⁸ Hiring Native guides and white scouts alike—of whom “Buffalo Bill” Cody and “Yellowstone” Kelly were two of the more famous—and taking a single Rodman gun along for artillery, Miles tracked Sitting Bull to Cedar Creek, where on the 21st of October, he and the Hunkpapa leader entered negotiations.⁷⁴⁹

Lakota and American accounts of the negotiations differ greatly. Miles admired Sitting Bull as a man and a leader, but viewed him as intransigent and unwilling to compromise during negotiations, even going so far as to suggest some of Sitting Bull’s subordinates sought to assassinate the American party under the flag of truce.⁷⁵⁰ The Lakota, meanwhile, had little reason to trust “Bear Coat”, as his choice of cold-weather gear caused them to dub Miles, and alleged Sitting Bull offered Miles peace, only for the colonel to insist upon initiating combat.⁷⁵¹ Both sides concur negotiations went nowhere during the first day and broke down completely on the 22nd, resulting in a general engagement each blamed the other for starting. What emerges most clearly from this incident, perhaps, is the fact that neither side could offer the other anything: Sitting Bull was committed to preserving the territorial integrity of the Lakota domains, while Miles, as an agent of US imperial expansion, had to attempt to seize them.

Whoever started the battle, it was undoubtedly Miles who won it. The colonel’s experience in the Red River War taught him “the Indian’s marksmanship is very accurate within the range to which he is accustomed to killing game—say within two hundred yards; but in use of the long range rifle, where he must take account of the elevated sights, the distance, and the

⁷⁴⁸ Miles, *Serving the Republic*, 146.

⁷⁴⁹ Miles, *Personal Recollections of General Nelson A. Miles*, 225.

⁷⁵⁰ Miles, *Personal Recollections of General Nelson A. Miles*, 227; Miles, *Serving the Republic*, 150.

⁷⁵¹ “Long Feather & Bear’s Face,” in *Lakota & Cheyenne* ed. Jerome A. Greene (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994): 98-104; “Spotted Elk,” in *Lakota & Cheyenne* ed. Jerome A. Greene, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994): 104-111.

effect of the wind upon the flight of the bullet he is inexperienced.”⁷⁵² Armed with longer barrelled rifles, Miles’ infantrymen significantly outranged the cavalry firearms borne by Sitting Bull’s Lakota. Drilled throughout the winter and given extensive target practise the 5th Infantry closed the accuracy gap John Gibbon noted as existing between white soldiers and Plains warriors. Miles’ Rodman gun further added to his firepower, and for the first time in the Great Sioux War an American officer successfully brought the artillery to bear: not to kill Natives in large numbers, but to keep them at range and break up charges before they could finish massing.⁷⁵³ It was a completely different style of frontier warfare, one the Lakota had not experienced before.

Lakota testimony on the Battle of Cedar Creek is scarce, and consequently it is not entirely clear which of the Lakota war-leaders took command of the force confronting Miles, or for that matter, how large a party of warriors Sitting Bull had at his disposal. American estimates of his strength range from six hundred to a thousand warriors, while American accounts of the action acknowledge the presence of Gall, White Bull, Low Neck, and Pretty Bear among the Hunkpapa mystic’s retinue of followers, advisors, and allies.⁷⁵⁴ All these men were experienced warriors and commanders and had seen action at the Rosebud and the Little Bighorn. Gall especially played a key role at the Little Bighorn in the blunting of Reno’s attack, and in the eventual entrapment and destruction of Custer’s detachment, with he and Crow King acting as the anvil upon which the other Lakota and Cheyenne war-leaders hammered the 7th Cavalry apart. Gall knew how to fight the white man, and had a thoroughly enviable record when it came to defeating him. Yet Nelson Miles and the 5th Infantry confounded his best efforts.

⁷⁵² Miles, *Serving the Republic*, 163.

⁷⁵³ Miles, *Personal Recollections of General Nelson A. Miles*, 228.

⁷⁵⁴ Miles, *Personal Recollections of General Nelson A. Miles*, 225.

Sitting Bull, Gall, and the other Lakota leaders chose their position well, atop a series of ridges intersected by deep, difficult to navigate ravines. Warriors positioned on the ridgeline and within the ravines could fire upon approaching soldiers with near impunity, and under normal circumstances, would have been able to gather for charges unimpeded by American fire. Lieutenant James Worden Pope, one of Miles' junior officers, deduced the Lakota tactics to be "disclosed by the nature of the ground so admirably adapted to Indian maneuvering. This was to yield in front, and then while the troops pressed forward and became entangled in the ravines to pour his warriors around the flanks and rear, and play his magazine guns upon the disordered mess."⁷⁵⁵ If Pope is correct, the Lakota were practising a variation of the scheme Crazy Horse first tried at the Rosebud, and that he, Gall, and Lame White Man used to dissect Custer's regiment at the Little Bighorn, aiming to encircle part of the American force and then destroy it in detail. The Lakota decision to fire the grass in front of the soldiers lends credence to Pope's deductions, as the resulting smokescreen blinded some of the soldiers and could have been used to funnel them wherever the Native war-leaders wanted them to go.⁷⁵⁶

Miles, however, frustrated Lakota intentions by deploying his men in skirmish line and sending them up not only the centre, but the sides and rear of the ridgeline, assaulting each of the Lakota positions simultaneously, forcing the Lakota back with ranged fire followed by infantry charges as they moved steadily up the ridgeline. Said Pope "the main line continued to advance, now pouring a rattling fire into the Sioux who, from behind hills, returned it, or dashing forward in wild circles and delivering a rapid fire from Henry rifles, would fleetly seek cover followed by the showers of bullets that responded."⁷⁵⁷ Sitting Bull and Gall, evincing the same tactical

⁷⁵⁵ James Worden Pope, "The Battle of Cedar Creek," in *Battles and Skirmishes of the Great Sioux War*, ed. Jerome A. Greene (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993): 137-138.

⁷⁵⁶ Miles, *Serving the Republic*, 151; Pope, "The Battle of Cedar Creek," 139.

⁷⁵⁷ Pope, "The Battle of Cedar Creek," 139.

flexibility that served them well in prior battles, adjusted their plan of attack, attempting to surround not part of Miles' force, but the entire command. As Miles described it, "at one time the command was entirely surrounded by Indians, and the troops were formed in a large hollow square in open order and deployed at five paces, with all the reserves brought into action, yet not a single man left his place or failed to do his full duty. The engagement demonstrated the fact that the Indians could not stand artillery, and that there was no position they could take from which the infantry could not dislodge them."⁷⁵⁸ With the artillery denying them the opportunity for a massed charge, the Lakota could not break Miles' square; as he summarised the engagement "the infantry soldiers presented but a small target, and their skilled long-range marksmanship kept the Indians at a very good distance."⁷⁵⁹ The Lakota were shoved off the ridgeline and made to flee as Miles' infantry stormed into their camp.

Miles did not let things go there. Having concluded the first battle of any size that the American Army had won during the Great Sioux War, he proceeded to pursue the Lakota. His infantry were obviously nowhere near as fast as the Native horsemen, yet Miles believed, given sufficient time, his men could walk the Lakota into the ground. The increasingly cold weather and lack of forage, as well as the strain of the battle they had just fought, exhausted the Lakota horses and made outrunning Miles' slow-moving but relentless infantry, more than many of the Natives could bear. "Thus they were pursued," Miles boasted, "for two days at a distance of forty-two miles. Wherever they made a stand the troops would deploy and drive them out. They would never remain for a close, decisive battle, although they outnumbered us at least three to one."⁷⁶⁰ Thoroughly demoralised by defeat, the resolve and the political unity of the Lakota in

⁷⁵⁸ Miles, *Personal Recollections of General Nelson A. Miles*, 228.

⁷⁵⁹ Miles, *Serving the Republic*, 151.

⁷⁶⁰ Miles, *Serving the Republic*, 152.

Sitting Bull's party began to fracture. On October 25, the bulk of them decided they were tired of running; while Sitting Bull and Gall, with four hundred or so of their closest companions struck north, the rest of the Hunkpapas and their Minneconjou and Sans Arc allies sent out peace feelers to Miles. "Bear Coat," agreed to talk, and negotiated the surrender of five major chiefs and about 2000 of their followers.⁷⁶¹ As the beaten Lakota filtered into the agencies, Miles returned to his Tongue River cantonment to resupply and ready himself for further pursuit of Sitting Bull.

Miles' was not the only army officer preparing an expedition against the Lakota and Cheyenne. After several months in camp or supervising the occupation of the reservations, George Crook was ready to take the field again and was under mounting pressure from Sheridan to do so. Several exchanges of letters between the Divisional and Departmental Commanders show the depth of the discord between the two former friends, with Sheridan pushing Crook to act and Crook pleading for further reinforcements and supplies. By November, an exasperated Sheridan gave Crook the troops he wanted in the form of eleven companies of cavalry under Bad Hand Mackenzie and eleven companies of infantry and four of artillery under Colonel Richard Irving Dodge. Dodge, an inveterate diarist, maintained a journal throughout the enterprise, recording, in sharp contrast to John Bourke, his thorough disgust with Crook's administrative abilities. In Dodge's eyes, the November effort against the Lakota and Cheyenne was the worst organized military force he ever had the displeasure to be part of.⁷⁶² Ironically, one of the things that makes Dodge's journals such a useful source is they demonstrate how much Crook had improved his logistical train since the Horsemeat March; while still beset by supply problems there were far fewer casualties from cold and malnutrition that November than in September.

⁷⁶¹ Miles, *Serving the Republic*, 152.

⁷⁶² Richard Irving Dodge, *The Powder River Expedition Journals of Colonel Richard Irving Dodge*, ed. Wayne R. Kime (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997): 65.

Even more importantly than the improvements to logistics, Crook and Mackenzie used their months at the Indian agencies to recruit the one element missing from all of Crook's previous endeavours: knowledgeable Indigenous scouts. In the spring and summer months political problems on the reservations and Sheridan's disdain for Native scouts left Crook with only a few Crow and Shoshone rangers available to him. With the Red Cloud and Spotted Tail agencies under the Army's heel, however, Crook was now in position to recruit from among the nonhostile Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho at which he was very successful. Bourke and Dodge both recorded Crook's speeches to the assembled peace chiefs, and both marveled at his talent for getting Native warriors to enlist against their own people. Pointing out the Army now had the power to deny food and other necessities to the agencies unless cooperation was forthcoming, Crook secured the assistance of a large number of reservation warriors who could see the writing on the wall. Many of the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho in Crook's pay maintained extensive contacts with the hostiles under Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Dull Knife, Little Wolf, and their allies and had a clearer picture of where their camps were located than either the Army, or enemy Natives like the Crows, Shoshone, and Arikara did.⁷⁶³

Crook struck out on November 14th, 1876, with 1900 men: 1500 infantry, cavalry, and artillery, and nearly four hundred Native scouts.⁷⁶⁴ By November 22nd, they were on the trail of what they at first believed to be Crazy Horse's following, but was subsequently proved to be a Cheyenne band. On November 23rd, Sitting Bear, an agency Cheyenne sent out to negotiate with the hostiles sometime earlier, rode into Crook's camp, and provided him with the location of a major Cheyenne encampment under the prominent war-chiefs Dull Knife and Little Wolf. Along

⁷⁶³ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 388.

Dodge, *Powder River Expedition Journals*, 73.

⁷⁶⁴ Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 390.

with Two Moons and the late Lame White Man, Dull Knife and Little Wolf were among the most experienced and prestigious of the Northern Cheyenne war-leaders, and their defeat and capture were a top army priority. Acting quickly, Crook decided he and Dodge would remain in camp with the infantry and artillery while Bad Hand took the cavalry and the scouts for a rapid strike against Dull Knife (Army accounts of the battle invariably refer to it as the “Dull Knife Fight,” even as they acknowledge the presence of Little Wolf and other Cheyenne notables).⁷⁶⁵

Aided by the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho auxiliaries, Mackenzie’s November 25th assault on Dull Knife and Little Wolf came as a total surprise to the Northern Cheyenne. Native accounts record their shock at the presence of the soldiers and their bitterness towards the reservation warriors who made the attack possible.⁷⁶⁶ Bourke, who accompanied Bad Hand’s vanguard, reported Dull Knife and Little Wolf’s people pleaded with his auxiliaries to go home as they could not fight the white men and their own people. Swiftly driven from their encampment by Mackenzie’s ambush, Dull Knife and Little Wolf rallied in the ridgelines and ravines northeast of the camp where they repulsed a cavalry charge by Lieutenant McKinney, killing him and several of his troopers with repeating rifle fire. Unwilling to risk the lives of any more of his cavalymen, Bad Hand sent a message to Crook requesting Dodge come up and join him; since Dodge’s rifles had significantly greater range than his cavalry’s carbines, Mackenzie believed they would allow him to win the sniper duel the battle had now settled into.⁷⁶⁷

Dodge, who, like Miles, considered the infantry to be the appropriate weapon with which to fight Native Americans—and had told Crook as much that March—was glad to get the chance to put his theories to the test and set out at once. Partway there, however, he was ordered to turn

⁷⁶⁵ Dodge, *Powder River Expedition Journals*, 81-82.

⁷⁶⁶ “Beaver Heart,” in *Lakota & Cheyenne* ed. Jerome A. Greene (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994): 119-121.

⁷⁶⁷ John Bourke, *Mackenzie’s Last Fight With the Cheyennes* (Middleton: Big Byte Books, 2015): 27-51.

back; running out of ammunition Dull Knife and Little Wolf had retreated from their campsite and Bad Hand, after firing everything of value in the camp, was returning to link up with Crook.⁷⁶⁸ It was Crook's first unambiguous triumph over the Lakota-Cheyenne coalition, and he immediately sent dispatches to Sheridan announcing Mackenzie had won an important victory. Crook had made similar reports before, after the Rosebud and Slim Buttes, but this time there was a difference: he was telling the truth. Robbed of their homes and supplies in the dead of a Montana winter, Dull Knife and Little Knife's followings were ruined as an effective fighting force. Refugees from their bands attempted to link up with other Lakota and Cheyenne chiefs and leaders with disappointing results. The bulk of the refugees sought safety with Crazy Horse and Two Moons who, while willing to accept them, had little in the way of rations to share, embittering many Cheyenne against their Oglala Lakota allies. This bad blood eventually spread; Dull Knife and Little Wolf had been transporting not only their own supplies, but those of much of the Northern Cheyenne coalition, and the arrival of winter meant there was no way to replace them. The loss of their food stocks had repercussions across the entire Northern Cheyenne nation as a starvation winter set in.⁷⁶⁹ Dull Knife, who had briefly considered surrendering to Mackenzie after the capture of his encampment, was now convinced the war, which had been going so well to this point, could no longer be won. This was not cowardice on Dull Knife's part, but an honest appraisal of the facts: with their rations gone, his Cheyenne could only keep their freedom by facing a famine. Little Wolf came around to Dull Knife's thinking and the Northern Cheyenne chiefs bowed out, awaiting spring peace feelers from the Army.⁷⁷⁰

⁷⁶⁸ Dodge, *Powder River Expedition Journals*, 86-89.

⁷⁶⁹ Since the late 1860s, the American Army had been waging a war on the bison herds, supporting the efforts of big game hunters and railroad men alike to exterminate the species. This was one of the major reasons food was scarce among the Northern Cheyenne: it was scarce everywhere on the Plains, and had been for some years.

⁷⁷⁰ "Beaver Heart," *Lakota and Cheyenne*, 121; Bourke, *On the Border with Crook*, 402.

Sheridan recognized the import of the Dull Knife Fight quickly, and his congratulations, and those of William Sherman, were conveyed to Crook and Mackenzie via dispatch. After resting for a few days, Crook and Mackenzie again headed out into the winter with the hope of encountering another warband. They spent most of December looking, but aside from a few brief skirmishes with Northern Cheyenne raiders, found nothing. In stark contrast to the past, this was not because of mistakes on Crook's part. Continuing to utilise the strategy that worked so well at the Dull Knife Fight, Crook kept his infantry in camp after marches, then sent out his Native scouts to reconnoitre. If signs were found, the cavalry under Mackenzie was sent to follow up; only after all his outriders reported back did Crook move again. This method conserved the health of the infantry and of the mules in the pack team, the latter of whom were already sickening due to the cold. If there was a reason why Crook was unable to find the Lakota and Cheyenne this time it is mostly because there was no one to find. Sitting Bull and Gall were in retreat from Miles, Dull Knife and Little Wolf's followings were in the process of disintegrating, and hundreds of other warriors had been trapped on the reservations since the assumption of military control at the end of the summer. Only Crazy Horse and Two Moons were left for Crook and Mackenzie to hunt for, and they were far closer to Miles' territory than Crook's.⁷⁷¹

On December 29th, Crook headed back into Fort Fetterman. Mackenzie was recalled to Washington by Sheridan and on January 3rd, Richard Dodge dismissed the men to their regiments of origin. Officially, the expedition was terminated because of logistical issues, especially a lack of forage for horses and mules. This was true, but there may have been an additional problem: namely the deteriorating mental health of Bad Hand Mackenzie. Shortly after the Dull Knife Fight, Mackenzie approached Dodge in the midst of a mental breakdown,

⁷⁷¹ Dodge, *Powder River Expedition Journals*, 124.

stating if he had any personal courage he would “blow his brains out” for his failure against the Cheyenne.⁷⁷² Dodge reported this to Crook, who spent hours playing cards with Mackenzie to cheer him up. The accolades offered to Bad Hand by Sheridan briefly improved his morose mood, but it did not last; Mackenzie sank back into depression and irrationality, ordering a spurious court-martial against a subordinate who irritated him. Dodge’s journals reveal the deep concern he, Crook, and Bourke shared vis-à-vis Mackenzie’s mental state, and it is not at all out of the question that the expedition was ended and Bad Hand ordered to Washington because Crook believed the Colonel was becoming a danger to himself and his men.⁷⁷³

Ranald Mackenzie’s brief service in the Great Sioux War, despite the man’s own angst about it, proved decisive. Dodge may have seen the Dull Knife Fight as a fluke, and one that, given Crook’s inability to administrate, could not be repeated, but Dodge did not have the full picture of what was going on. In their month together in the field George Crook and Bad Hand Mackenzie proved a highly effective team, one that could transform Sheridan’s ill-considered plans for the war into an actual recipe for victory. Crook’s way with Native scouts and Mackenzie’s ability to get the most out of the men under his command, synergised together to remove Dull Knife and Little Wolf from the war, and with them, most of the Northern Cheyenne who were not traveling with Crazy Horse and Two Moons. Crook trusted Mackenzie enough to delegate the attack on the Cheyenne camp to him alone, stripping down his force and creating a command that moved fast enough to catch the Cheyenne by surprise. Mackenzie, for his part, was willing to trust Crook’s Indigenous scouts knew their jobs and followed their advice to the letter; as Bourke noted, it was the cooperation of Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho auxiliaries that made the conquest of Dull Knife and Little Wolf possible. Sheridan wanted Mackenzie’s

⁷⁷² Dodge, *Powder River Expedition Journals*, 98.

⁷⁷³ Dodge, *Powder River Expedition Journals*, 107, 124-126.

presence to put some spine into Crook and it did: the spine to manipulate Sheridan's order to take over the reserves in to a recruitment drive for auxiliaries. Still plagued by logistical failures, Crook at least knew where he was going this time, and that made all the difference.

Crook and Bad Hand's obliteration of Dull Knife's camp and following and the political tensions it created between the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne went a long way towards taking the latter out of the war, though several bands led by Chief Two Moons and the medicine man Big Crow had yet to be neutralised. The wise, however, was closing in on them. While Crook and Mackenzie struck out at the Cheyenne, Nelson Miles busied himself with removing Sitting Bull and Gall from the equation. Despite a blizzard that temporarily blinded his men, Miles persisted in chasing the Hunkpapa leaders and his command "crossed and recrossed the Missouri River with artillery and loaded trains on the solid ice, the cold being intense."⁷⁷⁴ Miles' men were well-enough equipped he was able to report no casualties from starvation or frostbite, a significant achievement when one considers the Horsemeat March, and the damage cold wreaked on Crook's expeditions that November and the previous March. Tracking the Lakota in the snowstorms of November and December was not possible, but Miles adapted, sending out frequent patrols to scout the regions he wished to place under military control. It was an area denial strategy, intended not to capture Sitting Bull and Gall, but to run them out of the Department of the Dakotas. It was also the exact opposite of Sheridan's orders to prevent "scatteration"; rather than trying to keep the Lakota together and capture them all at once, Miles aimed to break up the large bands and drive them out of American territory. Aside from one brief encounter between Sitting Bull and a patrol, there were no battles between Miles and the Hunkpapa chiefs, yet by the end of December Sitting Bull was driven from American holdings

⁷⁷⁴ Miles, *Serving the Republic*, 152.

and into Canada. “Sitting Bull,” Miles decided, “had now been driven far enough north to be practically out of the field of operation, and the command retreated to the cantonment.”⁷⁷⁵ Of the war-leaders who slew Custer, only Crazy Horse and Two Moons were still free and on soil the Americans claimed.

Miles had no intention of allowing Crazy Horse to remain at large for long. While Miles and the 5th Infantry were hounding Sitting Bull and Gall, Crazy Horse took the opportunity to harass the cantonment on the Tongue River, mounting a series of raids on Miles’ wagon trains and supply depots in open defiance of the American Army and the notion the Lakota and Cheyenne did not make war in the winter. Even as Sitting Bull, Gall, Dull Knife, and Little Wolf were driven towards flight or surrender, Crazy Horse and Two Moons continued to prosecute their war. Returning to the cantonment December 23rd, Miles rested his men for six days then struck out again on December 29th with the goal of finding and forcing a confrontation with Crazy Horse’s warband. Miles took four hundred thirty-six infantry, a scattering of white and Indigenous scouts, and two artillery pieces disguised as covered wagons. As on his previous expeditions, Miles outfitted his troops for Arctic conditions, and Surgeon Henry Tilton was able to report only a few cases of frostbite, none of them serious—at least by the standards of the Great Sioux War. Provisioned against the cold, Miles and the 5th Infantry set out to deal with Crazy Horse’s Oglala Lakota and their Cheyenne compatriots.⁷⁷⁶

Rather than withdrawing, as Sheridan feared would be the case, Crazy Horse chose to oppose Miles’ advance from the start. Skirmishes between Miles’ advance scouts and Lakota and Cheyenne war-parties were frequent, and Miles reported two men killed in Native ambushes over the duration of the first week of the march. With contacts between their men so frequent, Miles

⁷⁷⁵ Miles, *Serving the Republic*, 153.

⁷⁷⁶ Miles, *Personal Recollections of General Nelson A. Miles*, 236; Miles, *Serving the Republic*, 153.

and Crazy Horse were both well-informed of their opponent's whereabouts; it may have been the first time in the Great Sioux War where both sides had an equally clear picture of the enemy before them. What, precisely, Crazy Horse, Little Big Man, Big Crow, Two Moons, and the other Oglala and Cheyenne war-leaders planned for this campaign remains elusive, though Miles speculated he was being drawn out from his cantonment so that when he was defeated returning to American-controlled territory without casualties would be next to impossible.⁷⁷⁷ Wooden Leg of the Northern Cheyenne and Eagle Shield of the Oglala, for their part, denied there was any idea of fighting with Miles, and said the Cheyenne and Oglala camps were getting ready to separate in order to better evade him.⁷⁷⁸ Whatever their operational goals, the actions of the Indigenous commanders are clear: they maintained a screening force of warriors out front at all times, keeping Miles busy and preventing any contact between his men and the more vulnerable elements in the Native camp.

On January 7th, however, that screening effort broke down, and Miles' scouts captured a small group of Cheyenne women and children, including Wooden Leg's sister.⁷⁷⁹ Between two hundred and three hundred Cheyenne attempted to rescuing the captives that night but were driven back by the massed rifle fire of Miles' troops. Recognising an opportunity to make Crazy Horse come to him, Miles encamped along the Wolf Mountain ridgeline and prepared his positions for the next day. Edmond Butler, one of his captains, described their placement: "[three companies] were deployed across the valley—the first mentioned to the west of the Tongue River—the other two to the east of the stream, all fronting to the south, the left resting at the base

⁷⁷⁷ Miles, *Serving the Republic*, 154.

⁷⁷⁸ "Eagle Shield," in *Lakota & Cheyenne*, ed. Jerome A. Greene (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994): 126-129; "Wooden Leg," in *Lakota & Cheyenne*, ed. Jerome A. Greene (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994): 129.

⁷⁷⁹ "Wooden Leg," *Lakota and Cheyenne*, 130.

of a bluff under which the train was parked.”⁷⁸⁰ On the front of the plateau, Miles placed one of his artillery pieces, flanked by another two companies, while two more companies held the rear of the valley. Miles then settled in to see what Crazy Horse would do.⁷⁸¹

What Crazy Horse did was launch an infantry assault down the valley, across the frozen river, and into the centre and right flank of Miles’ defenses. It was a move unprecedented in Lakota or Cheyenne warfare: a foot attack in the dead of winter on an entrenched American force. It was not something that, according to the colonial reasoning of men like Sheridan, the Plains tribes were supposed to be capable of. Yet Crazy Horse, Two Moons, and Big Crow not only attempted it, but came close to pulling it off. It was the last great Lakota and Cheyenne offensive of the war, and it made manifest just how firm the Indigenous leadership’s grasp on tactics really was. As Miles’ artillery blunted the thrust down the centre of the valley and fierce back and forth fighting continued on the right, Crazy Horse and his comrades took the opportunity to occupy the bluffs to the left of Miles’ fortified camp, threw up breastworks of cedar logs and stones, and poured repeating rifle fire into the 5th Infantry.⁷⁸² While Crazy Horse took a leading role on the gunline, Big Crow, the Cheyenne shaman, danced along the top of the bluff, daring the Americans to shoot him. Miles and Butler saw this as part of Big Crow’s “medicine” to empower the Lakota and Cheyenne.⁷⁸³ According to Wooden Leg it was a distraction meant to draw American fire while the rest of the warriors kept their heads down.⁷⁸⁴

Surrounded, and with his left under fire by Native American riflemen, Miles was in significant danger. The discipline of his troops held, however, and the artillery continued to

⁷⁸⁰ Edmond Butler, “The Battle of Wolf Mountain,” in *Battles and Skirmishes of the Great Sioux War*, ed. Jerome A. Greene (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993): 197.

⁷⁸¹ Butler, “The Battle of Wolf Mountain,” 197.

⁷⁸² Butler, “The Battle of Wolf Mountain,” 201; “Wooden Leg,” *Lakota and Cheyenne*, 130-131.

⁷⁸³ Butler, “The Battle of Wolf Mountain,” 202; Miles, *Personal Recollections of General Nelson A. Miles*, 238. Miles, *Serving the Republic*, 155.

⁷⁸⁴ “Wooden Leg,” *Lakota and Cheyenne*, 131.

prevent Crazy Horse and Two Moons from pushing home any of their charges. Miles then sent a countercharge up the bluffs on the left, cracking the Lakota and Cheyenne defenses in a close-quarters firefight that mortally wounded Big Crow and sent Crazy Horse into a retreat along the ridgeline. Falling back to a spur that commanded the left flank of the ridgeline, Crazy Horse massed another two hundred warriors for a charge to retake the left bluff and regain control of the battle and Miles' position. Miles and Butler both recognized the threat this posed, with both noting after the fact that a failure to take and hold the left would have demoralised the soldiers and fired up the Lakota and Cheyenne to the point they never would have broken. Pulling Butler from his spot at the rear, Miles reinforced his company with elements of two others, then charged them up the spur, into Crazy Horse's gathering warriors. It was the call that decided the battle, with Butler seizing the spur and splintering the Lakota fortifications. With the American left now firmly held and their own flanks threatened, Crazy Horse and Two Moons sounded retreat and evacuated the battlefield, taking the dying Big Crow, and the rest of their casualties with them.⁷⁸⁵

Uncommonly for the time, Miles did not exaggerate the number of Native Americans he killed, and in his memoirs admitted "the engagement was not of such a serious character as to cause great loss of life on either side."⁷⁸⁶ Killing the Lakota and Cheyenne had not, however, been the point. "It demonstrated the fact," he said, "that we could move in any part of the country in the midst of winter, and hunt the enemy down in their camps wherever they might take refuge. In this way, constantly pursuing them, we had made them realize that there was no peace or safety for them while they remained in a hostile attitude."⁷⁸⁷ It was the same thing Miles did to the Comanche and Kiowa in the Red River War, and to Sitting Bull that October: a

⁷⁸⁵ Butler, "The Battle of Wolf Mountain," 197-203; Miles, *Personal Recollections of General Nelson A. Miles*, 238; Miles, *Serving the Republic*, 155-156.

⁷⁸⁶ Miles, *Personal Recollections of General Nelson A. Miles*, 238.

⁷⁸⁷ Miles, *Personal Recollections of General Nelson A. Miles*, 238-239.

strategy of area denial in the form of a dogged infantry pursuit and, taken together with the Dull Knife Fight, the Battle of Wolf Mountain had a major deleterious effect on those Lakota and Cheyenne still in the field. Crazy Horse's prestige suffered when he could not feed the Northern Cheyenne after the Dull Knife Fight. Now he had finally, after an unbroken streak of victories, found an American officer who was his match. The aura of invincibility that surrounded him, and those like Two Moons who rode with him, began to waver. However minor the physical results of Wolf Mountain, the psychological impact on the Lakota and Cheyenne was severe, and for many proved the last straw. Just as the Hunkpapa had after Cedar Creek, the Oglala and Northern Cheyenne were now wondering if it was time to give in to the Army.

The Great Sioux War petered out after January of 1877. Both Crook and Miles sent runners from the Indian agencies to make contact with the hostiles and convince them it was time to surrender. Sitting Bull stayed in Canada, but as the snow on the plains began to thaw, Dull Knife, Little Wolf, Two Moons, Crazy Horse, and the other leaders of the Lakota and Cheyenne confederacy trickled into the reservations to surrender.⁷⁸⁸ There were still occasional skirmishes, and violent incidents on the reserves themselves, one of which led to Crazy Horse's death, but by April of 1877, only the sixty Lakota lodges under Lame Deer remained free on the plains. Their independence did not last long. Nelson Miles, assisted by surrendered Lakota and Cheyenne, tracked Lame Deer down and surrounded his camp. Miles tried to convince Lame Deer to surrender, but a misunderstanding caused the negotiations to turn violent and a short, sharp battle was fought, ending with Lame Deer dead and his following in Miles' custody. When those captives were marched into the reservations, the Great Sioux War was officially over.⁷⁸⁹

⁷⁸⁸ Bourke, *On the Border With Crook*, 413.

⁷⁸⁹ Miles, *Personal Recollections of General Nelson A. Miles*, 248-256; Miles, *Serving the Republic*, 162.

There is some debate among historians as to whether Miles or Crook, or sometimes Miles or Mackenzie, deserves more of the credit for closing out the war. At the time, it was Miles who got the lion's share of the accolades. Sheridan praised him in his annual report, as did Sherman, and both men wrote to now former President Grant about Miles' performance.⁷⁹⁰ In a letter to Sherman, Grant observed "Miles has done good work since, which, with what he had done before, must rank him high with our young officers."⁷⁹¹ What none of the correspondence between these important men ever discussed was how Miles did it. If Sheridan grasped the ways in which Miles went against his doctrine for frontier warfare, he never wrote about it and never communicated it to Sherman or Grant, his two closest confidantes. He took the defeat of the Lakota and Cheyenne as his due, and never analysed how it happened.

Phil Sheridan ended the Great Sioux War with all his illusions and his reputation intact. He shifted most of the culpability for the Little Bighorn onto Custer, and was now took credit for Crook, Mackenzie, and Miles' winter operations. He never re-examined his ideas about how Native Americans fought and never reappraised the likes of Gall or Crazy Horse as tacticians. Insulated by his position and his prejudice alike, Sheridan did not have to question his colonial reasoning or consider whether he had engineered and then fought an entire war on false premises. The public might not have been entirely happy with how things had gone, but they were inclined to blame Custer or Crook or Terry or even Grant before they sought to blame Sheridan. Sheridan, accordingly, did not have to learn anything. He could just accept the victories that Crook, Mackenzie, and Miles handed him, and claim his strategy of winter campaigning was a resoundingly good idea.

⁷⁹⁰ Miles reproduces both Sheridan's report and letter from Sherman on pages 164-166 of *Serving the Republic*.

⁷⁹¹ Ulysses S. Grant, "To Gen. William T. Sherman, November 17th, 1877," in *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* Vol. 28 ed. John Y. Simon, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005): 313.

The men who won the war, on the other hand, had to look past colonial reasoning and past Sheridan's commands. Beating the Lakota and Cheyenne required an awareness that they were an enemy worth respecting, and taking appropriate steps to counter their capabilities. Nelson Miles and Bad Hand Mackenzie were both willing to regard Native Americans as potentially formidable opponents. So was George Crook when his decision-making process was not impaired by Sheridan watching over his shoulder. Crook may not have been able to admit to losing at the Rosebud or Slim Buttes, but he learned from his experiences, and made sure come the November campaign he had the Indigenous scouts he needed (even if he had to gain them by coercion), Sheridan's opinion be damned. Abandoning the idea the Lakota and Cheyenne would fight like the Apache had, and mitigating, if not solving his logistical issues, Crook obtained the triumph that so long eluded him.

Mackenzie and Miles did not have any illusions to shed. Their previous combat against the Comanche and the Kiowa gave them a crash course in the strategies and tactics used by the Plains tribes, and their sympathy for the peoples they were fighting made them aware that there were innovative commanders on the other side who might well alter those tactics if given the chance. Miles is the standout on this front; at Cedar Creek and Wolf Mountain he met the tactical improvisation of Gall and Crazy Horse with innovations of his own and showed the men who killed Custer could themselves be stopped. More broadly, Miles reconceptualised the entire war, not as the pursuit of Lakota and Cheyenne warbands before they could "scatter," but as a campaign of area denial, intended to show Sitting Bull and his compatriots they could not hold any territory the United States Army was not willing to let them hold. He did not try to destroy the Lakota and Cheyenne physically, but instead targeted their psyche, chipping away at the prestige of their leaders until the coalition collapsed.

In his memoirs, Miles reflected that the weakness of the Lakota and Cheyenne militaries were not tactical or strategic, but cultural. “War,” he wrote, “is entirely voluntary with [the Native]. If he thinks it is a good day for scalps and plunder he is very daring, but if he thinks the signs are not favourable and he and his companions are receiving serious injury he can withdraw, with no loss of caste or reputation with his fellows. There is no such thing as order, positivity authority, or discipline among them. Knowing this, I found it to our advantage to hold them at a safe distance, to keep them losing and never gaining anything, and by constantly acting on the offensive I found they could be discouraged and dispersed. It was amusement for them to raid and make war during the summer, but when constant relentless war was made upon them in the severest of winter campaigns it became serious and most destructive.”⁷⁹² This assessment is overly harsh (and carries some of its own stereotypes about “lazy” Indigenous peoples), but nevertheless reflects an underlying truth: the hostile Lakota and Cheyenne were a coalition of allied warbands, not an army with a hierarchical chain of command. War-leaders like Crazy Horse and Gall could only hold onto their followers for as long as they continued to win, and the alliance itself could only hold so long as diplomats like Sitting Bull were present to make sure it held. Miles grasped this and laid his plans accordingly. His tactics were based on his understanding of Plains warfare. His strategy was based on his understanding of their culture. In the end this made him a much deadlier foe for them than Phil Sheridan could ever be.

*

Lord Chelmsford’s situation in the spring of 1879 was if anything far worse than Sheridan’s was in winter of 1876. Where Sheridan was able to transfer much of the blame for the Little Bighorn to Custer, Chelmsford was not nearly as successful at making Durnford the

⁷⁹² Miles, *Serving the Republic*, 163.

scapegoat for Isandlwana. London was not, as we have seen, unwilling to blame Durnford, but many Members of Parliament still thought Chelmsford should be held to account for the debacle. With Parliament openly debating his competency and the press and some MPs demanding his recall and replacement, Chelmsford's reputation, like his intentions for the war, was in tatters.

His strategic situation was also considerably worse than Sheridan's. Not only had he failed to conquer Zululand, and suffered terrible reverses at Isandlwana and Ntombe Drift (Hlobane was not yet known to the public or to Chelmsford himself) but he had been pushed onto the defensive. Pearson was besieged at Eshowe, Wood was skirmishing with Mbilini near Luneburg, and Chelmsford was on the Natal side of the border trying to put his army back together. His strategy of converging columns had come up disastrously short, while Cetshwayo's plot to divide and isolate the British forces was working as intended. Chelmsford had to break Cetshwayo's momentum and regain the initiative. Relieving Eshowe was the only practical method open to him.

Since February, Chelmsford had promised Pearson, Bartle Frere, the War Office, and anyone else who would listen that he was preparing to break the siege of Eshowe. He had also told them that without reinforcements he could not hope to succeed. In consequence, the date of his relief expedition was constantly pushed farther and farther back. By the end of March these excuses were no longer sufficient. New regiments from Great Britain and other colonies had disembarked in South Africa, and additional auxiliaries were raised from the colonial and Native populace of Natal. At Chelmsford's disposal were a Naval Brigade from the *Shah*, *Tenedos*, and *Boadicea*, the 57th and 91st Foot, five companies of the 99th Foot, six companies of the 3/66th Rifles, two battalions of Native auxiliaries, and the auxiliary cavalry under Barrow. Chelmsford's artillery complement also grew considerably: the Naval Brigade brought with them

two Gatling guns, two 9-pounder cannons, and four 24-pounder rocket tubes.⁷⁹³ In total the troops available to Chelmsford exceeded 5500: 3390 white men, and 2280 Indigenous Africans.⁷⁹⁴ It was a larger and better armed column than the one Chelmsford first invaded Zululand with in January.

Chelmsford took no chances this time around. After wiring Wood and requesting he stage a distraction—an order that led to the fiasco at Hlobane and the close-fought victory at Khambula—he marched into Zululand with the simple and specific objective of extracting Pearson’s column from Eshowe. Chelmsford’s letters from the time reveal a man whose expectations were much altered from January. Writing to Colonel Stanley at the War Office, Chelmsford informed him that while reports had reached him that Cetshwayo was having trouble gathering his army again after the casualties at Isandlwana and Rorke’s Drift, he did not believe these reports and expected “that the Zulus as a nation will be found once more in the field when we advance.”⁷⁹⁵ In a letter to Wood, he confessed his fears regarding the coming operation saying “it seems almost certain that we shall be attacked and I have been anxious therefore to make my column as strong as possible so that we may read the Zulus a severe lesson.”⁷⁹⁶ The man who once harboured dreams of subjugating Zululand with only a few thousand men was now worried that over five thousand might not be enough to salvage the situation at Eshowe.

In a memorandum to his officers on March 26th, Chelmsford exposed the ways in which his thinking had changed. Officers were charged with always keeping their units in close order and ammunition was to be readily available with the box lids already unscrewed. Troops were

⁷⁹³ Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*, 121.

⁷⁹⁴ Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*, 122.

⁷⁹⁵ “Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel F.A. Stanley, March 16, 1879,” 126-127.

⁷⁹⁶ “Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel H.E. Wood, March 17, 1879,” in *Lord Chelmsford’s Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 128.

instructed to stay on the defensive if attacked, and standing orders were to construct not only a laager but a shelter trench around the campsite every night. Troops were required to be under arms from four in the morning onwards, and sentries posted during the night were forbidden from smoking or speaking above a whisper on any subject save duty. Native scouts were to be sent out a mile ahead of the sentries during the night, and each face of the laager was to be guarded by a full company, relieved on the hour. During marches the troops were to halt every hour for at least ten minutes so they could pull together again and avoid becoming strung out and vulnerable.⁷⁹⁷ In these orders Chelmsford showed his absorption of the lessons of Isandlwana and Ntombe Drift: in the event of a Zulu ambush he wanted to bring massed firepower to bear as swiftly as possible. Chelmsford knew the Zulu commanders could outgeneral him and that their army was faster and stealthier than his own. He thus organized the Eshowe column around his one indisputable advantage over his Indigenous nemeses: the ability to put out a high volume of shot from a block of infantry and artillery.

After ferrying his army across the Tugela River, Chelmsford marched straight for Eshowe, guided by Natal Native scouts and Cetshwayo's former white advisor, John Dunn. Dunn was purportedly appalled the first time he saw the British soldiers attempt to laager, telling Chelmsford's aide William Molyneux "we shall have to do better than this if we are to beat Cetewayo's impi."⁷⁹⁸ Dunn's comments were echoed by Commandant Hamilton-Browne, the Irish mercenary who observed the carnage at Isandlwana, and who saw the botched laager as the kind of bungling only a British staff officer could produce.⁷⁹⁹ By March 30th Dunn and Hamilton-Browne were happier with the soldiers' talent at laagering, which proved fortuitous

⁷⁹⁷ "Memorandum by Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford, March 26, 1879," in *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 132-134.

⁷⁹⁸ Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*, 126.

⁷⁹⁹ Hamilton-Browne, *Lost Legionary*, 149.

timing: later that day first contact was made between Chelmsford's scouts and those of the Zulu at Eshowe. On the night of April 1st, Dunn helped Chelmsford select the evening's campground at Gingindhlovu, a Zulu homestead only a short distance from Eshowe.⁸⁰⁰ Determined to fight on the defensive, Chelmsford declared there would be no advance the next day. Instead, the white troops would hold to their positions inside the laager, while the Indigenous auxiliaries were sent out to induce the Zulu to attack their fortifications.⁸⁰¹ Chelmsford no longer had any belief he could defeat the Zulu military in open battle, and instead hoped they could be provoked into dashing themselves to pieces against his defenses. It was the same tactic that, unknown to Chelmsford, Wood used days earlier at Khambula—with the difference that Chelmsford's column was much larger than Wood's and had not sustained a cataclysmic reversal the day before.

Chelmsford did not have to goad the Zulu into offensive action. At six in the morning on April 2nd, just as he was preparing to send out his scouts to locate the Zulu army, said army appeared on his doorstep. Alerted by their own scouts, the scattered Zulu units maintaining the blockade around Eshowe pulled together into one army, reinforced by veteran regiments from Ulundi and recently raised Tsongo auxiliaries from the coast. Somopho kaZikhale, Chief of the Themba Zulu and Cetshwayo's personal armourer and gunsmith had charge of the combined forces, while Prince Dabulamanzi, who coordinated the siege of Eshowe, acted as his second-in-command.⁸⁰² Testimony from Zulu veterans of Gingindhlovu is sparse when contrasted with Isandlwana or Khambula, but Somopho and Dabulamanzi's purpose within Cetshwayo's grand strategy is not difficult to deduce: they were to prevent Chelmsford from breaking through to

⁸⁰⁰ Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*, 127-128.

⁸⁰¹ Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*, 130-131.

⁸⁰² Castle and Knight, *Fearful Hard Times*, 191.

Eshowe, keeping Pearson locked up behind the walls of the fort until he starved. They were aware the main army under Mnyamana and Ntshingwayo had been sent to eliminate Wood, and by interposing their 11 000-man detachment between Chelmsford and Pearson, Somopho and Dabulamanzi sought to act in concert with their fellow chieftains, chasing Chelmsford back to Natal and immobilizing Pearson while Mnyamana and Ntshingwayo disposed of Wood.⁸⁰³

The Zulu advanced in skirmish line, using the long grass in front of the laager as cover. Within ten minutes they surrounded the laager, and despite withering fire from the Naval Brigade's Gatling guns made it within musket range of the square, releasing a volley of shot in its direction.⁸⁰⁴ Most of this shooting was inaccurate, but the volume of musketry was enough to rattle some of the soldiers manning the laager. Ten minutes later, at 6:20, the Zulu made their first charge on the defensive works with nearly simultaneous strikes by the horns and boss of the pincer formation.⁸⁰⁵ Over the next hour, the Zulu assault rolled about the laager, trying every side of the square in turn, and, in the face of constant British riflery, closing to within twenty or thirty yards of their enemies.⁸⁰⁶ The terrain provided the Zulu with some defense against the British guns, and attacks massed in the long grass or in depressions in the ground before rushing towards the laager. The sight of the Zulu charge proved a serious strain on the greener troops, and neither the cannons nor the rockets were able to slow the Zulu appreciably; Chelmsford, Molyneux, Norris-Newman, and Hamilton-Browne credited the maintenance of their defenses to the Gatling

⁸⁰³ "Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel F.A. Stanley, April 10, 1879," in *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 138. Chelmsford's figure of 11 000, given here, is accepted by Ian Knight in his study of Gingindhlovu.

⁸⁰⁴ "Report of Engagement at Gingilhovo, April 11, 1879," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 5, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 56.

⁸⁰⁵ Hamilton-Browne, *Lost Legionary*, 153.

⁸⁰⁶ Hamilton-Browne, *Lost Legionary*, 154; "Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel F.A. Stanley, April 10, 1879," 136-137.

guns.⁸⁰⁷ The Zulu appeared to concur with this assessment, for efforts were made to take the corners of the square held by the machineguns, with one Zulu warrior touching the barrel of a Gatling before being shot down.⁸⁰⁸

Regardless of Chelmsford's careful preparations and the technological advantages offered to him by the Naval Brigade's machineguns, the Battle of Gingindhlovu was hardly one-sided, and there were two key moments of crisis for the British. The first came on the northeastern face of the square, held by five companies of the 3/60th Rifles. The 3/60th was a new battalion, raised for the Anglo-Zulu War, and comprised of green troops. When Zulu sniper fire mortally wounded their Lieutenant-Colonel the 3/60th began to waver, and as the Zulu shortened the gap between themselves and the laager, the 3/60th's firing grew highly erratic. Several of the battalion's junior officers later admitted their men were scared out of their minds, and some of the nearby Naval officers were afraid that the 3/60th might break altogether. The most scathing indictment of the battalion's performance came from Hamilton-Browne. The soldier-of-fortune attached himself to the 3/60th during the opening stages of the battle, and it was his opinion that they were on the verge of openly running. "It was only the frantic efforts of the officers of one regiment," he reported, "that, on the death of their Colonel, prevented their men from making a clean bolt of it, and that just at the most critical moment when the charging Zulus were within one hundred yards of the shelter trench. Troth it was a near call and for a few minutes it was a toss-up whether the laager at Ginginhlova [sic] was not to be a second shambles like Isandlwana."⁸⁰⁹ The 3/60th did, in the end, hold and the Zulu attack on their line was broken up by the Gatling guns and Marines of the Naval Brigade, but it was a near thing.

⁸⁰⁷ Hamilton-Browne, *Lost Legionary*, 154; "Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel F.A. Stanley, April 10, 1879," 137; Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*, 132.

⁸⁰⁸ Quoted in Castle and Knight, *Fearful Hard Times*, 198.

⁸⁰⁹ Hamilton-Browne, *Lost Legionary*, 153.

The second crisis occurred as the first Zulu offensive faltered. Chelmsford, seeing the Zulu falling back from his right front corner, ordered Captain Barrow and his Mounted Infantry to keep the Zulu on the run. The Zulu, however, were not actually running, and as Barrow charged out after them, the Zulu reformed their ranks, and encircled his cavalry, in much the same manner Mnyamana and Ntshingwayo's men trapped Buller's horsemen at Hlobane. Luckily for Barrow, Chelmsford quickly recognised his error and sent out William Molyneux and another body of cavalry to rescue the Mounted Infantry and usher them safely back inside the laager. Three men were killed, Barrow was wounded, and Molyneux's horse was shot out from under him, an experience that still disturbed him years.⁸¹⁰

The Battle of Gingindhlovu lasted until 7:30 am, and during that time the Zulu made several more unsuccessful attempts to storm the laager, causing few casualties among the British but provoking many more tense moments. After seven o'clock the Zulu offensive finally lost steam, with the warriors settling in to shoot at the British, rather than massing for another charge. Judging the time was right to try the cavalry again, Chelmsford sent out Barrow with the Mounted Infantry and his Volunteer and auxiliary horsemen. This time around, the tactic worked, and the cavalry charge went through the Zulu line, sending the army into full retreat. Somopho and Dabulamanzi left over four hundred bodies behind and are thought to have suffered a thousand casualties or so in total, nearly ten percent of their force. Chelmsford lost nine men killed and six officers and forty-six men wounded. In his report to the War Office, Chelmsford stated "our casualties are small considering the easy mark the laager afforded the assailants, and, had it not been for the cover afforded the troops by the broad shelter trench, I should have had to report a much heavier loss."⁸¹¹ No longer blind to danger, Chelmsford did not

⁸¹⁰ Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*, 133-134.

⁸¹¹ "Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel F.A. Stanley, April 10, 1879," 137-138.

linger long in the vicinity of Gingindhlovu. Breaking through to Eshowe, he relieved Pearson's starving garrison then abandoned the fortress, retreating to Natal.

Post-war propaganda by Evelyn Wood and the historical writings derived from his account, privilege the Battle of Khambula and discount Gingindhlovu as turning points in the war. In this narrative, it is Khambula that showed the way to defeating the Zulu, while Gingindhlovu (and eventually Ulundi) were mere afterthoughts, won by Chelmsford with the tactics Wood pioneered. This version of events does not survive an examination of the facts at hand. At the time of Gingindhlovu, Chelmsford did not know about Khambula or what tactics Wood used there. Chelmsford's dispositions at Gingindhlovu were his own, based on his own bitter experience and the advice of local experts like John Dunn. Moreover, Wood at Khambula was on the tactical and strategic defensive. Hlobane shredded his column and Wood's only concern the next day at Khambula was staying alive. Chelmsford, conversely, was on the tactical defense at Gingindhlovu, but on the offense strategically. He came to save Colonel Pearson and the Eshowe garrison and marched deep into Zulu territory to do so. He then assumed a defensive position not because he was trying to prevent his force from being overwhelmed and destroyed, but because Isandlwana and Ntombe Drift convinced him that only by keeping his men together and making the most of his technological superiority could he be victorious over the Zulu. Gingindhlovu was won by massed rifle fire and by the Gatling guns of the Naval Brigade, but also by Lord Chelmsford's realisation he needed to maximise those advantages to best the Zulu. It was the first time British offensive operations against the Zulu ended in unqualified success.

For the Zulu, on the other hand, Gingindhlovu was a major setback. Khambula was a defeat, but not one that notably altered the strategic picture. In the days immediately after it, Wood was far too battered to advance again, while in the other field of operations, Chelmsford

and Pearson remained separated by miles of ground and a second Zulu army. Had Chelmsford been halted at Gingindhlovu, it is far from unbelievable that Mnyamana and Ntshingwayo could have launched a second attack on Wood, finishing what they started and completing Cetshwayo's plan for the isolation and elimination of the individual parts of the British army.

With Somopho and Dabulamanzi in retreat from Gingindhlovu and the siege of Eshowe broken, the strategic picture was now entirely different for the Zulu King. Chelmsford and Pearson were headed back across the border into Natal and Wood's column would join them shortly. The British armies had reunited and would soon be joined by further reinforcements. The Zulu military, on the other hand, had taken more than 3000 casualties since January and had no way to replace those numbers. For now, Zulu morale was holding, but Cetshwayo knew if the war went on much longer both the people's will, and the agrarian economy would break down as the young men who were needed to work the fields were kept under arms or killed in action. Chelmsford knew it too, and the Anglo-Zulu War was now steadily moving into its final phase.

While Chelmsford was busying himself at Eshowe and Gingindhlovu, the extra men he had requested from Great Britain continued to arrive at South African docks. The 58th Foot, 94th Foot, and elements of the 60th Rifles, 4th Foot, 21st Foot and 58th Foot, were all in the colony by April 11th, as were new drafts for the 1/24th Foot, still tattered after Isandlwana. Batteries of cannon and Gatling guns from the Royal Artillery were sent out as well, freeing Chelmsford from his reliance on the Naval Brigade for his artillery complement, and the 1st Dragoon Guards, 3rd Dragoon Guards, and 17th Lancers gave him the dedicated heavy cavalry he previously lacked.⁸¹² The 30th Company of the Royal Engineers and new drafts of Special Service officers rounded out Chelmsford's new army which exceeded 22 500 men when completed.⁸¹³ The

⁸¹² Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*, 149-150.

⁸¹³ Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*, 152.

number of officers of general rank was also far higher than previously; Major-General Henry Hope Crealock (brother of Chelmsford's Assistant Military Secretary, John North Crealock), Major-General Edward Newdigate, and Major-General Henry Hugh Clifford were all sent to Natal, while Evelyn Wood was Brevetted Brigadier-General at Chelmsford's recommendation.⁸¹⁴ Chelmsford now had a real army under his command, one that nearly matched Cetshwayo's in number and, with increases in artillery and cavalry, should easily outperform it in flexibility.

Chelmsford spent the remainder of April and May carefully moving his forces towards frontline bases along the border between Natal and Zululand but did not begin his advance until May 31st despite frequent exhortations from the War Office and regular criticism in the press. Superficially, his plan resembled the one that ended so poorly at Isandlwana, with three columns moving into Zululand in tandem with one another to trap the Zulu between them. There were, however, important differences. In January, Chelmsford's columns, intended for the rapid pursuit of guerilla bands, were too weak to withstand an assault from the main Zulu army. By the second invasion Chelmsford rectified his errors on this front. The First Division, under HH Crealock, tasked with Pearson's old mission of advancing along the coast, numbered 9414 men, almost twice the number that successfully repulsed the Zulu at Gingindhlovu. The Second Division, theoretically under Newdigate but in practise commanded by Chelmsford himself, counted 4822 men in its ranks and was accompanied by the 1100 British heavy cavalry and auxiliary scouts of the Cavalry Brigade. Evelyn Wood commanded the Flying Column with 3849 men and was instructed to remain close to Chelmsford and Newdigate's Second Division so they could support one another. Each column had its own artillery support as well. On the Natal side of the border, Clifford was left in charge of their base.⁸¹⁵ Having incorporated the lessons of Khambula

⁸¹⁴ Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*, 150-152.

⁸¹⁵ Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*, 150-152.

and Gingindhlovu, Chelmsford's second invasion of Zululand immunised itself against Zulu attack through technological superiority and overwhelming force.

As it turned out, the Zulu, despite Chelmsford's best precautions, were still more than capable of upsetting his plans and dragging his name through the mud. On June 2, the third day of the invasion, a Zulu scouting party ambushed a small cavalry patrol and wiped it out. In itself this was no great setback, but among the dead cavalymen was Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, exiled Prince Imperial of France. The Prince came to South Africa as a staff officer, and Chelmsford promised Cambridge, and through him, Queen Victoria and the deposed Empress Eugenie, he would keep the young man safe.⁸¹⁶ Indeed, Chelmsford's standing orders regarding the Prince Imperial were that he remain on the Lieutenant-General's staff, and never be sent into action. Louis-Napoleon went behind Chelmsford's back, however, and bullied his way into accompanying a cavalry patrol, a bad decision that gained him nothing beyond a pointless death at the hands of Zulu scouts. Chelmsford's apologist, Norris-Newman, was right for once when he proclaimed the Prince Imperial's loss a minor skirmish blown entirely out of proportion by the press at home but being in the right could not help Chelmsford.⁸¹⁷ Even more than Isandlwana, the death of the last heir to Napoleon was frontpage news all over Europe, and Chelmsford's culpability was debated in the House of Commons and House of Lords alike.⁸¹⁸ Under pressure from Parliament, the War Office sent Sir Garnet Wolseley to South Africa with a mandate to supersede Chelmsford and Bartle Frere both.⁸¹⁹

⁸¹⁶ "Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to H.R.H. the Duke of Cambridge," in *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 146.

⁸¹⁷ Norris-Newman, *Through Zululand With the British*, 192.

⁸¹⁸ "House of Commons: Questions: 26th June 1879," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 3, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 414.

"House of Lords: Debate: 1st August 1879," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 3, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 420.

⁸¹⁹ "South Africa—the Zulu War—Overtures of Peace—Question," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 3, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 366-367.

Lord Chelmsford's career was now over and he knew it. All that remained was for him to salvage something of his dignity and reputation. Abandoning the comparative civility that characterised his first effort to conquer Zululand, Chelmsford implemented a policy of scorched earth warfare, burning Zulu homesteads and crops, slaughtering Zulu livestock, and ordering Crealock and Wood to do the same.⁸²⁰ Where military victories had failed to bring the Zulu to heel, the devastation of their agriculture and destruction of their economy might now do it instead. No Phil Sheridan at heart, Chelmsford still tried to avoid excess casualties among Zulu non-combatants, but some inevitably occurred and the malefactors, whom Chelmsford had previously threatened with severe punishments, now escaped without even a warning. The Zulu had taken Chelmsford's standing as a Victorian gentleman from him and he abandoned his gentlemanly notions of honourable warfare as he tried to gain that standing back, marching straight for Ulundi.

Cetshwayo knew Chelmsford was coming and was waiting for him. There was not much else the Zulu King could do at this date. He made additional peace overtures to Chelmsford and to Bartle Frere, but the British officials, driven to save themselves from the wrath of their superiors, were not interested in anything but his unconditional surrender.⁸²¹ Cetshwayo was going to have to fight Chelmsford again, and his ability to do was badly impaired. Chelmsford's new columns were far too large for the divide-and-conquer strategy the King and Ntshingwayo used in the early months of the war; the First Division by itself and the Second Division and Flying Column together being of such size only the full Zulu army would have a chance against them. The death of Prince Mbilini in a minor skirmish that April further limited Cetshwayo's

⁸²⁰ "Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Sir Henry Bulwer, April 18, 1879," in *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 154.

⁸²¹ "Lieutenant-General Chelmsford to King Cetshwayo, June 4, 1879," in *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 184.

options; the exiled Swazi Prince had been his best guerilla leader, and with him gone there was no Zulu commander who could successfully mimic the kind of delaying tactics that so frustrated Evelyn Wood.⁸²² The only card Cetshwayo had left to play was an open battle with Chelmsford at Ulundi, a scenario the King knew favoured the British. His councillors and generals were determined to make a last-ditch bid to stop Chelmsford though, and for the final time the Zulu levies were mustered at Ulundi. Prince Ziwedu kaMpande, Cetshwayo's brother, held command, but it was Ntshingwayo kaMahole, triumphant at Isandlwana and Hlobane, who seems to have been really in charge. Apprised of Chelmsford's movements by their scouts, and unwilling to give in without a last stand, Ziwedu and Ntshingwayo lay in wait for Chelmsford with 20 000 Zulu warriors.⁸²³

On July 3, Chelmsford and Wood reached the outskirts of Ulundi and made camp. A force of light cavalry, under Sir Redvers Buller was sent to scout the region around Ulundi and uncover the Zulu dispositions if any. Buller, who fought under Chelmsford in the Xhosa Wars and served Wood so ably at Hlobane and Khambula, was Chelmsford's preferred scout throughout the advance on Ulundi, and had, over the last months, burned more Zulu homesteads and rustled more Zulu cattle than any of the Lieutenant-General's other officers. Once described as "brave to the point of insanity," Buller was nevertheless careful with the lives of his white troops, and the Volunteer cavalrymen always loved him.⁸²⁴ He was therefore a natural choice to scout the vicinity of Ulundi and determine the route for Chelmsford's advance.

⁸²² "Governor the Right Hon. Sir H.B.E. Frere, Bart., G.C.B., G.C.S.I, to the Right Hon. Sir Michael Hicks Beach, Bart., April 29, 1879," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 3, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 196.

⁸²³ The figure of 20 000 warriors is given by Chelmsford and most historians, including Knight, Laband, and Greaves, agree with it.

⁸²⁴ Wolseley, *The Story of a Soldier's Life* Vol. 2, 279.

As luck would have it, the selection of Buller proved fortuitous for an entirely different set of reasons. As a survivor of Hlobane, Buller had seen what a Zulu ambush could do to an unprepared cavalry force and kept a wary eye out for any signs of a trap. Shortly after leaving camp, Buller's cavalry encountered first a small party of warriors, then several goatherds, and finally a band of mounted Zulu under Zibhebhu kaMaphitha, who led the Zulu scouts at Isandlwana and was responsible for a recent series of sniper attacks on parties of soldiers. Buller chased after Zibhebhu, aiming to end the Zulu officer's menace for good, only to stop short when he recognised something was wrong. Zibhebhu's horsemen, the small band of warriors, and even the goatherds, had all been fleeing in the same direction, drawing Buller into another Zulu ambush. At the banks of the Mbilane stream, just past the homestead of Nodwengo and three-quarters of a mile from Ulundi, Buller's suspicions became too much and he ordered his command to fall back, only moments before a hidden Zulu war-party raised the net they had concealed in the long grass. Essentially a low-tech equivalent of a minefield, the net was meant to entangle the legs of Buller's mounts, unhorsing the cavalry, and leaving them easy prey to the 5000 Zulu waiting in the grass. Their plan thwarted by Buller's acutely tuned sense for danger, those 5000 Zulu emerged from hiding and opened fire on Buller's Mounted Infantry who beat a hasty retreat to Chelmsford's army and the protection of the laager and infantry square.⁸²⁵

The July 3 ambush is alluded to in some form in most histories of the Anglo-Zulu War, but its implications have often gone unexplored; usually it is seen as little more than a prequel to the real battle at Ulundi the next day. Yet the elaborate attempt to eliminate Buller, and with him the better part of Chelmsford's reconnaissance force should probably be viewed as another

⁸²⁵ "From Brigadier-General Evelyn Wood, Commanding Flying Column, to the Deputy Adjutant-General," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 4, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 147.

example of Zulu tactical sophistication. The Zulu saw at Khambula and Gingindhlovu just how lethal British cavalry could be, especially when the terrain favoured them. They also understood, after observing Chelmsford's advance over the last month, that the Mounted Infantry and Volunteers under Buller were Chelmsford's eyes and ears in Zululand's countryside. At Nodwengo, Ntshingwayo and Zibhebhu tried to remove Buller and his scouts from the table, a move which, if successful, would have blinded Chelmsford, with no way to distinguish the best route towards Ulundi. This would have left the Lieutenant-General at a crucial disadvantage the next day and could, potentially, have tipped the odds at Ulundi in favour of the Zulu. Despite what some historians have suggested since, Nodwengo should be an obvious sign that the Zulu were still trying to win and had every intent of making a fight of it at Ulundi.

Nodwengo should also provide some insight into the Zulu plans for the battle. Throughout the conflict Ntshingwayo, in his capacity as King Cetshwayo's most trusted general, left his personal imprint on each engagement at which he held the command. At Isandlwana, he waited until Chief Matshana lured Lord Chelmsford away from the British campsite, before enveloping Durnford and Pulleine with his 20 000 man army, which was concealed a short distance away. At Hlobane, he had Prince Mbilini and Chief Manyanyoba bait Buller and Russell into chasing them up the mountain, then struck at Wood and Weatherly with his 15 000 warriors, encircling Hlobane and aiming to prevent escape. Now, at Nodwengo, he once again orchestrated an ambush of a detached piece of Chelmsford's army, and did so while his own host, 20 000 strong, was camped less than three-quarters of a mile away. The possibility must be considered that the Battle of Ulundi, as it took place, was actually the fallback plan, and Ntshingwayo's original idea was not only to blind Chelmsford by taking out his cavalry, but to then assault him while he was on the march, as Godide had done to Pearson in January. Such an attack, made

against an army in transit and with no warning from its scouts, could have done real damage to Chelmsford's column, particularly if they were hit while trying to cross the Mbilane. It would certainly have been Ntshingwayo's best bet for winning the war at this late date. That Zibhebhu, who did so much to enable the surprise attack at Isandlwana, was the one coordinating the attempt on Buller is even more suggestive as to Ntshingwayo's intentions. Since no one bothered to interview the Zulu general after the war his strategy remains undisclosed, but it may be that Buller, in evading Ntshingwayo's trap, also spared the army from a full-scale ambush on July 3rd.

Chelmsford broke camp early the next morning and, following the route Buller recommended, crossing the river between Nodwengo and Ulundi at 6:45am. Those injured during the march, and the 1/24, reconstituted by drafts from England, were left to hold the camp, while the rest of the Second Division and the Flying Column moved against Cetshwayo. Buller located a favourable position the day before, and Chelmsford set up his army along it, on "high ground uncommanded from any point, and with but little cover beyond long grass near it."⁸²⁶ As at Gingindhlovu, Chelmsford formed his infantrymen into a huge, hollow square with the cavalry inside and the corners anchored by Gatling guns. With four of the Gatlings in hand this time, instead of the two he had at Gingindhlovu, Chelmsford was able to place a machinegun in each corner of the square, defending his most vulnerable points with automatic gunfire. Each face of the square was reinforced by a battery of artillery loaded with cannister and primed to devastate the Zulu infantry.⁸²⁷ This superiority in artillery was key to Chelmsford's battleplan since, unlike at Khambula or Gingindhlovu, he did not intend to entrench or laager. To Molyneux, Chelmsford explained his belief that the Zulu, having bested the British at Isandlwana, Ntombe Drift, and

⁸²⁶ "Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel F.A. Stanley, July 6, 1879," in *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, ed. John Laband (Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994): 210.

⁸²⁷ Rothwell, *Narrative of Field Operations*, 115.

Hlobane, would never accept that they had been defeated as long as the only British victories were won from behind laagers and trench lines.⁸²⁸ The Zulu army had to be shattered in open battle before Cetshwayo's generals would admit the war was over. In his memoirs, Evelyn Wood, as he so often did, claimed credit for this idea, saying Chelmsford got it from him.⁸²⁹ William Molyneux's memoirs disagree, not only attributing the plan to Chelmsford, but stating that Wood wished to entrench.⁸³⁰ Whichever of the men the notion originated with, it showed a much better understanding of their Zulu foe than either of them possessed at the start of hostilities.

The Battle of Ulundi commenced at 8:45 the morning of July 4 as Chelmsford's cavalry, led by Redvers Buller, rode out to harass the approaching Zulu. Here, Buller played the same role he had at Khambula, with almost identical results. The younger Zulu warriors gave chase and were drawn within artillery and rifle range, where Chelmsford's gunners and riflemen stopped them cold as Buller pulled back inside the square. The Zulu loss of control was only temporary, however; Ziwedu and Ntshingwayo soon imposed discipline, and by 9:00 the British square was surrounded. Khambula and Gingindhlovu taught the Zulu the strengths and weaknesses of the British square as a formation, and at Ulundi that knowledge was put into use, with the Zulu boss attacking the frontal face of the square while the horns circled round back to strike almost simultaneously at the rear corners.⁸³¹ The Zulu have sometimes been criticized for their reliance on infantry assaults, but the reality of their situation was that nothing else was liable to work. In a shooting match Zulu musketry would be overmatched by British riflery, artillery, and machineguns. Only with a shock attack on the vulnerable corners of the square

⁸²⁸ Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*, 186.

⁸²⁹ Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 2, 89.

⁸³⁰ Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*, 186.

⁸³¹ "Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel F.A. Stanley, July 6, 1879," 211.

could Ziwedu and Ntshingwayo hope to crack the British defenses and trigger a rout. It was a high-risk, high-reward plan, typical of the Zulu in general and Ntshingwayo in particular.

When the war was over, Evelyn Wood told his readers the Zulu had not fought very hard at Ulundi. He aimed to bolster the image of his own triumph at Khambula, by making it the battle that broke the Zulu.⁸³² Chelmsford too downplayed Zulu effectiveness at Ulundi to make his victory clearer. Both general's claims are belied by reports from their subordinates who spoke admiringly of the courage of the Zulu charge. At the right rear corner the Zulu, despite British marksmanship and machine gunnery reached within thirty yards of the square, their final push broken up by cannister fire and close range riflery.⁸³³ Still undaunted, some Zulu, led by Zibhebhu, forced their way closer still, reaching within nine paces of the British line. Officers were drawing swords and revolvers in anticipation of a close-quarters bloodbath, when Chelmsford redeployed his reserves to the right corner and quashed the Zulu attack with seven rounds of case shot at point blank range.⁸³⁴ If the attack on the left face of the square was not quite so ferocious it was still intense enough that the infantry were ordered to fix bayonets in case the Zulu broke through the barrier of British fire.⁸³⁵

By 9:30 the Zulu knew they could not take the square. Bitter experience at Khambula and Gingindhlovu showed them that British defensive positions, if not taken swiftly, were unlikely to be taken at all. Chelmsford, sensing this was his chance, ordered a charge by Colonel Drury-Lowe and the 17th Lancers. The heavy cavalry, armed with their namesake polearms, scythed

⁸³² Wood, *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Vol. 2, 90.

⁸³³ "From Colonel Glyn, C.B., Commanding Infantry Brigade, to Assistant Adjutant-General, 2nd Division, July 5, 1879," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 4, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 145.

⁸³⁴ Ibid. See also Laband, *Kingdom in Crisis*, 225 for the best analysis of the action as a whole, and Knight, *Great Zulu Commanders* 173 for an examination of Zibhebhu's probable role in the encounter.

⁸³⁵ "From Colonel Glyn, C.B., Commanding Infantry Brigade, to Assistant Adjutant-General, 2nd Division, July 5, 1879," 144.

into the Zulu at the rear of the square, clearing the ground between Nodwengo and Chelmsford's army in a matter of minutes, killing an estimated hundred and fifty Zulu. The fight did not go out of the Zulu, however, and they briefly rallied, subjecting Drury-Lowe's lancers to a fusillade of musketry that stopped him in front of the hills leading to Ulundi. Drury-Lowe, not wishing to repeat the errors of Hlobane, declined to pursue the Zulu into the hills and chose instead to regather his men, a decision Chelmsford endorsed in his report after the battle.⁸³⁶

Chelmsford, in the meantime, sent out Buller and the Mounted Infantry, and it was this second cavalry charge that made the Zulu rout a general one. As the Zulu broke and ran, Chelmsford advanced two of his nine-pounder guns and opened up on the retreating enemy, hastening their departure even as first Buller, and then Drury-Lowe, took off in pursuit. Chelmsford estimated that four hundred and fifty Zulu were slain in the retreat, a number which most historians view as a fairly accurate one. Mustering his men into marching formation, Chelmsford pushed forwards to Ulundi and set fire to the royal homestead. The next day Chelmsford resigned his command, leaving Garnet Wolseley the unglamorous job of tracking down Cetshwayo who had vanished into the hills. The Zulu losses likely exceeded 1500 and may have been as much 2500; with so many dead, the Zulu army was never again able to offer any meaningful resistance to the British.⁸³⁷

Evelyn Wood's opinion notwithstanding, it was the consensus at the time that Ulundi was the battle that broke the Zulu. Sir Bartle Frere and Sir Michael Hicks Beach certainly thought so, with Hicks Beach reading Bartle Frere's opinion on the matter into the Parliamentary minutes.⁸³⁸ Wolseley, who had to negotiate the actual end of the war, found Zulu chiefs, previously defiant

⁸³⁶ "Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel F.A. Stanley, July 6, 1879," 212.

⁸³⁷ "Lieutenant-General Lord Chelmsford to Colonel F.A. Stanley, July 6, 1879," 212-213.

⁸³⁸ "South Africa—the Zulu War—Victory at Ulundi," in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 4, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 221.

in the face of British offers of surrender, were willing to talk after Ulundi and gave Chelmsford the credit was due to him for this.⁸³⁹ Molyneux reported speaking to Zulu veterans who concurred that the war was not over until Ulundi.⁸⁴⁰ The general acknowledgement of his triumph was not enough to save Chelmsford's career. Recalled home after his resignation, he became a personal military advisor to Queen Victoria but never held another field command. Even the patronage of the Queen was insufficient to overcome the stigma of Isandlwana and the death of the Prince Imperial, and the Duke of Cambridge refused to trust Chelmsford again.

Chelmsford was not the only member of the conspiracy to lose his job. When the First Anglo-Boer War began in 1880, Bartle Frere, who justified the Zulu campaign on the premise it would reconcile the Boers to British rule, was recalled to London. There he faced a Parliamentary inquiry into his misconduct as High Commissioner for South Africa. Theophilus Shepstone, the third member of the triumvirate, was ordered to London at the same time, ostensibly to advise the government on the situation in the Transvaal. Shortly after, he was pushed into early retirement, the trust Parliament had once had in him long since dissipated.

All three men deserved to lose their jobs. Yet it should be said, in a lukewarm defense of Lord Chelmsford, that for all the recklessness he displayed in starting the war, and for all the blundering arrogance that led to Isandlwana, he did learn from his mistakes and did, in the end, conquer Zululand for the British. Chelmsford's errors in judgement, most notably his underestimation of the Zulu and his belief they would fight him in the same manner the Xhosa had, were also far from unique to him. Colonial reasoning of this kind was common throughout the British establishment with Sir Bartle Frere, Lord Chelmsford, and Sir Theophilus Shepstone

⁸³⁹“From General Sir G.J. Wolseley to the Secretary of State for War, July 18, 1879,” in *Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Vol. 4, ed. John Laband, Ian Knight (London: Archival Publications, 2000): 172.

⁸⁴⁰ Molyneux, *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*, 199-200.

being only the most prominent victims of it. Sir Evelyn Wood, whose career was helped, rather than hindered by the Anglo-Zulu War, and who would eventually be granted a Field Marshal's baton, was every bit as guilty of bad judgement and colonial thinking as Chelmsford. Indeed, Wood's behaviour at Hlobane is, if anything, even more open to criticism than Chelmsford's before Isandlwana; Isandlwana had shown the British precisely how competent the Zulu were, yet Wood refused to accept it and earned the British Army another embarrassing loss in the process. It took the reversal at Hlobane and a life-and-death struggle at Khambula for Wood, widely acknowledged as a capable officer, to remove his own blinders and see the Zulu for the dangerous, professional adversary that they were.

Chelmsford's blinders were off after Isandlwana, and he spent months reformatting his strategy in accordance with his newfound appreciation for Zulu generalship. At Gingindhlovu he used overwhelming technical superiority, fortifications, and thousands of reinforcements from Great Britain to relieve the Siege of Eshowe. He then integrated what he learned at Gingindhlovu, what Wood learned at Khambula, and what the army all learned at Isandlwana, Ntombe Drift, and Hlobane into a war-winning strategy based around attrition, artillery, and the economic degradation of the Zulu Kingdom. Chelmsford was not a brilliant general but he was competent enough to know Zululand could not match the resources of the British Empire. So long as the London government was more worried about saving face than punishing insubordination, Chelmsford would have all the resources he needed to win the war, while Cetshwayo's economic base and reserves of manpower would continue to shrink. Unable to win the war through superior strategy, Chelmsford fell back on the advantages he held from the start and won by employing of technology the Zulu could not match. At the Battle of Ulundi, Chelmsford was not the best general present. He was, however, the general with the Gatling

guns, the cavalry, the artillery, and the masses of riflemen he needed to overcome his more skilled opponent. Chelmsford finally understood what the Zulu army could and could not do, and that understanding allowed him to maximise his advantages and finally close out the war.

*

When contrasting the conclusions of the Great Sioux and Anglo-Zulu Wars it is the differences, rather than the similarities that become immediately apparent. Phil Sheridan and Lord Chelmsford were, after all, very different men and their reactions to the reverses they suffered were diametrically opposed. Sheridan, widely regarded as one of the best of the Civil War generals, refused to alter his preconceptions, and to the end, tried to prosecute the war along the lines he first drew up in January 1876. It was the innovations and talents of subcommanders like Bad Hand Mackenzie and Nelson Miles that ended the Lakota and Cheyenne threat by early 1877 and prevented the war from dragging on for another year or more. This is quite different from South Africa, where Lord Chelmsford, often derided as incompetent, absorbed the lessons his prior embarrassments handed him, and went into Gingindhlovu and Ulundi with an entirely new set of tactics, enabling him to beat the Zulu military that had previously humbled him.

Nothing in the two men's personal histories accounts for this discrepancy. The difference lay in their motivations, not their pasts. Sheridan's skillful manipulation of the press saw most of the culpability for the Little Bighorn assigned to Custer, with the few dissenters targeting Crook, Terry, or even Grant, rather than Sheridan. No matter how poorly the Great Sioux War went, it had little impact on Sheridan's career, which continued to trend upwards, with his eventual succession to the post of General-in-Chief on William Sherman's retirement. Lord Chelmsford, however, was fighting for his public life. Durnford and Pulleine were not famous like Custer, and Chelmsford's distance from London made controlling the press a much more daunting task for

him than for Sheridan. Chelmsford knew any more mistakes would result in his professional ruin, and he was thus highly motivated to find a way to win the war, and win it quickly, before Garnet Wolseley could displace him and claim all the glory for Cetshwayo's downfall. Chelmsford ultimately failed to save his career, but his decision to change tactics was indicative of the desire to do so; faced with the loss of his job and the degradation of his reputation, Chelmsford discarded his colonial reasoning. Sheridan was never confronted with that same problem, and as such, never had his outlook transformed to the extent Chelmsford's was. The American general also had subordinates, like Mackenzie and Miles, who could win the war for him while he remained behind his desk; Chelmsford, having taken the field once had no choice but to take it again, and whatever aid he might have been given by Evelyn Wood and Redvers Buller had to finish the war himself. Chelmsford had to find his own war-winning strategies and tactics; Sheridan had those supplied to him by Mackenzie and Miles.

It is when examining those war-winning strategies that one again begins to see the overlap between the Great Sioux and Anglo-Zulu Wars. This is especially true when comparing Lord Chelmsford's victories at Gingindhlovu and Ulundi to Nelson Miles' triumphs at Cedar Creek and Wolf Mountain. Miles and Chelmsford both took the strategic offensive, but the tactical defensive, marching into enemy territory, taking a strong position and allowing their opponents to come to them. Both relied on massed riflemen, artillery, and at times, entrenchments and fortifications to counter the greater mobility and numbers of their enemies. The technological superiority of Euro-American armies is so widely accepted as fact that it is sometimes glossed over, yet it was critical to both Miles and Chelmsford's schemes. Miles used the superior range of his rifles to hold the Lakota and Cheyenne at a distance, and the power of his artillery to break up cavalry charges that might have otherwise endangered his infantry

squares. Chelmsford used squares of riflemen in the same way, while his artillery and Gatling guns backed up the infantry, defending the weak points of the square and reducing the number of Zulu who came within close-combat range even further. Miles and Chelmsford were victorious, in large part, because their tactics maximised the edge that their technological advantages gave them. On the tactical offense, against highly mobile indigenous enemies, artillery, Gatling guns, and lines of riflemen were next to useless; on the defense they created impassable walls of fire the Lakota-Cheyenne and Zulu could not overwhelm.

On a related note, Miles and Chelmsford's other discovery was that they could not beat Native armies on Native terms. Indigenous leaders like Crazy Horse, Gall, Mbilini, and Ntshingwayo were able generals, and the warriors under their command were competent to a degree that confounded their white enemies. The Lakota and Cheyenne were among the best light cavalry in the world, while the Zulu shock troops excelled in open infantry engagements. When the American Army fought the Plains tribes with cavalry, or the British forces confronted the Zulu in the open, they invited defeat at the hands of an enemy who understood that kind of warfare better than they did. At Cedar Creek, Wolf Mountain, Gingindhlovu, and Ulundi, Miles and Chelmsford changed the rules, employing tactics their white troops could easily execute, and leaving the Lakota-Cheyenne and Zulu on unfamiliar ground. There was an acknowledgement, explicit in Miles' case, tacit in Chelmsford's, that the American and British armies were overmatched at, respectively, cavalry warfare and open infantry fighting. Given Miles' use of infantry assaults in the final stages at Cedar Creek and Wolf Mountain, and Chelmsford's unleashing of the cavalry in the last moments of Gingindhlovu and Ulundi, the importance of combined arms warfare should not be overlooked either. The Lakota and Northern Cheyenne were superior to the US cavalry arm, the Zulu better at open fighting than the British infantry,

but Miles and Chelmsford did not have to rely on cavalry or infantry alone to win their battles. By changing which arms of the military they were emphasising, Miles and Chelmsford could employ a tactical flexibility the mono-arm forces of the Plains tribes and Zululand lacked.

This is not to suggest Indigenous leaders were incapable of innovation. At Wolf Mountain, Crazy Horse's surprise infantry attack threatened Miles' lines, while his use of fortifications made Miles' own infantry charge a far more hazardous prospect than it would otherwise have been. At Ulundi, Ziwedu and Ntshingwayo's plan of attack made it obvious that they had analysed and comprehended the strengths and weaknesses of Chelmsford's square formation, even if they did not have the resources necessary to break it. Native American and African commanders displayed every bit as much inventive spirit, tactical skill, and drive to win as their Euro-American enemies, and sometimes more. Given sufficient time, it is not unbelievable that the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne could have mastered infantry combat, or that the Zulu would have found a solution to the British square and its machineguns. Sufficient time, however, was not available.

From the very beginning, the Great Sioux Anglo-Zulu Wars were on time limits. The Lakota-Cheyenne coalition and Zululand did not have the economic resources or manpower reserves to fight it out with the American and British imperial projects over the long term. White soldiers were frequently outnumbered in individual battles, but there were always more reinforcements waiting in the wings. The Lakota, Northern Cheyenne, and Zulu did not have that same luxury. With far smaller populations to draw upon, any defeat was a potential demographic disaster. The Americans and the British also had the funds and the willpower to prosecute the wars for as long as it took to win, while the Indigenous peoples, tied to respectively the hunting season and the agricultural cycle, could not do the same. The Lakota and Cheyenne needed

enough food supplies to last them through the winter. Bad Hand Mackenzie's attack on Dull Knife and Little Wolf's camp may not have produced many casualties, but the capture or burning of their winter food stores proved far more deadly to the Northern Cheyenne. King Cetshwayo was in the same position, as he could only raise Zululand's levies for a short period without depriving the economy of men needed to bring in the harvest and manage the herds. Chelmsford's cattle rustling and burning of homesteads exacerbated these problems and the economic collapse was a major reason for the Zulu to give up after Ulundi.

The comparatively fragile state of the Indigenous polities was the last ingredient in Miles and Chelmsford's conquests. The Lakota and Northern Cheyenne did not have a single leader, and it took a steady stream of successes to keep them in line behind any one cause. Sitting Bull was at the centre of the Native American alliance, but he was not chief of all the Lakota, and he had no influence save diplomacy over the Northern Cheyenne. When Miles chased Sitting Bull into Canada and Mackenzie burned the Northern Cheyenne's winter food stocks, the coalition, founded on the premise the united tribes could beat the white man, began to fray. Zululand, despite its history of civil wars, held together far better and there were comparatively few defections before Ulundi, with Prince Hamu the one notable exception. After Ulundi was lost and Cetshwayo went on the run, though, most of the Zulu barons were prepared to come to terms with the British invaders. Zululand's feudal structure bound the great chiefs of the kingdom with oaths of loyalty to the king, but once he was no longer ruling each chief felt free to make his own decisions and come to his own accommodations with the British.

Some historians have posited that these internal divisions among the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Zulu—and more broadly, amongst Indigenous peoples the world over—made their subjugation by Euro-American imperialism inevitable. This goes too far. The Lakota-Cheyenne

alliance held together for a year, and only came apart when their most prominent leaders were beaten and half their number reduced to starvation. Prince Hamu aside, Zululand showed little internal dissent, with those chiefs who favoured making terms with the British—Ntshingwayo among them—staying loyal to the king until his favourite homestead was sacked and he himself went into hiding. Internal fault lines were present in both Indigenous polities, but it took action on the part of the Americans and the British to promote the collapse of both systems. In the absence of American or British battlefield triumphs, both the Lakota-Cheyenne coalition and Zululand could have survived for months to come; they had to be beaten, and beaten repeatedly at that, before surrender to the whites became an option many were prepared to embrace.

In the final months of the Great Sioux and Anglo-Zulu Wars, Nelson Miles and Lord Chelmsford hit on the same war-winning strategy: offensive operations couched in defensive tactics, using massed riflemen to keep their enemies at range and artillery or Gatling guns to shatter charges. While there were aesthetic differences in their formations, the same basic tactics underlay them both and the same strategic concepts governed their employment. That Europeans and Americans beat Indigenous peoples through use of more advanced armaments is an old canard of military history, but it is one that has not been dissected enough. As the Rosebud, the Little Bighorn, Slim Buttes, Isandlwana, Ntombe Drift, and Hlobane show, “more advanced” armies could be, and were, crushed by “primitives” when they failed to take maximum advantage of their high-tech arsenal, or when Indigenous peoples utilized tactics that limited the efficacy of those armaments. To achieve victory, Miles and Chelmsford had to come up with tactics that made the best use of their arms while covering up deficiencies in other parts of their armies. That the tactics they used were as similar as they were is profoundly interesting, and raises questions

about whether there were underlying rules for this kind of colonial war, and if those rules can be extrapolated to other conflicts between colonisers and Indigenous peoples.

Conclusion: Due to the Victors—and the Vanquished

If the Great Sioux War and the Anglo-Zulu War proved anything, it was that bigotry was a poor basis for a plan of campaign. American and European officers who based their assumptions about enemy behaviour on the colour of that enemy's skin made critical mistakes that damaged their own reputations and got their men hurt or killed. Two of the most famous disasters in colonial history, the Battle of the Little Bighorn and the Battle of Isandlwana stemmed from fatal miscalculations on the parts of white generals who did not—and perhaps it might be said, *could not*—appreciate that their Indigenous foes were every bit as resourceful and tactically adept as they themselves were.

The generals who made these mistakes were not stupid men, and to claim they were would be to brush off the deeply ingrained prejudices of the day and how they twisted the perceptions of even the most capable of professional soldiers. It would also be to denigrate the efforts of the Indigenous commanders who fought so hard to defeat those professional soldiers. Philip Henry Sheridan might have been a brutal man, and even a cruel one, but he was not, by any means, a mentally deficient one. A Lieutenant-General by thirty-eight, Phil Sheridan was one of the American Civil War's top generals and an early theorist of total war, a concept that only grew more important as the nineteenth century turned over into the twentieth. His British counterpart, Lord Chelmsford, did not have Sheridan's lustrous reputation but he was still an experienced and competent soldier, with nothing in his record to suggest he would turn in a subpar performance when trying conclusions with the Zulu, his experiences in Ethiopia and the Xhosa frontier seemingly making him the perfect choice for another African command.

Sheridan and Chelmsford were misled not by their lack of intelligence, but by their ample reserves of prejudice, which convinced them that their enemies would not stand and fight and

would instead have to be run down and cornered like rats. It was the premise both men based their campaigns upon, and it set up their operations to fail from the very start. Conceived on faulty logic, both Sheridan and Chelmsford's operational schemes were destined to be stillborn, and that had nothing to do with either general's intellect—or with the intellects of their subordinates. George Crook, Alfred Terry, John Gibbon, Charles Pearson, Evelyn Wood, and Redvers Buller were all well-educated veteran commanders with resumes ranging from the solidly serviceable to the brilliant. Analyses of their actions should not be predicated on the idea that failure against Indigenous enemies exposed them as fools; rather it should cause us to ask what made these men, none of them devoid of common sense, turn in such uncharacteristically poor performances? It does them, and those who battled them, a disservice to ask otherwise.

The same rules can be—and must be—applied to Lieutenant-Colonel George Armstrong Custer and Brevet Colonel Anthony Durnford, the two men whose reputations were most damaged by the events of the two wars and who, dead at the Little Bighorn and Isandlwana respectively could not defend themselves when Sheridan and Chelmsford needed scapegoats. Custer's decision to attack Sitting Bull's 3000 warriors with his six hundred soldiers may have been a bad one, but it was a decision he should never have been placed in a position to make. Sheridan's plans and Terry's instructions said Custer was supposed to attack any Native American encampment he found. That he did as he was told was on Terry and Sheridan as much or more than it was on him. Durnford was even more blameless: arriving at Isandlwana after Lord Chelmsford marched off with half the column and after Henry Pulleine failed to register the presence of Zulu ambushers, Durnford was left to extricate the 24th Regiment from a trap sprung hours before he got there. He managed to buy his men time to get away, and in doing so saved a few hundred lives—which was likely all he could realistically have been expected to do.

Custer and Durnford died, not because of their own incapacity for field command, but because they were shackled by their superiors' expectations and presuppositions. Phil Sheridan had not bothered to involve, or even, it seems, to interview, any veterans of America's last war against the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne when he went about laying his plans. Instead, he consulted almost exclusively with George Crook, who had brought the Apache to heel, but had never confronted the tribes of the Northern Plains. Lord Chelmsford dismissed the testimony of Boer settlers, local Africans, and his own intelligence service alike, relying on his own experience against the Xhosa to determine how the Zulu would fight. Both Sheridan and Chelmsford were prisoners of the notion all Native Americans or Africans would fight the same way, and a campaign plan tailored to defeating one Indigenous people could be adapted to defeat another with minimal effort. This vision of Native Americans and Africans as cultural and military monoliths convinced the men at the top that if one Indigenous group broke and ran when faced with white troops, all others would do the same. When Alfred Terry detached George Custer from his column and sent him out searching for Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, he was following Sheridan's instructions to prevent "scatteration" on the part of the Lakota and Cheyenne. When Lord Chelmsford marched out of his Isandlwana camp and left Anthony Durnford and Henry Pulleine to defend it from a Zulu host, he was likewise trying to chase down what he thought were fleeing Africans. That the enemy would not—could not—fight back was a core tenet of their plans. When the foe did not conform to stereotype, it ended in catastrophe.

These same problems underpinned the other defeats of both wars, which are often glossed over due to the fame of the Little Bighorn and Isandlwana. At the Rosebud, George Crook was taken completely by surprise when Crazy Horse launched a sudden attack on his lines. Crook's forces, which thought themselves invulnerable to assault, were not prepared in the slightest for a

Native American offensive and dissolved into chaos, surviving through weight of numbers and the competency of Crook's junior officers. When the Little Bighorn confirmed the Rosebud was not a freak accident, Crook had no idea how to alter Sheridan's orders to achieve success, and his confused wanderings about the Plains led to the twin calamities of the Horsemeat March and the retreat from Slim Buttes. At Ntombe Drift, David Moriarty, despite the lessons of Isandlwana, did not post sufficient sentries, his continued, baffling belief his company was immune to Zulu action resulting in its near total extermination at the hands of Prince Mbilini's Swazi warband. At Hlobane, Evelyn Wood declined to scout and acted as if the mere advance of his cavalry would be enough to repel Mbilini, buying himself several hundred dead horsemen, and a narrow escape from obliteration at Khambula the next day. Sheridan and Chelmsford's overconfidence infected the men under them, and they all had to learn for themselves what the reality on the ground was. For some, like Moriarty, that learning cost them their lives.

Beyond the dangers inherent in letting racial bias lead to the underestimation the enemy, what lessons about colonial warfare can be gleaned from the Great Sioux and Anglo-Zulu Wars? The first is that the classic claims about the importance of Anglo-American technological superiority need to be taken with a grain of salt. That the power of modern weapons like the Springfield and Martini-Henry rifles was important to the victories of the colonial powers is indisputable. So too are the advantages provided by the possession of artillery, and, in the British case, the Gatling gun. Each of these weapons had the killing power of whole squads of riflemen, and they were vital force multipliers for the Americans and the British. That said, ideas about technological determinism should be seriously examined and critiqued, for as the many reversals of the wars show, Indigenous militaries could overcome the difference in weapons technology

through clever tactics, indicating factors beyond rifles, cannons, and early machineguns need to be discussed when tallying up the advantages enjoyed by the Americans and the British.

At the Rosebud, Crazy Horse's attack broke Crook's army into multiple parts, preventing the Americans from concentrating their fire against the Lakota and Cheyenne. At the Little Bighorn, the divisions between Custer, Reno, and Benteen achieved much the same result. At Sim Buttes, Crook could barely see Crazy Horse and his carbine fire again went wild. The British officers experienced similar problems. At Isandlwana, Pulleine's outnumbered troops, strung out in skirmish line with limited artillery support, could not halt the Zulu advance. At Ntombe Drift, Moriarty's divided company was set upon in the night and massacred. At Hlobane, Wood's decision to send his cavalry uphill without infantry or artillery support gave Mbilini and Ntshingwayo a perfect opportunity to catch him. In each of these cases, the American and British forces engaged could not, be it a result of tactical error on their part or tactical genius on the part of their adversaries, bring their technological advantage to bear. Conversely, there were times when the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Zulu had the edge in weaponry. Whenever the fighting degenerated into melee combat, as it did during Reno's rout and the final drive on Last Stand Hill and in all three African triumphs of the Anglo-Zulu War, the Indigenous armies held the upper hand. American cavalymen and the rank-and-file of the British infantry had no way to fight back against Lakota and Cheyenne lances, tomahawks and warclubs, or against Zulu spears and knobkerries. The bayonets of the British infantrymen, useful in massed charges, achieved little in individual encounters, while the American cavalry only revolvers for close-in defense. If the Lakota and Cheyenne or the Zulu could get their men in among white troops who were no longer in formation, they usually won.

It was not having more advanced weaponry that gave American and British forces the edge over their Native American and African enemies, but the way that weaponry was employed. All the victories won by the colonial powers were won by men who did everything they could to magnify the technology gap between the opposing armies. Nelson Miles relied on the greater range of his Springfield rifles and artillery pieces to hold the Lakota and Cheyenne back, using the artillery to break up charges, and the massed riflery from his infantry squares to outdistance the missile weapons used by the Native American cavalry. At Khambula and Gingindhlovu, Evelyn Wood and Lord Chelmsford hid behind fortifications and let the foe come to them, using cannons, Gatling guns, and volleys of fire from their infantry formations to kill charging Zulu. At Ulundi, Chelmsford did not fortify his position to the same degree but brought even more artillery and again allowed the Zulu to take the offensive. Whether they were strategically on defense or offense, the American and British commanders learned to remain on the tactical defense, as it gave them the best chance of maximising the lethality of their guns. Only when the enemy had dashed themselves against the defenses could pursuits be ordered and cavalry unleashed. American and British triumphs were the triumphs of combined arms against foes whose militaries were focused upon a single arm: it took the joint efforts of Anglo-American infantry, cavalry, and artillery to defeat Lakota and Cheyenne horsemen and Zulu shock troopers, whose mastery over their particular specialties was such that they would always best their immediate American or British counterparts in open combats.

Both the United States and Great Britain needed officers who understood their nemeses well enough to use the right tactics. On the Great Plains, Phil Sheridan never changed his views, but Nelson Miles preferred to take his own advice anyway and, disregarding Sheridan's fears about "scatteration" pursued a strategy of area denial that pushed the Lakota and Cheyenne onto

the reservations or out of the country. Miles could do this because he respected Lakota and Cheyenne culture and put in the time and effort to achieve a genuine understanding of their military capabilities. His success enabled other officers like George Crook to overcome their fears of Sheridan and adopt winning strategies of their own. At Isandlwana and Hlobane, Lord Chelmsford and Evelyn Wood learned the hard way about the correct means with which to engage the Zulu, discovering they could not be at anything less than their very best if they wanted to avoid career ruination. Neither man ever took the tactical offense again, and during the second invasion of Zululand they brought far more men and far more guns; the Zulu were not, they now knew, the Xhosa, and would require enormous quantities of men and ammunition to crush. Knowing the Zulu were better than their own men in open battle, Chelmsford and Wood never obliged them again, protecting their men behind laagers and Gatling guns. What Nelson Miles understood going in, Lord Chelmsford and Evelyn Wood discovered in the aftermath of humiliation: never fight your enemy on his terms.

Good leadership is essential for military success. That maxim, generally accepted in conversations about conventional wars between European states, is sometimes ignored in colonial conflicts. A look at the Great Sioux and Anglo-Zulu Wars shows how wrong that attitude is. The Lakota and Cheyenne chieftains and war-leaders who opposed American imperialism in the 1870s, were experienced, veteran commanders, who could formulate tactics and strategies as complex as those of any American regiment—and whose charisma and medicine could galvanize their warriors in ways American officers only poorly understood. Ntshingwayo kaMahole and Mbilini waMswati were warrior-aristocrats of the old school, and heirs to a sophisticated Zulu (and in Mbilini's case, Swazi) military tradition. Conflict with the Boers taught the Zulu what they needed to know about using their heavy infantry against

European guns, and the more than 2000 British soldiers and auxiliaries who died at Zulu hands show Ntshingwayo and Mbilini's confidence in their men and their stratagems was not misplaced. Indigenous leaders knew their territories better than the invaders did, had greater immediate reserves of manpower to draw on, and knew far more about fighting the white men than the white men did about fighting them. On numerous occasions they showed they were better informed and more tactically adroit than their white counterparts and could maintain better battlefield control. These were not easy men to out-strategize, and if Anglo-American commanders could not accept that, they could not win.

Overcoming the Lakota-Cheyenne coalition and the army of Zululand, required colonial commanders to take their opponents seriously. It required they understand not all Indigenous peoples fought the same way. It required the removal of racial blinders, and officers who ignored what their enemies were "supposed" to be like and focused on the realities they encountered. It required knowing that fighting their adversaries on their adversaries' terms was a loser's game, and that adhering to a failing strategy was throwing good money after bad. What made Nelson Miles America's best colonial soldier was his determination to do what worked, rather than what Sheridan wanted, and of the Anglo-American officers who have been examined in these pages, his is probably the standout talent. He was prepared to accept that enemies like Crazy Horse could be talented too, which was why he was the one to finally beat the Lakota warlord. Lord Chelmsford had little of Miles' brilliance about him. For all his grandiose sense of self-worth, Evelyn Wood did not either. But they showed themselves to be adaptable, and if their second, defensive advance through Zululand did not make military history, it also did not make any mistakes that Ntshingwayo could exploit, and that was (barely) enough to win the day at Ulundi.

If the Great Sioux War and the Anglo-Zulu War produced any true military geniuses, they were on the Indigenous sides. Crazy Horse of the Oglala Lakota and Ntshingwayo kaMabhele of Zululand were the two most skilled generals on, respectively, the Great Plains and the South African veldt, and it took all the weight of technology and manpower that two modern imperial states had at their disposal to handle the Native American war-leader and the African nobleman. It is to the lasting credit of both of them—and of their allies whose names fill these pages—that in order to overcome them the white colonial states had to, for a moment at least, admit that these “primitives” were their equals.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Volume 1. Edited by John Laband, Ian Knight. London: Archival Publications, 2000.
- Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Volume 2. Edited by John Laband, Ian Knight. London: Archival Publications, 2000.
- Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Volume 3. Edited by John Laband, Ian Knight. London: Archival Publications, 2000.
- Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Volume 4. Edited by John Laband, Ian Knight. London: Archival Publications, 2000.
- Archives of South Africa-Zululand: The Anglo-Zulu War 1879* Volume 5. Edited by John Laband, Ian Knight. London: Archival Publications, 2000.
- Battles and Skirmishes of the Great Sioux War*. Edited by Jerome A. Greene. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993
- Bourke, John G. *On the Border With Crook*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1891.
- Bourke, John G. *The Diaries of John Gregory Bourke* Volume 1. Edited by Charles M. Robinson. Denton: University of North Texas, 2003.
- Bourke, John G. *The Diaries of John Gregory Bourke* Volume 2. Edited by Charles M. Robinson. Denton: University of North Texas, 2003.
- Cheyenne Memories of the Custer Fight*. Edited by Richard Hardorff. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995.
- Colenso, Frances Ellen. *History of the Zulu War and Its Origin*. Piccadily: Chapman and Hall Limited, 1880.
- Crook, George. *General George Crook: His Autobiography*. Edited by Martin F. Schmitt. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960.
- The Custer Myth*. Edited by WA Graham. New York: Bonanza Books,
- Dodge, Richard. *The Powder River Expedition Journals of Richard Irving Dodge*. Edited by Wayne R Kime. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997.
- Fight Us in the Open*. Edited by John Laband. Pietermaritzburg: Shuter & Shooter, 1985.

- Gibbon, John. *Adventures on the Western Frontier*. Edited by Alan and Maureen Gaff. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.
- Grant, Ulysses S. *The Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant: The Complete Annotated Edition*. Edited by John F Marszalek. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017.
- Hallam Parr, Henry. *A Sketch of the Kafir and Zulu Wars*. London: C. Kegan Paul and Co, 1880.
- Hamilton-Browne, George. *A Lost Legionary in South Africa*. Driffield: Leonaur, 2012.
- Indian Battles and Skirmishes on the American Frontier 1790-1898*. Edited by Joseph P. Peters. New York: Argonaut Press Ltd, 1966
- Indian Views of the Custer Fight*. Edited by Richard Hardorff. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004.
- King, Charles. *Campaigning With Crook*. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms Inc, 1966.
- Lakota & Cheyenne: Indian Views of the Sioux War 1876-1877*. Edited by Jerome Greene. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994.
- Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*. Edited by John Laband. Phoenix Mill: Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1994.
- Miles, Nelson. *Personal Recollections of General Nelson A Miles*. Chicago: Werner Company, 1897.
- Miles, Nelson. *Serving the Republic*. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1911.
- Mitford, Bertram. *Through the Zulu Country: Its Battlefields and People*. London: Greenhill Books, 1992.
- Molyneaux, William Charles Frances. *Campaigning in South Africa and Egypt*. London: Macmillan and Co, Ltd, 1896.
- Norris-Newman, Charles. *In Zululand with the British Throughout the War of 1879*. London: W.H. Allen and Co., 1880.
- The Papers of the Order of Indian Wars*. Edited by John Carroll. Fort Collins: The Old Army Press, 1975.

The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant Volume 26. Edited by John Simon. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003.

The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant Volume 27. Edited by John Simon. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005.

The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant Volume 28. Edited by John Simon. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005.

Philip Henry Sheridan Papers. Library of Congress: mss39768 reel 86.

Rothwell, J.S. *Narrative of the Field Operations Connected with the Zulu War of 1879*. London: Greenhill Books, 1989.

Sheridan, Philip H. *Personal Memoirs of P.H. Sheridan* Volume 1. New York: Charles Webster & Company, 1888.

Sheridan, Philip H. *Personal Memoirs of P.H. Sheridan* Volume 2. Piccadilly: Chatto & Windus, 1888.

Smith-Dorrien, Horace. *Smith-Dorrien: Isandlwana to the Great War*. Driffield: Leonaur, 2009.

Terry, Alfred. *The Field Diary of General Alfred H Terry*. Bellevue: *The Old Army Press*, 1970.

Washita Memories. Edited by Richard Hardorff. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006.

Wolseley, Garnet. *South African Journal 1879-1880*. A.A. Balkema: Capetown: 1973.

Wolseley, Garnet. *The Story of a Soldier's Life* Volume 2. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903.

Wood, Evelyn. *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Volume 1. Pickle Partners Publishing, 2013.

Wood, Evelyn. *From Midshipman to Field Marshal* Volume 2. Pickle Partners Publishing, 2013.

Zulu 1879. Edited by DCF Moodie. Driffield: Leonaur, 2006.

Secondary Sources

Ambrose, Stephen. *Crazy Horse and Custer*. New York: Meridian Books, 1975.

Bailey, John W. *Pacifying the Plains: General Alfred Terry and the Decline of the Sioux*.

- Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979.
- Bartlett, W.B. *Zulu: Queen Victoria's Most Famous Little War*. Stroud: The History Press, 2010.
- Bray, Kingsley M. *Crazy Horse: A Lakota Life*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006.
- Castle, Ian and Ian Knight. *Fearful Hard Times: The Siege and Relief of Eshowe, 1879*. London: Greenhill Books, 1994.
- Connell, Evan. *Son of the Morning Star*. New York: Promontory Press, 1984.
- Cozzens, Peter. *The Earth is Weeping*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016.
- DeMontravel, Peter R. *A Hero to His Fighting Men: Nelson A Miles, 1839-1925*. Kent: Kent State University Press, 1998.
- Donovan, James. *A Terrible Glory*. New York: Back Bay Books, 2008.
- Dunlay, Thomas. *Wolves for the Blue Soldiers*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982.
- Elliott, Michael. *Custerology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- Ellis, Richard N. *General Pope and U.S. Indian Policy*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1970.
- Greaves, Adrian. *Forgotten Battles of the Zulu War*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2012.
- Greaves, Adrian and Xolani Mkhize. *The Tribe That Washed Its Spears*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2013.
- Greene, Jerome. *Slim Buttes 1876*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982.
- Gump, James. *The Dust Rose Like Smoke*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016.
- Hedren, Paul L. *Great Sioux War Orders of Battle*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011.
- Hedren, Paul L. *Rosebud, June 17, 1876: Prelude to the Little Bighorn*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019.
- Hutton, Andrew Paul. "Phil Sheridan's Frontier." In *The Great Sioux War 1876-77: The Best from Montana The Magazine of Western History*. Edited by Paul L. Hedren. Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 1991.

- Hyde, George. *Red Cloud's Folk*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1937.
- Knight, Ian. *The Anatomy of the Zulu Army*. London: Greenhill Books, 1995.
- Knight, Ian. *Great Zulu Battles, 1838-1906*. London: Cassell & Co, 1998.
- Knight, Ian. *Zulu Rising: The Epic Story of Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift*. London: Pan Books, 2010.
- Laband, John. *Kingdom in Crisis*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992.
- Lock, Ron. *Blood on the Painted Mountain: Zulu Victory and Defeat, Hlobane and Kambula, 1879*. Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 1995.
- Lock, Ron. *Isandlwana: The Revelation of a Disaster*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2017.
- Magid, Paul. *George Crook: From the Redwoods to Appomattox*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011.
- Magid, Paul. *The Gray Fox: George Crook and the Indian Wars*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015.
- Marshall, Joseph. *The Journey of Crazy Horse*. New York: Penguin Group, 2004.
- Michno, Gregory. *Lakota Loon: The Indian Narrative of Custer's Defeat*. Missoula: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 1997.
- Morris, Roy Jr. *Sheridan: The Life and Wars of General Phil Sheridan*. New York: Crown Publishers Inc, 1992.
- Philbrick, Nathaniel. *The Last Stand*. New York: Penguin Books, 2010.
- Price, Richard. *Making Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Rein, Christopher. "“Our First Duty Was to God and Our Next Was To Our Country”: Religion, Violence, and the Sand Creek Massacre.” *Great Plains Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (Summer 2014).
- Robinson, Charles M. *Bad Hand: A Biography of General Ranald S Mackenzie*. Abilene: State House Press, 2005.
- Rosenberg, Bruce. *Custer and the Epic of Defeat*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1974.

- Scott, Douglas et al. *Archaeological Perspectives on the Battle of the Little Bighorn*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989.
- Sears, Stephen W. *Lincoln's Lieutenants: The High Command of the Army of the Potomac*. Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.
- Stiles, TJ. *Custer's Trials*. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2015.
- Utley, Robert M. *Frontiersmen in Blue*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967.
- Utley, Robert M. *The Commanders: Civil War Generals Who Shaped the American West*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018.
- Utley, Robert M. *Custer: Cavalier in Buckskin*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001.
- Utley, Robert M. *The Indian Frontier of the American West*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984.
- Utley, Robert M. *Sitting Bull*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993.
- Victoria's Generals*. Edited by Steven J. Corvi & Ian F.W. Beckett. Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2009.
- Welch, James. *Killing Custer*. New York: WW Norton & Company, 1994.
- Wittenberg, Eric J. *Little Phil*. Washington: Brassey's Inc, 2002.
- Wooster, Robert. *The Military and United States Indian Policy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.