

# Analysis of the battle of rorkes drift



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1. Purpose: The purpose of this document is to show how British forces successfully implemented the defensive characteristics of preparation, flexibility, and massing the effects of combat power against the Undi Corps of the Zulu Army at the Battle of Rorke's Drift.

2. Discussion:

a. Define the Subject:

(3) Where: The Battle of Rorke's Drift occurred at the mission known by the same name located a half mile from the Myzinyathe river in present day South Africa at MGRS 36JTQ4380224088 (Earthpoint), then directly on the border of what was British controlled Natal land and the Zulu controlled Zululand territory (Greaves, 150). Please see attached map 3 on the last page.

b. Weather and Terrain

(1) Weather: Although the exact temperature for the duration of the battle is unknown, it is known that 22JAN1879 was " an unusually hot day" at Rorke's Drift (Greaves, 153). This favored the defenders who were in a static position with a water source contained within their defenses. The Zulu forces attacking Rorke's Drift, although in the reserve at the battle for Isandhlwana earlier that day, still had to march 15 miles to get to Rorke's Drift and did not have secondary water sources, possibly contributing to fatigue. Visibility for both the British and Zulu was not degraded, it was a clear day with little to no precipitation. Affecting military operations was the position of the sun during the battle. By late afternoon it shone directly in the eyes of the Zulu

marksmen pouring harassing fires down into British positions from Shiyane Hill. This greatly inhibited the already poor accuracy of their aimed fires. This provided a distinct advantage to the British defenders on the southern perimeter who had an easier time picking off those same Zulu who were illuminated in their concealed positions by the setting sun (Knight, Rorke's Drift 45).

(2) Terrain:

(a) Avenues of Approach: British forces were in a static defensive posture waiting for the Zulu to attack and therefore had no dedicated Avenues of Approach. The Zulu, who were coming from the northern bank of the Myzinyathe River, decided not to risk getting attacked while fording the river at Rorke's Drift and crossed at Sothondose's Drift located a half a mile upstream (Knight, Rorke's Drift 37). Assembling behind Shiyane Hill on the southern flank, the initial skirmishing force approached in open formation, covering approximately 600 yards of open terrain from the cover of Shiyane Hill to the southern barricade of the defense. This approach favored the protected British whose Martini Henri rifles were extremely accurate at these ranges. The Zulu main body, upon seeing the volume of fire against the initial assault, maneuvered to approach from the west and settle into the concealment provided by the vegetation at the front of the post (Knight, Rorke's Drift 40). Please see attached Map 2.

(b) Observation and Fields of Fire: Observation for both the British defenders and the attacking Zulu was excellent due to the location of the mission on a raised sandstone shelf, and the proximity of Shiyane Hill to the post. From

the roof of the hospital, the posted British lookout was able to view the Zulu approach from Shiyane Hill 600 yards away (Knight, Rorke's Drift 36). For the attacking Zulu coming from the high ground and who positioned marksmen on the foot of Shiyane Hill, they were clearly able to observe the British defenses. The British barely had time to prepare their hasty defenses let alone clear fields of fire. This left the vegetation, outbuildings and various other structures outside the perimeter of the British defense for the Zulu attackers to take advantage of and to obscure the British view. The Zulu however, had to cover 600 yards of open ground in closing with the defenders, an advantage that went to the British. The Zulu " firing from Shiyane Hill down into the position" had the advantage provided by the high ground that was nullified by their poor aim and dated firearms (Knight, Rorke's Drift 44)

(c) Cover and Concealment: British forces that were protected in the fortified structures of the hospital and storehouse as well as along the mealie bag perimeter primarily had the advantage of cover and concealment. To the Zulu marksmen in covered and concealed positions on Shiyane Hill, the northern wall of the perimeter, in the interior yard and all of its British defenders were possible targets (Knight, Rorke's Drift 44). Once the Zulu had covered the open terrain and settled into concealed positions such as the cookhouse and oven at the rear, and the bush and garden at the front of the position, they were able to improve their cover and concealment.

(d) Obstacles: Not many natural obstacles existed except for Myzinyathe River to the north and Shiyane Hill 600 yards to the north. In addition, the northern section of perimeter was built on top of a rocky ledge that

measured approximately one and a half meters creating a two and half meter obstacle upon completion. Several man made obstacles existed including the mealie bag barricade that formed the perimeter, the well built stone kraal that measured 17 X 10 meters, and the rough stone kraal that was located northeast of the storehouse and measured 30 X 30 meters. Biscuit boxes stacked two high connected the corner of the storehouse with the front wall, cutting the position in half (Knight, Rorke's Drift 30). These obstacles were an advantage to the defenders as they served as cover and concealment as well as an impediment to attacking Zulu forces.

(e) Key Terrain: The storehouse and hospital were key terrain to the defenders. If both of the structures fell to the attacking Zulu, they would be able to envelop the British perimeter, possibly destroying the defense force. The bisecting biscuit box wall, constructed after the Natal Native Contingent fled the defenses, mitigated risk in the event that one of the structures was seized by the Zulu as it was in the case of the hospital.

### c. Action

(1) Phase 1: British preparation and the initial Zulu Attack.

(a) At approximately 1530, the British regulars and the Natal Native contingent begin establishing a hasty defensive position. Utilizing 200 pound mealie bags, 100 pound biscuit boxes, and two wagons on site to create a complete three to four feet high perimeter, the two structures were linked together in a continuous defensive perimeter incorporated into the terrain when possible. The hospital and storehouse were improved as well, with the

windows and doors being fortified (Knight, Rorke's Drift 25, 28, Furneaux 124).

(b) At approximately 1630, the 300 man Natal Native Contingent withdraws from the battlefield upon sight of the initial Zulu forces approaching from around Shiyane Hill (Furneaux 123, 125). This left 104 British soldiers and officers to defend the position against the approximately 3, 700 man Zulu element (Knight, 29). As a result, within the perimeter, a secondary position of biscuit boxes was prepared as a retrograde position in case one or the other of the buildings happened to be seized (Knight, Rorke's Drift 36).

(c) At approximately 1630 the Zulu skirmishing force comprised of 500-600 warriors in the traditional Zulu " Bull and Horns" formation, attacked the rear of the British position from the southern flank of Shiyane hill in an attempt to envelop the British defense (Knight, Nothing Remains 75). When the skirmishing force was 500-600 yards from the position, the British begin massing fires into the advancing Zulu. Overlapping sectors of fire from the buildings and the rear wall allow the defenders to repel the initial Zulu attack. This causes the attacking element to maneuver west, around to the front of the hospital and the northern perimeter. Here they take up concealed positions in the vegetation at that location and launch the first attack on the perimeter in front of the hospital (Knight, Rorke's Drift 37-40)

(2) Phase 2: The main Zulu attack.

(a) At approximately 1640, elements of the skirmishing force take up covered and concealed positions in the crevices and shallow caves located on Shiyane Hill as well as from the various outbuildings off the rear southern

wall of the southern perimeter. From these positions they begin directing fires down into the British position (Knight, Rorke's Drift 44).

(b) At approximately 1655, the main body of the Zulu force appears around Shiyane Hill and maneuvers left to join the majority of the skirmishing force engaged along the perimeter in front of the hospital. Settling into concealed positions, “ it is more than likely that most of the Zulus spent a major part of the battle lying in the bush and grass at the front of the post, waiting for the chance to do something useful” (Knight, Nothing Remains 77). The section of perimeter in front of the hospital was unfinished and weak, and the attacking Zulu massed forces at this point. The British were unable to sustain rates of fire consistent with Zulu attacks and resort to bayonet charges to defend their position.

(c) From approximately 1700 until 1745 the British fought to hold the perimeter in front of the hospital from which they were eventually driven from. Having constructed a hasty barricade linking the corner of the hospital to the front perimeter, the British concede to the Zulu the veranda, while attriting the attacking force with aimed and lethal enfilade fire whenever they attempted to breach the perimeter (Knight, Nothing Remains, 78).

(c) At approximately 1800, facing mounting casualties in the yard area between the two structures and facing a possible breach of the defensive perimeter, the British retrograde to the inner biscuit box wall. This British retrograde prevents the envelopment of the defensive perimeter. With the fields of fire from Shiyane Hill blocked by the storehouse, the Zulu harassing fire from that location is rendered ineffective. This also left the soldiers and

the wounded defending the hospital cut off from the rest of the defense (Knight, *Nothing Remains* 84). The Soldiers are forced to retrograde room to room holding the Zulus at bay in order to evacuate the casualties and rejoin the perimeter. During this time the Zulu forces torch the roof of the hospital (Furneaux, 130).

(3) Phase 3: British final perimeter defeats the Zulu attack.

(a) From approximately 1815 on, the Zulus mass their forces in the engagement area in front of the storehouse in an attempt to take that location as well. The light from the burning hospital provides the British defenders with illumination at a range of about 50 yards in front of their position allowing them to mass direct fire at the Zulu attacks and repel them (Furneaux, 134). The Zulu were now able to maneuver right up to the front barricade wall that had been abandoned when the British retrograded, using the dead space in front of the wall from which to attack from (Knight, *Nothing Remains* 84)

(b) At approximately 1900, while exposed to intense Zulu fire, Assistant Commissary Dunne and twelve Soldiers utilized the remaining heap of mealie bags to form a makeshift redoubt within the storehouse perimeter. The redoubt provided an elevated position for British riflemen to fire over the heads of the main defenders increasing the rate of fire and the ability to mass where necessary (Knight, *Rorke's Drift* 50, Greaves, 170). The British now defend a more compact square perimeter with nearly the same amount of men they had in defense of the original perimeter (Furneaux, 133)



(c) From approximately 2000-2200, intense close quarter fighting takes place in the area around the cattle kraal and in front of the storehouse forcing the British to delay first to the cattle kraal partition and eventually to the inner wall (Knight, Rorke's Drift 50). This became the British final perimeter; there was nowhere else to go. With the British massing fires into the final Zulu assault firing down from the redoubt as well as the final perimeter, the final massed Zulu assaults are defeated (Greaves, 172).

(d) From 2200 when the last Zulu assault was made, until 0400 when the last shots were fired, the Zulu forces resorted to pouring massed, yet inaccurate fires into the final British perimeter, but never mustered another assault again (Knight, Rorke's Drift 67). With the battle at a stalemate, the Zulu force withdrew back across the Myzinyathe River and home to Ulundi. The British set about reestablishing their defense, dispatching security patrols, and tending to their wounded (Greaves, 173, 175).

#### d. Assess the Significance

(1) Key Event #1: British defenders repel the initial Zulu attack.

(a) Causes: The Zulu skirmishers attacked across open ground, utilizing their traditional battle formation of the "bull and the horns". This is highly effective against troops in the open, however they encountered a highly defensible British position along a narrow front, from which concentrated and interlocking sectors of fire were massed (Knight, Nothing Remains 76).

(b) Effects: The combination of well protected and interlocking British positions and superior firepower, rapidly firing upon a fully exposed enemy

at very close range prevented the Zulu skirmishing force from enveloping the British defenses in the initial attack. This caused the entire Zulu attack to settle in for a lengthy battle of attrition.

(c) Lesson: The British ability to repel the initial Zulu attack demonstrates the importance of preparation when establishing the defense. Doctrinally, the commander utilizes as much time as possible to establish battle positions and sectors of fire, however in this case the British did not have time. Hastily linking the storehouse and hospital together in a continuous line of defense that utilized the advantages of terrain allowed Lt Chard to economize forces and concentrate all of his combat power along a narrow perimeter. This nullified the Zulu numerical and tactical advantage and provided command and control by avoiding a scenario where the storehouse and hospital were isolated defensive positions.

(d) Doctrine: The British element at Rorke's Drift properly exercised characteristics of the defense, specifically preparation which allowed them to defend against a numerically superior force. FM 3-90. 5 states that identification of engagement areas, integration of obstacles, and reinforcement of terrain with obstacles to favor the defender, are all tenets of sound preparation (FM 3-90. 5 7-24). The Zulu, being a light infantry force armed primarily with spears, depended on encircling and closing with the enemy in order to destroy them. With no effective combat power capable of knocking down the barricades integrating the obstacles, the Zulu forces ability to fight effectively was degraded (Knight, Rorke's Drift 31). Placement of the barricade on top of the four foot high sandstone shelf at the front of the position multiplied the effects of the obstacle creating eight foot high

sections of perimeter (Knight, Rorke's Drift 30, FM 3-90 8-133). By utilizing proper planning factors of a perimeter defense, such as the ability to defend against an attack from any direction and establishment of a defense in depth with alternate and supplementary, mutually supporting positions, the British were able to disrupt the initial Zulu attack (FM 3-90 8-37).

(2) Key Event #2: British retrograde prevents the envelopment of the defensive perimeter.

(a) Causes: Withdrawal from the perimeter in front of the hospital to the hastily assembled dog leg barricade gave the Zulu force the terrain in front of the hospital. This development, coupled with mounting casualties along the front wall due to the harassing fire from Shiyane Mountain, caused Lt Chard concern that sections of his perimeter were undefended and in danger of a Zulu breach (Knight, Rorke's Drift 48). Lt Chard ordered his forces arrayed along the perimeter of the interior yard, on the front and back wall, to retrograde to the interior biscuit box wall and take up the reserve defensive position.

(b) Effects: The British retrograde prevented a Zulu breach of the perimeter by economizing forces behind a defense in depth. The new position rendered the harassing fire from Shiyane Hill ineffective and prevented a breach of the perimeter by Zulu forces (Knight, Rorke's Drift 48). With the exception of the few remaining forces fighting for their lives in the hospital, the majority of the British defenders were now defending from an even smaller perimeter with nearly the same amount of firepower, still able to hold the yard with fires from the biscuit box wall (Greaves, 166).

(c) Lesson: The British retrograde to the biscuit box barricade demonstrated flexibility in the defense and the importance of defense in depth. The last minute implementation of the inner barricade upon the withdrawal of NNC forces prior to the battle, provided the British the flexibility to maintain the defense if the tactical situation caused the loss of the storehouse or the hospital. Thus the British were able to adapt when faced with mounting casualties and the loss of the verandah, they were able to maintain the initiative and strengthen their position by maintaining a continuous defensive perimeter.

(d) Doctrine: Army FM 3-90. 5 defines the characteristic of flexibility as “ sound preparation, disposition in depth, retention of reserves and effective C2” (FM 3-90. 5 7-30). It is not clear if the Zulu had a plan of attack, however one can deduce from their courses of action that they were seeking to exploit a weakness in the British defense to overrun the defenders. Due to a numerical disadvantage, the British were in a completely static defensive position, unable to counter-attack and seize the initiative. By exercising sound preparation, the British were able to exhibit flexible use of their combat power and maneuver within their defensive perimeter to consolidate forces in a defense in depth while maintaining effective C2 (FM 3-90 8-37). It was at this final perimeter in front of the storehouse that they were able to mass the effects of their combat power and force a decision, rather than face exploitation of a Zulu breakthrough and possible defeat.

(3) Key Event #3: The final massed Zulu assaults are defeated.

(a) Causes: With the majority of British forces concentrated in the perimeter directly in front of the storehouse, the Zulu massed forces at that location in a final attempt to overrun the British position where the illumination from the hospital was obscured by the barricades. The combination of the construction of the mealie bag redoubt, and the British consolidation to the final perimeter allowed the British to mass the effects of their combat power.

(b) Effects: British construction of the mealie bag redoubt provided an elevated position from which they could mass fires where necessary, creating an immobile reserve of sorts (Knight, *Nothing Remains* 88).

Although the final Zulu assaults managed to drive the defenders out of the cattle kraal, the Zulu were never able to use this terrain effectively; this was in direct fields of fire of the mealie bag redoubt and the inner wall (Greaves, 172). Unable to ignite the storehouse roof, and affected by massed British fires from the redoubt above and the inner wall to their front, the final Zulu assaults were blocked by British massing of effects.

(c) Lesson: The British forces demonstrated that mass can be achieved with a numerical inferiority and superior firepower by massing the effects of combat power at a decisive moment. The construction of the redoubt provided the British the ability to bring focused, distributed, and shifting fires to meet the increased Zulu assaults. The withdrawal to the inner wall of the cattle kraal, in addition to creating yet an even more compact perimeter defense, created a close quarter's engagement area where the already withering British fire was increasingly more accurate at such a close range.

(d) Doctrine: Army FM 3-90 states that, “ The defending force must mass the effects of its combat power to overwhelm the enemy and regain the initiative. The commander uses economy of force measures in areas that do not involve his decisive operation to mass the effects of his forces in the area where a decision is sought. This decisive point can be a geographical objective or an enemy force” (FM 3-90 8-16). The British defenders demonstrated a mastery of this principle through economizing forces in front of the storehouse rather than trying to defend the original perimeter as the battle progressed on. As a result of the massing of their combat power in a compact perimeter, the Zulu forces were only able to commit a portion of their forces at a time negating their overwhelming numerical advantage and allowing the British to accomplish a defeat in detail (FM 3-90 2-7). With the construction of the elevated mealie bag redoubt, the British were able to multiply the effects of the compact perimeter and economy of force, with increased rates and fields of fire to block the final Zulu assaults and sap their will to continue the attack.

3. Conclusion: On 22 January 1879, a vastly outnumbered yet technologically superior equipped British and native contingent earned a victory over the Undi Corps of the Zulu Army in the Battle for Rorke’s Drift. Through successful implementation of the characteristics of a defense, the British force of 104 men were able to attrite a force of over three thousand Zulu warriors while sustaining minimal casualties and holding the key terrain of their supply depot at Rorke’s Drift. By implementing the principle of preparation in establishment of a hasty defense, the British prevented the Zulu skirmishing force from enveloping or breaching the British defenses in

the initial assault and caused the entire Zulu attack to settle in for a lengthy battle of attrition. British forces then demonstrated the principles of flexibility during the Zulu main assault by economizing forces and retrograding to a defense in depth which kept intact the continuous line of defense. Lastly, during the final Zulu assault, the British demonstrated the importance of massing the effects of combat power to overwhelm the enemy in checking the Zulu assault at the British final perimeter. The resultant losses to Zulu forces produced a perceived stalemate, and caused a retirement from the battlefield. Making the ,” story of how a handful of Englishmen held the mission house at Rorke’s Drift for twelve hours against the furious onslaughts of 4, 000 Zulus glutted with victory, rank with the epic of Thermopylae” (Furneaux, 124).