

Aftermath at Isandlwana

The Toy Soldier Museum's James H. Hillestad creates a poignant diorama depicting the aftermath of the Zulu victory at Isandlwana with Lord Chelmsford discovering the extent of the British debacle

Text and Photos: James H. Hillestad

The hours after Isandlwana have long intrigued me, and I have dreamed of making a diorama depicting the aftermath of that epic battle of the Anglo-Zulu War. W. Britain's recent release of a brand new range of dramatic figures provided the missing ingredient for "The Morning After..." diorama.

The scenario: Lord Chelmsford has returned from his futile attempt to locate and attack the Zulu impi only to find that the African army had circled around and annihilated most of the force that he had left behind in his main camp at Isandlwana. More than of his 1,350 troops are dead.

Chelmsford is shown pondering amid the carnage, trying to understand the implications of the disaster and what might have taken place at his Rorke's Drift supply depot 6 miles to the west.

The diorama contains figures by W. Britain, Trophy Miniatures of Wales Ltd., Steadfast Soldiers, Alymer, Quartermaster Corps and Kingcast. They are a combination of 54-mm military miniatures painted in gloss and 58-mm, matt-painted pieces.

COMBATANTS: BRITISH

In 1878, the men of the British Army's 24th Regiment of Foot (the bulk of Chelmsford's force) were generally considered to be the best troops in South Africa. The regiment was also known as the 2nd Warwickshire Regiment and later the South Wales Borderers.

The 24th Foot consisted of two battalions. The men of the 1/24th were mainly of English and Irish birth. The 2/24th's soldiers were predominantly Welshmen. Each battalion fielded about 700 infantrymen.

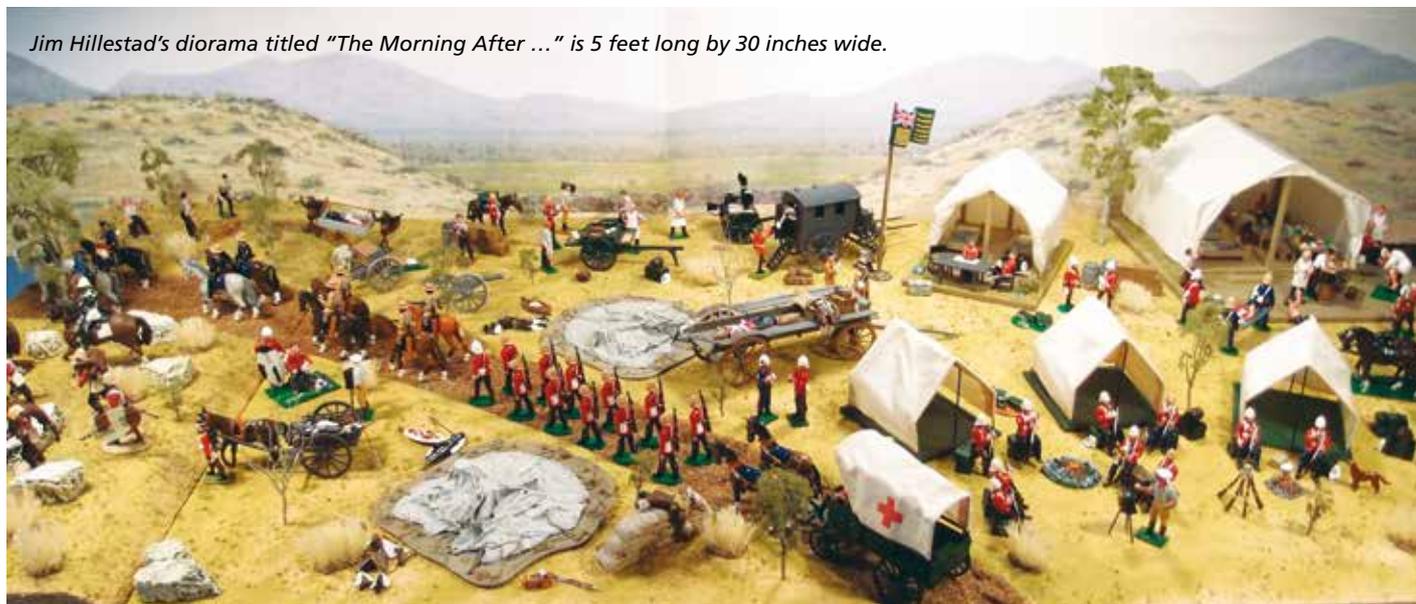
Their average height was 5 feet, 7 inches. Some of the younger soldiers weighed as little as 115 pounds. But they were all tough men.

They endured scorching heat (daytime temperatures of 120 degrees Fahrenheit), wearing a uniform made of thick serge material and laden with a two-day supply of rations, water, and ammunition — a total of 50 pounds. The Zulus called them the "red soldiers" because of their scarlet tunics with green facings. The Zulu War was one of the last times British troops would wear their red coats into battle.

The men were armed with the 45-caliber Martini-Henry rifle, probably the best of its kind in the world. A formidable weapon, resembling the American Winchester, it weighed 9 pounds unloaded. With



Zulu warrior of the uMbonambi Regiment from a W. Britain series based on Osprey Publishing artwork.



Jim Hillestad's diorama titled "The Morning After..." is 5 feet long by 30 inches wide.



Soldiers of the 24th Foot trek past collapsed field tents.

its 22-inch bayonet, it exceeded the height of the average British soldier.

Chelmsford's troops were well-disciplined and supremely confident that no African army could stand up against them. A favorite ditty was the chorus to a music hall ballad popular at the time:

"We don't want to fight, but by jingo if we do,

"We've got the ships, we've got the men, and got the money, too!"

It was the 1/24th that would bear the brunt of the Zulu onslaught at Isandlwana.

COMBATANTS: ZULUS

Zulus were trained to fight and they were very good at it. They were big men -- some as tall as 6 feet, 5 inches.

Zulus were accustomed to swimming and running long distances. A 50-mile run in a day was a common feat.

Sir Bartle Frere, the British high commissioner for Southern Africa, described the Zulus as "man-slaying gladiators."

The Zulus used a hand-to-hand weapon with a broad blade, 18-inches



South African Zulu War Medal 1879 from writer Jim Hillestad's collection.

long, mounted on a stout, short staff. It was a stabbing spear, little different in basic design from the short-bladed sword of the Roman legions.

The weapon was called an assegai by other tribes. But to the Zulus, it was known as the "iklwa," an onomatopoeic word for the sucking noise made by the blade as it was withdrawn from an opponent.

Along with the assegai, the Zulus fought with wooden clubs (knobkerries). They were taught to use their cowhide shields to throw



Recent releases from W. Britain depict Natal Carabineers watching as soldiers of the 24th Foot undertake the makeshift burial of Zulu dead.



Zulu shield and weapons from The Toy Soldier Museum's collection.



A cart is loaded with souvenirs of war.

an enemy off balance before stabbing him.

The Zulu army was deployed in a crescent formation for battle. The main body of men was preceded on each flank by two “horns” that rushed forward in an encircling movement. This was the tactic used at Isandlwana.

“Chelmsford is shown pondering amid the carnage, trying to understand the implications of the disaster and what might have taken place at his Rorke’s Drift supply depot 6 miles to the west.”

THE INVASION

After Frere took office as the colonial administrator in 1877, he perceived the Zulus as a standing threat to colonization and dreams of uniting the region in a confederation under the British Empire’s control.

In January 1879, British troops crossed the Buffalo River at Rorke’s Drift. The invasion force was commanded by Lt. Gen. Sir Frederic Thesiger (Baron Chelmsford). His mission was to overthrow the Zulu Kingdom of King Cetshwayo.

Organized into three columns totaling 15,000 men (including 5,120 Imperial infantry), the plan was to advance on Ulundi, Cetshwayo’s royal village.

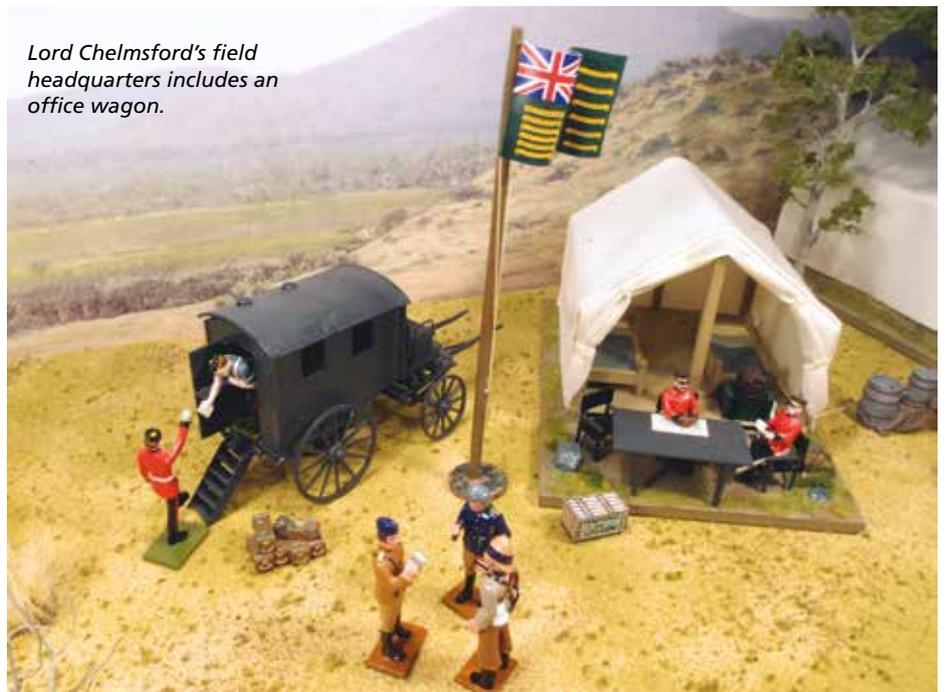
On Jan. 20, the center column, with which Chelmsford rode, arrived at Isandlwana — a Zulu name for a massive rocky butte. Some officers of the 1/24th noticed that the mountain bore a striking resemblance to the shape of the sphinx motif on their collar badges.



British and Colonial soldiers slain at Isandlwana are interred.



Officers of the Frontier Light Horse and troopers of the Natal Native Horse ride past an abandoned artillery piece and limber.



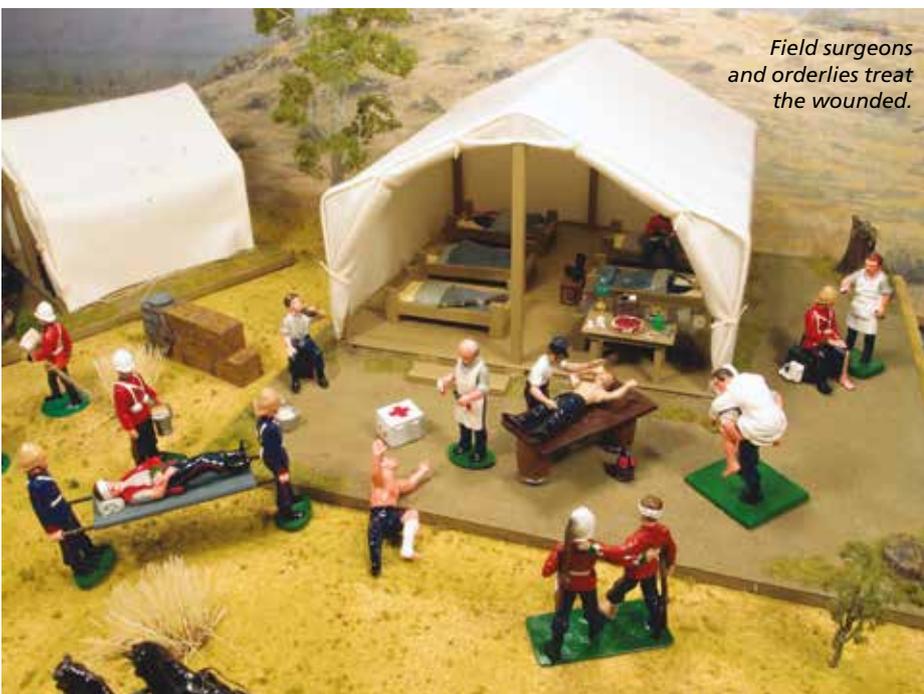
Lord Chelmsford’s field headquarters includes an office wagon.



British troops halt for breakfast before heading to Rorke's Drift.



"The Fallen" vignette depicts worthy foes from the clash.



Field surgeons and orderlies treat the wounded.

Lord Chelmsford's Report

I regret to report a very disastrous engagement which took place on the morning of the 22nd January, between the Armies of the Zulu King Cetewayo and our own Number 3 Column, consisting of five Companies of the 1st Battalion, 24th Regt. of Foot, and one Company of the 2nd Battalion, a total of nearly 1,500 men, Officers and other Ranks.

The Zulus, in overwhelming numbers, launched a highly disciplined attack on the slopes of the mountain ISANDLWANA, and in spite of gallant resistance, the Column was completely annihilated.
Lord Chelmsford
Commander-in-Chief of Her Majesty's Forces
Natal Colony, South Africa

A few weeks before the battle, Chelmsford had written to a colonial official, "I shall strive to be in a position to show the Zulus how hopelessly inferior they are to us in fighting power."

After posting a detachment to guard Rorke's Drift, Chelmsford divided his force, leaving half at Isandlwana. He marched out with the other portion, which he then proceeded to split again.

BATTLE JOINED

Meanwhile, Cetshwayo's instructions to his army had been, "March slowly, attack at dawn and eat up the red soldiers."



Lord Chelmsford with his military secretary Lt. Col. Harry Crealock and interpreter W.H. Longcast (from left).



The Toy Soldier Museum's collection includes an 1871 .45-caliber Martini-Henry rifle of the type used by British troops against the Zulus.

The main Zulu army evaded detection and prepared to assault the enemy encampment at Isandlwana. One of the weaknesses of the camp was

that the black warriors commanded the high ground, enabling them to appear and disappear at will.

As for the camp itself, one officer

later described it as “defenseless as an English village, with the air of a racecourse on a public holiday.”

At 7:30 a.m. Jan. 22, 1879, the Zulus attacked. Cetshwayo's army numbered as many as 25,000 men. By early afternoon, the camp was in Zulu hands.

When the fighting ended, 52 British officers had died (more than were killed at Waterloo). About 800 British soldiers and 500 of their African allies also lay dead. Only a handful escaped with their lives.

“We spared no lives and asked for no mercy for ourselves,” the Zulu chieftain Maphitha later recounted.

Zulu losses were estimated at 2,500.

It has been said that the Battle of Isandhlwana should be remembered not as a British defeat, but rather as a great Zulu victory against an invading army with superior arms. ■



British soldiers unload supplies from a wagon.



A war photographer chronicles the scene in a British bivouac.

FURTHER READING

- “The Washing of the Spears: The Rise and Fall of the Zulu Nation” is perhaps the definitive book about the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879. Written by American Donald T. Morris in 1965, it was inspired by Ernest Hemingway and emphasizes the British view of the conflict.
- “Like Lions They Fought: The Zulu War and the Last Black Empire in South Africa” is Robert B. Edgerton’s beautifully-written account of the story from the Zulu perspective.
- “Zulu Victory: The Epic of Isandlwana and the Cover-up,” coauthored by Ron Lock and Peter Quantrill, focuses on the battle in detail and shameful actions that followed.
- Renowned author and historian Ian Knight, a past TS&MF contributor who has served as a consultant to W. Britain, has written widely on this subject.

ABOUT THE WRITER

James H. Hillestad is the proprietor of The Toy Soldier Museum in Cresco, Pa., USA.