

The Action at Magnuson's Drift

A solo wargamer leads an Imperial column into Zulu territory

By Chris Hahn

Inspired by the content of the February 2012 issue of WARGAMES ILLUSTRATED (specifically the piece titled "Let's Have a Fight at Jim's Place!") and interested in testing out some rule revisions found on the Warlord Games Forum, in early February of 2012, I set about drawing up plans for my second experiment using Mr. Priestley's popular *Black Powder* rules.

The Scenario

Not being an especially original fellow, I decided to stage a rather simple, straightforward engagement. A column of Imperial infantry, accompanied by a number of ox-drawn wagons, and supported by an artillery section, as well as Gatling gun, assisted by a few packets of cavalry, and joined by a rather large native contingent, would be tasked with traversing the length of the tabletop in order to reach and secure an abandoned mission/farmhouse situated near a river crossing. Taking exception to this invasion of their territory, a large number of Zulus would appear and contest the advance of the colonial formations.

The Terrain

Map 1 shows how my six-by-four-foot table was set up for this fictional encounter. A river (perhaps the White Umfolozi?) runs down the right edge of the playing surface. Magnuson's Drift is indicated by the two pale brown hexagons. The three small abandoned buildings representing the mission and or farmhouse complex are indicated by the gray square, located in the center of a gentle hill (large green hexagon), to the left and a bit lower than the natural crossing point. Numerous hills and areas of rough ground (elephant grass, crops, and patches of scrub, brush, rocks, etc.) were scattered across an otherwise featureless expanse of ground.

The Forces

As this was not intended as a reconstruction of an actual engagement, I exercised some historical license in putting together the opposing forces. For the British, I studied the battle report in *Black Powder* (pages 152-161) as well as the Rorke's Drift adaptation in the February issue of WARGAMES ILLUSTRATED (pages 84-95). I also dug out my copy of *THE ZULU WAR: A Pictorial History*, by Michael Barthorp. After some enjoyable hours spent drafting and tweaking the Imperial order of battle, I decided that the core of the force or column would be six companies of regulars. Five of these units were from the 99th Regiment; there was a single company from the 1st Battalion of the 13th Light Infantry. Each of these "small" companies contained 18 "figures" arranged on three trays. A company of Naval Brigade infantry (slightly larger at 24 "figures," completed the foot complement of the redcoats. As to support, well, I attached a section of 7 pdr. cannon (1 "model" representing two pieces) and a half-section of Gatling guns (1 "model" representing one piece) to the Naval Brigade detachment. The cavalry of the force was a mixed bag. I gave Colonel Reynolds -- the imaginary commander of No. 6

Column -- some Light Frontier Horse (12 “figures”), a group of Native Cavalry (12 “figures,” and a small but powerful troop of lancers (9 “figures.”) The largest brigade of the column contained four battalions of Natal Natives. One of these units numbered 24 “figures” while the majority counted 36 in their ranks. The largest concern of the column were the nine heavy wagons, each one drawn by four oxen.

Appreciating the ideas of one “jazbo” (see the Warlord Games Forum, BP for the Zulu War, December 12, 2011; and thanks to a Mr. Alex Elstone for directing me to this “gold mine”), I listed the British regulars as “smallish” units, with an HTH factor of 4, a Shooting factor of 3, a Morale Save of 4+, and a Stamina of just 2. The Naval Brigade detachment was given an HTH of 5 and a Stamina of 3. I gave the Imperial infantry the specials of Steady and Stubborn. Borrowing an additional excellent idea from “jazbo,” these six companies could deploy into Extended Order and, if not Shaken from losses, they could use Volley Fire. The Volley Fire rule added two more six-sided dice to the roll, but it had to be conducted while in close order (line) formation, and was limited to a range of 15 centimeters.

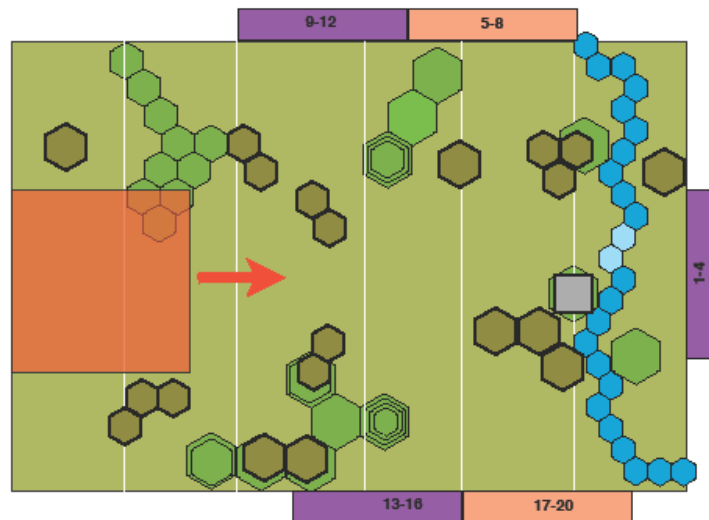
Stat lines for the cavalry varied, as might be expected. The light horse and native cavalry were listed as Marauders and Skirmishers. The lancers (of the 17th Regiment, of course!) were given Ferocious Charge in addition to the infantry’s Stubborn quality. The HTH value of the Natal Native Contingent battalions was 5, and their Shooting factor was 2. Their Morale Save was a 5+, and the Stamina of these “standard” units was 3. These troops were armed with rifle-muskets (not many) along with the traditional spears and shields. The ox-drawn wagons were categorized as unable to engage in combat. If contacted by an enemy stand, these vehicles were considered captured or worse, destroyed.

As for the Zulu army, I used the same resources, but spent more time reviewing Chapter 2 (“Opposing Forces”) and Appendix B (Zulu Corps and Regiments in 1879) in Barthorp’s book.

Thinking that “Redcoats versus Black Shields” had a period-specific ring to it, I decided to field a large number of unmarried and untried Zulu regiments. These would be supported by a smaller number of experienced formations. Taking additional historical license, I decided to give command of the Zulus to Prince Mpande, the warlike son of the former king. He would have a staff rating of 9, and have high ratings in Aggression and Decisiveness, but normal in the category of Independence. The subordinate commanders of the unmarried regiments would have staff ratings of 8, and have high ratings in only the Aggression category. They would be normal in the other two classes. The leaders of the three married or veteran regiments were also given staff ratings of 8. They were classed as normal or medium across all command qualities.

Brigades 1 through 6: “Black Shields”

Each consisting of 4 Regiments of Zulus, numbering either 36, 48, or even 60 “figures.” Spear and shield HTH of 6, Shooting of 1*, Morale of 5+, Stamina of 3, 4, or 5 Shooting asterisk for thrown spears. These units will not have muskets or rifles. Range is 6 centimeters. Ferocious Charge on first charge ONLY (HTH, Shooting, and Stamina will increase for the “large” units).



Map 1 for Magnuson's Drift: The British direction of advance (indicated by the large red arrow) threads some pretty difficult terrain. Hills - some gentle, some rather steep - and patches of rough ground (indicated by the darker green/olive-colored hexes) essentially frame the Imperial route. The colored boxes at the top, right, and bottom of the diagram indicate the arrival "zones" of the Zulu regiments. Each formation rolls 1d20 to determine its entry "zone." The turn of arrival is determined by rolling a 1d6. British forces were permitted to deploy within a "box" measuring 55 centimeters across by 48 centimeters deep.

Brigades 7 and 8: "Red Shields"

Each consisting of 3 Regiments of Zulus, either 36 or 48 "figures." Spear and shield; rifled-musket HTH of 7, Shooting of 1, Morale of 4+, Stamina of 3 or 4, Superbly Drilled, Tough Fighters.

Brigade 9: "White Shields"

2 Regiments of Zulus, each regiment numbering 36 "figures." Spear and shield; rifled-musket HTH of 8, Shooting of 1, Morale of 4+, Stamina of 3, Elite, Superbly Drilled, Tough Fighters

Having settled on the composition of the opposing armies (odds of five to one against the Europeans, at least in terms of trained infantry units, seemed appropriately historical), I turned my attention to creating a simple procedure for solo play.

Solo Guidelines

Map 1 shows the five entry zones reserved for the Zulu regiments. At the start of their phase of each game turn, a 1d6 was rolled for each brigade. If the result of the roll matched the turn of the game, then that brigade of Zulus would run onto the field. Their arrival point or zone was determined by rolling a 20-sided die. The Zulus could opt to take a free move, or they could chance it by rolling for orders. Once on table, the primary objective of the Zulu regiments was to engage and inflict maximum damage upon the colonial invaders.

And the Winner is . . .

As established above, the objective of No. 6 Column was to reach Magnuson's Drift. For each heavy wagon within 12 cm of the river crossing by the end of game turn 10 (the determined length of this second experiment), the British would receive 60 points. If a wagon was between 12 and 24 cm of the crossing point, then 30 points would be awarded. For each Zulu regiment in disorder at the end of the battle, the British would earn 5 points. If a regiment was shaken, the award went up to 20 points. If an enemy unit was broken or otherwise forced off the tabletop, 50 points would be deposited in the Imperial "bank."

The Zulus would earn points by capturing/destroying wagons, and by destroying British units. Each wagon, brigade commander, and unit of Regulars was worth 50 points to the Zulus. If a unit was shaken at the conclusion of game turn 10, then the Zulus would receive 25 points. The battalions of the Natal Native Contingent were worth just 15 points if broken by the Zulus.

Swamped by a Wave of Warriors: A Summary of the Contest

Embracing the role of the fictional Colonel Reynolds, I organized my command for its march to Magnuson's Drift. Diagram A shows how I arranged my infantry companies, cavalry detachments, native contingent, and wagons. Unfortunately, I misjudged the amount of space my units (especially the wagons) would occupy, so it took two turns before I was able to get my entire column on the field. Fortunately, the Zulus appeared to be concentrated -- or concentrating in one particular arrival zone, and so, created something of a traffic jam that interfered with their present and future progress.

A mass of Zulus was sighted at the beginning of the third turn, and the alarm was raised. Oddly enough, the units of the NNC proved more reactive to issued orders than the well-trained and experienced Imperial troops. Two units formed a battle line on the front right of the column, while the left hand unit wheeled in that direction so as to guard the flank and rear of the NNC.

Colonel Reynolds rode up through the halted wagons to get a better picture of what was going on, and in a premature move, ordered the Gatling gun to be set up. A couple of weak volleys were delivered by the NNC battalions, but these proved sufficient to knock down some Zulus and disorder one of the regiments which was positioning itself to charge. Closing fire was issued at the subsequently charging mass, but proved unable to stop them completely. In a savage melee, both combatants were reduced to shaken status, but an awful break test for the NNC unit resulted in it being fragmented and swept aside.

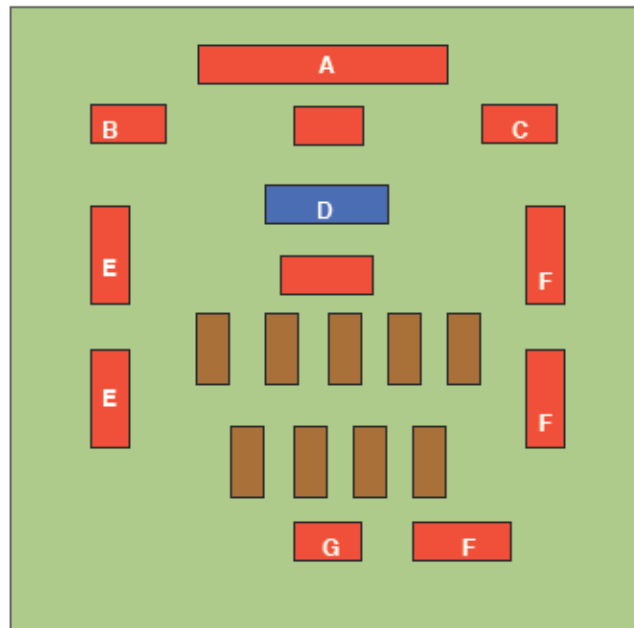


Diagram A - No. 6 Column: Three "battalions" of NNC (A) formed the front face of the "square," while Native Cavalry (B) and Frontier Light Horse (C) guarded the flanks of the contingent. The fourth battalion of the NNC Brigade was directly behind this line of semi-trained troops. The Naval Brigade Detachment (D) was next in line, as it were. The 7-pdr cannon was on the left, and the Gatling Gun was on the right of this formation. A company of regulars brought up the rear of the face of the "square." Two companies of the 2nd Brigade (E) marched on the left of the open formation, while three companies of the 1st Brigade (F) marched on the right. The wagons were stationed at the rear of the semi-open "square." Colonel Reyolds positioned himself next to the detachment from the 17th Lancers (G), so that he could best control his column of combined arms.

To be sure, the sudden appearance of another force of Zulus on the left of the British formation -- in proximity to the Native Cavalry -- did not bode well. Luckily, both riders and mounts were able to escape the very real threat of being overwhelmed by four regiments of bloodthirsty Zulu warriors. (Map 2 presents a snapshot of the state of the tabletop at the conclusion of Turn 4.)



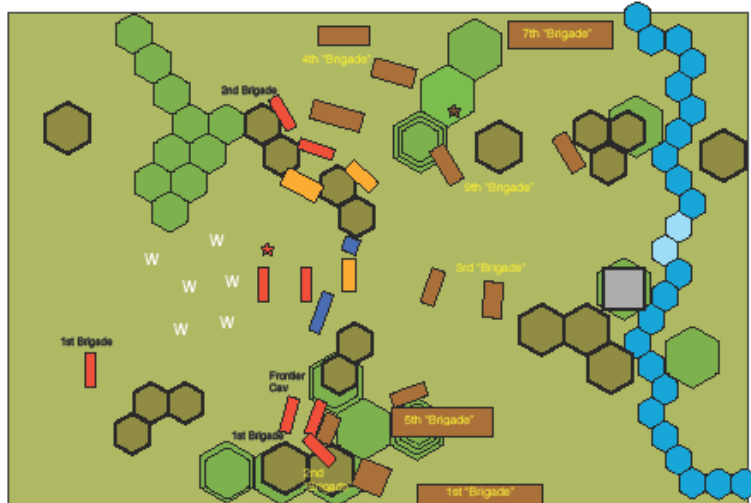
Map 2 for Magnuson's Drift: At the conclusion of Game Turn 4, masses of Zulus have appeared on the right and left of the British Column. The threat developed with the arrival of the 3rd "Brigade" of Zulu warriors. (There was a "traffic jam" in this arrival zone, with the 2nd formation coming on the field, quickly followed by the regiments of the 5th "Brigade.") The battalions of the NNC bore the brunt of the first combat, losing a unit to the first Zulu charge, but otherwise holding their own. The ox-drawn wagons (the white Ws) have stopped their slow progress as Colonel Reynolds (indicated by the red star) moves forward and begins to organize a defense. It appears that forward movement will have to be delayed until the Zulus are dispersed.

Over the next six turns (well, five and a half), the British commander completely ignored the attached wagons, and focused all of his attention on getting his regulars into line so that their breech-loading rifles could be used to proper effect. When this plan worked (meaning when orders were carried out), things went fairly well. But when units failed to respond -- especially the Naval Brigade troops -- things got a little desperate. Fortunately, for Colonel Reynolds, the warriors commanding the various Zulu "brigades" seemed to be having similar problems.

On the right and left of the column, the companies of the 1st and 2nd Brigades were pushed into close-order lines so volley fire could be used against the masses of warriors. The fighting grew in intensity as more Zulus attempted to rush and break through the "thin red lines," but effective volleys and stubborn resistance with the bayonet held them in check.

These local victories did not come without a cost, however. Two companies of regulars suffered pretty severe casualties in throwing back repeated charges. Indeed, for a few turns on the right of the British formation, one Zulu regiment proved particularly resilient (or just plain stubborn -- or just very lucky) when it engaged a company of redcoats for several turns of close combat. The British would win the melee every time, but the Zulu warriors would always roll splendid dice for the required break test.





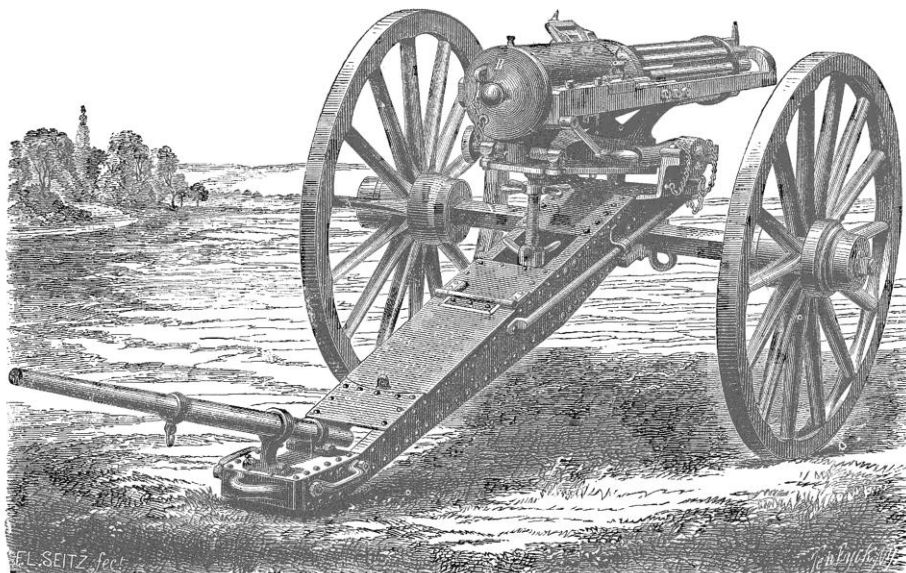
Map 3 for Magnuson's Drift: The British have established something resembling a line, but have made no progress toward their objective. Though seven formations of Zulus are on the field, very little damage has been done to the column. While the NNC Brigade has been broken, the companies of regulars on the left and right have held their ground. Several Zulu charges have been repulsed with effective volley fire. The detachment of the Naval Brigade has not been involved, as they are too busy ignoring orders. A "traffic jam" of Zulus has developed in one sector of the field, as disordered regiments and poor die rolls prevent any coordination or additional pressure on Colonel Reynolds' formation.

In the center of the field, or of the stalled British advance, the NNC continued to put up a surprisingly good fight against larger numbers. Eventually, however, their morale failed, and the survivors began to withdraw back toward the stalled Naval Brigade and the non-moving wagons. The detachment from the 17th Lancers had been moved forward just for this reason, and in addition to being able to provide support along the front face of the pseudo-square, were able to deliver a charge in the last phase of the engagement that pushed back a too-close-for-comfort regiment of Zulus.

Back over on the right of the column, the men of the 1st Brigade stood their ground against all attacks. These two companies were supported only by a unit of irregular cavalry. The third company of the brigade could not seem to find its way closer to the fighting. And the Gatling gun proved completely useless in the local contest. Given new orders to move into a better position and support the defensive line, the crew held on for dear life as the horses spooked and took the gun and caisson deep into enemy lines. (The order roll for this piece of “artillery” was blundered, and subsequent rolls dictated a charge move of three moves or 54 cm into an area swarming with Zulus! I thought it improbable that a limbered Gatling gun would “charge” an enemy formation, but believed it completely possible for horses to bolt. The resulting move put the crew very near newly arriving Zulus. These regiments caught the horses and crew in their phase of the turn and overwhelmed them.)

Despite this unusual occurrence, the Zulus were not able to mass sufficiently and then launch irresistible attacks against selected British targets. In fact, the majority of warriors seemed uninterested in getting “stuck in.” As the sun began to set on the miniature field, the British column was still rather far away from its planned stopping point (Magnuson’s Drift), but it was still intact. Granted, the NNC had been broken by Zulu attacks, but the column was still standing and most importantly, the wagons were safe! Scores of Zulus littered the ground on the left and right of the British position. While there was some fighting in the center, it never approached the desperate level of the struggle on the flanks of the column.

Unable to break the British companies with fierce charges, and unable to organize his various regiments into a more potent striking force, Prince Mpande issued orders for a general withdrawal. The regulars of No. 6 Column did not stand down for two more hours, however. The unit of Frontier Light Cavalry was sent out to scout, to make sure that the Zulus had departed. A makeshift camp was set up around the wagons. Since they took no real part in the fighting, the Naval Brigade was tasked with guarding the perimeter. Colonel Reynolds was frustrated that his men had not reached the Drift, but he was relieved that a majority of them would wake up tomorrow. Prince Mpande was as frustrated, if not more so. His warriors had prevented the British from making any real progress, but a steep price had been paid.



Evaluation

As related in the abbreviated narrative (12 pages of notes totaling some 3,800 words were produced while this wargame was played over six days), the British did not reach their stated objective. A strong case could be made, therefore, for a Zulu win. Because no British wagons made it anywhere near Magnuson's Drift, the Zulus should receive those points. As a counter to that position, there is the fact that not a single wagon came under direct threat from any Zulu regiment. Furthermore, based on points earned during the 10-turn fight (technically, just nine and a half turns; the Zulu phase of the last turn was not initiated), the British have a complete advantage: 525 points to just 130. Nine Zulu regiments were broken, two regiments were shaken, and one leader of a "brigade" was KIA. The British, in contrast, did not lose a single leader. They lost two units of NNC, a Gatling gun (though I still question if I played that blunder right), and two companies of their regular infantry were shaken as a result of prolonged combat.

Then again, perhaps points should be taken away from the British? Since not a single wagon was dragged within 24 cm of Magnuson's Drift, maybe I should penalize them 270 points? Even if I accept this, Colonel Reynolds still winds up with double the points of Prince Mpande. I think, then, that the victory has to go to the soldiers of Queen Victoria.

Setting aside the calculations, what else can be said about the action at Magnuson's Drift? Did I have fun gaming the battle? Was it realistic? In my subjective opinion, what worked and what did not?

To be candid, I did not have a great deal of fun working my way through this second experiment. This is not to say that sitting down to the table was on par with getting a cavity fixed without novocaine, or being forced to watch a marathon of "Life with the Kardashians," but to remark that, like the opposing fictional commanders, I found myself a bit frustrated as well as a little disappointed.

Why? Well, for starters, a sizable portion of the prepared Zulu regiments never made it on to the tabletop. For those that did, a large number of these units never managed to move themselves into combat with the enemy. The finger points at poor dice rolling, but I wonder to what extent poor scenario design and or solo mechanics can also be blamed.

As to realism, well, the following comments have to be prefaced by this author's admission of not being a recognized and highly respected expert on the Anglo-Zulu War. The adoption and use of the volley fire rules (again, I strongly recommend interested readers check out the posts made by "jazbo") seemed to work very well. Zulu aggression was blunted by the cool performance of Imperial troops commanded by NCOs and line officers. I also thought the performance of the NNC troops was fairly representative of the historical record. To a lesser extent, I thought the inability of the Naval Brigade detachment to follow orders detracted from the historical "flavor" of the miniature engagement. Then again, as Colonel Reynolds, my attention was focused in more than several different directions as Zulu regiments appeared at several points across the front of my route of advance.

Indeed, though I moved my command stand forward at the start of the battle, and issued orders to the Gatling gun crew as well as to the captain leading the lancers, I became engrossed with the action on the left and right. I do not think I moved Colonel Reynolds and his subordinates again after Game Turn 4.

On the other side of this “coin,” I questioned the realism of the runaway Gatling gun and crew. I also wondered about the one regiment of veteran Zulu warriors, who -- though a safe distance from the British -- suddenly decided to “turn around” and march the other way. The protracted combat on the right of the British formation also gave me pause. While I understand that Zulus are brave and fierce warriors, I was puzzled if not also a little impressed by the ability of one regiment to stand toe-to-boot with a company of British regulars. Accepting that melees in this period involved shooting at very close range as well as crossing spears with bayonets, it seemed unlikely that Zulus would “stand around” and take the punishment that they did in this local episode.

To a degree, I have already addressed -- or at least started to address -- the question about what I think worked and what I think needs improvement. At the risk of promoting my admittedly eccentric approach, I will say that both troops and terrain were prepared with a minimum investment of time and funds.

Though my miniatures were/are atypical, I could easily identify which units were regulars, NNC, or Zulus. Though my battlefield terrain was lacking in substance, I could easily tell what was a hill, a patch of rough ground, and where the river ran.



The scenario was simple enough, and certainly resulted in action. There was not, despite the previously completed manipulation of victory points, the perception of a clear-cut winner. Perhaps I should have continued the battle for five or seven more turns? Given the evident inability of the Zulus to coalesce and given the justifiable reluctance of the British to move their wagons while under attack, would these additional turns have produced a more definitive result? As the tabletop was cleared in the middle of Game Turn 10, an absolute answer will never be known. My hunch is that it would have been more of the same. In this sense, I guess there was an underlying realism to the engagement. Shields, spears, and naked flesh do not fare very well when pitted against uniforms, drilled troops, cartridge boxes, and breech-loading rifles.

I thought the solo mechanics sufficient for their purpose. I was not prepared, however, for the repetition of die rolls that put four “brigades” of Zulus into one arrival zone. Perhaps I should have re-rolled the dice, or simply moved the additional regiments to the left or right of the indicated arrival zone? Perhaps I should have simplified the victory conditions? After all, keeping things simple seems to be one of the foundations of the *Black Powder* rules.

If I were to offer a final grade for this second experiment, it would be a C-plus. Though I have no exact rubric, I think the reasons for this slightly better than average evaluation have been provided and supported. It is perfectly understandable that a student with a new set of rules would be prone to errors, and even second-guess himself with this or that interpretation of a particular situation. While I may have made a few mistakes in this recently completed battle, I don't think any were severe enough to affect the outcome. What is not so understandable is why an experienced solo gamer would have so much trouble -- evidently -- with developing a decent scenario and establishing reasonable victory conditions.

In my further experiments, I hope to increase my fluency with *BP* as well as address my shortcomings in scenario design, while hoping to raise my solo wargaming grade point average.

Photos of the action



PHOTO 1: The prepared battlefield. This view is from the British table edge. Magnuson's Drift can be seen in the distance. The nature of the terrain (hills and rough ground) surrounding the route of march is obvious.



PHOTO 2: The initial set up of No. 6 Column. As depicted in Diagram A, a loose square formation was adopted. As indicated in the text of the article, the allotted space was too small to hold all of the wagons accompanying the column. Here, the NNC and cavalry can be seen across the top of the square. The Naval Brigade has artillery and a Gatling gun as “bookends.” Five of the nine wagons are on the table. Brigade stats are located on the left and right of the formation for ease of reference and to speed play.



PHOTO 3: The first “brigade” of Zulus has run onto the field. Another brigade is preparing to enter as well. The NNC (top of picture) is shifting its line in order to meet the expected advance. The leading company of the 1st Brigade (left of photo) has deployed into line, and can just see the mass of Zulus moving across the hill to their front. (Picture taken at the close of Turn 3.)



PHOTO 4: A view of the developing action, taken from the Zulu table edge. Additional regiments have appeared on the left of the British column, forcing Colonel Reynolds to split his attention. In the foreground, Prince Mpande and two regiments of veteran warriors have jogged onto the field. At this point, one unit of NNC has been broken, and a second unit has been forced back to the base of a three-tier hill on the right.



PHOTO 5: An aerial close-up (sorry about the lack of focus!) showing the attempt of one Zulu “brigade” to overwhelm the “thin red line” of the 2nd Brigade. The red dots on the leading Zulu formation indicate the number of casualties; the yellow marker indicates that the unit is disordered.



PHOTO 6: Taken late in the battle, this picture shows the detachment of lancers (all mounted on black horses) moving forward to fill the gap left by the retreating NNC. The Naval Brigade still has not moved, but its artillery section has withdrawn to relative safety. (Oddly enough, the cannons would never unlimber during the battle.) The two units of NNC are working their way back through the lancers and native horse. Colonel Reynolds and his adjutant are in the lower left of the frame.