

# 'GOD SAVE THE QUEEN!'

By W. P. Bollands



**THE SHANGANI PATROL OR WILSON'S LAST STAND.  
FIRST MATABELE WAR, 3-4 DECEMBER 1893.**



The story of European colonial conquest in Africa contains equal shares of tales of folly, heroism and horror. Whilst modern opinions may be divided on the impact and effects of colonial experience in Africa, it is sometimes possible to find slices of history which can both inspire and sadden the wargamer and amateur historian. Most recently, I have become somewhat fascinated with the First and Second Matabele Wars and the Mashonaland Rebellion. Amongst the accounts of the adventures of such luminaries as Robert Baden-Powell, Frederick Selous, Cecil Rhodes and Frederick Russell Burnham, there are equally as significant but largely unknown characters such as Major Allan Wilson of the British South African Company Police and the doomed men of what has become known as The Shangani Patrol. In this article, I intend to cover the main events, as far as they are known, surrounding a prominent part of Southern Africa's colonial history, an event that is often referred to as the British equivalent of Custer's Last Stand and has almost as much myth blended with reality as its American counterpart.

## MOUNTED INFANTRY IN ACTION

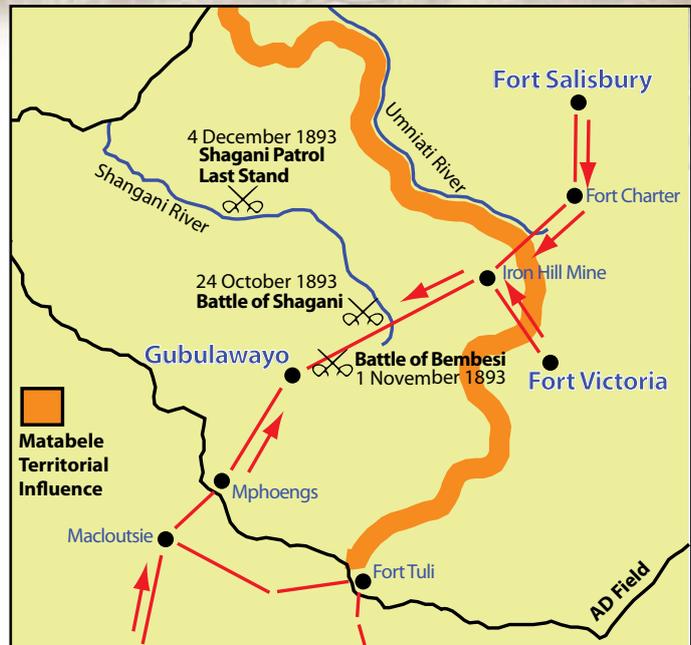
In an effort to capture the leader of the Matabele, King Lobengula, following the destruction of the royal kraal at Bulawayo, a force of 160 mounted BSAC police were dispatched under the command of Major Patrick Forbes. These were some of the better 'European' (although some of them came from as far afield as Australia, Canada and the Boer republics) troops available to the Company and operated, like almost all the white or white-led forces, as mounted infantry. Acting on

information received, as classic police jargon would have it, they followed the trail of Lobengula and his Zulu-style impis to the south bank of the Shangani River, about 40km north-east of the village of Lupane (see map). After a hard day's riding and in torrential rain, Forbes decided to form laager for the night and send a small patrol, under Major Allan Wilson across the somewhat swollen river to see if they could spot the enemy. Forbes intended that the patrol should act in a reconnaissance role only, reporting back to him what they had discovered and returning to the

laager for the night. To this end, the patrol set out. It contained between twelve and fifteen troopers, armed only with Martini-Henry rifles and revolvers. Although there were three of the devastating Maxim machine guns available to the column, there seemed little sense in sending any of these with such a small force. So, Major Allan Wilson, a brave and experienced Scottish-born warrior, led his band of men into the gathering darkness of a gloomy, rain swept, early evening at 5pm, never to be seen again by most of those who remained behind.

## THE DETACHED PATROL

Once they were on the other side of the river, it soon became apparent to Wilson and his men that they had evidence of a large force of approximately 3,000 Matabele warriors, including Lobengula himself. This discovery was aided by the tracking and scouting abilities of the famous American scout Frederick Burnham and the Canadian scout Robert Bain. Disobeying his orders, Wilson decided to 'have a go' and capture the King. He sent a request for reinforcements back across the rapidly deepening river to Forbes. By this time, full darkness had fallen and Forbes, amid fears of an attack by the main impi of Matabele, who had possibly turned back to encircle him (later found to be incorrect), took the sensible decision not to break up his defensive laager at night in such poor weather. However, rather than recall Wilson and carry out a planned advance across the river in the morning, Forbes took the unusual decision to send another twenty men under a Captain Borrow,



Above: A map showing the route taken by the Shangani Patrol

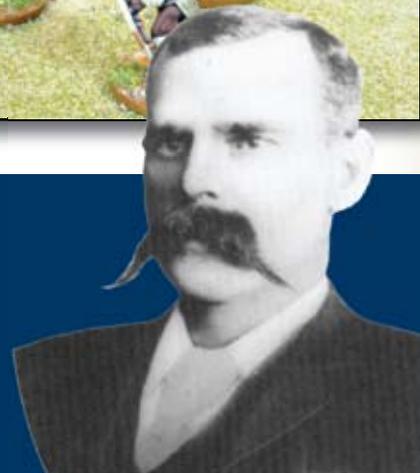
Opposite page: Members of the BSAC on patrol. Figures by North Star and Perry Miniatures.

Below: A BSAC camp comes under attack. Matabele figures by North Star.



## MAJOR ALLAN WILSON (1856-DECEMBER 1893)

An experienced, Scottish-born, soldier. After moving to the Cape Colony, he fought in both the Anglo-Zulu War and the First Anglo-Boer War. Having become a gold prospector for a brief time, he managed to secure a commission in the Basuto Police, before serving in the Victoria Volunteers and being promoted to Major. Described as a 'good, courageous, if somewhat rash officer', he had commanded his own column at the start of the First Matabele War. His death as the leader of the Shangani Patrol secured his place as an Imperial hero to both white Rhodesians and the British public of the time.



again only armed with rifles and revolvers. This second detachment included another American scout, Pearl 'Pete' Ingram, thereby potentially enhancing the already considerable range of tracking abilities available to Wilson. The fact that he had been reinforced led Wilson to be more hopeful of achieving his goal. He made plans to try to seize Lobengula in the morning. Given that his force only numbered around thirty-six lightly armed men, one can only believe that he expected to prevail by speed and surprise, a tactic that had worked in the past, especially as the Matabele did not use mounted troops. As the rain continued to fall, the weary troops settled down to an uncomfortable night in their own mini-laager, no doubt the prospect of a difficult action the next day preying upon their minds.

### NEW DAY, MORE PROBLEMS

At dawn the next day, Forbes found that the Shangani had risen even higher, making it almost impossible for the main body of the column to cross the river, encumbered by wagons and artillery as they were. To make matters worse, they came under attack by a number of Matabele warriors who struck from ambush as the column attempted to move off. Despite the ensuing skirmishes,

Forbes and his men were able to hear the sound of heavy fighting from the opposite side of the river. It was apparent that Wilson and his patrol had made contact with the enemy. This was confirmed by the unexpected arrival, after swimming the dangerous river and amidst a barrage of spears and bullets, of the scouts Burnham and Ingram and Trooper George Gooding, an Australian. They informed Forbes that they had been sent by Wilson, at great peril to their own lives, to request urgent reinforcements. The patrol had indeed discovered the main Matabele force led by Lobengula and his indunas. This force had launched an attack on the trapped troopers, cut off from escape by the fast flowing, swollen waters of the Shangani. It quickly became apparent that Forbes, beleaguered on all sides, short of food and supplies and unable to cross the river in any great numbers, would have to retire in the face of the enemy or possibly face the wrath of the main Matabele force when they had dealt with Wilson's command. Burnham, Ingram and the other officers reluctantly agreed with his assessment and Forbes gave the order for the column to withdraw, harassed by the enemy as they did so. In the distance, far across the river, could still be heard the sounds of gunfire, although it was apparently noticeably less heavy as the morning went on, eventually dying away towards mid to late morning.

### AFTERMATH AND A LEGEND IS BORN

Owing to the continued Matabele threat and the difficulty of gaining access to the location, the bodies of Wilson, Borrow and the others could not be reclaimed until February 1894. By this time, King Lobengula had died in suspicious circumstances and the war was over. Using the evidence left on the battlefield as a guide and a captured Matabele warrior who claimed to have been present at the battle, the 'reality' of the last moments of Wilson and his men were surmised. It was stated by those who examined the battle that the patrol had seemingly fought to the last cartridge and that many of the bodies were found in a tight knot around their leader, Major Wilson. The Matabele prisoner apparently claimed that the soldiers had died singing 'the song which praises their Great Queen', which was naturally taken as being the National Anthem. These perhaps somewhat distorted, but inspiring, facts came to be adopted by the producers of a somewhat jingoistic play, Wilson's Last Stand, which proved so popular that it ran for two years. During the play, Wilson and his men manage to kill nearly six hundred of the enemy, some of whom are members of Lobengula's Royal Guard. As the number of wounded increases, the troopers load and pass their rifles to



### THE BRITISH SOUTH AFRICA COMPANY

Established by Cecil Rhodes and a number of other notables. The Company gained a royal charter in 1889, allowing it to exploit the resources of southern Africa. It was modelled on the East India Company, providing a cheap alternative to direct, Imperial rule. To defend their interests, the BSAC recruited their own troops, most notably the paramilitary British South African Police. This unit numbered 750 men in 1893 and acted as mounted infantry. Other troops were raised as required.



Wilson, the last man to fall. Eventually, the ammunition runs out and the remaining wounded members of the patrol rise to their feet, surrounded by the enemy, singing 'God Save the Queen' and fighting on hand-to-hand from behind a barricade of dead horses. Wilson, with both arms broken, steps forward and walks towards the ranks of the Matabele, is stabbed by a young warrior, falls but rises up once more, causing the warrior to shrink back in fear as the bloodied hero stumbles towards him. Finally, the stalwart Wilson drops to the ground and the curtain falls as the voices of the Shangani Patrol are silenced.

### WARGAMER'S VIEW

Although perhaps rather exaggerated, it is that image of the heroic last stand that has come to epitomise so much of colonial history both in fact and fantasy. Indeed, my own tabletop colonial forces have been forced to 'fight to the last man' on more than one occasion! In addition to the sheer sense of colonial 'derring-do', The Shangani Patrol appears to be eminently suitable for a short skirmish or a longer game. On the one hand, the patrol itself is easy to put together, comprising only a few suitably armed and attired figures. There are also a number of 'what-ifs' - what if

Forbes had managed to fight his way through? What if Wilson had been given the deadly Maxim gun? Could Wilson and his men have seized Lobengula and then tried to make a dash for the main column? The possibilities are endless.

### UNIFORMS AND FIGURE AVAILABILITY

Although the BSAC had an official uniform, many troopers chose to interpret this in different ways, finding campaign life somewhat different to the parade ground. Written and photographic evidence suggests that shirt sleeves were most often worn on campaign. It should therefore be fairly easy to find suitable figures. Indeed, my own 28mm discoveries have included mounted and dismounted Imperial Yeomanry from Foundry's Boer War range, Old Glory's Mounted Infantry in Slouch Hats in their own Boer War section and even Perry plastic ACW cavalry in Confederate Soft Hats for the more cash conscious.

As Well as these perfectly suitable (if make-shift) BSAC figures, North Star Figures have just released the first couple of packs in their specific BSAC range, and I would suggest these should be your first port of call for 'taylor made' figures.

Hopefully these couple of packs will be joined in the not to distant future by more; personalities, Maxim teams and wagons would be useful additions.

You can see the North Star figures in the photos decorating this article, they are backed up by figures from Perry Miniatures Boer War range.

The Matabeles can be easily assembled using tribal warriors from a number of ranges, a particular favourite being Copplestone Castings or, if sheer weight of numbers is the aim, why not make use of the plastic Zulus from Wargames Factory? In addition to figures armed with spear and shield, the Matabele made wide use of muskets and modern rifles. This should be reflected in the ratio of guns to spears, perhaps one warrior with a firearm for every three without.

Again North Star is the place to go for your specific Matabeles though, they have just released around 10 packs which form a comprehensive range covering specific Matabele regiments and 'command' etc. Again these figures are featured in the photos along with this article.

### MY OWN, FINAL STAND

I hope you have found this potted history of one event in one corner of colonial history interesting. I undertook my research into this area largely in an effort to combat the 'holiday boredom' of not being in the presence of young minds (yes, I am a teacher, and yes, I know you non-teachers would 'like to have the time to be that bored'). I intend to expand my knowledge into this area in the future, although I have become a little sidetracked by the White Rajahs of Sarawak (Dayak headhunters, anyone?). In the meantime, I intend to keep gaming and try to prevent the old upper lip quavering as my stalwart defenders of Empire are once more swept aside by the brave and bold would-be vanquishers of colonial ambition.

*Below: The Last Stand. It all looks lost for Wilson's party - time to keep up a stiff upper lip and belt out the National Anthem as the curtain closes.*



### REFERENCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

*The Zulu and Matabele Warrior Nations* by Glynn Lyndon

*A History of Rhodesia* by Robert Blake

www.bulawayo1872.com  
BY JINGO - Colonial History and Wargames Page

British South African Police Website

Wikipedia