

"THE LAND IS DEAD"

A REVIEW OF CAPE FRONTIER WARGAME FIGURES

By Ian Knight



Think of conflicts between European colonial powers and African societies in southern Africa and you inevitably think of the 1879 Anglo-Zulu War. Michael Caine and Stanley Baker and a thin red line of heroes manning the barricades on the far-flung frontiers of Empire, trading bayonet-thrusts against jabbing spears, war chants for *Men of Harlech* (that bit never happened in real life, by the way - sorry).

Yet there is in fact much more to the European conquest of southern Africa than that one iconic campaign. For more than 250 years - from the establishment of the first Dutch settlement at the Cape in 1652 until the ruthless suppression of the last Zulu uprising in 1906 - white interlopers struggled to wrestle control of the region from indigenous societies. A long and rather dismal cycle of violence saw first the Dutch, then the British who succeeded them - after a conflict of their own, a surreal Napoleonic-style battle waged in 1806 within sight of Table Mountain - subjugate a succession of peoples as they encountered them in their

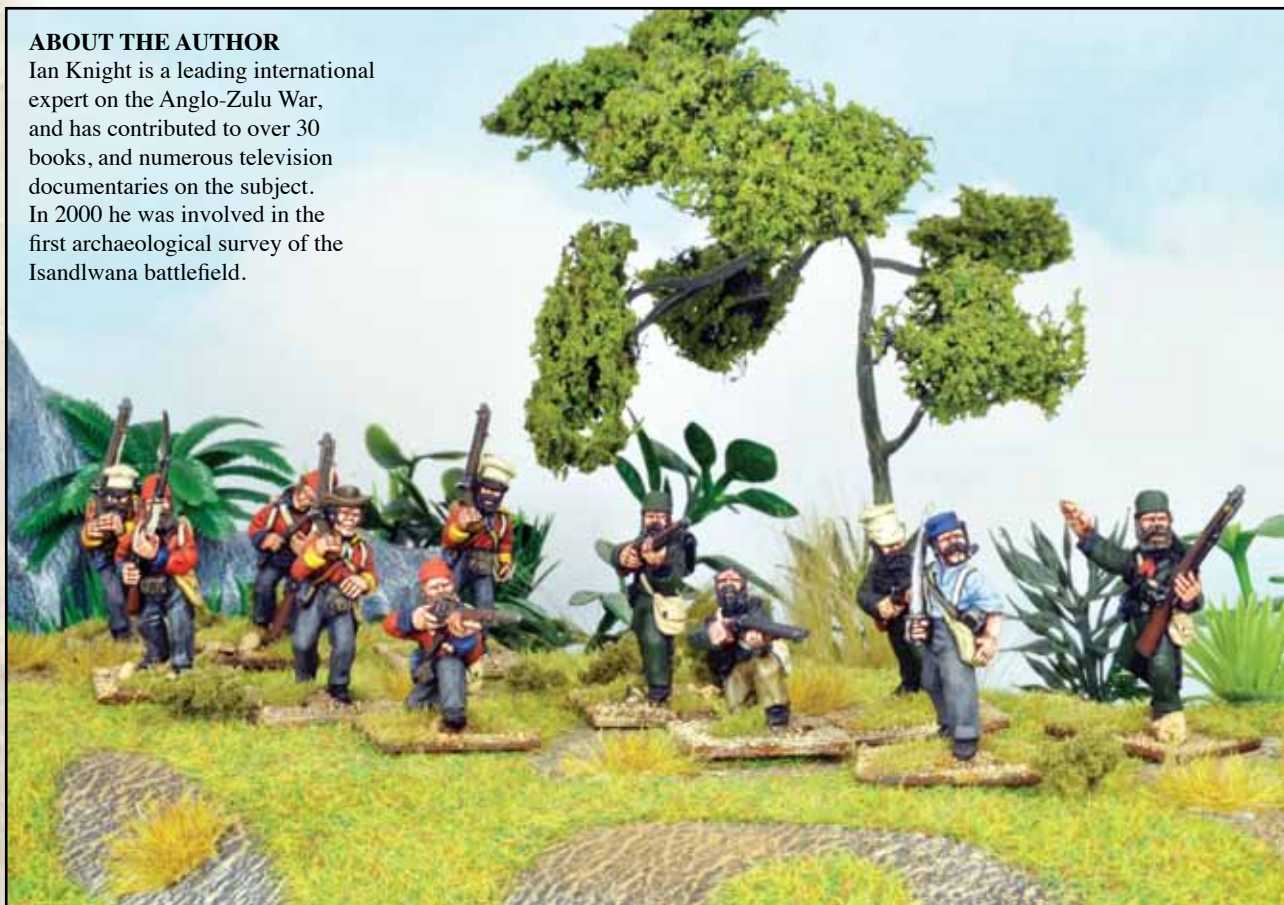
expansion into the interior. The Khoi-San (some of the earliest inhabitants of the Cape, known in the literature of the time as 'Hottentots'), the Xhosa, the BaSotho, the Ndebele, the Zulu (of course), the baPedi, the Tswana and the Venda all at some point found themselves defending their territory against inroads from either Boers (the descendants of the first Dutch settlers) or the British in an epic struggle which has much in common with that of the American West. And for good measure, of course, the Boers and the British fought amongst themselves, not once but several times.

The Anglo-Zulu War provided the exclamation marks - the Zulu victory at Isandlwana, the British stand at Rorke's Drift - which have come to punctuate understanding of this history and stand in the popular imagination for them all, but in fact many of these other struggles are worthy of study in themselves.

This is particularly true of no less than nine wars waged on the Eastern Cape Frontier across very nearly a century, between 1779 and 1878. They began when the first white settlers - and the word Boer means farmer or countryman in Dutch - began to press beyond the official boundary of the Cape Colony, following a line of grassy hill-country eastwards along the curving coast of the tip of the African continent. Here they encountered the first of the robust African societies who were already in possession of the hinterland beyond, and a sporadic struggle began which had at its heart ownership of a land which was ideally suited to the cattle farming which was the economic mainstay of both sides.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ian Knight is a leading international expert on the Anglo-Zulu War, and has contributed to over 30 books, and numerous television documentaries on the subject. In 2000 he was involved in the first archaeological survey of the Isandlwana battlefield.



Above: These are a handful of British regulars and Cape Mounted Rifles from 1st Corps's Eighth Cape Frontier War range.

THE XHOSA

Xhosa is pronounced with a characteristic clicking sound on the 'X' - the sound you make when trying to get a horse to 'gee-up' - which caused pronunciation problems for whites at the time, and for non-South Africans ever since. The most acceptable Anglicisation is 'Xhosa', pronounced 'Kor-sah' (and most definitely not 'ex-oh-shar'!). At the time, both Dutch and English settlers took the easy option and referred to them by an old Arabic word for black African unbelievers, 'Kaffir'. Then, this word was arguably no more than dismissive in tone, but it has since been burdened with two centuries of racial disdain making it a hugely offensive term to any person of black South African origin. Thus what were once known as the 'Kaffir Wars' are now generally known as the Eastern Cape Frontier Wars.



Above: British regulars and Cape Mounted Rifles (from 1st Corps) advance through a native encampment.

The African society were the amaXhosa ('ama' simply meaning 'people of'). Culturally and linguistically the Xhosa were closely related to the Zulu, who lived further up the coast to the north. They were a cattle-owning society who lived in clans ruled over by hereditary chiefs known as amakhosi. Unlike the Zulu, however, who had a strong centralised state system and organised part-time national service regiments to serve as an army among their people, the Xhosa had no strong state apparatus. Historically one clan was considered senior to the others, and its chief was nominally king, but each Xhosa chief went to war - the rallying cry to announce a new campaign was 'ilizwe ifile', 'the land is dead' - leading his own followers. Sometimes the amakhosi combined to form armies of considerable size - just as often they were beset with rivalries among themselves. Unlike Zulu men,

who wore loin-coverings of strips of fur, Xhosa men went about largely naked in their daily lives, wrapped round with a heavy cloak of cow-skin. This was worn with the hair on the inside, and the outside coloured with red ochre. In the early wars some carried large oval cow-hide shields, but these were largely discarded as time wore on because they were cumbersome to use in the bush and did not stop the soldiers' bullets. Although some Xhosa warriors carried broad-bladed stabbing spears, like the Zulu, most were armed with a bundle of light throwing spears which they could hurl with great accuracy over distances of 30 or 40 metres.

Similarly, in early wars among themselves, the Xhosa employed an encircling tactic broadly similar to the famous Zulu 'bull's horns' attack, but this was generally abandoned once it

was found to be too costly in the face of European firearms. Instead, the Xhosa became masters of raiding and ambush, luring troops into difficult terrain and surrounding them, striking at supply trains or making rapid strikes across country at unexpected targets.

The early wars were waged by Dutch forces, usually frontier militias composed of frontier farmers and called commandos (yes, that's where the word comes from). Later, after the British took over at the Cape, large numbers of regular troops were employed against the Xhosa, often supported by commandos, by locally-raised colonial units, and by African allies. Indeed, the 8th Cape Frontier War, 1850-53, saw one of the largest deployments of the Victorian Army in a colonial campaign to that time, and resulted in a protracted and particularly bitter campaign.

THE CAPE FRONTIER WARS AND WARGAMING

So why should war gamers be interested in these wars? The short answer is that they offer many of the intriguing aspects of the Anglo-Zulu War but with more flexibility and a more exotic array of troop types. The fighting raged from pitched battles - on 22 April 1819, for example, a Xhosa army of several thousand warriors attacked the frontier settlement of Grahamstown, and was driven back by British redcoats deployed in Napoleonic line - to innumerable skirmishes. Boer attacks on Xhosa settlements, Xhosa attacks on fortified farm-houses (a la Rorke's Drift), decoys and ambushes in the bush and attacks on wagon-trains were all commonplace, and even a full-blown cavalry charge (on 8 June 1846 the 7th Dragoons, supported by the Cape Mounted Rifles, blundered into a force of 500 Xhosa in the open and destroyed them with a classic charge). The Frontier Wars offer gamers the chance to explore a wider range of scenarios than the set-piece battles which characterise the Zulu campaign, and without such huge disparity in troop numbers and weapon types.

The Frontier Wars, too, offer some interesting field adaptations of classic British uniforms. In the early wars, the British took to the field in Napoleonic coatees and shakos, making little concession to the bush or the heat. By

the 1840s, however, it had become acceptable for colonels to allow their men to strip unnecessary lace of their coatees and to fight in forage caps, and by the 1850s all manner of practical variants were common - short shell jackets, locally-produced trousers, wide-brimmed hats, and blankets worn en banderole. The 74th Highlanders, famously, went so far as to adopt a loose hunting jacket - dyed a neutral brown colour with locally improved dyes, it is regarded as a forerunner of the move to khaki - worn with tartan trews and forage caps. By the time of the last war - the 9th, 1877-78 - the British troops involved were largely the same units who went on to fight in Zululand just months later. They were wearing the same uniforms, too - so a British Zulu War army could be quite authentically pressed into service for the last of the Frontier wars.

HOW CAN YOU FIND OUT MORE?

So far the wars have not yet produced a modern blood-and-thunder military epic - or even, sadly, an equivalent movie! - to capture the imagination in the way the extensive literature on the Zulu War has done. This is not to say, however, that there is not material readily available out there. Noel Mostert's *Frontiers* (first published in 1992, still in print) is a staggeringly epic reinterpretation of the history of the Cape Frontier, and very readable once you get into it - though it can be a bit daunting at first glance since

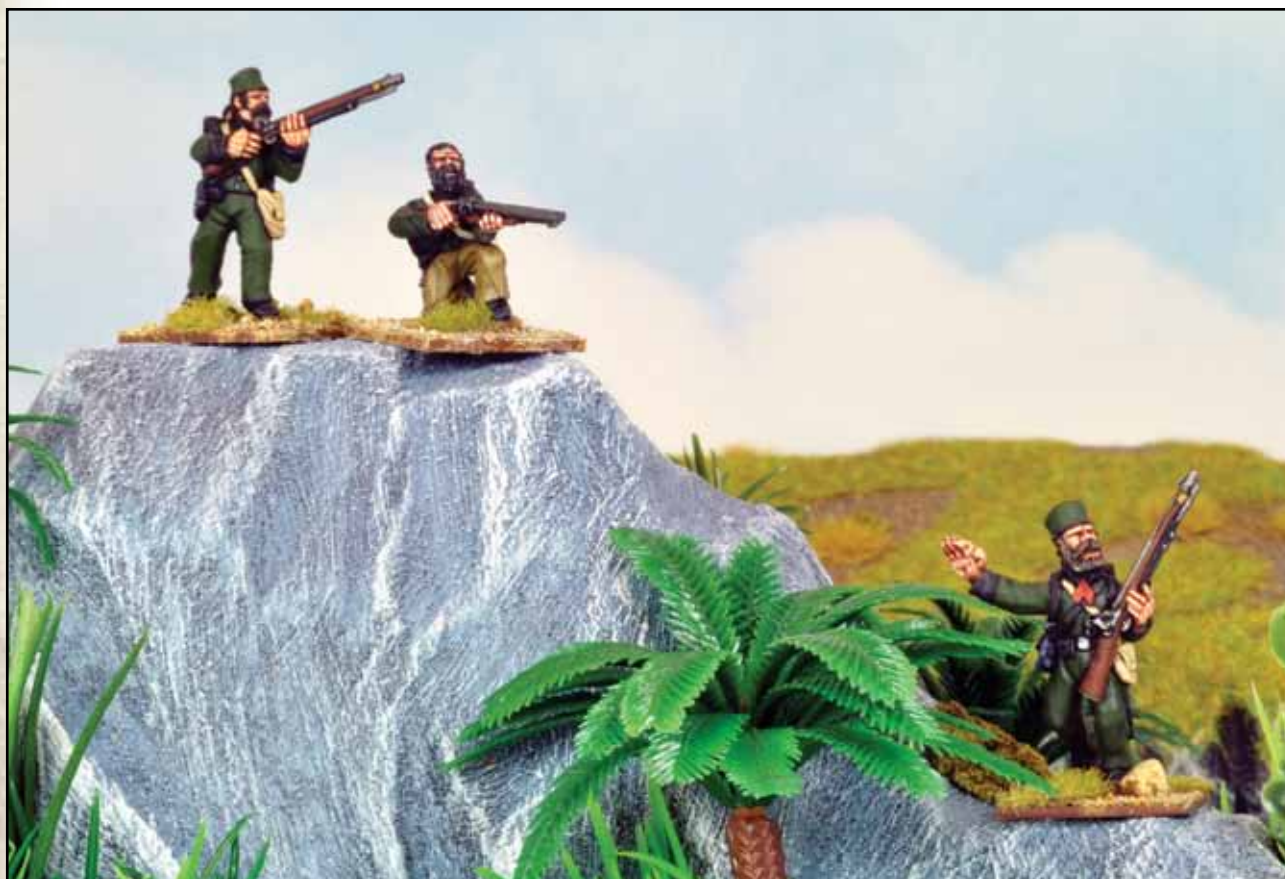
it runs to over 1300 pages! Rather more immediately accessible is John Milton's well-illustrated *The Edges of War*, published by the South African publisher Juta in 1983 (it's always worth looking for out of print books on www.abebooks.co.uk or www.abebooks.com). Uniform information is available in two Osprey 'Men At Arms' titles, *The British Army on Campaign 1816-1902* (1); 1816-1853, by Michael Barthorp, illustrated by Pierre Turner, for the British, and my own *Queen Victoria's Enemies* (1); *Southern Africa*, illustrated by Rick Scollins, for the Xhosa.

WHERE ARE THE MINIATURES?

So, then, to the figures. In this regard the Cape Frontier Wars are very much a period poised to be discovered, and there are already several excellent ranges out there, and in a variety of scales - and these can be expanded even further by a the exercise of a little judicial imagination.

THANKS

... to that small (so far!) but very dedicated group of Cape Frontier gamers who contribute to the Yahoo! Cape Frontier discussion forum online, and whose enthusiasm for the period has inspired me to actually paint up a few figures at last...



Above: These troopers from the Cape Mounted Rifles have climbed high to get their bearings and scout out the approaching enemy.

HONOURABLE LEAD BOILER SUIT COMPANY

First up are some biggies - the Honourable Lead Boiler Suit Company (www.hlbs.co.uk) do a range of figures from the 8th War in 40mm. Elegantly sculpted and cast in pewter, these require some minor assembling, and clearly bridge the gap between wargame and collectors' figures. The range so far is limited to a selection of Xhosa warriors and men of the British 74th Highlanders and 60th Rifles. It's easy to see why these regiments were chosen first, since both wore interesting campaign uniforms in the field - the 60th in braided shell-jackets and forage capes (all 'rifle green', of course), and the 74th in their locally-made hunting smocks, tartan trews and forage caps. The 74th are real gems, and come in a

nice variety of running, firing, loading, en garde, 'looking' and dead poses which would lend themselves ideally to small-scale skirmish actions. Indeed, I'm already mulling over an action in which an officer and a hand-picked group of half-a-dozen trusted men are sent back into the bush to recover a wounded Colonel before the Xhosa close in and finish him off! The Xhosa figures include a nice mix of 'early wars' figures, in heavy cloaks and headdresses, some carrying shields, and 'late wars' figures with muskets in European clothes - and the latter could also be pressed in an auxiliaries fighting for the British.

The only drawback I can see with

the HLBS range is that, if you are planning to go for man-for-man skirmishes, a wide range of troop types and figures is always preferable, and at the moment these are simply not available. Personally I'd like to see some Xhosa casualties - I can't quite reconcile myself in skirmish games to just removing 'dead' figures from the board without replacing them with a marker, especially when it is such large beautiful figures that are in effect disappearing into thin air! - and it would be nice to see some red-coats and Cape Mounted Riflemen in this scale. So, gentle reader, start buying - and hopefully HLBS will be prompted to release some more!



Above: The 8th CFW in 40mm; two of the HLBS Co.'s 74th Highlanders, including an officer with pistol and shotgun...



Above: ...and some of the Xhosa from the same manufacturer.

SASH AND SABRE



Above: Reinforcements; two Xhosa converted from Sash and Saber 40mm Zulus (largely by adding Milliput cloaks to disguise uniquely Zulu aspects of costume) with an HLBS equivalent on the left.

In fact it is not impossible to mix and match the HLBS range with other 40mm figures, particularly the British troops from the Sash and Saber Zulu War range (www.sashandsaber.com). S+S do a nice selection of infantry types representing the 24th Regiment in Zululand which could equally stand for the same regiment on the Eastern Cape a year earlier, and could be used to fight HLBS Xhosa. Indeed, having bought a packet of S+S Zulus - which come in mix-and-match bodies, legs and heads packs - I experimented by putting together a couple of figures wearing the least possible distinctively Zulu costume, then using Milliput to mask this with cloaks. I was certainly pleased with the results - not least because it the two ranges prove to be largely comparable in size and proportion.

1ST CORPS



Above: 1st Corps have lead the way with a comprehensive range of 8th CFW figures, including the unit no self-respecting Frontier Wars game can be without; Cape Mounted Riflemen (right), and Xhosa (left), including riflemen and young warriors with characteristic 'winged' headdresses.

Speaking of proportion, the largest range of Cape Frontier figures available in any scale comes in 28mm from 1st Corps (www.1stcorps.co.uk). Indeed, 1st Corps deserve an accolade for flying the Frontier Wars flag to a far greater extent so far than any figure manufacturer, and for coming close to providing a complete range for the 8th War. This includes a good selection of line infantry figures in appropriate poses - marching, firing etc - wonderfully recreating the field look of the troops. Coatees stripped of shoulder-straps and lace, locally-made ammunition waist-pouches, improvised headgear of night-caps or wide-brimmed hats - it's all here giving the troops the distinctive look which characterised the war. The command group includes some particularly delightful officers, one in a forage cap and shirt-sleeves, marching with his drawn sword at his shoulder, and another in open shell-jacket with his sword scabbard over his shoulder.

Best of all, the 1st Corps range includes two of the units who most characterise the fighting - the 74th and the Cape Mounted Rifles. Like HLBS' 40mm equivalents, the 1st Corps Highlanders are dressed in hunting shirts, forage

caps and trows, and their command group includes a piper and an NCO with a shot-gun - a weapon that proved popular on the frontier because of its stopping power at close range in bush-fighting. The Cape Mounted Rifles were, at that time, a regular British unit recruited at the Cape from among both white and Khoi or mixed-race personnel. They wore a distinctive rifle-green shell-jacket and forage cap and hard-wearing leather trousers, and they were armed with a double-barrelled carbine which fired ball from one barrel and shot from the other. They fought both as cavalry and as mounted infantry, and stamped their presence on a succession of campaigns like no other unit. Indeed, I'm tempted to go so far as to say without CMR figures it would be difficult to represent the Frontier Wars with any degree of accuracy -

and that 1st Corps should take a fair slice of credit for making it possible to wargame these campaigns at all.

The 1st Corps Xhosa include a mix of types armed with firearms and spears, and in particular a set of 'young Xhosa warriors' wearing the distinctive headdresses made from the wing feathers of the Blue Crane which symbolised their status as 'young but keen' battlefield novices. This set in particular have a verve and life about them which perfectly captures the subject, and my only minor quibble is that they have rather coyly been given Zulu-style loin coverings. Being picky about these sort of - let's face it, pretty minor - details, I have obscured these by adding a few extra folds to their cloaks. The 1st Corps range also includes a nice supply wagon and team of oxen with a Boer driver.



Right: The 1st Corps range includes these excellent 74th Highlanders in their famous hunting smock field-dress.

PERRY MINIATURES

A quick pitch for Perry Miniatures' (www.perry-miniatures.com) Carlist Wars range, whose Isabellino troops include British volunteers - the British Auxiliary Legion - some of whom are perfect for the Cape Frontier. These

include the recent box of BAL infantry running at the trail in shell jackets and forage caps (ISA52) and - best of all, in the absence to date of any CFW artillery - the BAL Royal Marine Artillery crew and 6 pdr gun (ISA54).

There are, in short, plenty of figures and references already out there, and hopefully more to come; all it needs is for a few more gamers to take the leap and plunge into this new, fresh and exciting period.

CANNON FODDER MINIATURES

If 1st Corps provide the closest range yet to a complete CFW army, Australia's Cannon Fodder Miniatures (now available exclusively through Blaze Away Miniatures - www.blazeaway.com.au) offer a small but extremely elegant range of Xhosa. These mostly come naked or with a cloak wrapped

over the arm, and are equipped with both firearms and traditional weapons. They also offer one particularly suitable to the later wars, wearing cast-off trousers, a cloak around the body, and a head-cloth. My own favourites are a figure with arm drawn back to throw a spear, which has an almost classical

quality to the sculpting, and a warrior with cloak wrapped round his left arm and musket held out at arm's length with his right. Sadly, I gather this figure is officially 'retired' - but there may be a few still out there in the system, in which case I recommend if you come across them, snap them up!



Above: The author's favourite - a Xhosa warrior swings his flint-lock musket one-handed.

Right: Cannon Fodder Miniatures produce a range of Xhosa with both traditional weapons and firearms.

WARGAMES FOUNDRY

Although at the time of writing HLBS Co., 1st Corps and Canon Fodder are the only manufacturers who produce figures specifically for the Frontier Wars, it's possible to add a good deal of variety by thinking a little outside the box(es). For example, Foundry's Darkest Africa range (www.wargamesfoundry.com) includes a set of 'B*****k naked spearmen' (DA7/3) which can easily be turned into Xhosa by no more than ignoring the supplied shields and trimming off the odd inappropriate feather - although if you are feeling keen, you could customise them further by adding cloaks of Milliput. Milliput, indeed, is a wonderful thing, especially if you are short of Xhosa casualty figures, since of host of simply-dressed Zulu dead can be

readily disguised as Xhosa by swathing them in a Milliput cloak.

The 1840s and 50s, moreover - time of the 7th and 8th wars - were a time when similar generic military uniform styles were popular among a number of nations. Whilst 1st Corps have concentrated on specific field variations of British infantry dress, many British battalions simply took to the field wearing short shell jackets and forage caps. These can be perfectly represented by the old Foundry Sikh Wars British, if you can find them, but they are also remarkably similar to US infantry uniforms from the US-Mexican War - allowing figures from those ranges, by 1st Corps, Old Glory and others, to be pressed into service for the sake of variety. Indeed, the Old Glory 1840s

Maori War British would also be broadly suitable. At the time of writing there are no cavalry figures - other than the CMR - available, but British Lancers from the Foundry Indian Mutiny range (BRV228) are perfect for the 12th Lancers (one of the few units who wore white covers with neck-curtains over their forage caps on the Frontier) during the 1852 BaSotholand expedition, while the 'Native Light Cavalry' (BRV230) could at a pinch be painted up as 7th Dragoons at the time of their charge on the Gwangqa river in 1846. Foundry also produce an excellent transport wagon in their Zulu War range (BSDA3) which is appropriate to pretty much any southern African conflict from about 1800 to the 1906 Rebellion.



Above: These Foundry 'stark naked spearmen' serve as extra Xhosa.

Right: The wonders of Milliput; African casualties from the 'Darkest Africa' series turned into Xhosa with added cloaks.

