

South Africa Campaign Medals

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MEDAL AUTHORISATION AND DESIGN 1834-53

The medal was awarded to those who survived and had been engaged in one or more of the Kaffir Wars of 1834-5, 1846-7 or 1850-53. This was the first medal specially struck for military service in the Continent of Africa.

The intention of awarding a medal for the campaign of 1853-53 was established in March 1854, and Adjutant General, Sir George Cathcart, late Governor of the Cape, had charge of deliberations. On the 16th July he laid the results before the Duke of Newcastle, Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, in a memorandum from Horse Guards presenting a suggested design for the medal and proposed rules to govern the award. At that moment there was already on its way from North America a letter which raised an important issue.

Serving on the Staff of General Rowan in Canada was Sir James Alexander, who in 1840 had addressed a memorial to the Duke of Wellington moving for a medal to be given to survivors of the Peninsula Wars in Spain, a proposition which was shelved until the Duke of Richmond took up the cause and obtained the Military General Service medal for Wellington's veterans in 1848. Now Alexander was to play a part in determining the distribution of the Kaffir Wars medal. On the 17th July he wrote from Montreal to the Duke of Newcastle, expressing satisfaction that the men who had campaigned in South Africa were to receive recognition of the hardships they had endured. He went on to ask that 'those who served without hope of prize money in 1834-5, 1846-7 at Boemplaats and in the capture of Natal should not be overlooked'.

Mention of the latter actions against the Boers suggests that, with the Military General Service, Naval General Service and Army of India medals in mind, Alexander envisaged a similarly retrospective Africa General Service medal. There was need for such an award. The warlike nature of the tribes who had migrated south, centuries before, and were collectively known as Kaffirs, had brought about a number of armed conflicts with European settlers.

Alexander made it clear he was an interested party, having been an Aide to Sir Benjamin d'Urban during the 1834-5 campaign, of which he wrote an account, and C. Talbot, an Under Secretary at the War Office, proffered the opinion that although the 'medal was advisedly restricted I am myself aware of no reason in favour of limitations'. This meant that the wider question of an Africa General Service medal had already been discussed, but with the assent of Newcastle, Colonel S. C. Mundy at the War Office, referred Alexander's suggestions to Lord Hardinge at the Horse Guards. In his reply on the 16th August, the Commander-in-Chief neglected to mention Natal or Boemplaats, which supports the possibility of a General Service medal having been considered and dismissed, but he felt it would be almost impossible to resist the claims of those engaged in previous wars with the same enemy.

Prior to approaching H.M. the Queen for her approval, Newcastle asked that the additional number of medals be ascertained and on 28th September the Horse Guards requested this information from the regiments concerned. Two months later only the 7th Dragoon Guards, 73rd, 90th and 91st (1st Bn.) Regiments and the Cape Mounted Riflemen had responded and so on 25th October, Assistant Adjutant General Wood submitted to the War Office an estimate based on the returns he had received. Wood calculated that some 6,000 extra medals would

be required but stressed that several Corps of Levies were also engaged and that their numbers could not be assessed without communication from the Colony. This was the first mention of Levies for it had been intended to reward officers and men of HM Regular Army only, but Talbot did not act on the point, merely noting that the figure was larger than had been anticipated and reminding Newcastle of Hardinge's view. On 4th November, the Duke recorded that he had obtained the approval of the Queen but it was not for another ten days that the Commander-in-Chief was officially advised the extension having been granted.

General Order No 634 was issued from Horse Guards dated 22nd Nov 1854 and laid down that the medal was 'to be conferred on Surviving Officers, non-commissioned Officers and soldiers of the regular forces, including Officers of the Staff and Officers and Men of the Royal Artillery, Royal Engineers and Sappers and Miners who actually served in the field against the enemy in South Africa'. The Order received the close attention of the late Governor of the Cape, Lieutenant General Sir Harry Smith, now in command of the Northern and Midland Districts. Sir Harry Smith had always been distinguished by his concern for his soldiers and since his return from South Africa, had addressed a number of vigorous letters to Lord Hardinge and other authorities on behalf of old comrades. He also proved that he was not only acting on behalf of the military because on 1st December he wrote to the Duke of Newcastle and raised the question of the eligibility of Seamen and Marines for medals. He pointed out that a detachment of Marines had served in the field for some months and frequently been engaged with the enemy and he continued '... as the Commander of that Army during the most eventful period of that campaign (1850-53) as well as Governor of the Colony I feel it is my duty to make your Grace this representation'.

For the benefit of the Duke, Talbot noted that although a medal had been given to the Navy for the China War (1842) 'neither the Nile, Trafalgar, Algiers nor any great naval action has been so commemorated and I cannot in all due deference to so high an authority as Sir Harry Smith what services the Seamen and Marines could have rendered during the Kaffir Wars which would justify a departure from the present rule in this respect'. Talbot was unaware of the existence of the Naval General Service medal, his knowledge of things naval was matched by Colonel Mundy who advised Newcastle 'I conclude medals have been considered incompatible with the dress and duties of sailors for assuredly they have earned honours as well as soldiers'.

Newcastle was at this time weighed down with the problems of the Crimean War. The Government was under pressure for the deficiencies of our military system and the Duke saw himself as potentially the first sacrifice to appease the clamour. With these more critical matters to concern him, the War Secretary was content to accept his minion's coolness towards Sir Harry's suggestion but, knowing the old Peninsular War veteran was not a man to be easily deterred, the War Department sought to persuade the Navy itself to dismiss the proposition. A letter was sent to the Admiralty on the 8th December to ascertain the opinion of their Lordships as to the propriety of conferring these medals on the Seamen and Marines. They chose to misconstrue the enquiry. Chatham Dock Yard was immediately asked to furnish lists of those officers and men who were engaged in the Kaffir War. The War Office was annoyed upon learning of this hasty action and the Duke minuted that it had better be privately explained that the measure of awarding medals to the Navy had yet to be decided upon.

On the 18th December Col. Mundy sent a formal letter to the Secretary of the Admiralty. It was made clear that the earlier communication had not been intended to encourage a call for

lists of officers and men and their Lordships were left in no doubt as to Newcastle's displeasure ..' it may be therefore superfluous to observe that his Grace would not feel himself warranted in recommending to Her Majesty that such distinction should be conferred on Seamen and Marines in the present instance unless the services performed by them were in the estimation of the Lords of the Admiralty of a marked and brilliant character.

Had the War Office been fully aware of the Navy's contribution, of the difficulties faced and the losses suffered, it is difficult to believe they would have been so obstructive, yet the Admiralty made an attempt to detail the services supplied. For the benefit of their Lordships, Chatham had already supplied a resume of the various ships at the Cape during the Kaffir War and it would have been a simple matter to pass on the information. On the 23rd December their Lordships felt justified in recommending to the Queen that the medal should be extended to Naval Officers, Seamen and Marines who served with the Army. To add weight to the petition they recalled the award of the Naval General Service medal and enclosed a copy of the letter addressed to the Queen, at that time, by the First Lord of the Admiralty.

The War Office was perplexed to find the Navy so ready to bypass them once again but the threat was effective and they made no further attempt at obstruction.

The Duke was to resign a little over a month later and he had put the Kaffir War medal behind him, but subordinates still in the War Office were determined to salvage something from the defeat. Their influence was brought to bear on Newcastle's successor Lord Panmure and after the Navy finally submitted their lists of officers and men on the 25th September 1855 they received a most unwelcome reply from Col. Mundy. On the 10th October he wrote '.. Lord Panmure is of the opinion... that these medals should not be indiscriminately distributed around the whole of the officers and crew of the vessels named, but to such portion of the Naval force who contributed to the operations by land'. The definition of 'who contributed to the operations by land' could, according to Panmure's informants, only be met by some 135 to 140 men, but the Admiralty was determined to reward all the crews of the vessels supporting the operations.

On the 11th August, Rear Admiral Edmund Lyons had written to the Admiralty from the Crimea pressing that the medal for the Crimea War should not be confined to ships which had seen service under fire. Lyon's view led to the less restrictive rules of the award than had been envisaged and the decision must have influenced attitudes to the Kaffir medal. Certainly it strengthened the resolve of the Navy and they brushed Panmure aside as they had Newcastle. Sir James Graham, First Lord of the Admiralty, went directly to the Queen and on the 30th October Mundy passed the Navy and Royal Marines lists to Sir C E Trevelyan at the Treasury.

The time spent on considering Sir James Alexander's proposal and the discussions with the Admiralty had pushed aside any thought of design or production of the medal. No doubt the pressures of the war with Russia also gave the late native troubles in South Africa a low priority and it was not until an enquiry arose about the ribbons for both the Kaffir and Crimea medals that the Duke of Newcastle was reminded that so much had been neglected. In consequence, one of his last acts in office was to write to the Lords Commissioners of the Treasury requesting their Lordships to instruct Sir John Herschel, Master of the Mint, to cause a drawing to be proposed for the medal.

Horse Guards had the responsibility to suggest a design for the medal and the memoranda on the 26th July 1854. These had been placed before the Queen without delay and on the 2nd

August Lord Hardinge was advised that Her Majesty had accepted the counsel and given directions 'that a medal should be prepared to commemorate the success of Her Majesty's Military Forces in the war in which they have been engaged against the Kaffir tribes of South Africa. Her Majesty has been further pleased to command that the medal in question should bear on the obverse side the head of the Sovereign with the words 'Victoria Regina' inscribed and on the reverse side a Lion emblematic of Africa in the attitude of 'Couchant' in token of submission with the words 'South Africa' above and the date '1853' underneath to mark the termination of the war'.

This authorisation now faced amendment following the extension to embrace the wars of 1834-5 and 1846-7. The draft of the letter carrying instructions to the Treasury provided for the medals displaying the dates of all three wars, but what about the men who had served in more than a single campaign? It was obvious permutations would be necessary to cover all dates and the numbers of medals required for each combination was clearly a problem, for the returns from the regiments were still far from complete. The potential increase in costs for extra dies, the difficulties of allocation and more importantly, the realisation that the returns had not been accurately recorded quickly persuaded the War Department to take an easy course. Mention of the earlier dates was simply struck from the draft instructions, leaving the original and now meaningless '1853'. It would have been better to show '1834-1853'.

Leonard C. Wyon, 'Modeller and Engraver to the Royal Mint', was approached to prepare for the reverse of the medal design in accordance with the previously mentioned description. Herschel, Master of the Royal Mint, wrote to Wyon 'In respect of the head of the Sovereign for the obverse I propose to adopt the very beautiful one of your late Father which adorns so many of our honorary decorations'. He also asked Wyon for his terms and the time needed to complete and deliver a Matrix and a Puncheon for the production of such dies as maybe required. Accepting the commission, Wyon undertook to complete the work within three months for 100 guineas. His terms were passed to, and accepted by, the Treasury who authorised rates of payment to the workman of 2.5d (1p) for each medal executed by ordinary Coining Presses and 3d when produced by the Die Presses. Their Lordships deemed it advisable for the sake of economy and the speedy execution of this important service that the medals should to the utmost extent be prepared in the ordinary Steam Presses. It was estimated that the working dies could be manufactured at the Mint for not more than £3 each.

The Duke of Newcastle resigned his office on the 1st February 1855 and it was to his successor Lord Panmure that the Mint submitted Wyon's completed design on the 9th March, not a drawing as had been ordered, but a wax model on a somewhat enlarged scale. This, it was felt, was more adapted to convey the artist's conception. The graceful illustration of the lion symbolising Africa is usually wrongly described as stooping to drink and as early as August 1854 the posture of the lion was prominent in the minds of the authorities. Herschel observed that 'the attitude of the Lion is as nearly conformable to the strict heraldic interpretation of 'Couchant' as consistent with artistic effect and fully conveys the idea of submission intended'. The shrub in the background is *Protea Melifera* which is abundant in every part of South Africa'. Under Secretary F. Peel made a note 'I hope the Lion doing penance will not be taken for the British Lion. From a letter by Col. Mundy to Major General Sir C Yorke it is known that the Queen had approved the design before 15th March. Mundy did not hurry himself to advise the Mint and it was not given the go ahead until the 20th March.

Two days later, W H Barton wrote from the Mint to Wyon asking him to proceed with the execution of the dies, adding a postscript 'Your model has not yet been returned to the Mint from the War Department; please let me know whether it has reached your hands through another channel'. The designer seems to have waited six weeks for his model to arrive and when in early May Lord Panmure enquired about the progress, Wyon replied 'owing to the loss at the War Office of the model of the Kaffir Medal, considerable delay will occur in completion'. He added that he was proceeding to repair the loss and would execute the work as soon as possible.

This stirred the Horse Guards who returned the original model to the Mint on 22nd May. When Wyon acknowledged its receipt he commented that as the original had been mislaid at Horse Guards he had completed another at great inconvenience. This irritated the War Department and it was pompously enquired of the Mint on whose authority Wyon grounded his belief that the model had been mislaid. Herschel could see no gain in pursuing this enquiry so he asked Wyon to complete the dies.

By July the work was finished and on 14th August 1855 a pattern medal was sent to the War Minister for submission to the Queen. This formality being completed, authorisation to begin striking the medals was passed to the Mint and in early October 1855 the first medals were at long last ready for distribution.

The Ribbon

In his memorandum of 26th July 1854 to the War Department, Sir George Cathcart suggested that 'the ribbon might be orange colour with a broad crimson stripe down the centre as emblematic of the history of the settlement, originally a Dutch colony, now held as a British Crown possession by right of conquest'. Against the words 'orange colour' Col. Mundy noted 'Irish Roman Catholics might break heads on this point'.

Following the Queen's approval to the design this description of the ribbon was included in the directions passed to the Commander in Chief by the Duke of Newcastle on the 2nd August and the question of pattern does not occur again in correspondence until January 1855. This was when Her Majesty asked to be shown examples of various campaign ribbons. The request went to Sir John Herschel who forwarded specimen ribbons to the War Department of all medals struck by the Mint and others he had obtained from India House. The Mint was baffled by reference to the 'Cape Medal'. Herschel asked 'should it refer to the Caffre medal?' When sending the ribbons to the Queen, Newcastle remarked in his covering letter that 'The ribbon for the Kaffir War had not yet been decided upon by your Majesty. It had escaped the notice of the War Office that approval had already been given nearly five months before. Less surprisingly, Queen Victoria did not recall the matter but some remembrance lingered with the Duke for he added that he believed Cathcart, who had been killed at Inkermann on 5th November, recommended that the colours of the ribbon be orange and blue. It is a pity the Minister's memory let him down and it must be assumed the Queen felt she was paying some tribute to the old soldier when, on the 24th January she approved of 'the Cape Medal being orange with a dark blue edge, as originally proposed by Cathcart. So the ribbon colours were decided by a faulty recollection and the failure to refer to earlier correspondence.

The medal

The medal was struck in silver and is a disk, 36 millimetres in diameter, with a swivelling suspender.

Who was entitled to the medal?

Nowhere is there any mention regarding the minimum period of service required for the award of the medal.

The medal was given to all who were involved in the campaigns which covered the period 25 September 1877 to 2 December 1879.

Upside Down medals.

If an eligible soldier made a valid late claim for a medal at Cape Town, such as where a soldier settled at the Cape, the medals were inscribed on the rim in 'Cape Naming' style. Two Cape Town jewellers, Seale and Armstrong, were commissioned to engrave blanks sent out from England for the purpose to those who had applied late or who had been late awards. For unknown reasons, the naming of such Cape medals was always upside down.

This created problems when such medals came on the market as they were considered by many as fakes, being unaware of the history of 'Cape Naming'. Indeed, until a few years ago this Society avoided such medals, many of which have since been discarded or lost.

So, until these medals' history is more widely known, if you come across an upside down medal for sale, you may well be able to buy it cheaply.