

Collecting the South Africa General Service Medal 1877-79

A comparison of values over the last forty years, and a personal experience

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Commonly called the Zulu War medal, it was awarded to those troops, Imperial and Colonial, who took part in numerous campaigns against the ethnic population between the dates below:

Sept. 1877- June 1878	against the Galekas, and the Gaikas.
Jan. 1878	against Chief Pokwane.
April – Nov. 1878	against the Griquas.
Jan. – Sept. 1879	against the Zulus.
Nov. – Dec. 1879	against Chief Sekukuni.
Mar. – Dec. 1879	against Chief Moirosi.

The medal could be awarded with or without one of the following clasps:- 1877, 1877-8, 1877-8-9, 1877-9, 1878, 1878-9, or 1879. A total of approximately 39,000 were issued, 6,000 of which were returned to the Royal Mint, usually where the recipient could not be traced, though later claimants were issued with their medal, some as late as the early 1900s. Medals have come on to the market with later naming styles, [originally the medal was issued with naming engraved in upright or sloping capitals]. Several have appeared with the naming style of medals issued for the First World War [impressed capitals] so these should not be disregarded, but careful research is necessary.

Medals issued for the Zulu campaign would either be issued with a clasp for 1877-8-9, 1878-9, 1879, or in some cases without. Those troops issued medals without a clasp would have been stationed in Natal, and would not have crossed the border into Zululand. Medals with clasps 1878 and 1877-8 are known to those regiments and corps who took part in the Zulu campaign, but those individuals would have returned to the U.K., have been posted elsewhere, or died before the campaign commenced.

Campaign medals have been collected for generations. Collecting can be broken down into various themes, such as to a particular campaign, a particular regiment, to the collector's surname, or to the town where the collector resides. Years ago, research was limited to the history of the campaign or the history of the regiment that the recipient served in. Nowadays with research material available via the internet, [Findmypast and Ancestry.com] more in-depth material about the individual is available, and therefore can add greater value to the medal.

When I started to collect medals there were very few reference books, other than regimental histories, that could help with the actual subject of collecting and the pitfalls that one may encounter when purchasing your desired piece. If you are collecting for the first time, it is recommended that you obtain information, either via the internet or reference books that actually deal with the subject of collecting. Visits to medal fairs are essential. There you can see first hand the range of campaign medals available. You can handle the items, [with the dealer's permission of course], study the different naming styles, talk to the dealers who are "walking reference books" and can advise you of the dangers of fakes and renamed medals that are about.

I was eager to collect one of each campaign when I started out. Medals with a gallantry award attached were then way out of my reach so were not considered. I also fell into the trap on a couple of occasions of buying renamed medals. These fall into two categories; renamed to deceive, whereby the original name is erased and another substituted in order to vastly increase its value, i.e. the name of a defender of Rorke's Drift; the other occasion where renaming takes place is when the original recipient may have lost or pawned his medal and has obtained another and gone through the same process of removing the original name and substituting his own details. (1)

As a boy at school I was promised my father's World War Two group of medals, and my grandfather's First World War pair. Someone had given me a single 1914-18 British War Medal to a chap in the Royal Navy, which had the chap's name, rank and number which I often looked at and wondered "who was he, what ship was he on, what did he do?" No research then, so into my collecting box he went with the Britain's soldiers, the bubblegum cards, Brooke Bond tea cards and all the other odds and ends that boys accumulated then.

In spring 1964 I went with my chum from school to the King's Cinema, Ramsgate, and saw *Zulu*. We always went in the afternoon, and on this occasion I stayed for the evening performance as well. I was smitten! I was unaware that there was a campaign in South Africa in 1879, and desperately scoured the bookshops for a volume that would elaborate on the story I had previously witnessed at our local 'bug hutch'. It also made me think that if eleven defenders were awarded the Victoria Cross, was there a medal awarded for the campaign itself. A trip to the local library confirmed that there was. So later that same year I came across Charles Lusted's medal shop [now long gone] in Tunbridge Wells. Having saved my pocket money and funds gained from a summer holiday job, I ventured inside and asked whether he had any Zulu War medals in stock and if so how much. "Yes we have" he replied, "but it will cost you around £6 depending on regiment". Devastated, I came away with a second class Iron Cross, World War One era, for 12 shillings and 6 pence [65p].

I decided that the next best thing [as they were cheaper] was to purchase 20th century medals to the South Wales Borderers, at least that way my collection would have a link with the old 24th of Foot. It was during this time that I obtained their regimental history, almost a complete run of regimental journals, and of course *The Washing of the Spears*. The journals were of particular value. As well as having articles relating to the Zulu War, there were obituaries of veterans who had served in the campaign and photos of defenders who had survived well into the 20th century along with items listed that had been donated to the museum, many relating to the campaign of 1879.

In 1972 I paid my first visit to Brecon and of course to the "shrine" of the Zulu campaign, the Regimental museum. Such was the quantity of items on display relative to the 1879 campaign that I paid a visit each day and therefore was able to spend a lot of time talking to the curator and staff there. Gauging my interest, the curator explained to me that in 1979 the Regiment was planning to visit the battlefields and that there were places available for 'civilians' to accompany those from the Regiment who were making the trek. Thinking to myself that I have seven years to save sufficient funds for the "trip of a lifetime", I didn't hesitate in agreeing to sign up.

That same year as my visit to Brecon, medal dealers J.B. Hayward and son published a catalogue supplement entitled *The South African Campaign 1977-79*. It contained 169 medals awarded to the majority of units who took part. Of particular interest to me were those awarded to the 24th of Foot. These ranged from the 1879 bar medal to Private G Garvey priced at £21.00 to the 1877-79 bar medal to Private J. Whelan who was killed in action at Isandlwana priced at £125.00. The medal awarded to Private W. Hough [Colonel Glyn's cook and a survivor of that action], could have been purchased for £150.00. The star lot was a group of eight to Colonel W.F.D. Cochrane, 32nd Foot, again, a survivor of Isandlwana, on offer for £850.00. Other choice pieces included an Intombi River casualty to the 80th Foot which was on offer for £90.00, and two casualties at Hlobane were listed at £45.00 each.

Whilst on that visit to Brecon in 1972, I called on a medal dealer in Swansea to make the same enquiry as I had made in Tunbridge Wells eight years previously. Posing that same question, the dealer replied "which Regiment? We have most of them in stock". The prices corresponded with those in the Hayward catalogue, and as I had vowed to save all available cash for the 1979 trip, I came away empty handed. A short while after returning home, my local dealer who had sold me several affordable South Wales Borderers First World War medals, had on offer a Zulu War medal, no bar, awarded to W.H. Saul, Army Service Corps for the affordable price of £14.00. I had got one at last.

Having attended the Centenary tour, [a most unbelievable and unforgettable experience], I was more than determined to devote my collecting to the South Africa General Service Medal 1877-79. In order to “kick start” and to fund this ambition I decided that the majority of medals that I had purchased so far, including most of those to the South Wales Borderers were to be put up for sale. Selling them through auction and to other dealers, I had sufficient funds that would enable me to obtain the “objects of my desire”. By this time though the average price had risen to an average of £130.00. Not out of reach, as I was now earning a decent wage, but quite a significant increase since 1972. I had purchased a copy of D.R. Forsyth’s medal roll for the campaign in the meantime and concentrating on the roll of the 24th Regiment, I made a mental note of several medals that I would like to own. Of particular interest was a Sergeant with my surname who was killed at Isandlwana. Not that he was a relative, but it would be nice to add that particular one to my collection, but a casualty at that time was about £400.00, still a considerable sum. Do you believe in fate? Also in the 24th roll was a Corporal J. Golding, my mother’s surname, not a casualty, so very affordable. The next medal fair that I attended, among several medals to the campaign which a long established London medal dealer was displaying, was the very one. Alas though after 30 years, no research available has pinpointed Corporal Golding to the area where my Grandparents lived.

My collecting continued at a steady pace through auctions and fairs and by the turn of the century the average price had roughly doubled since 1979. From 2000 to 2010 they have also doubled, but in half the time. Casualties and survivors of major battles have increased at a greater rate.

Some collectors avoid medals to casualties as the intended recipient never actually possessed it, but to others, especially if they have been lucky to have visited the place where he was killed, there is a certain “magic” that every time you look at the medal, the memories of your visit, and all that you have read about the action on that day, that convinces you that at least you are helping to preserve the memory of a gallant soldier, thousands of miles away from home.

Medals to the 24th Regiment will always command a higher price than that of other line regiments for obvious reasons. This is where research is invaluable. We would all like to think that the medal to our “24th” man, who may not have been at Rorke’s Drift or a casualty at Isandlwana, may have at least been out with Lord Chelmsford and would have witnessed the aftermath of the battle and even spoken to their chums who had put up such a gallant defence at the Drift, but beware. Many of the medals, named to the 24th, even with the 1879 bar, were given to reinforcements [some from other regiments], to replace the numbers lost on the 22nd of January, who did not reach South Africa until April or May, and on returning home many returned to their original units.

The advent of online auctions, dealer’s websites and EBay opens up a wider catalogue of material available for the medal collector and dealer. Prices therefore have started to accelerate and choicer items are selling way above the average guide price. Below is a guide, by year, of prices relating to medals of the South Africa General Service Medal 1877-79. These prices don’t include recipients of special note – their values are far in excess of the following figures.

YEAR	LINE REGT	24 TH	CASUALTY	ISANDLWANA CASUALTY	AVERAGE WEEKLY WAGE
1970	£18	£22	£90	£120	£34.60
1975	£60	£90	£200	£300	£73.50
1980	£130	£160	£240	£400	£145.86
1985	£145	£180	£300	£520	£224.82
1990	£160	£200	£320	£960	£340.17

1995	£180	£300	£490	£1500	£428.00
2000	£230	£400	£720	£2350	£523.34
2005	£380	£680	£1600	£6200	£646.82
2010	£500	£950	£2200	£7000	£722.30
2012	£600	£1,200	£2,500	£8-9,000	£804.15

If you had been collecting in 1955, a line Regiment medal would have cost you 90 pence and one to the 24th Regiment was on offer for £1.25. The average weekly wage then was £14.00. Oh! Happy Days!

Figures for the above have been taken from Dealers' lists and Auction houses specialising in campaign medals.

Editor's note.

Victoria Crosses have had similar dramatic price increases. In 1883 three VCs were auctioned by Sotheby's for sums between £10 and £23. In 1886, Colonel Edmund Lenon VC pawned his VC for ten shillings. It was auctioned by Glendinings in 1911 for £84 and was offered for sale in 1913 by Spinks for £125. In 1956 the Royal Hampshire Regiment Museum was presented with the VC together with the original pawn ticket. Its value today would probably exceed £200,000.

At a recent Society event at Pluckley in Kent, the VC awarded to Commissary Dalton of Rorke's Drift fame was loaned to the Society for two days. The insurance value was fixed at the maximum figure available – £500,000.