

A Medal Mystery:

Why Does The Year 1877 feature on Clasps of the South Africa Medal Awarded to soldiers of the 2nd Battalion, 24th Foot ?

Clive Appleby

If you look at a South Africa medal awarded to a soldier of the 2nd Battalion, 24th Foot, something might strike you as a bit odd. A quick look at the medal clasp (1) and you see that it reads “1877-8-9”. “Hang On”, you might immediately think, “The 2nd Battalion only arrived in South Africa in February 1878, so surely no clasp for the 2/24th should reference 1877, and the clasp should read “1878-9” ? (2)

Indeed, in what is probably the most comprehensive work to date on the subject of the South Africa Medal (1880), “*Forgotten Heroes - Zulu & Basuto wars 1877-8-9*” (3), author, Roy Dutton, believes that 1877 appearing on the clasp of medals awarded to soldiers of the 2/24th was a mistake.

I beg to differ. The War Office in 1880, when the medal was instituted, may have had its inefficiencies, but I do not believe that they would have made such a significant mistake, nor would such a “mistake” have managed to permeate through the system from the medal's institution through to identifying entitlement to clasps. Rather than being a mistake, I believe that the recognition of 1877 on clasps awarded to soldiers of the 2/24th was a conscious decision and a solution to a problem which the War Office faced.

If we look at General Order 103 of August 1880, under which the medal was instituted and the text of which is given in the Appendix, the medal was to be awarded in respect of six separate conflicts of varying duration and scale in the three years between 1877 to 1879. It was to be granted to forces employed against:

- (a) The Galekas, Gaikas and other Caffre (*Sic*) tribes from the 26th September, 1877 to 28th June, 1878 inclusive;
- (b) against Pokwani, from 21st to 28th January 1878 inclusive
- (c) against the Griquas, from 24th April to the 13th November 1874 inclusive (4)
- (d) against the Zulus, from the 11th January to the 1st September, 1879 inclusive;
- (e) against Secocoeni (*Sic*) from the 11th November to the 2nd December 1879, and including troops that were stationed at Fort Burghers, Fort Albert Edward, Seven Mile Post, Fort Oliphant, Fort Weeber, and in Secocoeni's valley;
- (f) against Moirosi's Stronghold (5)

The first of these is what became known as “The Ninth Frontier War” (6) and both the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 24th Foot were involved, the first time that two battalions of the same regiment served together in the same theatre of war. The first battalion had arrived in South Africa in 1875 and did take part in the 9th Frontier War from its outset in 1877 through to

1878. There can be no debate therefore that members of the 1st Battalion were physically there in 1877 and fully justify 1877 on a clasp.

A number of clasps to the medal were authorised, and it had been agreed and as per the General Order, there would only be one clasp per medal. But the problem facing the War office had been how to identify these clasps in a way which best reflected the complexity of six different conflicts against a variety of different tribes and an individual medal recipient's involvement in those conflicts.

Seven clasps were eventually agreed. These were: 1877; 1877-78; 1877-78-79; 1877-79; 1878; 1878-79; 1879.

In addition, the medal alone and without any clasp was to be awarded to "Those troops employed in Natal from 11th January to 1st September 1879, but who never crossed the border into Zululand." This "crossing of the border" was therefore a geographical qualification for a clasp featuring 1879 in respect of the Zulu War. However, as Dutton observes, an exception was made for the defenders of Rorke's Drift, many of whom never crossed the border at any point.

On the basis of the clasps agreed, technically you could argue that a soldier of the 2/24th who took part in the 9th Frontier War in 1878 (but not 1877) and the Zulu War, should have received a clasp for "1878-79". However, this would have immediately given rise to confusion. When looking at a clasp of 1878-79 this could be interpreted as the recipient having taken part in the Zulu War (1879) and any of: (i) the 9th Frontier War (ii) the action against Pokawani (iii) The action against the Griquas. The 2/24th did not take part in either of these last two actions.

So, how to distinguish the involvement of the 2/24th in the 9th Frontier War but not the other two actions ?

It can be seen from the General Order that clasps were linked to "Operations" and not necessarily to the years that a soldier was physically in South Africa. It reads: "the principle being that the year or years of the Clasp cover all the operations in which the recipient may have been engaged in such year or years."

The War Office's problem was therefore solved by treating the 9th Frontier War as a single entity despite having been fought over two years. In other words, the years 1877-8 on the clasps are "shorthand" for this specific conflict.

As the 9th Frontier War lasted from 1877-78, this war was therefore represented by an "1877-8" component on the clasp and, although the 2/24th didn't arrive in South Africa until 1878, because they took part in the Frontier War taken as a complete entity, (albeit later than their 1st Battalion colleagues), the clasps for those who took part in that conflict received 1877-8. Added to this of course, is 1879, for the Zulu War. Hence the clasp for the majority of 2/24th medal recipients becomes 1877-8-9.

This becomes clearer when you look at the pro-forma for the South Africa Medal entitlement to soldiers of the 2/24th. As an example, the following is the entitlement for Colour Sergeant James Gittins of H Company 2/24th:

<i>Rank and Name</i>	<i>Regtl Rank at the time the medal was earned</i>	<i>Whether in possession of the medal for previous wars</i>	<i>Whether engaged against the Gaikas and other Kaffir Tribes 1877-78</i>	<i>Whether engaged against Pokwane 1878</i>	<i>Whether engaged against the Griquas 1878</i>	<i>Whether engaged against the Zulus in 1879</i>
Col Sgt Gittins J	Col Sergt	No	Yes	No	No	Yes

Looking at this, it also re-enforces why the clasp is not 1878-9. This would incorrectly imply involvement in either of the 1878 actions against Pokwane or the Griquas, (Plus the Zulu War) but would not then recognise involvement in the 9th Frontier War. Hence a clasp to Gittins of 1877-8-9.

What is the relevance of the question of “whether in possession of the medal for previous wars” ? The answer to this is that the South Africa Medal (1880), was the second South Africa medal awarded in the 19th Century. The first, and which the 1880 medal followed very closely in design, was that of 1853. In theory at least, any soldier who had received the 1853 medal but who was entitled to the 1880 medal was only due to be awarded the relevant clasp for the later conflicts. This was to be added to the earlier medal. They were not therefore to receive a brand new (1880) medal.

A total of 39,014 South Africa medals were struck at the Royal Mint between 1880-1886 (7) and the medal was to be awarded to Imperial forces, colonial irregulars and native levies. The total number of clasps awarded for all recipients of the 1880 medal, were as follows (8):

Clasp	Total Number of Clasps Awarded
“1877”	171
“1877-8”	6081
“1877-8-9”	3890
“1877-9”	11
“1878”	2172
“1878-9”	1781
“1879”	19573

In addition, a total of 782 “loose clasps” were awarded, mainly in respect of “late claims.” 5,610 medals without any clasp, were also awarded. These were to members of the military (Imperial units, colonial Irregulars and native levies) who had been mobilised in Natal but who had not crossed the Tugela River into Zululand in 1879. This included for example, Naval shore parties. The no-clasp medals are sometimes seen as a non-combat award but which recognised a contribution for those who did not directly take part in the conflict.

Interestingly, and following some lobbying on their behalf, 14 medals without clasps were subsequently awarded to nurses, although they weren't technically “troops” as per the wording the General Order. This was the first time any women qualified for a campaign medal. (Although they don't have any clasps, these are extremely rare, given that only 14 were awarded). (to nurses - Ed.).

Although the 1877-8-9 clasp medals awarded to soldiers of the 24th Foot are highly sought after by collectors, it would appear that medals with the "1877-9" clasp (and not to be confused with the 1877-78-79 clasp), are much rarer. These were for service in 1877 and

1879 but with no service in 1878 and only eleven were awarded! Eight of these went to members of the 2nd Cape Mounted Yeomanry, and three of those were returned (9).

The “1879 “ alone clasp is significantly more common than any of the others and this is indicative of the scale of the second invasion of Zululand. As far as this clasp is concerned, there are a couple of caveats.

Firstly, the “1879” clasp was awarded not only for the Zulu War but, as identified earlier, also for those who took part in the Moirosi's Mountain campaign in Basutoland (25th March to 20th November 1879) and for the Second Sekhukhini War in the North-Eastern Transvaal (11th November to 2nd December 1879). It seems that unlike with the 2/24th and the Frontier War, the War Office could not find a solution to distinguishing these three conflicts in 1879 through the clasps!

Secondly, and specifically as far as the 24th Foot are concerned, a clasp of “1879” is far more likely than not to have been awarded to one of the replacements for the losses at Isandlwana and not to a participant in the First Invasion. These men were “loaned” by other regiments and returned to their “parent” regiment after the war was over. (10)

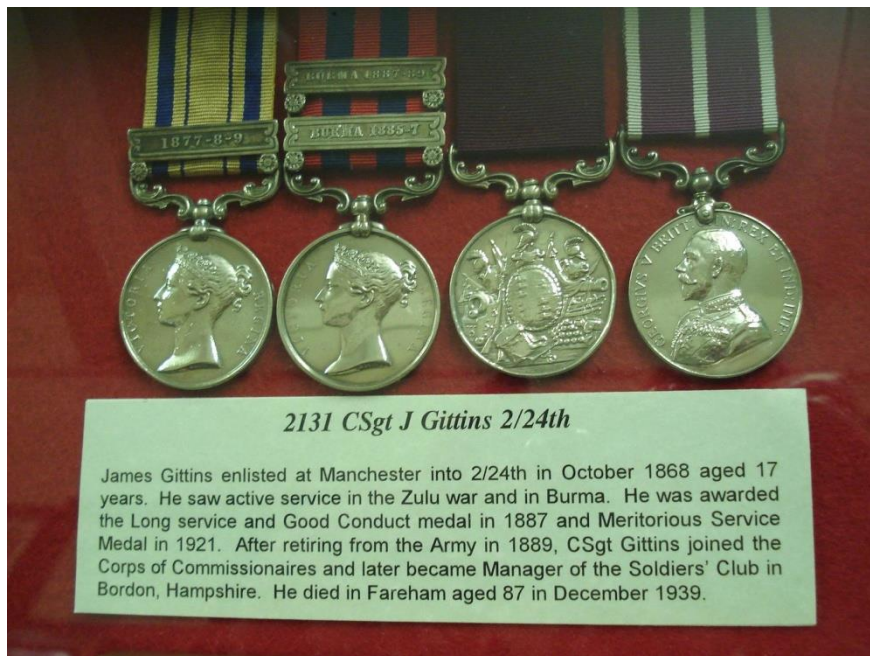
The only way to fully understand an individual soldier's involvement in South Africa between 1877 to 1879, is to check other sources such as their service record.

As this article began with a question about the 24th Foot and as this is the regiment which tends to be of most interest given its involvement at Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift, the following is the total number of medals / clasps awarded to members of that Regiment. (11)

Clasp:	1877-78	1877-8-9	1878	1878-9	1879	No Clasp	Total
1 st Battalion	157	526	1	24	663	33	1404
2 nd Battalion	55	823	0	0	163	290	1331

There isn't the space here to analyse these awards in more detail, nor those awarded to the other Imperial or Irregular colonial units or native levies, but Dutton is the highly recommended “Go To” source for further information.

The obverse and reverse of the South Africa Medal with a clasp for 1879 alone. The design of the medal closely followed the design of the 1853 South Africa Medal but the on the reverse, the year “1853” was replaced by a Zulu Shield and Assegais. (Source: Wikipedia)



Photograph © and information on James Gittins provided by Robert Claringbold, great, great, grandson of James Gittins.

The medals awarded to Colour Sergeant James Gittins (1851-1939), which are on display at the Royal Welsh Museum in Brecon. Left to Right are the South Africa Medal (1880), India General Service Medal (1854) with Burma clasps; Army Long Service and Good Conduct Medal and The Meritorious Service Medal.

As Colour Sergeant of H Company 2/24th, James Gittins survived the massacre of Isandlwana. H Company were due to have replaced Lt. Pope's G Company on picquet duty on the morning of 22nd January, but under the command of Captain James Harvey, they formed part of Lord Chelmsford's Column which left the camp in the early hours of 22nd January and along with F Company, they were tasked with escorting Major Harness and his four guns.

Notes:

(1) Although “clasps” is technically correct, the term “bars” is often used. For campaign medals such as the South Africa Medal, numismatists prefer “clasps”. This avoids any confusion with “bars” awarded in respect of gallantry medals when a medal recipient has received the same medal more than once.

(2) This question is posed by Dr. Adrian Greaves in Appendix VI of his recently published “*An Illustrated Tour of the 1879 Anglo-Zulu Battlefields*” (Pen and Sword 2023).

(3) Dutton R. *Forgotten Heroes: Zulu & Basuto Wars 1877-8-9* (InfoDial Ltd. 2010).

This is an excellent work that tells you everything you might need to know about the South Africa (1880) medal, including a complete list of the medal roll, (Imperial, colonial irregulars and native levies) and the clasps awarded. There are also a host of interesting features, such as prices for medals paid at auctions, letters home from soldiers and “mini-essays”.

(4) This clearly was a mistake in the General Order and should have read “1878” rather than “1874”.

(5) The General Order didn't mention the dates for this action, but it was recognised as being between 25th March to 20th November 1879.

(6) The Ninth Frontier War was the last war in a series which had seen intermittent conflicts in the south east of South Africa since 1779. The wars are also sometimes known as the Xhosa Wars and were fought between the sub-tribes of the Xhosa Kingdom and European settlers in what is now the Eastern Cape in South Africa.

The Ninth Frontier War also goes by a number of other names, including “The Kaffir War”, The Fengu-Gcaleka War, “Ngcayechibi's War”, and more recently, “The Wedding Feast War”, the last of these so named as the title of a book by Keith Smith. (“The Wedding Feast War – The Final Tragedy of the Xhosa People” (Frontline Books 2012). Involved were the Cape Colony Government and its Mfengu allies, the British Empire, and the Xhosa armies (of Gcaleka and Ngqika).

(7) In any numerical or statistical analysis of the medal and clasps, some caution needs to be exercised. There is a distinction to be drawn between the number of medals struck, the medal entitlement, the number of medals awarded, the number of medals returned as unclaimed and the number of medals forfeited on account of subsequent desertion or misconduct. The figures could also be affected by “late claims” to medals or clasps.

(8) If you access the Wikipedia article on the South Africa Medal, this gives different figures. These are based on research by Major Townsend of South Africa Medals.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Africa_Medal_\(1880\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Africa_Medal_(1880)) (Accessed 08/05/24).

The figures quoted in this article are from Dutton and are the totals he found on the medal roll.

(9) A high number of medals awarded to colonial irregulars were returned, as many of these men proved hard to trace.

(10) See Greaves (*Ibid*) Appendix VI. “*Medal Confusion: Who Was Awarded The South Africa Campaign Medal ?*”

(11) This curious single award of a clasp for 1878 is attributed by Dutton to Private R. Jenkins (2139). There is a discrepancy in that Norman Holme in “*The Noble 24th*”, (*Savannah 1999*) identifies Jenkins (25B/139) as having transferred to the 5th Regiment (but no date for the transfer given) and attributes him with the 1879 clasp. A look at the original medal entitlement for Jenkins shows that Holme is actually correct. It is not clear therefore how Dutton arrived at an 1878 clasp for Jenkins. This is possibly a transcription error.

The Text of General Order 103 – August 1880

1. *In the original text the paragraphs all run together with no spacing. It is reproduced here with spacing between paragraphs for clarity.*

The Queen has been graciously pleased to command that, in consideration of the arduous duties performed and the successful conclusion of the operations referred to in the next paragraph, a Medal be granted to her Majesty's Imperial forces, and to such of Her Majesty's colonial forces, European or native, as were regularly organised and disciplined as combatants, whether raised by the Colonial Government or by the General Officer commanding.

2. The Medal will be granted to the forces employed against

(a) The Galekas, Gaikas and other Caffre (*Sic*) tribes from the 26th September, 1877 to 28th June, 1878 inclusive;

(b) against Pokwani, from 21st to 28th January 1878 inclusive

(c) against the Griquas, from 24th April to the 13th November 1874 inclusive

(d) against the Zulus, from the 11th January to the 1st September, 1879 inclusive;

(e) against Secocoeni from the 11th November to the 2nd December 1879, and including troops that were stationed at Fort Burghers, Fort Albert Edward, Seven Mile Post, Fort Oliphant, Fort Weeber, and in Secocoeni's valley;

(f) against Moirosi's Stronghold

3. Her Majesty has also been pleased to approve of a Clasp being attached to the same Medal, on which will be indicated the year or years in which the recipients of the medal were engaged in the late wars, thus – For operations against the Galekas, &c on Clasp 1877-78; for operations against Pokwani and the Griquas, 1878; for operations in the Zulu and Secocoeni campaigns respectively, or both 1879; for operations as specified in Paragraph 2 in 1877-8-9, 1877-8-9; for operations as specified in Paragraph 2 in 1878-9, 1878-9 – the principle being that the year or years of the Clasp cover all the operations in which the recipient may have been engaged in such year or years.

4. Those troops employed in Natal from the 11th January to the 1st September, 1879, but who never crossed the border into Zululand, will be granted the Medal without Clasp.

5. The Medal will be that granted by Her Majesty to commemorate the successful termination or previous wars in South Africa; and those officers, non-commissioned officers and men who are already in possession of this Medal will, if they have been engaged in the operations referred to in Paragraph 2, receive the Clasp with the year or years inscribed thereon, in accordance with Paragraph 3.