

Ragama POW Camp Ceylon and the Scum of the Scum

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Several years ago I stumbled into the token shown below.



Fig. 1. Ragama camp memento, 1902.

Obv. BRITSCHE . 1902 . BESCHAVING with a central design of a man with a hat tied with ropes to a palm tree with his hands behind his back. A hut to the left.

Rev. HERINNERING RAGAMA KAMP around a worn central design with a few letters visible S . . . S . . . M

Darkly toned brass with traces of tinning, 30mm, plain edge, slightly thicker than an old bronze penny. Very crudely cut dies, but the sentiment is clear.

The obverse is Afrikaans for “Brit Civilisation” and the reverse “Reminder of Ragama Camp”. A quick search of the web revealed that there had been a British run POW camp at Ragama in Ceylon where the “irreconcilables” had been shipped from South Africa during the Boer War.

This didn’t fit into my collecting themes, so it was duly swapped for a few shillings, with a very enthusiastic South African collector! As the years passed my interest in shilling tokens and chits from past conflicts from all over the world grew but especially from the African continent. It is not only difficult to find the tokens, but it is even more difficult to find objective histories to put the pieces into their correct context. When the following piece appeared at auction⁽¹⁾, I was spurred to dig deeper.



Fig. 2. Ragama camp memento, 1902, and detail of obverse.

A much higher grade piece, with no signs of tinning, the central design of the reverse is now a clear “SCUM OF THE SCUM”. The piece came with a provenance as having once been owned by Cmdt C.T.M. Wilcocks who was captured with General Cronje at Paardeberg on 28 February 1900.

A further specimen has been traced to an earlier auction, also in South Africa, but this piece has been turned into a medal, possibly using a hat band for the ribbon⁽²⁾.



Fig. 3. Ragama Camp Medal, 1902.

This provenance of this piece was the grandson of Burger H.H. Smorenburg who was a POW at Ragama in Ceylon. With this lot also came the information that the dies for the piece had been engraved by C.F. Keyzer and that the piece was struck on a ZAR penny. The provenances are plausible, but difficult to confirm.

A contemporary correspondence has been found that confirms the prisoners at Ragama were known as the scum of the scum⁽³⁾. Jeannot Weinberg, a member of the Bloemfontein Commando was captured and after an escape attempt was sent to Ceylon. Though a Jewish South African, because of his surname he was considered a Russian and was not allowed to stay at the main POW camp at Diyatalawa. Following another escape attempt he was sent to Ragama camp with the other foreigners that had volunteered and fought alongside the Boers. On 31 December 1900 he wrote “I would not mind to go if some of my friends came and they are all Afrikanders. The Germans, Hollanders, Irish Americans are, with a few exceptions, a most disreputable lot. They are without exaggeration the scum of the scum”.

The term “irreconcilables” was coined by the British for those prisoners who refused to sign an allegiance to King Edward VII. In doing so they would have been given free passage back to South Africa. Thus Ragama was the last POW camp to close in Ceylon, after the war ended on 31 May 1902.

The Anglo-Boer war was one of the most significant events in the history of South Africa. Covering just two and a half years from 1899-1902, the rule books for conflict were rewritten with the invention of guerrilla warfare and hit and run skirmishes. In order to accommodate the tens of thousands of prisoners, the British created concentration camps and the families of captured soldiers were also imprisoned where poor sanitation and diet produced significant loss of life due to disease. In an attempt to break the stalemate, the blockhouse lines and scorched earth policy of Lord Kitchener laid waste to tens of thousands of farmsteads and more than forty towns. Miss Emily Hobhouse, a delegate of the South African Women and Children's Distress Fund visited some of the camps in early 1901 and her report shocked the politicians and public back in England, leading (eventually) to significant improvements to the conditions in the camps. Much has been written about the war from both sides. The Anglo Boer War Museum has a very comprehensive summary on its website⁽⁴⁾.

The problem with having many thousands of fighters imprisoned in camps inside the country in which you are fighting is that an enemy raid on one of the camps could suddenly release a large number of the enemy combatants. Thus it was decided to relocate 26,000 of the imprisoned soldiers to camps around the commonwealth. Boers who took refuge in Mozambique were transported to Portugal. The map below shows the locations of the camps⁽⁴⁾.

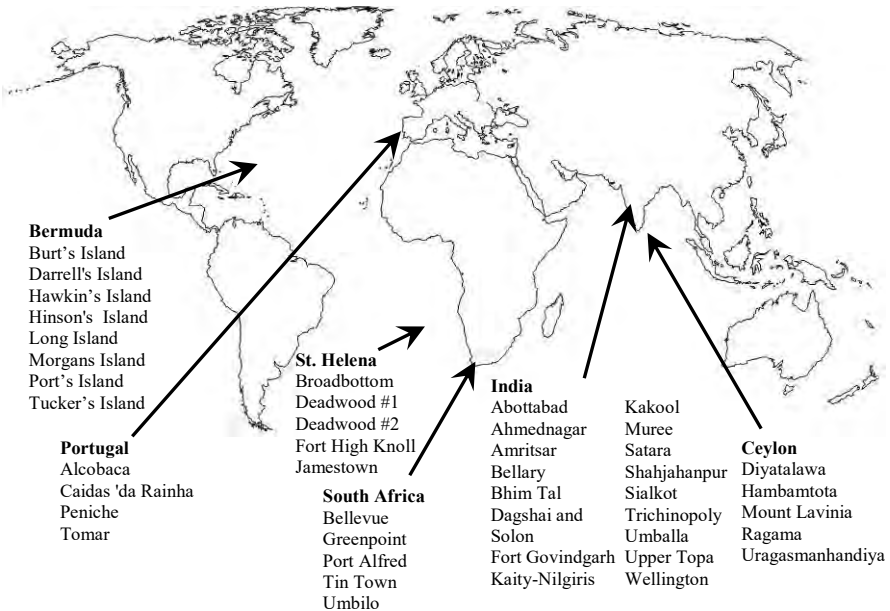


Fig. 4. POW camps for the Boer soldiers.

The first batch of prisoners arrived in Ceylon on 9 August 1900. Eventually some 5000 prisoners would be sent to Ceylon. Diyatalawa was the main camp. Mt Lavinia was a camp for convalescents, while dissidents and irreconcilables were housed at Ragama. A parole camp was set up at Hambantota and another was also opened at Uragasmanhandiya in September 1901.

Whilst there is much postal ephemera surviving from the various camps, and images in the form of postcards, drawings and photographs can be found, Ragama camp is unusual in that the only photographs of the camp so far found are in a near contemporary and quite rare book⁽⁵⁾. The title translates as “Ceylon and the exiles” and chapter 19 describes Ragama camp in detail.

The following illustrations are taken from that book with the captions translated into English using Google translate.



Fig. 5. The wire fence of Ragama camp⁽⁵⁾.

The following photograph shows a group of prisoners and it is possible that the surviving tokens and medal belonged to one of them and that the engraver of the dies is also amongst their number.



Fig. 6. Prisoners of war in Ragama⁽⁵⁾.

There are other surviving numismatic items from Ragama camp. These include a three series of thin card chits, all of which are very rare.



Fig. 7. One Rupee chit from the Ceylon Ice and Cold Storage Company⁽⁶⁾.

The first series chits are “Good for supplies” and “Payable to Prisoners of War only at the Company’s store, Ragama Camp” and are known in the following denominations; 10 cts (red on yellow card), 15 cts (red on light brown card), 25 cts (red on orange card), 50 cts (black on red card) and 1 Rupee (red on pale blue card).

The second series has “Ltd” added to the company’s title.



Fig. 8. Five Cents chit from the Ceylon Ice and Cold Storage Company Ltd⁽⁷⁾.

The following denominations are known; 5 cts (light brown), 10 cts (dark yellow), 25 cts (brown), 50 cts (red), 1 Rupee (green), and 5 Rupees (mauve).

A third series is more typical of internment camp money, and thus far I have only managed to find an illustration reproduced on a postcard. The postcard was printed in Sweden and is postmarked 1903. A similar design of chit was used at Diyatalawa.



Fig. 9. Swedish postcard showing a Ragama camp chit for 25 cents.

Returning to daily life in the camp, the photograph below shows a scene almost identical to that shown on the token, with the man in the dark waistcoat leaning against a palm tree, with a hut to the left. In this case though, he isn't tied to the tree.



Fig. 9. Five o'clock in the afternoon we can again venture to come out⁽⁵⁾.

Thus it would seem that the token or medallion is a local or later manufactured memento of the prisoners' time in the camp, made sometime around May 1902.

References and Acknowledgements

- (1) <http://www.bidorbuy.co.za/item/28487742> finished on 16 November 2013. The vendor was based in Tshwane, Pretoria.
- (2) Stephan Weltz & Co. Auction 1207, 19 Nov 2012, lot 50. The description in the lot also makes reference to a contemporary article in the Ceylon Times. This has not been traced.
- (3) D. Saks. The Wartime Correspondence of Jeannot Weinberg. The South African Military History Society. V12 n1, June 2001. Available on the web here; <http://samilitaryhistory.org/vol121ds.html>.
- (4) Anglo Boer war museum website <http://www.anglo-boer.co.za/boerpow.html>
- (5) J.N. Brink. Ceylon en de Bannelingen. Amsterdam – Kaapstad, 1904. Chapter 19, pages 187-271, covers Ragama camp.
- (6) Spink & Son. Auction 12023 lots 242-246, 2 October 2012.
- (7) Spink & Son. Auction 12023 lots 247-248, 2 October 2012.

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