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Canadian Victoria Cross a link with the past

By JOHN BOILEAU



Gov. Gen. Michaëlle Jean and Prime Minister Stephen Harper unveil the Canadian Victoria Cross in May. The medal was created for the members of the Canadian Forces, to recognize the highest acts of valour, self-sacrifice or extreme devotion to duty, in the presence of the enemy. (FRED CHARTRAND / CP)

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THE RECENT unveiling of the Canadian version of the Victoria Cross (VC) by Gov. Gen. Michaëlle Jean is the second last step in completing our national system of military gallantry awards. On May 16, in a ceremony at Rideau Hall, the Governor General displayed one of the first 20 purely Canadian VCs ever crafted.

Two of the medals were sent to the Queen for the Royal Collection, while others will be part of the collections of Rideau Hall, Department of National Defence, Library and Archives Canada and Canadian War Museum. The remainder will be kept to award to individuals for "the most conspicuous bravery, a daring or pre-eminent act of valour or self-sacrifice or extreme devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy."

For most of Canada's existence, our military awards were British ones, used throughout the Empire and later the Commonwealth. Over the years – besides the VC – thousands of Canadians received such medals as the Distinguished Service Order (DSO), Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM), Military Cross (MC) and Military Medal (MM) for courage in the face of the enemy.

For many years, the VC was the only gallantry decoration given to all ranks. The original Royal Warrant of 1856 stated that "neither rank, nor long service, nor wounds, nor any other circumstance or condition whatsoever, save the merit of conspicuous bravery" was to be considered in awarding it.

In 1972, the government of Pierre Trudeau created a new system of bravery awards – the Cross of Valour, Star of Courage and Medal of Bravery. Both civilians and members of the military are eligible for them. A later decision regarding the adoption of these awards upset many Canadians: The VC and other "British" medals would no longer be part of the Canadian honours system.

Led by the Royal Canadian Legion, a concerted campaign was launched to convince the politicians to change their minds. Ultimately, the fight was successful. In 1993, the government of Brian Mulroney announced the VC would remain as the highest gallantry award for Canadians – but with a difference.

In its "Canadianized" version, the VC's inscription "For Valour" has been amended to the Latin "Pro Valore," in keeping with the country's official bilingualism policy. A fleur-de-lis was also added to the existing thistle, shamrock and rose.

The final difference from the British VC is the medal's composition. Canada's VC contains some of the same metal from Russian cannons captured during the Crimean War, which is found in most British VCs. It also has copper from an 1867 Confederation medal, as well as metal from each region of Canada.

Along with the reinstatement of the VC, the Canadian Forces also instituted two additional gallantry awards in 1993: the Star of Military Valour (SMV) and the Medal of Military Valour (MMV). The SMV is roughly equivalent to the DSO and DCM, while the MMV equates to the MC and MM.

The first awards of the SMV and MMV took place in October 2006. To date, five SMVs and 18 MMVs have been awarded, all for gallantry in Afghanistan.

Since its inception, the VC has been awarded 1,357 times to 1,353 men. Three individuals received the VC and bar, indicating two awards, while one symbol – the Unknown Warrior of the United States – also received it.

Although the most commonly accepted number of Canadian VC recipients is 94, the correct number is 98. Four men who were born in Canada and subsequently served in the British forces continue to be ignored by most authorities, even though others who are in the same situation are counted.

Five Nova Scotians are among the 98, including William Hall, the first Nova Scotian, first black and third Canadian to receive it. Two VCs are held in the province. Hall's is at the Nova Scotia Museum, while Cape Bretoner John Bernard Croak's is held by the Army Museum in the Citadel.

Only 14 VCs have been awarded since the Second World War. The last VC of that war – as well as Canada's last VC – went to Navy flyer Lieut. "Hammy" Gray for his courageous act in August 1945 which sank a Japanese warship, but resulted in his death.

The most recent VCs were to a British private during the Second Gulf War in 2004 and two for actions in Afghanistan in 2004 and 2006, one to a New Zealand lance corporal and the other – posthumously – to a British corporal.

The New Zealand VC was the first one created by that country, which announced its own version in 1999. Besides Canada and New Zealand, Australia adopted its own VC in 1991, although none has been awarded so far.

As well, no Canadianized VC has yet been awarded. When some courageous soldier, sailor, airman or airwoman receives one, it will be the final step in the creation of our own Canadian military gallantry awards.

John Boileau is the author of *Valiant Hearts: Atlantic Canada and the Victoria Cross*, published by Nimbus in 2005.