

The price of valour

By JOHN BOILEAU

THE RECENT decision by the president of the Waverley Legion (The Sunday Herald, Sept. 21) to cancel an advertised military medal sale at his legion branch has brought the issue of selling medals back into the public eye. Many people – including local NDP MP Peter Stoffer – contend that selling military medals should be illegal. Stoffer even introduced a private member's bill in Parliament in 2005 to outlaw such sales.

Unfortunately, those who believe that selling medals should be a criminal act do not really understand the subject – or the total impracticality of what they suggest. There is nothing wrong with selling medals, and such acts should not be illegal.

During my 37 years of military service across Canada and abroad, I never met one serving or former soldier who objected to the idea of selling medals – or even brought the subject up.

Military medals – more properly termed medals, orders and decorations – symbolize a number of events. Some – the most common – denote participation in a war, campaign or peacekeeping/peacemaking mission. Others represent long or distinguished service, while still others – the rarest of all – signify battlefield valour.

Medals on a soldier's chest tell a story: how long that soldier has served, campaigns in which he or she participated and any acts of courage for which the soldier was recognized. And as a result of a recent government decision, the poorly named Sacrifice Medal will now denote if a soldier was wounded as a direct result of hostile action.

A law banning the sale of medals would be largely unenforceable. It would have no legal force outside Canada and would do nothing to prevent medal sales internally. Selling certain drugs is also illegal, and law-enforcement agencies have been spectacularly unsuccessful in preventing this.

There are thousands of medal collectors in this country. Countless medals are bought and sold daily, in full public scrutiny. Outlawing medal sales would simply move them underground.

For most of Canada's wars, campaign medals awarded to our service personnel were not Canadian medals, but British ones. Millions of them were given to soldiers across the British Empire/Commonwealth.

Beginning with the Second World War, war and campaign medals issued to Canadians were no longer engraved with the recipient's name, making it impossible to tell the nationality of the recipient.

Similarly, UN, NATO, European Union and other organizations' peacekeeping medals awarded to Canadians do not have the recipients' names inscribed. Soldiers around the world wear them, and one cannot be distinguished from the other.

Another problem is the silly notion that people are profiting from someone else's valour. While I would much rather see profit being made from someone's valour rather than their misery, this belief is misguided.

The simple truth is that the vast majority of medals were not and are not awarded for valour; they only indicate participation in a war or campaign. Take, for example, the First World War Victory Medal, of which more than 5.7 million were issued globally, including 351,289 to Canadians. This bronze medal was never issued alone, but always with the silver British War Medal. Many War Medals are no longer paired with their Victory Medal – usually for a very disappointing reason.

Several years ago, when the value of silver exceeded the normal value of a War Medal, thousands of them were irretrievably lost. They were melted down for their silver value, but not by legitimate collectors.

Another criticism levelled against selling medals is that they rightly belong in the soldier's family, not with some collector. If I sell or give away any of my possessions – from my house to a book – my descendants no longer have any claim on that item. It legally belongs to whomever I sold or gave it.

In most cases, at some time either the individual or a family member started this chain by selling or giving away a medal – all perfectly legal. That ended the individual's or anyone else's – including relatives' – right to claim it sometime in the future.

The cost to the taxpayer of such a law could be high. Dealers have invested millions of dollars in their stocks of medals. If selling them suddenly became illegal, these individuals would have a rightful claim against the government for reimbursement.

Additionally, what would dealers and collectors be expected to do with their current holdings – trace the recipients' families and give them back? That is clearly an impossible task.

Much of our military history would have been irrevocably lost without medal dealers and collectors. They have saved thousands of medals from being discarded, traced their provenance and carefully safeguarded them.

Rather than criticize or try to stop those who deal in medals, we should be thanking them for continuing to preserve this important part of our military history.

John Boileau is definitely not a medal collector, but received five medals during his military career – all for just being there.