

First World War medal remains a mystery



Bob Vanderham of Terra Cotta found a First World War medal more than two years ago but the medal's owner remains a mystery.

Photo by Ted Brown

With tomorrow being Remembrance Day, recognition of veterans is paramount in everyone's mind.

And during the past few months, I've found myself on a quest that relates to the efforts of one veteran, although I don't even know his name.

It all began when I was approached by reader Bob Vanderham, of Terra Cotta.

It seems Vanderham, while walking in front of his home more than two years ago, came across a badly decomposed leather wallet and was surprised to find it contained a medal.

The medal was unreadable, with a liberal coating of debris stuck to it, but after cleaning it in an ultrasonic bath, it was quite readable.

He had no idea what he was in possession of, so he filed it away, and more or less forgot it.

About three months ago, Vanderham approached me, saying he had something for me to research.

The medal was placed in my care, as I promised to see what I could

learn of its origin.

My first contact was Frank Grant of the Canadian Military Studies Museum in Limehouse.

"I haven't seen anything quite like this one before," he said, magnifier in hand. "It's one helluva medal, very articulate, with excellent workmanship."

Grant speculated it may have been presented by a municipality. Made in Montreal in 1919, he assumed it was presented to a Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) member, perhaps from the city of Montreal.

The next step was to check the Internet for information. I found a dealer in military decorations, Eugene G. Ursual, Military Antiquarian Inc., of Ottawa. I e-mailed his web site to request information, attaching an image of the medal to the message.

I then called the office and talked to Tonya Petrokov, who



works for Ursual.

Petrokov was most helpful, as she pulled up the e-mailed image on the screen in front of her. After checking one of her reference books she was able to ascertain its identity.

"It's a First World War CEF War Badge, Class C," she said read-

ing the information from a book. "And was issued by the Canadian government to soldiers who had been honorably discharged for medical reasons, mostly wounded, but it was NOT presented to veterans who had been discharged for misconduct."

She went on to elaborate how the recipient had to have served more than three months, with pay, to qualify, (which during the First World War was a lengthy time, especially in the trenches) and it could also be presented to someone discharged for old age. It wasn't a campaign medal, she added, issued for fighting in any particular battle.

At this point, I figured I'd gleaned as much information as I could from this medal/badge, and thanked her for her trouble.

"Aren't you curious to know who it was issued to?" she asked, as I was about to hang up.

"You can find that out?" I exclaimed, "I'd love to know!"

"That number on the back can possibly give you that information," she said. "Being a First World War badge, the files are now all open, so there's no charge to access the name of the recipient."

Petrokov then gave me the fax number for the National Archives, to request the information.

I prepared a fax, then sent an e-mail request, just to cover all bases.

The next step was to wait. A letter arrived about three weeks later. I was excited by the prospect of unraveling the mystery as I opened it. But, it wasn't to be.

The letter informed me the National Archives had no list to match badge numbers with the recipients, and apologized for not being able to help.

The next step was Veterans' Affairs Canada.

To date, my request hasn't been answered, but I realize the wheels turn slowly in some of these offices.

And though I haven't been able to match the medal to its owner, I'll continue my quest.

I know this medal was presented to someone who saw action in the First World War, and, I suspect it must have been important to its recipient, since it was obviously being carried when it was lost.

It occurred to me—the fact it was lost, found, and has sent me upon this little journey to search out its origin—that the medal still accomplished its purpose.

After all, its purpose was to recognize the efforts of a soldier who risked his life to defend his country. And though that soldier remains one of thousands of nameless veterans, his contribution has been recognized with this story alone.

And at this time of year, that's perhaps the most important thing.

—By Ted Brown, staff writer



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