

A Brief History of the British Army Medal

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For over a century, acts of bravery, merit or service during war and military campaigns in times of conflict and in times of peace, have been marked by the awarding of medals.

During the 17th and 18th centuries the service of the ordinary British soldier was simply rewarded with a state pension. During this time, due to the suffering and actions of the soldiers on both sides during the English civil war, public opinion of soldiers was quite low. Usually, only the most desperate volunteered for military service and in some cases it was the only alternative to a prison sentence. Public opinion of the British Army slowly began to change after the Napoleonic Wars (1799 to 1815) due to the heroic actions of soldiers and their officers. However, during this time, medals were only given to highly promoted officers and members of the aristocracy for their services.

The first British Army medal awarded to ordinary soldiers was the Waterloo Medal, issued around 1816-17. This was given to every individual British soldier who could prove that they were present during the campaign against Napoleon in which the British Army, alongside their Dutch and German allies, suffered horrific loss and suffering whilst performing feats of heroism. The medal was unique as not only was it the first of its kind but each soldier or officer who received it had their name stamped into the medal, recognising them individually. Around 39,000 of these medals were issued to the men who applied for them. The material chosen for the medal was Silver, which alongside Bronze, would be used widely for many medals in the coming century.

However, this medal was met with mixed feelings by some of the more veteran British soldiers and officers who had not been present at Waterloo and therefore did not get a medal; they had fought in the American War of 1812, and the Spanish Peninsula Wars and had suffered as much as the men of Waterloo.

In the coming decades, this controversy and the ongoing conflicts of the first half of the 19th century saw the establishment of army medals for all serving soldiers as a matter of routine. This was brought about thanks to the determined efforts of The Duke of Richmond (Charles Gordon Lennox) who was a veteran of the Napoleonic Wars.

After gaining the approval of Queen Victoria and Parliament, the Military General Service Medal was established in 1847 and offered to any soldier who could prove

they had served in the Napoleonic conflict. Sadly, due to the passage of time and the general illiteracy of the men of that era, only 26,000 of these medals were issued. However, following their introduction, awards for campaign and service to the common soldier of the British Army were firmly established.

In next decade dozens of different medals for past and present service were struck and issued to the serving and former soldiers of the army. The Indian General Service Medal of 1854 was awarded to all the soldiers and officers and laid the ground for general service medals for the decades to come.

After the Crimean War probably the most well-known medal, The Victoria Cross (VC), was struck. This was a gallantry medal awarded to men of any class or service in the armed forces who had performed an act of heroism or great service under enemy fire and risk of death. The medal itself is of a simple design compared to some others, minted from bronze. The VC has been awarded 1,356 times since it was created, the most recent one having been awarded to Private Johnson Beharry from 1st Battalion the Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment for two separate actions in Iraq.

During the 20th century the British Army would see bloody action in both the 1st and 2nd World Wars. Each conflict produced a unique series of campaign and service medals. A serviceman during World War 1, if he survived, was awarded a group of medals: the 1914-15 Star, the British War medal and the Victory Medal. These were given the nicknames Pip, Squeak and Wilfred (all post-war newspaper cartoon comic animals) by many servicemen. In total 2,366,000 medals were distributed to soldiers and support personnel of the era, including the Royal Navy and Canadian servicemen.

After the 2nd World War the men who had served were awarded their own version of a general service medal, the 1939-45 Star, which was worn alongside the medals of the campaigns the servicemen had been involved in. Those who had served in the North African campaign were awarded the Africa Star and those who had been present during D-Day or the Italian campaigns received their own specific medals to wear with the Star. Commonwealth soldiers of Indian, Australian, Canadian or South African descent also received a separate service medal to wear alongside their awards.

In the 21st century the serving British soldier will be awarded medals for numerous actions, including their service for the country, for United Nations peace-keeping, and for police actions as well as NATO service. International humanitarian action is even considered with one of the most recent British Army medals given out to both soldiers and civilians who risked their health and lives combating the Ebola epidemic.