

Air force men and women deserve more than a better than nothing medal

One of the hottest buttons the government can push when it comes to honoring the Canadian Forces is medals awarded for service to country.

That is readily seen in the controversy sparked by the government's decision to strike a Victoria Cross medal and, reportedly, bestow it upon Prime Minister Stephen Harper at the Vimy ceremony in France to honor the Unknown Soldier.

The president of the Royal Canadian Legion and others are adamant that the Victoria Cross or other military honor should not be considered for the Unknown Soldier because it would elevate his status above all others who died for their country.

It is astounding that the Canadian government could attempt to honour the gallantry of soldiers in combat and, in the process, manage to infuriate others who have risked their lives for their country.

But, in this the government is at least consistent.

The Legion's position on the Victoria Cross and the Unknown Soldier was taken on January 20, 1999, even as members of the Canadian air force were readying to participate in a 78-day North Atlantic Treaty Organization air war that ended the ruthless ethnic cleansing of Albanians in Kosovo by Serb military and paramilitary forces.

The vast majority of Canadians know very little about that war in which Canadian pilots dropped nearly 500,000 pounds of bombs during their participation in NATO's Operation Allied Force.

The work of Canadian pilots and ground crews from March 24 to June 10, 1999, was remarkable.

It takes a book to tell the story of the hardships they overcame, the dangers they faced under withering enemy fire and the innovation required of them in battle as a result of years of federal government neglect of the Canadian Forces.

It is also astonishing that none were killed.

It is perhaps cynical to suggest that had pilots been lost, perhaps Canadians would know more of their sacrifice and bravery, but so be it.

Years after the air war ended, the one thing that infuriated them was the Canadian government's refusal to strike a medal to specifically honor their participation in Allied Force which, at the time, was just the sixth overseas war that Canadians had fought since becoming a nation.

In Canadian history, fighting wars is not an ordinary part of military service, it is extra-ordinary and during the Kosovo air war, Canadians performed extraordinarily.

Lt.-Col. Billie Flynn, commander of the now-disbanded 441 Tactical Fighter Squadron, wrote up 22 Meritorious Service Medal recommendations, but just two were awarded.

"It's a lost battle," says Flynn who is now out of the forces and is still bitter that his air crews weren't treated better.

In Ottawa, air force commanders fought with their army and navy colleagues over the awarding of a medal for the Kosovo air campaign, but to no avail.

The prevailing thought was: "It couldn't have been that hard, no one was killed," says Flynn.

Instead of a medal specifically struck for them, the Canadian pilots were awarded the NATO medal with a Kosovo bar and ribbon if they flew a minimum of 15 missions. Those who risked their lives on 14 sorties or less were out of luck.

The other medal they and the ground crews could qualify for was a NATO medal with the former Yugoslavia bar and ribbon for serving in Allied Force or for 90 days outside of Kosovo.

The problem with both is that they were both peacekeeping medals, some 10,000 of which have been awarded since the mid-1990s.

It wasn't until 2004 that then-Governor General Adrienne Clarkson announced the creation of the General Campaign Star and the General Service Medal, both of which were to be issued with a bar specifying the operation being recognized.

Six years after the war ended, pilots who flew five sorties over Kosovo were awarded the General Campaign Star in 1995 and ground crew who served 30 cumulative days the General Service Medal, both with Allied Force Bars.

Much of the bitterness has given way to resignation, but is easy to understand why critics still think the government got it wrong because they are the same medals – only with an International Security Assistance Force Bar – now being awarded to Canadians who have served 30 cumulative days in

Afghanistan since April 24, 2003.

No one fights a war for a medal; they do as part of a higher calling. Soldiers, sailors and airmen risk their lives and die in wars because their government wants them to; it's for their country.

The medals awarded the air force men and women for the 1999 Kosovo air war are, at best, a better-than-nothing solution for this medal debacle.

The Canadian Forces personnel who risked their lives and who sacrificed so much during the Operation Allied Force campaign deserve much more than a "better-than-nothing" medal.

They deserve their own medal.

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