



## Stigmata: Military Insignia and the Recognition of Wounded Combatants during the Great War

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2012-12-04 21:58:08

If uniforms enforce standardisation, a sense of corporate identity, insignia provides a counter-stimulus towards individuation. Military insignia of the major combatants prior to the Great War can broadly be separated between rank, unit, and 'proficiency'. The first and second had existed in various forms since antiquity; the third was an invention of the nineteenth-century and the recognition that soldiers might be motivated to serve by something other than their pay.[\[1\]](#)

Prior to the war no combatants had any insignia for differentiating a man engaged on active service from his counterparts, nor any recognising wounds or disabilities. Contribution to a campaign might be rewarded with a medal, but such tokens of gratitude were authorised only after the fighting had ended. Wounded men received the same medals as their comrades; if their injuries were severe, perhaps a pension. Constants of the military recognition of active service were thus deferral and standardisation: campaign medals collectivised past experience and implied a uniformity of sacrifice.

When war broke out, most assumed the fighting would be a matter for professional armies rather than peoples. In 1915, however, the combatants took their first steps towards mobilising their entire populations for an industrial war. Against this background of dawning mass-participation, civilians began calling upon the military for badges that would honour *their* wounded and distinguish honourably-discharged soldiers from those who had not served.

Maurice Barrs, president of the French *Ligue des Patriotes*, launched an appeal in March 1915 demanding 'une mdaille des invalides de guerre pour qu'elle soit, sur la poitrine du soldat malheureux, le tmoin, la preuve du sacrifice que la France lui a demand aux heures difficiles et pour qu'elle soit, auprs de nous tous, un rappel muet et un souviens-toi de la dette patriotique qui nous incombe tous'.[\[2\]](#) On 24<sup>th</sup> September 1915 *The Times* called on the British authorities to make a similar gesture: 'the provision of such tokens in this country would protect some of our returned men, who are now in mufti [civilian clothes], from some very gallant attentions on the part of amateur recruiters.'[\[3\]](#) The idea would be debated for over a year by French politicians, and met with official intransigence on both sides of the Channel: 'precedent is quoted against it, and certainly no medal or badge has ever yet been granted until after the end of hostilities; but then' the war itself is altogether unprecedented in character.'[\[4\]](#) Eventually, the militaries would have to give way to popular demand.

On 21<sup>st</sup> April 1916, the French war ministry introduced two new badges: *chevrons d'anciennet de prsence* and *chevrons de blessure*.[\[5\]](#) The former marked the length of a man's front-line service, one chevron on the left arm for the first year, with subsequent awards every six months. The latter, worn on the right arm, were awarded for

each occasion of wounding (i.e. concurrent wounds resulted in one chevron). These badges were not quite what had been called for by M Barrs, as they could only be worn on uniform: those invalided out of service had as yet no distinguishing emblem.

Italy was the first nation to institute an actual medal for the wounded. Created by Royal Decree on 21<sup>st</sup> May 1916, the *Distintivo d'Onore Per i Mutilati di Guerra* was not intended as a general distinction but honoured permanent disability or serious disfigurement.<sup>[6]</sup> These conditions seem to have been interpreted too generously and were re-defined in March 1917;<sup>[7]</sup> to ease pressure on the exclusive award, all wounded were now granted permission to wear silver-braid bars on their uniforms, taking inspiration from the French.

British calls for such insignia received fresh impetus from the French gesture, which came to the attention of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes: 'I had been struck by this very human touch... which gave a man some credit and therefore some consolation for his sufferings. I represented the matter when I came back...?' (to General Robertson, who took the 'tip?').<sup>[8]</sup>

Wound stripes (vertical bars on the left cuff) were introduced on 6<sup>th</sup> July 1916 for 'all those who have been wounded in any of the campaigns since 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914'.<sup>[9]</sup> In November, a clarification was circulated re-emphasising that wound stripes should be awarded to those recorded 'gassed' or 'shell-shocked?', the inference being that badges had previously been withheld on spurious grounds.<sup>[10]</sup> Self-inflicted wounds and accidental injuries were excluded: the wound stripe recognised the consequences of enemy action, and was intentionally associated with heroism and sacrifice.

In August 1916, commanding officers were instructed to ensure that wound stripes were not assumed illegitimately.<sup>[11]</sup> The illicit wearing of uniform and insignia was a growing problem in Britain, as men tried to avoid the newly-introduced conscription or turn themselves into instant heroes.<sup>[12]</sup> As early as 12<sup>th</sup> September 1916, a deserter appeared before a court-martial on charges of fraud. He 'imposed on the public by pretending that he had lost an arm and by wearing on his sleeve seven of the gold stripes which are the badge of the wounded soldier'. The impostor elicited compassion and charitable gifts, including one sum of 5 (three months' army pay).<sup>[13]</sup>

The symbolism of the wound badge as a mark of gallant suffering grew more potent as the war progressed. Some soldiers began to view them as akin to bravery decorations;<sup>[14]</sup> in the complicated demobilisation scheme following the war, politicians spoke of men 'with three wound stripes' (not 'three wounds') being released earlier than their un-wounded comrades.<sup>[15]</sup> In January 1918, permission had even been granted for the badge to be worn on civilian dress, an unprecedented privilege for its wearers.<sup>[16]</sup>

Though the French took the initiative in recognising active service and wounds, the British went a step further. In September 1916, the authorities finally saw the wisdom of granting a badge to discharged soldiers for civilian wear, a sign of duty done and useful way of isolating avoiders of conscription. Anyone who had served for more than a week from 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914, and had subsequently been invalided out on ill-health grounds (whether from wounds, age or sickness) was now entitled to wear the Silver War Badge,<sup>[17]</sup> each numbered to discourage fraud. The military authorities avoided the break with tradition that issuing a medal would have represented, but devised an award that photographs suggest was worn with pride.

In December 1916, the French finally reached a less satisfactory compromise, the *Insigne special des Blessés militaires*: a ribbon embellished with a small red-enamel star.<sup>[18]</sup> Many men, dissatisfied by delay and the

smallness of the badge, purchased an unofficial medal prominently incorporating this red star. Though never formally recognised, the design was widely adopted and reluctantly tolerated by the French authorities.

By early 1917, the European allies had various systems for recognising the sacrifices of their wounded (Russia introduced her own wound stripe in 1916, worn horizontally on the left cuff). When the USA joined the war in 1917, the argument for such badges had already been won. In October, the short-lived Army Wound Ribbon was instituted.<sup>[19]</sup> But perhaps mindful of the French experience, the ribbon was abolished in January 1918 and replaced by a gold chevron on the right cuff.<sup>[20]</sup> The same order created chevrons for the left arm marking service at the front; similar Overseas Service Chevrons had finally been adopted by the British days earlier.<sup>[21]</sup>

Surprisingly, the Central Powers took much longer to devise similar insignia. The Austro-Hungarian Emperor established the Verwundetenmedaille in August 1917 (though issue did not begin until August 1918); the number of red stripes on this medal's ribbon corresponding to the number of the recipient's wounds.<sup>[22]</sup> It was not until March 1918 that the Kaiser approved wound insignia, the last instituted by a major combatant.<sup>[23]</sup> The Verwundetenabzeichen was awarded in three grades ' iron, silver, gold ' determined by the number of wounds received. At first only available to Prussian troops, it was soon adopted by the other German states; lack of a coherent Imperial policy regarding insignia probably contributed to its late arrival.

In British military circles at least, the proliferation of badges was viewed with misgivings. Following the announcement of Service Chevrons towards the end of 1917, a series of indignant letters appeared in *The Times* from serving officers:

*Many of us, from the first, regarded the institution of the wound stripe with the strongest disapproval. Others, who approved the intrinsic merits of the idea, yet viewed the innovation with misgivings as calculated to set on foot a new and mischievous tendency in the Army. Our apprehensions were not groundless. A clamour for distinctions, on all manner of pretexts, has arisen. This vainglorious demand is worse than discreditable. It is indecent, and it is unworthy of Army ideals' we too, who have been favoured by Providence with wounds, write in no spirit of envy.*<sup>[24]</sup>

In 1922, the British Regular Army ordered the wearing of Wound Stripes and Chevrons to cease.<sup>[25]</sup> Such insignia was an unprecedented response to a war of 'unprecedented character'. Once wartime volunteers had left the ranks, the public-relations exercise that wound insignia represented could be brought to an end. Those discharged after 31<sup>st</sup> December 1919 had already ceased to qualify for the Silver War Badge.<sup>[26]</sup>

By contrast, subsequent generations of French veterans took to wearing the unofficial medal of the Great War. The German Verwundetenabzeichen, Nazified with a swastika in 1939, was awarded to the wounded of Hitler's wars. In 1932, the Americans introduced the Purple Heart, an award that could be claimed retrospectively by the wounded of the Great War. The French and German badges are still worn today; the Purple Heart continues to be awarded.

[1] See the general remarks in M.S. Cross, *Awarded for Valour: A History of the Victoria Cross and the Evolution of British Heroism*(Basingstoke, 2008), pp. 26-42.

[2] *l'Echo de Paris*, 28<sup>th</sup> March 1918.

[3] *The Times*, 24<sup>th</sup> September 1915.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Cabinet du Ministre No. 49, 'Circulaire relative la cration d'insignes de distinction (fourragres et chevrons)?', *Bulletin Officiel du Ministre de la guerre*.dition chronologique. Partie Permanente, anne 1916, 1<sup>er</sup> volume, pp. 339-341.

[6] Regio decreto 640, 21<sup>st</sup> May 1916.

[7] Circolare del Ministero della Guerra 182, 12<sup>th</sup> March 1917.

[8] A. Conan Doyle, *Memories and Adventures*(London, [1924]), p. 380.

[9] Army Order 249, 6<sup>th</sup> July 1916.

[10] Army Council Instruction 2075, 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1916.

[11] Army Council Instruction 1637, 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1916.

[12] See L. Ugolini, 'The Illicit Consumption of Military Uniforms in Britain, 1914-1918?', *Journal of Design History* 24.2 (2011), pp. 125-138.

[13] *The Times*, 13<sup>th</sup> September 1916.

[14] See e.g. C. Lewis, *Sagittarius Rising* (London, [1936]), p. 199.

[15] See e.g. Hansard HC Deb. 6<sup>th</sup> March 1919 vol. 113 col. 635; 7<sup>th</sup> May 1919 vol. 115 col. 933.

[16] Army Order 9, 1<sup>st</sup> January 1918.

[17] Army Order 316, 12<sup>th</sup> September 1916.

[18] *Journal officiel de la Rpublique franaise. Lois et decrets*, 11<sup>th</sup> December 1916.

[19] War Department General Order 134, 12<sup>th</sup>

October 1918.

[20] War Department General Order 6, 12<sup>th</sup> January 1918.

[21] Army Order 4, 1<sup>st</sup> January 1918.

[22] J.C. Steiner, 'Die Verwundetenmedaille 1918?', *Das militrhistorische Archiv* 10 (1995), pp. 36-40.

[23] Armeeverordnungsblatt 1918 Nr. 270, Allerhchste Kabinettsordre of 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1918.

[24] *The Times*, 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1917. Cf. *ibid.*, 19<sup>th</sup> October 1917.

[25] Army Order 434, November 1922.

[26] Army Order 43, 20<sup>th</sup> February 1920.

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