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COLLECTING military medals has one tremendous appeal over all other collecting hobbies. Each medal has a personal history behind it and a great deal of the enjoyment obtained from medals is in unravelling that history. Naturally, it is not always possible to find out about the owner of a medal or what he did, but at least the collector starts with a vital clue—the man's name. The great majority of British campaign medals were 'named' and this means that more often than not the collector will find the recipient's name, rank and regiment or ship on the edge of the medal.

This facet of collecting is denied to the philatelist and numismatist and offers an alluring appeal to those who like the challenge of research of this nature.

Generally speaking, if a medal can be identified with an officer, then it is comparatively easy to find out about the man, his service career and what part he played in history. This is because the service careers of officers in HM Forces have been well docketed. Although nowhere so easy to trace, it is a practical proposition to try and find out about individual soldiers who took part in campaigns. The police, for example, would be most happy if someone would provide them with the name and whereabouts of criminals when they start their investigations. A medal in effect provides these valuable items of information. So, for those who like detective work, the challenge of finding out about the man behind the medal is by no means hopeless and depends upon individual thoroughness, persistence and, as with all things, a little luck!

Anyone with a few pounds to spare can start a medal collection, and those with large funds available can very quickly amass a large number of medals. Money is only one factor, however, and the true collector brings a collection to life and closes the generation gap between ourselves and our forefathers who marched to form one of the largest, and



1. *Long Service and Good Conduct Medal of King Edward VII's reign. The left-hand illustration shows the obverse ('head' side) and the right-hand shows the reverse ('tails' side). The condition of the medal and ribbon would be described as 'extremely fine'*

the longest-lasting empires in the history of the world. To him the finances for buying medals are only part of the equipment of the hobby. Money alone will not form an interesting medal collection (it may form a valuable one); only painstaking research and intelligent presentation will do this.

Not to be overlooked is the fact that the collector who searches and searches to find out about a soldier of the 93rd Foot who fought at Inkermann, and fails, has not wasted his time. The exercise will have taught him a great deal about the history of war and the endurance of men. If he has researched all possible channels, then by the time he has finished he will be a walking encyclopaedia on that particular battle—incidentally, this was the last battle in history where massed formations of fighting men met head-on with rifle butt, spade and fist.

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The study of military history is the study of history. All war stems from politics—stems from the day the politicians fail to get what they want by talking. Once war starts a nation's resources are thrust behind it; suddenly improvisation necessitates new invention and, once the war is over, more often than not it leaves a legacy of progress in general civilization as well as in improved methods of destruction. The rapid development of radar in World War II was later to find even greater uses in peacetime, guiding fishing fleets, etc. The student of war medals absorbs all this knowledge, and there is no better springboard to future progress than a thorough appreciation of the past. Man's insensitivity to the past has often led to the repetition of mistakes.

Just how important history is can be illustrated by the fact that whenever we judge anything our criteria can only be what has happened before. Nothing can so fit a man to lead others than a thorough knowledge of history—a knowledge of what has happened before. The medal collector is gaining this knowledge of history all the time and is going further than the general student of history. He is making it breathe again. Some collecting hobbies can be criticized because although they stimulate the mind and bring happiness they do not of themselves necessarily serve a useful purpose.

This cannot be said of the medal collector. His is a truly useful pastime. As well as stimulation and enjoyment, he is improving his mind with the knowledge which can be put to practical purposes, and, on a purely nostalgic note, he is preserving the memory of the millions of men before him who each in his way took a hand in shaping our inheritance.

How different the shape of history would have been if the British fleet had been sunk at Trafalgar, if the Allies had fled at Waterloo! It is part of everyone's education in modern society to learn what happened at such events; the medal collector is not content to leave it at that, he wants to know who did it, and how.

It is not necessary to have a large collection of medals to relate history—even a dozen medals can give an interesting account of a regiment over a hundred years or more. Almost as important as the medals to the collector is his library. If funds do not permit a comprehensive library at home then the collector has at his disposal the public libraries which are always useful and which can very often trace obscure books which the collector needs for reference.

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There are few specialist medal collectors who do not have extensive libraries of their own. In studying the medals of one regiment the collector may amass newspaper cuttings of the period relating to the regiment, letters written home by soldiers in the field, regimental histories and obscure references to the subject in biographies, etc. He is collating scraps of information from unusual sources to build up a full picture of the study he is making. He can bring to light 'forgotten' knowledge and add new snippets of information to enlarge the general knowledge of the events.

This is why sooner or later it is necessary to specialize. The man who just buys medals as and when they come his way ends up with a vast number of medals and little else. If he wants to know something about his medals he must contain his collection within reasonable limits, permitting him to make a close study of them. The man who can show you a hundred medals, but doesn't even know if a man's name is engraved or impressed on the edges is not a true collector; he is a medal amasser. If he takes so little interest in his medals the chances are that he does not even know if they are genuine or not.

The specialist, apart from being in a position to make a deep study of his chosen field, has the advantage of developing the ability to sense that something is wrong when he meets with a forgery. He will, with experience, know how the name of a person should appear on a medal of the particular group he is collecting; he will know that a certain military bar could not have been obtained in association with another, knowledge which a general collector would find impossible to absorb; and he will probably be able to turn up his records or even have a copy of the regiment's medal roll to ascertain whether a man was entitled to particular bars.

It is far better to specialize, enabling the collector to know what to expect to find and what it should look like. Anyone with enough money can buy lots of medals. It takes real collecting ability to acquire ten medals relating to the same warship for different actions it fought in. And once put together and studied those ten medals will tell a graphic history of that ship; a hundred varied medals, ranging from masonic or campaign medals to coronation or jubilee medals, will tell you nothing other than that such medals were issued.

There is a breed of collector whose enthusiasm in collecting is such that he finds it very difficult to resist obtaining items which take his

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fancy, even though they do not relate to his subject. Often the sudden enthusiasm wanes when it is realized how useless the item is to the study being made—but, then it is too late and the money has been spent. This impulsive purchasing is not nearly so rare as some would believe. The experienced collector will have disciplined himself to be more selective, even if only by bitter experience. The new collector could do a lot worse than to start a file for each new medal he acquires and make a point of not getting any more until he has found out something about that medal to put in his file. Naturally, one is referring to general additions to a collection—exceptions would be outright bargains or medals which fit into the general pattern of a specialized study and which may not be easy to find again if not taken at once.

Before spending large sums of money on rare medals the collector should be conversant with known forgeries and methods of doctoring medals. There is no substitute for experience and the sensible collector starts off with the more readily available material from which he gains the knowledge which enables him to spend out on rarities, which in some instances would be considered as common medals were it not for the addition of a particular bar or name. Such things are all too easy to produce for a collector who is not on guard against them.

It is no part of this book to go into the detail of such complexities. Many books by experts exist on the detail of particular battles, medals and forgeries. Here it is intended only to show the scope of the hobby, the methods of collecting and a broad picture useful to a beginner. The books necessary for a collector wishing to make a more advanced study of certain facets of the hobby are listed in Appendix II.