

# First World War medal worth thousands, but family willingly gives it to museum

BY PATRICK DARE

*CanWest News Service*

OTTAWA — The price of the rare Victoria Cross medal is reaching extraordinary heights when it comes up for sale at international auction houses. But the Merrifield family of Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., has decided their Victoria Cross will never be sold to the highest bidder and will never leave Canada.

In November, the Merrifields donated the Victoria Cross medal set that belonged to Sgt. William Merrifield to the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa. The family was donating a military artefact that would be worth a lot of money on the collectors' market; a British Victoria Cross sold for \$482,000 in 2004.

William Merrifield was an infantryman in the First World War who became one of only 94 Canadians in history to win the high honour. He won the medal in France for attacking German machine-gun posts that had trapped his platoon, then leading his platoon forward on the battlefield. He was twice wounded in the action. He received the medal from King George V at Sandringham in January 1919.

He returned to northern Ontario after the war, worked for the Algoma Central Railway, and had a family of four children. He died in 1943 and is buried

**"We don't want it sold and off to another country, just regarded as a piece of metal."**

Katy Merrifield,  
Granddaughter of Sgt. William Merrifield

at Sault Ste. Marie.

For the family, the fate of the medal set handed down from wife to eldest son, and kept in a safe deposit box, was a topic of concern and discussion for some time. The family saw the rising amounts of money being sought for military medals, and saw the angst and controversy over the recent sale of Fred Topham's Victoria Cross.

The executors of Topham's late widow's estate wanted to auction the medal in Britain, causing a national outcry in 2004. The federal government eventually stepped in and bought the medal for \$300,000.

The Merrifield family wanted to avoid all that.

"That was a great motivator," said Katy Merrifield, a granddaughter of William Merrifield. "We don't want it sold and off to another country, just regarded as a piece of metal. We were taught as kids that this

was a very highly respected honour and we should keep it that way. The museum was a good way to do it.

"I believe money makes people crazy," she said. "We just didn't want to go that way at all."

So, the family decided to hand over the medal set to the Canadian War Museum in a little ceremony in November.

Dan Glenney, director of collections at the War Museum, says the Victoria Cross is an icon of Canadian military history, and families that have one often become concerned about what will become of the medals. Often they simply sit in a bank vault. On a couple of occasions, sions Victoria Crosses have been stolen.

Families typically do a lot of thinking before donating such a piece, says Glenney.

So far, the War Museum has collected 29 of the medals.

Glenney says the medals are great for the museum to collect, not just because they are small and easy to store and display, but also because there's a story behind each set of medals and it's the museum's mission to tell those stories.