

Chief of the Defence Staff



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24 January 2023

Bruce Moncur

Valour in the presence of the enemy
afghanvetsofcanada@gmail.com

Dear *Bruce,*

Your letter of 15 September 2021 addressed to Her Excellency the Governor General suggesting that a previously awarded Star of Military Valour (SMV) be upgraded to a Victoria Cross has been redirected to this department for response. This letter is to formally provide in writing what I have already shared with you during our recent MS Teams meeting held 23 January 2023.

Firstly, I would like to state that I was very sad to hear that Private Larochelle is still experiencing adverse health consequences as a result of his service in uniform. He, like many of his colleagues who served with great gallantry in the long and arduous campaign in Afghanistan, is the embodiment of the highest of military virtues.

When it comes to military honours, the Governor General acts on the recommendation of the Chief of the Defence Staff in consultation with the appropriate honours committee, in this case the Canadian Forces Decorations Advisory Committee. The nomination process is thorough and comprehensive and, in accordance with the basic principles of the Canadian honours system, is specifically designed to be insulated from political influence and public pressure.

The request that you made in your letter is a matter that has been reviewed on previous occasions. Specifically, an in-depth review of all 20 Stars of Military Valour awarded for the Afghanistan campaign was conducted at the request of the then-Chief of the Defence Staff, General Walt Natynzcyk, in 2012. The review concluded that all awards had been fair and consistent and that none of the cases should have received a different decoration, either lower or higher, all of them fully meeting the intent and criteria for the Star of Military Valour.

Furthermore, the time limits for nominations for this campaign have long elapsed. The first such rule was established by King George VI at the end of the Second World War, as many recommendations for war time service were still pouring in. His Majesty

1/4

decreed that consideration will not be given for acts which were performed more than five years before the nomination. The King later expanded this direction to the creation of medals as well. Accordingly, this principle has been used for honours policy issues and proposals as well as individual nominations for honours since that time. In Canada, the five-year window has officially been embedded in the Canadian Honours Practice in 2005 and upheld again in the 2011 Honours Review which qualified the policy as 'one of the key principles of the Canadian honours system'. These important limits are in place to ensure events are judged by the standards and values of the time, are compared with other contemporary examples and that previous decisions are not second-guessed and history is not reinterpreted. It is also a reality that, as times goes by, documents are more challenging to obtain and human memory tends to fade or distort past experiences.

These timelines are also respected by some of our closest Commonwealth allies such as the United Kingdom and New Zealand, and was recently reinforced by the Right Honourable Jacinda Ardern, Prime Minister of New Zealand, when she declined a similar request to revisit awards for actions in Vietnam, saying "... , it does appear that, actually, our treatment seems to be fairly consistent with these kinds of awards across Vietnam relative to others. So having received that assurance, that then, I think, gives cause for me to stick with the general practice that we have." and "I'm very mindful that when I take on this job, I do take on a history and practice that goes beyond just one term of office and that if we unpick one decision, we can unpick many."

I have witnessed the valour of our members during my own tours in Afghanistan. This issue has not been an easy one, as I too wish our war could have produced a VC recipient. The same could be said for the Korean War.

In the end, as stated in the third paragraph above, the decision rests with me and I have given this very delicate matter much serious thought and reflection and consulted broadly. This has taken time, but I felt it was necessary. I know I will be criticized regardless of the decision. Several individuals and organizations have reached out to me on this matter to share their opinion or advice, for or against what your group has suggested. One veterans organization felt the proposal was aimed at raising the current morale of the armed forces, which misses the point and risks eroding the credibility of the nominations system. I have also consulted a number of experts, including historians and our Commonwealth counterparts. One raised very significant concerns over the proposal, stating that reopening old files 'will result in a perpetual re-examination of all sorts of awards and actions, media campaigns to see higher honours conferred. Ultimately, this will result in a devaluing of our national honours system' and would foster 'the view that with the right media partners and retired generals involved, the rules are now cursory. The exception has become the rule.' I reached out to General Natynczyk, who firmly stands by the conclusions of the review he ordered in 2012, and to General Hillier who acknowledged this was a very difficult issue but that, while he

supported your initiative, he will accept and publicly support the final decision that will be made by the Canadian Armed Forces in this matter, whatever it may be.

As Chief of the Defence Staff, it is my role, in consultation with Rideau Hall, the military leadership and duly constituted committees, to steward the institution, and ensure the continued credibility of the Canadian Honours System. We cannot constantly re-adjust history. In light of your correspondence, the Canadian Forces Decorations Advisory Committee examined the matter again and reaffirmed the importance of the existing practices. Consequently, with the unanimous support of the Committee and the support of Rideau Hall, I do not recommend reopening this or any other file related to the Afghanistan campaign. Indeed, Rideau Hall has made it clear that the 'OSGG [Office of the Secretary of the Governor General] has no wish to review past decisions or to process recommendations for awards that would be difficult to substantiate with a sufficient degree of accuracy and validity based on the passage of time.'

Although this has no direct bearing on this policy decision, it is important to note that the facts presented as new information in your letter and related media coverage were compared with the original nomination and the 2012 review file for this case. I would like to share that, although there are some factual inaccuracies in some of the details being discussed in the public realm, all the main elements raised were known and considered by the chain of command and honours review committees at the time. It must be remembered that the brief citation released to the public is merely a glimpse of the situation and cannot possibly reflect the comprehensive information reviewed by the committees, which include fully detailed narratives with plans, diagrams, witness statements and classified information as appropriate.

While we appreciate your well-meaning intentions, I can assure you that the award of decorations for the Afghanistan mission was done with the greatest care and diligence, and that that recipient did receive the appropriate recognition for their actions and services. I personally reviewed all twenty Star of Military Valour files, the same that were reviewed in 2012, and I am satisfied that this thorough review reached the right conclusions at the time.

This being said, while we are confident in our past decisions, we must admit that, thankfully, our recent experience with war and the use of the Military Valour Decorations has been limited. In order to help guide future deliberations on nominations for these prestigious honours, I have asked that, with the help of external advisors, we develop more precise guidelines to more clearly define the difference between the various levels of gallantry recognition available. This will take some time but should be useful to ensure the well-established high standards are maintained consistently over time.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your efforts in ensuring that the service and sacrifice of Canadian Armed Forces members who served in Afghanistan

and elsewhere around the world are not forgotten. I encourage you and your group to celebrate all 20 recipients of the Star of Military Valour (SMV), and the others who were recognized for gallantry and devotion to duty in that campaign. The SMV is not a second-class award. They are the worthy successors to generations of Canadians who have shown their mettle in combat in various conflicts around the world in the last 150 years. For these reasons, it is important to share the stories of the outstanding Canadians with their fellow citizens so that they can be remembered.

Finally, I want to also thank you for your efforts to connect veterans, especially during the challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic and in doing so creating a peer support network. Comradeship in retirement is just as important as during service.

Sincerely,



*It was great to talk to
you yesterday, and best
of luck with your studies!*

W.D. Eyre
General

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