

FIRE CROSS 1914-1918 ~ BELGIUM

A Belgian military decoration, the Fire Cross 1914-1918 (French: Croix du Feu; Dutch: Vuurkruis) was awarded to all those who came under fire at the front line during the First World War and who also received the “Fire Card”. The medal was established by Royal Decree on the 6th February 1934 and could not be awarded posthumously.

The Fire Card – Carte Du Feu Vuurkaart 1914-1918 – was established by Royal Decree in May 1932 to be awarded to all Belgians who had completed a minimum of twelve months in a unit opposing the enemy in the front line. The Fire Card or Map of Fire is a triple folded red card containing a small portrait photograph, personal details of the card holder, his regiment, rank, periods of service at the front and his military awards. The Fire Card is bilingual. To complement the Fire Card an inscribed Croix-Feu



Obverse ~ Cross of Fire 1914-1918

Badge was produced in April 1933 to be worn in the buttonhole by holders of the Croix du Feu. The holders of the Croix du Feu later established an organization of the National Federation of The Fire Crosses. The members received membership cards and were awarded a diploma certificate which was issued in French or Dutch depending on the language spoken by the member.

The patinated bronze cross quadrate Fire Cross is 44mm wide by 54mm in height (including the ribbon loop). Except for a 3mm wide plain border, the cross arms are striated horizontally for the lateral arms and vertically for the vertical arms on both the obverse and reverse. The central rectangle, 30mm wide by 37mm in height, has 5mm wide vertical laurel branches on either side. At the centre is a relief image of a deserted battlefield with at the forefront, the relief image of a First World War Belgium helmet over a bayonet. To the left is a 75mm howitzer and upper right the sun breaking through the clouds.

A large laurel branch extending diagonally from the bottom left to top right on the reverse is bisected with a relief inscription in two lines in Latin – “SALUS PATRIAE SUPREMA LEX” – “The Nation’s Salvation Is Our Highest Duty”. At the top is a royal crown from which seven rays in relief extend downwards. At the bottom right in relief in two rows are the dates “1914” and “1918”. Just below the laurel branch’s stem is the name of the medal’s designer, A. Rombaut.



Reverse ~ Cross of Fire 1914-1918

The medal is suspended from a 36mm wide red silk moire ribbon with three 4mm wide longitudinal blue stripes, one at the centre and the other two on either side 1mm from the ribbon’s edge. There are three basic types of this medal along with a number of manufacturing variants. Some known as ‘luxury models’ can be found in gilded bronze and vermeil – (silver-gilt).

THE GUESTBOOK OF FIRE CARDS ~ ‘BOOK OF GOLDEN CARDS’

The book was published and re-issued from 1933 until 1939 by the publishing house of J. Rosez of Brussels. An edition was also published in 1940 but was a copy of previous editions. Contained in the book are the names and photographs of war veterans holding a Fire Card. Those who wanted to be included in the book had to complete a form and list their award decorations and medals. There was provision on the form for the applicant to order the book. Visits were made to the homes of those who applied to verify the information they had submitted and provide the relevant documentation. To purchase a copy of the book the applicant had to pay 250Bf, if paying by cash. A deposit of 100Bf could be paid but the total cost of the book was 310Bf. If paying in monthly installments the price was 325Bf. Part of the profits from the sale of the books was paid into the “Fund Of The Great Invalids”.

The editions of the books were published in French and Dutch and are identical except for the description of the recipients. The veterans who ordered the book were given a personalized version with a copy of ‘his’ Fire Card. On the first page of the book is a template of the Fire Map/Fire Card. The holder of the Fire Card was entitled to a 75% discount on rail and bus fares

in Belgium. They were also able to consult a designated medical practitioner free of charge and receive discount on prescribed medication or in certain cases at no charge. To receive the medical benefit the veteran had to complete special forms and give them to the doctor or consultant. Belgian soldiers were awarded 'front line stripes' or 'front chevrons' and an annuity was paid to them from the age of 45 years on a quarterly basis. The amount depended on the number of chevrons awarded.



The 'Fire Card Guestbook' has Obverse ~ Ferdinand Verleyen's 65mm Bronze Medallion the history of the regiments that fought in the First World War. They are listed in the order that they appear in the book index. Using an alphabetical index list it is possible to search for the name of the military veterans included in the books. The various columns give the family name,



first name(s), address, book number page, rank, regiment and the possible presence of a photograph. 1498 veterans are listed in the index of the book. The Belgian war veterans whose name appeared in the "Golden Book of the Card of Fire" received a copy of the book and a large 65mm diameter bronze medallion.

Reverse ~ Ferdinand Verleyen's 65mm Bronze Medallion

On the obverse of the medallion is a soldier in 1915 uniform wearing the "Adrien" helmet and standing guard against the defensive floods of the Yser. On the reverse is the name of the holder. There were two types of medallions produced differing in the language used either French or Dutch for the inscriptions.

The language in the example shown is French and was issued to Reserve Lieutenant Ferdinand Verelyen who served with the 18th Regiment of the Line. His medallion is inscribed on the obverse around the top in an arc: “1914 YSER ON NE PASSE PAS! 1918” – “1914 Yser Do Not Go 1918!” At the bottom, below the soldier’s right boot is the signature of the sculptor Eugène Canneel (1882-1966). The inscribed reverse is also impressed with a small capital ‘A’.

BELGIAN MILITARY FORCE’S ~ FIRST WORLD WAR

In 1914 Belgium’s armed forces was comprised of approximately 20,000 regular soldiers and 180,000 civilians who had been drafted or conscripted into the army. During the course of the war a further 120,000 volunteers and conscripts were required to replace casualties to maintain a sufficient fighting force. The situation for Belgian soldiers of the First World War differed in many ways from that of their Allies and the Germans.

The Germans occupied a large part of Belgium which meant that many soldiers were separated from their families as were some French soldiers from northern France. When granted leave a Belgian soldier who was unable to go home and had to spend their time either in France or the United Kingdom at considerable financial cost. Charitable organizations did assist those who could not afford travel costs.

Military censorship of letters, trench newspapers and wartime restrictions on families in the occupied area limited information available to Belgium’s front line soldiers. For example, letters sent from families had to be smuggled via the Netherlands and was not a particularly reliable route for communication. Belgian soldiers were badly paid and little attention was given to their welfare, especially when away from the front line, by the military hierarchy. It was not until 1917 that this aspect of their lives began to slowly improve. Discipline was very strict and fully enforced not only in the frontline but also in rear areas. Difficulties which inevitably arose in the confines of trenches were mutually overcome between officers, NCO’s and other ranks. There was no mutinous conduct or armed insurrection amongst the Belgian soldiers although twelve were executed during the war.

There was always a problem over the use of language. Soldiers mainly spoke Flemish and those of higher rank spoke French. The latter was used for issuing orders, military publications and training instructions. Between 1915 and 1918, nearly three-quarters of those who died were Flemish but they only represented just over fifty per cent of the population. This caused an irritation and a certain amount of discontent among the soldiers and is still an issue today with Flemish nationalists. Disruptions occurred in the rear areas with soldier protesting and banner

waving, to which the military authorities responded by translating official publications into Flemish.

The soldiers spent most of their time in the frontline trenches on the Yser front and were not relieved for rest, recuperation or training. The appalling conditions in the flooded areas had a debilitating effect on the soldier's health and well-being. Out of 40,000 Belgian soldiers who died in the First World War, one-third of the deaths were due to illness and disease. Approximately 77,000 were wounded, over 120,000 were diagnosed with various illnesses and had to be admitted to hospitals. Front line trench life with its dangers and uncertainties inevitably weakened the Belgian soldiers morale, health and efficiency. However, despite their personal differences and opinions, the emotional strain or maybe because of them the Belgian soldiers fought and died courageously defending their country from an aggressive invader.

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Sources

Belgian Soldiers In The First World War by Tim Simoens – Royal Military Academy

Belgique-Croix du Feu Medailles 14-18 Web-Site ~ www.medailles1914-1918.fr

Wikipedia Croix du Feu Web-Site ~ www.wikipedia.org/fr

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