

ORDER OF LEOPOLD I – MILITARY DIVISION KNIGHT (BELGIUM)

History

The Order of Leopold – (Dutch: Leopoldsorde ~ French: Orde de Leopold I) – is one of three current Belgian national honorary orders of knighthood. It is the oldest and highest order of Belgium and is named in honour of its founder King Leopold I. It consists of a military, a maritime and a civil division. The maritime division is only awarded to personnel of the merchant navy and the military division to military personnel. The decoration was established on the 11th July 1832 and is awarded by Royal Order.



Order Of Leopold I – Military Division (Knight) With Crossed Swords ~ Belgium

When Belgium became independent of the Netherlands, there was an urgent need to create a national honour system that could serve as a diplomatic gift. The national congress provided this exclusive right to the sovereign, this military honour system was written in Article 76. The first King of the Belgians, Leopold I of Belgium, used his constitutional right in a larger way than foreseen: not only military merit, but every service in honour of the Kingdom. Two years after the independence, the young King officially founded the dynastic Order of Leopold. The king approved the colour and grades both civil and military, and the official motto L'Union fait la Force/Endracht maakt Macht.

In 1832 Felix de Merode had a design approved by the Chambers for military and civil merit. This system was adapted from other European countries. More specific, the Order of Leopold is based on the French honour tradition with five classes. On the 11th June 1832 the law was promulgated and the exact colours were defined; Article 2: “Le ruban sera ponceau moiré”. The devise was presented in the 3rd article: L’union fait la Force.

The Belgian court often used the Grand Cordon as a valuable diplomatic gift. However in the second half of the 19th century, the court also used it as a dynastic order to bestow on family members during major family celebration. The founder gave his French family Grand Cordons as wedding gifts. During weddings the Belgian court sent large numbers of crosses to the new family and its court. For the wedding of Rudolf and Stephanie the father of the bride sent twenty Grand Cordons to the Austrian Court. In return the Belgian court received decorations; these gifts were part of negotiations of the weddings. The order was bestowed by King Leopold II on Prince Karl Anton of Hohenzollern and Ernst Gunther, Duke of Schleswig-Holstein as a personal marriage gift. In 1878 the King named several diplomatic dignitaries Grand Cordon in honour of his silver wedding celebrations.

In 1900 the occasion of the wedding of Prince Albert was used to send fifteen Grand Cordons to the Bavarian Court. Among the recipients were Luitpold, Prince Regent of Bavaria and his two sons, Princes Ludwig (the future Ludwig III of Bavaria) and Arnulf, Duke Louis of Bavaria and the father of the bride Karl Theodore, Duke in Bavaria. The brother of the new Princess, Duke Ludwig Wilhelm was still a minor at the time of the wedding, and Minister de Favareau opposed this wedding gift for an adolescent. However, the young prince aged 14 received the gift by royal decree. People who fought in the Belgian revolution became members in great numbers. In 1838 the King lost his right to create members, this was from then on the responsibility of the foreign office.

In 1919 King Albert granted all Lieutenant-Generals of the Belgian Army the Grand Cordon in Brussels, and it was also bestowed on Major-Generals. There were also foreign recipients and one to the rare ladies in the order, Countess Renée de Merode. The order can be bestowed post-mortem and it can also be withdrawn from recipients. After the Second World War, the Order of Leopold was bestowed on the several officers of foreign militaries who had helped to liberate Belgium from the occupation of German forces.

The most illustrious was the Grand Cordons with Palms given by the King to Sir Winston Churchill and Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1945. Today membership can only be granted by decree of His Majesty King Philippe of Belgium and is reserved to the very most important Belgian

nationals and to some distinguished foreign persons who contributed in some way to the Belgian military, the Belgian civil society or the Belgian State. Annually, there are two major days when the King normally grants membership, on April 8th (King Albert I's birthday) and on November 15th (Day of the Belgian Dynasty).

During state visits, the Order of Leopold is the most important diplomatic gift of the state. In 2015 some protest was noted when King Philippe offered the Grand Cordon to President Erdogan of Turkey during his state visit in Belgium.

Classes

The Order of Leopold is issued in five classes:

- a) Grand Cordon ('Grand Cordon/Grootlint'), who wears the badge on a collar (chain) or sash on the right shoulder, plus the star on the left side of the chest.
- b) Grand Officer ('Grand Officer/Grootofficer'), who wears a badge on a necklace, plus a star on the left side of the chest (created on the 31st December 1838).
- c) Commander ('Commandeur'), who wear he badge on a necklace.
- d) Officer ('Officer'), who wears the badge on a ribbon with rosette on the left side of the chest.
- e) Knight ('Chevalier/Ridder'), who wear the badge on a ribbon on the left side of the chest.

All five classes come in three divisions (civil, military and maritime). No membership can be granted to a person before the age of 42, except in the military division. Only the Belgian king is entitled to chair the order and to be named Grand Master ('Grand Maître/Grootmeester').

Grand Cordon

The Grand Cordon title is reserved in general for other monarchs, heirs, foreign heads of state, general, cardinals, ministers of state, Prime Ministers and high diplomats. The Belgian Court has granted the Grand Cordon to all its family members, often considered a personal marriage gift of the king.

The Court has sent grand cordons to other dignitaries like ambassadors, cardinals, important artists and in exception high functionaries. As of the class of commander the decision must be approved by the Council of Ministers. Following the tradition, it is not allowed that a Belgian minister can accept this gift from the King during the period of public office.

Insignia

The collar of the order is in gold, with nine crowns, nine face-to-face monograms “LR” (for “Leopoldus Rex” for King Leopold I), and eighteen lions.

The badge of the order is white-enameled Maltese Cross, in silver for Knight class and in gold for higher classes, with a green-enameled wreath of laurel and oak leaves between the arms of the cross. The obverse central disc features a lion on a black enamel background; the reverse central disc has a face-to-face monogram “LR” (for King Leopold I); both discs are surrounded by a red enamel ring with the motto “Unity Is Strength” in French (L’union fait la force) and in Dutch (Eendracht maakt macht). The cross is topped by a crown, which might have crossed swords (military division) or anchors (maritime division) underneath it. The civil division has neither swords nor anchors.

The plaque of the order is an eight-pointed faceted silver star for the Grand Cordon class, and a silver faceted Maltese Cross with straight rays between the arms for the Grand Officer class. The central disc has a lion on a black enamel background, surrounded by a red enamel ring with the motto as on the badge. Golden crossed swords or anchors might be added behind the medallion, depending on division. The ribbon of the order is usually plain purple. However, if the order is awarded in special circumstances, the ribbon of the Officer and Knight classes show the following variations:

- a) Crossed swords are added to the ribbon when awarded in wartime (if the order was awarded during the Second World War or during the Korean War, a small silver bar is added to the ribbon mentioning the name of the war).
- b) The ribbon has a vertical gold border on both sides when awarded for a special act of valour at war.
- c) The ribbon has a central vertical gold stripe when awarded for an exceptionally meritorious act in wartime.
- d) A silver star is added to the ribbon when awarded for meritorious acts of charity.
- e) A gold star is added to the ribbon when the recipient has been mentioned in dispatches at the national level.
- f) Silver or gold are palms are added to the ribbon when awarded in wartime to military personnel.

Stars and borders or stripes can be awarded together, but these deviations are currently only rarely awarded. The colour of the ribbon has varied during the 19th century from red to purple.

Ribbon bars are worn on the semi-formal dress uniform. Since 1921, insignias of the order not awarded in wartime have to be purchased by the recipient.

Current Award Conditions Of Belgian National Orders

National orders are awarded by royal decree at fixed dates: 8th April (Birthday of King Albert I), 15th November (King's Feast), and in some cases on 21st July (Belgian national holiday) to reward meritorious services to the Kingdom of Belgium based on the career path and age of the recipient. A number of different regulations rule the award of national order for the various ministries. In addition the national orders may be awarded by the king for especially meritorious deeds. The royal decrees, except for conferrals on foreigners, are published in the Belgian Official Journal (Moniteur Belge).

The minister responsible for Foreign Affairs, currently the Federal Public Service (SPF/FOD) Foreign Affairs, administers the national orders and has a role of advisor in cases not fitting within a regulation. For the award of national orders for persons to which no regulation apply or has been adopted the number of awards is limited every year by decision of the Council of Ministers. The classes of the national orders are integrated in a combined hierarchy defined by law, whereby within one class the Order of Leopold is senior to the Order of the Crown, which is senior to the Order of Leopold II.

Except in some specific cases, one cannot be awarded a national order at a level below the highest that the recipient has already received (e.g. a commissioned officer who become a Commander of the Order of Leopold II because of meritorious personal service to the king before he became a Knight of the Order of Leopold may not be awarded the latter decoration or that of Officer of the Order of Leopold). Persons who are the subject of criminal proceedings will usually not be awarded a national order until they are declared not guilty.

Award Of The Order Of Leopold In The Military Division

The Order of Leopold in the Military Division (with crossed swords under the crown) is awarded to military personnel on the basis of their length of service, with the years of initial training counting for half and the first twelve years of service as member of the flying personnel counting double:

- a) Grand Officer: Awarded to a Lieutenant-General after holding that rank for about 2 years, for exceptional services to the Armed Forces;
- b) Commander: Awarded after 35 years of meritorious service to a general officer;
- c) Officer: Awarded after 28 years of meritorious service to a field officer;

- d) Knight: Awarded after 20 years of meritorious service to a commissioned officer within a minimum rank of Captain and after 40 years of meritorious service for a non-commissioned officer;

The years of service that are counted to calculate the eligibility of the award are not necessarily equal to the (calendar) years of duty. Additional bonuses can be earned for service in the air (an heritage coming from King Albert who wanted to bestow extra credit upon pilots in the First World War, who often faced great danger in a new and experimental military branch) or on the battlefield (during wartime) and years of service as a non-commissioned officer or as enlisted personnel count as half for the awards made to officers. For awards to military personnel, there is no minimum age requirement. The Order of Leopold is also sometimes awarded to military personnel not meeting the above requirements when they have performed especially meritorious services to the king.

Award Of The Order Of Leopold In The Maritime Division

The order in the Maritime Division (with crossed anchors under the crown) is only awarded to members of the merchant navy, as members of the Belgian Navy are awarded the order in the Military Division. The Order of Leopold is currently almost never awarded in the Maritime Division.

Award Conditions For Long Civilian Service

The Knight's Cross of the Order of Leopold may be awarded to workers in the private sector of contractual employees of the public sector after fifty-five years of professional activity. The Knight's Cross of the Order of Leopold is also awarded to the members of the national and provincial committees for the promotion of labour who have reached the age of 42 after a tenure of 20 years (national committee) or 30 years (provincial committee).

The Association Of The Order Of Leopold

Founded in 1932 on the occasion of the centenary of the creation of the Order of Leopold as "Société d'entraide des membres de l'Ordre de Léopold"/"Vereniging tot onderlinge hulp aan de leden van de Leopoldsorde" (Mutual aid society for the members of the Order of Leopold), the Association of the Order of Leopold (Vereniging van de Leopoldsorde in Dutch, Société de l'Ordre de Léopold in French) is a private association, that is headquartered in Brussels.

Sources

Wikipedia Web-Site ~ Belgian Military Decorations & Medals; Belgian Civic Decorations & Medals – www.wikipedia.com.uk

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