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Managing Your Collection

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A common activity amongst many members of the CSMMI is the searching for and acquiring items that enhance our interest in militaria and military history. As our interest grows often so does our collections. In this article, I will provide advice on how to create and maintain an inventory of your collection, and provide suggestions on how one may display and protect your pieces.

The Importance of an Inventory

Collections are meant to grow, and sometimes they grow past our ability to mentally catalogue our items. As a collector, how many times has a visitor been over to your house and with great excitement they ask for information on a particular piece that you are displaying only for you to forget the information – or worst yet the name of the piece? As a vendor, how many times have you had to look up the same information about an item you want to sell? Even more troublesome, how many of us have forgotten what they have paid for an item bought many years before. The answer is, we have all done this.

As militaria collectors we pride ourselves in remembering important historical information relevant to our hobby and our pieces, yet we sometimes overlook the importance of inventorying our items in a meaningful way. To create an inventory, we can use several programs from Microsoft office.

For a professional detailed inventory, a spreadsheet application, such as Excel, is the best. With it one can store information such as:

Name of Item, Date of Purchase, Price Paid, Vendor, Provenance, Characteristics, and any relevant Notes that might be of help. Unique identification details, such as listing medals with the recipient's service number, rank, name and unit and any device attached to the ribbon (i.e., Mention in Dispatches oak leaf device) can be recorded.

The spreadsheet can also include a column for items that are sold to help record items that leave your collection.

There are templates already available on the program that can easily be modified for your militaria information.

Below is an example of a Militaria Collection Inventory created using Microsoft Excel which illustrates how individual items may be listed. The beauty of using a spreadsheet

This example was created using the Microsoft PowerPoint application.

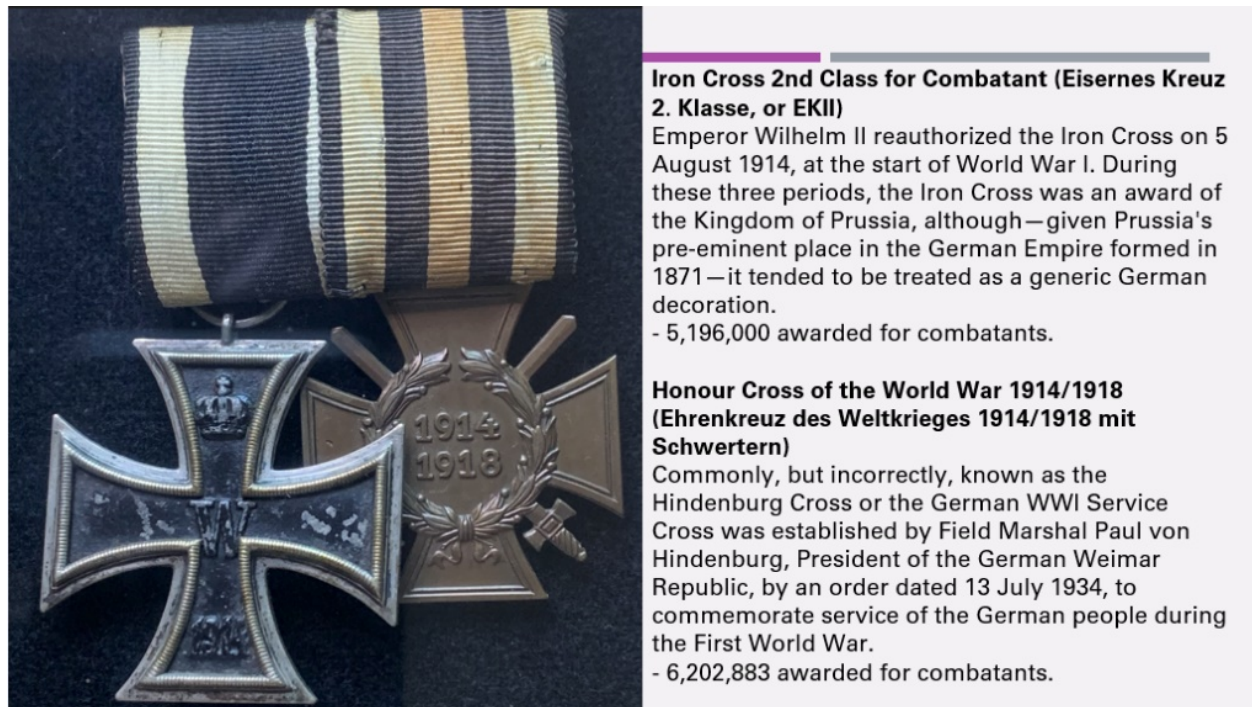


Figure 2: A sample picture of a display made with PowerPoint from author's personal collection inventory.

Writing a short historical note on a family item or a prized antique connects you to that piece's history while aiding in preserving it. Personally, cataloging my items has also given me a good opportunity to expand on the research that I conduct, making it possible to go back and add points of interest and other notes through the years as this information becomes available. This can create some amazing stories attached to our items as we research its history. Recently, I have been using *Ancestry.com* to significant effect in finding records, as well as personal portraits that add to the story.

Correct inventorying and cataloguing of a collection is not only useful for collectors, but becomes crucial for loved ones should they become responsible for our collections or have to deal with the liquidation of our estates. We would not want those hours of research go to waste should one of our loved ones take over management of our collection. Similarly, we would want them to maximize the sale of the collection. The more detail that we put into our records, the more useful it can become.

The effort we spend on our inventory is also a duty that our artifacts deserve, and this is tied to our responsibilities as guardians of these items for future generations. We must remember that we are temporary keepers of these pieces and while we appreciate and

study our items, we should also be looking towards the future that these pieces might have and how we can contribute to the historical memory of any item.

This information is important when it comes to having your collection insured. The data, values, and the pictures you have collected overtime will make this an easier task.

Displaying Your Collection

We spend so much of our time and money on our collections that it only makes sense to put an equal amount of effort into our displays. How many of us have been invited to see someone's collection only to be greeted by all sorts of loose bits and ends without any explanation or organization. Why spend the time and effort to buy a collectable item for it to just sit away in a drawer or box unappreciated and unprotected? Even the smallest of collections can reach a greater degree of worth and beauty if properly displayed.

There are several ways of displaying your collection including glass cabinets, wall mounted displays, shadow boxes, or simple glass frames. A nice frame or Rikers tray filled with labelled and organized items can make the difference between a collection and a hoard.

To avoid militaria aficionados, the correct placement according to order of precedence and even lineage adds another level of professionalism and intricacy to displaying militaria accurately. We must take care to make sure that the correct face of the medal or item is displayed and that it has its proper accompanying ribbon and attachments. I have been guilty of placing medals with the wrong ribbon in the past – and with bars, scrolls, and palms - this can get even more complicated.

The composition of your display can aid in telling a story clearly. We must imagine our display as a vessel to tell a story, educate someone, and pay respects to the sacrifices endured by the item's earlier owners. It is for this reason that we back our collection with knowledge.

There are militaria catalogues, references, and texts which give a collector inside knowledge about the many items one could collect in this hobby and give information on the correct order of precedence when mounting a display. A good source is *The Independent Price and Collectors Handbook* by Token Publishing, or the *Medal Yearbook*. There are also a number of online sites and communities that will aid with identification, verifications and valuations.

The bottom line in placing your items in any type of display is both for presentation and for protection. Glass displays protect our delicate items from dust and from unwanted touch while special types of glass with ultraviolet light inhibitors can protect fabrics from the effects of sunlight. Several levels of elegance and protection can be achieved with different types of display cases.

Displaying documents can be challenging. We must be careful of light fading our articles. It is for this reason that I rotate document displays and leave more fragile ones in special folders. These prevent folding and allow for the documents to remain flat.

Protecting Your Collection

As collectors, we are but guardians of our items until they are passed off to other caring hands. We need to protect those pieces that are in our collections against mishandling and the ravages of time. Measures must be taken to protect against fading, discoloration, drying of materials, insect infestations, and inappropriate handling.

It is especially important to choose the correct placement of our displays. Sunlight or strong light is one of the biggest enemies in our hobby. Prior to displaying an artifact or collection, we must ensure the sun or excessive intense light does not damage our items. These should never be in direct sunlight.



Figure 3: A selection of Canadian militaria protected in a glass display cabinet.

Credit: Juan José Besteiro

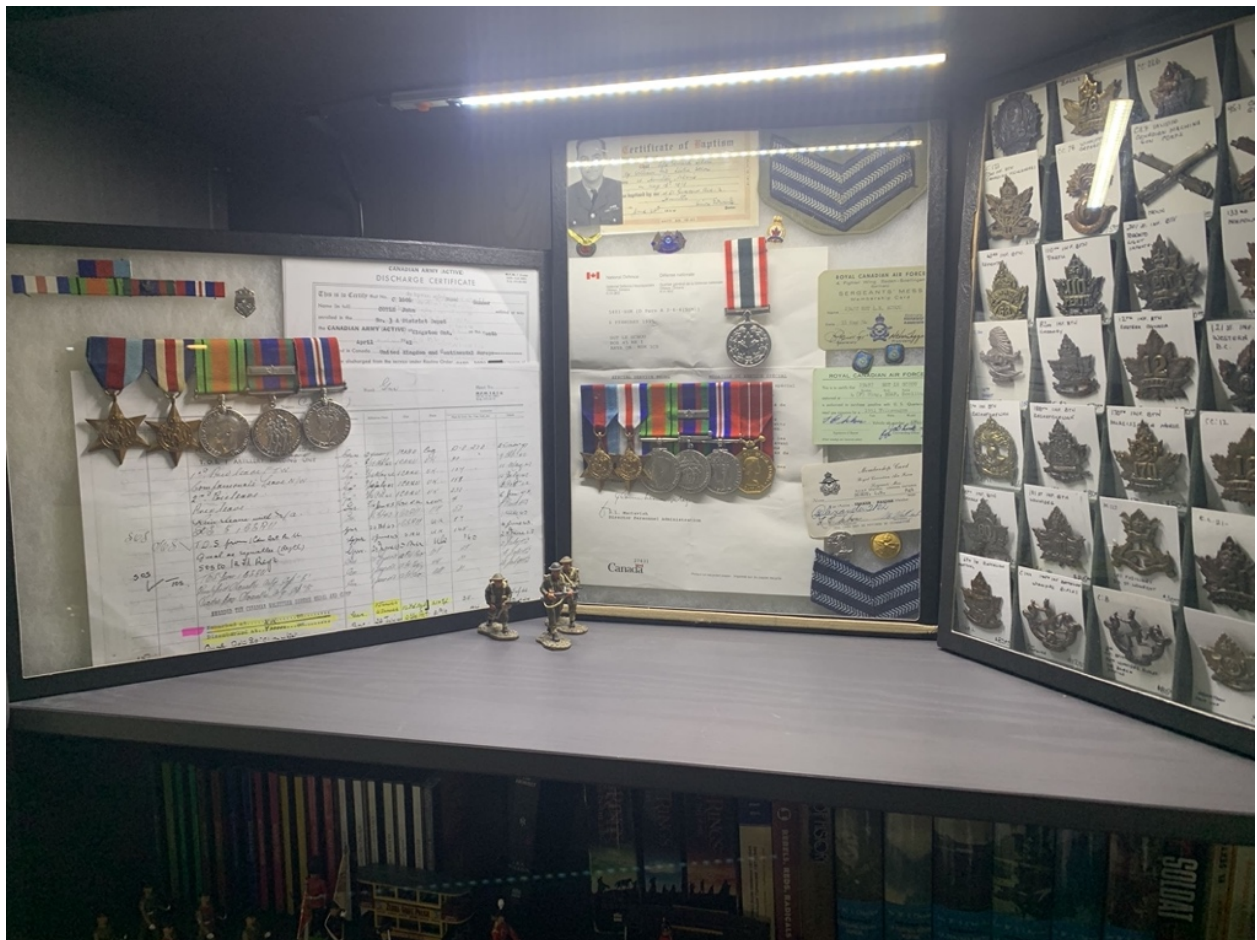
Fabric uniforms or other antique cloth items should be displayed on a rotational basis. That is no more than six months displayed in natural light before being removed and stored in darkness for another six months. This technique, used by museums around the world, extends the life and colours of fabric enormously.

Metals used in gun barrels, swords, medals, and plaques must be protected from human touch, as the oils in our skin causes oxidation. A good pair of cotton gloves allows handling these items while protecting them from corrosion and wear.

The Canadian Conservation institute has created useful guides on how to properly clean and maintain medals and metallic objects. These guides are found on their website under:

[Caring for metal objects - Preventive conservation guidelines for collections - Canada.ca](https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/preventive-conservation/guidelines-collections/metal-objects.html) - <https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/preventive-conservation/guidelines-collections/metal-objects.html>.

The artificial lights we use to illuminate our displays may also be detrimental to artifacts. Modern lights may emit heat that can dry leather, fabrics, and plastics. Therefore, it is important that we consider the heat being emitted and isolate vulnerable items from the light source.



*Figure 4: Collection protected from dust and the elements behind glass cases.
Credit: Juan José Besteiro*

Water is a big hazard to any surface. Similarly, water moisture or high humidity can be equally problematic. The location for storing or displaying your collectibles should minimize potential damage from water and humidity.

Just as we want to protect our collections from the ravages of time, it is equally important that we are not overly eager in our quest to clean a particular item. We could damage it or even change it to a less appealing form by making it look too new. It is because of these issues with cleaning that we must come to realize that some collectors would prefer to keep their pieces in as much of an “as is” condition as possible. Having said this, it is important to remove surface dirt and soil.

Patina is something that many collectors look for when collecting badges and medals. We risk removing this layer, formed over time, if we are careless in our cleaning. The chemicals and liquids we use in trying to shine our metal items could very well damage the surface. Appearance also applies to plating. Done to add a layer of shine to a medal, these medals have now become less desirable than ones with their original finish.

In conclusion, let’s review what we have learned and put it to use. There is no time like the present to start this never-ending process. Share the knowledge of our items with family members, let them know their historical and financial value. Failing to do this, risks future generations giving up items with family history or worse yet, throwing them in the trash. The importance of an inventory, displaying your collection, and protecting your collection are all important pillars in keeping an active collection with foresight into the future.

An inventory template in Excel format is available for download on the CSMMI website under the resources section. See <https://csmmi.com/managing-your-collection/>.

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