



Don't put soldiers' sacrifices on sale

Greg Roberts

A SYDNEY businessman who has forgone up to \$1 million to keep two Victoria Crosses in public hands has been joined by the RSL and Kerry Stokes in calling for federal restrictions on the sale of war medals.

Neil Jenman paid \$105,000 in 1998 and \$185,000 in 1999 at auctions in London for medals awarded to Australians Lieutenant Colonel Blair Anderson Wark and Private Robert Matthew Beatham for services in Europe in World War I.

The medals will be displayed by the Queensland Museum on loan from the United Service Club Queensland, which received them from Mr Jenman, whose grandfather was in the first landing at Gallipoli.

The value of war medals in Australia has soared in recent years as public

empathy with war veterans has grown.

In November, a VC awarded to Lance Corporal Bernard Gordon sold at auction for \$480,000. In July, a world record for war medal sales was set when Mr Stokes, the Seven Network boss, paid \$1.2 million for the VC of Captain Alfred Shout which he gave to the Australian War Memorial.

Mr Jenman, a former real estate agent who became a consumer advocate, said the Government should ban the sale of medals for profit.

"A VC was never meant to be a monetary gift to the soldier or to his family," he said. "It should be a national treasure, not sold for profit."

Mr Stokes said he did not favour the auction sales of medals.

"My grandfather was an Anzac at Gallipoli, and I think it's dreadful that VCs come up for sale, so I buy them so they can be never sold again," he said. "You cannot put a value on valour

and sacrifice."

But Mr Stokes said the sale of a VC might secure the financial future of a war hero's family. This should be allowed if the medal is retained in Australia, as the legislation requires.

RSL national president Bill Crews, who supports a ban on the sale of war medals for profit, said the ban should not apply retrospectively to the families of recipients. Major General Crews cited Vietnam War veteran Keith Payne, who had stated his intention to sell his VC to help his family. "I would not want someone in that position to be denied that opportunity," he said.

Minister for Veterans Affairs Bruce Billson said he disapproved of third-party profiteering by medal dealers. However, he was not inclined to limit the options available to those who were awarded VCs, or their families.



Not for profit: Neil Jenman with his mother Ruth, handing over two World War I Victoria Crosses to the Queensland Museum

Picture: Lyndon Mechielsen