

# St. Joan of Arc: Soldier's medal is a prayer in metal

by Pat Benincasa

*Editor's note: A year ago, Macalester-Groveland artist and teacher Pat Benincasa created a medal that depicted the 15th-century French warrior, St. Joan of Arc. Her intent was to raise the money necessary to produce the medals and provide them free of charge to U.S. military personnel overseas.*

When the war in Afghanistan and Iraq began, I didn't know anyone in the military, and I cannot explain my visceral response to our soldiers lacking something as basic as proper body armor. What I can explain is how in the short time since I created the St. Joan of Arc scroll medals, I have fared in the unfamiliar territory of military expressions. I have learned about Army rank and protocol and about the special closeness of military families—or as much as a nonmilitary person can.

The e-mails have been the biggest surprise. I have heard from soldiers, Navy nurses, Army brass, chaplains and medics telling me what the St. Joan of Arc medal means to them and how good it feels to be remembered. They ask for medals not just for themselves, but for their buddies in their

units, and they sometimes include their photos.

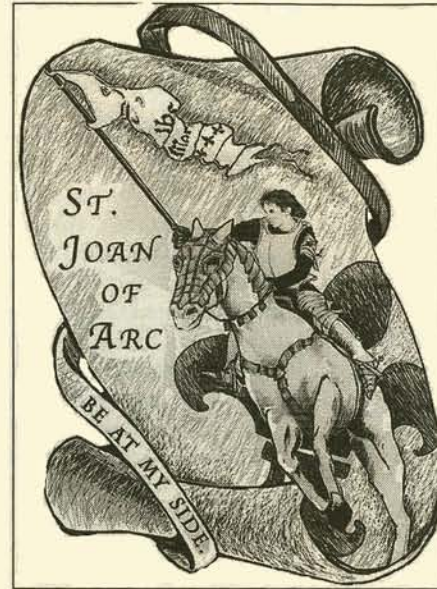
Other surprises in this year-long odyssey have included a note of thanks from the headquarters of the Command Chaplain in Iraq and a certificate from the 1/34th Brigade Combat Team “in appreciation for the support given to soldiers.”

A Catholic priest in Philadelphia, while saying a Memorial Day Mass, on the spur of the moment decided to talk about the St. Joan of Arc medals. He then called to tell me that a check was in the mail for the medals from money that was collected from parishioners.

The St. Joan of Arc medal is now in the Boston Public Library's Joan of Arc Collection, the largest collection in the world of Joan of Arc objects.

As of May 2007, I have sent out more than 3,400 medals to our troops overseas, to the St. Cloud Veterans Center, to military families all over the United States and to other people who feel a connection to St. Joan of Arc or feel a need for her intercession.

Last week, I received an e-mail order from a woman in Maplewood for 10 medals. In the course of our correspondence, the woman wrote that she had friends and co-workers who were going through life-threatening illnesses and she thought the



A drawing of the St. Joan of Arc Medal.

medals would help them. “The message of strength and courage is for everyone,” she wrote. “I gave one to my boss who was diagnosed with ALS.... The other ones are for friends who are battling cancer. Jeanne d’Arc can intercede for all of us.”

Why did I send my art off to a war that I do not support? First, I respect and admire our military men and women—and their families—for their brave service. These

young men and women are focused, dedicated and committed to their duty. In my own way, I wanted to design an original work of art for them to wear with their dog tags—as a symbol of gratitude and admiration for all that they do.

St. Joan of Arc was a warrior with heart and a purpose, and she appeals to those of all faiths and no faith. I think of the St. Joan of Arc medal as being a prayer in metal—physical and tangible, like God’s grace. Still, I was surprised that the medal has become a conduit for people to connect spiritually with our troops.

In addition to sending medals to our soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, we have yet another urgent front—our wounded soldiers who are fighting for their lives in VA centers around the country. They too need the spirit of St. Joan of Arc. My aim is to send the medals to Walter Reed, Bethesda, the VA Medical Center in Minneapolis and any other veterans center that wants them. I need help getting contact information for these places. If you can help, please contact me at [pbenincasa1@mac.com](mailto:pbenincasa1@mac.com) or through my Web site at [www.patbenincasa-art.com](http://www.patbenincasa-art.com).

The St. Joan of Arc medals are inscribed with the saying, “Be at my side,” in hopes that military men and women, and anyone else in need of St. Joan of Arc, will know that they are not alone.