

## Why Challenge Coins Matter

**There are several stories detailing the origins of the challenge coin.**

The Roman Empire rewarded soldiers by presenting them with coins to recognize their achievements.<sup>[3]</sup>

Prior to actual Challenge Coins being minted, soldiers who acted bravely in battle would be rewarded by comrades or superiors by buying that individual a drink. They would give that soldier a coin to buy the drink but more commonly, they would make a spectacle by slapping it down loudly on the bar or presenting them a coin in an informal group setting. Receiving a coin from an officer was generally a considerably more valuable coin and rarely presented.

Challenge coins were also known as "Portrait Medals" during the Renaissance and were often used to commemorate specific events involving royalty, nobility, or other types of well-to-do individuals. The medals would be given as gifts or awards, and people also exchanged them with friends and associates. The most common format was for one side to depict the patron while the other showed something that represented that individual's family, house, lineage, and/or seal.<sup>[4]</sup>

**According to the most common story, challenge coins originated during World War I.**<sup>[5][6]</sup>

Before the entry of the United States into the war in 1917 American volunteers from all parts of the country filled the newly formed flying squadrons. Some were wealthy scions attending colleges such as Yale and Harvard who quit in mid-term to join the war.<sup>[7][8][9]</sup>

In one squadron, a wealthy lieutenant ordered medallions struck in solid bronze and presented them to his unit. One young pilot placed the medallion in a small leather pouch that he wore about his neck. Shortly after acquiring the medallion, the pilot's aircraft was severely damaged by ground fire. He was forced to land behind enemy lines and was immediately captured by a German patrol.<sup>[10]</sup> In order to discourage his escape, the Germans took all of his personal identification except for the small leather pouch around his neck. In the meantime, he was taken to a small French town near the front. Taking advantage of a bombardment that night, he escaped. However, he was without personal identification. He succeeded in avoiding German patrols by donning civilian attire and reached the front lines. With great difficulty, he crossed no-man's land. Eventually, he stumbled onto a French outpost. Saboteurs had plagued the French in the sector. They sometimes masqueraded as civilians and wore civilian clothes. Not recognizing the young pilot's American accent, the French thought him to be a saboteur and made ready to execute him. He had no identification to prove his allegiance, but he did have his leather pouch containing the medallion. He showed the medallion to his would-be executioners and one of his French captors recognized the squadron insignia on the medallion. They delayed his execution long enough for him to confirm his identity. Instead of shooting him they gave him a bottle of wine.<sup>[3][7][8][11][9]</sup>

Back at his squadron, **it became tradition to ensure that all members carried their medallion or coin at all times.**<sup>[3]</sup> This was accomplished through challenge in the following manner: a challenger would ask to see the medallion, if the challenged could not produce a medallion, they were required to buy a drink of choice for the member who challenged them. If the challenged member produced a medallion, then the challenging member was required to pay for the drink. This tradition continued throughout the war and for many years after the war while surviving members of the squadron were still alive.<sup>[8][11][9]</sup>

According to another story, challenge coins date back to [World War II](#) and were first used by Office of Strategic Service personnel who were deployed in Nazi held France. Similarly, Jim Harrington proposed a Jolly sixpence club amongst the junior officers of the 107th Infantry.<sup>[3]</sup> The coins were simply a local coin used as a "bona fides" during a personal meeting to help verify a person's identity. There would be specific aspects such as type of coin, date of the coin, etc. that were examined by each party. This helped prevent infiltration into the meeting by a spy who would have to have advance knowledge of the meeting time and place as well as what coin was to be presented, amongst other signals, as bona fides.

While a number of legends place the advent of challenge coins in the post-[Korean Conflict](#) era (some as late as the [Vietnam War](#)), or even later, Colonel William "Buffalo Bill" Quinn had coins made for those who served in his 17th Infantry Regiment during 1950 and 1951.

Colonel Verne Green, commander of the 10th Special Forces Group-A, embraced the idea. He had a special coin struck with the unit's badge and motto in 1969. Until the 1980s, his unit was the only unit with an active challenge coin tradition.<sup>[12][13][14]</sup>

There is another story about an American soldier scheduled to rendezvous with Philippine guerrillas during WWII. As the story goes, he carried a Philippine solid silver coin that was stamped on one side with the unit insignia. The coin was used to verify, to the guerrillas, that the soldier was their valid contact for the mission against the Japanese.

The challenge coin tradition has spread to other military units, in all branches of service, and even to non-military organizations as well as the [United States Congress](#), which produces challenge coins for members of Congress to give to constituents. Today, challenge coins are given to members upon joining an organization, as an award to improve morale, and sold to commemorate special occasions or as fundraisers. In the Air Force, military training instructors award an [airman's coin](#) to new enlisted personnel upon completion of their [United States Air Force Basic Military Training](#) and to new officers upon completion of the [Air Force Officer Training School](#).<sup>[11][15]</sup>