

History of the Challenge Coin

The history of military challenge coins is widely debated, and their origin is rooted in the history of civilizations from the Romans to the American colonials. But there's no doubt that military challenge coins are a big part of military culture and increasingly so in the civilian world. Challenge coins are a great way to boost morale, identify allegiance and are a terrific way to extend one's appreciation by saying "thank you" with coin in hand and a firm handshake. Moreover, challenge coins—specifically in military units—demonstrate "proof of membership" and affiliation with a specific unit or element extending esprit de corps and morale in its proud members. Then, there is the time-honored tradition of slamming your unit challenge coin down in bars to see who has theirs. He who is last or without buys the first round. The traditions of unit challenge coins date back to the World Wars, but their true origin is steeped in myths and legends. Regardless, challenge coins are fun to give, receive and display.

Today, we'll explore the history of military challenge coins, examine their possible origins and explain how military challenge coins have made their way into the White House, the United States Congress and the highest levels of the Pentagon, as senior government leaders have pressed their own challenge coins to present to well-deserving recipients. While the specific origin of military challenge coins may never be known, we can certainly trace its history back to the first stamped coinage of the Roman Empire and its legionnaires.



The Romans Built this Place

During ancient times, kings and emperors shaped precious metals with their image as currency for the exchange of goods and services. The Roman Emperor Maximus was one such leader who also had legionaries who fought for Rome. The legionnaire was not always a Roman citizen, but often mercenaries who fought for payment of their professional skills. They were often rewarded handsomely by the emperors of Rome for their exploits in battle, as it was in the best interest of the emperor to keep his military force well financed. The payment of legionnaires in pressed, metal coins is likely the first recorded military challenge coin in the history of warfare and, if not, it's a good place to begin. The Romans were among the first to stamp precious metals into coins, and given their veracity of large-scale military forces, why not bestow upon the Romans the mythological origin of challenge coins.



The Great Wars of the World

One particular story dates military challenge coins back to World War I (1914-1918) and a wealthy military officer who had bronze medallions struck with his flying squadron insignia stamped on them. He presented the coins to each member of the squadron before they departed

on missions over Europe. One day, a pilot was shot down over Germany and later captured by German soldiers and held captive as a prisoner of war. He was stripped of all personal belongings and identification by the Germans and only had his personal clothing and a small leather pouch that contained a squadron coin inside. The pilot eventually escaped his German captors and made his way back to France. The French, who retained him, thought he was a spy. Upon discovery of the squadron medallion, he was recognized as an American and later returned to his unit. The coin saved his life and earned him the recognition as an American Soldier.



Clandestine Operations in the Vietnam War

The United States of America's entrance into the Vietnam War (1956-1975) first consisted of U.S. special operations forces working with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) conducting clandestine operations against the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong. The nature of the military clandestine mission was such that the actions of many American special operations Soldiers were not recognized overtly by the United States Army with medals and ribbons. The 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne) participated in many of these clandestine missions over the years in Southeast Asia with little to no fanfare.

As legend has it, the Commander and Sergeant Major of the 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne), in order to properly recognize their men, designed a military challenge coin to present to them. On the front was the unit's name, a beret flash with the numeral one in the top right and a sword pointing up, signifying the unit was ready for combat, and an eagle on top spreading its wings. On the reverse side, was the Special Forces motto "De Oppresso Liber," the traditional green beret, a bayonet and scroll and a blank space to enumerate the coin for prosperity. The command kept a detailed registry to record the name, date and mission of each recipient. The 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne) coin was a way for the command to formally recognize their men and their accomplishments when formal acknowledgment by the Army was openly frowned upon.



The story of the 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne) presenting coins to men in secrecy deep in the jungles of Southwest Asia is a story of legendary proportions. The dark, shadowy nature of the special operations forces coupled with the CIA only adds to the mythological nature regarding the historical origins of military challenge coins.

Today, the 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne) retains the original design it had during the Vietnam War, and it continues to conduct missions throughout Asia as part of its heritage. The coin is legendary, as its own history within special operations lore only adds mythological proportions as to the true origins of military challenge coins. The tradition continues then and now.

The 'Coin Check'



Today, a popular tradition at unit social functions, formal events and in local bars is the “coin check.” The popular coin check dates back to the Vietnam War and the bars run by military service members at the forward operating bases (FOB) and combat outpost (COB). As the story goes, military service members were to present enemy bullets or their unit challenge coin to gain entrance into the bar.

The tradition continues today when someone yells out “coin check” and then slaps their coin onto the bar and all military members—active duty and veterans—are to respond in kind by placing their coin on the bar. The last one to present their coin or the one who shamefully is without theirs has to buy the round of alcoholic drinks for the group. Oftentimes, there are strong verbal arguments initially regarding whose coin is more senior to the other coins. The older the coin, the more senior. But also, the more senior in rank the person’s coin is, based on rank of the presenter, wins out in the end.

The coin check is a great icebreaker and gets folks talking about their personal experiences. It brings out the pride many of our service members feel regarding their service during a specific era, a specific branch and a specific mission they participated in. It starts the stories flowing at the bar that last well into the late evening and early morning hours.

History of the Coin in the RKMC

There are existing two types of coins.

1. The coin that is given at rally’s, events or chapter parties. It’s often called a challenge coin but is in fact a collector coin or event coin.
2. The challenge coin.

The tradition of the RKMC challenge coin is also known in our club. Officers from the International Board, such as members have their own coins. They are presented by you, if you have done something that in the eyes of the Coin presenter was special and wide over his duty’s.

How the rules and the meaning of the coin are, will be explained by the person who presents it to you.



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