

Origin of the Challenge Coin

There are a number of war time stories that reference the origin of challenge coins. One of the most widely shared story is the one below:

According to the most common story, challenge coins originated during World War I. 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.

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. 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.

Back at his squadron, it became tradition to ensure that all members carried their medallion or coin at all times. 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.

The Challenge

The challenge, which can be made at any time, begins with the challenger drawing his/her coin, and slapping or placing the coin on the table or bar. In noisy environments, continuously rapping the challenge coin on a surface may initiate the challenge. (Accidentally dropping a challenge coin is considered to be a deliberate challenge to all present.) Everyone being challenged must immediately produce the coin for their organization and anyone failing to do so must buy a round of drinks for the challenger and everyone else who has their challenge coin. However, should everyone challenged be able to produce their coin, the challenger must buy a round of drinks for the group. While most holders of challenge coins usually carry them in their pockets or in some other readily accessible place on their persons, most versions of the rules permit a challenged person "a step and a reach" or if an individual has an extra coin to pass it off to the person closest to them. Coins on belt buckles or key chains are not acceptable for meeting a challenge. However, a coin worn around the neck is acceptable for meeting a coin challenge.

Giving a Challenge Coin

Traditionally, the presentation of a challenge coin to another person is done by passing the challenge coin during a handshake as a sign of friendship and camaraderie.