

AN  
UNOFFICIAL  
ANECDOTAL  
HISTORY  
OF  
CHALLENGE  
COINS

Collected personal accounts  
compiled and edited by Sandra Tayler  
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# Unofficial Anecdotal History of Challenge Coins

## Introduction, by Howard Tayler

“It is a tree.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. It is a rope.”

“You are both wrong. It is a spear, and I will fight anyone who says otherwise.”

The parable of the blind men and the elephant, which originated somewhere in India, comes to us through hundreds of years of retellings. It has been cited in numerous disciplines, and I can’t think of any elephantine application more apt than an examination of challenge coin tradition.

At one point during a discussion on challenge coins a very irate man said to me “Well I guess your research trumps my actual military experience.”

Well, no. I can’t tell somebody holding the elephant’s tusk that what they’re holding does NOT feel like a spear. I’ve never served in the military, so it’s fair to say that I’ve never touched any part of the elephant. What I have done, however, is listened carefully to lots of people who have, and I learned very quickly that there is an elephant in the room.

The metaphors are getting a bit mixed here.

“**Challenge coins are pieces of metal shaped like coins...**” and I’m already half wrong. Not all of them are shaped like coins. I haven’t encountered any non-metallic ones, but my experience is limited.

“... **issued as recognition for exceptional service, as tokens of unit membership, or as commemorations of deployment.**” That’s probably mostly right, but I’m pretty sure I can start an argument by stating that as a fact in a room full of active duty personnel.

For a brief time I felt like something authoritative should exist, something that laid down hard-and-fast rules, so that this confusion could be laid to rest. I found some authoritatively-worded documents, but their codification of challenge coin tradition was narrow to the point of exclusion, which is another way of saying “it is a spear, and I will fight anyone who says otherwise.”

In early 2015 we, the human race, were given an unusual gift. It was a photograph of a dress which, thanks to a hitherto unseen combination of pixels, was perceived so differently by different people

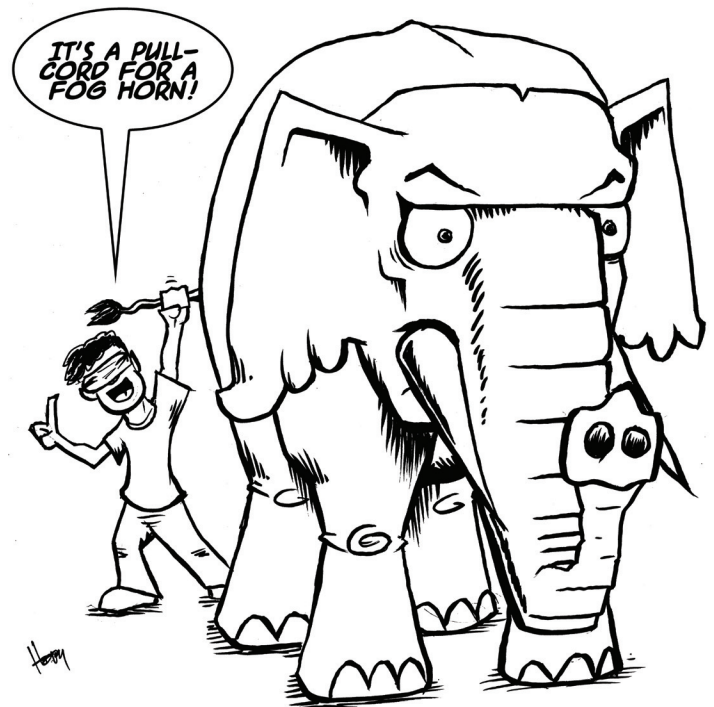
that fights broke out. The actual pixel colors were a cerulean blue and a shimmering brown, but some people saw white and gold while others saw blue and black. A few saw pale blue and brown, and many people (myself included) saw all three.



What, then, was the gift? It was a new kind of elephant. It was a concrete example of a simple, yet often offensive truth of human existence: We do not all see the same things.

If you want to know a thing for yourself, you can examine it. If you want to truly understand the thing, you must experience it, and listen to others who have experienced it differently.

In 2013 we put out a call for stories about challenge coins. We wanted personal stories—not friend-of-a-friend retellings—having to do with challenge coins in any setting. The storytellers who answered our call have come from a variety of backgrounds, and they have all seen different things.

This document is not the whole elephant, but it is also much more elephant than the average person gets a chance to see.





I joined the US Air Force in 1991 to help kick Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait. I served a term on active duty and then was in the air force reserve until 1998.


I do not know how many times in those eight years I heard the words challenge and coin, but I can tell you how many times I heard them used together in that order with no words in between: zero. Same goes for seeing that phrase in print. I admit, this does not prove that challenge coins did not exist in the air force at that time. Maybe they did but were top secret. My clearance only went up to secret.

After some time in the private sector I became a contractor for the Department of Defense in about 2004. I think it was a couple of years after that I first actually encountered these coins, and so it was as something a civilian boss gave to civilian workers in a mostly civilian context. I eventually found out that more recent veterans were getting them for graduating basic training.

So wherever these things came from, they seem to have gone from nonexistent to ubiquitous in a few years. Or maybe they were around a long time and just known to a few (Special Forces? Marines? Army infantry? Officers only?) and then the idea caught on suddenly and everyone wanted them. Or, and I suspect this may be it, it's an example of a revival of a long-lapsed tradition.

I admit to being curious. I'm due for an appointment at the VA hospital day after tomorrow. Maybe I'll strike up a conversation with one of the old vets and ask them if they ever heard of the damn things.

Lucius Alexander  
USAF & USAFR  
1991-1998  
Senior Airman, Inventory Specialist  
2004-



“On one base, more than forty years ago, there was a place we could go ‘n get a drink. Anyone could go, all ranks which wasn’t the way most places did it, but we were a pretty tight group. Had a coin club there. After your first mission ‘ya could buy in for the “price of the coin” as we called it, rounded up to \$20. You also had ‘ta drop a empty casing from a round in the ammo box on the bar.

The coin had ‘yer name and a serial number stamped inside a bell on one side and the unit patch on the other.

The coin blanks were local, simple brass melted down from casings we gave the guy ta make the blanks, and

we didn’t have any fancy stuff like some do nowadays. The bar had two blanks to strike the coin in front of everyone,

and everyone in the club would take the club’s five-pound sledge hammer and give the blanks a strike before the coin was given to the new guy. The name and the number were punched in by hand, and the rim was notched. The coin was dropped in a shot glass, and the guy got the shot on the house.

The club had a penalty bell. Rang it any time someone made a foul. Anyone who fouled the club rules had to drop a twenty in the penalty box, and when the box was full, we’d have a party until the money ran out. It was a ammo box (not the same one as the box for the rounds), so it could hold plenty. Penalty rules were pretty typical for bars: the times to or not to wear a hat, not giving a greeting when walking in—that sorta thing.

Any time a guy came back, he would drop a casing in the ammo box on the bar and ring the bell. Everyone pulled out their coin (not having yers was a penalty and you didn't get a drink), and the lowest number bought a drink for the guy, and the guy bought a drink for the highest number. If a couple guys came in at the same time, it was a couple a the lowest and highest numbers bought and got drinks. Nobody had to pay for more than one. The guy with the lowest number would ceremonially take the guy's coin and notch the rim with the sledge and a knife that was kept on the wall. Actually, it was stuck in the wall. The knife was supposedly from the first guy that started the club, but that was before my time.

Any time someone didn't come back, we put his coin on the wall and we all had a drink out of the ammo can. His buddies would try to bring back his coin and a round, but sometimes ya just couldn't. We made a replacement for those guys.

Ya could tell those 'cause they only had a name—no number or notches.

I do have one other coin that means more ta me, but the club coin has better memories than any others I got.

Sergeant Mann  
Master Sergeant  
1956-1980



I got my first challenge coin in 1985. I had just graduated from the US Air Force Electronic Warfare School, at Mather Air Force Base, California. All graduates are inducted into the Association of Old Crows, the EW professional organization, and given a certificate and a coin. The coin was lost years ago, but then, I haven't been on a flight line or at an officers' club bar since 1989.

Looking into their history, the coins have been out in their current incarnation since 1964; although the back of the coin has changed several times since then, the front remains the same.



Above is an image of the current coin. My old one had five interlocking circles on the back with images of the various "crows": air force, army, marine corps, navy air, and navy surface.

Digging into history even more, it turns out the coins got started around 1953 but didn't become a real tradition until the 1964 rollout. I'm attaching a 1999 newsletter with the history of the coin. Not sure if it's the oldest challenge coin, but it's pushing sixty this year . . .

Keith A. Glass  
Captain  
USAFR  
1984-1989

My first Challenge Coin that I ever received was what is known as a 'Been There' coin. You got the coin because you were there, and in this case, boy was I ever there!

We were on a training mission in Totskoye, Russia, in 1994, a few years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. I was with Charlie Company, the first company of the Fifteenth Infantry (Mechanized), and we were training with elements of the Russian army in perpetration for peacekeeping operations in Bosnia. It was called Peacekeeper 94.

We spent a grand total of six days there: five days of training and one day of picnicking. I was a brand-new private and, at the time, a monumental screwup. But I was having loads of fun! It was then that I really learned that I had a gift for picking up languages.

But back to the coin. On the last day, the two-star general (whose name I can't remember) was handing out coins to the troops. Each was serial numbered and was handed out with a specially made wristwatch from the Russian government. (The watch was a mechanical windup).

When they held the formation to give them out, I was well beyond three sheets to the wind, besides which I had traded away almost everything I had (including my rank tabs) for stuff like a Russian uniform belt and other sundry items.

So there I was, a private second class, in front of a two-star general, drunk as a skunk, with no rank on my collar and wearing a Russian belt. But he still gave me the coin . . . albeit with a sidelong look to my squad leader.

Needless to say, I got smoked to within an inch of my life by two corporals, who proceeded with malice aforethought to sweat every last drop of alcohol out of my system. It really sucked . . .

But it was worth every minute!


James Copley  
Staff Sergeant  
US Army  
20 years

## COIN CHECK!

So I got my first challenge coin in Air Force ROTC when I was a freshman. My squadron leader presented it to me as something of a service award for having been willing to go and buy something for a project the squadron was working on. It didn't seem like much to me, but that coin still has great value to me, and I still carry it. So at the end of that semester I went home for the break, and the day I flew home as I was going to bed I got a phone call from my squadron leader. He said the normal stuff you'd expect, "Great semester" and all that, and then he told me to listen. Suddenly there was an odd noise that I couldn't place coming from his end. He asked me if I recognized it, and I didn't, so he did it again. I told him that it sounded like something metallic, and suddenly I realized he was trying to challenge me over the phone! Sadly for him, I had my coin within reach, even though it wasn't in my pocket as it usually was. I haven't seen him since then, but he still owes me two drinks for those two challenges. Maybe someday I'll actually collect.

Scott Slack  
USAF





Members of my unit had a general attitude of indifference toward challenge coins. Something like “Dude, I just got coined by the division commander.” was met with “Yeah, that and a buck twenty five will get you a Coke.”

Some officers would usually give them as a reward for doing a good job or being in their presence in garrison or a combat zone (like candy). I received one from the new brigade commander for participating in his change of command ceremony and another for rigging a pulley system to lift sandbags up a floor when we were fortifying a patrol base on Christmas Day. I received yet another from my gunner when he got one in sector and didn't want to have to carry it around. We never did seriously challenge one another. Such illustrates the apathy. We knew we were the best, we knew what unit we were in, and that was that. We saw them as great for a memento or conversation piece, but not much else; most of us just threw them in a drawer. As an example why: the squadron commander's (battalion commander to everyone else) coin weighed 1/10 of a kilogram and was 90 × 40 × 4 mm (heavy and oddly shaped!), and the officer in question wasn't even very popular before the coin was produced. Nobody wanted to carry theirs around.

It must be pointed out that there is a general procedure for giving and receiving a challenge coin. After all, there is for everything else in the military. The officer reaches in their pocket and palms one when they think you're not going to notice during the conversation. You be polite and carry on pretending not to notice them reaching into their pocket. They then shake your hand and tell you why there's a piece of metal in your hand. When you break the handshake, rapidly rotate your hand while you curl your fingers so that the palm is facing you and the coin is still in your hand. (It's considered bad form to drop the coin; the noncommissioned

officer [NCO] with that officer will give you a dirty look, and then your NCO tends to hear about it afterwards. Depending on the rank of said officer or how popular they are, the results could be anywhere from a laughing comment to doing pushups until your arms feel like they're going to fall off, followed by the laughter of your peers. It's best not to go down that road.) Assuming you've managed not to drop the coin, you thank the officer and place the coin into an empty pocket so it doesn't get scratched.

My most treasured challenge coins were ones from officers not in my direct chain of command: I received one from the squadron chaplain after my vehicle hit a pressure plate activated IED (improvised explosive device) that killed my passenger. Another was from a navy officer in JCCS-1 (Joint CREW Composite Squadron One) for taking a course in Iraq to be certified in unit-level maintenance of radio-controlled improvised explosive device countermeasure systems. The difference that made (and makes) these coins so treasured to me was that they were so rare. Our chaplain didn't just give them out like they were going out of style (also, he was an awesome officer), and JCCS-1 only gave one to my unit. The JCCS-1 coin served as a reminder to me of the responsibility I had to members of my unit to make sure the countermeasure systems operated every time a driver or vehicle commander flipped the switch from “standby” to “on.” Both coins serve as reminders of jobs well done: the former for not letting my emotion get in the way of my job, and the latter as a small reward that pales in comparison to the fact that nobody in my unit had a negative experience with a radio-controlled improvised explosive device after I started my duty as the unit countermeasure systems specialist.

But outside of my unit, all of these and a buck twenty-five will get me a Coke.

Andrew Foss  
Specialist, United States Army  
Dec 2005 - May 2010 (B troop, 6th Squadron, 8th  
U.S. Cavalry Regiment,  
3rd Infantry Division)

Here's pictures of the two challenge coins I was awarded back in the day when I was in the army reserves.



The top one was awarded by the governor of Iowa at the end of Desert Storm. (Got sent to Fort Lewis [a little southeast of Tacoma, Washington] for six months and then spent some time at the ghost post [Fort McCoy,

Wisconsin].)

The lower one is the one I carry in my wallet, folded up in my retirement orders. (Actually, thanks for bringing this up now. That copy of my retirement orders was about ready to fall apart.) Anyway, that one was awarded by the sergeant major in charge of the humanitarian operations in Guatemala and Honduras in April 2001.



Gene Koehler  
Staff Sergeant  
Army Reserve TPU  
20 years

When my unit's Senior Chief retired in 2012, my command gave him an excellent send-off, complete with side boys, boatswain's pipes and ship's bells, and me singing the national anthem.

Two months before the ceremony, the Senior Chief asked for volunteers to help with the ceremony: side boys, flag and rifle bearers, the whole nine yards. Offhand, he mentioned that he was trying to get a Navy band to play the national anthem, but chances are that scheduling wouldn't permit them to come. His plan B was to have a recording of the anthem play if he couldn't get anyone to sing. As a musician in my younger years, it was anathema to me for

anyone to be sent off by mere recorded music, and I could not let that stand. So when no one else did, I stepped up and volunteered to sing at the ceremony.

I had practiced every day for two weeks before the event, and I even had some time to rehearse onstage before the ceremony began. I practiced singing at a relatively low pitch and worked out that the acoustics of the drill hall were good enough that I didn't need a microphone. I was calm, even excited, and looking forward to singing. I looked smart in my Service Dress Whites, which I had never worn outside of boot camp.

When the ceremony started, I was standing in the wings off the stage, waiting for my cue, and promptly got lost in my fear and doubts. Before I knew it, the Senior Chief was whispering to get my attention so I would start singing. I had totally missed my cue! In a panic, I started singing at a pitch too high.

I was thinking to myself, "What do I do if I can't hit the high notes?" followed by, "No time to worry about that now! I'm already singing! I have to make sure I remember the words and don't mess up!" It simultaneously occurred to me, "I'm singing the national anthem, for the Senior Chief's retirement, in front of my command. There's no way I can stop and start again. I'm going to be a complete embarrassment if I screw this up."

Luckily, the performer in me kicked in (thank you, many years of theater work in high school and college), and the show must go on no matter what. Before I hit the high notes, I managed to suck in as much breath as I could, and I powered through them. I think my voice cracked a little, but I made it through.

At the dinner after the ceremony, many people complimented me on my singing. My shipmates clapped me on the back, saying I did a good job. One person said that it was the first time he heard the words articulated enough that he could understand them. I'm not sure if anyone noticed how nervous I was and how badly I jacked things up, but apparently it was good enough for government work.

Near the end of the evening, for everyone who helped with the ceremony, the Senior Chief gave a challenge coin from his deployment in Kunar



Province, Afghanistan. It is the first and only challenge coin I've earned in my two short years in the Navy.

With great relief (and a little disappointment), this is probably the hardest thing I've had to do in the Navy so far. I hope I'm up to any challenge the Navy puts in front of me and hope to earn more coins down the road. I'm glad to know that my first coin was earned giving an old Sailor a proper send-off.

Fair winds and following seas to you in your civilian life, Senior Chief Petty Officer Jeffery M. Leslie!

David Ordonez  
Petty Officer Second Class  
USN (Reserve)  
2010-Present

## COIN CHECK!

I was a young private first class stationed in Hanau, West Germany, in 1984 when I got my first unit/challenge coin. Coming from a family of predominantly navy officers, I had been taught the significance of the coins, and I knew the potential hazards of not carrying my coin the first time I went off post. A few hours later I encountered an intoxicated spec 4 who decided to challenge the "still wet behind the ears newbie" to present my coin, figuring that he had just earned him and his buddies a free beer. After confirming the fact that he was challenging me (if you get challenged and don't have your coin, you buy the bar a round), I looked him in the eyes, slapped my coin onto the bar, and said, "Thanks for the welcoming party!" (if you challenge and the person does have their coin, you buy the round)

Frederick S Morrison  
PFC  
US Army  
1983-1991

In 2001, I was an Air Force officer working in Virginia, just a few blocks from the Pentagon, when the plane hit it on 9/11.

It was a significant tragedy for the whole nation, but especially for those of us who experienced the event up close. Naturally, coins in memory of those lost in the attack and honoring those who survived and who served were created very quickly, and I purchased a few for my own collection, as well as to share with others.

The following spring, I was presented the very rare opportunity to attend the finale of CBS's Survivor: All-Stars (the reality show) in New York City. A friend of mine and I met several of the former years' Survivor contestants and got to spend a few hours socializing with them. As it came time to leave, I exchanged addresses with many of them and offered to send each a commemorative 9/11 coin in appreciation for their time and hospitality. Brian, a previous winner, became particularly excited. He said that his wife had recently gotten out of the air force. However, just before she did, her entire set of military challenge coins had been stolen. I followed up by sending him not just one coin, but also a second one of a different design for his wife.

The next week, I got a package in the mail. I opened it to find a thank-you note from Brian and a short note from Brian's wife that read, "Thank you so much for the coins! I've included a copy of my DVD. Enjoy!" I was totally surprised (and my wife was none too pleased) to discover that the DVD was actually a porn flick. My wife dutifully disposed of the DVD, and I was forbidden from sending any more coins.

Note: In the Air Force, we don't refer to it as a challenge coin. Rather, we call it an "RMO," short for "round metal object."

Johnny Giles  
Lt Col  
USAF  
1992-2012

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Regarding challenge coins, challenge coins are on sale at the National Museum of the US Navy in Washington, DC,

Nauticus in Norfolk, Virginia, and the Maritime Museum of San Diego in San Diego, California.

These coins usually feature the museum or a ship on display at the museum. When I was at Nauticus, I met a person whose challenge coin had been stolen, so they wanted something just to have the feel of it.

The only problem with purchasing coins is when you are trying to imply that they were awarded instead of purchased, or if a company is selling coins with the apparent intention of supporting such falsehoods.

Lest you feel that I am overly liberal, I am extremely offended by stores that sell jackets with rank insignia on them, usually that of a sergeant of some type. I have also been on tours of a number of ships and have felt that purchasing a hat with the ship's name on it (usually sold in an impromptu shop next to where the tour ends) would imply a service connection with the ship, and that is why I have never purchased such a hat.

Bradley A Ross  
Civilian

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I was on my first deployment, OIF II back in '04-'05. My son had been born a week before I had left for predeployment training, and I was excited to go home for a couple of weeks. However, our sergeant major spotted me on my way out and insisted that I get a haircut before I left. It's good that he did, as you will see in a minute.

I had just come back on leave when my wife looked at me as I got out of the shower and said, "What's that thing on the back of your head?" to

which I replied, "I don't know. I don't look at the back of my head."

She showed me, using a pair of mirrors, a dark, dime-sized spot on the back of my head, well above the hairline. I still didn't know what it was, as it wasn't a scab or anything.

"Well, it wasn't there before. I want you to get it checked out when you get back." So I did.

When I got back to Doha, Kuwait, I went in to the navy-run medical clinic to get it looked at. However, the guy there (a navy senior grade lieutenant) said that I would have to get it checked out at my camp. I did so and was then told, "No, you have to get this checked out at Doha . . ."

I finally got back to Doha, and the doc in charge of the clinic (the same one who told me to go to my camp) said it was probably a hyperpigmented lesion (a mole) and that if I was really worried about it, I would have to be sent to a specialist in Kuwait City or even shipped off to Germany.

I was not interested in being away from my duties that long, so I asked, "Well, can you just cut it off and send it somewhere?" to which he agreed, and they sliced it off, bottled it up, and shipped it off.

Two weeks later, I got an urgent summons to the tactical operations center, and as this seemed to be a fairly common thing lately, my thought was "Geez, what did they do now?" However, on arriving I was given a phone number and told to call it right now. At this point I was getting suspicious.

"This is Sergeant Copley. I was told to call this number."

"We need you to come to Doha, right now!"

"Um, why . . . ?"

"We don't want to talk about it on the phone."

(Needless to say, I had a feeling I knew what it was about, and yes, this was the same lieutenant that had told me, in sequence, to go away, to not worry about it, and to deny that it was his responsibility to look into my concerns.)

"Look, please don't play this bullshit Bond shit. Was it cancer?"

"Um, yes, Sergeant."

Less than three days later, I was in Landstuhl, Germany (the fastest I have ever seen the army move), and the doctor in charge of my case (an army

major) was asking me about the whole thing. As I told him all the steps I had done to get checked out, he grew more and more disturbed, and when I was done, he looked at me and sighed.

He turned to his desk and opened a drawer, pulling out a coin.

“I don’t normally give these things out for anything less than finding out that someone was wounded in action, but hearing what kind of idiocy you dealt with, repeatedly, from both a doctor and an officer, I have to congratulate you on your perseverance. What you had was malignant melanoma, and according to our biopsy, it was weeks, or less, from metastasizing through your body and, given the subtype, probably killing you.”

He handed me the coin, I went home safely, and to this day I still buy my wife roses on October 29th, the day she spotted it and insisted that I get it looked at.

James Copley  
Staff Sergeant  
US Army  
20 years

I first ran into the phenomenon of the challenge coin in the early '80s. I had recently joined the Nineteenth Special Forces Group in Utah and was awaiting my training dates for basic training and advanced individual training. The Nineteenth was a National Guard unit that has the unusual distinction of spending more time in the field than most of the regular army. It was common for us to spend up to twenty-six weeks a year deployed. This was not a hardship, as at that time the economy was not very good. Any work was good work for me.

During my second drill, I had been attached to an A team as general labor, for familiarization, and as a kind of initiation to the unit. This particular drill did not involve the unit being deployed or even leaving the vicinity of Camp Williams, Utah, where we were training. It was just putting the new guy with an A team to see if he could keep up as they practiced a few things during a normal monthly drill.

That was when I encountered my first coin check (see insert)


## COIN CHECK!

After normal duty hours, the team had me tag along with them for further nightly entertainment. We ended up in the enlisted club, and once we were through the door, everyone on the team looked at me and shouted, “Coin check!”

In a moment, everybody’s hand was digging into their pockets. Rapidly a large number of large, circular disks were pulled forth and displayed to the crowd beyond. Everybody else in the bar was doing the same thing. Suddenly everybody except me was displaying one of these coins. The team leader gleefully told me that because I didn’t have a coin, I was buying the first round. Then he took pity on me and told me it didn’t count because I had only been in the unit for a month.







For the rest of my time in the Nineteenth Special Forces, coin checks were part of the culture. They were used for determining who had to do the mid shift for standing watch in the field, who had to haul out the trash, and even who had to clean out the latrines.

I even saw a coin check one time when we were in a C-130, high over the Utah desert. Somebody hauled out his coin, standing in the door yelling, "Coin check!" Then he jumped out of the aircraft.

When I got my coin, I asked my unit if I should put the date on it. Everyone looked at me a little oddly, and someone said, "The only date I have ever seen on a coin is usually an ETS date." That is the date when you get out of the army.

A variation of the coin check was introduced to me when I was stationed in Germany. There, it was not uncommon for a service member to yell out, "Pfennig Check!"

With this call, everybody would have to produce a German pfennig, and the service member with the newest date on the coin was usually buying. Various rules were usually in effect: the coin had to be current issue and legal tender (thus anybody with a WWII coin was excluded from playing), and it was usually called on our time off.

Normally, a challenge coin has to be earned.

They are given for some unusual events in a service member's life. For instance, when I was assigned to the 101st Forward Support Battalion, Bravo Company, First Infantry Division, I received a

coin under the following circumstances.

We had been deployed to the National Training Center. The NTC is the major league of training environments. Everything there is as real as they can make it. When I was there, a strenuous effort was made to create an environment that was more difficult than actual combat. Everything was done under combat conditions.

I was in Maintenance Company, and we had been repairing damaged equipment for about three days. Just after dark one night, the opposition force decided that destroying the maintenance and support capacity of our brigade would be an interesting event. The bad guys were overrunning us. My platoon leader rushed up to my position. He told me, "Sergeant Evans, you and Specialist Barnes are going to be our shop preservation team. That means you have to get into your shop truck with your generator and get out of camp and to this location." He handed me an envelope with coordinates in it.

Then Barnes and I took our two-and-a-half-ton truck, with the work shelter on the back, towing our generator, and rolled out of camp. We used no lights, dropped into the wash, and snuck away.

So, no sh\*\*, there we were . . . There were just two of us. The opposition force had been very inventive with members of the brigade that got captured, and we had no desire to undergo any of their inventiveness.

After an entire night of sneaking bush to bush, rock to rock, we finally arrived at our rendezvous point. The moment we were there, a crowd formed. It was filled with people from line units who wanted their radios fixed.

As was normal, most of the radios all had the same problem. The radios used in vehicles had a pair of circuit breakers installed. The circuit breakers existed to keep the radio from being burned up if the operator had left the radio turned on when they cranked the ignition of the vehicle they were in. What would happen is the circuit breaker would trip and prevent the radio from being burned up by the large amount of current generated by starting the vehicle. When the breakers tripped, they would usually be too hot to reset for at least half an hour. The organizational maintenance technicians would

check the radio out and put it on a truck and send it to me.

By the time the radios reached me, the circuit breakers were cool enough to reset, and the symptoms of this condition were always the same. I got to the point where I would strike a pose, put one hand on the radio and one hand in the air, and intone, "Work, oh radio!" Then I would turn the radio on, and it would work. At that point, I handed it back to the the organizational maintenance techs, who always looked at me in shock.

During this particular time, I was in need of stress relief, so I was playing up the event as dramatically as possible. What I didn't know was that my battalion commander was standing behind me as I performed.

Finally Colonel Krystal could contain himself no longer and burst into laughter. He said, "Sergeant Evans, post!"

I presented myself to him, snapped to attention, and listened.

He said, "Sergeant, that is probably not a good use of religious authority." He then proceeded to hand me a 101st Battalion challenge coin in recognition of our successful escape from the entrapment attempted by our enemy.

To this very day, even though I have been out of the military since 1996, I still carry my Special Forces coin. Like myself, it shows a little wear but is essentially intact.

Kevin Evans

Sgt

National Guard 19th Special Forces

21st TAACOM (Europe), 101st FSB 1st ID

1983-1996



I was in the army, and I served during the late '80s. During that time, the coins were rare, and I never actually saw one. I was stationed in Germany, and this was right during the fall of the Wall and before the Euro. So, all money out on the economy (as we called it) was in DMs, or deutschmarks. The least common coin was the pfenning, the German equivalent of the penny, but much smaller. Being a group of hard-drinking young soldiers, we had our own tradition used to get other people to buy our rounds of Asbach and Coke, ice-free, called the pfenning check.

One would simply holler, "Pfenning check!" and throw theirs on the bar. Everyone else who was an American soldier would have to produce a pfenning or be stuck with the round.

Fortunately, I was never without my pfenning. I actually still have several of them.

Twenty years later, I'm a bartender and a member of the USBG (United States Bartender's Guild), and suddenly challenge coins are flowing like little metal raindrops compliments of Fratelli Branca, the people behind Fernet Branca. And I am again carrying around coins that will buy me nothing, but keep me from having to buy the round of Fernets. We have a large and connected community, and I have collected coins from many different cities and states. As the local keeper of the coins (I am responsible for handing them out), I am also in a great position to explain what they mean. Which, as a sergeant, is a great honor.

Elizabeth Powell

Sergeant

Army

1986-1993

Challenge coins were a gleam in some young lieutenant's eye in 1984. Colonel "Cheese Eater," the commanding officer of the battalion, did have moral coins, which we quickly renamed "that a boy" coins. Up to three coins could be given to the junior enlisted: one for shooting expert on the range, one for maxing the physical training test, and the other one I forget, but I think maxing a military occupational specialty course you took. The obverse of each coin had the Berlin Brigade patch on it, with the words "Berlin Brigade" in the center, "Defenders of Freedom" on the bottom, and oak leaves on the top. The reverse of the marksman coin had "Excellence" on top, with two stars on each side and the words "Marksmanship" on the bottom; in the center was an expert badge. The reverse of the PT coin had "Excellence" on top, with two stars on each side and the words "Physical Fitness" on the bottom; in the center was a guy in shorts and a T-shirt running.

Being a four-eyed wimp and cook too busy to take classes, I never got one. But I was friends with the colonel's driver. As I was ETSing out and bummed out, the driver slipped me all three. When I got home, they were quickly discovered by my mom's grandkids and used as diving coins in the pool. They currently rest in a pile of other coins as part of a dragon's horde in a display case of my dragon collection.

Roger Martin	
Specialist	Senior Airman
US Army	Alabama Air Guard
1982-1986	1991-1996

## COIN CHECK!

It is not uncommon for military members to show off their coins to others. One of the accepted ways of doing so is to politely place your coin on a hard surface and slide it over. The admirer looks it over and then does the same thing, returning it to you. Some units have interesting coin designs that catch the eye and imagination while others are flat boring.

I was assigned to an electronics systems development unit that had a coin with an eagle stylized as a circuit board on the back with the motto in binary around the side. Any comm guys I met always wanted to see it. Anyway, we'd gone TDY to Lackland Air Force Base for a show-and-tell of our aircraft. We'd shut down the bird and were at the club looking for some adult beverages. Still in flight suits, we saddled up and ordered our drinks. Eventually this 33S (comm officer) came up and started chatting with me. He noticed the Electronic Systems Command patch on my left shoulder and wanted to chat with a fellow geek. As I happened to be a geek, this was cool and we started talking. The conversation got really techy fast. This guy was intel, and I worked on testing flying intel systems. Eventually we moved away from work stuff, but as we did, I did let it slip we had a cool coin. Of course, this captain wanted to see it. I gingerly removed my coin and set it on the bar. This guy picked it up, looked it over, and commented on how cool it was. Then he looked at me with a mischievous grin and a sadistic twinkle in his eye.

Thunk.

"Coin check!" he bellowed across the bar.

The son of a beep just coin checked me at the club with my own freaking coin. How low can you get? As everybody else was whipping out their coins, this captain thought he was gonna make friends for having me buy the entire bar a round. With the sound of tearing Velcro, I ripped my AFMC (Air Force Major Commands) patch off my right breast. The patch had a solid piece of Velcro backing it. I had cut a slit in the middle of the Velcro and slid a coin in there a long time ago for just such a dastardly trick. Smiling like a Cheshire cat, I pulled out my backup coin and, to his horror, plunked it down next to my unit coin. I wish the story had a happy ending and the captain got stuck with the bill, but it doesn't. Some second lieutenant didn't have a coin on him. He wound up buying the round.

Name: Alex Taylor  
MSgt  
USAF  
2004-present



Unit coins: I'll start with the two I created to reward/recognize soldiers of my unit, Battery A, First Battalion, 78th Field Artillery Regiment, at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. I had the pleasure of commanding this unit from 31 July 1988 till 8 September 1989, if I recall correctly. This unit had the mission of training new soldiers on self-propelled cannon artillery, and we had two primary weapon systems and the associated equipment to teach soldiers how to move, shoot, and communicate: the 155 mm M109A2/A3 and the 203 mm (8") M110A3 howitzer. I used to joke about having more firepower under my direct control than most corps commanders.

Each weapon system was organized into platoons; two platoons of M110s with eight guns each and eight platoons of M109s with eight guns each, if I recall correctly. I bought about twenty-five of each of the coins below through the post exchange to give to soldiers that exhibited superior performance in their duties as instructors/trainers during a class cycle. The back of each coin would be personalized with their rank and name, and because I wanted to discourage alcohol use, I did not have them serialized. The recipient could coin me for a onetime three-day pass with twenty-four hours' notice, so there was some value to being singled out as a recipient. Don't know if the guy that replaced me used them or not; unit commanders are sometimes funny about doing things the previous guy did for recognition and morale building.



The above is the M109 platoon version. This is an image of an M109A2 series, which was new from the factory, while the M109A3s were rebuilt M109A1s.



And this is the M110A3 one.

Here's what the reverse looks like for both coins:



I've seen a few of these mounted on trophies/nameplates with other "I was good once" awards, so I guess they are much more common than they were when I did this.

Next, coins I was given: when I was a battalion fire support officer in the Republic of Korea in 1985, I was attached to one of the two US tank battalions on the Pacific Rim, the Second Battalion, Seventy-Second Armor Regiment. This unit had what I think of as the standard coin procedure: no one in the unit admits to any knowledge of coins; if they admit to knowing about coins, they don't know how anyone gets a coin or who has one; and after you do something that in the eyes of the battalion commander demonstrates high moral character



and unbelievable, fantastic service to the unit and the army, you get a coin, usually in an appropriate ceremony such as dining in, although that depends on the unit. In some units in the ROK it was easier to get an ARCOM (Army Commendation Medal) than a coin. Second Tank at the time had the “one step and a reach” for coin challenges at the local bar, and since it was a tanker bar (yeah, I know), tapping was also allowed to initiate a challenge. Challenges were not permitted at the main officers’ club, where you might be observed by REMFs from the division staff who would tattle and get the unit in deep kimchee. . .

Here’s the coin:



In my experience most coins were commissioned and awarded by battalion commanders (O-5 on the promotion list) and above, I’m guessing because of the cost and level of authority and desire to provide an immediate reward when soldiers were caught doing something good. In the ROK the brigade fire support officer (O-4) in my parent unit got coins for all the members of the fire support section, and this is as close as I’ve seen anywhere to your recent storyline about how the Tuffs got coined. Issuing coins as part of unit in processing seems like, well, science fiction. Coin below:



Sometimes you get a coin instead of a traditional award. While assigned to Seventh Army Training

Command, I was given the additional duty of escort director for the ML/SLTC (Major Leaders/Senior Leaders Training Conference), an annual event at the Grafenwöhr Training Area. Major leaders are three- and four-star army officers, and senior leaders are all four-star officers from all services. I exhibited unbelievable, fantastic service and high moral character and got coined by the CSA (chief of staff, US Army), and because I got that, I received a coin from the CG 7ATC (commanding general, Seventh Army Training Command), ’cause if the chief of the army gives you a coin, then you deserve a coin from your bosses’ bosses’ boss. Here’s the CSA coin:



Remember above where I mentioned getting coined in a formal ceremony? These were given in a “let me shake the hand of the man that ran the escorts” handshake. Neither coin is serialized, nor did I get any instructions on coining processes, and I’ve never met another CSA coin holder, although I know the chief must have given out dozens of these things. Maybe no one else carried them around like I did.

When challenged in a bar, if I didn’t have the appropriate coin I would say, “I’ll bet a beer [or round, depending on my mood] I’ve got the senior coin in the room.” Hasn’t failed me yet.

And here’s the 7ATC coin:



You may get the impression from the above that the coin-granting process is very random. Well, in my experience coin presentations were created by unit commanders as a way to express tangible gratitude and appreciation for superior high performance that, if going through the normal army channels, could take weeks or longer to get a more traditional award, and in most cases I'm aware of, a coin recipient could have the fact that they received a coin favorably influence what level of traditional award they received. Most coin granters had specific criteria/standards for giving out coins. You might not know why you got it, but they did.

When I got out of the army I thought I was done with coins, but I received the coin below from the city of Norman, Oklahoma, after giving a class to the city staff on performance measure/effective government.



And last in this series, from my wife's grandfather J.B. "Red" Foster we have the following:



Perhaps the oldest coin in my collection. And the only nonmetallic coin.

JO Sirmans  
Major  
US Army  
14 years

I've never considered the coins that I collected during my 8 years in the Marine Corps as "challenge" coins.

For me, they are tokens of recognition from various individuals or reminders of people I have met, places I have been, and units I have been stationed with.

Out of the thirteen coins I collected, I have four that were given to me as recognition for something I did, four were given to me by people I met, while the remaining five were coins I bought myself.

The first of recognition coins I have I received from the Sergeant Major of Marine Barracks 8th & I and the second is from the Marine Corps' Information Assurance Assessment Team. The third coin was given to me by the division chaplain for the Second Marine Division while I stationed out in Iraq. While the last one is from the commanding general of II MEF (II Marine Expeditionary Force) from work I did as part of an assessment prior to the unit's deployment to Iraq.

Of the four coins that were given to me by people I met or knew, the coin for the US Navy Ceremonial Guard in Washington, DC, and the memorial coin for September 11th attack on the Pentagon were given to me by someone I knew who worked at the Pentagon. I was given the coin from the Master Chief Petty Officer of the Coast Guard, when I met him during a parade while I was stationed at 8th & I. Also, I have a coin for the "Global War on Terrorism", but I don't remember how I got that one and it is possible I received it in trade for another coin.

Two of the five coins I bought are unit coins, which would fall in the traditional challenge coin category.

I was never was never challenged to produce either of them, as purchase of them was optional.

Another one I bought was created for a specific exercise that I took part in. The next coin in this group is a one I bought while I was at the Staff Non-Commissioned Officers Academy on Okinawa,



Japan, when I completed the Marine Corps' Sergeants Course there.

The last coin I bought, I actually bought two of, as I bought the coins out in Iraq during my last deployment there. One was for me, and the other was for my officer in charge at my last unit. It was a thank you to him for being a mentor to me for the last part of my military career. This was the only time I recall ever giving a coin to someone else.

### In some cases, some coins could be considered bragging rights.

For example, when I was stationed at 8th & I, a number of people wanted the coin for the Marine Corps Silent Drill Platoon. However, I'm only aware of a few people managing to acquire one while stationed there, as they were either in the SDP, or knew someone in it. Additionally, I remember being told that the commanding general for II MEF rarely handed out his coins after receiving the one from him.

Joseph Swick  
Marines

### COIN CHECK!

Normally, one doesn't expect to need their coin while taking care of the morning chores. So I'm in the shower at Al Dhafra in the UAE while deployed minding my own business. Somebody enters the shower area, but I pay it no attention. This knucklehead then drops something metallic on the floor. "Coin Check," he calls out. I poke my head out and discover I'm the only one showering and it's one of my coworkers that got me. There is no way that I'm ten feet or ten seconds from my room. "You owe me tonight," he informs me before picking up his coin. Laughing, he leaves and I'm fuming for the rest of my scalding hot shower.

Suffice to say, I picked up a spare coin for my shaving kit that same day. He bought the next time he tried it.

Alex Taylor  
MSgt  
USAF  
2004-present

I am not now, nor have I ever been, part of any military organization. I have a challenge coin anyway.

This coin is not a coin to produce in hopes of free drinks, which would make sense considering the fact that those of us who received one got it as part of a church group. The Taylorsville Twenty-Fourth Ward in the LDS Church (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) gave a coin to each member in the young men's group, along with some basic history regarding their nature. These specific coins came with an actual challenge, or rather more of a reminder, to be true to our faith. Boys being boys, most of us have already misplaced them, though thankfully I still have mine, making it a matter of some small amount of pride for those of us that still have them.

The coin is silver in color, with a blue ring near the outside edge, and is 1 and 3/4 inches in diameter. One side bears the words "And now, my sons, remember, remember that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation. -Helaman 5:12" in the center and "Worship, Obedience, Pray" around the blue ring. The opposite side has a depiction of a scene from the Book of Mormon, where Helaman raises the Title of Liberty, and has the words "Sons of Helaman, Remember" around the outside edge.

Simon Thatcher  
Civillian

A friend of mine related a touching account of how he, a civilian, was presented a coin by a rather elite team of soldiers to whom he had given some training.

Perhaps someday I'll get him to tell the story for you here. My story is about my conversation with him, which I will now recount as best I can.

"So, can I see the coin?" I asked.

"No. It's gone."

"What do you mean, gone? How could you lose something like that?"

---

“It was in my desk drawer, in my office. Things there got pretty bad, and my business partner basically screwed me out of the business. When I left, I left behind all of my stuff.”

I thought about this for a moment.

“Did your business partner know the story behind that coin?”

“Not really.”

“So, wherever that coin ended up, it is now just a piece of metal. The story it told is no longer attached to it.”

“Thanks, Howard. Now I feel sad for the coin.”

Each challenge coin is an information storage device. As storage mediums go, the coin is durable, but extremely lossy. As I look at the coins I've collected in the last few years, some of them have stories that I can't bear the thought of losing. The coins will almost certainly outlive me (assuming we don't have a metal shortage crisis that demands they be smelted into weapons for repelling the invading aliens) but the only way for their stories to be that long-lived is for me to pass those stories along.

And so I do. When I show off a coin I'm carrying it's not to issue a challenge. I'm decoding and decompressing the story held in that coin, and then relating it to the person with whom I'm speaking. I then listen to the story behind their coin. This is how I honor the challenge coin tradition. I've yet to be in a setting where drinks needed were owed, but if and when that happens, I will make sure that stories are exchanged while the drinks are consumed.

One of the coins I carry is of my own minting, and its story has yet to be written. I carry it because every day there is the possibility that I will need to say “thank you” with more than just two words and a smile. I carry it because it needs to have a story written onto it by me and someone else. Until then, it is just a pretty piece of metal.

I've issued several of those. I like to imagine that they're out there in the wild awaiting the opportunity to come forward and share their story.

Howard Tayler  
Civilian

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I participated in the Schlock Mercenary Kickstarter project to fund challenge coins. I received them, they were fantastic, and my Tagon's Toughs coin (series 2, #852) went straight into my wallet. Once there it was promptly forgotten, except on the rare occasion that I had cash.

I'm the sort of person who enjoys tabletop RPGs. And I'd taken to Meetup to find a new group. After a brief period, I found a group that was willing to take me in. Last Sunday I found myself sitting at their table for the first time, dice in hand, trying to figure out how much to hand over for pizza. The cartoonists name, Howard Tayler, had already come up once while we were discussing *Pacific Rim*, and so after handing over my eight dollars, I took out my Tagon coin and slapped it on the table. Our DM turned around then slapped his own (series 1) Tagon coin on the table. I laughed as he complimented me on my impeccable taste.

Having the challenged coin helped me form bonds with my new DM.

Bradson Goldie



Occasionally, we get called up to do some DV (distinguished visitor) airlift missions. Rarely, we get to fly them over to the AOR (area of responsibility—the Middle East). After dropping our DV off in the 'Stan, we headed back to civilization for a break. We headed to one of the support bases and shut down the jet. Here, there were only two clothing options at the time: official physical training (PT) gear or duty uniforms. We were only scheduled for an eighteen-hour layover so, like an idiot, I hadn't brought any PT gear. The other guys changed and we all headed to the bar. It was hot, humid, and late, and there were maybe ten people around the outside bar. The bar was under this large canvas cover near a stage with a big globe painted behind it. The bar was old and not in great shape, but they had beer. Overlooking the aesthetics of the place, I went over and ordered a drink. After scanning my ID card to ensure I wasn't getting more than my ration, I paid for the beer and got a cold bottle in return. My unit didn't get us desert flight suits, so I was the only guy on base wearing green. These people probably hadn't seen this much green since the fake Christmas trees got put away, and I stood out like a sore thumb. A couple of wisenheimers probably decided I made an easy mark and came up to me.

Yahoo number one told me, "Around here, we play the coin rules a little differently."

"Yeah," his buddy chimed in. "If everybody gets their coin, then it goes by rank."

"And if your coin don't got rank on it, then it goes by your rank."

Next thing I know, they each dropped a coin down. Both were showing blue flags. One had three and the other four stars on the flags. Normally, I only carried a squadron coin and would have lost, but our DV had been really appreciative of our services and coined us. I still had the coin in my pocket and proceeded to whip it out. I politely tapped the edge of it on the bar, with the flag side towards them. It had an American eagle surrounded by a star in each corner on it. The scrollwork around the edge read, "Robert M. Gates—Secretary of Defense."

"SecDef," I say with some finalism. "Unless you got W's coin, you're buying me my second beer, boys."

Around the units I've been in, coins are more for collecting than actually using at the bar. Occasionally, a daring individual will coin check a small group or a few buddies. Mostly it's friendly and used as a sly way of the lower ranking guys saying, "I got the next round." The screwball move at Lackland was the only time I've ever seen the entire bar checked at once.

Morale coins are often made for significant events or for special units/deployments—patches more so, but since the introduction of airman battle uniforms, only we fliers really get unit patches. And some of the morale patches could easily draw an equal opportunity/sexual harassment complaint. Man, those are the good ones . . .

Anyway, I've enclosed a pair of pictures to help illustrate things.




I'm holding my SecDef coin and one of the doomsday bottle openers I have. I own three in the style shown here. The other pic is of my MAJCOM (Major Commands) patch, which I have rigged on my flight suit with Velcro and a coin inside, as shown. A spare ACC (Air Combat Command) patch is used to show the front side. The SecDef coin, doomsday bottle opener and comm coin are also shown, along with the scarf (lingerie).

Alex Taylor  
MSgt  
USAF  
2004-present







Throughout my military career, I have received five coins: two are unit coins, mementos of places that I've worked. Two are commander's coins, in recognition of specific accomplishments. My first coin, however, was a challenge coin.

In 2001, I left home to join the Canadian Forces. After a summer of basic training, I was sent to the Royal Military College of Canada in Kingston, Ontario. I and my fellow first-year cadets underwent an orientation program for a few weeks before being formally recognized as RMC students. During the ceremony we were presented with our cap badge and college coin. The presenters were members of the Old Brigade, a cadre of ex-cadets who had attended the college at least fifty years ago.

As with any long-standing military institution, we were indoctrinated into a host of traditions. For the challenge coin we were told that when in the mess (or any other drinking establishment), a fellow cadet could put his coin on the table, obligating us to do the same. Failure to do so meant that we had to buy a drink for the challenger and anyone else who produced their coin.

The risk of a challenge from my peers was low. No one wanted to be known for putting tradition (or more cynically, lack of beer money) ahead of their classmates. Still,

**the risk of being caught flat-footed by a senior or worse, an ex-cadet, was ever present.**

I decided it was worth the effort to keep it on my person whenever I was out. The easiest way to do this was to store it in my wallet. It had a pocket opposite the card holder and billfold that wasn't much useful for anything else. There my college coin faithfully remained, ready for any challenge.

When the Christmas break of second year came around, I went back to my parents' house for a visit. One day, I was out shopping with my younger brother, buying presents for my family. Over the course of the outing I pulled my wallet out several times to make purchases, usually with him close by. As we got into the car to go home, my brother said to

me, "You know, they say you're not supposed to store them in your wallet."


I responded: "What are you talking about?"

Somewhat sheepishly he replied, "Condoms. Keeping them in your wallet degrades the rubber, damaging their effectiveness."

I was quite confused at first, but then it dawned on me. My college coin had worn a mark into my wallet, circular and of the approximate diameter of a packaged prophylactic. Embarrassment quickly turned to humor, and we had a good laugh about it once I showed him the coin.

I've since acquired a new wallet. Should I ever be in a situation that requires the carrying of a challenge coin, I will have to find a better way to do it.

Chris Bryan  
Captain  
Canadian Forces  
13 years



So, when I was in tech school at Goodfellow Air Force Base in 2009, we had two instructors. One of them was Staff Sergeant Freudenthal, a 1A8, airborne linguist, and the other was Technical Sergeant Zimmerhagl, a 1N3, ground linguist (names are changed to protect the indecent). Well, Technical Sergeant Zimmerhagl had no interest in any silly aircrew traditions, but unfortunately, nine out of twelve students were future flyers, and we were all terribly eager to learn about the airborne world. So,

**Staff Sergeant Freudenthal would regale us with various stories about how aircrew would insult each other and play pranks and other such bonding experiences. But the best stories were the ones involving coins.**

I won't pass any of them on, because they aren't my stories, and I couldn't remember them well enough to do them justice anyway. The important thing is that we decided that since we were going to

be aircrew, we were damned well going to act like aircrew. In our minds, at least for the moment, that meant getting into coins and coining in a big way.

Technical Sergeant Zimmerhagl simply shook his head and said we were all nitwits, but he said we could go along with it, provided that (a) we kept it in the class, (b) we all agreed on the rules by vote, and (c) we kept him out of it.

First, we set up some ground rules, under our instructor's guidance.

You had to carry a coin with you at all times, and if you were challenged without one, you owed the challenger a drink. If you had one, the challenger owed you. Dropping your coin instantly initiated a challenge to everyone present.

If you got the whole class, and they had their coins, you owed everyone a drink, generally in the form of one twelve pack per offense. Standard stuff. Since we were all meeting in the SCIF (sensitive compartmented information facility), it would be a nonalcoholic beverage. Now, to carry things just that one little step past ridiculous (a fine aircrew tradition),

we also used the rather more obscure rule that saying "coin" meant challenging anyone who heard you say it.

Instead, you were supposed to say "round metal object," or RMO. These were the rules that Staff Sergeant Freudenthal had been used to when he was flying. Needless to say, we didn't often go without soda in that class.

Now, we had one guy in the class, Airman Spud. Spud was a bit of a hustler. He was always trying to get people to say the word or drop their coins—anything to get them to issue the challenge by mistake. He'd try and get you to read the word out

loud off a list or bring it up in casual conversation. And he'd never issue a challenge himself. He was incredibly cagey about it. It was all good fun.

But then there was another guy in the class, Airman Conquest. He was a quiet guy. Not slow, just didn't tend to speak up much, and when he did, he usually thought about what he was saying carefully. He'd mostly managed to stay out of the hustles, just carefully bringing his airman's coin out whenever someone made the challenge (intentionally or otherwise).


One day, Staff Sergeant Freudenthal brought in some of his coins to show us how many you can accumulate over the course of your career. We were looking them over, passing them around (being careful not to drop them), and Spud, as was his wont, began trying to hustle someone else. While he was doing this, Conquest just slowly eased his way over and waited until Spud was caught up in the middle of his patter.

While Spud was in midsentence, Conquest reached over and tapped him on the shoulder. "What's that?" he asked, pointing at what Spud had in his hand.

"Oh, it's a coin, Co—" The memory of the look on Spud's face as he realized what he'd just said kept me warm on cold flights over Afghanistan.

John Beattie  
SrA  
USAF  
2009-Present





My name is Erik Sunde, and I own a challenge coin.

I bought it from the school store after I attained my master's of science in emergency management in 2009.

The school I attended was (and still is) a quasi-military academy, known as the Massachusetts Maritime Academy. I attended the school, as a cadet, for my undergraduate degree as well, approximately six years before getting my MS. I obtained a BS in marine safety and environmental protection, which is a fancy way of saying environmental and ocean science.

When I was an undergrad, the high point of the cadet's life (aside from graduating) was earning the class ring as a junior. There was all kinds of pomp and circumstance with the ring, including a "ring dance," where you dressed up in your best uniform, went to a fancy hall, drank champagne, and promised one another that nothing will change (or at least things will get better) in the upcoming senior year; it invariably changes, many times for the worst, as best friends are soon tested due to the duty and responsibility of being a cadet officer (known as "wearing the bars") on top of getting good grades in highly technical and specialized classes in order to graduate.

Anyways, back then "the ring" was the social status symbol. We wore them with pride, made sure they were shiny, and made sure they hit whatever they could to make a nice "bonk" sound. As we graduated, and life happened, we would see our classmates at reunions or bars, or in professional settings, and we would look to see if they were wearing the ring. Some opted to leave them in boxes, citing fashion reasons or family reasons, or explaining that the ring wouldn't fit their fingers anymore. Some, like me, kept wearing the ring, less as a fashion statement or a bragging right, but as a reminder that we went through a tough curriculum, at a tough school, at a tough time.

When I went back for my graduate degree, I saw pictures in the halls, where I once walked

and studies as a cadet, advertising colorful coins. Having travelled the world a little bit (including a stint in Kuwait as a military contractor, handling environmental issues in the desert), I was aware of what a challenge coin was and knew a little of the history and purpose. I thought it interesting the school, tradition bound as it was, had had a minor cultural shift and had embraced the challenge coin. It made sense to me afterwards, as I realized a lot of the cadets were serving, or had served, in the military and saw it as another tradition they were to uphold.

After graduating with my graduate degree, I walked into the school store, to get a hat or something, and I saw the wall of coins for sale. Each coin, like the ring I wear, has one side common to all the school coins, with the school name and seal. The opposite side has a design peculiar to the year's class. Since I got my degree in 2009, I opted for the 2009 coin. It has a black border, with "Class of 2009" on it, and a creole-style pirate skull superimposed on an anchor, with a banner above it reading "Hold Fast." I bought it as a reminder of my grad school days, as apparently the degree wasn't enough.

When I got my current job and moved from my home state, I brought my ring and coin with me. I wear my ring proudly, although it is a little scuffed and dinged, and keep my challenge coin in my desk drawer. As I run into classmates, we buy drinks for one another, get caught up on life's happenings, relate gossip, and tell war stories.

We don't check for the ring as much, and we don't bring out the challenge coins. We don't do these things, not because we don't take pride in the rings and coins, but because they become personal mementos, personal tokens of hardship, sacrifice, and success.

I wear my ring every day, to remind me of the road I have taken, with all of its bumps and bruises along the way. The challenge coin I keep to remind myself that there is always another challenge to



undertake, another quest to start, another success story to write.

During tough times in work, and in life, I catch myself fiddling with my ring as I decide what options I have, and flipping my challenge coin mindlessly while deciding which option is best . .



Eric Sunde  
Civilian, military academy

## COIN CHECK!

When I was stationed in Germany as a soldier in H Company, Second Squadron, Eleventh Armored Cavalry Regiment, the rule was if someone in a group produced a "Blackhorse" coin, then everyone else had to produce theirs. If anyone did not produce one, they had to buy a round. But if everyone did produce a coin, then the one who brought out his coin first had to buy the round. This made producing the coin very risky. I was with a bunch of guys in my platoon, and one of them decided to see if he could get a free round. He brought out his coin, and all of us produced our coins. There were about ten of us there, and he had to buy a round for us all. He ended up using his cab fare to do it and had to borrow money to get back to the barracks.

Robert Davenport  
E-4, Specialist  
US Army  
4 years

## Normally a Serious Man

Poem by Randy Brown,  
Iowa Army National Guard, 1990-2010;  
embedded reporter, 2011

*Normally a serious man,  
the brigade commander gives you a hug  
and later a coin.  
You keep turning up like a bad penny, he says.*

*You have followed him  
across deserts and oceans.  
First in uniform, now out of it.  
You dress yourself these days.*

*Friends downrange frequently call attention  
to your color-filled wardrobe.  
You are only following the rules, you tell them.  
Camouflage, according to the Army, might make  
you a target.*

*The colonel's coins are numbered.  
Two-hundred-and-forty-nine have come before,  
but you are a first:  
once part of the tribe, but no longer in the fight.*

*You showed up like Justice,  
who also jumped on the plane late.  
He got killed while pinned down  
trying to secure a helicopter crash.*

*You are here to share in stories like that.*

*The coin is worthless, of course,  
but it will pay your way back across the water,  
once you have found yourself  
at war.*

*"Why the hug?" you ask your buddies later.  
It is because you are like a puppy, they say.  
You remind the old man of better days.  
You are no longer dangerous.*

*You are a puppy.  
You are a penny.  
You are home.*

---

I started off back in the dimness of military time, back in June of 1999.

At the time, the US Army was still wearing the same uniform they'd worn in every movie set in the 1980s and '90s—the good old battle dress uniform that was starched, pressed, hanged, beaten, and sometimes drawn and quartered before use, along with the old spit-and-polish black leather boots (which I still actually miss, believe it or not). It was rare to see a soldier wearing a US flag on one shoulder, indicating that they'd served in wartime, and even rarer to see someone with a battle patch on the same shoulder, indicating that they'd been deployed to a combat zone. The Gulf War was a fading memory, but still fresh in the minds of those in the Pentagon (some generals there had made their careers out of the aftermath of that particular conflict and the myriads of minor conflicts that came after it, like, say . . . Mogadishu . . .).

Back then, the Vietnam-era M60 machine gun, the “gun of Rambo,” was still a mainstay of the US Army arsenal as a medium machine gun, but was slated to be replaced soon by the M240B and M240C machine guns, also known as the FN FAL, French-made machine guns of theoretically the same caliber (try firing M60 ammunition out of them, though, and you discover just how jam-prone they can be). Back then, we still trained to go up against Soviet machines and Soviet combat doctrines, as all of our enemies at the time still used Eastern Bloc tactics and equipment. Back then, we still trained to go up against enemy armies, not civilian insurgents and terrorists. It was a time that was doomed not to last much longer.

A bit of explanation is warranted here: in the US Army, there are two private ranks, and they are basically enlisted rank 1 [recruit] and enlisted rank 2 [private], with the difference being the addition of one chevron, affectionately referred to as “skeeter wings”) in the US Army's Third Army, Eighteenth Airborne Corps, Third Infantry Division, Third Brigade Combat Team, Second Battalion, Sixty-Ninth Armored Regiment, Headquarters Company, Scout Platoon (which is the entire nomenclature for my station, but mostly I was considered to be in Headquarters, 2/69 AR for daily affairs.

I received my first challenge coin after my first monthlong field exercise as a brand new E2 private. This was actually in lieu of a medal that I had earned for excellence and professionalism while conducting operations as an OPFOR (OPFOR is opposing force—basically, we pretended to be the bad guys so we could have realistic practice combat engagements) against the Second Brigade Combat Team.

At the time I had no idea what a challenge coin was for, and nobody bothered to explain it to the newcomers. “It will help your career to keep it, so don't throw it away”

was the only response to inquiries as to “What's this big hunk of metal you gave me?”

The facing side of the coin was the 2/69 AR regimental crest (a black panther scaling the green background at a forty-five-degree angle) with the unit motto, *Vitesse et pissance* (“Speed and Power”), and the back side of the coin was a crimson triangle (like you'd see in any traffic accident to keep cars from smashing into it) and the words “Scout Platoon” across the top and “OPFOR 4-0” across the bottom (we'd successfully won all four of our engagements against Second BCT).

There was also another coin we could get called the sergeant major's coin, which was basically the command sergeant major's way of patting us on the back if we did a good job and he noticed. It was a challenge coin, but this one could be purchased in bulk from the post exchange (PX) and had a command sergeant major's insignia on one side and the Third Infantry sigil on the other side. Unlike the previous challenge coin I'd received, these were considered nothing more than an attaboy award and not really worth more than a single beer as no worthy story could be attached to them (something I found out much later).

Later on, I joined the California National Guard in the form of the 132nd Multi-role Bridge Company (at the time it was the 132nd Engineers, then later

the 579th and 598th Engineers, depending on who you asked, and yes, we asked—often), which was part of the Fortieth Infantry Division at the time (and is now part of the Fifty-Ninth MP Brigade . . . I think . . .). This turned out to be a boon to my knowledge of challenge coins and their actual use, as it was here that

## I learned that you could get free beers by offering up the coin and a story at the local soldiers' bars on active duty

(gee, I wonder why they didn't tell us this when I was on active duty . . .) so long as your story topped that, or suitably impressed the listeners. At this point in our narrative I feel it's important to note that I'd been promoted once to private first class (E3 in the army) and then subsequently demoted to private again (E2) for something that both was and was not my fault. Basically, if I hadn't done what I'd done (and yes it was the wrong thing to do) then I would've gotten in worse trouble. But that is another story . . . probably worth a beer for the telling . . .

At this point in time, we would get brigade challenge coins awarded to us if we did exceptionally well during annual training when the eyes of the brigade were upon us. Naturally, being who we were, we tended to outshine every other unit in our area of operations and routinely won those coins with the frequency of Mario in a special stage. This was especially true when we transitioned from being a combat engineer unit to a bridging engineer unit (we went from playing with explosives to building with gigantic Legos—So much fun!). Of course, by this point in time, I'd regained my rank the usual way (I stayed out of trouble for six months and they promoted me) and found myself deployed with a Southern California unit: First Battalion, 160th Infantry Regiment, A Company (the fact that it took me three tries to find out what company I was in should've given me a clue to their competence), Second Platoon. These were ground pounders, light infantry and proud of it . . . and they'd just been told they'd be doing a military police/cavalry scout's job in escorting convoys in Iraq . . . Joy.

We received, each of us, a challenge coin upon our arrival in Kuwait. This wasn't from our unit; this was from the Third Army, which we were now officially part of, having been federalized in the process of going to war. (The funny part was we had an active duty unit attached to us and subordinate to our own. They had to wear our patch. You have no idea how funny that idea is to a National Guard soldier. :D) This was the official Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) challenge coin, and upon its receipt, a major actually informed us of the general history of challenge coins and what they were used for . . . a British major . . . who was going out of country soon . . . Oh well. After we were told about the coin's ability to get us free booze in the establishment of our choice (provided another service member of any military was around), we were informed in no uncertain terms that there was no booze allowed in the entire combat zone! (Oh, the humanity!) In fact, it was a crime, punishable by fairly severe measures (not just an Article 15 punishment, but actual jail time), to be caught with alcohol while in the combat zone (this was less restrictive in Kuwait, where it would just result in an Article 15) . . . not that that stopped us in any fashion, but you get the idea.

Once we got home, those of us who returned to our home units (telling the story of my deployment to Iraq is at least a case of beer) informed the pinky new faces we found in the unit of what these shiny coins were and what they were used for (pity they had no coins or stories to go with them—would've been worth something to hear of home while we were away), and thus

**the tradition, while nearly dead in the active duty army, is still alive and well in the CA National Guard,**

and still being passed on to the new troops who come in, the tradition being rekindled by the flames of war . . . though you'd think those flames wouldn't burn so bright without the presence of alcohol to get them going . . .

Benjamin Osborn  
PFC

US Army, 3 years  
CA Nat'l Guard, 9 years



## COIN CHECK!

This story came to me from Bob Pryor, who was one of my crew members at the Fourth Space Operations Squadron, Schriever Air Force Base, Colorado.

When Bob was assigned to the First Special Operations Communication Squadron at Hurlburt Field, Florida, the rule was that you had to have your coin within arm's length, if not on your person, at all times. The unit went on temporary duty (TDY) to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, for an operational readiness inspection, and while they were there one day the squadron commander "coin checked" Bob—in the showers. Bob says, "To this day, I have no idea where he was hiding his coin that time and don't think I want to know."

A few weeks later, Bob had occasion to go to the commander's house, and Lieutenant Colonel H—— answered the door in shorts because he'd just gotten back from running. Bob figured he wouldn't get a better opportunity to get the commander back for the shower incident, so he coin checked him on the spot—whereupon the colonel just reached up above the door and pulled down a unit coin off the molding.

Gray Rinehart

LtCol, USAF (Retired)

(4th Space Operations Squadron, 1995-98)

1986-2006




My father's father, Thomas Barclay of Dunfermline, Scotland, volunteered for military service at the age of sixteen (under age) during the First World War. He always maintained he did so because the British Army was paying and he felt he needed to help raise money for his parents and six siblings; His father was a coal miner, and coal miners didn't make much back then (a third over-time shift compensated with a cabbage, no less!). Thomas had already had to quit school at thirteen to take up two jobs (horse-drawn milk delivery and work in a bakery) to help support the family.

Thomas was enlisted into the British Army and, after training, he would eventually join the 16th Highland Light Infantry. It is unclear whether he was subsequently seconded to another unit or not as finding his service records has been difficult and he passed away in 1989.

During training, someone from the neighborhood ratted Thomas out for being underage. He was not discharged, but he was assigned to further training in the North of England which included (beyond standard infantry training) caring for the horses of the officers of his unit. His prior expertise with horses from work in milk delivery (a solitary activity undertaken in the wee hours of the morning, including fending off bandits at least once) was what brought him to the attention of the unit's officers.

Thomas was diligent and meticulous so the horse brass was well polished and the horses so well looked after that when Thomas turned seventeen (the soonest the army would think about letting him go overseas to France), the colonel of the training unit offered him an immediate promotion to sergeant with a possibility for further non-commissioned officer rank gains if he would stay and take care of the animals and their tack and harness. Thomas' standards of care for both were exceptional.

Thomas' choice at this juncture is part of why we believe the "I joined to support the family" wasn't



the whole story. Thomas felt he had to go and do his part with the other brave men, young and old, from his neighborhood by going overseas. He declined the promotion, elected to go overseas and remained a private for the rest of the war.

At this point it was 1916, and Thomas was getting ready to ship out.

**His father must have scraped up any financial reserves the family had to purchase a single 1916 gold half-sovereign.**

The half-sovereign is a small coin, but made entirely of gold (the last valuation the family had in the 1980s would have valued it at about \$8000). This was given by Thomas' father to him as a good luck piece and as an emergency fund if circumstances required.

**That good luck piece saw Thomas through the trenches and some of the bitterest fighting in France, Belgium and the low countries, and into Germany.**

He fought and lived in the trenches - complete with rats, contaminated water, and boardwalks where a wrong step could see a man disappear in the muck so fast that no one could help him. Thomas carried an Enfield bolt-action .303, a bayonet that saw use, Mills bombs, and for a time he was part of a two-man Lewis LMG (light machine gun) team. Thomas was mustard gassed several times and enough penetrated the gas mask of the day on one occasion to require some convalescence in France and to add a rasp to his voice for the remainder of his days. This gassing may also have contributed to late-life throat cancer.

During one action, Thomas was crossing no man's land with an advancing wave of HLI (Highland Light Infantry) when a German artillery round landed amidst the advancing soldiers. The shell threw up enough mud to bury several men, leaving my grandfather buried up to his neck, unable to

move or extricate himself. Other soldiers were killed by the shrapnel and one was buried in mud over his head and was never right after being rescued due to oxygen starvation while buried.

In another action, revisited in late-life "sundowner's syndrome" flashbacks, Thomas and another lad he was very close to were caught in no-man's-land on a patrol when a mortar or artillery round injured his friend. Thomas was trying to get his best friend back to the lines, but his friend, badly hurt, was making a lot of noise and there were German patrols nearby that the two were trying to evade. Grandfather was trying to keep his friend quiet to avoid drawing the Germans down upon them, but his friend kept wondering why he couldn't feel his lower arm and hand. My grandfather replied, "Shush lad, ye'll be awright. Ye canna feel yer arm - tis'nae there nae mair." They got back to British lines and his friend survived the war as far as we know.

These horrible scenes are typical of the kind of experience common to the brutal warfare in the trenches and in no man's land during the First World War.

My grandfather saw action at the Somme, likely at Arras, and across the landscape from France to Germany. He served in the Occupation and did not get home to Scotland until early 1920, after all of the victory parties were well over and all the jobs snapped up (which is indirectly what saw him attend textile college and emigrate to Canada, where he eventually became superintendent in the Rosamund's Woolen Mill in Almonte, Ontario).

My grandfather was a sensible man. He was awarded the custody of the company's rum ration because he did not drink and didn't dare after he had that job! He was the sort of man who, while other British soldiers were looting jewelry from battle ravaged towns they passed through, was instead searching damaged mills to find oatmeal or (in one case) a bag full of pea meal to make soup in case the supply chain didn't get hot food to his trench as frequently happened (Thomas always said, "Ye canna eat ae gold ring").

His good luck piece brought him home safe and as whole as anyone who survived the horrors of the war could be.

You might not think any particular part of his war story seems overly lucky. However, consider also this: Of thirty-two men from his neighborhood who enlisted, only three returned home.

One of them was the fellow who had suffered brain damage by being buried. Of the other two who returned, one was my grandfather and namesake, Thomas.

**That gold 1916 half-sovereign is a treasured family heirloom.**

Every time I see it or touch it, it reminds me of the man whose name I have the honour to bear. I only hope my small feet can one day fill his big shoes.

I have carried forward the “lucky coin” tradition. Even if you don’t subscribe to the notion of ‘good luck’ as embodied in a talisman, I think there is a psychological value to such a talisman that may slightly impact your chances of survival – warfare is largely about the human element and about the morale of soldiers.

My godson’s father, Robert Brunner, Lieutenant Commander, Royal Canadian Navy, took a tour at Kandahar Airfield in Afghanistan. Robert was supposed to be doing CIMIC (civil-military cooperation) work. CIMIC is considered as a “purple” activity (no specific trade or branch limits) which is why a MarS (Maritime Surface Warfare) officer could be deployed in that capacity.

Robert did that work for a period of months (very dangerous work outside the wire, complete with roadside bombings and hot engagements of insurgents in response to roadside ambushes), but eventually they recognized Robert’s planning experience and re-tasked him to doing joint operational planning for Canadian, American, Dutch, and British forces.

I sent Robert off with a Canadian silver dollar (I could not afford gold, sadly) and he carried it taped inside the bottom of a C7 magazine pouch

throughout his tour. Robert returned home safe, despite the bombings and gunfire. I am happy that Jack and Alex, my godsons, got their father back in one piece and I know Erica was happy to have him home intact.

The lucky coin had worked twice and another opportunity to propagate the tradition ensued: My close friend from university, now Captain Gary Kett, Royal Canadian Air Force, an intelligence officer, accepted a tour at Canada House in Juba, Republic of South Sudan. I sent Gary also with a Canadian silver dollar, which he carried through his tour and he returned home safe. Charles, James, and Shelly were happy Gary came home with nothing worse than a sense of how unfortunate conditions are in South Sudan and how difficult it is to change things for the better.

Thomas Robert Scott Barclay

Once upon a time before the Berlin Wall was torn down:

R031 Infanteer

Private

Princess’ Of Wales Own Regiment

Canadian Primary Reserve





## COIN CHECK!

The squadron I'm currently assigned to has a nice "heritage room" a.k.a. bar. It's well stocked with many historical mementos from years past and plenty of alcohol. Every Friday we can't get the squadron out early we meet up in the heritage room for roll call. This semiformal event is presided over by the Mayor, one of the most colorful chaps in the unit. One of the first orders of business is a lingerie and coin check. The lingerie check is to ensure you are wearing the squadron scarf around your neck. The next is to verify that you have your unit coin on you. Anybody who fails to have any of these or is late to roll call is brought up to the bar. There the offender is asked if they want a shot of leaded or unleaded. Unless you're a teetotaler, you're better off leaded. The leaded shot is whatever hooch/moonshine/home brew the Mayor happens to grab first off the shelf. Sometimes it's great. Last time I forgot my lingerie I had a shot of this sweet apple stuff. Tasted like pie going down with no burn. Other times, uh, I shudder at the memories. But if you don't drink, the unleaded shot is really whatever the Mayor feels like making. Olive oil, Tabasco, lime juice, Coke—whatever—goes into it. And when you're done with the shot, you have to turn the glass upside down over your head.

Alex Taylor

MSgt

USAF

2004-present

While we were touring the Mighty Mo (Missouri Aircraft Carrier) in Pearl Harbor, we saw this display of Challenge coins. We read the story of how a challenge coin saved the life of an American pilot in World War II.

The display had three panels. The first photo is of the center panel. The were rows of challenge coins on either side of the central panel. We took a closeup of the inscription at the bottom of the right panel.

Rose and Jerry Owens

Civilians



## Closing words from Myke Cole

The term *challenge coin* was old hat by the time I started working with the military, a holdover of an old custom, obsolescence sticking around for tradition's sake.

We were all taught about the tradition of challenging another service member to produce a coin, with the promise of bragging rights and free beer if they failed.

We all carried our unit coins in our pockets, waiting for the right moment to slap them on the bar, wave them aloft, and shout our service pride.

But we never did. It never seemed to be the right time. The folks we knew well enough to risk doing something like that to were all from the same unit and had the same coins we did. The thought of going up to a complete stranger, with only a common uniform between you, looking him in the eyes, and slapping down your coin felt too much like the protocol preceding a duel for our tastes.

But the coins were always there, as thematic and omnipresent as acronyms and regulation haircuts.

No commander's office was complete without the walnut tiered stand, row upon row of challenge coins, telling the story of their career as surely as the ribbons on their chest.

I swap challenge coins of the fictional unit in my novels with fans all the time. Before I became a writer, I used to do coin swaps with friends. My collection has become pretty large and varied. I've got coins from law enforcement organizations, special operations units, even universities.

But the few times I've gotten coins given to me outside of swaps were more significant and memorable than they ever would have been had

somebody slapped it down on the bar in front of me.

There was the time that the general in charge of Joint Functional Component Command—Network Warfare (JFCC-NW, now USCYBERCOM) thanked me for helping out with a particular op that had involved weeks of practically living at the office. After the third long night, I decided I'd earned the right to wear casual clothing and started showing up to work in a (clean, not ripped) T-shirt and jeans. She got a kick out of this and gave me the nickname "GQ," which I'm sorry to say stuck for a while.

"Thanks, GQ," she said when it was all over, reaching out to shake my hand. I felt the cold metal of the coin press into my palm as she squeezed. "You did good."

We do good all the time. We usually do it unconsciously, fumbling into it or just showing up and performing to expectations. Good is often in the mundane, the rote. And so it's easy to forget, to write off the good you've done as "just doing my job."

But there are times I don't feel capable of doing good, don't feel equal to the work necessary to pull good off.

The coin sits on my rack, a glittering reminder of the good I can do when I really try.

There was the time I took command of the reserves at my current unit. At the time I had no experience with small boat operations (search and rescue, maritime law enforcement). With over fifty sailors reporting to me, it was the largest leadership position I'd ever had in my career. At our all-hands meeting, the outgoing lieutenant presented me with a long oval of a challenge coin, emblazoned with the insignia of the guard's boat forces: the boat hook and the oar crossed behind the compass rose. "I'm passing this on to you," he said, "on the condition that you take good care of it and pass it along when you stand relieved."

It was a public statement of faith and welcome. It was a symbol of continuity, of the long tradition this

community had in one of the most important and most dangerous missions the guard undertakes.

And when I see that coin winking at me from my rack, I realize it is a reminder of expectations. I have inherited a legacy I must not shame. I have inherited a crew I must not fail. I have inherited a responsibility I must guard as carefully as that coin, handing it over to my relief as bright and as shining as when I received it.

And there was the time a coin was hidden in my bag. I was supporting a specialized unit out in Iraq, doing work that stretched me far beyond my limits, took me out of my comfort zone, and forced me to live there, daily doing things by dint of luck and training that I'd never imagined I could do. Better men than me died in that time. Four of them, to be exact. I stood in formation while the loudspeakers played "Amazing Grace" on bagpipes, stared at the monument we built for them: boots, rifle, and helmet, all belonging to people as close to superhuman as I could imagine.

Each one of those deaths felt like a personal failure, a reminder to work harder and faster, to find a way to win before the word came down and I was called to my next funeral. I felt personally responsible for each team member who went down. I thought the unit leader would hate me, would condemn me for not pushing hard enough, for failing to somehow find a way.

But he didn't. When I wrapped up my work for him, he grabbed my hand and shoulder checked me in what passes for a hug among people of his stripe. "Thanks, man," he said. "This would have been a lot rougher without you. Left something in your pack for you. Catch you on the flip side."

The unit coin was in my pack, and I never did catch him on the flip side. Never saw any of them again, for that matter. The coin is all that remains.

It's right there in the front row of my rack. Sometimes, at night, I think about those men that died, turn over the same old question: why they died and I lived. Your brain does these spirals, following

familiar trails, wondering if some divine hand kept you around for a specific purpose (and if so, then what is it and why aren't you doing it) or if it's worth it to exist in a universe so capricious that a tossed die determines your continued existence. You anthropomorphize bullets and explosions, imagine them as bloodthirsty things that must be fed, and see the dead as balancing that ledger in your favor. You feel intense gratitude, intense guilt, intense determination.

In my saner moments, I realize that all that spinning is the churning of a mind trying to find reason in the unreasonable, to see a pattern in the chaos that governs everything from blowing wind to the death of soldiers.

A more cynical man would let it go at that. But I won't. If there's no meaning to be found, then I construct my own. I stare at that coin and see four souls staring back at me. I imagine their legacy bound into the gold metal. I am reminded of that scene from *Saving Private Ryan* where a dying Tom Hanks reminds a rescued Matt Damon to "earn this."

I remember their example, know what they would have had to do to feel like they'd earned their lives, for it to be something more than just pushing air past teeth.

I watched them earn it every day. It was an example I can remember.

I look at that coin each morning, a gold reminder that I'm not alone, that my days are borrowed from everyone around me. Men and women stand watches, teach children, put out fires. They cure sickness, fix pipes, drive buses, and run businesses. They fight wars. Sometimes, they die. All of them, trying to earn it.

Those four men were stronger than me. They were faster. I'd even say they were mentally tougher. It'll be hard to earn it as they did.

But I look at that coin each day and choose to try.

Myke Cole  
Lieutenant (O-3, LT)  
USCG  
2008-present