

History of the Challenge Coin

The yearning for camaraderie and unity exists in humans as naturally as hunger for food. It's an emotional craving that drives us to connect with others of like-minds and souls. We also harbor a need to express that connection, create a physical manifestation of that alliance. We see many such expressions in the form of things like bumper stickers, tattoos, haircuts, flags, rings, t-shirts, and hats. In the past few decades, challenge coins have sprung their way into popularity as a representation of solidarity and brotherhood.

Typically, military superiors delve out challenge coins for a job well done – “atta-boy coins” as some dub them. When a person receives a coin in this manner, he's been “coined.” And only those who have been coined qualify for a “coin check.” The *challenge* begins when a coin-holder whoops, “Coin check!” Rules and repercussions vary widely. Generally though, those without their coin at the time of the check must carry out the penalty designated by the challenger – such as buying the next round of drinks. If everyone produces their coin, the challenger is on the hook for the next round.

But where did this tradition begin? The answer to that swells with varying stories and opinions – and depends on what you've read and who you talk to. One theory points back to soldiers of ancient Rome. Roman soldiers sometimes received a bonus coin in addition to their daily pay for exceptional service. Reportedly, these coins bore the mark of the soldier's unit or legion. Rather than squandering the coins, the soldiers retained them as mementos of conquest and praise.

An oft-repeated story of more recent history takes us to World War I. An Army Air Force Service officer gifted his men bronze coins bearing their squadron's insignia before their first mission. Forced to land after taking enemy fire, one pilot unluckily fell into German hands. They stripped him of all personal belongings except for a leather pouch he wore around his neck, which carried his medallion.

Somehow the pilot escaped and dressed in civilian attire to slip pass German forces. But once he reached French territory he was captured, pegged as a spy, and detained – spies were rumored to masquerade as civilians. His execution was ordered. However, a French soldier recognized the pilot's coin that the detainee presented in an attempt to prove his innocence and identity. The French released him after confirming his identity and saw his return to his squadron. Once safely reunited with his squadron, he told his tale. Once the word spread, no squadron member was ever without his medallion.

Since that legend of fortune, unit insignia coins have slowly tip-toed into military tradition. Yet, the customary challenge associated with the coins reportedly didn't come into play until World War II. American soldiers stationed in a small German town during the war brought the challenge to U.S. shores with a local German tradition called “pfenning checks” - pfennigs were the lowest German coin denomination, much like the U.S. penny.

During a tour at the neighborhood pub, a patron would call out “pfennig check!” Whoever his party woefully found themselves without a pfennig bought the next round of drinks. The American soldiers adopted this jovial practice, substituting their unit's coin for the currency.

The camaraderie and pride the challenge typified had netted the whole of the U.S. military by the 1980s. Though the challenges are now executed for more than pub drinks. Rules and details vary from one military division or unit to the next, but generally, the accepted rules state that a challenge may be declared anytime, *anywhere* – even in the shower. Excuses are not accepted for being without your coin. The penalties, of course, differ as well. The challenger holds reign to throw down any punishment he chooses.

Today, the challenge has snaked outside of the military into law enforcement, fire departments– the list goes on.

For many, when they hold a coin minted with a symbol of their unit, division, ship, base, battle, etc., they are holding a physical piece of solidarity and support that feeds the human soul.

General Challenge Coin Rules:

1. Rules of the game must be divulged to all new coin holders.
2. The coin must be carried at all times. A challenge may be declared anywhere, at any time. You must produce the coin without taking more than 1 step to retrieve it.
4. There are no exceptions to the rules and apply to clothed or un-clothed individuals.
4. The challenger must state the repercussion for not having your coin – such as an entire round of drinks.
5. Failure to produce coin results in performing whatever punishment the challenger chose. Once the offender has carried out the action, they can't be challenged again.
6. If all present produce their coins, the challenger loses and is stuck fulfilling the penalty.
7. No one is permitted to hand coin to another in response to a challenge. If someone gives away their coin, the recipient is now the new owner.
8. An individual is responsible for the replacement of a lost coin. Replacing a coin as soon as possible is always in your best interest - losing a coin doesn't relieve a member of his responsibilities. And no doubt a lost coin will be exploited by fellow members.
9. Belt buckles, key chains, or necklaces are not permitted replacements. Coins worn around the neck in a case are valid.

10. No holes may be drilled in a coin.

11. The coin should be controlled at all times. It is an honor to be given a coin. A given or awarded coin possesses more personal value than a purchased coin.
