

28TH FIELD ARTILLERY REGIMENT ASSOCIATION

POLICY LETTER #2

CHALLENGE COINS

Proposed by 1st Vice President: 30 Jan 2022

Approved by Board of Directors: 27 Feb 2022

President's Signature: _____

To quote an extremely popular Neil Diamond song, "Where it began, I can't begin to knowin', but then I know it's growin' strong."

While the origin of military challenge coins is greatly debated there is no argument that they are a huge part of military culture. Some believe they date back to the Romans and everyone agrees that they are a great way to boost morale and signify your allegiance to a unit. Most importantly they demonstrate your "proof of membership" to an organization or association.

There is the time-honored tradition of slamming your coin down in bars to see who else has theirs. He who is last to show theirs or is without it must buy the round. Regardless of their origin they are great to reward performance, to receive, and to display.

In antiquity kings and emperors shaped metals with their image as currency to be used in the realm. Maximus was one such Roman emperor who had mercenaries who fought for Rome. They were not always citizens of the empire but were paid for their professional skills. Therefore, these pressed coins were likely the first challenge coins in history.

Legend has it that in World War I a wealthy military officer had bronze medallions made with his squadron insignia on them. They were presented to each member before they went on their flying mission over Europe. In one instance a pilot of the squadron was shot down and captured by the Germans. All of his identification was taken away except for his personal clothing and a leather pouch that contained the medallion. Upon his escape he made his way back to France. The French people who found him thought he might be a spy until they saw his medallion identifying him as a member of that American squadron.

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

As legend has it, the Commander and Sergeant Major of the 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne), in order to properly recognize their men, designed a military challenge coin to present to them. On the front was the unit's name, a beret flash with the numeral one in the top right and a sword point up, signifying the unit was ready for combat, and an eagle on top spreading its wings. On the reverse side was the Special Forces motto, "De Oppresso Liber," the traditional green beret, a bayonet and scroll, and a blank space to enumerate the coin for

posterity. The command kept a detailed registry to record the name, date, and mission of each recipient. The 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne) coin was a way for the command to formally recognize their men and their accomplishments when formal acknowledgement by the Army was openly frowned upon.

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



A popular tradition at unit social functions, formal events, and in local bars is the “coin check.” This tradition dates back to the Vietnam War and the bars run by military service members at the forward operating based (FOBs) and combat outposts. As the story goes, military service members were to present enemy bullets or their unit challenge coin to gain admission to the bar.

The tradition continues today when someone yells out, “Coin check!” and then slaps their coin onto the bar. All military members, active and retired, are to respond in kind by placing their coin on the bar. The last one to present theirs or the one who is shamefully without theirs has to buy the round of drinks. There are often strong arguments regarding whose coin is the most senior. The older the coin the more senior it is. But also, the more senior in rank the person’s coin is, based on the rank of the presenter, wins out in the end.

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

Our Association has purchased 300 challenge coins. They will be initially by Tommy Houston or Rock Young in recognition of outstanding service to the Association. They are numbered and a registry of recipients will be maintained by the Association’s historian and secretary. Each will also come with an acrylic display case.

The criteria for the award of a challenge coin will be determined solely by the current Board President and Command Sergeant Major. If you are fortunate enough to receive one be certain to carry it with you at all Association events lest you be challenged!