

## ORIGIN OF THE MILITARY'S NEWEST COLLECTABLE CHALLENGE AND AWARD COINS

By: Ronald E. Fischer

### WORLD WAR II:

During World War II the US Army Air Forces Air Transport Command pilots began a practice of gluing together strings of banknotes from the many lands in which they touched down or perhaps in which they had a drink or a short snort. These strings of bills were called "Short Snorters" and usually bore autographs collected in the course of each journey from crews, friends, girls, allies, etc. If a crew member did not have this short snorter when meeting other Short Snorters he bought a short snort for all who had their \$PRrSFrYuanPounds etc. The practice received some wartime publicity and even ground-pounders picked up their own local currency from the counties and islands they passed through



### Bill Signing Flourishes Over Hump

Some people associate the "Short Snorters" with ocean flying exclusively, but this is not so. The sky voyage on which more than on any other, air travelers sign each other's "Short Snorter" bills, is the Hump. The ceremony is held above the ranges of the world's highest mountains—the Himalayas. Some "Short Snorters" have long strings of paper money lined with signatures acquired on flights. Sometimes only your name is signed, then again the date and the words, "Above the Hump" are written. The altitude shows up—signing is clumsy because of oxygen masks that are worn. The owner was obliged to collect signatures on it and display it on demand, or face the consequences. The penalty for such an infraction was usually picking up the tab or buying a round of drinks.



### EUROPE:

It was rumored that in Europe that the French Foreign Legion used counter stamped named coins in a similar practice. I have not been able to confirm this. I was able to find a World War II Veteran by the name of Jim Harrington whom, if any one, was probably the acknowledged father of the challenge coin in the Special Forces. He told me his story, in a letter, back in 1990, which is worth quoting:  
"For five glorious years I was a Company Commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Bn HQ Co, 107<sup>th</sup> Infantry - - New York's famous old Gallant Seventh. It was the closest thing to a British unit in spirit, conduct, tradition, and trappings I have experienced. The only officers - only room in the Park Avenue edifice was called the Field & Staff Room and there we met and drank prior to donning our uniform of the day and presiding over our Company table within the Seventh Regiment Mess dining with our outfit. This was around 1954. In 'The Field & Staff' we used to sing a lot and 'I've Got Sixpence' was often heard, as the Lyrics were easy. Remembering the Short Snorter fun, I proposed a Jolly Sixpence Club among the junior officers and a few of the more fun loving Majors got in. We all carried a Sixpence, which we had to produce on demand when boozing. He who had no "6d" could be in for trouble and there are a few survivors who most likely still dam and blast Captain. Harrington and his coins. Every participant with imagination tried for a unique coin. Mine was from Fiji but the grand winner was a Colonial American 6d. There were a variety of other Tanners in use."

“Time passed and I found myself promoted out and in command of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the 19<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group, a NY State National Guard unit in up state NY. The operational area that was projected for this unit was Africa at that time. One of the prime potential AOs in that area was Ethiopia. I knew more and more than the average American about this fascinating empire that deserved better than it got did. I spearheaded the area studies and got more intrigued. I had us go all out on area studies, but even with planes flying regularly at least to Eritrea, I could not get any of us to the area. Finally I had developed numerous contacts and bought my own ticket and flew to Ethiopia in 1969 and 1971. I jumped with the Imperial Ethiopian Airborne Battalion and layered the groundwork for us if we were ever deployed. – In my efforts within the “C” Detachment to fire up and maintain interest along with a lot of other things and remembering “The Jolly Sixpence Club” I started awarding Maria Theresa Thalers (MT\$) (these silver coins were minted in Austria, all dated 1780, were captured in large numbers as the Turks besieged Vienna and afterwards became the trade dollars of the Middle East, much as the pieces of eight were in the Americas) to deserving recipients in the “C” Detachment and other unit members. Later I found a small hoard of MT\$ counterstruck with an Arabic “chop” of the word for “Doctor” or “Surgeon” phonetically “jarahha”. The Arab letters are also my initials and my nickname “Hakim” which translates “Doctor”. I got the nickname from painting a lot of sores and doing minor first aid in the Ethiopian boonies. The counterstruck MT\$ became an award like the “Blue Max”. In 1972/3 “they” switched all of our AOs and we could never find out who got Ethiopia. I retired soon after, and the battalion was disbanded some 18 months later. My two sons were with me on my 1971 trip, we still carry the Jarahha coins, and carry on the traditional game. I gave a Thaler to Captain Dieter Protsch who took it back to the Special Warfare Center at Ft. Bragg. Other officers and NCOs from the SWC saw us use and discuss our coins.”



Maria Theresa Trade Dollar mounted up as a souvenir of the North African Campaign

The first Special Forces Challenge Coin was designed by a member of the 10<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group and made in Germany of .999 fine silver by the Soligen firm. The process quickly spread and soon each of the Special Forces Groups had their own coins. The design used the flash in some form on the obverse and on the reverse there was always a place for the recipient’s name, rank, and position to be engraved. The coins were made of silver, silver plate, and bronze. They could have serrated or plain edges and some units numbered them. Special coins were struck for exercises Such as “Flint Lock”, a Multi National Special Forces Exercise in Europe and given as awards to American and foreign participants. The concept spread on to the Rangers, then the Airborne, then the rest of the Army.



First Special Forces Coin designed by the 10<sup>th</sup> Group in Germany

**KOREA:**

During the Korean War the 17<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment had a Buffalo Nickel copied with the units crest on the other side and the dates 1950 –1951, 1950-1952, or 1950-1953. After the war the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division copied the concept and created a similar coin using an Indian Head Penny.



17<sup>th</sup> Infantry Buffalo Nickel and 2<sup>nd</sup> Division Indian Head Penny

During the mid 1960s the Korean Demilitarized Zone heated up and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division revisited the earlier coin concept and created a new coin for service during that period. This coin was the size of the silver dollar with a place left open for the date when things calmed down.



2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division 1965 DMZ service coin

It can be debated that challenge coins started in Korea from the 1960's Second Division coin, but it is my strong suspicion that the unit coins in Korea were not made until the tenth Special Forces Group coins came over from the States.

## THE RULES:

With the use of the coins in drinking games some formal rules have evolved:

### CHALLENGE © and RESPONSE ® RULES

#### Part 1

1. © is made by displaying coin on a hard surface.
2. ® is made by displaying coin on a hard surface within 10 seconds of a ©.
3. Unsuccessful ® obligates you to the © for the drink of their choice.
4. Successful ® obligates © for the drink of your choice.

#### Part 2

1. Un-numbered coin is obligated to numbered coin.
2. Numbered coin © & ® between same unit coins is mandatory: higher number is obligated.
3. Numbered coin © & ® between different units: must be mutually agreed: high number is obligated.
4. Except unit numbered coin, i.e., 187<sup>th</sup> Infantry and coin number 0187 does not buy regardless of the other coin number: other is obligated.
5. © & ® between unit numbered coins are considered equal and therefore a draw.
6. Only coins count. Neck worn coins or medals, dog tags, belt buckles do not count.

The process of the challenge can be as simple as someone yelling “COINS OUT” with those who left their home buying. There are many legendary stories about challenges at odd times and places. During a promotion ceremony at Ft. Bragg a newly “minted” 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant had a coin in his right hand when he shook the commander’s hand. LTG Wm. P. Yarborough asked him if he really wanted to do this, to which the new Lieut said “yes”. The General wiped out his coin and told the surprised Lieut. that he and his staff who were all very thirsty would meet him and the bar at 1800. Then there were the three Special Forces Troopers who tried to catch one of their team in the shower. They walked in, threw their coins on the floor and watched in total surprise as their victim reached behind him into his soap dish and pretended to pull his coin out of you can guess were and threw it down in reply. As you can see these stories are endless.



19<sup>th</sup> Special Forces, “DELTA FORCE”, 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn. 75<sup>th</sup> Rangers 1<sup>st</sup> Bn. 325<sup>th</sup> Inf (Abn), 501<sup>st</sup> Inf. (Abn)  
All coins 39 mm

## THE AWARD COIN:

The practice of discouraging drinking in the Army and the services as a whole caused a major shift in the use of the coin. It is now the Commander’s impact award. Every major personage in the chain of command has a coin today from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and the Secretary of the Army, who downsized their seals, to a separate Battalion and even Company Commanders. The Sergeant Major of the Army down to a Battalion Command Sergeant Major also have their own coins. As the use of the coin spread to other services, through their respective elite forces, now the Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and even the Coast Guard have coins. Each of the services has in depth pyramid of awards. But even in the day when the Commendation Ribbon with Medal Pendant was in existence units created their own non-wearing presentation certificates and medals for achievement. Each service now has its own achievement medal that can be awarded by the Battalion Commander as a spot award. But the medals, because they require paper work, are almost always end of tour awards. The coin presented by the Battalion Commander for a job well done, that means something and the recipient will carry it for the rest of his tour with that unit. In the beginning the coins were silver or bronze. Now many of them vary in size ( 1 ¼”, 1 ½” or 1 ¾”), can be made of bronze, silver, or plated in silver or gold and have the option of plain, serrated or scalloped edges. The process of the use of enamel or epoxy on one or both sides is also now wide spread. Most of

the coins are made in South Korea, but there are also still pieces of varying quality made in the US, China and in Europe. Challenge / Award Coins are the next Militaria collectable. They are often made in small numbers of each design, many are more attractive and better designed than the currently awarded pyramid of DOD decorations and campaign medals. Nearly all of the unit coins still have a place for the engraving of name or initials, rank and even serial numbers or assigned position. A career soldier will typically acquire 40 to 80 coins over a 20 to 30 year term of service. In May of 1998 one South Korean manufacturer showed me twenty books with his production for the last eight years of 2000 different coins. He kept none of the examples he made the four before 1990 that had not been reordered, and was one of



four manufacturers within a block. Since they are generally made in small runs of 100, 200, 500, or tops 1000, each strike is quite rare when compared with the mintage of conventional coins or even Military tokens.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff maintained a variety of awards for Americans and foreign visitors (76mm). Shown here is a table medal incorporating the seal of the JCS awarded to a former Ambassador to Russia.



Units also used Certificates of Achievement for impact or end of tour awards. Some units also used medals such as this one. The 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division was stationed in Europe and deactivated on 10 May 1971. (60mm)



The Signal School located at Ft. Monmouth, N.J. went one step further and created a Medallion of Achievement. (59mm)



The Chairman of Joint Chiefs created his own coin based on a down sized seal, similar to the medal above. (1 1/2" or 39 mm)



The Secretary of the Army used a similar concept in designing his coin using the Army Seal for the obverse. (1 3/4" or 44mm)



The Chief and Vice Chief of Staff of the Army created their own coins (44mm) using the Army seal with raised reverse. The Sergeant Major of the Army created a coin with his own seal and a raised reverse.



One of the most beautiful of the coins seen to date this one used by General George A Jollwan, SHAPE Commander features enamel and epoxy on each side and scalloped edges (2" or 50mm)



This coin used by the 4th Infantry Division Support Command features the use of the bronze statue of the Wrangler on the obverse. Note the insert of a small patch in the design. The reverse is also enameled and features the Support Commands insignia. (44mm)

It is interesting that the first American medals were table or pocket medal authorized by Congress during the American Revolution. The process appears to be going almost full circle. Where will this concept go in the future? Because many commanders want to use government funds to pay for these awards the question of what type of fund to use has now come under the scrutiny of Army Lawyers. Where one coin could have been used by a commander before, for recognizing military, civilians, and foreign visitors, now three distinct versions must be used. To keep commanders from violating regulations it is at least one Army lawyer has researched opinion that “ Commanders’ coins are inexpensive yet powerful management tools. They can be purchased with government funds, given as awards, and under limited circumstances, as gifts to hosted guests of the unit. It is important, however, that their purchase comply with funding rules and limitations. ... A coin “for excellence” would be funded with Appropriated Funds (APF) and given to soldiers or civilian employees. A coin purchased with Official Representation Funds (ORF) might identify the bearer as a “friend” of the unit (an authorized guest which would include: certain foreign citizens, national and local government officials, national or regional dignitaries), and coins for Non-appropriated Fund (NAF) employees could include a morale, welfare, and recreation motto.” At least one major commander has sent out a message delegating award authority for APF (mission) funds to the Major Command Commander, his Sergeant Major, Brigade and Group Commanders & their Command Sergeants Major, special reporting activity Commanders, and Battalion Commanders. Of course Coins may still be purchased with private funds and are not subject to legal regulations and design suggestions. Anyone who may have doubted that these coins would ever catch on needed only to look at the table behind President William Jefferson Clinton when he gave his Kosovo Victory speech to the nation. On either side of him were two display racks and a table covered with several hundred coins that he no doubt collected over his presidency while visiting the troops of all services. They were laid out for effect because he was sure the troops would spot them and feel a sense of solidarity with their Commander in Chief.

#### SOURCES:

CHINA AIRLIFT – THE HUMP, Hump Pilots Association CBI, Volume I 1980, Short Snorter, page 233

Letter from James R. Harrington to Ronald E. Fischer dated 23 March 1990.

“Commanders’ Coins: Worth Their Weight in Gold” Major Kathryn R. Sommerkamp, October 1997 the Army Lawyer. DA Pam 27-59-300.

The above article was published by the author in a number of professional Journals nearly fifteen years ago. Today there are a variety of articles found on the internet that describe both the rules and or the history of Challenge Coins.