

A BRIEF HISTORY OF U.S. ARMY SPECIAL FORCES CHALLENGE COINS

By Stephen Sherman and Joe A. De Santos, Jr.

U.S. Army challenge coins have a long-standing tradition rooted in camaraderie, unit pride, and recognition of service. Though the exact origin is debated, the most widely accepted story dates back to World War I, when a wealthy American lieutenant reportedly had bronze medallions made for his unit. One of his pilots, shot down behind enemy lines, used the coin to prove his identity to French soldiers, saving his life. This incident is often cited as the birth of the challenge coin tradition.

Military drink challenge devices appear to date back to WWII. USAAF Air Transport Command crews used to "build" short-snorters -- strips of bills/banknotes from each country to which their far-ranging routes took them. These worldwide supply routes were based upon the range of a C-47 transport -- the ATS "work horse" -- so you can see that stops and opportunities for a "short snort" were varied and many. Some WWII "short snorters" stretched the length of a good-sized bar. It was the custom to have the bills autographed by buddies, lady friends of short duration, local contacts, etc. If you could not produce your "short snorter", you bought a round for those who did. Whether the challenge aspect was part of the play then or later is moot; You showed down your strip of bills and those without the device bought the snorts.

James Harrington instituted a copy of this idea in the 107th Infantry -- the grand old Seventh Regiment of New York....He had suggested that we all carry a sixpence and show-down our coins in the Mess or clubs in which we gathered....It was a lot of fun and sometimes quite costly. That was about 1954.

When his unit E Co 16th SFG(A) was integrated with 19th SFG(A), ... he instituted the practice in 1/19th SFG(A). [about 1966] For a short period we used paper notes from the AOR. He then obtained a supply of the large silver coins that were the only money freely circulating within the AOR for a couple of centuries prior to 1948.... Our challenge coins were Maria Theresa Dollars or "Thalers" originally minted in Vienna in 1780. Because of their purity and convenient size, they became the most popular coin in the Middle East and Horn of Africa. They were still struck in recent times, but always dated 1780. The MT\$ was a terrific pocket-piece and became popular immediately within the unit. He awarded Maria Therasas for various meritorious acts or service within 1/19th. About this time -- 1968 he thought -- the price of silver soared and we had to resort to counterfeit or copy MT\$ coins made of plated brass. Nobody liked these "clunkers" and among the troops some would make a big thing about possessing real MT\$ coins vs. the replicas.... They did not then use the challenge aspect -- it was "coins out" and if you did not have your MT\$ you bought for those who did.

In 1973 some briefer from DA told us gaily that 1/19th SFG(A) was going to get new AOR assignments -- as if it were good news. It was apparent to who had worked at it -- a few of us shouted "WHAT?" It seemed all too typical to the few of us whom had taken it seriously. But De Oppresso Liber = What the hell did you expect, anyway? Harrington retired not long after that.

Back to point, he recalled some staff visitor from JFK getting quite turned-on to our 1/19th SFG(A) MT\$ and its use within the unit. He asked for one and took it back to the hill. That was probably in

1969 or 1970 -- perhaps later, but prior to 1973. Harrington thought that it started the deluge. He gave one or two of coins to other people from Bragg before retirement; but thought think the one that went to the SWC started the deluge -- he seemed a zealot.

The Group coin, minted in a number of metals, including sterling, is approximately two inches in diameter. The coin carries the mottos or slogans of the particular Group manufacturing it. In addition to any official motto is usually a likeness of the Group flash, SF crest, and the beret. Nearly every Special Forces unit has minted its own version of the Group coin: however. the 10th Special Forces Group can be credited with fostering the tradition for a Group coin. In July 1969, Colonel Vernon E. Green, Group Commander. designed and had manufactured the 10th Group coin. On the obverse. or front, is the inscription: "10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) 1st Special Forces. In the center of the coin is the Trojan Horse crest, the original SF crest worn during the 1950s, and below, the words "Trojan Horse." The reverse side is inscribed with the Special Forces motto "De Oppresso Liber" and "The Best." A beret with flash is centered over a scroll for engraving the owner's name or job specialty, e.g., team sergeant or light weapons leader. Many Group coins have a scroll or such place for engraving. Once the 10th Group coin was minted, the tradition began calling for each Group member, past and present, to procure and carry a coin at all times. In addition to active or former Group personnel owning coins. they have been presented to friends and foreign Special Forces soldiers at the close of joint country training, as mementos.

"The Coin Check"

The actual history of the challenge initiated by one SFer to another by demanding to see his Group coin varies greatly. According to an NCO, with over 10 years' service in Special Forces, including a few with MACV- 5 SOG, the original coin check was done only by the senior man present (usually the team sergeant), who did it for the sole purpose of ensuring each man's team spirit (In which case, all would be carrying a coin). This was not done as a dare, by unabashedly extracting the coin and slamming it down onto the floor or tabletop, to challenge all SF present to produce their coins or end up buying a round of drinks. but a coin check was done primarily as a morale check. This method of the "coin check" is the most prevalent today. Presently, a couple of the active SF groups have an established set of rules for the coin challenge to ensure uniformity. Regardless of any "coin regulation," most SF prefer to carry their coins. not only to show their pride with Special Forces. but also to save money on drinks they may have to buy if caught without it. The practice grew significantly during the Vietnam War, when Special Forces units began minting custom coins to represent their team spirit and operational achievements. Over time, the tradition spread throughout the Army and other military branches, becoming a way to honor accomplishments, commemorate deployments, and build esprit de corps.