

PIANO **BUR** NING

and Other

FIGHTER PILOT TRADITIONS



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– Rob Burgon –

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The "True" Legend of the Challenge Coin

A young American company-grade officer, whose name has long been forgotten, found himself alone at the controls of a British Sopwith Camel as the sun set over a raging ground battle in late summer, circa 1917. As with many of the pilots who had volunteered, our young 1st didn't have much flying experience and quickly found himself disoriented as visual conditions deteriorated with the waning light and the increasing smoke over the battlefield.

He had arrived in-theater only a week earlier, a recent graduate of Yale University looking for excitement and the opportunity to serve in uniform. Upon his arrival, he was relieved to see the familiar face of a fraternity brother of his from Yale leading one of the flights in the squadron.

Before departing on this particular mission, our protagonist's friend and flight commander presented him with a bronze medallion; a token of his induction into the squadron. Our lieutenant promptly put the medallion in a small leather pouch, which he hung around his neck before preparing his aircraft for flight. His heart raced as the wheels left the ground, and rightly so-he hadn't experienced the thrill of flight more than a handful of times, yet now he was being thrust into the throes of combat.

Upon reaching contested airspace, he was quickly separated from his flight mates. Wide-eyed, he strained his neck as he aggressively searched for his fellow airmen and any enemy aircraft that might be rolling into fire upon him. As his eyes searched the

heavens, it was only a matter of time before this young man's aircraft fell victim to ground artillery; something from which he thought he was immune as he circled the skies above the bloody fields below.

Desperately, he tried to maintain control. He looked for an open field towards which he could maneuver his crippled Sopwith. A grassy meadow just beyond a hedge practically called out to him as he descended, against his will, into enemy territory.

His wheels touched down hard, sinking into the soft ground causing his aircraft to flip over on its back, slamming the young pilot violently to the earth. As he regained consciousness, he found the muzzle of a German Mauser staring him in the face. He had been captured.

I'm not entirely sure what events took place over the next several days, but we go now to our young captive about a week after the crash-his body still bruised and aching from the impact. The Germans had taken everything from him, except the leather pouch, which was hung around his neck. He sat crouched in a makeshift cell somewhere near the battlefield; the burlap prisoner's garb kept any semblance of comfort from him.

Suddenly, the entire building shook violently as explosions rocked the compound. The young man's heart lifted. Surely; the Allies were assaulting the prison camp to rescue him! Several bomb-bursts eventually brought part of his building down, creating a gap in the exterior wall through which he quickly climbed. He emerged

from the dilapidated building to find a scene of pure

chaos. The bodies of German soldiers were strewn across the prison camp. The fence at the west end of the camp was down, and he ran toward it. He breached the fence but didn't stop running. His adrenaline carried him as he ran for his life.

Hours later, our hero found himself weak from hunger and exertion. He couldn't remember when he last ate, and his throat was parched from lack of water. He stumbled into a small farming settlement in search of sustenance. The French farmer who owned the farmstead met him with the barrel of a rifle. Our intrepid lieutenant thrust his arms skyward pleading in English, the only language he knew, for food and water. The French farmer was unfamiliar with the young man's American accent and took him to be a German.

The young officer was bound, thrown into the back of a wagon, and taken through the dark French countryside. When horse and wagon stopped, the lieutenant was met by a mob of angry Frenchmen. You see, there were several German scouts in the area masquerading as British soldiers. When the farmer didn't recognize the young man's accent, he decided to take him to a gathering of freedom fighters to find out what to do. This angry mob decided execution was the best course of action.

As they tied our shaken hero to the firing post, one of the Frenchmen saw the leather bag beneath his shirt. The bag was ripped from his neck and opened on the spot. The young man's captor took the medallion from the bag and held it up in the torchlight. After a few seconds of scrutiny, the Frenchman's eyes lit up, and the young man was released! The freedom fighter had recognized the squadron insignia emblazoned on the

coin and knew right away the young man was no German.

The medallion had saved the lieutenant's life! Our hero was given a bottle of the finest wine they had on hand and was soon returned to his squadron. Since that day, pilots have always carried a coin for good luck, and thus the Challenge Coin was born.

Today's Challenge Coin Tradition (varies by military service-this is the Air Force's)

The tradition can best be explained by laying down the ground rules:

1. First of all, it's not called a "coin" unless you are invoking a challenge (except for purposes of describing the tradition or imparting these rules.) To avoid erroneously invoking a challenge, the item in question will be referred to as a Round Metal Object or RMO when not throwing down a challenge.
2. Ignorance can be claimed, but not by you. If you are the first to give someone a coin, you must explain the rules to him or her. If you fail to do so, you must pay up if that person unknowingly breaks the rules.
3. You must carry the coin with you at ALL times and in all places.
4. When challenged for your coin, you must produce it without taking more *than x* number of steps round-trip to retrieve it (the number of steps allowed varies by squadron-

e.g. the 7thFS would allow you to take seven steps, the 27th FS would allow you to take 2.7 steps, etc.)

5. Failure to produce an RMO when challenged requires the purchase of a round of drinks for all those who have produced their coins. If multiple people fail to produce, multiple rounds are purchased.
6. If everyone who is challenged can produce their coin according to the above guidelines, then the challenger buys a drink for everyone challenged.
7. This tradition adheres to the concept of *every man/woman for himself/herself*. In other words, there is no helping or lending a coin to someone who has forgotten theirs.
8. Individual squadrons may invoke additional rules to the challenge coin tradition- as long as those rules are more restrictive in nature. An individual squadron's rules apply only to members of that squadron and will be scoffed heavily if erroneously applied to members of a different squadron.
9. Don't lose your RMO. If you lose your coin, you must find a suitable replacement. Your coin must never fall into the wrong hands. What are considered the wrong hands? Anyone's but yours.
10. The rules of this tradition apply to everyone who has been coined and continue to apply

until death and maybe beyond. There's no way to tell for sure.