

Challenge Coins

Some versions of history say that the challenge coin began as far back as Roman times, with coins being issued as identifying markers for troops. But according to the most common story, challenge coins originated during World War I. American volunteers from all parts of the country filled the newly-formed flying squadrons. In one squadron, a wealthy lieutenant ordered medallions that were struck in solid bronze and presented to his unit.

One young pilot placed the medallion in a small leather pouch that he wore about his neck during the war. Shortly after acquiring the medallion, the pilot's aircraft was severely damaged by ground fire. He was forced to land behind enemy lines, where a German patrol captured him. To discourage his escape, the Germans took all of his personal identification except for the small leather pouch around his neck. The pilot was taken to a small French town near the front. Taking advantage of a bombardment one night, he escaped. He avoided German patrols by donning civilian attire.

Eventually, he stumbled onto a French outpost. Not recognizing the young pilot's American accent, the French thought he was a saboteur and prepared to execute him. The pilot had no identification to prove his allegiance, but he did have his leather pouch containing the medallion. He showed the medallion to his would-be executioners, and one of his French captors recognized the squadron insignia on it. Once they confirmed his identity, they stopped the execution and gave him a bottle of wine.

Back at his squadron, it became tradition that members carried their medallions at all times. To enforce this tradition, the squadron developed a challenge policy: A challenger would ask to see the medallion. If the challengee could not produce a medallion, he was required to buy the challenger a drink. If the challengee produced a medallion, then the challenger had to buy the drink. This tradition continued throughout the war and for many years afterwards.

Today we continue that storied tradition in order to honor the Western District of Michigan's 150 years of service and justice to the people of the 49 counties of the District, as well as to the entire State and Nation.