



During World War I, American volunteers from all over the country filled the newly formed flying squadrons. Some were wealthy scions attending colleges such as Yale and Harvard who quit in midterm to join the war. In one squadron, a wealthy lieutenant ordered medallions struck in solid bronze emblazoned with the squadron emblem for every member of his squadron. He carried his medallion in a small leather pouch about his neck. Shortly after acquiring the medallions, this pilot's aircraft was severely damaged by ground fire. He was forced to land behind enemy lines and was immediately captured by a German patrol. In order to discourage his escape, the Germans took all of his personal identification except for the small leather pouch around his neck. In the meantime, he was taken to a small French town near the front. Taking advantage of a bombardment that night, he donned civilian clothes and escaped. He was without personal identification, however. He succeeded in avoiding German patrols and reached the front lines. With great difficulty, he crossed No-man's land and eventually stumbled into a French outpost. Unfortunately, the French in this sector of the front had been plagued by saboteurs. These saboteurs sometimes masqueraded as civilians and wore civilian clothes. Not recognizing the young pilot's American accent, the French thought him to be a saboteur and made ready to execute him. Just in time, he remembered his leather pouch containing the medallion. He showed the medallion to his would-be executioners. His French captors recognized the squadron insignia on the medallion and delayed long enough to confirm his identity. Instead of shooting him, they gave him a bottle of wine. Back with his squadron, it became a tradition to ensure all members carried their medallion or coin at all times. This was accomplished through a challenge in the following manner. A challenger would ask to see the coin. If the challenged could not produce his coin, he was required to purchase a drink of choice for the member who had challenged him. If the challenged member produced his coin, then the challenging member was required to pay for the drink. This tradition continued throughout the war and for many years after, while surviving members of the squadron were alive. We, as USAF Chiefs, proudly continue this tradition today.

Coin Rules of Engagement

1. Thy coin shalt be on thy person at all times.
2. Thou shalt be responsible for the security of thy coin at all times.
3. Thy coin shan't be altered to allow for wear as ornamentation.
4. Coin Challenge:

- If thy coin strikes a hard surface, it constitutes a coin challenge, and requires an immediate response.

- All other coin owners must then produce their coins.

- If everyone produces a coin, the challenger must buy drinks for the group.

- If a coin owner fails to produce a coin, that person must then buy the round for all those producing coins.

Challenge Coin

Leisure time in Vietnam was a precious commodity, but when it came, it was utilized to the max; catching up on sleep; writing letters home; letting off steam at the hootch bar. The latter proved to be the most popular, but eventually it too could become boring and mundane. To heighten excitement and foster unit esprit de corps, Bullet Clubs were formed. These were comprised of small, elite, front-line fighters who each carried a personalized bullet from the weapon they carried in combat. The ultimate use of the bullet, usually carried in a hip pocket, was to deny the enemy personal capture. When an individual entered the Hootch Bar, he would be challenged by fellow team members to produce his bullet. If he did, the challengers would pay his bar tab for the rest of the evening. If he failed to produce his bullet, he bought all the drinks for the remainder of the night. Eventually, personalized bullets took on unbelievable proportions. Some "teamies" took to carrying 20-, 40-, or 105mm cannon shells. Clearly, these were not personalized Coup de Grace munitions but rather manifestations of perceived individual prowess in combat, or- perhaps- on R & R. At the height of the Bullet Club's heyday, it was not an uncommon sight to see strewn across a barroom table a very respectable representation of the full range of bullets, rockets, cannon and artillery shells used in Southeast Asia. In order to gain control of the situation- and to avoid accidental discharge of the large, fully functional munitions- bullets were traded for coins which reflected the unit's symbol and pride. Each coin was personalized by a controlled number and/or the individual's name. The rules remained the same, although today they are greatly expanded. Loss of one's coin was and remains tantamount to eternal disgrace and banishment. To forget to carry one's coin in anticipation of a challenge results in a minor death. Emerging from those small, elite groups using bullets are today's coin challengers. Known to strike anywhere at any time, they insidiously stalk the challengee, waiting for just the right moment to attack. An innocent bystander may never hear the challenge- only the challengee's despairing cry "...Ah! I forgot mine!"

Courtesy of TSgt Brian Johnson, Director of Operations, Air Force Enlisted Heritage Research Institute