



A NEW COLLECTING CHALLENGE

Challenge Coins Gain Emotional Worth Over the Years

by Amy Drew Thompson

(EDITOR'S NOTE: "Challenge coins" are a relatively new pursuit for collectors of exonomia—tokens and medals and other objects off the beaten path. But while they're in their infancy compared with other numismatic collectibles, their value can be incalculable to those who create and cherish them.)

Totems have long been imbued with power. They represent clans, families. They tie groups of people together psychologically and emotionally, signifying camaraderie. They symbolize unbreakable bonds. And over the millennia, such objects have taken on different forms.

In the military, men and women begin their service as strangers but become family often forged, quite literally, under fire. Units that serve, live and sometimes die together are transformed into brothers and sisters who rely on one another.

The origin of "challenge coins" is debated, but the most common story centers on a World War I flying squadron composed largely of volunteers, each of whom was presented a bronze medallion

One of the most prized coins in Lt. Carmelo Ayala Jr.'s collection is that of the late Adm. J.M. Boorda, the first-ever enlisted man to rise to the rank of four stars.

by a wealthy officer in the group. One pilot carried his token in a pouch around his neck and, after being shot down and captured by the Germans, it was all he had left of his personal possessions when he managed to escape eventually (and miraculously—as the best stories are oft rooted in miracles) and make his way to a French outpost.

The French, however, were suspicious. There had been bomb activity in their sector. The pilot was judged to be a saboteur and sentenced to die. With no ID, all seemed lost, until the airman showed them his "coin." One of the French recognized the squadron's insignia and the execution was delayed so the dubious stranger could prove his identity. Wine flowed in place of blood.

Challenge coins have no numismatic value, but unlike monetary pieces they are born sentimental, gaining more emotional worth as the years press on and pieces change hands purposefully—exchanges that are built on valor and achievement, hard work, admiration and respect.

"I love collecting," says Lt. Carmelo Ayala Jr., who has been doing so for some 25 years. "It really builds my morale. It makes me feel good. Receiving a coin is a message that says, 'Hey, thank you for doing a good job, for helping me. I appreciate that.' These coins are very valuable to me."

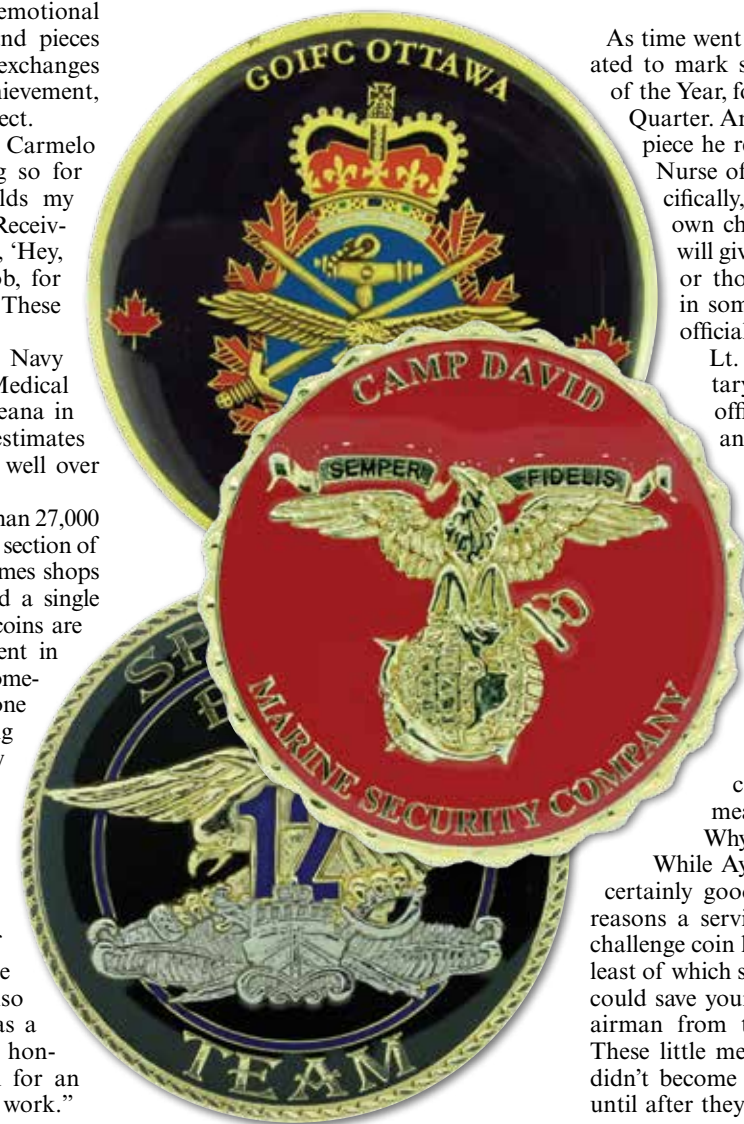
Ayala, an officer in the U.S. Navy Nurse Corps, works at Branch Medical Clinic at Naval Air Station Oceana in Virginia Beach, Virginia. He estimates his challenge coin collection at well over 1,500 pieces.

At press time, there were more than 27,000 such "coins" listed in the militaria section of eBay—and though Ayala sometimes shops for others, he has not purchased a single piece for himself. "Most of my coins are special because each is a moment in my life," he explains. "When someone goes to Italy and brings one from a hospital there, that's a big deal. [That person] thought highly enough of me to bring back a coin. If you point at any one of my coins, I can tell you who gave it to me, when and why."

Who gets them? Traditionally, challenge coins were created to be given out to members of a single unit, "but through the years," Ayala says, "they've also been presented to other folks as a mark of respect, to make them honorary members or thank them for an accomplishment or outstanding work."



Ayala, an officer in the U.S. Navy Nurse Corps, estimates that his challenge coin collection has well over 1,500 pieces in it. Pictured is just a portion of it.



As time went on, such "coins" were created to mark specific achievements: Seal of the Year, for example, or Sailor of the Quarter. Among Ayala's collection is a piece he received upon being named Nurse of the Year. Even more specifically, some people create their own challenge coins—pieces they will give out to friends, loved ones or those who have helped them in some way. Most high-ranking officials have them.

Lt. Ayala is a Mustang—military slang for a commissioned officer who began his career as an enlisted service member.

One of his most prized challenge coins is that of the late Adm. J.M. Boorda, the first-ever enlisted man to rise to the rank of four stars. "He was responsible for many commissioning programs, and that's the reason I'm wearing my bars today," Ayala says, "so I carry his coin in my pocket because it means a lot to me."

Why carry challenge coins?

While Ayala's poignant rationale is certainly good enough, there are other reasons a service member might want a challenge coin handy at all times—not the least of which stems from the possibility it could save your life as it saved the fabled airman from that French firing squad. These little medals (or are they tokens?) didn't become "challenge coins," in fact, until after they'd already gained popular-

LT. CARMELO AYALA JR.; KIDDER CORP. COINS



Ayala's extra-large challenge coin measures about 5½ inches by 4½ inches. It is a United States Army Europe Coin and was given as a thank-you for those who served in Europe. It is inscribed with "Freedom isn't free. Thank you for serving."

ity. Why? In order to ensure that service members would remember to carry them, a drinking game of sorts was born.

Ayala chuckles when he's asked if the custom remains alive and well.

"You can definitely be challenged at a bar to show your coin," he says. "And if you don't have it, you will be paying heavily for it." And by paying heavily, he means picking up the tab.

Sometimes the challenge is to present your unit's coin. Other times, if the crowd is mixed, the highest-ranking piece will win. Ayala, who carries the "coin" from Admiral Boorda with him at all times, no matter what uniform he's wearing, often keeps an extra ace up his sleeve—for besides being a four-star admiral, Boorda also served as chief of naval operations.

"Not many people would have a Chief of Naval Operations coin," Ayala remarks. "I respect the man highly and I am proud to carry his coin. If I lose, I'll be happy to pay. It's a hard coin to beat. You'd need to have the Secretary of Defense, Secretary of the Navy, Vice President or President."

And Ayala has a challenge coin from President Barack Obama, which during happy hour can prove as useful as it is meaningful.

Who can collect? Anyone. Although collectors are mostly members of the military or people with some affiliation thereto, whether civilian employees or relatives of those who serve or have served, the

field is growing. Perhaps there has been a renewed level of interest in the military due to geopolitical conflicts and current events. Perhaps it's due to the fact that challenge coins have caught on in other social strata as well.

They are increasingly common among police and fire departments. The Boy Scouts make them. Sometimes they even fit into corporate American marketing strategies, as evidenced by Ayala's recent acquisition of a Marvel Avengers Military Coin, presented to him by a civilian employee who purchased the Blu-Ray version of "The Avengers" movie at a store on the base. The "coin," presumably meant as a collector's item, was packaged with the movie.

"Coca-Cola has a coin," Ayala says. "USAA—the insurance company—makes a tribute coin for the military. Busch beer made a military coin for its efforts to support Operation Iraqi Freedom. There are Starbucks coins, Pampers coins, a NASCAR coin."

Not all are related to the military, he says, but more than a few have some connection.

For Ayala, who has had a challenge coin of his own made, the best pieces are still those that have been presented to him for a job well done. His most treasured piece was presented to him by a woman he'd never met, a civilian.

"I got paged over the intercom that someone had come to see me," he says, his voice soft with the memory.

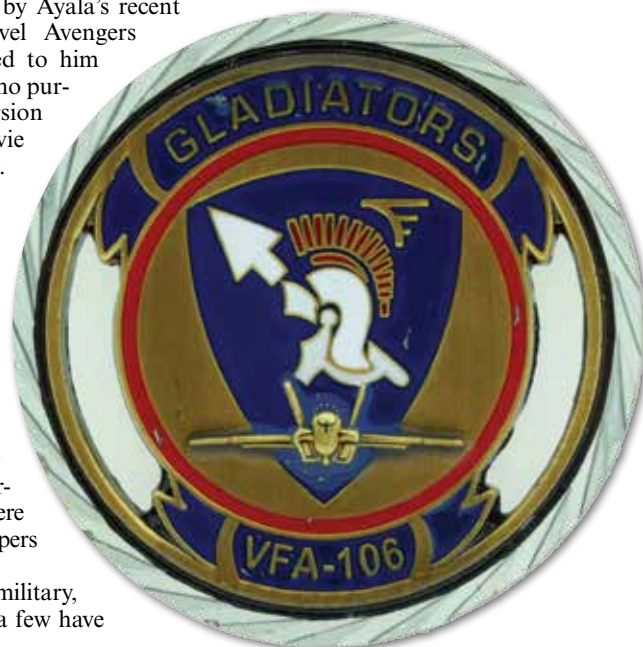
"Someone wanted me to give you this and say thank you for what you do," she told him, presenting the "coin" in the customary fashion, delivering the piece from her palm to his via handshake. "On behalf of my husband."

A senior Mustang named Captain Branson had wanted to thank Ayala for taking care of something he'd needed done. At the time, Branson was serving as a commanding officer in Afghanistan and could not express his gratitude in person.

"This was the wife of someone who outranks me by a lot—three ranks higher," Ayala explains. "And she came to the clinic; she presented it to me correctly. Though small it might have been and nobody was around to see it, there was no need. It was between me and her husband. It was very meaningful. It was a very good moment for me."

MINTING MEMORIES

Near the end of his long Navy career, Master Chief Petty Officer Martin W.



LT. CARMELO AYALA, JR.; KIDDER CORP. COINS

Kidder, himself an NCO, was charged with designing a challenge coin for a new scholarship fund that would benefit his brethren: chief petty officers and their children. As the program's impetus was raising money for education, he spent quite a bit of time researching the different companies that manufactured them—and what they were charging.

"And of course," says Alexander Kidder, vice president, chief of operations and general counsel for the Connecticut-based Kidder Corp. Coins, "he found out that 90 percent of the stuff is made in South Korea or China."

Frustrated with the process and its expense, the elder Kidder (Alexander is his son) decided he could do it better. "We made that first coin ... and everything since has grown out of that." Business, brisk since the company's formation in 2005, has been largely word-of-mouth, growing from a side business Martin Kidder was running himself upon his retirement into something larger, necessitating Alex's entrance into the picture – a decided change of pace from his previous work as a corporate litigator.

"It's been pretty fascinating," Alex Kidder says, relating stories similar to that of the American pilot in France—tales of the challenge coins' use as identification markers. "The soldiers fighting overseas In Europe, they all looked the same," he explains. "It made it very easy to infiltrate a camp if you were to get a uniform. Many of the Germans spoke English. These coins were used as a way to authenticate who you were."

Kidder Corp. makes many coins, quite a few of them personal, often for high-ranking officers. "Generals, admirals, ships' captains—they pass them out formally," Alex Kidder explains. "The Navy has a procedure. But more often, they are passed out informally, as a thank-you for something that was done. And because so many people collect them now, various military groups will create them as part of a fund-raiser, designing really cool coins that are official coins of their units but that they will sell themselves."

Kidder Corp. has done coins for many of the active naval carriers sailing today. Designs are often combined, culled in part



One unit, the "Star Warriors," has been using Darth Vader's helmet in its crest for 25 years.



KIDDER CORP. COINS

from history—crests chosen long ago with a given unit's inception on the obverse—then bolstered by something new, often created in house, on the reverse.

Is collecting these pieces easy for civilians?

Kidder says no, but admits there is a huge eBay aftermarket. "Like, massive," he deadpans. "We see our coins there all the time, despite the fact that many of them are limited-edition, created in batches of, say, just a hundred coins."

Kidder Corp.'s longtime naval connections are solid. As such, the company has been called upon to create multiple coins for the ultra-elite U.S. Navy Special Warfare Development Group, or DevGru. You may know the unit by another name: Seal Team 6.

"We've made all their coins for all the events leading up to the raid [and death of Osama bin Laden] and the coins they did to commemorate it afterward," Kidder says, noting that officials were very specific that its design remain undisclosed. "But within a year-and-a-half, one of those coins was up on eBay and it fetched about \$1,500."

He has no idea how the piece made its way to the auction block but is sure that the coin was authentic. He only knew it had surfaced because members of the team contacted him directly. "It just reaffirms how meaningful the coins are. I think they keep very close tabs on them."

Kidder says collectors are definitely on the rise, particularly in the realm of retired military. "We're hearing from organizations, groups for ships long since decommissioned who go to events, see coins that we've made and call asking if we can make one for their ship, their retirement group." Once the "coins" are made, calls often come in from others who served on the same vessel—just later in its life.

As formal as the Armed Forces can be, protocol for the creation of challenge coins is still developing. As such, it wouldn't take much for a person or group to commission a piece with a given unit, ship's name or otherwise. "We work with a unit [the Electronic Attack Squadron 209 (VAQ-209), known as the 'Star Warriors']



that's been using Darth Vader's helmet [in its crest] for 25 years," Kidder says.

Incredibly, the unit had been doing so without George Lucas' knowledge or permission, "though they recently made a formal request and it was granted," Kidder says. "No one wants to tell small military units who have been using this stuff forever that they can't. Who is going to fight a group of a hundred soldiers and say, 'That's mine?'"

These days, deployment coins are gaining in popularity.

"These coins, commissioned for a given unit that's headed overseas, will be paid for by the military and given to everyone as they leave," Kidder says. Created in small batches, they're given to perhaps one or two hundred service members. They

have little in the way of monetary value, but they are priceless in terms of their significance to those who receive them as a testament to their service.

In fact, Lieutenant Ayala, who keeps his cherished collection in a custom-made case, longs for a single piece, one for which he'd pay handsomely—that of his first ship, the *USS Cimarron* AO-177, decommissioned in 1998. "I served on that ship more than 20 years ago and once a ship is gone, once a marine unit is gone, it's gone. To find a coin or any memorabilia from that command is almost impossible."

To someone who serves or has served, a challenge coin's value—not unlike those shamanistic totems of old—is a symbol of



that service, whether as part of a unit or to a specific individual.

"They'll put it up on a shelf," says Kidder, whose intimate knowledge of the pieces infuses his voice with respectful gravitas, "and they'll look at it forever and think, 'I was there. I was a part of that.'" ☺



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