



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## Double Dog Dare

A lot of trouble starts with the utterance of the phrase “I dare you!” Anytime someone says I double-dog dare you, there is likely to be an injury somewhere along the way. Yet we are in the profession in which taking risk is very much a part of our way of life and those who seem to last the longest are those that know how to take those risks very carefully and in a very calculating fashion. Going into harm’s way specifically with the intent of removing whatever is from causing the harm, is a fairly lethal occupation. We share that mission with law enforcement and the military.

One might say that a dare is a challenge. In the concept of a challenge is something we in the fire service have a propensity for facing. It is interesting that one of the greatest challenges that the American Fire Service has faced was the attack on the United States on September 11, 2001 by a foreign nation. While it has not completely removed the apathy and indifference that some people had towards being adequately prepared it certainly was a wakeup call for many in our profession.

One of the more interesting things that came out of that phenomenon is a concept that is sweeping the fire service today. It is my belief that it needs to be explored and talked about openly in order to put it into perspective. What I am talking about is the concept of the “Challenge Coin”. Many fire service organizations, prompted by the outcome of September 11<sup>th</sup> was the idea of organizations beginning to issue challenge coins as part of a way of expressing professional pride and creating something that is so solid it is virtually impossible to destroy.

Right now many of you reading this column are likely to have one or more challenge coins in your possession. If you have one in your pocket right now, I consider you to be an aficionado. If you have received one but have never had one to give away then you are part of those who are participating in the process but are not yet committed to it.

One thing we should always remember is where the challenge coin came from in the first place. Its history dates all the way back to World War I. There were a group of young American’s who went to Europe to fight as part of the aerial combat. For the most part, they were relatively wealthy individuals who in some cases paid their own way to go to Europe and may have likely even contributed towards the purchase of their own aircraft.

What the challenge coin from was one of the wealthier individuals who realized he didn’t have any identification if he was inadvertently shot down behind enemy lines. Therefore, he created a coin. The organization was called Lafayette Escradille. As luck would have it his aircraft was shot down and he was captured by French soldiers. His captors did not speak English. He did not speak French. However, he was able to show them his challenge coin which was instantly recognized and he was returned to his unit unharmed.



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This trend of designing challenge coins for individual fire departments is an obvious extension of that sense of pride and performance. There are however, some ground rules from the original concept of the challenge coin that is becoming increasingly difficult to comply with. In the first place you are supposed to carry the challenge coin as it relates to your own organization on your person at all times. Any other individual who has a shared experience with that same coin has the right to challenge you. If you cannot produce it, there is penalty to pay.

Today many of the challenge coins are being distributed amongst individuals not because we are all part of the same organization but rather as recognition of a unit identifier. I know that if I took all of the coins that I have in my possession and tried to carry them with me at one time, I would most likely have to have a wheelbarrow.

Symbolism in our business today has meant a lot. Going back to the days of the Crusading Knights from the first use of the Maltese Cross, continuing through our use on the badges of today, and perhaps extending to when we put that same Maltese Cross on a challenge coin the symbol is supposed to mean something. I once wrote a column entitled "A Symbol is a Promise". The symbols we embrace mean something to us, but in many ways they mean more to the outsiders that recognize them.

Therefore, the challenge coin should take on standing for something also. When they are given they stand for camaraderie. When they are received they stand for competency. So, I dare you to be better tomorrow than you are today. I double dog dare you to be better next year than you are this month.

As the fire service continues emulating the military in many ways, the challenge coin can possibly become one of the most heartfelt symbols of what we stand for in the long run. But only if we believe the symbol does stand for something.