

CAP coins represent merit deserved, excellence achieved

TRUE CHALLENGE

The custom of presenting special coins in recognition of superior achievement dates back to the Roman Empire. Coin collectors, aware of military and para-military organizations' long-standing tradition of rewarding significant career milestones, acts of bravery and valor with specially designed coins, also prize coins issued by the Civil Air Patrol. CAP coins are collectible because there are relatively few struck, and the majority of them are only presented to deserving CAP members.

By Janet Adams

CAP coins are often imaginatively designed around a meaningful logo or insignia, and some have colorful enamelware enhancing the image. Generally, they are struck from modified bronze, though a few are made of silver or gold. Yet, many members are avid collectors, and the reasons can be readily traced to each coin's origin.



An important coin known as the Phoenix was first minted in 1994. Members of the Iowa Wing's Washington-Brinton Composite Squadron were the first recipients of the coin in recognition of outstanding performance. It was subsequently awarded to other individuals or squadrons for superior performance in the CAP cadet program. The morale value of the



coin set the stage for other CAP coins to honor participants, such as the National Cadet Competition coin first issued in 2001, the Cadet Officer School coin given to graduates since 2003 and the official CAP National Commander's coin introduced in 2004, which is awarded to CAP members who excel in meeting specific challenges and goals. These coins continue to be a prized memento of the experience. Among the top coins awarded

for a special achievement or accomplishment are numbered Spaatz Association coins. CAP National Historian Col. Lenny Blascovich, an honorary member, was presented a Spaatz coin for his work in coalescing and fostering the fledgling organization in the 1960s. The association consists of a group of present and former recipients of the Gen. Carl A. Spaatz Award, and the coin honors the highest achievement for CAP cadets.

Rob Smith, deputy director of aerospace education, cadet programs and professional development at CAP National Headquarters at Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala., has a personal collection of around 45 coins. "Most of these coins are collectibles because so few are minted," he said. "All of the coins have a special meaning to me because they remind me of my positive connection to a person, a place or an event."

CAP National Curator Lt. Col. William Schell has an extensive archival CAP coin collection that includes a number of challenge coins. The history of issuing challenge coins dates to World War I when an Air Force lieutenant captured in France was unable to produce identification papers but was saved from

execution as a suspected saboteur when his French captors recognized his squadron medallion as that of an ally. So, instead of facing a firing squad he was treated to a glass of wine.

The practice of issuing military coins was revived sporadically during World War II, and coins designating specific units were issued during the Vietnam and Korean wars. Soldiers given a unit coin were expected to present it when challenged to prove membership. If the coin could not be produced, the person challenged had to buy a round of drinks.

Air Force Reserve Lt. Col. Rex R. Meyer, a CAP national aircraft accident investigator, has been collecting challenge coins for more than 38 years. He and his wife, Maj. Vickie Meyer, Southeast Region deputy chief of staff for cadet programs, joined CAP eight years ago.

Lt. Col. Meyer has created a special F-4 Phantom gold and silver coin to commemorate all the men and women who either worked on or flew that aircraft. Meyer, who worked on this plane for

most of his 38-year career, created the coin when he discovered there was not one available to recognize these men and women.

Occasionally, coins are available on the Internet; however, the most valued coins for CAP members come from participating in CAP's programs.

One of the earliest coins issued by CAP commemorated its 35th anniversary in 1976. A coin marking the 50th anniversary was unveiled in 1991 and the most recently minted CAP coin commemorates the organization's 65th anniversary.

A limited number of 65th anniversary coins are available for \$8 from Vanguard Industries. Orders may be placed by calling 1-800-221-1264.

More historical information on Challenge Coins can be found at www.militarycoins.com/history.



Lt. Col. William Schell, CAP's national curator, would appreciate receiving any coins issued by wings, composite squadrons or other CAP entities to ensure they are recorded and become a part of the permanent CAP archive. His e-mail address is awmschell@verizon.net.