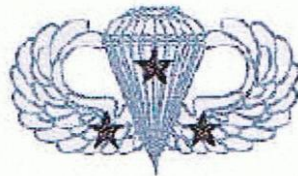
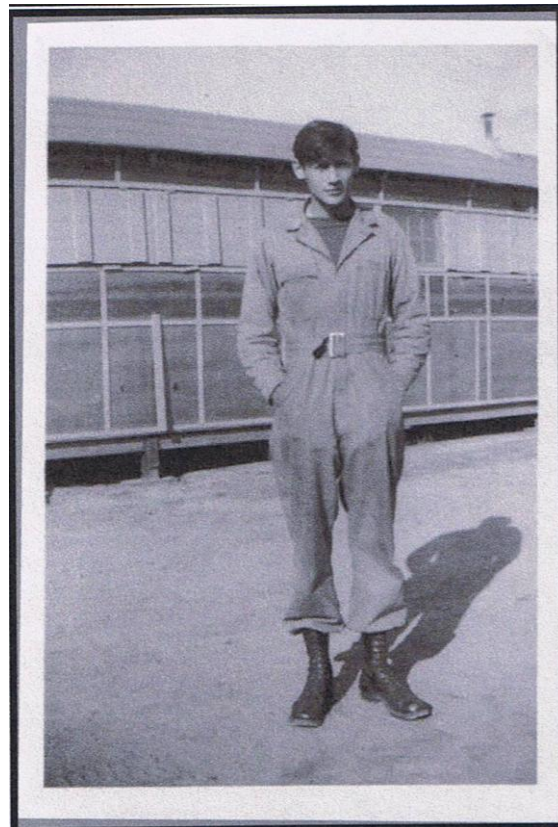


THE HERO & THE COIN

'A Story for Future Generations'



Three combat jumps

By
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THE HERO AND THE COIN: A story for Future Generations

Loose coins bouncing around in your pocket or purse can be useful but at the same time they can be noisy, heavy and with today's prices, some would say a nuisance. It seems nothing is priced in even dollar terms and given that local sales taxes add odd amounts to transactions, it is inevitable that we get some of them in return. If you are like me then for convenience sake most of this change ends up being collected in one of those five gallon plastic water jugs or some other container and later taken to a bank where it is exchanged for paper money. Recently I received a coin from a World War II veteran that had a special kind of value and meaning. It is a bit larger and heavier than an Eisenhower Dollar coin but it even won't buy you a cup of coffee. It is a *Challenge Coin*.

THE HERO: JACK AGNEW & THE FILTHY THIRTEEN

In today's world it seems that the term hero is an often over used expression to describe sports figures, entertainers and other prominent people. As time passes the stories of true heroes who are not in the public's perception or limelight can get lost to future generations. How do we define a true hero? What qualifies one to be labeled a hero? Unfortunately Jack Agnew would be the first to say his service during World War II does not make him a hero. As he says it "*I did only what they me told to do*". I will let you be the judge and consider the following:

John "Jack" Agnew was a member of a legendary World War II group, the *Filthy Thirteen*. Jack and his fellow paratroopers were demolition-saboteurs and part of Regimental Headquarters Company of the 506th Paratroop Infantry Regiment. This regiment was part of the 101st Airborne Division, known as the "Screaming Eagles". The *Filthy Thirteen* were a rough cut group of men that were not the military's idea of 'spit and polish' with numerous stories surrounding their antics. Their reputation for not bathing, rowdiness and hard living was only overshadowed by the tenacity and ferociousness of their fighting. A 1960's movie *the Dirty Dozen* was loosely based on the *Filthy Thirteen*. Unlike the movie they were not convicts and as Jack says "*We were not prisoners but we didn't do everything we were supposed to do and we did a lot more than they wanted us to do*".



Jack, like all the others who joined this new division being assembled, volunteered to become a paratrooper. The untested tough training methods and danger of paratrooper duty meant no conscripts were used. Training was fraught with extreme physical and mental exercises. To give you an idea how difficult the training was, one hike in the hot Georgia sun for the entire regiment covered 156 miles from Fort McPherson to Fort Benning.

His first combat jump was in the darkness of the early morning hours on D-Day June 6th, 1944. Unlike the other 16,000 paratroopers that jumped that night Jack and the other *Filthy Thirteen* members were easily recognizable with their Mohawk haircuts and 'war' painted faces. Over the Normandy coast in among the occupying German forces his leap was at barely 600 feet above the ground. The only illumination in the pitch black sky came from lights of exploding planes and the millions of tracer bullets crisscrossing the sky that brought death to the door.

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Jack's first step into war was not so much a 'Leap of Faith' but rather as a step to his 'Leap of Fate'. For far too many paratroopers this would be the last step they would ever take.

Their mission to defend and/or destroy bridges over Douve River to prevent the Germans from reinforcing the beach heads with tanks was considered suicidal. Landing over eight miles from their intended drop zone behind German lines Jack, Jake McNiece, the *Filthy Thirteen's* leader, and others would make their way to their objective, fend off repeated German counter attacks for five days and complete their mission. Jack and the others would then contribute immensely to the liberation of the first major city in France, Carentan. They fought bravely for thirty six (36) days in Normandy along side other elements of the 101st before returning to England for resupply and redeployment.

Jack's second combat jump would be the following September with the rest of the 101st Airborne as part of Operation Market Garden. Fighting for seventy eight (78) days they fought the Germans along a thinly held highway liberating and defending Dutch villages with names like Son, Eindhoven, Uden and Veghel. Summing up the intensity of the fighting in Holland that took place, history has bestowed the nickname 'Hells Highway' to where Jack and his paratrooper buddies fought to keep this vital transportation corridor open during the operation.

Hitler's last major offensive of the war in December 1944 would have Jack making his third combat jump but of a different sort. Jack would volunteer to become a Pathfinder just prior to what is known as the *Battle of the Bulge*. These small all volunteer Pathfinder units would parachute from their C-47 planes with signaling equipment in among the enemy. This was done usually in advance of other units to direct air drops of troops and/or supplies. By definition "normal" paratrooper operations were extremely dangerous with casualties that most often exceeded fifty percent, however, experience with previous Pathfinder units showed casualty rates on their missions were usually eighty percent or more. The Pathfinders, burdened down with their communications equipment were lightly armed and with little or no support paid a heavy price.

While others of 101st Airborne were rushed in by truck to defend the city of Bastogne on December 17th during the *Battle of the Bulge* Jack, Jake McNiece and others waited for their mission. Jack and the Pathfinders would play a key role by directing the resupply of their comrades during the siege. History has shown that the 101st, now surrounded by the Germans in Bastogne repelled all attacks but were running dangerously low on all supplies including medicines, food and ammunition.

The especially harsh Belgium winter weather with its continual overcast skies and the encirclement by the enemy prevented resupply. Something had to be done. Battle lines were fluid with no real understanding as to what was friendly or enemy territory. The pathfinders would have to jump in, establish where the main line of defense was and then set up their beacons to direct the supply drop. As the skies over Bastogne cleared on December 23rd Jack

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and the Pathfinders jumped in and accomplished their mission, guiding in over 440 tons of supplies on the first day alone, saving the 101st Division from possible annihilation.

Eventually the 101st Airborne were awarded the first and only Presidential Unit Citation for their defense of Bastogne. Without the heroics of Jack and the other Pathfinders the 101st most likely would not have had, what has become known as their *Rendezvous with Destiny*. Jack and the Pathfinders would be responsible for saving an entire division and in the process help change the outcome of the war.



Jack atop a brick pile sets up his AN/PPN-1A Eureka radio beacon to direct supply drops in Bastogne

Jack would continue to fight through the end of the war. Along the way he would earn the Purple Heart, four Bronze Service Stars, four Battle Stars, the Presidential Unit Citation, the Good Conduct Metal, and ATO Ribbon with Bronze Spearhead to name just a few.

What is your definition of a hero? It seems to me given what Jack has done for this great country it certainly qualifies him to this level of distinction.

THE CHALLENGE COIN

The origin of the challenge coin is a matter of debate. It has been said that they originated during World War I in the then United States Army Air Corp, the forerunner of the US Air Force. Pilots like other branches of the service during the war were citizen soldiers, coming from all walks of life. Their backgrounds varied from wealthy families who attended Ivy League colleges to ones who were from the working class with little chance of attending college.

One of these well to do pilots came up with the idea to have solid bronze medallions with a gold coating struck with their unit's insignia on it. As the story goes the pilots got to carrying them all the time. One of these pilots who came from lesser means and not having anything else like it, put his medallion in a leather pouch around his neck. This same pilot was later shot down and captured. The Germans confiscated his personal belongings overlooking his medallion around

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his neck. After escaping he was confronted by the French and was mistaken for a German saboteur. These saboteurs were known for dressing in civilian clothes. The French having no tolerance for these spies prepared to have him executed. Having no other identification to prove his nationality he pulled out the coin from his pouch. Fortunately one of the Frenchmen recognized the unit insignia thus the medallion avoided his execution.

Upon return to his squadron it got to be a custom for other members to keep the medallion on their possession at all times. It became a practice that they would challenge each other to ensure compliance. If challenged to show your medallion and you didn't have it, you were obligated to buy the challenger a drink. If you could produce it, the tables were turned and he owed you one. This friendly confrontation gave us the now common name *challenge coin* to describe the medallion.

Today challenge coins extend beyond the military. They are produced for firefighters, police departments and other organizations to increase morale, aid in their fundraising programs and to memorialize special events.

These challenge coins are a tradition that go back almost 100 years and demonstrate one's dedication and commitment to their unit, a loyalty to others in your unit and a dedication of ones service to this country.

MEETING AND GETTING TO KNOW THE HERO

I first met Jack Agnew briefly back in 2005 at a dinner for a number of World War II veterans. Although I consider myself a student of this history little did I know, at that time, that Jack Agnew and another veteran at the dinner, Jake McNiece, were part of that famous group, *The Filthy Thirteen*? At the dinner I would purchase Jake's book and learn more of their World War II experience.

Then in early 2008 I was asked to write a story about the *Filthy Thirteen* that would not only reintroduce me to Jack and other surviving members but set a course for me to get to know him and his lovely wife Betty. First, traveling to rural Oklahoma I would attend an open weekend for the Airborne Demonstration Team's graduation ceremonies for re-enactors who learn to jump out of vintage C-47 airplanes. I not only got the opportunity to spend time with Jack and Jake McNiece but also 'bunk' with Jack during my stay. Over the course of the next year and one half I would visit Jack and Betty several times at their home in suburban Philadelphia, spend the better part of five days at a veteran's conference in Washington, D.C. and attend a World War II Reading, Pennsylvania Air Show on D-Day's 65th anniversary with them.

Jack was raised in a household where gambling, swearing and drinking was not permitted, so it is hard to imagine that even as a member of the 'rough and ready' *Filthy Thirteen* Jack was true to his upbringing. To give you an example of this Jack found a way to keep busy, away from all the antics of the *Filthy Thirteen*. It was an outlet that let him be true to his roots during the lead up to D-Day in England. Instead of the card playing and carousing with them where as he says,

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"I knew if I went to town with Jake and the others I would end up in the Brig", he volunteered to be a dispatch rider ferrying communications between units contributing further to the war effort.

Countless veterans have told me that during war of their sometime disconnect with making friends in ones unit. It was a way of insulating themselves from the pain of loosing them. Reading other accounts of Jack and speaking to the other surviving members it seems he was the one who they saw as a friend. A genuine a nice guy, that even in the horrors of war, it was worth the effort to befriend him. My meeting and getting to know him only reinforces this opinion.

That affable Belfast born (Northern Ireland) "Irish" kid that everyone seemed to call a friend is still alive and well in this octogenarian. His wit, gracious manners and charm continue to light up a room, gravitating all in his direction in hopes that some of his qualities rub off on you. He has not let the horrors of his war experience taint his personality or attitude on life.

THE GIFT AND ITS MEANING

Returning from the Mid-Atlantic World War II air show this past June I drove Jack and Betty back to their home. After getting them settled, we said our goodbyes and as I was about to leave Jack extended his hand and pressed something into mine. It was the 101st Airborne Air Assault Challenge Coin embossed with the paratroopers crest on one side and the 101st Airborne Eagle Insignia on the reverse. Jack simply said *"I want you to have this"*. Looking at it in my hand I was honored that he thought enough of me to give it to me but it was not until my long journey home that I started to reflect on the significance of the gift. Jack's gift had and continues to have a profound effect on me.



Air Assault 101st Airborne Challenge Coin

It is with a strong sense of gratitude that I accept it knowing that this challenge coin was carried by Jack as a gesture of his solidarity to the other veterans that fought and sometimes died fighting with him. By entrusting me with this coin I would tell Jack that I understand it is my responsibility to preserve and promote his and all of the other veteran's legacies.

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I would want Jack to know that every time I leave the house the Challenge Coin now goes in my pocket. Needing change when I pay for something it comes out with the nickels, dimes and quarters. My routine is always the same in this situation. In clear sight of everyone around I open the palm of my hand as I pick around it to complete the transaction. Chances are good that upon seeing the coin, it will stir the curiosity of others. As the coin has already done so it tends to spark a question as to what it is, giving me the opportunity to tell a little of Jack's story.

So if you're looking to find the definition of a hero, stop me and ask to see my Challenge Coin. I will share a piece of Jack Agnew's story with you and it will remind me and hopefully explain to you the sacrifices a true hero has made.

Carrying his Challenge Coin in my pocket is a constant reminder that provides comfort to me knowing that when it counted, we Americans had Jack and others like him 'on that wall' defending and protecting our freedoms just as countless others are doing today.

The next time you hear a reference to someone who is considered a hero, stop and think for a moment, and apply the 'Jack Agnew litmus test' to measure that individual's contributions. I know I will and only then will that person be put in context with Jack, who is certainly is my definition of a hero.



Jack & Betty at the Veteran's Conference, Washington, D.C., November 2008

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I am truly grateful and blessed that my life's path has crossed with Jack and Betty's. They have enriched my life more than they can ever imagine. They are wonderful people that are humble, lead by example and quintessential of what America is about. His Challenge Coin is now one of my most treasured possessions and seeing it will always bring me bring closer to my friend's heart. Jack's story is one for others to hear and this coin will be my catalyst to hopefully introduce his narrative to this and future generations. This is my commitment and tribute to Jack. It is the least I can do given what John "Jack" Agnew has done for all of us.

