

This tradition of leaving coins on military headstones serves as a silent message and a sign of respect from fellow veterans and visitors. Different coin values communicate specific bonds or shared experiences:

- **Penny:** Shows that a visitor stopped by to pay respects.
- **Nickel:** Indicates that the person went through boot camp with the deceased.
- **Dime:** Signifies that they served together in the armed forces.
- **Quarter:** Means the visitor was physically present when the service member died.
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The practice grew in popularity during the Vietnam War as a discreet way for veterans to show they visited a comrade's final resting place without needing to disturb or contact the family. Eventually, the collected coins are gathered by cemetery staff and used for maintenance or burial costs for indigent veterans.

The modern American tradition of leaving coins on military graves **grew into a widely recognized practice during the Vietnam War**. However, the underlying custom of burying or honoring the dead with currency dates back thousands of years to antiquity.

The historical evolution of this tradition moved from ancient mythology to practical wartime communication:

Ancient Origins

- **Charon's Obol (Ancient Greece and Rome):** The practice traces back to ancient Greek and Roman funeral customs. Families would place a coin—often inside the mouth or on the eyes of a fallen soldier. This served as a "down payment" to Charon, the mythological ferryman, to secure safe passage across the River Styx into the afterlife.
- **Naval Lore:** This mythological belief adapted into maritime culture. Sailors would traditionally place coins under the mast of a ship to guarantee that if the crew died at sea, the "ferryman" would still be compensated for their safe transport to the afterlife.

The Vietnam War Era

The custom shifted into its modern, denomination-coded form during the Vietnam War due to intense national friction:

- **Navigating Political Divides:** The Vietnam War was highly controversial and politically polarizing. When veterans returned home, visiting a fallen comrade's family in person carried the risk of sparking an uncomfortable or emotionally painful political argument.
- **A Wordless Message:** Leaving a coin flat on the headstone became a practical, quiet alternative. It allowed a veteran to leave "proof" of their visit for the grieving family without forcing an interaction. It simply said, *"I was here, and I remember"*.

- **The "Down Payment" Promise:** Some Vietnam veterans also left coins as a deeply personal symbol, representing a "down payment" to buy their fallen friend a beer or play a hand of cards when they were eventually reunited in the next life.

Modern Practice

Over the decades, what started as a discreet communication tool among Vietnam veterans solidified into an established military tradition practiced across all national and state veterans' cemeteries. Today, civilians and service members alike continue to leave pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters to honor those who served.