

The V for Victory

CANADIAN COINS

BY GEORGE MANZ

that your comrades of the army will hear it and so that the Germans hear it too. They have to pretend now that they like it, but they don't."

Part of Churchill's message on that radio program was as follows: "The V sign is the symbol of the unconquerable will of the occupied territories and a portent of the fate awaiting Nazi tyranny. So long as the people continue to refuse all collaboration with the invader it is sure that his cause will perish and that Europe will be liberated."

The people of occupied Europe were urged to chalk or paint the letter V on the walls of buildings. According to *The New York Times*, the V for Victory sign made its appearance in France immediately after the BBC broadcast, where many French civilians began painting the symbol throughout the country. It soon spread through Belgium and the Netherlands and became one of the first symbols used by the anti-Nazi underground.

While the symbolism of V for Victory had a dramatic effect throughout much of the world, Canada was the only country to use the V on its coinage during World War II.

Almost 25 million of the 1943 tombac coins were produced by the Royal Canadian Mint. An additional 8,000 were produced in 1944 as well, but almost all were melted.

The Royal Canadian Mint also produced new 1944 and 1945 5-cents which were identical to the 1943 tombac in all respects save one: it seems the wartime demands for both copper and zinc necessitated a change in metals. So the 1944 and 1945 5-cent coins were produced from a steel planchet coated with a very thin layer of nickel and then plated with chromium.

Unfortunately, the steel coins minted in 1944 and 1945 presented a major problem for the Mint, since the extreme hardness of the steel planchets caused the dies to wear out much faster than either nickel or tombac.

While circulated examples of the three V for Victory 5-cent coins in VF condition are extremely easy to obtain and cost only about 50 cents each, examples in MS-63 or higher grades of preservation are much more difficult to find. But they are nonetheless still quite affordable and well-worth collecting.

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I want to call them nickels. But I can't.

That's because the Royal Canadian Mint issued three V for Victory 5-cent coins that weren't made of nickel from 1943 to 1945.

I'm certain most collectors who have even a small Canadian coin collection have these coins. But these common and inexpensive coins have a very interesting history that's not widely known.

During the early years of World War II, from 1939 to the early part of 1942, Canada's 5-cent nickel coinage remained the same as before, with George VI on the obverse and the Canadian beaver on the reverse. But that was soon to change.

You see, nickel was needed to manufacture goods made of stainless steel and other alloys for the war effort. So in 1942, according to *The Charlton Standard Catalogue of Canadian Coins*, a decision was made "that nickel would have to be suspended as a coinage material for the duration of the war and experiments were initiated to find a substitute metal for the 5-cent piece."

And the metal alloy they decided to use became known as tombac, from the word tombago, a metal used to make cheap jewellery. The new 1942 12-sided Canadian tombac 5-cent coin with the beaver on the reverse was comprised of 88 per cent copper and 12 per cent zinc. The idea, according to Charlton, was first tried in Britain in 1937 when the Royal Mint produced a 12-sided three pence coin made of nickel and brass.

But the Canadian design on the reverse changed dramatically in 1943. Although the tombac composition of the coin remained the same, Canadian officials decided that a more patriotic symbol supporting the war effort would replace the Canadian beaver on the reverse.

So Thomas Shingles, the Royal Canadian Mint Chief Engraver, designed and engraved a new reverse, this one with a large torch superimposed on a large V. Shingles' initials are clearly visible near the bottom and to the right of the V.

The V represented not only the number five in Roman numerals, but it also represented

the V for Victory sign which had become synonymous with Allied hopes of victory over the Axis countries. According to Ralph Yate's article in the November 1965 issue of *Coins*, this made the Canadian V for Victory coin "the only coin in the British commonwealth, and one of the few in the world, whose design directly reflected the war then raging."



Probably the most interesting part of the design on the 1943 tombac is the Morse code on the reverse. The dots and dashes, which replaced the denticles on the reverse, spell WE WIN WHEN WE WORK WILLINGLY.

Yates writes that the inspiration for the tongue-twisting code was due to "the wartime enthusiasm which swept the home front in those days."

In order to read the inscription properly, one must hold the coin upside down and begin reading from the bottom of the coin, just below the N in CENTS. The first "W" in "WE" consists of a dot followed by two dashes.

Although some authorities claim that Winston Churchill "invented" the V for Victory sign, he is certainly credited with popularizing it. When Churchill took office as British Prime Minister in 1940, his speech included these words: "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat... You ask, what is your policy? I will say: It is to wage war, by sea, land, and air, with all our might... You ask, what is our aim? I can answer with one word: Victory."

One year later, Churchill started his V for Victory campaign on July 19, 1941. On that day, BBC Radio, in its broadcasts to occupied Europe and the rest of the world, took the first four notes of Ludwig von Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, which matched the dot-dot-dot-dash of the letter V in Morse code. A mysterious announcer calling himself "Colonel V Britton," urged his listeners to "tap it out whenever you can, so