



Uncle's Dog Tags

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By Gilbert Gia
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Aunt Minnie unwrapped her husband's WWII dog tags. They were bright silver metal and oval instead of the rectangular ones I had when I was in the Navy. The 1943 tags had Joe's name and service number stamped on one side, and there was a hole at one end. The tag's back was plane. There was a small-link chain. I learned later that the Navy and Marines used these oval-style dog tag for many years.

Marine Order 32 of 1916 required the first standardized dog tags; a year later the Navy followed. These 1-1/4-in x 1-1/2-in tags were made of Monel metal, a corrosion resistant alloy of nickel and copper. They had a hole at one end and were worn on a Monel wire necklace encased in cotton sleeves.

Early tags carried an acid-etching of the owner's fingerprint, his initials and his surname. When hundreds of thousands of men were "over there" in France, the Navy and Marines issued service numbers. They also went on the tags.



Above: One-hole tag; birth date 1901; enlistment date 1920; service number



etched print on reverse

USN Order 294 of 1917 assigned the Hospital Corps the job of making the acid-etched tags. Following is a list of supplies and procedures from Order 294: "An outfit for making a finger print on paper: A supply of printer's ink thinned to the proper consistency for easy use with an ordinary steel pen-- dilute with gasoline or turpentine. Gilsonite or powdered asphaltum. Nitric acid, one part by volume and water two parts by volume in a glass dish. Alcohol lamp with good flame, or electric stove. A device for holding the tag without touching the flat surfaces --not supplied but can be made by any carpenter's mate. An etching solution consisting of concentrated nitric acid one part by volume and water two parts by volume."

"The etching process or acid bath should be watched and a tag lifted out from time to time to see how lively the action is. It can be moderated by adding water. Usually the process of etching requires one hour. The acid solution naturally weakens with use and should be renewed from time to time. If the corrosive action is slow in beginning, concentrated muriatic acid (HCl) may be added - 1 part to every 30 of the nitric solution."



above: Two hole tag; service number; tetanus injection date, Dec 1941; blood type?



etched print on reverse

Between the wars servicemen didn't wear the tags unless they were going into combat. That changed in the early 1940s. An article entitled "Sailors Will Wear Shining Necklaces" by Captain Richard B. Coffman, Commander of the 11th Naval District, appeared in the July 1941 *Bakersfield Californian*. The

story described the oval identification tags with etched fingerprint and promised that every serviceman in the Los Angeles, Long Beach, and San Pedro district would get one "by the end of August." By then some tags were also coded for religion, "date of anti-tetanus injection," and blood type. Capt. Coffman wrote, "To facilitate life-saving, whole companies of men of the same blood type will be working together." (July 1941 preceded plasma.)

Making acid-etched tags was an art that a war-time Navy could not afford. The new tags were made of stainless steel, and personal information was stamped by a special machine.¹ The process went much faster.

In October 1943 Joe Molinaro managed the A&P grocery store in downtown Bakersfield. He was 31, Minnie was 26, and their kids were eight, six, and three. That month he went into the US Coast Guard Reserve. After training he was assigned to PF-13, USS Pueblo, a picket ship launched in January 1944. At this late date in the war, why was Joe issued an old-style dog tag? The answer is that it was a matter of economy. The US sea-going services were using up their supply of old, oval tags.

With the war ended, the man came home, and his children played with his dog tags. Years later, his widow wrapped the tags and chain in white cotton and laid them carefully away in a little box.

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¹ The Graphotype with minimal modifications was pressed into service without the need to manufacture a totally new and dedicated machine. See <http://www.dogtagsrus.com/addressograph%20graphotype.htm>
www.gilbertgia.com