

WORLD WAR VICTORY MEDAL - 1919

Reviewing the history of the **Victory Medal** (now known as the **World War I Victory Medal**) is to study a fascinating aspect of the American military's first modern participation alongside forces of other nations. Of the nearly 5 million Americans who served during the war, some 500,000 were sailors, 50,000 were Marines, and more than 4 million were in the Army. Significantly, then, the Victory Medal was the most widely distributed American award up to World War II.



Within months of the 11 Nov. 1918 armistice ending the First World War, the concept of a Victory Medal was approved and an Inter-Allied Military Commission meeting in France formulated a set of recommendations that would evolve into the Victory Medal we know today.

The name originally proposed for the medal, the "Allies' Medal," was rejected by the Commission because the name technically excluded the U.S. (America was an *Associated* power versus an *Allied* power) and Germany, ironically, could issue a medal by the same name. The following design-related resolutions were adopted by the Commission and were to apply to the separate Victory medals created by the 16 Allied and Associated nations:

- 1. A medal of the Great War shall be created and be called the Victory Medal.
- 2. It shall be distributed under conditions to be determined by each government.
- 3. The ribbon, identical for all countries, will represent two rainbows placed in juxtaposition in such a manner as will bring the red in the middle. [An American, Army Col. T. Bentley Mott, is credited with the ribbon design.]
- 4. The medal shall be bronze, round, its diameter 36 mm.
- 5. The final design of the medal itself shall be left up to the respective countries.
 - a. On the obverse will be represented a figure of Victory -- winged, standing, full length and full face. The background and border will be plain and bear no inscription or date.
 - b. The reverse will bear the inscription "The Great War for Civilization" in the language of the country concerned and will show the names of the various Allied and Associated nations or indicate their coats of arms.
 - c. The edge will be plain.

The various countries' final interpretation of this design criteria is a curious chapter in itself but beyond the scope of this presentation.

On 12 April 1919, announcement of the soon-to-be issued Victory Medal was made by Gen. Peyton C. March, Army Chief of Staff, who placed the medal's design in the hands of the government's Commission on Fine Arts.

That group selected prominent sculptor James Earle Fraser for the project. Celebrated designer of our "buffalo" nickel, Fraser not only executed the U.S. Victory Medal, but also the Navy Cross, an early design of the Navy's Distinguished Service Medal and portions of a proposed (but discarded) redesign of the Navy Medal of Honor. Final endorsement of Fraser's Victory Medal design was given by Secretary of War Newton D. Baker on 14 November 1919.

As specified, the obverse shows a representation of Victory, in this case wearing a spiked crown, arguably similar to that seen on the Statue of Liberty. The reverse has an American shield and the names of 14 Allied and Associated nations. Atop the shield is a fasces -- a medieval battle axe.