



An Identification Disc for the Army, 1862

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were not placed on the base ring until the gun had been turned and completed. This was cut by an engraver. All embossing was cast in the mould and shaped and cleaned afterwards.

Photographs 9a and 9b are of a 12-pounder cast in 1759 by W. Bowen. On the breech it has the royal coat of arms of George II; on the chase it has the ducal coat of arms of Lord George Sackville. Lord George Sackville was Lieutenant General of Ordnance from November 30, 1757 to September 10, 1759. This is the celebrated Lafayette gun. General Lafayette when in America in 1824 visited Watervliet Arsenal at Troy, New York. According to tradition, he recognized this piece as one of the original Yorktown guns. The gun has a large dent on the side near the breech resulting from a direct hit by a cannon ball. The gun also bears the inscription showing that it was surrendered by the capitulation at Yorktown, October, 1781.

Photograph 10b shows the coat of arms of John, Marquis of Granby. John, Marquis of Granby, was Lieutenant General of Ordnance from September 10, 1759 to September 10, 1763, and held the office of Master General of Ordnance from November 10, 1763 to the year 1770, when he died. In this instance the coat of arms is that of the Duke of Rutland, who also held the title of Marquis of Granby. The title of Marquis was usually given to the oldest son, hence, John, the son of the Duke of Rutland, would use the family coat of arms, but placed a marquis' coronet above the shield instead of the ducal. John, Marquis of Granby, was a general in the army and attained high military reputation as commander in chief of the British forces serving under Prince Ferdinand of Brunswick.

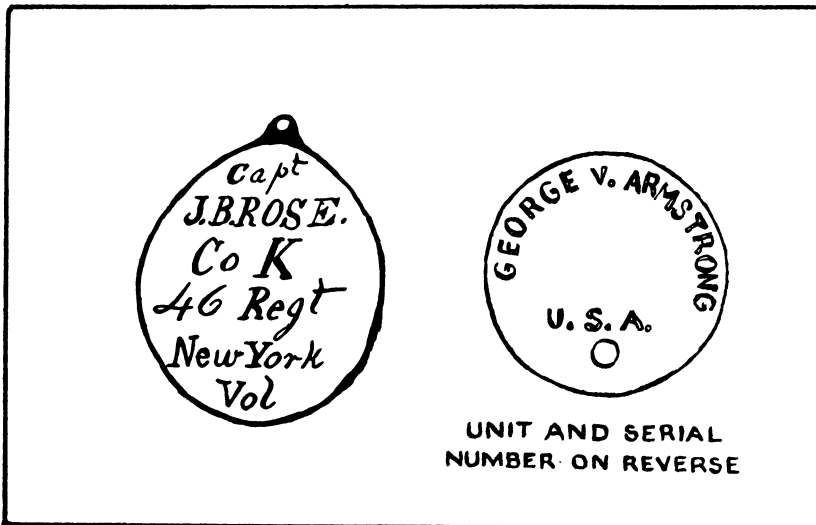
THOR BORRESEN

*Colonial National Historical Park,
Yorktown, Virginia*

AN IDENTIFICATION DISC FOR THE ARMY, 1862

The identification of the dead after battle has always been a partially unsolved problem of administration in the history of modern warfare. In the American Civil War, this problem appears to have been one of particular magnitude. The system of identifying the slain by means of personal possessions or by other sources of information found on the bodies by burial parties, was inadequate even under favorable conditions. Although early in the war, orders were issued requiring all commanding generals in the field to set off burial grounds for the dead immediately after each engagement, this regulation recognized the obvious difficulties of identification. In substance it directed that all graves be marked by some form of headboard, and "when practicable," the names of the persons buried should be inscribed on these grave markers. From the markers, registers of the burials were to be preserved, "in which will be noted the marks corresponding with the headboards."¹

¹General Orders, No. 33, April 3, 1862, War Department, *Official Records*, Series III, Vol. II, 2.



The tag proposed by Kennedy.

The tag as used in the A.E.F.

A number of obstacles prevented the satisfactory identification of the bodies so interred. Frequently men did not carry on their persons articles which could serve to identify them. Burial parties were often composite details from various units, whose members could not recognize more than a few of their fallen comrades, and had to rely upon whatever items of personal belongings that they found on the bodies left on the field. Frequently the dead were so disfigured by their wounds and exposure to the sun as to be beyond recognition, even by members of their own companies and squads. Finally, the destruction or disfigurement of identifying papers or other articles often accompanied the fatal wounding of the individual soldier, thus rendering hopeless any possibility of identifying the man after death.

Another problem also arose, in the case of the removal of bodies hastily buried after battle, for interment in permanent cemeteries. When records were lost or were unreliable, the remains temporarily buried on the field could not be identified later, thus making the transfer to permanent cemeteries almost impossible in some cases.

These difficulties were recognized by a citizen of New York, John Kennedy, who wrote to Secretary of War Stanton on May 3, 1862, offering a proposal for an identification disc to be issued to all officers and men in the Federal army.² This letter, enclosing a drawing illustrating his plan, reveals an article of field equipment identical with that prescribed by regulations more than forty years later, and with slight modifications, identical with the disc used by American troops in the World War, and in our army at the present day.

² War Dept., Sect. War, Doc. File, 1862-K-206 [formerly in AGO, now in The National Archives].

75 South Street,
New York, May 3rd, 1862

Hon. E. M. Stanton,
Sec. of War,
Washington, D. C.

Dear Sir: Enclosed please find a plan of a badge or medal which I propose getting up for distribution in the Army for the purpose of obviating the difficulty already experienced at Bulls Run in identifying the bodies of the slain after burial—It is intended to be of metal and worn by the soldier under his clothing. It will simplify the record kept by the burial squad and enable the friends of the Patriotic dead to identify their remains even in after years—It has been highly approved by all the Military men to whom I have shown it—It has also been endorsed by the Union defence Committee of this city—I have no doubt sir but your own intelligence will enable you to see at once that there can be no difficulty hereafter in identifying the bodies of soldiers wearing the “Kennedy badge.” The object of this letter is to solicit permission from the department to visit the army with the necessary tools to strike them off and distribute them to the officers and men with the necessary condition of proof of my loyalty and devotion to the Union Cause—As the object to be attained suggests under the existing state of affairs promptness of action I would most respectfully request and early reply and a favorable consideration

Respectfully Yours
JNO. KENNEDY

P. S. Of course the name title & is different from the specimen as they are to be stamped upon the ground to represent the wearer.

Despite the obvious value of the suggestion, which has been fully proven by subsequent usage, Kennedy's request for permission to furnish the army with these discs was summarily refused. Assistant Secretary of War Watson notified Kennedy on May 6 that the request could not be granted. No reason for the refusal was given.³

Forty-four years later, the War Department issued orders adopting the first identification disc in the American army. This order, dated December 20, 1906, required that “an aluminum identification tag, the size of a silver half dollar and of suitable thickness, stamped with the name, rank, company, regiment, or corps of the wearer, will be worn by each officer and enlisted man of the Army whenever the field kit is worn, the tag to be suspended from the neck, underneath the clothing, by a cord or thong passed through a small hole in the tag.”⁴ From the specifications named in this order, it may be seen that the tag first adopted by the Army was practically identical with that offered by Kennedy. Though subsequent regulations replaced the name, rank, and organization, with a serial number, the principle of the identification disc, as applied to American forces, may justly be said to have had its origin in the unheeded proposal of John Kennedy in May, 1862.

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³ Draft of reply filed with Kennedy to Sec. War, May 3, 1862, *loc. cit.*

⁴ General Orders No. 204, December 20, 1906, War Department, AGO.