

This Day in History... November 29, 1944

Honorable Discharge

On November 29, 1944, the War Department officially adopted the Honorable Discharge Emblem, a small but meaningful symbol worn by millions of service members returning home from World War II. For many veterans, it represented not only their service, but also their safe return after years of sacrifice.

The idea for a multi-service discharge emblem began decades earlier, shortly after World War I ended in 1918. In 1919, military planners proposed a patch that honorably discharged veterans could wear on their uniforms once they returned to civilian life. At the time, many service members could not afford new clothes immediately after leaving the military. The emblem would allow them to continue wearing their uniforms for a limited time without being mistaken for active-duty personnel. Although the idea was well received, it remained mostly a proposal until the next world conflict forced the nation to revisit it.



Honors all those who served in WWII and pictures the Honorable Discharge Emblem.



Issued for FDRs 100th birthday

As World War II intensified, the need for a clear identification system became even more important. Millions of men and women were cycling through the military, and many were transitioning home. In 1943, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill reviewed and revised the original design. The first version resembled the eagle on the presidential seal, but the two leaders wanted something that symbolized the Allies' growing momentum against the Axis powers.

The redesigned insignia featured an eagle with wings raised as if preparing for flight. Appropriately, it became known as "The Eagle Has Flown." This imagery was meant to capture the spirit of the Allied offensives that had begun pushing back both Germany and Japan in the Atlantic and Pacific theaters. It symbolized forward movement, determination, and hope—qualities important to service members returning from the front.

On November 29, 1944, the US Army and Navy officially adopted the new Honorable Discharge Emblem with the publication of War Department Circular No. 454. Soon after, millions of newly discharged veterans would wear the emblem proudly on their uniforms as they made the difficult transition from wartime service to civilian life.

Yet the emblem became famous under another, far more colorful nickname: the "ruptured duck." According to legend, the phrase can be traced back to actress Hedy Lamarr. Before she became known in the United States for her acting and her pioneering work in early wireless technology, Lamarr had been married to Friedrich Mandl, owner of several German arms factories. Her husband reportedly became jealous of her creativity and intelligence, especially her ideas for improving weapon designs.

Fearing for her safety, Lamarr escaped Europe and fled to the United States. She later described her dangerous escape as like riding a "segeltuch gebrochen," a German phrase that could be interpreted as "broken bird." When translated more literally, it means "ruptured duck." Her story spread among women working in the factory that produced the honorable discharge pins. Inspired by Lamarr's daring escape—and following wartime rules requiring boxes to be labeled with misleading terms to confuse enemy agents—they began marking the shipping crates with the phrase "ruptured ducks." The nickname stuck and soon became the common term used by both service members and civilians.



In the weeks after V-J Day, factories couldn't keep "ruptured duck" pins in stock—millions of veterans were mustering out at once, each handed a pin before heading home.



Veterans wearing the Honorable Discharge Emblem could ride US railroads for reduced fares, a small benefit meant to help them get home after the war.

The Honorable Discharge Emblem became a familiar sight in the final years of World War II. It was worn above the right front pocket on outer uniforms. Veterans with an honorable discharge rating—typically those who served faithfully and received good to excellent evaluations—were authorized to wear it. While most veterans earned it by completing their full term of service, it could also be awarded to those who left the military early, as long as their departure was not the result of misconduct.

For returning service members, the emblem served several practical purposes. It signaled to transportation workers, police officers, and employers that a person wearing a uniform was no longer on active duty. It also allowed veterans to travel home without facing questions about why they were out of uniform or where they were supposed to be. More than anything, however, it was a symbol of honor—small in size, but powerful in meaning.

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