

## *The Kittanning Destroyed Medal*

On May 1, 2006, western Pennsylvania began the celebration of the 250th anniversary of the Seven Years' War with an exhibit entitled *Clash of Empires: The British, French, and Indian War, 1754–1763*, the largest known exhibition on the conflict, at the Senator John Heinz Regional History Center in Pittsburgh. Nestled among the nearly three hundred rare artifacts and paintings was the “Kittanning Destroyed Medal,” the first documented medal engraved and struck for military honor in British North America. Originally struck in silver by order of the Corporation of the City of Philadelphia, it was presented by Mayor Attwood Shute to Colonel John Armstrong, who led the Second Battalion of the Pennsylvania Regiment against the Indian village of Kittanning on September 8, 1756, in retaliation for the raiding and burning of Fort Granville approximately a month before. The front of the medal displays the battle at Kittanning; it shows a military officer followed by two soldiers, with an Indian prostrate on the ground before them. In the background, the Indian village is burning. The reverse side portrays the Philadelphia Corporation's coat of arms. Although this original medal is one of the rarest American treasures, it is easy to find in the historical literature—it is invariably mentioned as a fitting commemoration of Armstrong's raid. Despite its historical significance and value, however, there has been no attempt to document the medal's history or explain its meaning.<sup>1</sup>

These insignia were bestowed upon Armstrong and his men for their “signal Proofs of Courage and personal Bravery” on January 5, 1757.<sup>2</sup> The medals were engraved by Edward Duffield, a watchmaker, and were struck by Joseph Richardson, a noted silversmith. Armstrong and his officers received silver medals; later, his noncommissioned officers accepted medals struck in bronze, while the enlisted soldiers collected theirs in pewter. By 1800, the original dies were placed in the US Mint in

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<sup>1</sup> “Investigation Regarding the Authenticity of Several “Armstrong Medals” also Known as “Kittanning Destroyed Medals” Currently in Possession of the Armstrong County Historical Museum and Genealogical Society” (Oct. 23, 2006), 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Feb. 17, 1757.

Philadelphia by Joseph Richardson Jr. It appears that these dies lasted until approximately 1874, when they became cracked and were rendered useless. The last strike from the original dies was most likely in the early 1860s.<sup>3</sup> The medal has been restruck for many of America's commemorative anniversaries and celebrations, but the dates have been rarely recorded. An examination of the six medals in possession of the Armstrong County Historical Museum and Genealogical Society proves both the popularity of the medal and the difficulty in tracing subsequent strikes.



Facsimile in copper of the original silver medal given to Gen. Armstrong in 1756. Courtesy of the Philadelphia History Museum at the Atwater Kent, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania Collection. According to Armstrong's battle report, the Allegheny River would have been behind or to the left of the attackers, not on the right as depicted on the medal. Moreover, the battle itself was unorganized and chaotic due to the unfamiliarity of the area, perhaps belying the portrayal on the medal (Hunter, "Victory at Kittanning," 383–94, 405).

<sup>3</sup> C. Wyllys Betts, *American Colonial History Illustrated by Contemporary Medals*, ed. William T. R. Marvin and Lyman Haynes Low (New York, 1894), 178–79; "Colonel Armstrong and the Kittanning Medal," *MCA Advisory* 8, no. 1 (2005): 9–10.

Some of these restruck medals were produced as fundraisers to support local celebrations, while others were donated by private owners. Within the museum's collection are Kittanning medals that were reproduced in honor of the 250th anniversary of Armstrong's raid in 2006, the nation's centennial and bicentennial, and George Washington's 200th birthday in the 1930s. The final two artifacts, a silver medal struck sometime between 1810 and 1840 in England by jeweler Thomas Halliday and a copper medal struck from the original dies, are significantly more important historically because of their age and composition. Although both medals were difficult to assess, the copper medal easily revealed its age because it has visual imperfections caused by an air bubble that damaged both the medal and the die.<sup>4</sup> The society currently does not have any of the original silver medals, which remain the rarest and most valuable.

In an age when medals are regularly awarded within the US military for various achievements, most Americans are ambivalent to what all these decorations represent. The proliferation of medals has greatly numbed their true value. Perhaps the reason why the Kittanning Destroyed Medal continues to be reproduced and admired is that it is attractive and possesses many of the characteristics most desirable to collectors: narration, perspective charm, commemoration, image, beauty, and longevity.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it was the very first military medal in North America awarded for courage and bravery, predating the Badge of Military Merit or Purple Heart by approximately twenty-five years. Finally, medals are largely awarded for morale. Contemporary medals are now considered by many in the military community to be unexceptional and commonplace;<sup>6</sup> the Kittanning Destroyed Medal, on the other hand, provided a real boost in morale for the backcountry inhabitants desperate for relief from relentless attacks by Native Americans.

In historical memory, the medal awarded to Armstrong and his men illustrates the significance of how a global war transformed the backcountry from relatively peaceful coexistence between Indians and whites to one engulfed in bloodshed and hate. For nearly seven decades William Penn's vision of a Peaceable Kingdom succeeded to make Pennsylvania

<sup>4</sup> "Investigation," 4–7.

<sup>5</sup> D. Wayne Johnson, "Okay, Then, What Are the Characteristics of Medals," Medal Collectors of America website (2004), <http://www.medalcollectors.org/Questions/#Q10>.

<sup>6</sup> Raymond M. Powell, USAF, "Medals for Mediocrity: How to Restore Meaning to Air Force Decorations," *Air and Space Power Journal* 23, no. 1 (2009): 41–43; Neal Creighton, "Restoring Meaning to Medals," *Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 25, 1992, 15.

unique among the British North American colonies, but the Seven Years' War redefined that relationship. Beginning in the summer of 1756, as depicted on the medal, killing Indians and burning down their villages, crops, and other property, distinguished how Pennsylvanians dealt with their "Indian problem."<sup>7</sup> Colonel John Armstrong, often referred to as the "Hero of Kittanning," is celebrated as a model of American manhood; he is displayed prominently, orchestrating the attack and directing his men to shoot the Indians and burn their village.

Native Americans, Britons, and the French were immersed in a three-way struggle for the possession and ultimate control of North America during the conflict that began in western Pennsylvania and raged there for four long years. The Kittanning Destroyed Medal is a reminder of how that conflict played out on a local, continental, and global stage. Thus, with its symbolic importance in western Pennsylvania history and the fact that the medal has been reproduced numerous times for America's most significant commemorations and anniversaries, the preservation of the Kittanning Destroyed Medal and its meaning is important for the understanding of early American history for future generations.

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<sup>7</sup> William A. Hunter, "Victory at Kittanning," *Pennsylvania History* 23 (1956): 376–407; James P. Myers Jr., "Pennsylvania's Awakening: The Kittanning Raid of 1756," *Pennsylvania History* 66 (1999): 399–420; and Daniel P. Barr, "Victory at Kittanning? Reevaluating the Impact of Armstrong's Raid in the Seven Years' War in Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 131 (2007): 5–32.