



'I've Experienced Tonight What A&M Is All About'

In 1968 Letter, Freshman Described Silver Taps; Weeks Later, Bugles Played For Him

BY SUE OWEN '94

Tens of thousands of A&M freshmen since the 1980s have learned about Silver Taps before they even reach campus—at Fish Camp when a young Aggie's letter home is read aloud.

Since last summer, students who put on that Fish Camp program and their Class of 1969 sponsors have gathered much more information behind the letter, which will be part of a new monument planned at the heart of campus.

It began with a cadet sitting at his desk.

'DEAR MOM & DAD'

As the 1968 fall semester began, Silver Taps was held Sept. 17 and Oct. 22. One of those nights, likely the first, Corpus Christi freshman Don Coward '72 sat down and started a letter to his parents.

"Right now it's 11:00 and Call to Quarters is over, I should be in bed, but there's something I have to tell you both first," he wrote. "I've experienced tonight what A&M is all about."

His clear, moving account of the ceremony follows (see text, next page).

On Nov. 12, Silver Taps was held again—this time for Coward and two other cadets killed in an auto collision during the weekend of a Corps trip.

TEACHING THE TRADITION AT FISH CAMP

Most freshmen learn a little of that story at Fish Camp, the annual orientation held since 1954 at a lakeside camp in Palestine, in a program explaining the more solemn traditions of A&M.

The letter is presented without a date, as a timeless event, "so it's applicable to every freshman," said Liz Springs '16, a leader of the Fish Camp Crew students who put on the program in addition to doing the camps' behind-the-scenes and set-up work.

One night in each session, freshmen gather in the camp's main meeting room. As they come in, Springs said, "You can tell that they're excited from their really busy day. By that point they've really made some friends at Lakeview." But the room quickly quiets.

A light shines on a single student onstage, a cadet in uniform, who sits at a desk writing while Coward's letter is read aloud.

Next, the freshmen are told of the fatal accident. The sounds of Silver Taps follow. The presentation continues with Muster history and includes the names of those killed in the 1999 Bonfire collapse.

"When they leave, no one has to ask them to be quiet," Springs said, "because they're all so moved by the program."

CONNECTED TO THE PAST

The Class of '69 began sponsoring Crew five years ago partly because of the program, but did not realize until

Don Coward '72's handwritten letter home, the "fish spurs" he made before the Nov. 9 SMU game, a Silver Taps notice and a Texas A&M scrapbook that was never filled are among family artifacts.



3 Aggies Die in Crash

Word of Tragedy Plunges Corps Into Mourning

By JAMES EWELL

Three members of the Texas A&M Cadet Corps, including a company commander, were killed early Saturday in a head-on car-truck collision northwest of Dallas on State Highway 114 in Denton County.

The cadets were part of the 3,000-man corps marching in Dallas for the Aggie-Southern Methodist University football game in the Cotton Bowl.

The victims were identified by police as Cadet Maj. John W. Groves, 22, a senior from Lexington, N.M., and commander of Co. C1, George W. Reynolds, 18, of Orange Grove, Jan. Wells County, and Donald W. Coward, 18, of Corpus Christi. Both Reynolds and Coward were Aggie freshmen.

Word of the fatal crash plunged the corps into mourning only hours before its traditional parade up Main Street in downtown Dallas.

The company to which the cadets belong voted against withdrawing from the parade, but instead marched bareheaded in an act of reverence.

Reynolds was listed by police as the driver of the late-model sports car. The

driver of the truck, Bryan Clayton of Irving, escaped injury.

The crash occurred on a 2-lane stretch of the highway about 2.8 m. near the Tarrant-Denton County line about 3½ miles west of Roanoke. A Highway Patrol officer said the

collision apparently occurred when the driver of the auto fell asleep at the wheel and the car veered into the path of the east-bound tractor-trailer truck.

The bodies were taken to the Green Funeral Home in Denton, where large numbers of cadets began assembling after word of the accident had spread throughout the corps in Dallas and Fort Worth.

Groves' roommate, Robert Turley, 20, a senior from West Orange, said the three cadets had visited in Fort Worth Friday night and apparently were en route to Denton when they were killed.

Turley said company members talked of withdrawing from the parade.

But we felt like we should go ahead and march because this would have been the way they would have wanted it," Turley said at the funeral home.

A country club dance planned by the company after the game was canceled, however.

Plans were under way for company cadets to accompany the bodies of their dead comrades to their respective homes after the game.

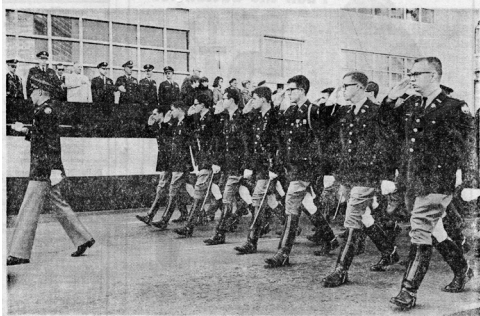
Gen. Critz to Speak

At Veterans Day Rite

LT. Gen. Harry H. Critz, commanding general at Ft. San Houston in San Antonio, will speak at the 19th Massing of the Colors and Veterans Day observance ceremonies Sunday, sponsored by the Dallas Chapter of the Military Order of World Wars, at Southern Methodist University.

Ceremonies will begin at 3 p.m. with the massing of the colors by military and patriotic groups in the vicinity of Pandemonium Library on the east side of the campus.

The procession will cross the quadrangle to McFarlin Auditorium where the observance program will take place.



The Letter

Dear Mom & Dad,

Right now it's 11:00 and Call to Quarters is over, I should be in bed, but there's something I have to tell you both first. I'm sitting here at my desk with tears in my eyes and thinking more about life itself than I ever had before. I'm not crying because of all the hell I'm going through – but rather because I've experienced tonight what A&M is all about. Mother & Dad we're one big family up here and now I know what it means to be an Aggie. Tonight was "Silver Taps." In case you don't know what that is, I'm going to tell you & you've got to listen. Anytime a student here loses his life – no matter how – on an assigned date soon afterwards we have what you call Silver Taps. Everyone puts on civilian clothes and goes to the Quad in front of the administrative building and stands around a flagpole on which all the names of students from A&M who died while attending school here are listed. No one says a word from 7:30 at night until the next day. All is quiet & all the lights on campus are turned off. You have to put blankets up over your windows & even the coke machine lights are covered. The whole campus is a blanket of darkness. Then at 10:30 while everyone is at the Quad, a firing team fires a 21 gun salute in honor of those who died and the buglers play Taps and it's over. Tonight I experienced one of the most solemn feelings I've ever had and feel so good inside. Mom, Dad it was just like God Himself was there with us. Well I guess you're wishing I would grow up and quit coming on like this, over Silver Taps – but it was so, hell I can't even tell you how it was, there's nothing else like it. Well I've got to go now, it's late & I need the sleep. Y'all be careful & I love you both.

D.C.

initiating research last year that it connected to the deadly crash their senior year.

The Corps had a march on downtown Dallas' Main Street set for the morning of the Nov. 9 game in the Cotton Bowl stadium.

In a tradition that continues today, Coward and his fellow freshmen cadets had fashioned "fish spurs" from bottlecaps that rang with a metallic chime against the campus sidewalks during the week before the game against the SMU Mustangs. Coward's spurs are part of his family's collection of memories.

Students traveled to the area ahead of the game, some attending a Friday night dance at Texas Woman's University in Denton. Early Saturday morning, a car carrying Coward and fellow C-1 freshman George W. Reynolds '72 and C-1 commander John W. Groves '69 ran head-on into a truck on a highway west of Roanoke.

A few hours later, grieving cadets opted to go on with the march, playing Silver Taps before they stepped off. Larry Lippke '69, who directed the



Don Coward '72

Taps team, still recalls the sound of the three-part trumpet harmony echoing off the tall buildings around them.

In those days, A&M held Silver Taps as soon as possible after a student's death. So four nights later, Aggies gathered again.

Coward had written only weeks before: "The whole campus is a blanket of darkness. Then at 10:30

... a firing team fires a 21 gun salute in honor of those who died and the buglers play Taps and it's over.... Mom, Dad it was just like God Himself was there with us."

CREATING A MEMORIAL

At their 40 Year Reunion in 2009, the Class of '69 launched a Legacy Fund supporting Aggies throughout college life, from Fish Camp to Aggie Rings. They helped pay Crew students' costs to attend Fish Camp, and last fall approved \$125,000 to expand and permanently endow that initiative.

Freddie Wong '69 said that as the Class sought ways to enrich life on campus, they came to focus on Coward's letter, and have proposed a Traditions Plaza on the Academic Plaza near the YMCA building.

A new sculpture is planned with a replica of Coward's letter. The Silver Taps bugle sculpture and Muster candle sculpture will be relocated from their current Academic Plaza locations. Work could begin within a year, Wong said.

The classmates hope to have one of Coward's nieces as their guest when the plaza is unveiled, Wong said. And this summer, they plan for her to attend Fish Camp with them to watch the program featuring her uncle's letter.