‘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.

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CONNECTED TO THE PAST

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