

Silver Taps solemn, moving

By RENEE HARRELL
Reporter

A mass of silent Aggies gather in the dark at the heart of campus in front of the Academic Building. The area immediately behind the Lawrence Sullivan Ross statue is reserved for the families and close friends of the deceased Texas A&M students being honored. The crowd solemnly awaits the Ross Volunteer firing squad. Finally, the steady beat of their funeral march is heard.

It's 10:30 p.m.

"First order ... ready ... aim ... fire!"

The firing squad begins its 21-gun salute with the familiar bronze statue of "Sul Ross" looking on. After the third volley, six buglers begin to play "Taps." Three times it sounds. Once to the north, once to the east and once to the west. No one says a word as the last strain rings across the darkened campus. As the silent Aggies begin to leave, the firing squad remains in position. Gradually the lights come on again.

The event described is "Silver Taps." This final farewell to Texas A&M students who have died is one of the oldest Aggie traditions.

Silver Taps, as observed today, was pieced together over time. Its complete history remains unknown, but legend says the first Silver Taps was held in 1898 for Lawrence Sullivan Ross, governor of Texas from 1886 to 1890 and president of Texas A&M from 1891 to 1898.

The first Silver Taps ceremonies were held in front of Old Main, which stood where the Academic Building now stands. It was then moved to Goodwin Hall. The Academic Building has been the site of Silver Taps since 1918.

New elements have been added to the ceremony since that first night in 1898.

According to the University Archives, the flag at the main flag pole was first flown at half-mast the day of the ceremony beginning in the 1920s. Two buglers arranged and played the music "Silver Taps" in the 1930s. From 1955 to 1973, chimes were rung before the ceremony. The use of chimes was resumed after the renovation of the Memorial Student Center in 1975.

Silver Taps is held the first Tuesday of each month during the fall, if needed. It is held the second Tues-



Photo by PETER ROCHA

Students gather in front of the Academic Building to mourn Aggies who have died.

day in September each year for Aggies who have died during the summer. The names of the deceased Aggies are posted on the base of the flagpole in front of the Academic Building the day of Silver Taps. Notices of the ceremony also are posted around the campus.

A Texas A&M freshman, who attended Silver Taps in October of 1968, wrote this letter to his parents:

"Dear Mom and 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 have before.

"I'm not crying because of what I'm going through — but rather because I've experienced tonight what

A&M is all about. Mother and Dad, we're one big family 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 and you've got to listen. Any time a student here loses his life — no matter how — on an assigned date soon afterwards we have what is called Silver Taps. Everyone gathers in front of the Academic Building, in front of which is a flag pole on which Silver Taps notices are posted.

"No one says a word from the time we leave the dorms until the next morning. All is quiet and all the lights on campus are turned off. Even lights on the Coke machines are covered.

"At 10:30, when everyone is in place in front of the

Academic Building, a firing team fires a 21-gun salute in honor of those who died. Then buglers play Silver 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. I guess you're wishing I would grow up and quit carrying on like this over Silver Taps — but it was so, I can't ever tell you how it was, there's nothing else like it.

"Be careful and I love you both.

"D.C."
Three weeks after Don Coward wrote this letter to his parents, Silver Taps was held again. This time for Coward and two of his Company C-1 friends who were killed in a Denton County automobile accident.

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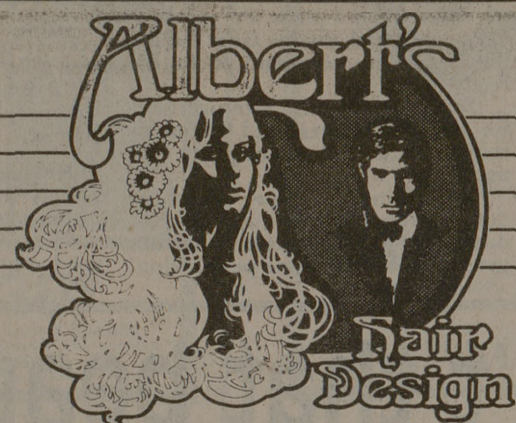
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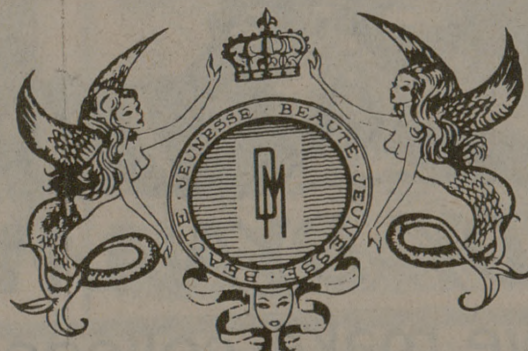
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