

Remembrance ...

A&M's Silver Taps allows Aggies a chance to pay final respects

By **RENEE HARRELL**
Reporter

Silent Aggies gather in the dark outside the Academic Building. Slowly a circle forms around the Lawrence Sullivan Ross statue. They wait for the memorial to begin.

This is Silver Taps — one of the oldest Aggie traditions.

It is the first Tuesday night of the month. There is no hustle, no hurry here. The crowd solemnly awaits the Ross Volunteer firing squad.

It's 10:30 p.m. The slow, steady beat of the funeral march is heard. Then silence.

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

The firing squad begins its 21-gun salute as the bronze statue of "Sul Ross" looks 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.

The silent Aggies depart. This is Silver Taps — a final farewell to Aggies who have lost their lives during the course of a month.

Although the complete history of this tradition remains unknown, it is said that 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.

"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. . . ."

— Don Coward in 1968.

The first Silver Taps ceremonies were held in front of Old Main, which once stood where the Academic Building now stands. Later the ceremony moved to Goodwin Hall. But Silver Taps returned to its former site in 1918. The Academic Building had taken the place of Old Main.

During the 1920s, the flag at the main flag pole was flown at half-mast for the first time, according to the University Archives.

And those attending Silver Taps in the 1930s would be among the first to hear the music of "Silver Taps" It was at this time that two buglers arranged and played the melody.

Silver Taps is held the first Tuesday of each month during the fall and spring if Aggies have died over the month past. The only exception is the ceremony held on the second Tuesday in September 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 on the day of Silver Taps. Notices of the ceremony also are posted around the campus, and relatives and friends of the deceased are reserved a spot behind the statue of "Sully."

Don Coward, an A&M freshman, wrote this letter to his parents about a Silver Taps he saw in October 1968:

"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. Anytime 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 Coward wrote this letter to his parents, Silver Taps was held again — this time for Coward and two of his Company C-1 buddies who were killed in a Denton County automobile accident.

Silver Taps will take place on Sept. 10.

Muster

Service honors Aggies who died in past year

One of the most unique and revered Aggie traditions is Muster, a ceremony that remembers Aggies who have died during the past year.

Muster is celebrated by Aggies all over the world on San Jacinto Day, April 21.

During the ceremony, a roll call of the deceased is read and a living comrade answers "here" in their stead.

First held in 1883, Muster started as a social event for alumni to relive their college days.

During World War I, Muster was held on foreign soil for the first time. Although Aggies met in European foxholes and army posts as well as in American camps, Muster was not held on the A&M campus.

Muster gained national recognition during World War II when a group of Aggies held a ceremony while under fire on Corregidor Island in the Philippines. Under the command of General George Moore, Class of 1908, 24 men celebrated Muster, only 15 days before the island fell to the Japanese. All these men were either killed or captured.

News of the Muster was one of the last messages to come from the area. Despite the bleak outlook for the

United States, the report gave people back home hope.

In 1943, the tide of the battle was turning in the United States' favor. Musters were held on the small island of Guadalcanal, on the beach head at Anzio under fire, in Africa and on the Rhine.

At the 1944 Muster ceremony in Naples, Italy, a news correspondent reported that Aggies sang the Aggie War Hymn while Nazi planes flew overhead.

The 1942 Congress commemorated the Aggie heroes at Corregidor, and at A&M a unique Muster ceremony began.


During the 1943 ceremony in College Station, a poem by Dr. John Ashton, Class of 1906, was read as a friend answered "here" as the heroes of Corregidor were called.

Muster has changed slightly in the late 1970s when a candlelighting ceremony was added.

The Muster program is coordinated by the Student Government Muster Committee. It is held in the Rollie White Coliseum and includes speakers, a roll call for the absent and music by the Singing Cadets and the Aggie Band. The Ross Volunteer Firing Squad gives three seven-gun volleys and "Silver Taps" played three times by an unse bugler.

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