

## **The Main Drill Field**

The Main Drill Field at Texas A&M University has been the center of campus activity and Corps of Cadet training since the school opened in 1876. The school officially opened on October 2, 1876 as the state's first institution of higher learning when it opened its doors for six students. The school opened as a result of the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862. The Act also mandated that military tactics be taught as part of the college training program. The legislators believed that college-educated leaders should understand something of the military just in case their country needed them in the future.<sup>1</sup> All students were required to serve in the Corps of Cadets, wear uniforms and follow military discipline as directed by the Commandant of Cadets.<sup>2</sup>

On October 4, 1876 Governor Richard Coke, directly across from the Main Drill Field, formally dedicated the college by calling for students to "Let your watchword be duty, and know no other talisman of success than labor. Let honor be your guiding star in your dealings with your superiors, your fellows, with all. Be true to a trust reposed as the needle to the pole, stand by the right even to the sacrifice of life itself, and learn that death is preferable to dishonor."<sup>3</sup>

For generations, in war and peace, scores of citizen soldiers have marched on this field.

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<sup>1</sup> John A. Adams, Jr., The Main Drill Field, Email April 4, 2002. P 2.

<sup>2</sup> John A. Adams, Jr., We Are The Aggies, Texas A&M University Press, 1979, College Station, pp.6-7.

<sup>3</sup> John A. Adams, Jr. First Call, "Keepers of the Spirit, Part I-The Early Years", Newman Printing Company, Bryan, p. 10

The open parade ground has been the site of horse drawn artillery drill by caisson and cannon, infantry exercises, and in the late 1920s served as an airfield for student pilot training.<sup>4</sup> Cadet life in early years would usually begin at 6:00 A.M. with morning reveille and roll call. Drill exercises or various other military duties usually occupied the time between 5:00 and 6:00 P.M.<sup>5</sup>

Military drills were precise maneuvers taught and practiced on the outdoor drill field known as the drill field. They were conducted on the drill field after classes so not to interfere with classes.<sup>6</sup> Early football games were played on the drill field prior to approval of a permanent athletic field in 1904.<sup>7</sup>

On this site the famed Aggie Bonfire was held from 1909 until 1955.<sup>8</sup> Veterans of the Battle of San Jacinto visited the college on June 26, 1878. They met with Governor Lubbock and then observed the cadets and the Bryan Rifles (a non-campus military company) perform on the drill field.<sup>9</sup> During annual graduation activities, the final drill was always a highlight for all. At the annual review in 1894, General Frank Wheaton, a visiting officer, reviewed the cadets. He was joined by the president of the college and former governor, General Lawrence Sullivan Ross. General Wheaton said the drill was beautiful and the cadets performed the difficult evolutions of drill with promptness, grace

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<sup>4</sup> John A. Adams, E-mail, "The Main Drill Field", April 4, 2002, P.2.

<sup>5</sup> College Station Battalion, December 1, 1893.

<sup>6</sup> TAMU Catalogue, 1876-7, p.21, 25.

<sup>7</sup> TAMC Minutes, Board of Directors, November 10, 1904.

<sup>8</sup> Jerry C. Cooper & Henry C. Dethloff, Footsteps, Texas A&M University Press, College Station, 1991, p. 107.

<sup>9</sup> Galveston Daily News, "The Wind Up at Bryan", June 27, 1878, p.1.

and skill. He further stated that the campus was the finest in the country.<sup>10</sup> In 1920 the A&M Board of Directors recognized the distinct nature of this drill field by planting 55 oak trees around the outside of the field in honor of former A&M cadets killed during World War I. This was a tribute to the sons of the college who fell in the world war. Later that year markers were placed at the trees, which listed each man's name, class and site and date of death. The markers were to remind people of those brave sons of A&M who made the ultimate sacrifice for their country.<sup>11</sup> A granite memorial is located on the West Side of the drill field, which further recognizes those, lost in World War I.<sup>12</sup> It was given by the Classes of 1923, 1924, 1925 & 1926.

In the fall of 1942 Universal Pictures from Hollywood, California arrived in Aggieland to film the movie: "We've Never Been Licked". The Walter Wanger film was billed as depicting the traditions and history of Texas A&M. Classes were canceled during portion of the filming and part of the 6,500 man Corps of Cadets staged reviews on the Main Drill Field.<sup>13</sup> Located south of the drill field on Lamar Street is the Memorial Student Center which was dedicated on Aggie Muster Day, April 21, 1951, in memory of the 916 Aggies who died in World War II. Also in the entryway is a plaque in honor of the 104 Aggies who led and supported the gallant defense of Bataan and Corregidor.<sup>14</sup> Plaques commemorating the seven Aggies who were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor

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<sup>10</sup> Galveston Daily News, "A&M College", June 4, 1894, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Memorial Marker, Main Drill Field, Dedicated April 9, 1988. Texas A&M University.

<sup>12</sup> Jerry C. Cooper & Henry C. Dethloff, Footsteps, Texas A&M University Press, College Station, 1991, p.38.

<sup>13</sup> The Texas Aggie, "Shooting on Motion Picture Gets Started", November 20, 1942, p.1.

<sup>14</sup> Jerry C. Cooper & Henry C. Dethloff, Footsteps, Texas A&M University Press, College Station, 1991, p.18.

can be found on the hall just inside the front door as well as in the Sander's Corps of Cadets Center.<sup>15</sup>

The drill field was named in June 1985 in honor of Marine Lieutenant General Ormond R. Simpson, Class of 1936. General Simpson was an A&M Distinguished Alumni who returned to Texas A&M University, after retiring from military service and served as head of the School of Military Science.<sup>16</sup>

On September 21, 2001, as part of the Corps of Cadets 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, the James B Kelly '52 Reviewing Stand was dedicated.<sup>17</sup> A plaque on the reviewing stand reads: From this drill field to the Battle of San Juan Hill, the Trenches of Europe, the Pacific Beaches and Normandy, The Mountains of Korea, The Jungles of Vietnam, the Arabian Desert and Beyond ... came the Foundation of America's Officer Corps of Citizens Soldiers and Professionals in Time of Utmost Need. ... The Sons And Daughters of Texas A&M.<sup>18</sup> At the dedication of the reviewing stand, Lieutenant General James Hollingsworth, Class of 1940 and Texas A&M's most decorated general officer stated that he had been very fortunate in the military and in business but the most important things he had ever learned, he learn them on the drill field.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The Aggienetwork, 1876-2000 Directory of Former Students, he Association of Former Students, 2000. p.XXIII

<sup>16</sup> Jerry C. Cooper & Henry C. Dethloff, Footsteps, Texas A&M University Press, College Station, 1991, pp.16-17.

<sup>17</sup> Texas A&M Corps of Cadets 125<sup>th</sup> Reunion Booklet, September 21-22, 2001, p.5.

<sup>18</sup> 125<sup>th</sup> University Reunion Program, "Keepers of the Spirit", September 21-22, 2001, p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> Hollingsworth, James F, "Quote to Jim Kelly, September 21, 2001.

For decades, the military drill field along Old Main Drive has been a central feature of the campus. The footsteps of cadets who have crossed and re-crossed this field by the thousands echo through Aggie history. In addition to drill practice, at least five times yearly the Corps of Cadets conducts formal military parades on Simpson Drill Field. Final Review, which concludes each school year, is an Aggie tradition that dates back over one hundred years. For many, the reviews on Simpson Drill Field are the most important display of spirit and heritage at Texas A&M University. They exemplify the sacrifice, selflessness and honor to be found in service to the state and nation. The picturesque, oak-lined backdrop offered by Simpson Drill Field provides a singularly distinctive setting in which to conduct these time-honored ceremonies. During each parade, the viewing public comes to better understand the deeply rooted values instilled in all cadets. The emotions of the Corps experience foster memories and devotion for Texas A&M and the Corps of Cadets that last well beyond the college years.<sup>20</sup>

A State of Texas Historical Marker about the Texas A&M Corps of Cadets was erected at the Sander's Corps of Cadet Center on February 24, 1996.<sup>21</sup> The words on the marker reads: Soon after the opening in 1876, the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas (Texas A&M) established the Corps of Cadets to fulfill its mandate to instruct its students (All-Male until the early 1960s) in Military Science. A&M contributed more Officers to America's WW II effort than any other institution, including the U.S. Military Academy. Many of the Corps' traditional activities, such as The Aggie Band, Fish Drill Team and

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<sup>20</sup> Texas A&M Corps of Cadets 125<sup>th</sup> Reunion Booklet, September 21 – 22, 2001, p.5.

<sup>21</sup> Texas Historical Marker, The Corps of Cadets, Sander's Corps Cadets Center, Dedicated February 1996, Texas A&M University.

Ross Volunteers, have gained National and International Recognition. A&M's Elite Corps of Cadets continues to dominate the University's Unique Public Image.<sup>22</sup>

The Main Drill Field has and will continue to provide a location where Cadets receive training that allows them to leave Texas A&M with an additional education to accompany their academic achievements.



By: Donald R. Henderson

Class of 1962

March 1, 2003

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<sup>22</sup> Texas Historical Marker, The Corps of Cadets, Sander's Corps Cadets Center, Dedicated February 1996, Texas A&M University.

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