



Official Newsletter of the Michigan Company of Military Historians & Collectors
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*“It follows then as certain as that night succeeds the day, that without a decisive naval force we can do nothing definitive, and with it, everything honorable and glorious. **George Washington, 1787***

*“Climate change is, and always has been, a driver of wars. Drought, pestilence, flood, and even famine push people to the limits of human survival, often resulting in war for control over what few resources remain.” **Gordon J.F. MacDonald, DARPA co-founder, 1966***

*“Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest things are difficult because of friction. Which results from the interaction of two contending bunches of humans and the influence of the surrounding environment.” **Carl von Clausewitz***

*“He’s a psychopath. He is such an egocentric...He has never made a mistake in his whole life. He wants to make sure that the Americans, and me in particular, had no credit, had nothing to do with this war.” **General Dwight Eisenhower commenting on General Montgomery, January, 1945***

*“An enemy force that has temporarily or permanently lost the physical means or will to fight, and unable to pursue their previous course of action; thereby yielding and no longer able to interfere to a significant degree the actions of the friendly forces.” **Military definition of defeat***

Our speaker for February is John Carlisle, a former Chief Petty Officer trained as a Navy Corpsman. Served from 1985-2005. Saw duty in Operation Desert Storm and served aboard the *USNF Mercy*.

MEETINGS take place the second Monday of every month at the *Riverfront Hotel Grand Rapids* 270 Ann St NW, Grand Rapids, MI 49504 (616) 363-9001. Socializing begins at 6:00 (1800), dinner at 7:00 (1900), business meeting 7:15 (1915), and program at 8:00 (2000).

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Company Notes

- ◆ The newly elected officers are posted on the left.
- ◆ **We will have a SILENT AUCTION this month, please bring anything you wish to sell to benefit our Treasury.**
- ◆ **Dues are still being accepted. Only \$40.00**
- ◆ **Electronic copies will receive more than 10 pages of the Cannon Report. The additional page(s) will carry current and applicable military news along any recent books the editor has found extremely interesting**

The Continental Navy

There was none. The various colonies gave letters of marque to ship owners which made them privateers. They secured their own armament and split the spoils with the issuing authority, sometimes. The Continental Congress did fund the conversion of several merchant ships but they were poorly fitted out and easily overwhelmed in action. The Committee then authorized the construction of thirteen light frigates but colonial shipbuilders lacked the relative experience and consequently made many costly and time-consuming mistakes. None were completed on time and the delays did not really matter for when they were launched they lay at anchor for a year or more waiting for ordnance, rigging, provisions and crews. Arming them was a serious problem for Britain had forbid the manufacture of heavy cannon in the colonies and there were no foundries capable of smelting and casting big naval guns. The ships that made it to sea were quickly forced to return to port for repairs. General Washington was exasperated by the demand for troops, sorely needed elsewhere but required to protect the frigates in port from attack by British raiding parties. In all, seven ships were captured and the remaining four were destroyed when the British invaded Philadelphia in 1777. Washington refused to further protect colonial warships for they were just becoming supply depots for the British Navy. Thereafter, he relied upon the the French, Spanish, and Dutch navies to engage the British at sea.

Combat between British warships and American privateers was rare. Anytime a man-of-war was sighted they were easily outrun by the faster and lighter ships of the colonists. The only real success enjoyed against the British Navy was by John Paul Jones in a converted French merchantmen, the 40 gun *Bonhomme Richard*. Jones raided isolated seaports in England and Scotland, taking dozens of prizes and evading Royal Navy cruisers dispatched to hunt him down. When France entered the war in 1778 Jones found the now open French and Dutch ports perfect to reprovision his ship and redeem his spoils. The London *Morning Post* wrote that "John Paul resembles a Jack O'Lantern, to mislead our marines and terrify our coasts. He is no sooner seen than lost and has robbed the British people of their sense of peace and security at home." He was branded a "desperado, a daring pirate, and a vile fellow." On September 23, 1779, Paul Jones became our first American naval hero ("Jones" was added later in life to hide from law enforcement after winning a duel).

On August 14, a vast French and Spanish invasion fleet approached England. Jones was sent to provide a diversion by heading for Ireland. Halfway up the coast of eastern England lies a outcrop of land into the North Sea called Flamborough Head. Its chalk white cliffs are similar to those at Dover, 200 miles to the South. Just offshore Jones met the 50-gun British frigate *HMS Serapis* and the 22-gun ship *Countess of Scarborough* escorting a large merchant convoy. The English captains placed themselves between the convoy and Jones's squadron (the 36 gun *Alliance*, the 32-gun *Pallas*, and the 12-gun *Vengeance*), allowing the merchants to escape. The 4th Rate *Serapis* then engaged the *Bonhomme Richard*. Soon afterwards, *Alliance* fired, from a considerable distance, at the *Countess*. Quickly recognizing that he could not win a battle of big guns, and with the wind dying, Jones made every effort to lock his ship and *Serapis* together (his famous, albeit possibly apocryphal, quotation "I have not yet begun to fight!" was allegedly uttered in reply to a demand to surrender in this initial stage of the battle). Finally after about an hour, Jones, with his deck guns and Marine marksmen in the rigging cleared the British decks. *Alliance* then sailed past and fired a broadside, doing as much damage to *Richard* as to *Serapis*. Meanwhile, the *Countess of Scarborough* had enticed *Pallas*, downwind of the main battle, to begin a separate engagement. Sailing on the *Alliance* approached this contest, about an hour after it had begun, and the badly damaged *Countess* surrendered.

With *Bonhomme Richard* burning and sinking, her ensign shot away, one of the officers, apparently believing Jones to be dead, shouted a surrender. The British commander asked, seriously this time, if they had struck their colors. Jones later remembered saying something like "I am determined to make you strike," but the words heard by crew-members and reported in newspapers a few days later were more like: "I may sink, but I'll be damned if I strike." An attempt by the British to board *Bonhomme Richard* was thwarted, and a grenade caused the explosion of a large quantity of gunpowder on *Serapis*'s lower gun-deck. *Alliance* then returned to the main battle, firing two broadsides. Again, those did at as much damage to *Richard* as to *Serapis*, but the tactic worked to the extent that, unable to move, and with *Alliance* keeping well out of the line of his own great guns, Captain Pearson of *Serapis* accepted that prolonging the battle could achieve nothing, so he surrendered. Most of *Bonhomme Richard*'s crew immediately transferred to other vessels, and after a day and a half of frantic repair efforts, it was decided that the ship could not be saved, so it was allowed to sink, and Jones took command of *Serapis* for the trip to neutral Holland.



The Alliance firing on the Bonhomme Richard and Serapis

Without her allies, privateers, and the incessant in-fighting between the British admirals and the Admiralty, the Americans could not have chosen a more opportune time to declare independence. The war in Europe placed many British warships on port blockades and convoy duty. Over 2000 privateers were licensed by the various states, 1000 by Massachusetts alone. The British Navy was hard-pressed to protect not only her vast merchant fleet but also her far flung possessions in the Caribbean, southern Africa, India, and the Far East. Privateers were like the U-Boats of WWII and stalked stragglers or lone merchantmen sailing from the Windward Islands to England. They would seize ships, sell their cargo, oftentimes in Spanish Florida, and ransom the ship back to their owners. Insurance rates skyrocketed and the merchant class could not let this war continue for too long. The Seven Years War (1756-1763) had forced the Admiralty to go on a building spree but they used improperly aged oak in their haste to meet demand. Consequently, many of her great frigates, 3rd and

4th Rate ships were in need of extensive repair by the late 1770s. Many ships went to sea in need of an overhaul but the lack of timber and other naval stores made their voyages susceptible to disaster. In 1780 bad weather accounted for the greatest loss to the British Navy until WWII. A 100 ship merchant convoy left Jamaica in August. She was guarded by a number of men-of-war of dubious reliability. Off the coast of Florida they encountered a hurricane that scattered the fleet. Individually the ships tried to make a safe port. Many were seized by colonial officials when they entered a non-English protected harbor. The British Navy had 11 warships sunk at sea: one 3rd Rate, two Great Frigates, three lesser Frigates, and five Sloops with the loss of almost 4000 men. Many of the surviving ships that reached Halifax during November were in no condition to continue. They were stripped of needed material to restore other more seaworthy vessels.

The most telling incident occurred just prior to the Battle of Yorktown, in September, 1781. Admiral Thomas Graves left England in August to provide men and supplies for Cornwallis. He had been ordered by General Sir Henry Clinton in June, to proceed to Yorktown and prepare a deep-water port for resupply. A fleet was leaving England and would arrive within a month. In crossing the Atlantic storms severely damaged his supply vessels and warships. By the most fortunate of circumstances a French mast ship was encountered and seized. The only safe harbor available was New York City where much needed repairs were quickly made with the newly acquired naval stores. Meanwhile, Admiral George Brydges Rodney, had been tracking a French fleet under Admiral de Grasse around the West Indies. Alerted to the latter's possible departure, but uncertain of the French admiral's destination he believed that de Grasse might return a portion of his fleet to Europe. Rodney detached Rear Admiral Sir Samuel Hood with 14 ships of the line with orders to find de Grasse's destination in North America. Rodney, who was ill, sailed for Europe with the rest of his fleet in order to recover, refit his ships, and to avoid the Atlantic hurricane season.

Both fleets sailed for the Chesapeake but de Grasse took a circuitous route while Hood sailed directly to the Virginia Capes. Arriving at the mouth of the Chesapeake on August 25, no French ships were sighted so Hood sailed on to New York. When Hood arrived he found Graves in port, but had only five ships of the line that were ready for battle. By August 31, Graves had moved his five ships out of New York harbor and joined Hood's force. Taking command of the combined fleet, now 19 ships, Graves sailed south, and arrived at the mouth of the Chesapeake on September 5. His progress was slow due to the poor condition of some of the West Indies ships and the necessary repairs he had to make en route. Graves was also concerned about some of the ships in his own fleet. Many had to have their bilge pumps constantly manned for they were leaking continuously.

The fleets saw each other and battle lines were established off shore. Firing began almost immediately as the two lines converged. Both sides suffered damages but the French could withdraw and make repairs at Norfolk. A French relief fleet was sighted further tipping the balance against the British. In a council held that day, the British admirals decided against attacking the French, due to "the truly lamentable state we have brought ourself." Graves then turned his battered fleet toward New York arriving off Sandy Hook on September 20. The French success left them firmly in control of Chesapeake Bay, completing the encirclement of Cornwallis. After effecting repairs in New York, Admiral Graves sailed from New York on October 19 with 25 ships of the line and transports carrying 7,000 troops to relieve Cornwallis. It was two days after Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown. General Washington acknowledged to de Grasse the importance of his role in the victory: "You will have observed that, whatever efforts are made by the land armies, the navy must have the casting vote in the present contest." The eventual surrender of Cornwallis led to peace two years later and British recognition of the independent United States of America. England made a temporary peace with France, but soon the beginning of the French Revolution caused hostilities to be resumed, much to the benefit of the newly formed United States.

The USS Constitution

After the Revolution the United States was not much more than a narrow strip of sparsely populated beachfront real estate. In time the interior would open up and the frontier would recede. The land beyond the Appalachians was remote, little known, poor, and dangerous. More than half of the country's inhabitants lived within a days journey of the ocean. A body of water that served both as a defensive barrier against the rest of the world and as a highway to it. Centers of population were strung out along the coastline like a chain of islands, enclosed on one side by the sea and on the other by a sea of woods. Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore were all Atlantic seaports with large communities of professional seamen and all the essential industries needed to build, fit out, provision, and repair ships. Fast little fore- and aft-rigged schooners ran the English blockade into French, Dutch, and German ports carrying grain, flour, kiln-dried corn in barrels, dried fish, salted meats, rice, cheese and other foodstuffs to feed the war-torn Continent. Every outgoing tide carried American ships to the far corners of the world. Conflicts in Europe allowed windfall profits to be made by almost every American, from the farmer to the seamen.

In 1793 a number of American merchantmen were being seized by Algerian corsairs; rather than continuing to pay ransom in securing the release of American citizens Congress and President Washington decided to fund an American Navy. The ensuing discussion centered upon what type of ships were to be built. Political parties had yet to be firmly established but there was a decided difference in opinions. Thomas Jefferson and the Republicans (no relation to today's party) felt that six 20 gun sloops would be more than enough to handle the Mediterranean pirates. The Federalists felt that if trouble developed elsewhere sloops would be ill-equipped to handle any larger force. A simple cost/benefit analysis determined that the nation would be better served if a more capable force was built to meet any unexpected events. The Act to Provide Naval Armament was signed into law on March 27, 1794. The War Office was authorized to buy or build six frigates. Four would be rated for 44 guns and two for 36 guns. The House vote had not been on strict party lines. Several Republicans from northern coastal and urban districts, where pro-navy sentiment was strong, cast their votes with the Federalists. The result hinted at a latent rivalry between North and South, but also at the antagonism in every part of the country between the maritime seaboard and the growing, agrarian interior. Republicans managed to add a provision stipulating that the sole purpose of the frigates was to police the Mediterranean against piracy. Should a truce be successfully negotiated with Algiers, the building program would come to an immediate standstill and the navy, such as it was, would cease to exist.

Congress had charged the Secretary of War, the former General Henry Knox, to decide on the design and construction of the six frigates. The professional shipwrights of this period were a conservative lot by tradition and temperament. Conservatism was a natural consequence of the grave responsibility they bore. No one wanted to face down the accusing stares of widows and orphans resulting from an ill-conceived ship. Any deviation from the designs that have come through centuries of experience was heresy. Joshua Humphreys, a Philadelphia Quaker and master shipwright persuaded Knox that his plan for a more robust frigate was the most logical response to not only meet the threat of the corsairs but also to successfully challenge any encounter with a more formidable foe. As a small, underpopulated nation the United States had no hope of achieving numerical parity with the major European powers. Their fleets were now dominated by 74-gun battleships and 36- or 38-gun frigates. This was a result, in part, to alleviate the manpower shortage felt by all the navies and to economize on the shipbuilding costs. Humphrey was proposing a hybrid between the frigates and the battleships for he recognized a tactical weakness of such a binary fleet that could be exploited by the

Americans. By building a super-frigate his ships could easily avoid engaging the battlewagons but take on the captains of other frigates, who driven by their own hubris would attack the more powerful American ships. Their pride and contempt would act as a powerful pull, drawing them into fights they could not win.

Joshua's plans were for an exceptionally large, heavily armed, fast-sailing ship—weighing over 1000 tons, with a deck length not less than 175 feet and mounting a battery of thirty 24-pound long guns on the main deck and a smaller battery of carronades on the upper deck. In heavy seas they would be an overmatch for double-deck ships whose lower gunports would be closed to avoid taking on water, and in light winds they would just evade combat. Criticism for this new, unorthodox design attacked many of its specifications. It was too big, the heavy frame and long keel would cause structural weakness; the draft was too deep; the weight and number of guns would cause instability; et cetera. But the main fault cited was that frigates of this size just did not exist anywhere else in the world. It was different from what prevailed in Europe. Humphreys's response was that the United States could not afford to imitate its rivals. "We should take the lead in a class of ships not in use in Europe... (and) it will in some degree give us the lead in naval affairs." Knox presented Humphreys's plan to Washington who immediately approved them. Joshua was immediately made "Master Constructor of the United States." Washington wanted the six frigates built in six different seaports to both spread the financial benefits and to ensure that a handful of Philadelphia Quakers would not become the nation's exclusive source of expertise in the construction of ships of war. Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Norfolk would build the 44-gun frigates. The two 36-gun frigates would be built in Baltimore and Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

Unlike England, North America was richly endowed with the raw materials needed for ship building. An almost limitless supply of prized timbers: northern white oak for planking and frame pieces; pine, spruce, and cedar for masts, spars, and deck beams. Navigable rivers provided access to the heavily forested interior and a means of transporting raw timber down to the sea. Hemp was grown for cordage, jute for caulking material, and flax for sailcloth. Mines and blast furnaces produced the pig iron used by blacksmiths who made bolts, hooks, nails, spikes, et cetera. Washington and his advisers were in no mood to economize. The frigates would be built to last. They had seen what happened to the British Navy when accountants made decisions. The most important selection Humphreys made was to use the *Quercus virens*, or southern live oak for key pieces of the frame. These trees are only found in the southeastern United States and only in a twenty-mile-wide coastal zone stretching from southern Virginia to East Texas. A mature tree stands 40 to 70 feet high with branches that can spread to a radius of 75 feet or more (its shade can cover half an acre). The trunk can be 20 feet in circumference but it divides into branches 5 to 18 feet from the ground. As it grows the live oak's vascular system is plugged with a thick gum, making it dense and heavy—as much as 75 pounds per cubic foot, the heaviest oak ever. Its particular geometry also made it the perfect choice for those curved and compass timbers (see 1/2016 *Cannon Report*) that give the ship its extraordinary strength.

By the summer of 1795, most of the timbers had arrived at the shipyards but few keels had been set by that winter. In February, 1796, a treaty with Algeria was ratified by the Senate without debate. The peace would cost Americans nearly a million dollars in bribes, ransom, and payments of tribute. Most humiliating was the stipulation that the United States would build a 32-gun frigate and deliver it as a gift. Washington asked Congress to amend the law for an immediate halt of naval construction with the signing of the treaty. Congress chose to allow the *United States* (Philadelphia), the *Constellation* (Baltimore), and the *Constitution* (Boston) to be completed and launched. The remaining three would be left to rot on the stocks, perhaps to be sold as firewood. The *USS Constitution* was the last of the three frigates constructed. It was the largest ship ever made in Boston

and was initially scheduled for launch on September 20, 1797. She slid down the ways only 27 feet before stopping; her weight had caused the ways to settle into the ground, preventing further movement. An attempt two days later resulted in only an additional 31 feet of travel before the ship again stopped. After a month of rebuilding the ways, *Constitution* finally slipped into Boston Harbor on October 21.

Though rated as a 44-gun frigate, *Constitution* often carried over 50 guns at a time. Ships of this era had no permanent battery of guns, such as modern Navy ships carry. The guns and cannons were designed to be completely portable, and often were exchanged between ships as situations warranted. Each commanding officer outfitted armaments to his liking, taking into consideration factors such as the overall tonnage of cargo, complement of personnel aboard, and planned routes to be sailed. Consequently, the armaments on ships changed often during their careers, and records of the changes were not generally kept. During the War of 1812, *Constitution's* battery of guns typically consisted of thirty 24-pounder cannons, with 15 on each side of the gun deck. A total of 22 cannons, each one a 32-pounder carronade, were deployed on the spar deck, 11 per side. Four chase guns were also positioned, two each at the stern and bow. Until 1812 the *USS Constitution* saw limited action during the Quasi-War (future article), and the Barbary Conflicts. In 1807 she returned to Boston for a major refitting after spending almost four years in the Mediterranean.

Returning to duty in early June, 1810, under the command of Issac Hull, the newly appointed captain trained his crew incessantly, anticipating a war with England. War was declared on June 18 and Hull put to sea attempting to join the five ships of a squadron under the command of John Rodgers in *President*. Hull sighted five ships off Egg Harbor, New Jersey, on July 17 and at first believed them to be Rodgers' squadron, but by the following morning the lookouts determined that they were a British squadron out of Halifax: *HMS Aeolus*, *Africa*, *Belvidera*, *Guerriere*, and *Shannon*. They had sighted *Constitution* and began giving chase.



Constitution outrowing a British squadron

Finding himself becalmed, Hull ordered the crew to put boats over the side to tow the ship out of range, using kedge anchors to draw the ship forward, and wetting the sails down to take advantage of every breath of wind. The British ships soon imitated the tactic of kedging and remained in pursuit. The resulting 57 hour chase in the July heat saw the crew of *Constitution* employ a myriad of methods to outrun the squadron, finally pumping overboard 2,300 gallons of drinking water. Cannon fire was exchanged several times, though the British attempts fell short or over their mark, including an attempted broadside from *Belvidera*. On July 19, *Constitution* pulled far enough ahead of the British that they abandoned the pursuit. She arrived in Boston on July 27, and remained there just long enough to replenish her supplies. Hull sailed without orders on August 2 to avoid being blockaded in port. Heading on a northeast route towards the British shipping lanes near Halifax and the Gulf of Saint Lawrence, *Constitution* captured three British merchantmen, which Hull ordered burned rather than risk taking them back to an American port. On August 16 a passing privateer told Hull of the presence of a British frigate 100 miles to the south and sailed in pursuit. The next event made this ship a naval legend.

A frigate, half the size of the *USS Constitution* was sighted on August 19 and subsequently, determined to be *HMS Guerriere*, with the words "Not The Little Belt" painted on her fore topsail (the words were in reference to the Little Belt Affair, when *USS President* had fired on *HMS Little Belt* the year prior. Captain John Rodgers of *President* had mistakenly identified *Little Belt* as the *Guerriere*. Captain James Dacres of *Guerriere* had earlier written a challenge of combat to Captain John Rodgers of *President*). *Guerriere* (formerly a captured 44 gun French frigate) opened fire upon entering within range of the *Constitution*, doing little damage. After a few exchanges of cannon fire between the ships Captain Hull maneuvered into an advantageous position and brought *Constitution* to within 25 yards of *Guerriere*. He then ordered a full double-loaded broadside of grape and round shot fired, which took out *Guerriere's* mizzenmast. With her mizzenmast dragging in the water, *Guerriere's* maneuverability decreased and she collided with the *Constitution*; her bowsprit becoming entangled in *Constitution's* rigging. This left only *Guerriere's* bow guns capable of effective fire. Hull's cabin caught fire from the shots, but the fire was quickly extinguished. With the ships locked together, both captains ordered boarding parties into action, but due to heavy seas neither party was able to board the opposing ship. At one point the two ships rotated together with the *Constitution* continuing to fire broadsides. When the two ships pulled apart, the force of the bowsprit's extraction sent shock waves through *Guerriere's* rigging. Her foremast soon collapsed, and that brought the mainmast down shortly afterwards. *Guerriere* was now a demasted, unmanageable hulk, with close to a third of her crew wounded or killed, while *Constitution* remained largely intact. The British soon surrendered. Aboard the *Constitution* crewmen were heard to cheer "Huzzah boys! We've made a brig of her, then a sloop, now she's a hulk!"

After the battle as crewmen inspected the bulwarks of their ship they noticed many indentations in her sides. Cannon fire failed to penetrate the twenty-six inch thick oak side and just bounced off. One sailor exclaimed "Huzzah! her sides are made of iron!" and the *Constitution* acquired a nickname, "Old Ironsides." Sailing again she met the *HMS Java* and after demasting her, the hulk was burned at sea. The British ordered English captains not to engage the American frigates alone. So when the *HMS Cyane* and the *HMS Levant* met the *Constitution* off Bermuda, they were outmaneuvered and both eventually surrendered. After the battle it was found that "Old Ironsides" had twelve 32-pound British cannonballs embedded in her hull.

The rest of her history spans almost 150 years of active service but at the present time she is docked in Boston and at 217 years old she is the oldest commissioned naval warship in service. Only about 15% of her timbers are original but all the Paul Revere made copper fittings are still present.

JUST A COMMON SOLDIER

(A Soldier Died Today)

He was getting old and paunchy and his hair was falling fast,
And he sat around the Legion, telling stories of the past.
Of a war that he had fought in and the deeds that he had done,
In his exploits with his buddies; they were heroes, every one.

And tho' sometimes, to his neighbors, his tales became a joke,
All his Legion buddies listened, for they knew whereof he spoke.
But we'll hear his tales no longer for old Bill has passed away,
And the world's a little poorer, for a soldier died today.

He will not be mourned by many, just his children and his wife,
For he lived an ordinary and quite uneventful life.
Held a job and raised a family, quietly going his own way,
And the world won't note his passing, though a soldier died today.

When politicians leave this earth, their bodies lie in state,
While thousands note their passing and proclaim that they were great.
Papers tell their whole life stories, from the time that they were young,
But the passing of a soldier goes unnoticed and unsung.

Is the greatest contribution to the welfare of our land
A guy who breaks his promises and cons his fellow man?
Or the ordinary fellow who, in times of war and strife,
Goes off to serve his Country and offers up his life?

A politician's stipend and the style in which he lives
Are sometimes disproportionate to the service that he gives.
While the ordinary soldier, who offered up his all,
Is paid off with a medal and perhaps, a pension small.

It's so easy to forget them for it was so long ago,
That the old Bills of our Country went to battle, but we know
It was not the politicians, with their compromise and ploys,
Who won for us the freedom that our Country now enjoys.

Should you find yourself in danger, with your enemies at hand,
Would you want a politician with his ever-shifting stand?
Or would you prefer a soldier, who has sworn to defend
His home, his kin and Country and would fight until the end?

He was just a common soldier and his ranks are growing thin,
But his presence should remind us we may need his like again.
For when countries are in conflict, then we find the soldier's part
Is to clean up all the troubles that the politicians start.

If we cannot do him honor while he's here to hear the praise,
Then at least let's give him homage at the ending of his days.
Perhaps just a simple headline in a paper that would say,
Our Country is in mourning, for a soldier died today.

by A. Lawrence Vaincourt (1987)

Coins Left On Tombstones

While visiting some cemeteries you may notice that headstones marking certain graves have coins on them, left by previous visitors to the grave. These coins may have distinct meanings when left on the headstones of those who gave their life while serving in America's military, and these meanings vary depending on the denomination of coin. A coin left on a headstone or at the grave site is meant as a message to the deceased soldier's family that someone else has visited the grave to pay respect. Leaving a penny at the grave may mean simply that you visited. A nickel might indicate that you and the deceased trained at boot camp together, while a dime says you served with him in some capacity. By leaving a quarter at the grave, it is believed that you were with the soldier when he was killed.

According to tradition, the money left at graves in national cemeteries and state veterans cemeteries is eventually collected, and the funds are put toward maintaining the cemetery or paying burial costs for indigent veterans. In the US, this practice became common during the Vietnam war, due to the political divide in the country over the war; leaving a coin was seen as a more practical way to communicate that you had visited the grave than contacting the soldier's family, which could devolve into an uncomfortable argument over politics relating to the war. Some Vietnam veterans would leave coins as a "down payment" to buy their fallen comrades a beer or play a hand of cards when they would finally be reunited. The tradition of leaving coins on the headstones of military men and women can be traced as far back as the Roman Empire.

Humans have been leaving mementos on and within the final resting places of loved ones almost from the beginning of the species. Excavations of even the earliest graves uncover goods meant to serve the deceased in the next world, such as pottery, weapons and beads. The earliest known coins date to the late seventh century B.C. As societies began embracing monetary systems, coins began being left in the graves of its citizens merely as yet another way of equipping the dear departed in the afterlife.

Mythologies within certain cultures added specific purpose for coins being left with the dead. In Greek mythology, Charon, the ferryman of Hades, required payment for his services. A coin was therefore placed in the mouth of the dear departed to ensure he would ferry the deceased across the rivers Styx and Acheron and into the world of the dead rather than leave him to wander the shore for a hundred years. In England and the U.S., pennies were routinely placed on the closed eyes of the dead, yet the purpose for that practice was not clear — some say it was to keep the eyes of the corpse from flying open, yet the eyes, once shut by the person laying out the body, do not reopen.

In these more modern days, coins and other small items are sometimes discovered on grave markers, be they plaques resting atop the sod or tombstones erected at the head of the burial plot. These small tokens are left by visitors for no greater purpose than to indicate that someone has visited that particular grave. It has long been a tradition among Jews, for example, to leave a small stone or pebble atop a headstone just to show that someone who cared had stopped by. Coins (especially pennies) are favored by others who wish to demonstrate that the deceased has not been forgotten and that instead his loved ones still visit him. The 'tradition' of soldiers leaving on the headstones of fallen comrades varying denominations of coins to denote their relationship with the deceased, traces back to June 2009, when it appeared as a web site post.

Despite the claim of this tradition's dating back to the days of the Roman Empire, there's no reason to suppose that it does. A coin might be placed in the mouth of a fallen Roman soldier (to get him across the River Styx), but his comrades wouldn't be leaving their money on his grave, but rather expending it on a funeral banquet in his honor.

Military News

The upper echelon of the USAF was served with a setback last week. *“February 4/16: The life of the A-10 attack jet will be extended until 2022 after it was announced in Secretary for Defense Ash Carter’s 2017 defense budget preview on Tuesday. Lawmakers including former A-10 pilot Rep. Martha McSally and Sen. John McCain who supported the plane’s continuation were pleased with the announcement. The close-air support aircraft will continue to see service in the operations against the Islamic State in the Middle East where it has been supporting ground troops. The deferral of the A-10’s retirement comes as continued delays seem likely for the F-35, which is due to replace the A-10 once it comes into active service. The A-10’s ability to swoop in to heights of 50 feet above ground and engage enemies has been held up as an advantage against the F-35 by supporters. The F-35 program is still under continual development and is sucking up much needed dollars by the military in general and by the Air Force in particular. Its main contractors are lobbying strenuously for additional funding just to meet the testing guidelines.*

The USN has plans to have the latest unmanned jet weaponized seems less likely, as plans seem to have shifted towards a tanker role. The long deferred Unmanned Carrier-Launched Airborne Surveillance and Strike (UCLASS) program was recently provided enthusiastically with \$350 million by Congress. The idea of UAVs with full stealth and combat capabilities has come a long way, quickly. Air forces around the world are pursuing R&D programs, but in the USA, progress is being led by the US Navy. Their interest is well-founded. A May 2007 non-partisan report discussed the lengthening reach of ship-killers. Meanwhile, the US Navy’s carrier fleet sees its strike range shrinking to 1950s distances, and prepares for a future with fewer carrier air wings than operational carriers. Could UCAV/UCAS vehicles with longer ranges, and indefinite flight time limits via aerial refueling, solve these problems? Time will tell.

BOOKS

ARDENNES 1944 : Hitler's last gamble by Anthony Beevor. An excellent read on the Battle of the Bulge especially on the disposition of the various forces before the attack began. To better appreciate the author’s effort the reader is advised to get a large map (topographical if possible) of the area to better understand the problems faced by both forces. A satellite view using Google Earth is especially effective. Beevor’s maps are just too small and only show the local conflicts, their relationship to the bigger picture is lost.

WHY WE LOST A General’s Inside Account of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars by General Daniel P. Bolger. Published in 2014 this book has yet to reach a tactical conclusion but it provides interesting many disclosures. Much like Colonel David H. Hackworth's 1989 ABOUT FACE The Odyssey of an American Warrior (Vietnam) both men examine and explain the consequences of ill-formed political opinions based on faulty perceptions colored by a political agenda supported by the AAA. Not the West Point Army Athletic Association but as Bolger writes “...the other one, the careerist self-promotion society that hung out near the military throne rooms: Aides, Adjutants, and Assholes.” He writes an excellent prologue in his book that precedes the global war on terrorism, and carries us from the Clinton Presidency up to December, 2014. It unfortunate that the first and most sane voice in this whole scenario was ignored, then marginalized, even when his predictions were seen to be accurate. Colin Powell was a man ignored by lesser minds made more so by the power they possessed. There were still many men who were disciples of Powell and persevered despite the lack of a plausible, and well-thought out mission statement from the politicians.

The Cannon Report will entertain any book recommendations submitted by any readers.