

# ROBERT GILBERT BRINGS SIGNAL CORPS HISTORY TO LIFE

By Steven J. Rauch

Generosity, enthusiasm, and commitment are words that only begin to describe Robert "Bob" Gilbert, a true friend to the U.S. Army Signal Corps.

For several years, Gilbert has been researching his interest in the history of US meteorology, of which the founder of the Signal corps, Albert J. Myer, played a central role. His focus on Myer and his weather studies has lead Gilbert to acquire a complete replica uniform so that he can portray Myer and promote Signal Corps history at various educational and commemorative events.

Three years ago Gilbert traveled to Fort Gordon for one of his most memorable events, the official induction of Myer onto the rolls of the Distinguished Member of the Regiment during the 2008 Signal Conference. Myer (Gilbert) received his honor and gave a thank you speech to the assembled audience. He posed for a photo with other signal general officers dressed in his uniform.

## Family Connections

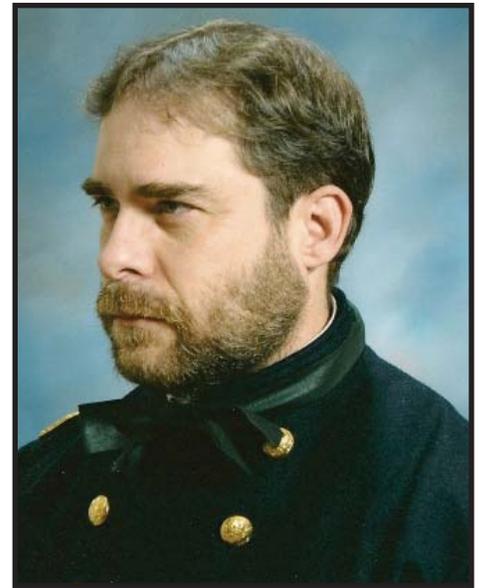
Often asked why he does this, Bob will respond with the story which begins with his late mother, Mary, who passed away 4 years ago. From her interest in genealogy and the American Revolution, Bob developed his own love of family history and U.S. history. "She never needed to work, thanks to a trust from her parents. After my parents divorced, we moved into her family's old brick house in Virginia." The house, which was



Albert J. Myer

named Ben Lomond, was built around 1755 in Essex County in the Tidewater region. Gilbert saw daily reminders of his ancestors who fought in the Civil War and relatives of the previous owners of Ben Lomond who were buried in the yard. These headstones, photos of relatives who served during the Civil War, the extensive library in the house, and trips to nearby Civil War sites are what piqued Gilbert's interest in the American Civil War.

Gilbert's association with the signal corps developed later, when he learned about a connection between his family and that of GEN Adolphus Greely who had served as chief signal officer. "My maternal grandfather was Charles Baird, who served as a volunteer WWI ambulance driver before the U.S. entered the war and then became a captain in the 6th Field Artillery, 1st Division and Army of Occupation, Rhine River. Charles' parents owned



Robert 'Bob' Gilbert

Hebekah Farm on Baird Hill near Conway Lake, New Hampshire. GEN Greely owned land adjacent to Hebekah Farm and their friendship with him was indicated by his daughter, Rose Greely, who often mailed Charles, my grandfather, care packages during WWI. Also, my grandfather's cousin was COL Alvin Coe Voris, Chief Signal Officer, 3d Army AEF and later post commander of Fort Monmouth in 1938."

Gilbert's mother used to talk about GEN Greely's missing finger, result of frostbite from the Arctic expedition. Gilbert discovered proof of this in a photo he received from his uncle. "Something stood out on the photo of the Greely and Henrietta's picture with the dogs at my grandfather's farm in New Hampshire. I noticed the right hand...the middle finger was missing." That detail of the photo and his mother's account further



**GEN Adolphus Greeley, one of the pivotal leaders of the U.S. Army Signal Corps, spends time with the family of Robert 'Bob' Gilbert on the family farm in New Hampshire. Gilbert noticed the missing finger on Greeley's hand, a result of frostbite from the Greeley Arctic expedition.**

illustrated his family connection to one of the great Signal Corps leaders.

### **Military Service**

Although he never served in the Signal Corps, Gilbert's military career was connected to similar functions historically associated with the branch. His military service began in the US Air Force where he trained in Morse Code School, Teleprinter Operator School, and then Non-Morse Signals Analyst Course. He then spent 18 months at Misawa Air Base, Japan followed by a tour at the National Security Agency, Fort Meade, Maryland. Of the changing technology of those years, Gilbert stated, "The computer modem's debut in 1985 made all my training and experience obsolete." When the Air Force would not send him to Russian Language training at the Defense Language Institute, he decided to ETS after 4 years.

He later continued his service, this time in the U.S. Army as a Russian Voice Interceptor (98G), having succeeded in attending the Defense Language Institute in 1989. According to Gilbert his timing and choice of career field was impacted by unexpected events, "I graduated from a follow-on school at Goodfellow AFB, TX only two days after the Berlin Wall began to be dismantled. That meant no \$25,000 reenlistment bonus and promotion

points frozen after serving two years in Augsburg, Germany and four months in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia for Operation Desert Storm. Instead of another ETS, I decided to transfer to the Army Reserve in 1992."

Now a citizen Soldier, Bob attended college at the University of Maryland, where he obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree in history and a minor in Russian Language, in 1994. When the Army Reserve failed to honor a \$5,000 bonus in his contract, he was allowed to transfer to the Maryland Air National Guard, which paid for 16 months 'school and On-The-Job Training for Meteorology. He recalled, "I'd hoped to become a permanent, full-time National Weather Service employee, but military training and experience were no longer accepted by the NWS as a substitute for a civilian college degree in Meteorology." When active duty tours were hard to find in the Air National Guard, Gilbert transferred back to the Army Reserve for an intelligence assignment at Fort Dix, N.J., which is where he was on 9/11. He then volunteered for mobilization and was reassigned to the National Security Agency at Fort Meade, Md. for two years, which included 4 months in Africa supporting GWOT.

### **Portraying BG Albert J. Myer**

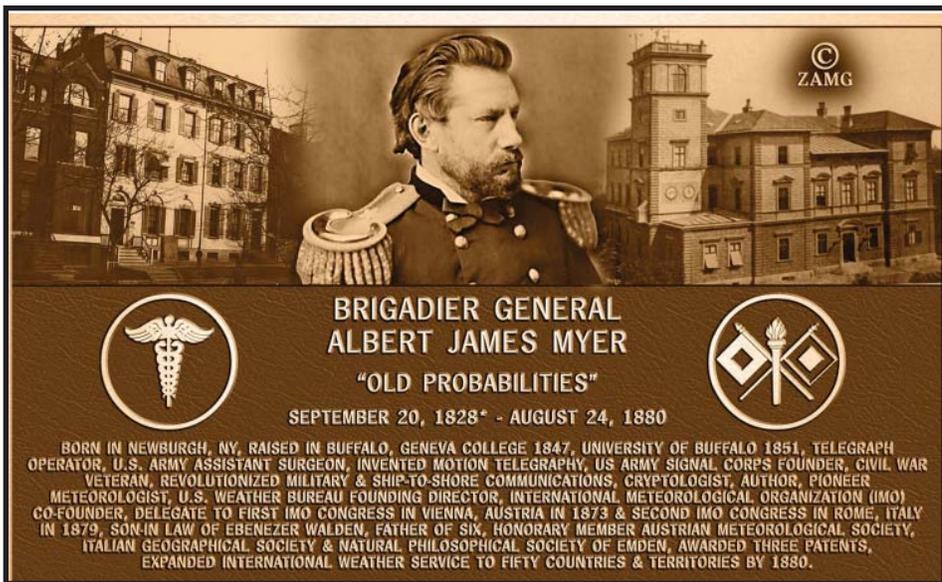
During the summer of 2005 Gilbert retired from the Army Reserve and began work as a weather observer at Rochester International Airport. This occurred fortuitously at the time National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration was preparing for its Bicentennial and he was asked to portray Albert J. Myer because of his physical resemblance and background in meteorology and history.

When he portrayed Myer at the 2008 Signal Corps Conference he experienced what he called a life changing event, both for him, and the Signal Corps. "BG Jeffrey W. Foley invited me to his office for an interview and asked how I got interested in the history of the Signal Corps. I told him how special Myer was for starting a weather service and expanding it into 50 countries and territories in less than a decade despite limitations in the technology of the 1870s."

Bob admits being awed by all of the attention and explained, "General Foley impressed me beyond words. As busy as he was, he not only took the time to meet me, but then he also sent me a hand-written thank you letter, which will always mean a lot to me. He epitomized what I was taught about leadership from PLDC and ANCOG."

This recognition lead Gilbert to expand his research about the Signal Corps role in meteorology, and thus began what can be described as a one man campaign to tell the story of Myer, military

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This bronze plaque was commissioned by Robert ‘Bob’ Gilbert to be placed in front of the Myer mausoleum at Forest Lawn Cemetery, Buffalo, NY.

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meteorology, and the Signal Corps. Among many of his projects, perhaps his most generous was funding a scholastic achievement award in Myer’s name at the University at Buffalo. This scholarship was awarded for the first time in 2010 to Chuck Baynes, a USMC radio operator who had deployed to Fallujah in 2003. In 2010 he wrote a 3,800-word article published in the winter 2010 issue of Western New York Heritage magazine about Myer and the weather service.

Two of his biggest and most expensive projects involved elaborate physical reminders of Myer in the Buffalo/Niagara area. Gilbert connected with Carvings for a Cause, a non-profit group in Buffalo that repurposed fallen trees from an October 2006 surprise snowstorm and carves images of historical figures from them. Gilbert sponsored one for Myer, mainly because of the “ironic connection - bad snowstorm, in Buffalo, founding director of the Weather Bureau, it was too good to pass up.” The final Myer statue weighs over 1,000 pounds

and Gilbert posed as the model wearing his uniform.

The other project was Gilbert’s desire to have a proper historical marker located at the site of Myer’s grave site, a granite mausoleum located in Forest Lawn Cemetery in Buffalo, New York. Gilbert worked with many agencies to design and produce this marker, along with one for Myer’s father-in-law, former Buffalo mayor Ebenezer Walden. To ensure accurate information, Gilbert traveled at his own expense to Vienna Austria to the location where the first International Meteorological Congress was organized to obtain photos of the building where weather reports from the Austrian Empire were collected and telegraphed to General Myer’s headquarters in Washington D.C. The finished plaque honoring Myer recognizes his service as both an Army doctor and the founder of the Signal Corps. In smaller type below the historical information is the statement, “Placed by an anonymous benefactor and friend of Forest Lawn 2010” demonstrating that Bob did not seek credit for this project.

## 150-year Commemoration - 2010

During the Signal Corps 150th anniversary commemoration in 2010, Bob Gilbert was a very busy man. On 27 May 2011 at Fort Myer, Va, Gilbert (portraying Myer); LTG Jeffrey Sorenson, the Army G-6; and COL (Ret) Joseph ‘Tom’ Catudal participated in a wreath laying at the granite monument to Myer which stands directly in front of the quarters of the Army chief of staff.

On Memorial Day weekend 2011, Gilbert saw his dream of having the plaque to Myer dedicated during observances and ceremonies at Forest Lawn Cemetery. For these ceremonies, the 34th Chief of Signal, BG Jeffrey W. Foley, was the key note speaker. BG Foley was



Robert ‘Bob’ Gilbert (*right*) participated in many events commemorating BG Albert J. Myer, including this wreath laying ceremony 27 May 2011 at Fort Myer, Va. With Gilbert, are the CIO/G-6 of the Army, LTG Jeffrey Sorenson, U.S. Army CIO/G-6 (*center*) and COL (Ret) Joseph ‘Tom’ Catudal (*left*).

accompanied by CSM Thomas J. Clark and the Signal Center historian, Steve Rauch, who visited the final resting place of the founder of the U.S. Army Signal Corps.

Here, at the home of the Signal Corps, Gilbert spent the anniversary week participating in many events, most importantly, a ceremonial cake cutting ceremony on 21 June 2010 with the serving Signal leadership, BG Foley, CSM Clark and others.

During the 150th Birthday Ball at the Gordon Club, Gilbert was recognized for his role as a portrayer of Myer and his commitment and dedication to the history of the U.S. Army Signal Corps. Of that night Gilbert remembers, "I was stunned. The Ball was great, I was treated very, very well and most important is that I was always referred to as Bob Gilbert portraying BG Albert Myer, never as "the Myer guy."" In addition, Gilbert was able to meet the Army Chief of Staff, GEN George W. Casey and many officers, noncommissioned officers and Soldiers of the regiment who thanked him for his contributions.

### On-going Projects

Since 2010, Bob Gilbert has returned to his research efforts, of which the signal historians have benefited greatly as he never fails to provide copies of documents, photos, and other pieces of information that is inaccessible due to distance, time and funding.

As an independent researcher, Bob is among the best, and his generosity has added to the knowledge of Signal history. One example was an image of the first weather map that was printed in an American newspaper, a feature still seen today in newspapers. All of this research however is aimed at his goal of a book, tentatively titled, "To the Benefit of All," about the Signal Corps' role in starting the U.S. Weather Bureau and today's World Meteorological Organization based in Geneva, Switzerland.

Most recently, Bob Gilbert has been recognized by the national leadership of the Signal Corps Regimental Association with a life-time membership for his devotion and dedication to Signal Corps history. In return, Gilbert has included SCRA as a beneficiary of his estate, along with an endowment for the Myer Scholastic Achievement Award for Veterans at the University of Buffalo.

Gilbert sums his relationship best stating, "Because of the unique ways the Signal Corps has benefited the world, and not just the United States, I believe in perpetuating Signal Corps history, providing financial assistance for veterans attending college, and special tributes for its fallen Soldiers. It's also closure because this is my grandparents' estate ultimately, and now, more than ever before, I can appreciate how special my grandfather's friendship with General A. W. Greely



**Robert 'Bob' Gilbert is shown after the mausoleum and marker ceremony honoring BG Albert J. Myer on 30 May 2010 in Forest Lawn Cemetery Buffalo, N.Y.**

really was."

The friendship between the Baird and Greely families perpetuates today in the life of Bob Gilbert, a great American and dedicated friend of the U.S. Army Signal Corps.

*Mr. Steven J. Rauch has served as the historian for the U.S. Army Signal Center of Excellence since 2002. He is a retired Army officer and has taught military history at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. He holds a Master of Arts degree in history from Eastern Michigan University and a Master of Arts degree in adult education from Kansas State University.*