The legend of the Song of the Signal Corps

Part I

This is a legend of a service song which was embraced by the officers, men and women, of the Signal Corps from its "adoption" by the Corps in 1927 until it was abandoned at the beginning of the Vietnam conflict in 1961, and of its tribulations and successes during its 34 years of active service. The story reiterates the importance of music in the service, discusses a former Signal Corups unit with its own glorious lineage, and describes events in the course of Signal Corps, U.S. Army, and national history.

Lt. Col. Gustave E. Vitt, U.S. Army retired

Given that it is well known and accepted that our mental nature (soul) is, more or less, affected by music; that the great factors of music affect our intellectual and emotional faculties; and by affecting one of these faculties the other is affected, we can conclude that martial airs such as regimental, branch and corps songs, and soldier ballads have a significant role in the development and maintenance of morale of the total Army. When our heart pulse is slightly quickened, we become "excited" or "in good spirits." When we feel "low" or "depressed in spirit," it may be said that there has been a slowing of the heart pulse. In martial music, the dominant factor is rhythm. Rhythm can affect our emotional nature instantaneously for it affects our heart pulsations by means of sympathetic vibrations. Melody, lyric poems and harmony affect our higher nature, or intellect, because they present an ideal representation to our mind. Consequently, music has had, and still has its influence and special mission in all known armies. It is not merely to charm the ear, but also to touch the heart and elevate the mind to conceive an ideal to which one aspires. It is this natural phenomenon which motivates an individual's esprit de corps.[1]

Martial music, with its appropriate rhythm, idealistic lyric, and inspiring melody, has traditionally performed a major role in the manifestation of unit pride and integrity, competitive proficiency toward excellence, and self-dedication to purpose in all the armies of the world — from the bawdy songs of Caesar's armies during campaigns of the Gallic War (58 to 52 B.C.) to the present time.

The most outstanding example of a stirring military song that can be offered under any standard is Brig. Gen. (then Lt.) Edmund L. Gruber's Field Artillery Song which was inspired by an incident that occurred during a difficult march across the Zambales Mountains by the second battalion, Fifth Field Artillery, in the Philippine Islands in 1907. Gruber was sent with an advance detachment ahead of the battalion to select the route and prepare stream crossings, etc. The following April, 1908, Gruber was asked to write a song that would symbolize the spirit of the reunited regiment when the first battalion arrived from the States to relieve the second. Drawing from his experiences during the recon trip, he wrote the Field Artillery Song. Needless to say, it has undergone many changes in words and music since it was first sung at Camp Stotsenburg, P.I. Like the Song of the Signal Corps, it was not published until a number of years after adoption, when it was published as "The Caisson Song." No wonder the melody of this simple but lasting and inspiring song was designated as the chorus of the official song of the U.S. Army — "The Army Goes Rolling Along." Other examples of serious, spirited martial songs which have endured and live on are the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" (1862), and "The Marine's Hymn" (1918). On the lighter side, the soldiers of 1917-1918 gave us "Hinky, Dinky, Parley-Voo."[2]

MUSIC IN THE 1920 POSTWAR ARMY

The value of musical heraldry and soldier singing was realized by the War Department during World War I, when song books were prepared and distributed by the Commission on Training Camp Activities. Thousands of pieces of band music were purchased and hundreds of song leaders were scattered throughout the camps. Like modern day USO shows, thousands of soldiers gathered for band concerts, entertainment and singing in unison, to bolster their morale. Singing to the tune of the "Old Gray Mare," they'd serenade the Signalmen with:

Oh! Uncle Sammy, he needs the Signal Corps,
Wigway and semaphore,
He gets them by the score,
And the, by jing, we're off for a foreign shore.
Good-by, Kaiser Bill!

Many long years ago,
Many long years ago.
Oh, the Signal Corps it ain't what it used to be,
Ain't what it used to be,
Ain't what is used to be.
The Signal Corps it ain't what it used to be,
Many long years ago.

With the signing of the First World War Armistice, the Signal Corps, like other Army and governmental branches, was required to demobilize. This reduction in force cut the Signal Corps drastically, to a strength below that authorized before the war, presenting the Corps with a very difficult problem. The demand for telephone and other signal services did not diminish at a rate at all proportional to the decrease in military personnel, and a heavy burden was placed upon the Signal Corps at a time when personnel changes were frequent and the morale of the Army was generally low.

The 1920 Reorganization Act revised the entire Signal Corps force structure. It reduced organic Infantry and Cavalry Division Signal battalions to companies and a troop, and it made all unit commanders below the division level responsible for their own communications through assignment of communication duties to their branch personnel as additional duties. The structure of the postwar (1920) Army left scarcely any Signal Corps Units under control of the Chief Signal Officer. It wiped out most of the tactical interest of the Signal Corps and moved the center of gravity away from classification as an "Arm" and toward classification as a "Service." This was a further blow to the morale of the Signal Corps. By 1921, the strength of the entire Signal Corps was fixed at 300 officers and 3,000 enlisted men. The Army, in general, was having the same postwar problems.

The story of the Song of the Signal Corps and the Signal Corps March begins in 1923, when the Secretary of War announced his desire that all regimental commanders and chiefs of branches and corps encourage in every way the composition and adoption of a song, which should deal with the past exploits and achievements of their organization. The Adjutant General's directive, file AG 007.13, subject: Regimental Songs, dated 14 Dec 1923, implements and clarifies an earlier policy statement of 17 July 1923. All TAG directives carried the command line "By Order of the Secretary of War."

Receipt of the SECWAR directive coincided with the arrival of a new Chief Signal Officer, Major General Charles McK. Saltzman, Jr., (January 1924) who vigorously supported the search for a corps song. As a former head of a Signal Corps subsidiary branch—the Air Service—he believed we had the makings for a good corps song, and that a corps song would help bring the corps into a close family. His office took two routes to implement the SECWAR's desires. One included a call through an item in a monthly bulletin entitled, The Signal Corps Bulletin No. 24, dated February 1, 1924, which was given Signal Corps-wide distribution. The other was a WD OCSigO letter to all Corps Area and Department Signal Officers, file 007-Music, subject: Signal Corps Song, dated 11 February 1924 (Departments: Hawaii, Panama, etc.). The Corps Area Headquarters forwarded the CSigO letter to the National Guard and ROTC institutions of their respective status. Signal sections of the General Depots were also contacted.

A search of the "old Army Records" in the National Archives located seven responses from Corps Area Signal Offices and one from the Chicago Quartermaster Intermediate Depot-Signal Section, conveying seven sets of lyric poems but no original music. Three were set to old tunes. Four made no suggestion as to music since the TAG directive volunteered the Army Music School as musical advior. One candidate availed himself of that assistance and later related his entry to H.M.S. PINAFORE instead of the French National Air, "The Marseillaise." According to a later letter from the OCSigO, "Numerous contributions have been received and some time will elapse before decision is reached on the matter." The lapse turned out to be three years.

The composition and adoption of an original piece of music to symbolize a military organization is second in importance to the rhythm or meter of the tune. While the words are almost equally as important as the music, it is an historical fact that the music will be performed many, many times more often in military organizations to identify units, to arouse esprit de corps and to heighten the spirit of an occasion than will be the performance of the words and music, or of the words alone. The March is the customary form of regimental songs, and often the music is twice as long as the lyrics.

The absence of original, inspiring musical compositions to accompany the lyrics being received, and the standing SECWAR requirement to adopt and submit a corps song for approval created a command problem within OCSigO. This lack of musical compositions was probably an unintentional, self-imposed problem because the notices soliciting inputs stated, "The adoption of a tune is the most important feature. It does not necessarily have to be a tune specially composed, inasmuch as almost all college songs are familiar tunes much older than the college." This lack of musical compositions brought the Signal Corps Song project to an impasse.

Recognizing that the general call, issued in the Signal Corps Bulletin No. 24 of 1 Feb 1924, had failed to produce useful results, Maj. Gen. Saltzman resorted to more direct and personal lines of communication to produce a Signal Corps Song.

To imply that the Chief Signal Officer of the Army had nothing more pressing than the composition of a corps song on his mind during this postwar transition period would be ludicrous. However, the record shows he did interject himself into the program. Saltzman knew Mrs. Dawson Omstead, wife of then Maj. Olmstead, assigned to the Department Signal Office in Hawaii, had formal training in music and was an accomplished pianist, so he sought her assistance.

On 8 January 1927, Olmstead sent a radiogram to Saltzman reading, "Mailing words and music new Signal Corps Song composed by Mrs. Olmstead. Olmstead".

Since the Army Music School had been designated as the review authority for the regimental songs program and since the first band arrangement of the Song of the Signal Corps is credited to WO T. Darcy of the Army Music School, it is evident that the Chief Signal Officer forwarded the Olmstead "Song of the Signal Corps" to the Music School for approval in accordance with the TAG letter.

The lyrics to the first version follow.

Dedicated to the U.S. Signal Corps

Vocal Lead Sheet

Song Of The Signal Corps

Arranged by Mayhew Lake

Words and Music by
BESS HEATH OLMSTEAD

March (*with spirit*)

mf

Shout out the slo-gan of the Sig - nal Corps: "Get the mes-sage through."

Fight till our en - e - mies can fight no more: That's what we've

got to do. We'll pack walk - ie - talk - ies and set up poles,

Splice up our ca - bles, shot full of holes. And don't try to stop us while we're

f

out to fight for the Red and the White and the Blue. When the

CHORUS *mf-f*

dough-boys hike on the hard turn-pike, we'll be there to guide the way;

When the big guns roll t'ward their far off goal we will fol-low them day by

day From a thous-and sta-tions we call the na-tions from Green-land's

moun-tains to the South seashore For the sun can't set on our short wave net: That's the

While there's work to do, we will see it through: That's the

1 2

boast of the Sig - nal Corps. When you

pledge of the Sig - nal Corps.

Copyright MXMXXXI by Bess Heath Olmstead
Copyright Assigned MCMXLII to Sam Fox Pub. Co., New York, N.Y., U. S. A
Copyright MCMXLIII by Sam Fox Pub. Co., New York, N. Y., U. S. A
International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved, Including Public Performance for Profit. Printed in U. S. A.

SONG OF THE SIGNAL CORPS
By Mrs. Dawson Olmstead
(8 Jan 1927)

1.

In the time of war, no matter where you are,
There you'll find the Signal Corps!
When the long lines file, weary mile by mile,
They're the ones who are at the fore
When there's big news coming, and buzzers humming,
When Springfields rattle and the big guns roar,
With a flash and flare, over land and air,
Comes the word: That's the Signal Corps.

2.

In the time of peace, our duties never cease,
There is drill and work to spare.
In the field we go, with our radio,
And we talk thru the empty air
From our short wave stations, we call the nations,
From Greenland's mountains to the South Sea shore.
Every day we say, we're in the Corps to stay,
"See the world with the Signal Corps."

3.

(Added later)

When the doughboys hike
On the hard turnpike
We'll be there, to show the way;
When the big guns roll
Toward their far-off goal
We will follow them, day by day.
From a thousand stations
We call the nations
From Greenland's mountains to the South Sea shore,
For the sun can't set
On our short-wave net;
That's the boast of the Signal Corps!

At the March 1927 Signal Corps dinner dance in Washington, D.C., a "good dance orchestra" played the Song of the Signal Corps while the entire gathering sang the words from mimeographed hand-outs. Saltzman later wrote that, "the entire gathering was enthusiastic and found the song to have pep and swing, and better still, its own distinctive charm." He continued, "Were this a Washington Signal Corps song only, we would say we had something very close to our ideal; we would be inclined to rest with it 'as is.' We want to adopt, however, not a song tried out by a few enthusiasts, but a song tested by the entire Corps — one that will be hummed in the radio hut at Wiseman, Alaska, or on the Beach at Waikiki; sung in Panama, Manila, Fort Monmouth, Fort Sam Houston, and everywhere Signalmen go. Perhaps we have the song here now, without change or addition. Mrs. Olmstead says she is not sure about that; so far, she has been the only critic of her song. She says it can be improved and suggests that all members of the Corps contribute thought and talent to that end."

On 19 April 1927, Saltzman forwarded a copy of Mrs. Olmstead's song as an enclosure to a personal letter to all Signal Corps officers in the Army. In his rather lengthy letter he pointed out Mrs. Olmstead's suggested weaknesses and stated, "It is hoped that these suggestions will be acted upon without delay and that we can very soon adopt a song to fill our needs, a song which the entire Corps will enjoy singing and of which it will be proud. I wish you would try it out; think about it and send in, as soon as practical, all impressions and suggestions."

In the meantime, the relatively small Signal Corps was being further reduced to a new authorized strength of 268 officers and 2,165 enlisted men. Many of our now-famous leaders of that era were striving to improve the morale and posture of the Corps to meet the requirements of anticipated communication electronics technological breakthroughs, which they knew would be applicable to military operations. Examples of some of these then potential aids to combat operations were radio intelligence and radar.

By September 1927, responses to Saltzman's letter and the Song of the Signal Corps were being received from every echelon of the Army — from the Office of the Assistant Secretary of War and the Office of the Chief of Staff of the Army to Carnegie Tech, Ohio State and the Army Industrial College, as well as from many of the Army commands, schools, and so on.

A summary of the replies found in the National Archives shows that:

85% voted to adopt the music;
75% voted to adopt the words;
3 replies contained new verses;
1 provided letter and cord diagrams for ukelele, banjo and guitar;
1 submitted a simplified piano accompaniment to the melody;
1 suggested the "G" above the staff in fifth last measure from the end was too high for male voices.

By the end of 1927, the Olmstead Song of the Signal Corps was "adopted" by the Signal Corps without further ado, and it began what became a flourishing lineage as a Service song. Sometime in 1927, Mrs. Olmstead is reported to have registered the Song of the Signal Corps' words and music with the Copyright Office as an unpublished work. It should be pointed out here that the War Department's purpose for designating the Army Music School as the review authority was to provide a focal point for technical assistance, and to avoid duplications between the branches during their song writing efforts. This step was completed and sometime later the Song of the Signal Corps, in its original key and composition, but with an added chorus, was printed in the "Army Song Book," which was compiled by The Adjutant General's office in collaboration with the Library of Congress and published by order of the Secretary of War. It is evident that this was the method employed by the War Department to announce the Service songs. Also, note that the Copyright Office is an agency of the Library of Congress.

In the next issue of TAC, Lt. Col. Vitt pursues the story of "The Song of the Signal Corps" through the 1930's, WWII and Korea to its apparent abandonment in 1961. TAC addendum to his article briefly examines the current "official preferred" Signal Corps song.

Lt. Col. Gustave E. Vitt has had a long and interesting career. He is a fourth generation Army Bandleader. The tradition began with his great-grandfather who was appointed Bandleader to the 8th Infantry Regiment at Ft. Thomas, Kentucky, in 1853. Vitt graduated from the Army Music School as a PFC in 1927 and joined the 13th Cavalry Band, where he served until it became the Signal Corps Band in August 1930. As a MSgt., he became Bandleader in 1940. On 1 July 1941, he became the very first musician ever to appear on television. The camera focuses on his chevrons before pulling back to reveal the entire band which then played a short program. In the same year, he left the band to enter OCS where he was part of the First Signal Corps class. He was a personal friend of Bess Heath Olmstead and her husband Maj. Gen. Dawson Olmstead. Now retired, Vitt lives in Virginia.