

HISTORY OF MILITARY LODGES IN FREEMASONRY

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About twenty years ago the North Carolina College, Societas Rosicruciana in Civitatibus Foederatis, asked me to present a paper about Freemasonry in the military services. This invitation motivated me to explore the history of Freemasonry for a better understanding of the Masonic communications available to the military service members throughout the centuries. I have reworked that research for this presentation today.

The major portion of my adult life has been spent as a career Marine in the service of my country. During that active duty career of more than 36 years, I was a Freemason for all but the first four years. I often craved to know more of the relationships between our fraternity and its military members in antiquity, but I had little time for such academic exploration. From my childhood I have heard stories about brother Masons, serving in opposing armies, who spared each other from death upon being recognized as fraternity brothers. These stories are prevalent in the history of the American Revolution, the American Civil War, and in World War I, but are decreasingly prevalent thereafter in World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War.

General George Washington, the Commander-in-Chief of our forces in the American Revolution, is reported to have visited a lodge with his British adversaries while under a flag of truce. The nature of warfare has changed so much over the centuries one cannot comprehend how such an act could be possible. But modern armies fight so differently! They do not go into winter quarters and bivouac for months in a gentleman's agreement that it is too cold to fight. They do not cease fighting just because it becomes dark.

Let me share with you some of the highlights of my research. I hope that those of you who have served in other branches of our Armed Forces will forgive my Marine Corps parochialism. I will begin with a discussion of the nature of Freemasonry prior to the establishment of the Grand Lodge of England in 1717, and of course, prior to the birth of our country and the establishment of the U. S. Marine Corps about which I will comment later.

To refresh your memories about Masonic affairs before Grand Lodges were formed, there were no charters, no regularly elected officers, and no regular lodges as we know them today. Seventeenth and early eighteenth century lodges were very informal and were attended by any Freemason who happened to be in the area. Since they often had no permanent officers, the oldest master in attendance assumed the east. No dues were paid, and no dues cards were issued. Voluntary contributions from those present were solicited to pay for food and drink consumed at the meeting. They did considerable drinking compared to our modern lodge meetings where complete abstinence is the law. Freemasons met whenever and wherever they desired, had no lodge buildings as such,

but most frequently they met in local taverns where food, drink, and lodging were available.¹

At first, few if any records or minutes were kept. It is interesting to me that "The very first record of the making of a Mason in England (but not in an English lodge) was in 1641 when General Hamilton and certain Masters and others from Lodge of Edinburgh met at Newcastle, England, and admitted the Rt. Hon. Robert Moray (Murray), General Quarter Master of the Army of Scotland. This proceeding outside the boundaries of the Kingdom was approved by the Lodge."² It was normal in the transition period between operative and purely speculative Freemasonry to bring in high-ranking military and civil leaders. Some lodges were known as "Leg of Mutton" lodges and required the candidate to provide food for the night of his initiation. When we consider that General Moray was the supplier of goods for the Army of Scotland, we might be suspicious about why they traveled outside the Kingdom to make him a Mason and what food and entertainment was required of him.

With the establishment of the Grand Lodges of England, Ireland, and Scotland, all between 1717 and 1736, Freemasonry quickly spread throughout Europe and the English Colonies. The nobility, the clergy, and men of great influence sought to become part of the Fraternity. Before the period of Grand Lodges, the Colonies had many military and civilian men who were made Masons prior to departure from their homelands. According to the practice of the time (that Freemasons had the immemorial right to meet together), these Freemasons doubtless held Masonic communications and initiated candidates just as was being done in England and elsewhere. Additionally, they appeared to have continued this practice far beyond 1717 when the Grand Lodge of England was established.

Along with the Grand Lodges came more standardization of the ritual, more control of lodge affairs including chartering, meetings, and initiations. Technically, all lodges in the Colonies became clandestine until they received written charters. Some lodges acted promptly and others rather slowly in obtaining charters. One that met at Tun Tavern in Philadelphia boasts of having the first recorded lodge meeting in America. It was denied being known as the oldest authorized lodge in America by its failure to submit a timely request for a charter to some Grand Lodge. Our Brother General George Washington was made a Freemason in the Fredericksburg (VA) Lodge [now Fredericksburg Lodge No. 4] in 1752, technically a clandestine lodge, for it did not receive its charter until 1758. But such was the nature of communications and attention to detail in those days. Who would fault them? They saw no immediate need to apply for a charter.

Members of military organizations may well have held their own Masonic communications as their civilian brothers did in immemorial or Saints John Lodges, but I have not been able to document such events. The military Freemasons did join their

¹ Henry Wilson Coil, Sr., Freemasonry Through Six Centuries, Vol. I, (Richmond: Macoy Publishing and Masonic Supply Company, Inc: 1967), p. 106

² *Ibid.*, p. 109.

civilian brothers in the taverns for meetings. However, an accommodation was made for the professional soldiers when Grand Lodges began issuing warrants or charters for Regiments to have Military (traveling) Lodges. The first such authorization appears to have been made by the Grand Lodge of Scotland in 1743 when "at the recommendation of the Earl of Kilmarnock, Grand Master, the first Military Lodge (under the Grand Lodge) was erected, the petitioners all belonging to "Colonel Lees' regiment," afterwards the 55th foot."³ "The first English Military Lodge was established in 1750, and attached to the 31st Foot."⁴ It had the distinction of providing the ten charter members of the first stationary lodge in Florida in 1771. The 31st Foot was departing Florida and these members were local civilians who had joined the Regimental Lodge.

Regimental Lodges proliferated in the Forces of England, Ireland, and Scotland during the eighteenth century. By 1760, because of the lengthy conflict with the French in which many Regiments from England participated, there were at least 50 Regimental Lodges in the Colonies. "They were warranted by both the Antient and the Modern Grand Lodges of England, and the Grand Lodges of Scotland, Ireland, and the Provincial Grand Lodges of Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and New York. At the time hostilities started in the Revolution, the number of military lodges had increased about 50 percent. At the close of the French and Indian Wars there were, in addition to the military lodges, about one hundred lodges warranted by the Grand Lodges previously named. Military Lodges greatly accelerated the growth of Colonial Freemasonry."⁵ It is no wonder that so many of the civil and military leaders of the Revolutionary War were Freemasons!

As the Revolutionary War approached, the U. S. Marine Corps was organized in that same Tun Tavern in Philadelphia where the first recorded meeting of Freemasons had taken place in 1731. The Innkeeper of Tun Tavern, Samuel Nicholas, was a member of the Lodge and later became its Junior Warden. He was commissioned a Captain of Marines by the President of the Continental Congress in 1775 and directed to recruit two battalions of Marines. He set up his recruiting station in Tun Tavern and he is recorded in our history as the First Commandant of the Marine Corps with rank of Major.

The Regimental Military (traveling) Lodge system was perpetuated in the American Military Forces, first by the Colonial Grand Lodges, and finally by the State Grand Lodges. Throughout the Revolution, the Mexican War, the Civil War in both camps, and to a lesser degree in the Spanish-American War and World War I, the military Freemason could find his brothers in a traveling Military Lodge in his organization. The stories of Freemasons saving life and property of their brothers in the opposing camps are probably true. Dr. Joseph Newton in his book, The Builders, A Story and Study of Freemasonry, tells that the Union Army Commander who attacked Little Rock, Arkansas, ordered a guard to be stationed around the home of [Confederate] General Albert Pike to protect his library. What a blessing for Freemasonry! Dr. Newton also expresses gratitude for the kindness of a brother Freemason in the Union Army who spared the life of his father, a

³ Robert Freke Gould, A Concise History of Freemasonry, (London: Gale & Polden, Ltd. 1904), p. 356.

⁴ Ibid., p. 420.

⁵ William H. Knutz, Colonial Freemasonry, (Chicago: Committee on Education, Grand Lodge of the State of Illinois), p. 11-12.

prisoner of war from the Confederate Army and himself a Freemason. In the Final Foreword dated 1948, Dr. Newton makes some observations I cannot confirm or deny of my own experience. He states that the Fraternity was ill prepared to administer to the mobilized Masonic brethren during World War I, but by the World War II timeframe, the Masonic Service Association organized in 1919, and the War Service Work of the Grand Lodges of America were ready to serve and provided tremendous comfort and relief to military Freemasons away from their homes. I must have fought in the wrong places in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, for these activities have never come to my attention.

But Military Lodges did exist in World War I. For instance, near the end of the War, a lodge of particular interest to U.S. Soldiers and Marines was Overseas Lodge No. 40, Coblenz, Germany. This lodge was formed in an enemy country, and utilized lodge rooms in which Napoleon and his officers reportedly held Masonic communications more than a century before.

Shortly after the American Army entered Germany in December 1918, a small group of brothers organized a Masonic Club in Coblenz. This Club met regularly in the Kaiser's Gymnasium Hall and in six months had become a body of some 3,200 souls. Overseas Lodge No. 40 was the outgrowth of this Masonic Club with a dispensation granted by the Grand Lodge of Rhode Island. The Lodge did not hold its Masonic communications in the Kaiser's Gymnasium, but began conferring degrees utilizing the German Masonic Temple, home of Johannis Lodge, Frederick Zur Vater-land, originally an Army Lodge during the Napoleonic Wars. This lodge was first organized in 1812 as a field lodge during Napoleon's Campaign in Russia.

Three future Commandants of the U. S. Marine Corps became Freemasons in Overseas Lodge No. 40 during its short existence: General John A. Lejeune, probably the most outstanding Marine of the Twentieth Century for whom Marine Corps Base, Camp Lejeune NC, and John A Lejeune Lodge No. 350, Quantico, VA, were named; General Wendell C. Neville; and General Lemuel C. Shepherd, under whom I have often served and from whom I have taken this story. General Shepherd tells this story of General Lejeune's initiation as it originated with fellow U S. Army officers in the second Army Division when General Lejeune commanded it. "General Lejeune is reported to have called his driver and told him he was going to Coblenz. When he named the hour of departure, the driver's face fell. 'I was going to ask if I could get off this afternoon, sir,' he said. 'No, you had better come along,' the General replied, 'You will have plenty of time to yourself in Coblenz.' 'Yes sir,' said the driver, although he was not wholly cheerful. 'Where to , sir?' he asked as he was entering Coblenz about three o'clock that afternoon. The driver gave his chief a peculiar look as he nodded that he understood.

"At the gate in front of the Temple, General Lejeune tarried a moment to tell the driver to be back promptly at seven o'clock. 'But, sir,' was the smiling reply, 'I also have been notified to report here this afternoon,' and together they entered the Temple to take their First Degrees."

Generals Lejeune and Shepherd were raised in this same Lodge on the same night. When General Shepherd, then a company commander, submitted his petition, he was sponsored and coached by the company gunnery sergeant of his company. He elaborated and evaluated much later saying

“Thus did Overseas Lodge develop and strengthen a fellowship between men of all ranks in the Army and the Marine Corps. Upon its return to America, Overseas Lodge was established at Providence, Rhode Island, where it continues active at this time. In order to be eligible for admission an applicant must have served in one of the armed services. The work continues to be conducted in the same manner as in Germany, the officers of the Lodge wearing their service uniforms and carrying out the ritual with military precision.”

“An interesting souvenir possessed by the Lodge is a Masonic diploma presented by a descendant of the French Lodge stationed in Coblenz during the Napoleonic War, which was issued by the Great Orient of France in 1816 and bears the signature of both Napoleon and Marshall Ney.”⁶

If there were any Military Lodges traveling with U. S. Forces subsequent to World War I, I have overlooked the records about them. Some writers say there were none.

This inquiry would not be complete without investigation of activities in the Orient. Freemasonry was established in the Philippines in 1898 by the Field Lodge that accompanied the North Dakota Regiment of Volunteer Infantry. This Lodge was established by a dispensation granted by the Grand Lodge of the State of North Dakota, and its charter members consisted of both officers and enlisted men of the regiment. In a short time it had received 100 petitions and had to refuse to receive more. I have read of no other lodge that has had the ceremony of obligation of a candidate interrupted by rifle fire! It departed the Philippines with its regiment about a year later.⁷

Shortly after departure of the North Dakota Regiment with its Military Lodge, A Sojourners Club was formed in Manila. It was composed of Freemasons who were in good standing and who wished to promote good fellowship and contribute to the welfare of their less fortunate brothers. By 1901 this group of Sojourners had obtained a dispensation from the Grand Lodge of California to form a permanent Lodge in Manila. As the members of the Sojourners Club were charter members of the newly formed Manila Lodge, the Club was disestablished. But in 1907, the Sojourners Club was again formed in Manila, this time to provide a way for military Freemasons to know each other better and to be of assistance to those in distress.⁸ These military Freemasons, officers and enlisted men, returned home throughout the period preceding World War I with good feeling about the Club and its function.

⁶ General Lemuel C. Shepherd, USMC (Ret), An Address to the Members of John A. Lejeune Lodge No. 350, A. F. & A. M., Quantico, Va. 16Oct61. (John A. Lejeune Lodge Bul. Nov. '61).

⁷ LaVon Parker Linn, Fifty Years of National Sojourners (Washington, D. C.: National Sojourners, Inc. 1970), p. 13-14.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15-19.

In the months immediately following World War I, a group of commissioned officers of all the Military Services who were Freemasons held meetings in Chicago, Illinois, and formed the organization now known as The National Sojourners, Inc.⁹ It is now composed of Freemasons who are commissioned officers, warrant officers, or senior noncommissioned officers, past and present, of the Armed Services of the United States, the U. S. Coast Guard, the Public Health Service, or Coast and Geodetic Survey. Commissioned officers in any armed services of a nation allied with the United States in time of war may also be qualified for membership. National Sojourners, Inc., is organized into chapters with the objective of strengthening our national defenses, promoting patriotic ideals, and providing good fellowship among its members. It has served its purposes well. It was created in an era when there was extreme class-consciousness between officers and enlisted men. I am a member and have been since World War II. But I found it difficult to sway the membership to change the rules even to allow career staff noncommissioned officers to become members. We have persevered! The National Sojourners, Inc., has recently offered membership to senior noncommissioned officers of the Armed Forces. This has greatly increased the potential to enrich the lives of military Freemasons who are serving their country in far off lands where Masonic Lodges are not readily available.

In modern warfare, combat is often continuous and intense for the span of time of an entire campaign. Armies must keep on the move to avoid destruction by the enemy. No winter bivouacs are possible, nor is there an opportunity for much rest for the troops. Rather, personnel are replaced in the combat zone on a periodic basis and returned to their homeland for recuperation from wounds or sickness, and for reorientation and retraining. The combat zone is hardly a place to confer degrees! The North Dakota Regiment discovered that in 1898! Nor is man capable of evaluating the true qualifications of a petitioner in the combat environment. Emotions for survival run too high and "loyalties of necessity" are too strong for one to make an accurate assessment of the overall moral character of his fighting companions.

Even if time were available to conduct regular lodge communications in military traveling lodges, the experiences of the North Dakota Lodge would be repeated, for men of many varied moral persuasions tend to fraternize under the pressures of common dangers. Joining the Masons might become the "thing to do at the moment" and the ballot box would be too timid to be effective. I would not subscribe to the establishment of traveling lodges in our Armed Forces today. The Masonic Services Association, sponsored by our Grand Lodges in the United States, is now the proper organization to provide assistance to Freemasons in combat overseas.

In the final analysis, except in the combat zone, military Freemasons are seldom stationed beyond easy commuting distances of regular lodges where their presence would be honored.

⁹ Ibid., p. 26.

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