The legend of the Song of the Signal Corps

Part II

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 Corps 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

In Part I of The Legend of the Song of the Signal Corps, Vitt discussed military songs in general, the search for a Signal Corps song, and the selection of Bess Heath Olmstead's song. In Part II, he picks up the story just after WWI.

POSTWAR LEAN YEARS AND THE DEPRESSION

In 1928-31, the Chief Signal Officer was still concerned about the relatively small strength of the Signal Corps and the assignment of signal duties to the using arms; views he expressed before the Army War College in 1928. Talkie movies were introduced; then in 1929, we had the stock market crash and the ensuing depression. New permanent barracks and officers' and noncommissioned officers' quarters were being completed at Fort Monmouth, N.J., to house the largest contingent of active Army Signal units and students in the Army at that time, and the Signal Corps engineering laboratories had gotten a start. In addition to the post operating detachments (Medics, Engineers, Ordnance, Quartermaster, etc.), the 51st Signal Battalion, the 1st Signal Company (1st Div) and the 15th Signal Service Company, which comprised the instructional staff and students of the Signal School, represented the post population. Music for this new permanent Signal Corps post was provided by a volunteer, or so-called "Jawbone Band." Its leader was SSgt. Daniel (Pop) McCarthy. The members were malassigned, special-duty musicians, individually assigned to the several units and attached to the 15th Signal Service Company. Some, like Pop McCarthy, were WWI veterans.

This condition was corrected by the tireless efforts of Col. Arthur S. Cowan, Commanding Officer of Fort Monmouth and Commandant of the Signal School, and Gen. George S. Gibbs, Chief Signal Officer, when a War Department announcement authorized the Signal Corps Band, effective 15 August 1930. The band was established by Act of Congress as a Special Army Band by the redesignation of the Thirteenth Cavalry Band as the Signal Corps Band, with station at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. The Signal Corps Bulletin No. 57, Nov-Dec 1930, "Timely Topics," stated "...This event was made possible by a combination of circumstances which were brought together by the necessity of rendering inactive an existing band organization and the ability to absorb for this purpose a small number of the additional grades and ratings recently authorized the Signal Corps...." (The event was the mechanization of the 1st and 13th Cav as the 7th Cavalry Brigade. The 1st Cav Band remained with the Brigade.) Upon arrival of the band from Fort Riley, Kansas, the two bands were merged. The Corps now had its own official song and its own official band.

Unfortunately for the band members, the permanent barracks program at Fort Monmouth had not included permanent barracks for a band, so the Post Engineer had to condition one of the one-story WWI wooden buildings to accommodate them. Shortly after this was accomplished, the band was informed by the Band Commander (Post Adjutant) that they should be prepared for a visit from Mrs. Dawson Olmstead and others, to improve the Song of the Signal Corps. By this time, the band had become familiar with the piano score and the Army Band—Army Music School arrangement of the Song of the Signal Corps, adopted by the Signal Corps and published by the Adjutant General in the Army Song Book.

The meetings held sometime during late 1930 began with an explanation of the objectives to be accomplished in order to complete the Song of the Signal Corps as the "Signal Corps March." These objectives were discussed in detail

and the responsibility for completing the march, to include a complete military band arrangement, was assigned to WO Wheeler W. Sidwell, Bandleader, Signal Corps Band.

The participants included representatives from Headquarters Fort Monmouth and the Signal Corps Units at Fort Monmouth, the Bandleader and three or four principal musicians, and Mrs. Olmstead, who asked that in the future she be referred to as Bess Heath Olmstead when referring to the Song of the Signal Corps or the Signal Corps March. Mrs. Olmstead was accompanied by Brig. Gen. R. J. Burt, Sr., composer of the song of the U. S. Infantry entitled, "The Infantry - Kings of the Highway," and who later wrote the original theme and words of the "Song of the Army Engineer."

The Office of the Chief Signal Officer had provided a compilation of the suggestions received in response to General Saltzman's letter to each Signal Corps Officer, and General Burt gave an excellent analysis of the requirements of a good conventional military march.

Mr. Sidwell, who was an accomplished musician, as a member of the Duluth and Minneapolis Symphony Orchestras before his entry into the Service during WWI, was tasked with responsibility for converting the single chorus into a march for the Signal Corps. Bess Heath Olmstead would cooperate by providing revisions to the words of the song.

After approximately two (winter) months of diligent work by the members of the band, manuscripts of the completed march were photostatted by the laboratory photo section, and the march was ready for staffing. While most of the bandsmen toiled to produce the handwritten manuscripts, SSgt. John R. Whiteside, solo trumpet player of the band, deserves credit for most of the additional musical composition. He also helped Mr. Sidwell do the arranging. This task gave the bandsmen an opportunity to "gin-in" their ideas for what would become their signature march and theme song; and after only a few performances, the march was approved in the time it took for the mail to travel from New Jersey to Washington, D.C., and return.

There were no music typewriters or "copiers" in those days, and musicians often spent their waking hours copying music, some by ear at performances, to permit them to obtain music for their organizations. Copying music was a detestable duty for the average instrumentalist because it consumed so much time. The alternative in the Army was to buy printed music from the music publishing companies and if one had original music, to copyright it before having it printed in multiple copies for distribution. It was not customary for the Army to do this. It was done by the individual on a personal basis and, in many cases, without cost since the publisher sold the copies for profit. Desiring printed copies, and anticipating a need for Army-wide distribution of the Signal Corps March, it was concluded that the March should be copyrighted and, on 27 Feb 1931, the Signal Corps March was registered as an unpublished work under Class E, No. 35402, as "Military Band Parts - Signal Corps March," arranged by W. W. Sidwell, owner Bess Heath Olmstead, in Washington, D.C. But, alas, the Signal

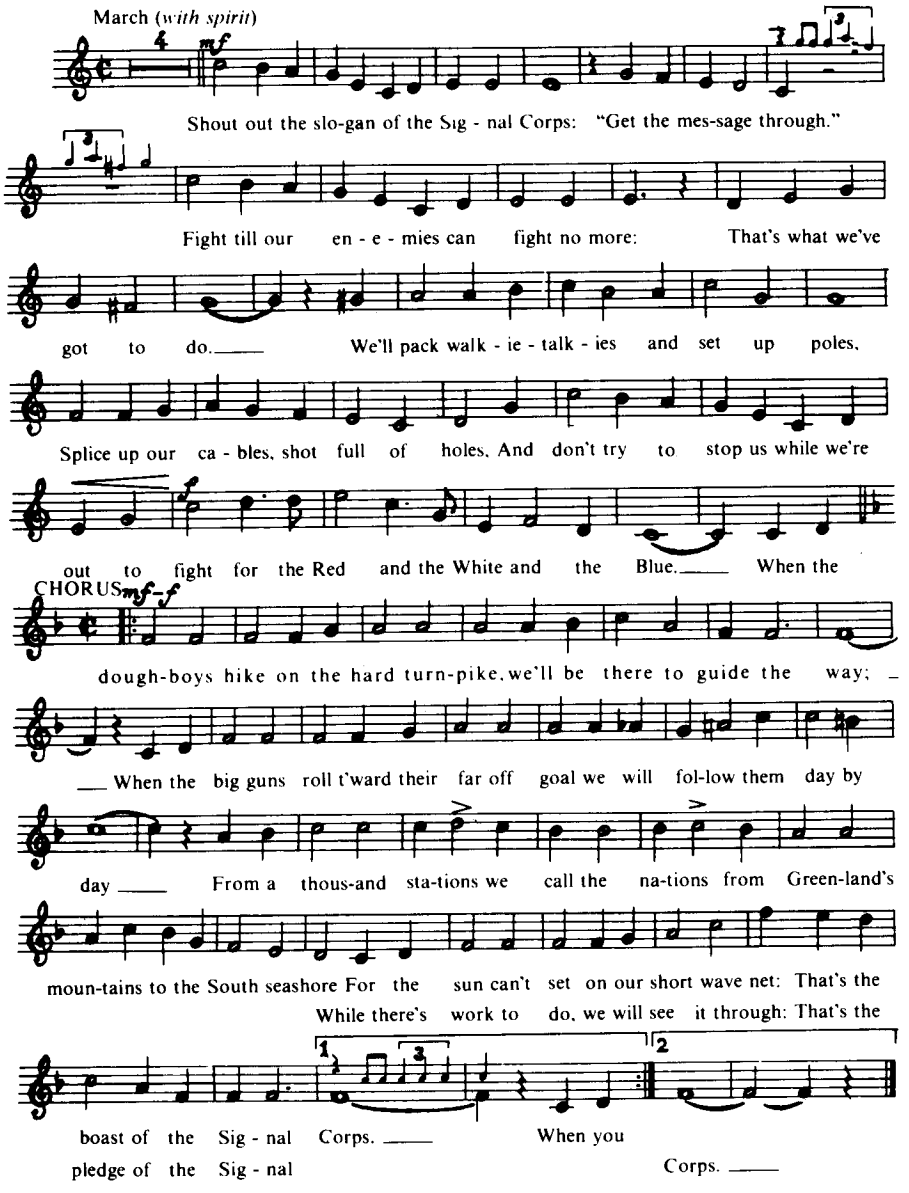
Dedicated to the U.S. Signal Corps

Vocal Lead Sheet

Song Of The Signal Corps

Arranged by Mayhew Lake

Words and Music by
BESS HEATH OLMSTEAD



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Corps Band was destined to hand-copy music for a long time. No further action was taken to publish either the song or the march. This was not a deterrent to performance, for being at Fort Monmouth we had special authority to use the photographic labs for reproductions when required. Although we played the march from memory, we needed extra copies to respond to requests received from time to time. The song and march were used for every occasion. It was characteristic of the band and was used for graduation exercises, on the air, at dances, for soldier shows, the National Horse Show, parades, baseball, basketball and football games and concerts. There was never any question about its official nature. The copyright question never surfaced, but the words of the song were seldom sung at Fort Monmouth, except for special ceremonies.

THE NEW DEAL AND THE EMERGENCY

(WWI Liberty and FWD trucks were junked and new Chevys were issued!)

By 1932-33, we were still using the tattered photostats of the Signal Corps March but with increasing numbers of performances, and still no one questioned the official status of the march or the song. It should be noted that the rallying cry of the Depression years, "Happy Days are Here Again," ran a close second to our theme song.

President Roosevelt's New Deal began in 1933 with the many changes, such as old age pensions and unemployment insurance legislation, and huge spending-lending programs.

The unrelated repeal of the Volstead Act in December of 1933 eliminated bootlegging and brought back 3.2 beer on the post.

Aside from not being paid several times, and a seemingly unfair arbitrary 33-1/3% reduction in military pay and allowances in the Spring of 1933 for an extended period, the majority of the personnel, military and civilian, considered themselves fortunate to be at Fort Monmouth. A favorite pastime of every communicator, to include many of the bandsmen during this period, was to work on discovering ways and means to beat "radio silence" during combat, and the elimination of wire and cable from the Signal Corps inventory. (Someone got lucky and thought up VHF and Microwave Radio Relay.)

In 1934, things began looking up; and by 1935, several new Signal Corps units were constituted, increasing the enlisted strength of 3,687. The officer strength dropped a few. Best of all for us, a new permanent band barracks was approved. Of course, other Army branches were improving also and requests for the Signal Corps March and Song of the Signal Corps were beginning to tax our photo lab.

Concurrent with some of the new military applications of radio and radar for aircraft warning, an expansion of the Army during the 1939-41 emergency brought unprecedented increases of personnel, signal units, equipment and facilities to Fort Monmouth, and a cadre of a second Signal Corps band was activated at Monmouth in the fall of 1940 for a Signal Corps Replacement Training Center. Conscription was bringing in outstanding musicians and both bands were literally bursting with talent. In addition, the initial establishment of the Training Film Studios drew most of the inducted "actors" to Monmouth. So, we had two superior Signal Corps bands and two superior Signal Corps orchestras using photostated Song of the Signal Corps and Signal Corps March music, and requests for copies from other expanding Army elements were mounting. Big names in the Motion Picture Industry and broadcasting and music worlds were daily visitors at Fort Monmouth. Fund drives fro the USO (United Service Organization) had begun and the bands and orchestras were barnstorming to support the drive. An Army Emergency Relief soldier show, "Bottlenecks of '41," employing actors from the Training Film Studios and the Signal Corps bands, was a huge success with lots of original music. Brig. Gen. David Sarnoff, Sig C -USAR, Chairman of the Board, Radio Corporation of America (RCA), was a regular visitor and friend at Fort Monmouth. He had attended one of the showings of the "Bottlenecks of '41" and was impressed.

Expanded training activity and facilities at Fort Monmouth grew to the extent that satellite camps were planned. By 1 July 1941, the Signal Corps Officer Candidate School opened as the band stood in the quadrangle playing the Signal Corps March (from memory). Another significant event that took place on 1 July 1941 in NBC's television studio 3H — commercial

Bess Heath Olmstead wrote the words and music to the "Song of the Signal Corps" which was adopted by the Corps in 1927 as its official song. It was retired in 1961.

television was born. At exactly 1:29 PM, the familiar three notes of the NBC chimes signaled the beginning of commercial television in this country, as station WNBT (now WNBC-TV) signed on. The first event was from Ebbett's Field as the Brooklyn Dodgers played the Philadelphia Phillies and Ray Forrest provided the play-by-play report. For the evening program, members of the cast and the Signal Corps orchestra had been invited by Sarnoff to present excerpts from the "Bottlenecks of '41," in conjunction with a funding presentation to the Armed Forces for the USO. There were many other performers and performances and several commercials involved in that NBC station's historical program. The evening show was rehearsed in Studio 3H during the afternoon baseball telecast and was to start with the orchestra playing the Song of the Signal Corps as background for the opening announcement. When the program director asked if the song was copyrighted, he was told that it was and he refused to permit its use, even though we convinced him that the song had been dedicated to the Signal Corps by Mrs. Olmstead and that the Army had authority to use it any time. As an expedient, we decided that we would

write a fanfare after the rehearsal to replace the Signal Corps Song, which we did. As previously stated, that orchestra had talent. When we returned from dinner, we rehearsed the fanfare several times and by show time no one knew the difference in the program. As far as can be determined, this program was not recorded. That TV show was the last time the members of the cast and the orchestra performed together. Most were under orders to other units and stations as of 1 July 1941. I returned to my second day at Officer Candidate School, and the assistant orchestra leader departed for new duties as a bandleader. The copyright incident was probably never reported to Mrs. Olmstead, the headquarters staff at Fort Monmouth, or the Chief Signal Officer.

WORLD WAR II AND KOREA

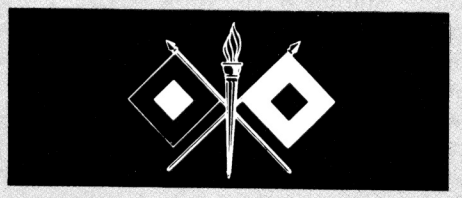
By the end of 1941, the United States was at war and total mobilization began. The Signal Corps Replacement Training Center at Camp Crowder, Missouri, had been activated and centers in California were to be constructed. The time was at hand to contract for the publication of the Song of the Signal Corps and, in 1942, Bess Heath Olmstead "assigned" the copyright of the "Song of the Signal Corps" to Sam Fox Publishing Company, New York, N.Y. This included the Signal Corps March arrangement by W. W. Sidwell. The song would now get the full commercial treatment and world-wide distribution. The 1942 agreement with Sam Fox Publishing Company does not affect Mrs. Olmstead's agreement granting the Signal Corps of the United States Army the right to use the musical composition in any manner in connection with its operation and official functions; and an agreement between Twentieth Century-Fox, Inc. and Mrs. Olmstead for use of the composition in a motion picture to be distributed throughout the United States of America, its possessions and all foreign countries; an agreement between the Radio Corporation of America and Mrs. Olmstead covering record No. 27814-B; and Mrs. Olmstead reserved the right to personally perform the Song of the Signal Corps or parts thereof.

In 1943, Sam Fox Publishing Company copyrighted and released a new sheet music version of the Song of the Signal Corps, complete with an introduction, verse, and chorus, in a lower key, with letter and chord diagrams, dedicated to the United States Signal Corps. And a stirring march arrangement by Mayhew Lake, entitled "Song of the Signal Corps," was dedicated to the U.S. Signal Corps (all rights reserved, including public performance for profit).

The RCA Victor album of Service Songs contains the Song of the Signal Corps March as the flip side of the Marine's Hymn. It is recorded by the RCA Victor Band, conducted by Leonard Joy, with the Four Clubmen (No. 27814-B).

The Twentieth Century-Fox record TCF 163 is a recording of the Twentieth Century-Fox Orchestra and Chorus, conducted by Alfred Newman. This recording was used to introduce the musical background of the first war film, entitled "At the Front," giving a pictorial account of the opening phases

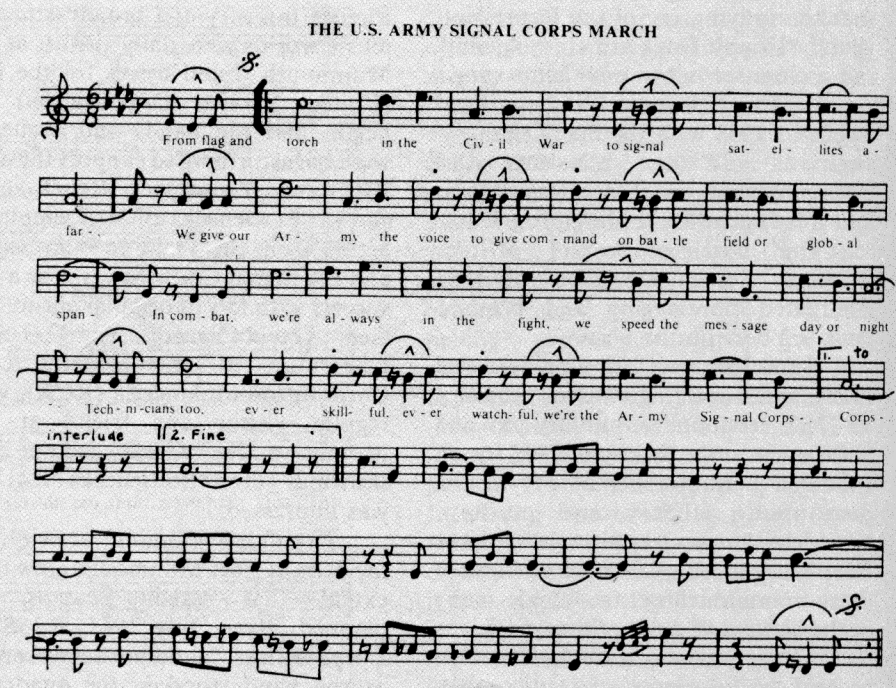
"Official preferred" song for the Signal Corps



At least two other widely recognized Signal Corps songs exist, both of which have been published in TAC. The first, which appeared in our Summer 1977 issue, is Lorraine X Page's "US Army Signal Corps." The other is Allan Woolley's composition, "The US Army Signal Corps March," which appeared in the Summer 1979 issue of TAC.

When Bess Heath Olmstead's "Song of The Signal Corps" (see page 6) was retired in 1961, a search for a new song was begun. The new song, it was decided, should honor the Army Signal Corps, its mission and the men and women who serve.

A professional group from the combined Armed Services School of Music and the Army Signal Corps



of fighting by U. S. forces in North Africa.

The commercial publication of the Song of the Signal Corps did not in any respect alter its official status. In fact, it just consolidated all developments and changes into a single package. The tremendous distribution of the music and recordings, as well as the regular use of the song in training films and recruiting films, together with the rapidly expanding Army and war activities, not to mention the constant turnover of bandleaders and command staffs or the transfer of Signal Corps Bands to the Adjutant General's Corps with numerical designations, gave rise to a concept that the "Song of the Signal Corps" was just another commercial war song, like say - George M. Cohan's "Over There." This concept is evident in an official Signal Corps letter from Fort Monmouth to Mrs. Olmstead in January 1949, posing a question to her about the "official" status of her song, instead of resorting to the official files of the War Department or Department of the Army. It is true, she had no official correspondence from the War Department or Department of the Army about her song's "adoption," and she could not answer the question, which was probably prompted by the need to obtain copyright releases at times to perform her song on radio and TV. It can be reported that Mrs. Olmstead purposely avoided becoming too involved in official Army channels pertaining to her song.

Few communicators of the 1941-61 era had knowledge of the historical background of the "Regimental Songs" program or that songs, like units, have a lineage. There were too many other pressing operational problems for such detail. But you can be assured that the "Song of the Signal Corps March" did its job and did it well. It flourished during WWII and the Korean Conflict, and beyond, as the official adopted song or march. Its lineage should include 18 hash-stripes, all the service medals that have been struck since 1939, and 53 years of history. Its military precedence is formidable. In addition, it has a vociferous alumnus.

Besides all of this, it's a very good march (which is "out of print").

ENDNOTES

1. Baker, F. C., *How We Hear — The Psychological Aspects of Music.* G. Schirmer, N.Y., N.Y.
2. Dolph, Edward A., *Sound Off — Soldier Songs from The Revolution to World War II.* Farrar & Rinehart Inc., N.Y., N.Y.

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.

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.

Traditions Committee were the judges.

Woolley's song was selected from the eight submissions.

The "US Army Signal Corps March" became the "official preferred" song for the corps. Though the march does not take precedence over the official Army song, it is used on occasions when distinctive Signal Corps music is appropriate and as background music in certain films produced by the Signal Corps.

Woolley's march has been recorded by the US Army Band and the US Army chorus.