

MILITARY ORDER OF THE LOYAL LEGION OF THE UNITED STATES



Loyal Legion Vignettes



THE MILITARY ORDER OF THE LOYAL LEGION 135 YEARS OF SERVICE TO THE NATION

By

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The Military Order of the Loyal Legion is first of all a veterans organization; given the interests of many of its members it became a catalyst to promote national public interest in military and naval science; and finally it was the great guardian of the legacy of President Abraham Lincoln and his ideals.

"It is", said General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, " the noblest of all the American Orders." And in this, its 135th year of service to the nation its Companions helped to preserve, it is fitting that we take a moment today to reflect upon its history and its future. It was founded on April 20, 1865 by the officers who formed the guard of honor when President Abraham Lincoln's body arrived at Independence Hall in Philadelphia on its way to Springfield, Illinois. War was still going on, Confederate forces were still in the field, and the recent assassination of the President and attempted assassination of the Secretary of State had raised the anxiety level in the nation to a new high. John Wilkes Booth now identified as the assassin was still at large, though some of the conspirators had been seized and thrown into Old Capitol prison. Who could predict what might happen next? In these moments of high drama this group of officers gathered to pledge their unswerving loyalty to the Union and their unqualified support of the National Government. They chose the name Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States as best expressing their intent and selected April 15, 1865, the day of President Abraham Lincoln's death as their date of founding. The first public meeting was at Independence Hall in Philadelphia on May 31, 1865.

The organization was patterned after the Society of the Cincinnati, which had been formed by officers of the Continental Army at the close of the War of American Independence. Like the Society of the Cincinnati membership was limited to commissioned officers of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard, and, also like the Cincinnati, a provision was made for the male descendants of such officers to also become members. Unlike the Cincinnati, which limits its membership to one

member per qualifying ancestor and that ancestor shall have held a Continental commission, all commissioned officers of the Volunteer Forces as well as the Regular Forces were eligible for membership as were their descendants. Also, unlike the Cincinnati, which permits cousin relationships to some degree depending on the state involved, the Loyal Legion limits its relationship to the qualify ancestor to that of a direct descendant or a descendant of a brother or sister of the serving officer.

But we are getting ahead of our story. The Legion itself was formed as the result of an accidental meeting as described in a letter by Captain Peter Dirk Keyser, M.D. "We begin with the facts of the assassination of the lamented Lincoln which took place on April 14, 1865. The news came out here about 12 to 1 o'clock that night. The next morning it was all over the city and as the Old State House was and is the headquarters for the public to meet on occasions of great moment to the Country and to the State. I like many others sauntered down there early in the morning of the 15th to hear the special news. The State House is on Chestnut Street between 5th and 6th Streets and my old friend Col. T. Ellwood Zell (then like myself out of the Army) had his publications office on 6th Street just above Chestnut Street near the State House, so as I walked down 6th Street in the crowd near the office I met Bvt. Lt. Colonel S. B. Wylie Mitchell, M.D. another old chum, whom I took with me up to Colonel Zell's office."

The three men discussed the shocking news from Washington and then proceeded to plan for a new patriotic organization to bind together officers and ex-officers in the event of a continuing threat to the national government in the future. These three gentlemen are regarded as the founders of the Loyal Legion. At the first meeting the three men decided that the next step was to call a mass meeting of Philadelphia veterans to pledge renewed allegiance to the Union and to plan for participation in the funeral arrangements for President Abraham Lincoln. The funeral train was to move from Washington D.C. to Springfield, Illinois, retracing the route the President had followed four years previously on his way to his first inauguration. It would stop in the major cities along the route. The Philadelphians held a public meeting attended "by an immense number of people" on April 20th in the offices of Devit and Company on Walnut Street near Third Street to make arrangements for their part in the ceremonies. After the President's body had arrived and lay in state in Independence Hall, guarded by officers of the Army and Navy, a further meeting was held by Zell, Mitchell and Keyser to discuss the creation of a permanent organization which would stand for the support of the general government and the principles of Union. As noted the model selected was that of the Society of the Cincinnati. As mentioned earlier they decided to call the organization The Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States. They wanted an Order not a Society to conform more to European fashion and decided that the members would be called Companions, for the same reason. Having discussed the preliminaries of organization, the three comrades decided to see how their idea would be received by their fellow veteran officers.

A notice was published in the Philadelphia papers, to wit "A meeting of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States will be held in the County Courthouse, Sixth and Chestnut Streets on Wednesday evening, May 31, 1865, at eight o'clock. All officers and ex-officers of the army, navy, and Marine Corps interested in the establishment of an organization founded to perpetuate the memories and associations of the present war are invited to attend." The notice was signed by Samuel B. Wylie Mitchell, Secretary. Years later, in an address to the Massachusetts Commandery, Acting Assistant Paymaster Henry M. Rogers said, "The Loyal Legion, to my mind, to-day is the concrete, crystallized expression of earnest men who hated human slavery, who fought for human rights, who believed in the United States of America as a Union and were determined to perpetuate the high ideals of those States; of men, who in the exigencies brought into being by Lincoln's death, pledged anew to the great cause which they themselves had helped to win, their lives their fortunes, and their sacred honor."

At this first meeting a Constitution and By-laws were adopted. Major General George Cadwallader who was commanding Union forces in and around Philadelphia, was elected the first Commander of

the Commandery of Pennsylvania. Because of the response which had been received by the founders even before the first meeting when the notice was published and the reaction of officers of other states who were passing through Philadelphia, on military business or furlough, the potential for a national organization was recognized. Additional meetings were held in Philadelphia until November 4, when the officers of the Commandery of Pennsylvania were installed, their positions to date from April 15, 1865 which was declared the official date of founding. President Abraham Lincoln was elected the first honorary companion by special resolution. Three classes of membership were established. The first class was that of the commissioned officers who had actually served in the war and they were also called original companions. The second class was composed of their sons, grandsons, and nephews and was generally termed hereditary companions. The third class which was in existence until 1896 was composed of civilians who had made a prominent contribution to the war effort. Lincoln's entire war cabinet, for example, were made Companions of the Third Class as were persons such as Frederic Law Olmsted, Secretary of the Sanitary Commission, a number of Governors, Senators and Congressmen and poets such as James Russell Lowell and song writers like Henry Clay Root. One interesting Companion of the Third Class was Benito Juarez who is simply listed as President of Mexico. Today there are Honorary Companions who correspond to those of the Third Class, among them being Ken Burns, Ed Bearss (yesterdays speaker), Brian Pohanka, A. Wilson Greene, Don Troiani, Superintendent Latcher of Gettysburg National Military Park, and so forth. Commander George Kasten, Captain of the U.S. S. Hartford SSN 678 is an Honorary Companion. There is also a category of Associate Member for those not hereditarily eligible but who support the principles and programs of the legion. But to return to our story.

The national character of the Order was not long coming to fruition. In 1866, less than a year after the initial meeting Commanderies were established in New York and Maine. Massachusetts followed in 1871. Wisconsin in 1874; Illinois in 1879; the District of Columbia in 1882; Michigan, Minnesota, Oregon, Missouri and Nebraska in 1885; Kansas and Iowa in 1886 and Washington and Vermont in 1891. Until 1885 the Commandery of Pennsylvania was regarded as the chief legislative and judicial body of the Order. General Cadwalader was annually re-elected Commander of the Pennsylvania Commandery and Acting Commander-in-Chief until his death in 1879. General Winfield Scott Hancock was then elected Commander of the Pennsylvania Commandery and also served as Acting Commander-in-Chief until 1885. In that year the Commandery-in-Chief of the United States was established at a meeting at the Union League Club in Philadelphia and General Hancock was elected as the first Commander-in-Chief. General Hancock was re-elected in 1886 and upon his death that same year, was succeeded by Bvt. Major General and President, Rutherford B. Hayes. With the election of President Hayes of the Ohio Commandery, the Order had its first Commander-in-Chief who was not a member of the Pennsylvania Commandery, a further evidence of the national character of the Order.

By the time President Hayes assumed the office of Commander-in-Chief the Constitution and By-laws had been established, and the insignia and directions for its wearing had been designed and adopted. Baily, Banks and Biddle, is still the manufacturer of the regalia. General Hancock is given credit for at least overseeing the design of the Maltese cross insignia and Samuel W.B. Mitchell, Recorder-in-Chief until his death in 1879, made the arrangements for its manufacture. Besides the medal and distinctive red, white and blue ribbon, a rosette was designed, the first used by any organization in the United States, and also a large and distinctive certificate of membership. An insignia number for each successful applicant for membership was placed on the certificate and on the medal. It is almost certain that the motto "Lex Regit Arma Tuentur" was the contribution of Bvt. Major General Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain in 1866. In 1890 John Philip Sousa composed the rousing march "The Loyal Legion" honoring the annual meeting of the Loyal Legion at the Union League Club in Philadelphia that year.

Although small in number of members at the beginning with a single commandery located in Pennsylvania the membership began to increase quite rapidly. In an era in the Armed Forces of the United States when the only medal or insignia of service was the Medal of Honor, which at that time

was limited to enlisted men, or army or corps badges, there was no decoration to indicate service in the War of the Rebellion. The attractiveness of the MOLLUS decoration and the impressive certificate which could decorate the office or parlor wall were incentives to membership; but even more was the formalization of the relationship of the Union officer corps who could now meet in a formal organization designed to perpetuate the memories of their part in the great War of the Rebellion. By 1898, no doubt inspired by the Spanish American War, the Loyal Legion carried over 8,000 Companions on its rolls. To date over 22,000 names have been added to the Roster of the Loyal Legion. In the Spanish American War the young officers who had fought for the Union some 30 years earlier, were now the military and civilian leaders of the nation and undertook, with considerable success, to bring the United States to victory against Spain. Perhaps the best known was Vermont Commandery's Commodore George Dewey. This is the centennial of the so called Boxer Rebellion in China and should be no surprise that the American Minister at Peking, the Commander of the U. S. military forces there and the commander of the U.S. portion of the relief expedition were all Companions of the Loyal Legion. The descendant of one of them, Major General James Harrison Wilson is a Companion of the Connecticut Commandery and is with us today. World War I saw hereditary Companions taking the field, such as Douglas MacArthur and William "Billy" Mitchell. General MacArthur was probably the most prominent member of the Legion to participate in World War II and Korea. Other Companions served in Vietnam and the Gulf War.

As the number of Commanderies increased they began to develop the kind of programs for which they would become famous. Almost all of the Commanderies either built or rented rooms, usually in a local armory, in which they displayed artifacts brought from the battlefield or of historical interest to those who fought in the Civil War. They lined the walls with pictures of the famous officers of the Armed forces of the United States. Many of these were magnificent oil portraits, some more than life size, under which the Companions met, deliberated issues of the day, enjoyed brandy and cigars, and, most importantly for historians and posterity, presented papers telling of their personal experiences in the War. Not only did they present the papers; they published them, thus providing one of the great sources of information for Civil War historians of today. In some cases, commentaries, particularly if there was some disagreement about a particular topic, were offered at the following session, which must have made for a lively meeting and debate amongst the Companions. When Lt. General Philip H. Sheridan became Commander-in-Chief he devised the order for business which the Commanderies were to follow and that has changed very little since he set it down in one of his general orders to MOLLUS. In 1888, with Rutherford B. Hayes as Commander-in-Chief, the Loyal Legion chartered the War Library and Museum of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States located in Philadelphia. This became its headquarters and the office of the Recorder-in-Chief, a position held for no less than 43 years by Bvt. Lt. Col. John Page Nicholson, the true shaper and guardian of the Loyal Legion. Meetings were held year in and year out. The offices of the State Commanderies were filled by some of the greatest names in the history of the United States. Ulysses S. Grant and David Glasgow Farragut were commanders of the New York Commandery; William Tecumseh Sherman was commander of the Ohio Commandery and George Dewey was Commander of Vermont; yet none of these held the position of Commander-in-Chief, because circumstances or on occasion death had intervened. But figures such as Philip H. Sheridan, John Gibbon, Grenville M. Dodge, Lucius Fairchild, Arthur MacArthur and Nelson A. Miles (who was Commander-in-Chief at the time of the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial-which was conducted for many years by the Loyal Legion following the program of the 100th Anniversary of Lincoln's birth in ceremonies at the Union League in Philadelphia) did occupy the place of leadership as Commander-in-Chief and it was not limited to the Army as Bancroft Gherardi and George W. Melville were among the representatives of the Navy as CinC. Less familiar names of those who served in the War of the Rebellion and as Commander-in-Chief were Arnold Rand and Robert Means Thompson. Col. Arnold Rand of Massachusetts whose arduous collecting of artifacts and, most importantly, photographs provided the basis for the great collection of the Mass Mollus material at the United States Military History Institute at Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Without the MOLLUS collection, said Ken Burns, at a press conference in Hartford several years ago, he could never have made the award winning series on the Civil War. Commander-in-Chief Rand was the person most responsible for that great historic

achievement. Today the name Robert Means Thompson is not a name with which we are very familiar; a graduate of the United States Naval Academy, a young officer during the Civil War he rose to the rank of Master. After the war he resigned his commission and went into business heading the International Nickel Company and Pell and Company in New York City-in 1912 and again in 1924 he chaired the United States Olympic Committee commemorated in the film, Chariots of Fire. And he edited the Confidential Correspondence of Gustavus Vasa Fox, Assistant Secretary of the Navy 1861-1865. The last Commander-in-Chief to have served in the Civil War was Captain William P. Wright of Illinois.

Slowly the passage of time caused the original companions to fall away and their sons and nephews and grandsons assumed the positions of leadership. The wisdom of the Loyal Legion in allowing descendants to become full members was now apparent as the younger men took over responsibility and the Grand Army of the Republic simply dissolved as post after post closed with the death of the last member; the Sons of Union Veterans, although their successors in law, was not the same organization. as those they came to represent. This was not the case with MOLLUS. And descendants of the original Companions, such as U.S. Grant III became prominent in the Loyal Legion's leadership. One of the most intriguing names born by a Commander-in-Chief was that of Major General Malvern Hill Barnum who led the organization from 1940 to 1941.

Many of the meeting rooms/ libraries could no longer be maintained as cultural interests brought on by the Depression and World War II with the expansion of such organizations as the American Legion had their effect, and, except for that in Philadelphia, they gradually closed, their records and artifacts either going to what was eventually the Civil War Library and Museum in Philadelphia or following the lead of Massachusetts and the District of Columbia commanderies to the USMHI. Many Commanderies donated their records to local historical agencies and libraries where they are today available for research. The Ohio Commandery, for example, has placed much of its material at Lincoln Memorial University, Harrods gate, Tennessee. The Legion today through its Commanderies offers scholarships, ROTC Awards, presents medals to the Service Academies and through the Loyal Legion Journal continues to publish articles on Civil War history. It erects and restores monuments to Civil War officers and helps with a national grant program to perpetuate battlefield preservation and promotes programs educating the general public about the Civil War. An increasing concern about the current status of the care of today's veterans and veterans homes has been manifested by our Commander-in-Chief, Major Robert James Bateman who is making that concern a hall mark of his administration.

The last decade has seen real growth in membership. Beginning in the early 1980's some of the great commanderies, which had become moribund for one reason or another, were revived, including Wisconsin, Connecticut, Kansas, Missouri and Texas. Tennessee is on the verge of being re-formed and Vermont and Maine are showing some promise. Of great interest is the formation of Comanderies in States, which previously had none. Virginia and the Commandery of the Department of the South (Georgia and South Carolina) as well as Florida indicate the invasion of Dixie goes on apace. As a minimum of ten members are required to form a Commandery the new Commanderies represent a significant increase in membership. This, of course, results in additional revenue as does the increase in sales of ties, blazer patches and buttons, and, most importantly the famous membership badge and rosette seen more and more frequently as they are worn by Companions of the Order. Certainly the most important recruiting device is the MOLLUS Website designed and maintained by Commander Keith Harrison of the Michigan Commandery. This award winning site contains everything imaginable to inform the public about MOLLUS. A majority of our new members in the last few years have joined because of the Web Site. It is updated continuously and historical and informational articles are added almost day by day.

In 1999 the 100th anniversary of our sister organization, the Dames of the Loyal Legion was celebrated at the Union League in Philadelphia. Founded on the same principles as MOLLUS The Dames also have programs involving education and historic preservation of Civil War sites and work

closely with MOLLUS in national projects.

In 2000 the national headquarters will shift from the location on Pine Street to its new home at the Union League Club in Philadelphia where so many of its activities took place beginning in 1865.

The Military Order of the Loyal Legion is today still embodies the statement made by the Commander of the Maine Commandery, Bvt. Major General Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain in an address at the Union League, "What a century of concession could not do, secession did-with marvelous demonstration, its own weapons tuned to its destruction. It pleased its maddened mood to invoke war; and the very laws of war gave the President power to knell its doom; it proclaimed a Confederacy built on the corner-stone of slavery - and lo! The corner-stone itself was overturned; it set slavery across the nation's way, and God-in his wrath, in his justice, in his mercy, in his love, in his far purpose for man and earth-swept slavery from the path, as the mighty pageant of the free people passed on to its glory. So if one asks why we did not leave the Slave States in the enjoyment of their institution, I answer-it is because we were not allowed to leave them. We must rescue them too. It was not hate; it was not revenge; it was not self-will. It was because we were called by a warrant higher than our will; because were summoned to account as holders of a great trust; because this was one Country and our Country, and we in our measure of ability were responsible for it; because the flag that stood for our public faith promised for all the people under it that right should be enthroned in her laws and defended by her arms; because the covenants of the Constitution were mightier than its compromises."

(Given at the Annual Luncheon of the Lincoln National Birthday Celebration Committee, Washington, D.C. February 12, 2000))

