

Lore of the Corps
“It’s A Grand Old School” and “The Ballad of the SJA”:
Two Song from the Corps of Yesteryear

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While some members of the Corps know that there is a *Regimental March* (approved by Major General (MG) Hugh Overholt as the Corps’s official marching tune in 1987), few know that the Corps also has had a number of legal-related songs. While these have not been sung for some years, they are worth knowing about because the words to these songs, although intended to be light-hearted and humorous, nevertheless reflect attitudes about military law and judge advocates in the era in which they were composed (and performed). *It’s A Grand Old School* dates from World War II and was composed by students at The Judge Advocate General’s School (TJAGSA) in Ann Arbor, Michigan. *The Ballad of the SJA* dates from the 1960s, when judge advocates saw themselves as far removed from combat, much less the front lines. Both tunes provide insights into the attitudes and perspectives of judge advocates of the past.

It’s A Grand Old School

(sung to tune of the University of South Dakota Field Song)¹

(verse one)

Dear Old JAG School, School of lawyers,
School of soldiers true,
For our gold bars we aspire and perspire
too
Thanking humbly General Cramer and the
faculty
Glad of jobs that are much tamer than the
infantry.

(verse two)

Quote that note, quote by rote, give better
than they send,
Never yield, on Ferry field, fight to the
bitter end,
No retreat, on Tappan Street, safe from the
Krauts and Japs,²

¹ The *Field Song* of the University of South Dakota was written about 1938 by J. Hyatt Downing with music by Francelia Feary. The song begins:

South Dakota, Land of Empire, Land of Sunshine, too
For your glory we conspire; All our Hearts are True
Thanking humbly our Creator, Loyal we will be
Proud to call you Alma Mater

² Derogatory terms for German and Japanese soldiers used during World War II.

We can’t lose, we get the news, from
Pollock and his maps.

(verse three)

‘Cross the drink, we’ll shed our ink, we’ll
louse up each review,
For our sins, there’ll be no skins, no matter
what we do.

Through the years, we’ll give three cheers,
for from the Board we’re free
Hail to Miller, he’s a killer, so’s the J-A-G.

(verse four)

O snug harbor, in Ann Arbor, free from
stress and storm,
Bless thy staff, and mimeograph, and keep
their mem’ry warm.

Gothic Cloister, that’s our oyster, sword
shall bow to pen,
Alma Mater of the Blotter, Mother-in-law
of men.

(verse five)

Hit that writ! Hit that writ! We’re groggy,
Major Farr
On the ball to study hall, file every damn
AR,
Had no short arms, had no port arms,
learning JAG techniques,
On our chassis, in your classes, seventeen
long weeks.

When was this song written? Since the “Cramer” in verse one is a reference to MG Myron C. Cramer, The Judge Advocate General between 1941 and 1945, and the “Miller” in verse three refers to Lieutenant Colonel Reginald C. Miller, who assumed command of TJAGSA in December 1944, it seems likely that this ditty was composed in early 1945. It would have been performed at social events at TJAGSA or at skits during a dining-in or similar event in Ann Arbor, Michigan. It is highly likely that this song was composed by candidates in TJAGSA’s Officer Candidate School (OCS), since it refers to the “gold bars” of a second lieutenant—the rank received by those who successfully

completed OCS.³ Sung to the tune of South Dakota Field Song, a South Dakota lawyer probably spearheaded the writing of the song. Other words and phrases are fairly easily discerned: “Ferry Field” is a multi-purpose sport stadium on the Michigan campus and seems to have been where judge advocate students conducted military drills; “Tappan Street” (actually Tappan Avenue) is the street adjacent to Michigan’s law school in Ann Arbor, where TJAGSA was then located; and “Pollock” and “Farr” refer to two members of the faculty and staff. Since TJAGSA closed in Michigan in February 1946, this song is largely forgotten today.

The Ballad of the SJA

(sung to the tune of Barry Sadler’s *Ballad of the Green Berets*)

(verse one)

Bringing justice to the groups
of America’s fighting troops
They tell the Generals yes or nay
Those clever men of the SJA

(chorus)

Coffee cups upon their desks
Trained for mental arabesques
They will distort what others say
Those clever men of the SJA

(verse two)

Trained in logic of a sort
‘Midst regulations they cavort
The Federal law is just child’s play
For those clever men of the SJA

(chorus)

(verse three)

In the office clients wait
While attorneys cogitate
Those lawyers sit, so calm and cool
Picking scores for the football pool

(chorus)

This song is clearly a riff on Barry Sadler’s popular *Ballad of the Green Berets*, which sold over one million copies and reached No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 in mid-1966.⁴ But while Sadler’s song was intensely patriotic and about an elite combat unit, the *Ballad of the SJA* could not have been more different, with its light-hearted focus on Army lawyers “manning” desks in an office and focused on coffee cups and football pools. Much has changed in the Corps since this song was written in the late 1960s. The emergence of operational law in the 1980s and 1990s meant that judge advocates were deploying with units on military operations and advising commanders in the field; the days of the work in an office in the division or corps “rear” were in the past. But, just as The Adjutant General’s Corps once had a ditty about its branch insignia that reflected a rear-echelon mentality (“Twinkle, twinkle little shield, save me from the battlefield”)⁵, so too Army lawyers in the Vietnam era saw themselves as attorneys who were far removed from the battlefield. Being a judge advocate ‘back in the day’ was almost exclusively about lawyering, with little thought given to soldiering.

Songs, tunes, and ditties will always be a part of the culture of our Corps, and future members of the Regiment will likewise look back at songs being written today to get an insight into what soldiering was like in the Corps in the early 21st century.

More historical information can be found at

The Judge Advocate General’s Corps
Regimental History Website

Dedicated to the brave men and women who have served our Corps with honor, dedication, and distinction.

<https://www.jagcnet.army.mil/History>

³ For more on the Officer Candidate School at The Judge Advocate General’s School, U.S. Army, see Fred L. Borch, *An Officer Candidate School for Army Lawyers? The JAG Corps Experience (1943–1946)*, ARMY LAW., July 2012, at 1–3.

⁴ Mar 5, 1966: Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler Hits #1 with “Ballad Of The Green Berets,” HISTORY, <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/staff-sergeant-barry-sadler-hits-1-with-quotballad-of-the-green-beretsquot> (last visited June 24, 2013).

⁵ MIL TERMS: AG, COMBAT, THE LITERARY EXPRESSION OF BATTLEFIELD TOUCHSTONES, <http://www.combat.ws/S4/MILTERMS/MT-A.HTM> (last visited July 15, 2013).