



Where Do We Find Such Men and Women?

The title of this article is a slightly edited sentence from James Michener's 1953 novella *The Bridges at Toko-Ri*. On December 17, 1777, General George Washington recruited former Prussian officer Baron Friedrich Wilhelm Von Steuben to strengthen professionalism in the Colonial Army. Von Steuben then wrote a manual outlining the duties and responsibilities of the noncommissioned officer (NCO). In essence, this hallmark document was the creation of the NCO in the U.S. Armed Forces. This article is about one of those NCOs.

To fully understand the significance of this event, we must go back 153

years to April of 1861. Our nation is divided and has fallen into civil war. James R. Tanner, a 17-year-old farm boy from Richmondville, New York, enlists in Company C of the 87th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment. Through his steadfast dedication and incredible performance, he is rapidly promoted to the rank of corporal. Over the course of the next 16 months, he would see action in nine major battle campaigns. His last battle would be the Second Battle of Bull Run in August of 1862. When a Confederate artillery shell hit his position, he sustained massive shrapnel wounds that required surgeons to amputate both of his legs below the knees.

Due to his injuries, Corporal Tanner was left behind when the Union Army moved on, and he was ultimately captured by Confederate forces. After being paroled, he spent weeks recovering before finally being sent home. His time in the Army was finally over. However, his commitment to service was not. Undaunted by the loss of his legs, he learned to walk with artificial limbs and navigated through life continuing to serve the Nation.

Corporal Tanner, as he would be known for the rest of his life, began his civil service as a deputy door keep for the New York State Assembly. During this time, he studied and became proficient

in stenography, a skill that would soon prove critical. On April 14, 1865, while working as a clerk and stenographer for the Ordnance Department in Washington, DC, Tanner was summoned to the bedside of the critically wounded President Abraham Lincoln. During the course of the night, he meticulously recorded the eyewitness accounts of the shooting of the President. Tanner was present in the room when Lincoln finally succumbed to his wounds.

Shortly afterward, Corporal Tanner left the Ordnance Department and began working as a committee clerk for the New York State Legislature. He later moved on to the New York Customs House and eventually was promoted to deputy customs collector. Tanner finished his civil service as the tax collector for Brooklyn and became an important public speaker on behalf of fellow veterans. Eventually Tanner opened a private legal practice dedicated to the defense of veterans. In April 1904, he was appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt as the Register of Wills for the District of Columbia, a position he held until his death in 1927.

Though employed in a full-time capacity, it was not enough. Corporal Tanner did not just continue to serve his nation through civil service; he dedicated much of his time to various veteran organizations. Tanner served as a member of the Grand Army of the Republic, an association for Union Army veterans. He was elected as the commander for the New York chapter and ultimately served as national commander. He was also a member of the Union Veteran Legion and went on to serve as its national commander as well. While a serving member of the Grand Army of the Republic, Tanner was the driving force behind the establishment of a Soldier's Home in Bath, New York, and later, a Confederate veteran's home in Richmond, Virginia.

Around this same time, Tanner became an active member of the newly founded American Red Cross. His efforts saw him elected to the board of directors. Through his tenacity and hard work, Tanner would champion the Red Cross in its reorganization and ultimately to a



(Photo courtesy of Michael R. Patterson)

Congressional Charter. Tanner lived a remarkable life, and upon his death in 1927 was buried in Arlington National Cemetery, just a few yards from the Old Amphitheater.

Though this article highlights Corporal Tanner in particular, it is important for the reader to know a little about the Old Amphitheater. It was erected in 1873 to serve as a location for patriotic meetings in celebration of Decoration Day (later renamed Memorial Day), which had been established in 1868. The amphitheater was first used on May 30, 1873, and remained in use until the early 1900s when it became evident that the popularity of the events dictated that a new, larger venue was needed. In 1920, the current Memorial Amphitheater was christened, and the original structure became informally known as the Old Amphitheater.

Ninety-four years after assuming the *Old* moniker, the amphitheater was formally renamed in recognition of a Civil War veteran who spent his life dedicated to civil service and advocating for his fellow veterans. This Soldier can be described as the epitome of professionalism, courage, patriotism, and more of what our current NCO corps traditionally represents: leadership, selfless sacrifice, and a lifelong commitment to the Nation. The amphitheater began its service as a gathering place for the remembrance of the selfless actions and honorable deeds of all our veterans. Who qualifies more than Corporal James Tanner, U.S. Army, to represent our veterans? In an effort

to fully recognize the actions and service of Corporal Tanner, the leadership of Arlington National Cemetery proudly renamed the “Old” Amphitheater as the James Tanner Amphitheater on May 30, 2014.

Stop, if only for a moment, and remember those whose footsteps we have followed, those who dedicated their lives to service. Consider, too, the title of this article. It is a slightly edited sentence from James Michener’s 1953 novella *The Bridges at Toko-Ri*. In a 1982 radio address, President Ronald Regan asked this same question and answered it thus: “we find [such men and women] where we’ve always found them. They are the product of the freest society man has ever known. They make a commitment to the military—make it freely, because the birthright we share as Americans is worth defending.” Next Memorial Day, visit the James Tanner Amphitheater at Arlington in honor of all those noncommissioned officers who have served the greatest fighting force in the world. JFQ

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