



Cadet Gray for 3 Sep 2009

On 4 September 1816, the use of gray cloth in place of blue was authorized for cadet uniforms at West Point. Legend has it that gray was selected to honor the Soldiers that BG Winfield Scott led to victory against British regulars at the Battle of Chippawa, NY, on 5 July 1814. Scott's regulars wore gray because of a shortage of blue cloth and the desire to present a uniform appearance. In this case, however, truth is not stranger than fiction. West Point merely adopted the gray cloth because it was less expensive and wore well. Had this not happened, presumably there now would be no legendary Long Gray Line in song and story. And thereby hangs a tale.

The phrase, "the long gray line," of course, comes from a line in "The Corps." As many may recall, the words to The Corps were written as a poem by West Point Chaplain, later Bishop, Herbert Shipman and reportedly read from the pulpit at the Baccalaureate Service for the Centennial Class of 1902. The poem then re-appeared in print in the *Howitzer* of the Class of 1904, at the end of a toast presented at dinner on 1 January 1904 by CDT Robert P. Harbold. Music by the Cadet Chapel organist and choirmaster, W. Franke Harling, was added later, especially so that the poem might be sung at the closing of the Old Cadet Chapel on 12 June 1910. The Corps became a West Point tradition after being performed at the Baccalaureate Service for the Class of 1911. West Point historian George Pappas '44 has found no earlier mention of the phrase "the long gray line." Thus it is a relatively new thing, being merely 107 years old at an academy twice as old. And let us not forget that there was a short blue line, from 1802 to 1816, not that anyone bothered to describe it as such.

But if West Pointers are to be part of a long gray line, when does membership begin? Efforts to fix membership on a specific cadet event, such as graduation, recognition or the taking of the cadet oath are doomed to failure, since many cadet traditions did not come into being until decades or longer after the founding of the academy. To even speak of a long line of any shade or hue would have been ridiculous on 12 October 1802, when Swift and Levy were the first to be commissioned from the fledgling academy. The same may be said for the contentious era that found Partridge, Class of 1806, academic professor and often acting superintendent, seeking dissolution of the school. Likewise when Congressmen like Davy Crockett and others called for the same on the basis of elitism. Riding a crest of popularity after the War with Mexico, West Point again was questioned, and then praised, during the Civil War.

Perhaps the Centennial of 1902 was the first time that we could be said to have established a significant history, even with only 4,121 graduates on the rolls. By that time, the concept of a graduation parade had been established; diplomas were issued along with commissions (but degrees were not conferred), oaths were sworn by cadets, and recognition was begun about this time, as well as some form of ceremony that could be construed as an acceptance parade for the incoming class of plebes. Although there are several words in *The Corps* that could be interpreted as suggesting that one may not join the Long Gray Line until death ("ghostly assemblage," "long dead" and "years of a century told"), other words clearly indicate that cadets—at least those about to graduate—are living members of the line, along with all other graduates, living and dead. Although the singing of *The Corps* at the closing of the Old Cadet Chapel conveys a sense of history, including the ultimate sacrifices made by early graduates, the original purpose of Shipman's poem was to celebrate the graduation of the Centennial Class of 1902, men wearing gray now but about to enter the Army. Certainly, in 1902, no active duty soldiers wore gray, so the symbolism undoubtedly means those who have worn gray as cadets, although they later wear other uniforms. The question still remains: when does a cadet join the long gray line?

Attempts to select a specific event fail because virtually no key events extend back to 1802—not even the gray uniform. Even accepting 1902 as the date from which traditions are to be measured is unsatisfactory to many. It is logical but unsatisfactory nonetheless. Let us sum up what is certain. Graduates are members of the Long Gray Line, even though they no longer wear gray. One does not have to die to become a member, but graduation is certainly a key factor. Cadets have to be members because they are the beginning of the line—and the only members who do wear gray. But exactly when do they achieve this membership? May I suggest to you that the exact time varies among individuals—and is forfeitable?

Some new cadets arguably join the Long Gray Line immediately upon entering the academy. Sons and daughters of graduates, or those otherwise influenced by the service of relatives or friends, imbued with the spirit of Duty, Honor, Country, they are living extensions of their role models. If they fail to graduate, however, they forfeit that membership—regardless of how strongly they may feel to the contrary—although this remains a debatable area in cases of continued exemplary military or other national service. Cadets who die while at the academy are presumed to join the "ghostly assemblage" directly, although in some individual cases that may be a refutable presumption. For many cadets, the relatively new tradition of the affirmation ceremony at the beginning of second class academics "seals the deal," although graduation is still required. Finally, those who graduate are bona fide members of the Long Gray Line, save those few who bring discredit upon themselves and the profession of arms by subsequent deeds.

Many only grow in stature by deeds of physical and moral courage and/or quiet commitment to principal in military and civilian life. Others diminish somewhat in stature; a very few forfeit all right to membership. Further deponent sayeth not.

In the history of our country, 3 September is a significant date. In 1777, the "Stars and Stripes" flew for the first time in battle, near Cooch's Bridge, MD. In 1783, the United States, Great Britain, France and Spain signed the Treaty of Paris that granted independence to the 13 British Colonies in North America.

Your humble servant, J. Phoenix, Esquire

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