The Ross Volunteers

By James H. Willbanks '69

The Ross Volunteers is one of the oldest active student organizations in the state of Texas and the oldest honor guard or drill team of its kind in the state. The unit was formed in late 1887 as an honor guard made up of upperclassmen that would serve as a ceremonial unit. It was first named the Scott Guards, in honor of the college business manager at the time, Colonel Thomas Scott. They soon became known as the "Scott volunteers." They drilled in white duck uniforms and pith helmets with spikes on the crown.

The unit made its first public appearance in June 1888 to honor the visit of Lawrence Sullivan Ross, then serving as the 19th governor of Texas. After leaving office, Ross became the president of A&M and the name of the Scott Guards was changed to the "Ross Volunteers." Upon Ross' death in 1898, the name of the unit was subsequently changed to reflect each new administration that followed. The RVs were known as the Foster Guards during the tenure of Lafayette L. Foster from 1898-1901 and the Houston Rifles during the tenure of David F. Houston from 1902 to 1905.

When Dr. Henry H. Harrington, son-in-law of Ross, assumed the presidency in 1905, he requested that the name of the unit be permanently changed to the "Ross Volunteers" to honor late president who is remembered for his leadership that saved the college from it near closure when Ross forced state attention and much-needed funding. From that time forward, Ross Volunteers became the permanent name for the ceremonial unit.

For most of its history, membership in the Ross Volunteers was limited to juniors and seniors, but during World War I, some nonmilitary students and a few sophomores were admitted. Most notably, J. V. "Pinky" Wilson was admitted as a sophomore in late 1916; he penned the lyrics of the "Aggie War Hymn" while sitting in a trench during a battle in French in 1918.

With the coming of World War II, the RV company was disbanded 1942 for the duration of the war. The Ross Volunteers were reactivated in 1948 by Colonel Guy S. Meloy, Jr., Commandant of Cadets from 1946-48.

Cadets are chosen for the company on a basis of honor, humility, and character. Each fall, approximately 72 top junior Cadets are selected and inducted into the company by the RV seniors. Once the juniors are inducted into the company, they are joined by 35 seniors holding leadership positions. The fall of 1985 marked the first time women cadets were selected for membership in the Ross Volunteer Company.

Since its establishment, the Ross Volunteer company has continued to serve as the honor guard for the governor of Texas and acts as the official escort for the inauguration of the governor every four years. In January 1931, despite a campus-wide influenza epidemic that placed more than 400 cadets in the hospital, the RVs escorted newly elected Texas governor Miriam A. "Ma" Ferguson to her inauguration in Austin. In addition to its duties in support of the Texas governor, the company also serves as the official escort of his Majesty King Rex at the Mardi Gras parade in New Orleans.

On campus, the RV company provides a salute platoon that performs 3-volley, 21-gun salutes at Texas A&M's Silver Taps ceremonies remembering fallen students. The company also serves at the annual Aggie Muster on campus, as well as other ceremonial occasions throughout the academic year, both on and off campus.

Since the earliest days on campus, the Ross Volunteers have been the embodiment of Texas A&M and the Aggie Spirit. That is true today and will be so long into the future.