

"Bivouac of the Dead"
A 19th Century Poem by Theodore O'Hara
by Rich Thompson©



"Bivouac of the Dead" Memorial Tablets
Finn's Point National Cemetery

On a quiet day and with a little imagination you can almost hear the cries of agony from the soldiers who were once imprisoned in the fort across the bay. The voices are still now. The soldiers rest in peace in this old cemetery.

Exploring the estuaries of southern New Jersey, I came upon the small cemetery on a quiet summer day. Like my Dad, I like to explore old cemeteries and seek out the stories that the tombstones tell. No one living now remembers the characters, but in their day they laughed as children, grew and loved, had families, enjoyed the hearth in winter, labored in fields and factories, fought for freedom in forgotten battles, lived out their lives and in time died.

I followed the lane off the main road about a half mile to a gate and plaque that read 'Finn's Point National Cemetery'. It was a small, shaded burial ground of only several acres and neatly kept. I was surprised that it was a national cemetery. I had the impression that military cemeteries

were all vast green spaces with row upon row of white markers naming those fallen in battle.

A low stone wall surrounded the cemetery. The sacred place was watched over by a 19th Century mansard roof administration building. No one was there. The American flag hung quietly in the still summer air. There weren't a lot of markers, but at the base of one memorial spire many small flags of the Confederate States of America caught my attention and nearby in a lonely corner were small white stones marking the graves of about a dozen German soldiers. Why were these soldiers buried in a field so far from home?

Finn's Point was pressed into service as a soldiers' burial ground in 1863 during the Civil War when as many as 12,500 Confederate soldiers were confined as prisoners of war at Fort Delaware out on Pea Patch Island. Historical records indicate that there are nearly 3,000 Confederate soldiers and civilian detainees buried in an area near the monument. The dead were buried in wooden coffins stacked three to four deep in the trenches. Designated as a National Cemetery in 1875, the cemetery also contains the remains of Union soldiers and other American soldiers from the Civil War through the Vietnam War. The 13 German POW's from WW II died while prisoners at Fort Dix, New Jersey.

The graves were unusual but so was the poem on the cast iron tablets located between the Confederate burial trenches and the administration building. On seven iron tablets were seven quatrains from an elegy to the dead. The melancholy verses capture the reader's heart as they describe the gut-wrenching fear of the soldier facing the next day's battle, his concern for family back home, the blare of the bugle, the rattle of the drums, the shouts of the men, the frightening thud of the cannon, and finally the ultimate silence of the grave. The most quoted stanza reads:

On fame's eternal camping-ground,
Their silent tents are spread,
And glory guards with solemn round
The bivouac of the dead.

The last line of the stanza is the poem's title. Verses from the poem appear at one of the gates to Arlington National Cemetery, at Antietam and at other national cemeteries across the United States.

**Seven Quatrains from Theodore O'Hara's Elegiac Poem
Placed at the end of the Confederate Burial Trenches
Finn's Point National Cemetery circa 1885**

Rest on embalmed and sainted dead,
Dear as the blood ye gave.
No impious footstep here shall tread
The herbage of your grave.

On fame's eternal camping-ground,
Their silent tents are spread,
And glory guards with solemn round
The bivouac of the dead.

No rumor of the foe's advance
Now sweeps upon the wind,
No troubled thought at midnight haunts
Of loved ones left behind.

No vision of the morrow's strife
The warrior's dream alarms.
No braying horn nor screaming fife
At dawn shall call to arms.

The neighing troop, the flashing blade,
The bugle's stirring blast,
The charge, the dreadful cannonade,
The din and shout are past.

Your own proud land's heroic soil
Must be your fitter grave;
She claims from war his richest spoil,
The ashes of the brave.

The muffled drum's sad roll has beat
The soldier's last tattoo.
No more on life's parade shall meet
The brave and fallen few.

The iron plaques at the national cemeteries do not however name any author. A common explanation is that because the poet served in the Confederate army as a colonel in command of the 12th Alabama Infantry regiment, it seemed inappropriate after the northern victory to record his name in cemeteries occupied by Union dead. The poet-soldier, Theodore O'Hara, was a native son of Kentucky born to an Irish-Catholic family in 1820. He actually wrote "Bivouac of the Dead" nearly two decades before the Civil War while an officer in the United States Army during the Mexican War. He wrote the elegy in memory of soldiers who fell during the Battle of Buena Vista in northern Mexico in 1847 against troops led by General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, who in March 1836 had led the attack on the Texans at the Alamo. Between the wars, he wrote and worked as an editor for several southern newspapers. Described as a handsome bachelor, he suffered bouts of depression and alcohol and died after the end of the Civil War at the young age of 47.

Although the author got little public recognition, the poem became popular and was often quoted and its lines frequently inscribed on battlefield memorials for the remainder of the 19th Century. In the last century, the poem became less popular.

The iron tablets with the verses from 'Bivouac of the Dead' were erected at Finn's Point around 1885. Many of the iron tablets in other national cemeteries were removed in the 1920s and 30s, but verses appear at 14 other national cemeteries across the nation in addition to Arlington and Antietam. The Department of Veterans Affairs has recently approved a plan to place new cast-aluminum tablets featuring verses from the elegy in all national cemeteries.

The words of a little known poet-soldier reveal the heartrending emotions of men in battle. They also speak about the eventual peace of the grave that comes after all the battles have been fought. Finn's Point tells that story well with a poignant reminder that the anguish of all young soldiers transcends the centuries and the borders of nations.

Editor's Note: Rich Thompson is a resident of Harleysville, Pennsylvania and Director of Development for the Indian Creek Foundation, an organization which provides support to people with developmental disabilities. While not a Civil War "buff" per se, Rich is interested in history and was especially intrigued with Finn's Point National Cemetery. The Department of Veterans Affairs National Cemetery website was the source of much of the historical background for this article.