

## IN TIME: THE RISE, DECLINE, AND REBIRTH OF THE CULLEN RIFLES

By James Wang

The sound of hands clapping the wooden stocks of 1903 Springfield rifles echoed loudly across the field as a crowd of Houston Cougars football fans watched. Thirty young men, all dressed in their pink and green military dress uniforms, were executing the Queen Anne's Drill—a complex rifle maneuver that requires high levels of discipline and precision to perform correctly. At the end of the drill, each man planted his rifle butt-first into the field and the crowd erupted into applause. The stadium lights shined down on each individual's bowed head, glistening off their chrome-plated helmets. These men are hallowed members of the famed Cullen Rifles, a once time-honored tradition at the University of Houston.

For such a highly decorated tradition at the university, the history of the Cullen Rifles is very poorly documented. Deep within the M. D. Anderson Library archives, only decades-old pictures from past college yearbooks remain to chronicle the group's history. What can be gathered, however, is that the Rifles were a modern day praetorian guard and once served as color guards to the President of the United States, all the while remaining undefeated as a competitive drill team throughout the southwestern United States, representing discipline, precision, and honor for the Houston Corps of Cadets, the university's Army ROTC program.

The Houston Corps of Cadets and the Cullen Rifles were both established in 1948. Created as one of many extracurricular activities offered to the members of the Houston Corps of Cadets, the Cullen Rifles were named after university benefactor Hugh Roy Cullen in recognition of his \$88 million in donations. The Rifles were "equipped with silver helmets and chrome-plated 1903 Springfield rifles" with which they proudly marched in various "parades and special events."<sup>1</sup> These events included home football games, Armistice Day

and Mardi Gras parades, and whatever else the university chancellor, mayor, or President of the United States asked them to do in Houston.

The Rifles enjoyed accolades and recognition from the city and the student community. Starting from their inception through the 1950s, the *Houstonian* yearbook constantly featured the Rifles, showering them with flattering phrases depicting them as a "crack drill team well known to Houstonians." The 1951 *Houstonian* described the Rifles as already enjoying the distinction of being "one of the most outstanding marching units in the Southwest," just three years after its founding.<sup>2</sup> According to former Cullen Rifle, William "Bill" Taylor, one would have been hard-pressed at the time to find anyone on campus that "didn't know the Cullen Rifles."

Aside from its competitive successes, the Rifles's campus fame can be attributed to a few special cosmetic features. Their distinctive chrome helmets made them easily recognizable at special events and drill ceremonies. On campus, through the 1950s, Cullen Rifles members typically dressed like their counterparts in the Houston Corps of Cadets with a few unique characteristics. According to Taylor, during the summer and fall, their uniform consisted of a military top, khaki pants with a red stripe down the side, of their "bloused pants," and "straight military dress shoes with the... leggings." In the winter, they wore the "pinks and greens, which was then the standard officer's Army uniform." While all cadets wore the UH insignia on the left sleeve of their uniform, the right side of the Rifles's uniform featured a cougar's head emblazoned on a shield, setting them apart. They also wore a distinctive cord, "which was red in the khaki uniform and white in the winter uniform."<sup>3</sup>

Aside from the uniform, Rifle members were like any other ROTC cadet. Taylor recalls



*The distinctive uniforms of the Cullen Rifles included chrome-plated helmets and the Cullen Rifle patch on the shoulders. This member of the Rifles is wearing the winter "pinks and greens" uniform worn by contemporary officers of the United States Army. Circa 1950s.*

All photos courtesy of the Digital Library, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries, unless otherwise noted.



*Shown here in downtown Houston in 1952, the Cullen Rifles marched in various parades during their existence, including the Armistice and Veterans Day parades and at the New Orleans Mardi Gras parade.*

that in the early- to mid-1950s, physical training was not a mandatory morning activity in a cadet's life, as one might assume of a military unit, because the cadets were expected to stay in shape on their own. Instead, the cadets and the Rifles began their mornings like any other student—going to classes with freedom in between to do as they pleased. By virtue of being a part of the Rifles, though, they had an activity added to their agenda. "Every morning at seven o'clock," the Rifles met to rehearse their drills and maneuvers for upcoming events. These rehearsals proved essential to refining rifle handling skills into an art form.

One particular maneuver they performed, explained by Taylor, was the "Queen Anne's Drill." Performed with the standard Cullen Rifle platoon formation—three squads deep, with ten men in each squad—the maneuver required the platoon to line up on a football field, from one thirty yard line to the next, and perform "various manual arms movements," one after another, creating a ripple effect. After this, they performed the "Queen Anne's Salute," which began at the position of "Right Shoulder, Arms" and then featured each Rifle flipping his weapon off his shoulder. The Rifles assumed a kneeling position, with their heads bowed down and the rifle planted into the ground beside them at a forty five degree angle.

This formation was followed by the "Five Sixes to the Wind" in which the platoon split the unit in half and marched off in opposite directions—"one would go to one side of the field, one to the other side of the field." The units divided even further into their squad formations and then broke off in four different directions. The Rifles did maneuvers in their split formations and then reassembled as one platoon.<sup>4</sup>

The Rifles performed these drills at Houston Cougar football games and numerous local events such as the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, or anywhere their presence was requested. Their dedication to their craft enabled them to win awards, beating teams within their conference, including the Ross Volunteers of Texas A&M. As Taylor noted with unsuppressed glee, the Rifles excelled at beating Texas A&M's rival drill team, the Aggies' Fish drill team in particular, who the Rifles reportedly "beat... like a drum pretty regularly."<sup>5</sup>

While their rifle drill maneuvers were far from traditional marching, the Rifles did march in major parades. They participated in the annual Mardi Gras Parade in New Orleans and the local Armistice Day and, later, Veterans Day parades, in addition to receiving invitations to participate in parades in cities across the nation.

The Rifles's greatest distinction, however, was serving as the Honor Guard for President Dwight D. Eisenhower during his presidential visits to Houston. The Rifles did not serve solely as a color guard and escort because at that time, "there were virtually no Secret Service agents," according to Taylor. "It was literally just [the Rifles]" protecting the President of the United States, who came to Houston for some matter of business and was often found speaking with Hugh Roy Cullen and other influential businessmen. The Rifles followed Eisenhower from his arrival in Houston to his departure and were privileged to stand by his side during campaign stops or whatever galas the president attended.<sup>6</sup> The Rifles moved in high circles, and the future looked bright.

Having enjoyed fame in its early years, the Rifles experienced an unexpected decline in popularity and coverage in the 1960s followed by rebranding. The decline began with

the 1960 *Houstonian*. Just like years past, ROTC received a multi-page spread chronicling the various company members, but the Cullen Rifles were nowhere to be found.

From there, the blackout spread. Rather than including panoramic photos of the companies, the regimental band with the Rifles, and the military ball, the 1965 yearbook allotted only three pages to ROTC.<sup>7</sup> While the reason for the decline in coverage is unclear, it might have been due to the growing counterculture movement and anti-military sentiments of the times.

Even though ROTC had less coverage in the yearbook, the program and the Rifles continued to thrive as evidenced by photographs depicting cadets in full regalia marching in parades and the continued practice of the Final Review, which can only be held by larger units. Eventually, ROTC's competitive rifle marksmanship team and civilians from the UH varsity rifle team became associated with the Cullen Rifles name in the *Houstonian*. The drill team was not mentioned.

This rebranding allowed the precision-based drill team to branch out as a national top-tier rifle team, however, the Rifles still lacked the media recognition they previously received, culminating with the loss of the "Cullen Rifles" name. The *Houstonian* referred to them generically as the "rifle team" or the "University of Houston rifle team." Nevertheless, the Rifles won first place at the NRA International meet in 1965 and the 4<sup>th</sup> Army Southeastern Conference in 1966. As the UH varsity rifle team, members of the Rifles finished the 1966 season with ten first place victories and two second place victories resulting in a win at the Southwest Rifle Association championship. That same year, Cadet Jesse Reynolds became "UH's first All-American marksman."<sup>8</sup>

The 1967 *Houstonian* officially dropped the "Cullen" name from the Rifles and Houston ROTC cadets. Still wearing the characteristic silver helmets and uniforms, they were now called the Cougar Rifles, complete with a new guidon bearing

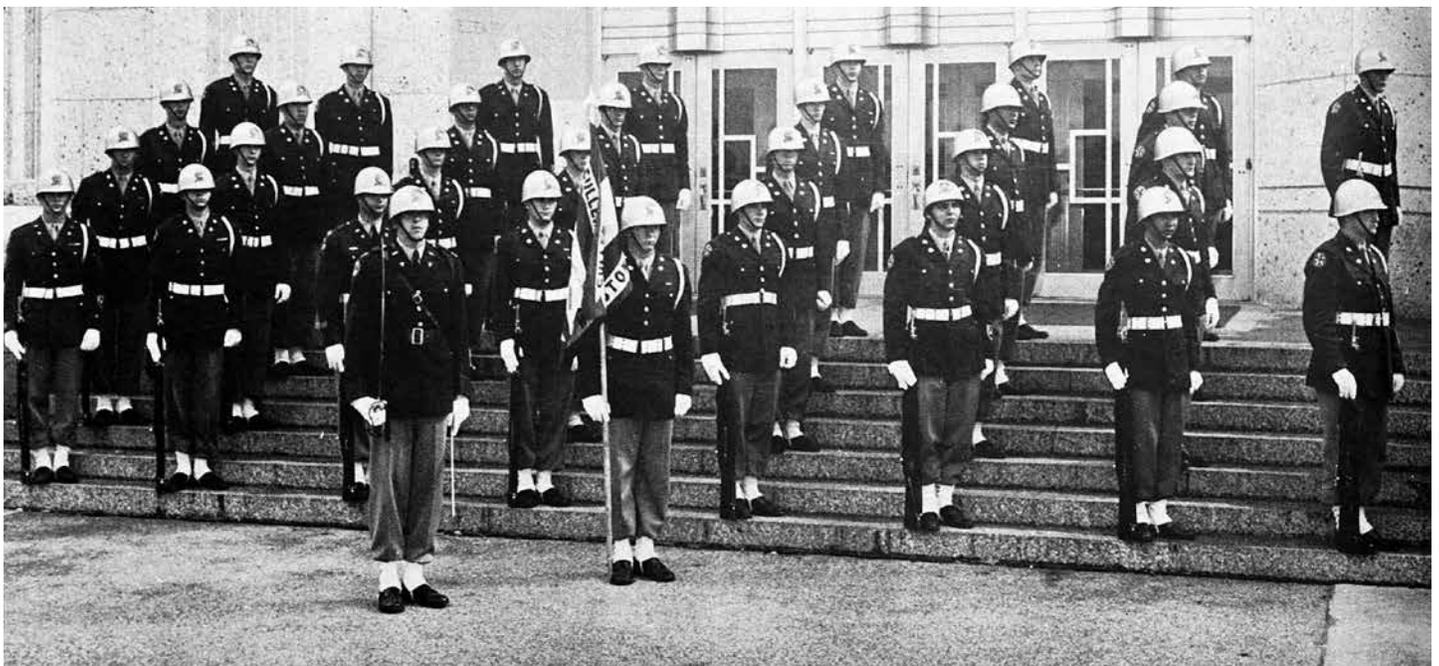
a new emblem. That year the Cougar Rifles "rated number one among the drill teams of non-compulsory military colleges in the state of Texas."<sup>9</sup> In 1967, it placed second nationally and first overall in the "big 4th Army, Southwest Association, Oklahoma Invitational and Central Texas championships" as well as the NRA sectional meet, "scoring just 13 points below the national record." It marked the third year in a row that the Rifles "dominated the Southwest [Association]."<sup>10</sup>

As it turned out, the Cougar Rifles name did not catch on as widely as the Cullen Rifles had, and by 1970, the *Houstonian* referred to them simply as the ROTC rifle team. Yet, the Rifles continued to strive towards excellence, still marching in city parades and racking up victories as an undefeated competitive shooting team.<sup>11</sup>

Shooting competition victories alone could not sustain the Cullen Rifles, however. With anti-war sentiment continuing to grow, there were more uniformed war protesters on campus than cadets. The Houston ROTC experienced a sharp decline in membership and popularity on campus. In a decade when veterans returning from Vietnam were spat on and called baby killers and child murderers, it was a bad time to be an American serviceman, much less a cadet on a liberal college campus.<sup>12</sup>

According to Taylor, who served in the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War years, few students were willing to be ridiculed and spat upon by their classmates for wanting to serve their country. As enrollment numbers dropped, the Cullen Rifles found themselves "pressed to function with less than about thirty" cadets, and as an extracurricular activity, they took a back seat to the Army's main mission of developing officers to lead troops into combat.<sup>13</sup>

Existing documentation, or rather the disheartening lack thereof, seems to further confirm that the final death knell of the Rifles was the decline of ROTC as a result of anti-war sentiments. Beginning in 1972, the *Houstonian* had very few references at all to the ROTC program, much less of the



The 1955 Cullen Rifles, led by Cadet First Lieutenant William "Bill" Taylor, stand in formation on the steps of the Ezekiel Cullen Building, a favorite place for members of the Rifles to have photos taken for the *Houstonian* yearbook.



*In September 2013, the Cullen Rifles were re-established thanks to a generous donation from Lillie Robertson, granddaughter of Hugh Roy Cullen.*  
Photo courtesy of UH Army ROTC.

Rifles who, with their precision marching and rifle marksmanship, must have epitomized the goose-stepping imperialism that anti-war student protestors now associated with their country. The blackout from the *Houstonian* ended in 1975, the same year that the Vietnam War ended.

Houston ROTC annual field training briefly returned to the campus spotlight in the 1975 *Houstonian*. Not until 1983 did ROTC begin to fully rebound from “years of negative sentiments” and by then, the damage had already been done.<sup>14</sup> In the years between ROTC’s sudden disappearance from campus life and its equally sudden resurgence, no mention of the Cullen or Cougar Rifles as a marching, drilling, or shooting team exists. The Rifles became a casualty of the Vietnam War, and like many of those casualties, the exact date of death is difficult to discern. It appeared that the Rifles were gone for good, but appearances can be deceiving.

Donations from Lillie Robertson, granddaughter of Hugh Roy Cullen, made it possible to re-establish the Cullen Rifles on September 17, 2013. These donations included fourteen new M4 rifles, a gift befitting the modern warrior. The revival became part of “a new expansion phase for the UH Battalion” as the ROTC sought to return to its earlier numbers and strength. According to then-battalion commander Lieutenant Colonel Michael Smith, the new Rifles were intended to serve as a “key recruiting and retention tool” for the battalion, and as another front for the university to compete with other schools in the NCAA.<sup>15</sup> However, an unexpected government shutdown in October 2013, Lieutenant Colonel Smith’s retirement, other personnel changes, and administrative difficulties left the Rifles at risk of disappearing into the realm of forgotten history again.

In the fall of 2015, the Rifles’s rebirth began when the ROTC program, now led by Lieutenant Colonel Neil Chaffee, reorganized the Cullen Rifles into a sub-organization within the program. The most athletic, tactically knowledgeable, and academically skilled cadets were hand-selected to join this new generation of Rifles who were no longer simply drill and ceremony professionals or expert marksmen.

For the last five years, U.S. Army Cadet Command has held Ranger Challenge, a national competition among ROTC programs that is regarded among cadets as the “varsity sport” of ROTC. Named after the U.S. Army Rangers special operations unit, annual competitions are held within each local brigade. They subject cadets to a rigorous thirty-six-hour gauntlet of events such as a ten-kilometer ruck march, nighttime land navigation, and combat skill proficiency tests.<sup>16</sup> With their return, the Cullen Rifles took the reins as the premier competitive team for Houston ROTC.

The ROTC cadets themselves, said Chaffee, chose to resurrect the Cullen Rifles by taking the Houston Battalion Army ROTC Ranger Challenge team, which was already a highly successful team on its own, and transforming it into the Rifles to “[preserve] the legacy of the Cullen Rifles while modernizing the role, function and charter for the team.” This modernized the exhibition marksmanship and drill team iterations of the Rifles of yesteryear into the hard-hitting, fast thinking warrior leaders the Army needs today. This fundamental shift changed how the Rifles trained and the challenges they faced.

According to Cadet Edgar Orellana, the 2015-2016 commanding officer of the Cullen Rifles, today’s Rifles redirect the discipline and dedication it took to become a Rifle in the past. Instead of the voluntary physical training and rifle drills of the 1950s Corp of Cadets, these modern Rifles are up at 6:00 a.m., conducting their physical exercise with an intensity few can match, before most other cadets



*The 1966 ROTC rifle team poses with the University of Houston’s varsity rifle team. While the Cullen Rifles began as a precision drill team, the name became associated with the two award-winning rifle teams, and the Cullen Rifles began to be called the Cougar Rifles. Featured in this photo is UH’s first all-American marksman, Jesse Reynolds (center front).*

present for regular formation. Instead of the basic tactical lessons, the Rifles receive more in-depth, hands-on training, occasionally using the M4 rifles gifted to them by Lillie Robertson to hone their marksmanship.

As the new face of the Cullen Rifles, these cadets began by training for one thing—their official debut at Cadet Command 5th Brigade’s Fifth Annual Ranger Challenge Competition on October 16, 2015. The Cullen Rifles sent nine of their most elite members, and they placed in almost every category by taking third place in casualty evacuation and the ruck march, second in one-rope bridge execution, and first place in communications and the hand grenade assault course.

Even though the major competition is over, the Cullen Rifles continue to train for next year. Plus, the organization has a reputation to live up to. The mission statement says it all:

**Be the standard for which all cadets should strive to be. Leading in all aspects**

**Physical Training, Academics, Community Service, and Military discipline. While maintaining the demeanor, respect and attitude of a silent professional.**<sup>17</sup>

With these core values, the Rifles are high performance athletes and future military leaders. Each Rifle is expected to be an exemplary student and outstanding member of the community. According to Cadet Orellana, in addition to intense PT and battle drills, the Rifles also reach out to local disadvantaged youths around the University of Houston area. On a recent trip to Waltrip High School, the Rifles spoke to JROTC cadets about applying for college, receiving good grades, and potentially joining the Rifles’s ranks in the UH ROTC program.

Today’s Rifles may look and train differently than their predecessors, but the spirit remains. Their first year back has already garnered excitement among cadets and other students on campus. “I’m starting to hear more and more people start to wonder, ‘Hey, who are those guys in uniform? Are those cadets?’” said Orellana. “And I’m just thinking, wow, four, five years ago, nobody even knew there was an ROTC program on campus. Now?”

Now, the Cullen Rifles are preparing to send off a new generation of senior cadets into the Army as officers and welcome a new generation of Rifles into the fold as spring graduations and commissioning approach. “Now, I hope that the Cullen Rifles become the face of the new program,” remarked Orellana hopefully.

“I remain exceptionally proud of the cadets as they take the Cullen Rifles into the future,” said Chaffee. “They had a guidon and unit T-shirts made to outwardly show their pride. They literally carried the Cullen Rifles legacy and name with them during each Ranger Challenge event and competition this year.” While the future will hold challenges for the Rifles and certainly more victories, everyone involved is optimistic that the number of cadets will grow and, with that, the possibility of an increased size in the team, making select drill and ceremony and competition shooting events possible again.

Until then, the Rifles must be content with its recent tri-



*Students protest the Vietnam War outside of the University of Houston administration building. Rising anti-war sentiments along with the counterculture movement of the 1960s helped to marginalize the Cullen Rifles’s role as a campus tradition. Enrollment numbers for the Houston ROTC dropped dramatically and the Cullen Rifles eventually disappeared.*

umphs and resurrection. From the atmospheric highs of the 1950s to pitch-black obscurity in the 1970s, today’s chapter of the Rifles ends with a high note. While the past proves that nothing is certain, it is with great hope that the Rifles’ mission and its creed are carried onwards with them.

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### **The Cullen Rifles Creed**

As a Cullen Rifle I will endeavor to be the standard for which all cadets should strive to be.

Leading in all aspects including Physical Training, Academics, and Community Service.

While maintaining the demeanor, respect and attitude of a silent professional.

As a Cullen Rifle, Integrity will be the foundation on which I am built.

Service will be the mission that I will pursue. Discipline will be the path on which I walk,

And Honor will be the Compass guiding my way.

I will face these labors with Character, taking full responsibility for my actions.

Never, failing my school, unit or fellow cadet.

This is what I strive to be, this is what I am. I am a Cullen Rifle.<sup>18</sup>