

Attention

by Chuck Sweetman

“After the performance of *Attention*, unit commanders immediately face about and command their units.”
—U.S. Army Band “Ceremonial Music Guide”

Memorial Day morning, and I am listening
to the U.S. Army’s Ceremonial Music Playlist
and reading their excellent guide to it.

It’s the army, so naturally the guide weaves
a spell of protocol and significance
around the musical pieces and their combinations.

“*Four Ruffles and Flourishes* followed by
the *General's March* is used to provide
musical honors to (four-star) Generals,”

Senior civilian officials can merit the grandioso
strain from *The Stars and Stripes Forever*,
to go with their ruffles and flourishes, whereas

honors to the Vice President would add *Hail
Columbia*. And if you’re not in the band
and lack rank to salute, there’s something

for you, too. Remove your hat, “place the right
hand over the heart and stand at attention.”

I think of that ensign on the memorial
above the USS Arizona in Pearl Harbor
who steadily reminded people engaged
audibly elsewhere to please be respectful.
Remember, he reminded, this is a grave
site over which we are standing.
It was personal. It was painful. And still
he fielded our questions about how it all
happened that morning to so many
that we’d end up drawn here these years later.

Musical honors to you, midshipman,
and—if protocol allows—an additional
solemn strain of some kind.

Remembrance is hard, even in graveyards.
Even here, listening to instruments play
pieces handed down ceremony after
ceremony, year after year. Hot pavement,
glistening ponchos, chilly morning bugle calls
lingering in the charged air.

The shortest ceremonial song is *Attention*,
which I hummed as a focusing exercise.

Its four notes and seconds of quiet
suggest the act of gathering slack, summoning
senses to the promise of new information,
instruction, and or experiences—
including the active duty of commemoration.

Ruffles and flourishes on those who served.

Chuck Sweetman is a senior editor for *december Magazine*. His essays, stories, reviews, and poems have appeared in such places as *Verse Daily*, *Brilliant Corners*, *River Styx*, *Revel*, *Poet Lore*, *Black Warrior Review*, and *Notre Dame Review*. In addition to chapbooks, he is the author of a book of poems *Enterprise, Inc.* (Dream Horse Press 2008).