

The Military Order of Saint Barbara and the Artillery Order of Molly Pitcher

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Introduction

The Military Order of St. Barbara and the Artillery Order of Molly Pitcher are fraternal orders associated with artillery sponsored by the United States Field Artillery Association, which is headquartered at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Fort Sill is the artillery center for the U.S. Army and home to the Field Artillery School.

Beginning with the Military Order of Saint Barbara, this article will briefly explain each order, examine the life of the namesakes of the two orders and its relationship to artillery, and describe the insignia of the orders. The section pertaining to the Military Order of Saint Barbara also includes a short history of this order.

The Military Order of Saint Barbara

“Artillery lends dignity to what might otherwise be a vulgar brawl.”

Artilleryman’s saying

The Military Order of Saint Barbara is one in a succession of organizations of artillerymen that have been associated with this Saint since the 15th century. Of particular interest is the relationship between artillerymen and the Catholic Church, which began with the German monk Berthold Schwarz, also known as Berthold the Black, who is credited by most military historians with inventing the cannon in about 1320.

There are two classes of membership within the Order of St. Barbara - an entry-level class called the Honorable Order of St. Barbara and a senior class called the Ancient Order of Saint Barbara. Candidates for induction into the entry-level class are proposed by artillery Colonels and above, while the induction of entry-level members into the senior class is based upon the recommendation of senior artillery commanders with final approval resting with the Commanding General of the Field Artillery School. Membership in the order is restricted to Field Artillery officers of the regular establishment, the National Guard, the Army Reserve, and the Marine Corps. Membership is also extended to selected exchange and foreign liaison officers who have successfully completed a year on the staff of the Field Artillery School. In rare

instances, civilians who have contributed to artillery doctrine are inducted into the order. The order is administered by a Board of Governors that reports to the Executive Director of the U.S. Field Artillery Association.

The Life and Legend of St. Barbara

“Artillery conquers the ground; infantry occupies it.”

Military maxim

Saint Barbara is first mentioned as the Patron Saint of artillery in a Papal Ordinance to the citizens of Florence dated 14 December 1429. One of the earliest of a number of Italian artillery companies and schools dedicated to St. Barbara was a school established in Venice in 1521. The Italian author Camillo Albertini noted that in 1574 Pope Gregory XIII founded a school of artillerymen under the patronage of St. Barbara. In 1594, Cardinal Bisto Aldobrandino established in Rome a company of artillery gentry of Castel Saint Angelo with its own chapel dedicated to St. Barbara. The writer Marchese di Villabianca (probably a *nom de plume*) describes a 16th century celebration of St. Barbara at an unspecified location that included a parade led by artillerymen and cadets in battle formation.

The exact date of the elevation of the martyr Barbara to sainthood is not known. Prior to the Council of Trent (1545-1563), Church regulations regarding canonization were vague to the point of being nonexistent. During the Middle Ages and earlier, canonization was a prerogative the local bishop; and before 1000 there was no process at all. Rome was not involved until 1634, when the first papal canonization was proclaimed by Pope Urban VIII.

The first written reference to St. Barbara is in a love story written by an unknown author around 650. With no firm historical basis, Church scholars emphasize that the figure known as St. Barbara might be apocryphal. However, the popularity of her story, and in particular the circumstances of her death and that of her executioner, formed the basis of her subsequent sainthood. So powerful was the legend of St. Barbara that canonization was practically demanded by the *vox populi*, the “voice of the people.” The early Church, in an attempt to legitimize the actions of its flock, went a step further by

declaring *vox populi, vox dei*, “The voice of the people is the voice of God.” Eventually, St. Barbara became revered as the Patron Saint of those in danger from thunderstorms, fire, and explosions - all causes of sudden death. On Italian warships, there is always a sign marked “santabarbara” (one word in lower case) above the door to powder magazines that invokes her protective powers for the ship and crew.

In reviewing source material for this article, the author encountered several biographies of St. Barbara. In each case, the events of her life coincided. The only appreciable differences were the location where she lived and the dates of her life. Depending upon the source, she lived in Turkey, Egypt, Rome, or Tuscany during either the third or fourth century. If indeed there was a St. Barbara, authorities believe that she was martyred on 4 December 235 during the reign of Pope St. Anterus. The biography that follows is the official biography of St. Barbara within the order. It was prepared for the order by Major General Thomas E. de Shazo during his tenure as the Commanding General of the Field Artillery School (1956-1958). Except for the location, this biography includes all the particulars of the life of St. Barbara generally accepted by her biographers.

Saint Barbara is believed to have lived around 200 in the city of Nicomedia in Asia Minor, an ancient city on the Bosphorus in present day Turkey. Her father, a wealthy heathen merchant named Dioscorus, was concerned that his beautiful daughter would be taken from him in marriage by an unworthy suitor. To insure his continued domination of her life, he locked her in a tower to protect her from the evils of the outside world. Somehow, St. Barbara heard the teachings of Christ while her father was away on a business trip and was so moved that she embraced the Christian faith. On learning of his daughter’s conversion, Dioscorus became enraged and brought her before the local magistrate who decreed that she be tortured and put to death by beheading. This task was given to her father, who took her into the mountains where he performed the awful deed; but during his return journey to Nicomedia, Dioscorus was struck by a bolt of lightning and reduced to a pile of ashes. The part of the legend of St. Barbara pertaining to lightning is the basis for her patronage in times of danger from fires, thunderstorms, and sudden death.

The appearance of gunpowder in the Western world and its application to military ordnance, especially the cannon, began in the 14th century. Early artillery pieces were

often flawed in construction, and they frequently misfired or exploded resulting in the sudden and violent death of their crews. From the practice of calling upon St. Barbara for protection against explosions, she eventually became the Patron Saint of artillerymen.

Christian iconography usually depicts St. Barbara standing by a tower with three windows that are symbolic of the Holy Trinity. Most representations show her holding a chalice in one hand and a holy wafer in the other hand and wearing a crown. She is often seen near cannons. The Feast of St. Barbara falls on 4 December, the supposed date of her martyrdom. Over the years, she has become the Patron Saint of artillerymen in the armies of Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal, France, Germany, and England.

History of The Military Order of St. Barbara

“God fights on the side with the best artillery”

Napoleon I (1769-1821)

The earliest association of St. Barbara with artillery in the U.S. is found in an article published in 1920 in the *Field Artillery Journal*. The *Journal* article drew from a book by Anna Jameson entitled *Sacred and Legendary Art* that was published in 1870. In her work, Jameson described a statue of St. Barbara with supporters and narrated the story of her martyrdom. A year later, the *Field Artillery Journal* published an article by Joseph M. Hanson entitled “17th Century Candidate for the Position of Patron Saint of Artillery” which argued that the Maid of Orleans, Joan of Arc, would be a more appropriate patroness than St. Barbara. While interesting, Hanson’s proposal went nowhere. The first observance of the Feast of St. Barbara by American artillerymen occurred on 4 December 1934 at the University Club in Boston during a conference of New England Field Artillery officers. Further observances followed including two St. Barbara Day meetings in 1938 that were reported in the *Field Artillery Journal*.

On 3 December 1938, officers of the 119th Field Artillery Regiment of the Michigan National Guard met at their Charlotte Armory for the purpose of writing a constitution for the Order of St. Barbara and to elect chapter officers. The Articles of Association of the order were signed at a follow-up meeting held at the Gibson Hotel in Cincinnati, Ohio, that was attended by twenty-seven reserve and four Regular Army Field Artillery offi-

cers. This group proceeded to copyright the order's Articles of Association and its name, which was the "Military Order of Saint Barbara, First Regiment." The application for the copyright was made on 5 December 1938, and the Copyright Office subsequently issued Copyright No. AA286775 effective as of the date of the application. The copyright was not renewed, nor was an attempt ever made to patent the badge of the order.

The objectives of the Military Order of Saint Barbara are "To promote among artillerymen, good fellowship, esprit de corps and [the] recognition of Saint Barbara as the Patron Saint of artillerymen." An additional objective - and perhaps the most important of all - was the promotion of professionalism and integrity among Field Artillery officers.

During World War II, the activities of the order remained, for the most part, at a standstill because all energies were being directed to winning the war. Beginning in 1956, the order was revived largely through the efforts of Major General Thomas E. de Shazo, who at the time was the Commanding General of the Field Artillery School. A headquarters for the order was established at Fort Sill; and later, the Commanding General of the Army Artillery and Missiles Center was designated as the National Commander of the order. During his tenure as National Commander, General de Shazo ably led the order in achieving a number of important goals. These goals, which are listed below, were attained with the assistance of Major General Robert T. Wood, who was then the Commanding General of the Antiaircraft and Guided Missiles Branch of the Field Artillery School at Fort Bliss, Texas.

- Select the order's official picture and legend of St. Barbara
- Establish chapters of the order by working with senior artillery commanders throughout the Army
- Dedicate the St. Barbara stained-glass window in the old post chapel at Fort Sill
- Direct the first observance of the Feast of St. Barbara at Fort Sill (4 December 1956), with appropriate ceremony.
- Establish the badge of the order

It wasn't long before a number of non-Catholic church groups noted the activities of the order with dismay. These groups complained that military activities associated with Patron Saints violated the religious liberties of individual military members. As the consequence, the



The St. Barbara window in Ft. Sill's old post chapel. In one hand she holds a castle tower with three windows and in the other hand a sword, which was the instrument of her martyrdom. Appearing behind the Saint are a wheel and end of the barrel of a cannon.

Adjutant General of the Army declared on 16 January 1959 that military activities with religious connotations would be "unofficial and voluntary" on the part of interested military personnel.

During May 1969, Pope Paul VI deleted thirty Saints from the liturgical calendar "in the belief that they may never have existed," and these former Saints were reduced in status from church-wide acceptance to "local devotion" only. Sadly, St. Barbara was among the thirty Saints, but she remains a presence in the Church as a "holy helper." The action by the Holy See actually helped the order. Once Barbara ceased to be an official Saint of the Catholic Church, religious objections to joining the order were removed for many potential members.

Today, the order consists of what might loosely be described as local chapters at military installations where artillery elements are stationed. These chapters are pre-