

Upper Dublin teacher 'drums up' Revolutionary War history



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Music teacher Sean Kennedy demonstrates colonial-era military drumming for a group of eighth graders at Sandy Run Middle School Wednesday, March 12, 2015. Geoff Patton -- Montgomery Media

Upper Dublin >> In the quiet world of the 1770s — no airplanes, trains or cars — listening to the beat of the drum was literally a way of life.

That message was brought home to the eighth-graders at Sandy Run Middle School last week when music teacher Sean Kennedy demonstrated the role of drummers during the Revolutionary War.

Always ready to link music to other curricula, Kennedy came up with the idea after the eighth-grade social studies curriculum was changed to American history this year, he said. So when the classes had “just wrapped up the Revolutionary War,” Kennedy was waiting in the band room with his snare drum.

“The history of music goes hand in hand with history,” Kennedy said, tracing the history of drum music back to Revolutionary drummers.

“Snare drums were strictly tools of war” back then, said Kennedy, a professional drummer who “was brought up learning all of the battle signals the drummers used to play in the 1700s and 1800s,” and teaches them to his current students. “Without the battlefield drummers, modern drumming might not exist,” he said. During a March 11 social studies class, Kennedy demonstrated the various signals used by drummers during the war, relating them to the April 19, 1775, Battle of Lexington, one of the first engagements of the American Revolution, following Paul Revere’s famous ride to warn that British troops were headed to Concord, where munitions were stored.

The drum itself was different then, with a calfskin head and catgut snares, compared to the plastic head and plastic-coated metal snares on today’s drum.

“There’s a long history of drummers in the U.S. military,” Kennedy said, noting the “single largest employer of musicians today is the U.S. military.”

And that history can be traced back to sunrise April 19, 1775, when John Parker, commander of a 77-member militia company in Lexington, Mass., seeing 700 British troops approach, told company drummer boy William Diamond, 17, to sound "To Arms," signaling the enemy's approach and the start of the armed conflict leading to the War of Independence, he said.

Kennedy proceeded to tap out the beats that served as the communication system in the military camps, where each company had a drummer and a fifer, and each regiment had 10 drummers and 10 fifers.

"The Reveille," signaling time to rise for the day, was played for 10 minutes — "you weren't late," Kennedy said. "The Assembly" was the signal for troops to line up and "The General" meant "we're getting out of here."

There were signals for retreat, turning off the beer keg taps, time to go to bed and to summon a meeting with the commander, with different signals according to rank. "The Roast Beef," which had "a more lilting feel," signaled time to eat, and "Peas upon a trencher" meant vegetables that day. There were calls to "load your muskets" and signals for the direction to face.

Gen. George Washington complained the "music of the army" was "very bad," and threatened that if the drum and fife majors didn't improve, their ranks and pay would be reduced.

"Everything was bad if the drummers were," Kennedy said.

When German Gen. von Steuben was training the Continental Army at Valley Forge during the winter of 1778-79, he standardized the drum calls and their functions, so the whole army was using the same beats and signals. French Gen. Lafayette instructed them to play faster, so the troops would move faster, he said.

"The Rogue's March," a slow beat with snares off, was played when a soldier was "drummed out" of the army for misbehavior or for a funeral procession.

"The drummers and signals were life and death," Kennedy said. "Usually they were teenage boys and usually didn't get shot at, but it was very dangerous."

Returning to the present, Kennedy noted, "Everything that's played on the drum set today has roots in the Revolutionary War."