



The 24 Notes Known as Taps

*Even if you think you already know
the story behind Taps, read on*

by Curtis Rostad

The Story

Maybe you have read somewhere the story of the origin of the bugle call known as Taps. As the story goes, a Union Army captain named Ellison was with his men near Harrison's Landing, Virginia, during the Civil War. One night, he heard the moaning of an injured soldier somewhere in the no-man's land between him and the Confederate Army.

Risking his own life, he crawled to the injured man and dragged him back to safety. When he was safely behind his own lines, he discovered that the man was a Confederate soldier and had already died. When he turned the man over, he made a shocking discovery: *the man was his own son*. Unknown to his father, the boy had enlisted in the Confederate Army.

Despite his enemy status, Captain Ellison received permission to bury the boy with military honors. While his commander did not allow a full band to play the funeral dirge, a bugler was offered and the father asked him to play a series of notes that he had found written on a piece of paper in the pocket of his dead son's uniform. The music played became known as Taps and has been used ever since at all military funerals.

This is an amazing story, but there is only one problem with it: *it is not true*. There is no historical evidence to back up the tale. In fact, there is no evidence to even back up the existence of Captain Ellison, or *any* of the many variations of the name used in the story. The only thing truthful about the story is the location: Harrison's Landing, Virginia.

The Real Story

Daniel Adams Butterfield (1831-1901) is the man identified as responsible for the bugle call known as Taps. Born in Utica, New York, Butterfield worked for the American Express Company in New York City. When the Civil War broke out, he joined the Union Army and quickly rose through the ranks. He was eventually promoted to brigadier general and was given command of the Fifth Corps of the Army of the Potomac. Years later, he would receive the Medal of Honor for bravery during the battle of Gaines Mill.

Prior to modern forms of communication, bugles were used to signal troop activity during times of battle. A distinctive call was used to wake soldiers (reveille), call them to eat, engage in battle (i.e. the

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if such a bugle call was blown when several different units, including the enemy, were within a small area. Butterfield pioneered the idea of a distinctive bugle call for his men that was sounded before the standard bugle call so that his troops knew that a particular call was meant for them.

He also took a dislike to the standard "lights out" call and wrote a new one for his troops while they were encamped at Harrison's Landing during the Peninsular Campaign in July 1862. He gave the new call to his bugler, Oliver Norton, who used it that evening. Other units soon adopted the call and Taps became an official bugle call after the war.

This version of the story first surfaced in a magazine article written in 1898 by Gustav Kobbe, a music historian. His source for writing the article was based upon an army drill manual compiled by Major Truman Seymour. Since Seymour wrote the manual, Kobbe assumed that he also had written the bugle call.

One of the people who read the article, and wrote to Kobbe to correct this assumption, was none other than the original bugler, Oliver Norton. He told the Taps story and then invited Kobbe to confirm his version of the story by contacting General Butterfield, who had by then retired and returned to New York City. Butterfield indeed was contacted and his reply basically substantiated the story, but several discrepancies were noted. While Norton said that Butterfield wrote the notes on an envelope, Butterfield said that

he could not read music and therefore there was little chance that he had personally written it. In fact, Butterfield claimed that he had whistled it and his wife had written down the notes as she heard them. Obviously this must have occurred at some time before the battle.

To his credit, Butterfield never claimed credit for Taps and probably never would have spoken about it were it not for the original article and Norton's response to it. He admitted a "dim memory" of the origin of the bugle call.

Further research, however, showed that Butterfield did not compose Taps, but actually revised an earlier bugle call known as Tattoo, which was described in manuals dating back to 1835. Variations of Tattoo were used at the end of the day to signal troops to prepare for bedtime roll call. The call was sounded an hour prior to the final call of the day, and was used to notify soldiers that they were to cease drinking and return to their garrisons. The final call then signaled lights and fires out. Thus, Norton's version of the story was true, as far as he knew, because he had assumed that Butterfield had written Taps, even though it was simply a modification of a version of Tattoo.

Taps Trivia

■ General Butterfield died in 1901 and was buried at West Point, even though he never attended the Academy. There is also a monument to him in New York City near Grant's tomb, although neither monument mentions his association with Taps.

■ The earliest mention of the use of Taps at a funeral was when a soldier in

Battery A, 2nd Artillery, under the command of Captain John Tidball, was killed in battle later that year. Since the battery was so close to the Confederate lines at the time, the captain did not want to fire off the customary three volleys and risk revealing his exact position, thereby inviting attack. Instead, he decided that sounding Taps would be the most ceremony that could be afforded at the time.

The custom took hold within the Army of the Potomac and eventually became the standard bugle call at all military funerals. The earliest official reference to the mandatory use of Taps at military funerals is in the "Infantry Drill Regulations" of 1891.

■ The sounding of Taps at military funerals is commemorated in a stained-glass window at the chapel at Fort Monroe, Virginia, and a monument is also located on Berkeley Plantation at Harrison's Landing. The Harrisons of Harrison's Landing, by the way, include Benjamin Harrison and William Henry Harrison, both presidents of the United States, and one a signer of the Declaration of Independence.

■ As soon as Taps was first sounded, soldiers began to put words to the music. Contrary to popular belief, there are no official words for Taps, although there are several popular verses, including:

*Day is done, gone the sun,
From the hills, from the lake,
From the skies.
All is well, safely rest.
God is nigh.*

*Go to sleep, peaceful sleep,
May the soldier or sailor,
God keep.
On the land or the deep,
Safe in sleep.*

General Butterfield merely revised an earlier bugle call and the story is not nearly as dramatic as the one involving the dead soldier and his father. Butterfield's role in producing these simple 24 notes, however, ensures his place in the history of war, the history of music, and the history of the funeral. *

The story of Taps is currently on special display at Arlington National Cemetery and was compiled by Jari Villanueva, who is a graduate of Peabody Conservatory and Kent State University, and a master sergeant in the United States Air Force Band at Bolling AFB in Washington, D.C.

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