



The History of the Military Bugle Call "Taps"



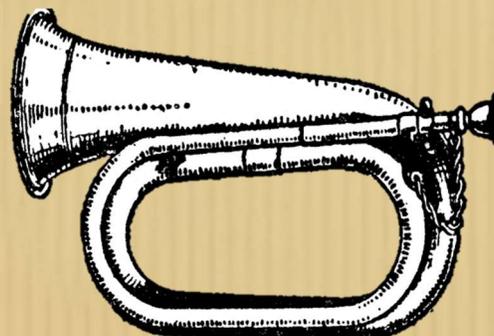
Of all the military bugle calls, none is so easily recognizable or more stirring and able to render emotion than *Taps*. Up until the Civil War, the traditional call at day's end was a tune borrowed from the French called *Lights Out*. Then, in the aftermath of the bloody Seven Days battles in July of 1862 and hard on the heels of losing 600 men and being wounded himself, Union General Daniel Adams Butterfield called the brigade bugler to his tent. He thought *Lights Out* was too formal, and he wanted to honor his men with something different. The bugle call "Taps" originated during the Civil War with the Army of the Potomac. Union Army Brig. Gen. Daniel Butterfield didn't like the bugle call that signaled soldiers in the camp to put out the lights and go to sleep and worked out the melody of "Taps" with his brigade bugler, Pvt. Oliver Wilcox Norton. The call later came into another use as a figurative call to the sleep of death for soldiers.

Oliver Wilcox Norton, the bugler, tells the story:

"...showing me some notes on a staff written in pencil on the back of an envelope, (he) asked me to sound them on my bugle. I did this several times, playing the music as written. He changed it somewhat, lengthening some notes and shortening others, but retaining the melody as he first gave it to me. After getting it to his satisfaction, he directed me to sound that call for Taps thereafter in place of the regulation call. The music was beautiful on that still summer night and was heard far beyond the limits of our Brigade. The next day I was visited by several buglers from neighboring Brigades, asking for copies of the music which I gladly furnished. The call was gradually taken up through the Army of the Potomac."



This more emotive and powerful *Tap* was soon adopted throughout the military. The U.S. Army officially recognized it in 1874, and it became standard at military funeral ceremonies in 1891. There is something singularly beautiful, mournful, and appropriate in the music of this wonderful call. Its strains are melancholy yet full of rest and peace. Its echoes linger in the heart long after its tones have ceased to vibrate in the air.



Why Is It Called *Taps*?

The origin of the word "taps" is thought to have come from the Dutch word for "tattoo," which is "taptoe." More than likely, "Taps" comes from the three drum taps that were played as a signal for "Extinguish Lights" when a bugle was not used in the rendition. As with many other customs, the 24 notes that comprise this solemn tradition began long ago and continues to this day.

Official Lyrics

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the nature of the song's origin, there are no official lyrics for *Taps*. The following unofficial verse is often used. The author is not known.

*Fading light dims the sight,
And a star gems the sky, gleaming bright.
From afar drawing nigh -- Falls the night.
Day is done, gone the sun,
From the lake, from the hills, from the sky;
All is well, safely rest, God is nigh.
Then good night, peaceful night,
Till the light of the dawn shineth bright;
God is near, do not fear - Friend, good night.*

The above information is courtesy of United States Army Center for Military History

