

Taps

By

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As the old saying goes, "There are two sides to every story." This story is no exception. Both versions have many things in common such as the times of the writing and the historical event which provided the catalyst to birth the song. Plus, both stories end with the same application of the song. Yet to arrive there, two different paths can be followed.

The timing was 1862. In our first story, General Daniel Butterfield, the leader of Meroll's Division, Fitz-John Porter's Corps, army of the Potomac, had composed a new call for lights out. At Harrison's landing, Butterfield gave his bugler, Oliver Norton, the new composition and asked him to play it. In short time, this new piece of music called, "Taps" replaced the usual call to "Extinguish Lights." In the military manuals, the name, "Extinguish Lights" stayed till 1891. Thereafter, the 28 notes would be known as "Taps."

The second story takes place the same year, 1862, and at the same place, Harrison's Landing, Virginia. Union officer, Robert Ellicombe, could hear the groaning of a wounded soldier in "no man's land" which is where the battle had raged hours earlier. Under the cover of darkness, Ellicombe was able to rescue the wounded soldier and bring him back to the Union camp. By the time, a lantern was found, the soldier died. To the shock of the captain, when the lamp arrived, he was holding the dead body of a Confederate soldier—his own son. The next day, a lone bugler played a 28 note piece of music found in the boy's coat. The captain's son had entitled it "Taps."

Both stories have the same date, 1862, the same place, Harrison's Landing, Virginia, and the same setting, the Civil War; but only one can be true. Right?

Butterfield admitted he could not read music, let alone write it. Yet it appears he did. Researchers have found a melody to another call known as "Scott's Tattoo" which is very similar to Butterfield's tune. Maybe, Butterfield was more of an arranger than a composer.

No military records have ever been found on Captain Robert Ellicombe or his son. In the story, the boy had gone south to study music and joined with the Confederates when the war broke out. Most today consider this story as legend. Yet you must admit it is a good story to explain such a moving piece of music.

This we do know. The name, "Taps," comes from the practice of three drum beats that followed the lights out call each night. It is also thought that the origin of the title, "Taps," comes from the Dutch word for "tattoo" or "taptoe." "Taps" is played each year at the placing of the military wreath ceremonies at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. It can be heard at committal services of our fallen military heroes. Each evening, at Arlington National Cemetery, a lone bugler signifies the end of day and a tribute to those who have died for their country.

Day is done
Gone the sun
From the lakes
From the hills

From the sky All is well,
safely rest.
God is nigh, Fading light Dims the sight
And a star Gems the sky,
Gleaning bright From afar,
Drawing nigh,
Falls the night.
Thanks and praise,
For our days,
Neath the sun,
Neath the stars,
Neath the sky,
As we go,
This we know,
God is nigh.

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13)