

# 24 Notes That Tap Deep Emotions

**Jari A. Villanueva**

Of all the military bugle calls, none is so easily recognized or more apt to render emotion than the call Taps. The melody is both eloquent and haunting and the history of its origin is interesting and somewhat clouded in controversy. In the British Army, a similar call known as Last Post has been sounded over soldiers' graves since 1885, but the use of Taps is unique with the United States military, since the call is sounded at funerals, wreath-laying and memorial services.

Taps began as a revision to the signal for Extinguish Lights (Lights Out) at the end of the day. Up until the Civil War, the infantry call for Extinguish Lights was the one set down in Silas Casey's (1801-1882) Tactics, which had been borrowed from the French. The music for Taps was adapted by Union General [Daniel Butterfield](#) for his brigade (Third Brigade, First Division, Fifth Army Corps, Army of the Potomac) in July, 1862.

Daniel Adams Butterfield (31 October 1831-17 July 1901) was born in Utica, New York and graduated from Union College at Schenectady. He was the eastern superintendent of the American Express Company in New York when the Civil War broke out. Despite his lack of military experience, he rose quickly in rank. A Colonel in the 12th Regiment of the New York State Militia, he was promoted to Brigadier General and given command of a brigade of the V Corps of the Army of the Potomac. The 12th served in the Shenandoah Valley during the the Bull Run Campaign. During the Peninsular Campaign Butterfield served prominently when during the Battle of Gaines Mill, despite an injury, he seized the colors of the 83rd Pennsylvania and rallied the regiment at a critical time in the battle. Years later, he was awarded the Medal of Honor for that act of heroism.

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As the story goes, General Butterfield was not pleased with the call for Extinguish Lights feeling that the call was too formal to signal the days end and with the help of the brigade bugler, Oliver Willcox Norton, wrote Taps to honor his men while in camp at Harrison's Landing, Virginia, following the Seven Day's battle. These battles took place during the Peninsular Campaign of 1862. The call, sounded that night in July, 1862, soon spread to other units of the Union Army and was even used by the Confederates. Taps was made an official bugle call after the war.

The highly romantic account of how Butterfield composed the call surfaced in 1898 following a magazine article written that summer. The August, 1898 issue of Century Magazine contained an article called The Trumpet in Camp and Battle, by Gustav Kobbe, a music historian and critic. He was writing about the origin of bugle calls in the Civil War and in reference to Taps, wrote:

In speaking of our trumpet calls I purposely omitted one with which it seemed most appropriate to close this article, for it is the call which closes the soldier's day. . . . Lights Out. I have not been able to trace this call to any other service. If it seems probable, it was original with Major Seymour, he has given our army the most beautiful of all trumpet-calls.

Kobbe was using as an authority the Army drill manual on infantry tactics prepared by Major General Emory Upton in 1867 (revised in 1874). The bugle calls in the manual were compiled by Major (later General) Truman Seymour of the 5th U.S. Artillery. Taps was called Extinguish Lights in these manuals since it was to replace the Lights Out call disliked by Butterfield. The title of the call was not changed until later, although other manuals started calling it Taps because most soldiers knew it by that name. Since Seymour was responsible for the music in the Army manual, Kobbe assumed that he had written the call. Kobbe's inability to find the origin of Extinguish Lights (Taps) prompted a letter from Oliver W. Norton in Chicago who claimed he knew how the call came about and that he was the first to perform it.

Norton wrote:

Chicago, August 8, 1898

*I was much interested in reading the article by Mr. Gustav Kobbe, on the Trumpet and Bugle Calls, in the August Century. Mr. Kobbe says that he has been unable to trace the origin of the call now used for Taps, or the Go to sleep, as it is generally called by the soldiers. As I am unable to give the origin of this call, I think the following statement may be of interest to Mr. Kobbe and your readers.. .. During the early part of the Civil War I was bugler at the Headquarters of Butterfield's Brigade, Morell's Division, Fitz-John Porter's Corp, Army of the Potomac. Up to July, 1862, the Infantry call for Taps was that set down in Casey's Tactics, which Mr. Kobbe says was borrowed from the French. One day, soon after the seven days battles on the Peninsular, when the Army of the Potomac was lying in camp at Harrison's Landing, General Daniel Butterfield, then commanding our Brigade, sent for me, and showing me some notes on a staff written in pencil on the back of an envelope, 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. I think no general order was issued from army headquarters authorizing the substitution of this for the regulation call, but as each brigade commander exercised his own discretion in such minor matters, the call was gradually taken up through the Army of the Potomac. I have been told that it was carried to the Western Armies by the 11th and 12th Corps, when they went to Chattanooga in the fall of 1863, and rapidly made its way through those armies. I did not presume to question General Butterfield at the time, but from the manner in which the call was given to*

*me, I have no doubt he composed it in his tent at Harrison s Landing. I think General Butterfield is living at Cold Spring, New York. If you think the matter of sufficient interest, and care to write him on the subject, I have no doubt he will confirm my statement. –Oliver W. Norton*

The editor did write to Butterfield as suggested by Norton. In answer to the inquiry from the editor of the Century, General Butterfield writing from Gragside, Cold Spring, under the date of August 31, 1898 wrote:

I recall, in my dim memory, the substantial truth of the statement made by Norton, of the 83rd Pa., about bugle calls. His letter gives the impression that I personally wrote the notes for the call. The facts are, that at the time I could sound calls on the bugle as a necessary part of military knowledge and instruction for an officer commanding a regiment or brigade. I had acquired this as a regimental commander. I had composed a call for my brigade, to precede any calls, indicating that such were calls, or orders, for my brigade alone. This was of very great use and effect on the march and in battle. It enabled me to cause my whole command, at times, in march, covering over a mile on the road, all to halt instantly, and lie down, and all arise and start at the same moment; to forward in line of battle, simultaneously, in action and charge etc. It saves fatigue. The men rather liked their call, and began to sing my name to it. It was three notes and a catch. I can not write a note of music, but have gotten my wife to write it from my whistling it to her, and enclose it. The men would sing , Dan, Dan, Dan, Butterfield, Butterfield to the notes when a call came. Later, in battle, or in some trying circumstances or an advance of difficulties, they sometimes sang, Damn, Damn, Damn, Butterfield, Butterfield.

The call of Taps did not seem to be as smooth, melodious and musical as it should be, and I called in some one who could write music, and practiced a change in the call of Taps until I had it suit my ear, and then, as Norton writes, got it to my taste without being able to write music or knowing the

technical name of any note, but, simply by ear, arranged it as Norton describes. I did not recall him in connection with it, but his story is substantially correct. Will you do me the favor to send Norton a copy of this letter by your typewriter? I have none. –Daniel Butterfield

On the surface, this seems to be the true history of the origin of Taps. Indeed, the many articles written about Taps cite this story as the beginning of Butterfield's association with the call. Certainly, Butterfield never went out of his way to claim credit for its composition and it wasn't until the Century article that the origin came to light.

There are however, significant differences in Butterfield's and Norton's stories. Norton says that the music given to him by Butterfield that night was written down on an envelope while Butterfield wrote that he could not read or write music! Also Butterfield's words seem to suggest that he was not composing a melody in Norton's presence, but actually arranging or revising an existing one. As a commander of a brigade, he knew of the bugle calls needed to relay troop commands. All officers of the time were required to know the calls and were expected to be able to play the bugle. Butterfield was no different—he could play the bugle but could not read music. As a colonel of the 12th N.Y. Regiment, before the war, he had ordered his men to be thoroughly familiar with calls and drills.

What could account for the variation in stories? My research shows that Butterfield did not compose Taps but actually revised an earlier bugle call. This sounds blasphemous to many, but the fact is that Taps existed in an early version of the call Tattoo. As a signal for end of the day, armies have used Tattoo to signal troops to prepare them for bedtime roll call. The call was used to notify the soldiers to cease the evening's drinking and return to their garrisons. It was sounded an hour before the final call of the day to extinguish all fires and lights. This early version is found in three manuals the Winfield Scott (1786 –1866 ) manual of 1835, the Samuel Cooper (1798–1876) manual of 1836 and

the William Gilham (1819?-1872) manual of 1861. This call referred to as the Scott Tattoo was in use from 1835-1860. A second version of Tattoo came into use just before the Civil War and was in use throughout the war replacing the Scott Tattoo.

The fact that Norton says that Butterfield composed Taps cannot be questioned. He was relaying the facts as he remembered them. His conclusion that Butterfield wrote Taps can be explained by the presence of the second Tattoo. It was most likely that the second Tattoo, followed by Extinguish Lights (the first eight measures of today's Tattoo), was sounded by Norton during the course of the war.

It seems possible that these two calls were sounded to end the soldier's day on both sides during the war. It must therefore be evident that Norton did not know the early Tattoo or he would have immediately recognized it that evening in Butterfield's tent. If you review the events of that evening, Norton came into Butterfield's tent and played notes that were already written down on an envelope. Then Butterfield changed it somewhat, lengthening some notes and shortening others, but retaining the melody as he first gave it to me. If you compare that statement while looking at the present day Taps, you will see that this is exactly what happened to turn the early (Scott) Tattoo in Taps. Butterfield as stated above, was a Colonel before the War and in General Order No. 1 issued by him on December 7, 1859 had the order: The Officers and non-commissioned Officers are expected to be thoroughly familiar with the first thirty pages, Vol. 1, Scott's Tactics, and ready to answer any questions in regard to the same previous to the drill above ordered Scott's Tactics include the bugle calls that Butterfield must have known and used.

If Butterfield was using Scott's Tactics for drills, then it is feasible that he would have used the calls as set in the manual. Lastly, it is hard to believe that Butterfield could have composed anything that July in the aftermath of the Seven Days battles which saw the Union Army of the Potomac

mangled by Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Over twenty six thousand casualties were suffered on both sides. Butterfield had lost over 600 of his men on June 27th at the battle of Gaines Mill and had himself been wounded. In the midst of the heat, humidity, mud, mosquitoes, dysentery, typhoid and general wretchedness of camp life in that early July, it is hard to imagine being able to write anything.

In the interest of historical accuracy, it should be noted that it is not General Butterfield who composed Taps, rather that he revised an earlier call into the present day bugle call we know as Taps. This is not meant to take credit away from him. It is only to put things in a correct historic manner. Following the Peninsular Campaign, Butterfield served at 2nd Bull Run, Antietam and at Marye's Heights in the Battle of Fredericksburg. Through political connections and his ability for administration, he became a Major General and served as chief of staff of the Union Army of the Potomac under Generals Joseph Hooker and George Meade. He was wounded at Gettysburg and then reassigned to the Western Theater. By war's end, he was breveted a brigadier general and stayed in the army after the Civil War, serving as superintendent of the army's recruiting service in New York City and colonel of the 5th Infantry. In 1870, after resigning from the military, Butterfield went back to work with the American Express Company. He was in charge of a number of special public ceremonies, including General William Tecumseh Sherman's funeral in 1891. Besides his association with Taps, Butterfield also designed the system of Corps Badges which were distinctive shapes of color cloth sewn on to uniforms to distinguish units.

Butterfield died in 1901. His tomb is the most ornate in the cemetery at West Point despite the fact that he never attended. There is also a monument to Butterfield in New York City near Grant's Tomb. There is nothing on either monument that mentions Taps or Butterfield's association with the call. Taps was sounded at his funeral.

How did it become associated with funerals? The earliest

official reference to the mandatory use of Taps at military funeral ceremonies is found in the U.S. Army Infantry Drill Regulations for 1891, although it had doubtless been used unofficially long before that time, under its former designation Extinguish Lights.

The first use of Taps at a funeral during the Peninsular Campaign in Virginia. Captain John C. Tidball of Battery A, 2nd Artillery ordered it played for the burial of a cannoneer killed in action. Since the enemy was close, he worried that the traditional 3 volleys would renew fighting.

During the Peninsular Campaign in 1862, a soldier of Tidball's Battery - A of the 2nd Artillery - was buried at a time when the battery occupied an advanced position, concealed in the woods. It was unsafe to fire the customary three volleys over the grave on account of the proximity of the enemy, and it occurred to Captain Tidball that the sounding of Taps would be the most ceremony that would be substituted. The custom, thus originated, was taken up throughout the Army of the Potomac, and finally confirmed by orders. Colonel James A. Moss Officer's Manual Pub. George Banta Publishing Co. Menasha Wisconsin 1913 Elbridge Coby in Army Talk (Princeton, 1942), p.208 states that it was B Battery of the Third Artillery that first used Taps at a military funeral.

This first sounding of Taps at a military funeral is commemorated in a stained glass window at The Chapel of the Centurion (The Old Post Chapel) at Fort Monroe, Virginia. The window, made by R. Geissler of New York and based on a painting by Sidney King, was dedicated in 1958 and shows a bugler and a flag at half staff. In that picture a drummer boy stands beside the bugler. The grandson of that drummer boy purchased Berkeley Plantation where Harrisons Landing is located. The site where Taps was born is also commemorated. In this case, by a monument located on the grounds of Berkeley Plantation. This monument to Taps was erected by the Virginia American Legion and dedicated on July 4, 1969. The site is also rich in history, for the Harrisons



of Berkeley Plantation included Benjamin Harrison and William Henry Harrison, both presidents of the United States as well as Benjamin Harrison (father and Great grandfather of future presidents), a signer of the Declaration of Independence.

It must be pointed out that other stories of the origin of Taps exist. A popular one is that of a Northern boy who was killed fighting for the south. His father, Robert Ellicombe a Captain in the Union Army, came upon his son's body on the battlefield and found the notes to Taps in a pocket of the dead boy's Confederate uniform. When Union General Daniel Sickles heard the story, he had the notes sounded at the boy's funeral. There is no evidence to back up the story or the existence of Captain Ellicombe. As with many other customs, this solemn tradition continues today. Although Butterfield merely revised an earlier bugle call, his role in producing those 24 notes gives him a place in the history of music as well as the history of war.

As soon as Taps was sounded that night in July 1862, words were put with the music. The first were, "Go To Sleep, Go to Sleep." As the years went on many more versions were created. There are no official words to the music but here are some of the more popular verses:

Day is done, gone the sun,  
From the hills, from the lake,  
From the sky.  
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.

Love, good night, Must thou go,  
When the day, And the night  
Need thee so?

All is well. Speedeth all  
To their rest.

Fades the light; And afar  
Goeth day, And the stars  
Shineth bright,  
Fare thee well; Day has gone,  
Night is on.

Thanks and praise, For our days,  
'Neath the sun, Neath the stars,  
'Neath the sky,  
As we go, This we know,  
God is nigh.

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His website, [www.tapsbugler.com](http://www.tapsbugler.com) includes a history of Taps, performance information and guidelines for funerals, finding buglers for sounding calls, many photos of bugles and buglers, music for bugle calls, stories and myths about Taps, Taps at the JFK funeral, ordering his 60 page booklet on Taps (24 Notes That Tap Deep Emotions) and many links to bugle related sites. Jari is also working on book on the History of Bugle Call in the United States Military.