

Why Taps is Played!

It's hard to feel surprised when a melody as hauntingly beautiful as 'Taps' picks up a legend about how it came to be written — it's too mournfully direct a piece for the mere truth to suffice.

Taps was composed in July, 1862 at Harrison's Landing in Virginia, but aside from that basic fact the fanciful e-mail quoted above, which dates at least to the 1930s, in no way reflects the reality of its origins. There was no dead son, Confederate or otherwise; no lone bugler sounding out the dead boy's last composition. How the call came into being was never anything more than one influential soldier deciding his unit could use a bugle call for particular occasions and setting about to come up with one.

If anyone can be said to have composed 'Taps,' it was Brig. Gen. Daniel Butterfield, Commander of the 3rd Brigade, 1st Division, V Army Corps, Army of the Potomac, during the American Civil War. Dissatisfied with the customary firing of three rifle volleys at the conclusion of burials during battle and also wanting a less harsh bugle call for ceremonially signaling the end of a soldier's day, he likely altered an older piece known as "Tattoo," a French bugle call used to signal "lights out," into the call we now know as 'Taps.'

Summoning his brigade's bugler, Private Oliver Willcox Norton, to his tent one evening in July 1862. Butterfield (whether he wrote 'Taps' straight from the cuff or improvised something new by rearranging an older work) worked with the bugler to transform the melody into its present form. As Private Norton later wrote of that occasion:

"General Daniel Butterfield ... 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."

'Taps' was quickly taken up by both sides of the conflict, and within months was being sounded by buglers in both Union and Confederate forces.

Then as now, 'Taps' serves as a vital component in ceremonies honoring military dead. It is also understood by American servicemen as an end-of-day 'lights out' signal.

When "Taps" is played at a military funeral, it is customary to salute if in uniform, or place your hand over your heart if not.