



Minnesota LEMA Honor Guard Taps Origin

An Excerpt from Twenty-Four Notes That Tap Deep Emotions: the Story of America's Most Famous Bugle Call

By Jari Villanueva

Of all the military bugle calls, none is so easily recognized or more apt to evoke 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 type call known as Last Post has been sounded over soldiers' graves since 1885, but the use of Taps is unique to the United States military, since the call is sounded at funerals, wreath-laying and memorial services.

Taps began as a revision for the signal of Extinguish Lights (Lights Out) at the end of the day. Up until the Civil War, the infantry call for Extinguish Lights was the printed in Silas Casey's (1801-1882) Infantry Tactics and other manuals, the music 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 (1831-1901) 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. 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 5th Corps of the Army of the Potomac.

During the Peninsular Campaign Butterfield distinguished himself when, during the Battle of Gaines Mill and despite an injury, he seized the colors of the 83rd Pennsylvania and rallied the regiment at a critical time in the battle. He was awarded the Medal of Honor for that act of heroism.

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 (1839-1920), wrote Taps to honor his men while in camp at Harrison's Landing, Virginia, following the Seven Days battle. These battles took place during the Peninsular Campaign of 1862. The new call, sounded that night in July,

1862, soon spread to other units of the Union Army and was reportedly also 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 Kobbé, (1857-1918) a music historian and critic. He was writing about the origin of bugle calls in the military 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 as seems probable, it was original with Major Seymour, he has given our army the most beautiful of all trumpet-calls."

Kobbé 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, Kobbé assumed that he had written the call. Kobbé'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 Corps, 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 Peninsula, 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

What could account for the variation in stories? My research shows that Butterfield did not compose Taps but actually revised an earlier bugle call. 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 into 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 General Butterfield did not compose 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.