

THE SENTINEL

TAPS: A MEMORIAL ICON

Taps — We have all heard this plaintive bugle call played, many times when we would rather not have. It has been a standard of military funeral services for well over a century now, but some do not know that its origin is from the American Civil War. That fact is easy to verify, but beyond that, the actual creation of this mournful tune (also known as *Lights Out*) is a bit of a controversy. There are at least three well-known stories that claim to be the “actual account” of its composition and/or first use.



At Arlington National Cemetery

The first, and certainly most poignant, involves a Union Army captain, Robert Ellicombe, who was with his men at Harrison’s Landing in Virginia in 1862. He could hear the moans of a single soldier who was clearly wounded and lying on the battlefield in great agony needing help. Not knowing which side the soldier was from, or even really caring, Ellicombe decided to crawl onto the battlefield while shots still rang out and try to help this wounded man. It was dark and bullets were still flying, so he simply found the man by following his groans, then laboriously dragged him back to his lines. When he got there, he found the man had, unfortunately, not survived the rescue effort, dying somewhere along the way. Lighting a lantern in the dim light, he saw that it was a Confederate soldier, and, looking at the face, gasped when he realized it was his own son. The boy had been studying music in the South and had enlisted, unbeknownst to his father, in the Confederate army.

The next morning, the Union high command, because the boy was Confederate, refused Ellicombe’s request to have a military band play a dirge at a hastily arranged funeral, even though it was their colleague’s son, but did allow the captain one musician, a bugler. A piece of paper with a few haunting notes written on it was found in the dead boy’s pocket and appeared to be something he had been working on either at school or in camp. Captain Ellicombe asked that this be played by the bugler. Thus, *Taps* was born out of the tragedy of a father’s grief.

The details of this story sometimes change, but the basic

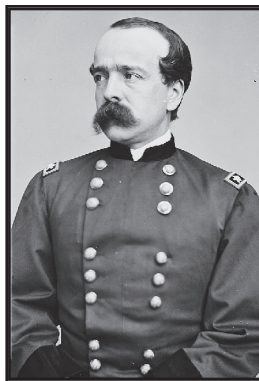
elements of it continue to resound to this day. The problem is that no one has ever been able to even identify a “Captain Ellicombe” in this unit, at this battle, at this time, much less give any deeper provenance to the tale. And most serious historians doubt the possibilities of the coincidences it contains, even with the many verified “brother-meets-brother-on-the-battlefield” stories that we have all heard, many of which *have* been verified.

A second account has a Union captain, John Tidball, Battery A, Second U.S. Artillery, asking the tune to be played over the grave of a member of his unit while they were still posted at a forward battle position during the Peninsula Campaign because the customary three volleys at such an event were considered to be too foolhardy, given the proximity of enemy forces. While this version does not really address the origin of the tune, it is given some sanction as the first time *Taps* was played at a military funeral. It had never had the connotations or overtones of somberness and death that it took from that moment on, and which stay with it to this day.

The final version of our *Taps* story recounts that in July 1862, while the Army of the Potomac was stationed at Harrison’s Landing, then Brig. Gen. Daniel Butterfield, tired of the old, boring “lights out” call, summoned his Brigade Bugler, Pvt.

Oliver Wilcox B. Norton, to his tent and whistled a tune to him. After some trial and error, with Butterfield whistling and Norton playing, they came up with the current version of *Taps* and instituted it as the new nightly call. It soon spread to other nearby units who could hear it being played. Eventually, the high command began to hear it and adopted it as the regulation call for the entire Army of the Potomac. It was not until some later time (perhaps with Capt. Tidball?) that it became associated with military funerals. The “Butterfield version” seems to be the most accepted one historically, mainly because of the exact recollections of Pvt. Norton years after the war ended.

Whatever your favorite version may be, and there are vigorous supporters of all of them, there is no doubt that this simple melody is deeply entrenched in the ways that we honor our war dead to this day. According to the Arlington National Cemetery website (<http://www.arlingtoncemetery.org/ceremonies/originoftaps.html>), *Taps* is played at every one of the 2500 wreath laying ceremonies at the Tomb of the Unknowns (an average of almost seven every day!), as well as the many daily funerals held there and at every national cemetery nationwide, and at the non-military funerals of many ex-military personnel at family, religious, and municipal cemeteries. Its haunting simplicity reminds us of the debt we owe to all of these women and men for the sacrifice they gave to allow us to live in the freedom we have today.



Maj., Gen. Dan Butterfield

Holiday Dinner Enjoyed by Members

Our December meeting was not a program event, but a first-time-ever dinner gathering outside the History Center to celebrate the holiday season and be able to actually sit and spend time talking and sharing. About twenty members, spouses, and friends met at Bloomington's well-known and very popular downtown restaurant, the Uptown, to enjoy a marvelous dinner and drinks. Our server, James, was more than accommodating in taking orders from our disparate and sometimes confusing crowd. Some members brought things to "show and tell," including a beautiful reproduction of a Union soldier's great coat, some pages from a scrapbook of Civil War luminaries, an original historic document, and a GAR medal. The evening began and ended with the singing of Civil War era tunes, accompanied by the incomparable Jerry Spore on the keyboard. Really folks, don't miss this event next year. It was a blast!

A Year-End Quiz

To end the year, and just for fun, try this short quiz from a vintage copy of *Civil War Times* in the library. No prizes... no awards... just a little mental exercise. If you don't feel like looking up the answers, we will have them next month.

1. Name the officer who commanded Grant's naval forces at Forts Henry and Donelson.

2. Name the fort, part of Washington's defenses, where Lincoln personally observed the advance of Early's troops in July of 1864. He was said to actually be standing in the open under enemy fire, supposedly prompting Oliver Wendell Holmes to yell at him, "Get down, you fool!"

3. Name the Indiana Congressman who was Speaker of the House from '63 to '69 and became Grant's vice-president.

4. What state would you go to today to see the battlefields of Gauley Bridge, Carnifex Ferry, and Cheat Mountain?

New Author Donates His Book to the Overlease Library

A chance encounter between MCCWR President Steve Rolfe and a new Civil War author has produced an addition to the Overlease Library and a potential future program. Recently U.S. Army Lt. Col. Sam Passo was at the Monroe County History Center and donated a copy of his new book (with co-author Billie Crane), *The First Flag on the Summit: History of the 15th Indiana Civil War Regiment*, to the MCCWR. The book is a labor of love of the authors, recounting the story of relatives of both men who participated in the Battle of Missionary Ridge, as well as a general regimental history. Passo, a dentist, is stationed currently at Ft. Knox, and we hope we may be able to bring him to Bloomington soon to share his story with the Roundtable. The book will eventually be available in the library and, of course, is for sale through Author House.

The Roundtable is Now on Video!

Last month we announced a trial project to try to make a video DVD of our programs. Our member "techie" (thank heavens for these people or most of us would be lost!), Rick Watson, brought his own camera and used it at the November meeting, took the recording home, edited it and made a copy for the Overlease Library, where it will reside, along with any future program DVD's. With some material assistance from Bloomington Area Cable TV (CATS), we hope to expand on this and be recording, editing, and producing an even more professional (although Rick's IS great) DVD to be placed in the library for future use by any of our members. This is still in the early and experimental stages, but we hope to have these for each presentation from now on. What we need, of course, is help. We have had one volunteer step up already, but if there is anyone else out there who would like to assist in producing two or three of these a year, contact one of the officers or anyone on the executive board. It will not take a great deal of expertise, and the minimal training will be provided. And, of course, if you missed the November program and would like to learn about VMI from a Hoosier graduate, contact any Exec Board member, and we can arrange to get you the DVD.

Upcoming Programs

Jan. 13: Michael Tomey speaking about our very own local regiment, the 27th Indiana – the only Indiana regiment to serve in both the Army of the Potomac and the Army of the Cumberland.

Feb. 10: With the Lincoln birth bicentennial upon us, we have a special program by member Charlie Matson on Lincoln and his interest in armaments throughout the war. This will be a very interactive session, so come loaded with your curiosity and your questions.

Contacts

Steve Rolfe, President	336-0757	srolfe@indiana.edu
David Wiley, Secretary	337-0649	davidwwiley@sbcglobal.net
Carol Wise, Treasurer	824-8708	CWise30099@aol.com
Deborah Cronin, Hospitality	323-9615	d.cronin@comcast.net

On the web at <http://mypage.iu.edu/~rawatson/roundtable/>.

