

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

