

Taps is a 24-note bugle call which marks one of two events:

- It signals that all unauthorized lights must be extinguished. This is the last call of the day.
- It is also sounded at the completion of a military funeral ceremony.

Who wrote this emotive piece of music? When was it first played?

The U.S. Army's Center for Military History tells us that Union General Daniel Adams Butterfield had much to do with the creation of "Taps." Wanting to honor all the men who were lost in the "Seven Days' Battles" - in July of 1862, during America's Civil War - Butterfield thought a new piece of music was needed.

Calling for Oliver Wilcox Norton (the brigade's bugler), Butterfield showed the musician notes on the back of an envelope and asked him to play them. Norton tells us what happened next:

...showing me some notes on a staff written in pencil on the back of an envelope, (he) 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. The call was gradually taken up through the Army of the Potomac.
(Norton's letter dated August 8, 1898.)

In 1874, the U.S. Army officially recognized Butterfield's music. By 1891, Butterfield's version of "Taps" was regularly performed at all U.S. military funerals.

Did General Butterfield, who couldn't write a note of music, actually compose the entire tune? After Norton's account became public, Butterfield provided other details. On the 31st of August, 1898, he 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...

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

Jari A. Villanueva, a bugler and member of the U.S. Air Force Band, has pieced-together what is likely the "rest of the story" which squares the accounts of Norton and Butterfield.

A bugle call - known as the "Second Tattoo" - was used by the U.S. military just before the Civil War started (in 1861). That may be the tune which Butterfield (the man who could not write a note of music) modified by ear (with the help of Oliver Norton).

This moving piece of music also has lyrics, composed by an unknown poet:

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

The bugler who first-played the 24 notes of "Taps" assessed their value:

There is something singularly beautiful and appropriate in the music of this wonderful call. Its strains are melancholy, yet full of rest and peace. Its echoes linger in the heart long after its tones have ceased to vibrate in the air. (See *Army Letters, 1861-1865*, by Oliver Willcox Norton, at page 329.)

Those words still apply, hundreds of years later.

A bugler from the U.S. Army Band performs this rendition of "Taps."

Credits:

Taps, performed by a bugler from the U.S. Army Band. Online, courtesy U.S. Army Center for Military History.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Taps-A-Military-Bugle-Call>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Taps-A-Military-Bugle-Call>

Media Stream



Playing Taps - The Bugler's Perspective

Clip, from West Point Band, online via YouTube.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Playing-Taps-The-Bugler-s-Perspective>