

**Paper delivered to the  
American Civil War Round Table (NSW Chapter)  
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## **The Origin of *Taps***

Of all military bugle calls none is so easily recognized or more apt to render emotion as our *Last Post*, signifying originally to troops to 'lights out' and since 1885 is played at all military funerals to farewell to a fallen comrade. Americans have an even more haunting tune, '*Taps*,' played at all their military funerals, wreath layings and memorial services as a tribute to their fallen. Both tunes give us a lump in our throats and sometimes tears in our eyes. The story behind the tune that we now know as "*Taps*" is both interesting and clouded in controversy.

### **Version 1 – The Myth**

The following somewhat romantic story is one that is presently circulating on the internet. It is a good story but has no basis in fact. Reportedly, it all began in 1862 during the Civil War, when Union Army Captain Robert Ellicombe was with his men near Harrison's Landing in Virginia facing Confederate forces on the other side of a narrow strip of land.

During the night, Ellicombe heard the moans of a soldier who lay severely wounded in "no-mans-land" between the opposing forces. Not knowing if it were a Union or Confederate soldier, Captain Ellicombe decided at the risk of his own life, to bring the stricken man back to the Union lines for medical attention. Crawling on his stomach through the gunfire, Ellicombe reached the wounded soldier and began pulling him back towards the Union lines.

When he finally reached the Union encampment, Ellicombe discovered it was actually a Confederate soldier he had sought to save, but the soldier was dead. Captain Ellicombe lit a lantern and suddenly caught his breath, his whole body numb with shock. In the dim light he saw the face of the dead soldier – it was his own son! The boy had been studying music in the South when war broke out and without telling his father, the boy had enlisted in the Confederate Army.

The next morning, heartbroken, the father asked permission of his superiors to give his son a full military burial, despite his enemy status. His request was only partially granted. Ellicombe had asked if he could have a group of Army band members to play a funeral dirge for his son at the funeral. This request was turned down since the soldier was a Confederate. Out of respect for the father, however, they did approve his having one musician only. Ellicombe chose a bugler and asked him to play a series of musical notes he had found on a piece of paper in the pocket of the dead youth's uniform. This request was granted and the haunting melody we now know as "*Taps*" that is used in all military funerals was born.

Whilst a moving story, accurate with respect to time of composition and place of origin of the bugle call, it is simply not true! Indeed, a search of the Union muster rolls finds no record of a Captain Ellicombe whatsoever. It's a pity, because it made a great story but, unfortunately, it's just a myth.

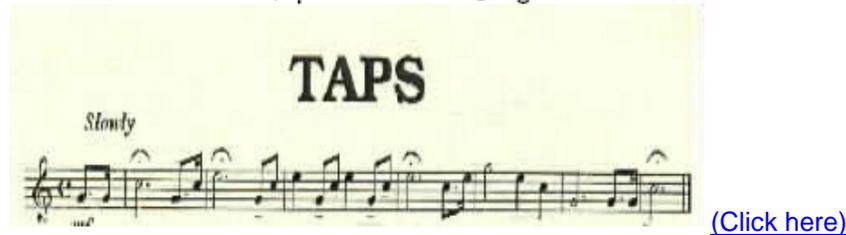
### **Version 2 – The Facts**

The true story is that in July 1862 following the Seven Days Battles at Harrison's Landing, the wounded commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade of the 1<sup>st</sup> Division of the V Corps of the Army of the Potomac, the then Brigadier General Daniel Butterfield, collaborated with his bugler, Oliver Wilcox Norton, to re-work another bugle called the "Scott Tattoo" to create "*Taps*".

Up until the Civil War the infantry call for 'Lights Out' was set out in Silas Casey's (1801-82) Tactics having been borrowed from the French. Versions of the bugle call, Tattoo, were included in at least three military manuals authored respectively by Winfield Scott (1786-1866), Samuel Cooper (1798-1876) and William Gilham (1819?-1872) and were used by both the Union and Confederate sides of the War.

Originally, 'Tattoo' was sounded to notify soldiers to cease their evening's drinking and return to their lines and was sounded one hour before the final call of the day to extinguish all lights and fires. During the early part of the Civil War versions of 'Tattoo' were played at the conclusion of each day. Butterfield believed this regular call for 'Lights Out' was too formal to signal day's end and with the aid of his bugler (see next page) adapted the "Scott Tattoo" to create 'Taps'. The new call was sounded that night in July 1862 for Butterfield's brigade, soon spreading to other units and formations of the Union Army and was even used by the Confederates. Taps was finally confirmed in orders as the official bugle call for 'Lights Out' after the War in 1867.

The 24 notes that comprise this haunting tune are:



General Butterfield, in "composing" this call and directing that it be used for "Taps" in his brigade, could not have foreseen its popularity and the use for another purpose into which it would grow. There are no official words to 'Taps' although there are many versions that have been written, some more popular than others. In the next edition of this Newsletter some of the more popular verses to the tune will be presented.

Today, whenever a man is buried with military honours anywhere in the United States, the ceremony is concluded by firing three volleys of musketry over the grave, and sounding with the trumpet or bugle "Put out the lights. Go to sleep"...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."

### **Taps - Out of the Horses' Mouths:**

The interesting 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 Kobbe, a music historian and critic. He was writing about the origin of bugle calls in the Civil War 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 it seems probable, it was original with Major Seymour, he has given our army the most beautiful of all trumpet-calls."*

Kobbe was using as an authority the Army Drill Manual on Infantry Tactics prepared by Major General Emory Upton in 1867 (and revised in 1874). The bugle calls in this manual were compiled by Major (later General) Truman Seymour of the 5<sup>th</sup> 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, Kobbe assumed, albeit incorrectly, that he had written the call.

Kobbe'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.

*"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 Peninsular, 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 (sic) 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"*

The editor did write to Butterfield as suggested by Norton. In answer to the inquiry from the editor of the Century, General Butterfield writing from Gragside, Cold Spring, under the date of August 31, 1898, 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. Later, in battle, or in some trying circumstances or an advance of difficulties, they sometimes sang, Damn, Damn, Damn, Butterfield, Butterfield.*

*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 (sic) to send Norton a copy of this letter by your typewriter? I have none. - Daniel Butterfield"*

John Cook  
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