

The hardest funerals at which I've been asked to sound Taps were those of active duty military members. One such was a funeral in Oil City, Pennsylvania for a nineteen-year-old airman who was killed by a drunk driver while on his way to his first duty assignment. At the cemetery, most of the mourners were teenagers from his high school. As I began to play, a wail went up from those who knew this young man. It was hard to finish the call. Another tough time was when I sounded the call for a friend's father who had served as a bombardier during WWII. As I glanced at her before beginning, I noticed that she was wearing his wings. Pretty difficult...



When I sound the call at a ceremony I'm sometimes approached by family members who wish to thank me for being part of the service. A reply of, "You are welcome," has always seemed inappropriate or inadequate, so I say, "It is my honor."

A Shortage of Buglers?

Indeed it is my honor when I get a chance to perform this ritual for those who have given part of their lives to our nation. And there is certainly a need for qualified buglers around the country to perform this service.

In the past, when not available, military buglers could be replaced by musicians from a VFW or American Legion Drum and Bugle Corps or even Boy Scouts. However, the tradition of bugling and drum corps in those organizations has all but disappeared. A real shame, for those groups have long fostered musicianship and patriotism.

With veterans dying at the rate of over one thousand each day and with many of the funeral services only having a recording of Taps as the musical honors, lawmakers are looking into having legislation passed to ensure that each family that requests military honors for a deceased veteran will be provided with a live bugler and firing party. However, I surmise that there is not actually a shortage of buglers but simply an inadequate system currently in place to make sure all requests for a live bugler are met.

If you are interested providing the service of sounding Taps at a funeral, you may want to alert your local VFW and American Legion Posts and local funeral homes that you are willing to perform at funerals, or contact your state's National Guard office and find out if they have a need for civilian contract buglers for ceremonies. Many buglers and professional trumpeters are willing to sound Taps and can be hired to do this duty.

Because few civilian buglers today have the background of a military musician and many are unaware of the protocol involved, the following guidelines are written to provide those with little knowledge of military ceremonies with the basics needed for rendering this honor. These guidelines can also be downloaded as a PDF file from www.tapsbugler.com. I hope this helps to guide those buglers who have a sincere interest in sounding Taps at funerals.

B) The best reason for using the straight eighth note rhythm comes from four sources:

1. The original 1835 call of Tattoo from which Taps was derived. An examination of the notes that correspond with the present-day Taps shows an even rhythmic figure.
2. The biography of General Butterfield, A Biographical Memorial of General Daniel Butterfield Including Many Addresses and Military Writings, edited by Julia Lorillard Butterfield (his wife), shows the call printed on p. 49 with the straight eighth note figure.
3. Oliver Willcox Norton published a pamphlet in 1903 entitled Two Bugle Calls, in which he reminisces about his Civil War days and discusses calls written by General Butterfield. The call is printed on the last page.
4. The 1874 revised Upton's Infantry Tactics shows the first version of the present-day Taps in a U.S. Army book.

These are extremely reliable sources in that Butterfield is credited with the call and Norton was the first to play it.

C) It is the way it is sounded by all armed services at Arlington National Cemetery for funerals, wreath-laying ceremonies, and memorial services and at The Tomb of the Unknowns.

Why then, is it so frequently performed wrong? I believe that the call has often been passed around by rote, with few buglers checking the manuals. Also, it has been performed in that manner in many Hollywood movies.

Why care? As musicians and performers, we should strive to play with the utmost perfection.



US Army MSGT (Ret.) Mark Elrod sounds Taps at a funeral in Maryland

Sounding Taps at Ceremonies

As a bugler, you may be asked to sound Taps at a funeral, memorial service, or wreath-laying ceremony. With the number of veterans funerals rising and the number of active-duty military buglers declining, many non-military musicians are asked to perform at the services. The following are guidelines I have written based on the procedures followed by military buglers over many decades. I have modified them to cover those civilian buglers who may be called into service to sound Taps at funerals or memorial services.

1. Bugler is to prepare before the funeral, making sure to have the proper uniform and outerwear in case of inclement weather. Uniform, appearance, and instrument should meet or exceed the military standards as outlined in regulations. That is, make sure you look neat and presentable. A dark suit, quasi-military uniform (without rank), civilian band uniform, or Boy Scout uniform is acceptable. Retired military members may wear their uniforms. (Note: The provisions of Title 10, Section 771 of the U.S. Code prohibit the wearing of the uniform or a distinctive part of the uniform of the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, or Air Force or of a uniform any part of which is similar to a distinctive part of such uniform by a person who is not a member of the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, or Air Force.)
2. Bugler is to report promptly to the funeral site at the appropriate time and report to the Officer In Charge (OIC) or Non-Commissioned Officer In Charge (NCOIC). If you are a civilian bugler performing at a military ceremony, always check in with that person to coordinate when Taps is to be sounded.
3. Bugler is to position him/herself near the gravesite, angled from the firing party (ideally the bugler, firing party, and funeral party will form the three points of a triangle). The bugler should take care to stand in a location where the sound will carry to the funeral party and where he/she can be seen. The bell of the instrument should be pointed toward the casket.
4. Bugler will render a Hand Salute as the casket is carried to the gravesite. If you are in civilian dress, place your right hand over your heart. The bugler will stand at ease during the funeral service.
5. When the service is complete, the OIC or NCOIC will Present Arms. The firing party will come to attention and fire three volleys. Bugler will sound Taps after the third volley and after the NCOIC of the firing party executes Present Arms. After sounding Taps, the bugler will render a Hand Salute (if in civilian dress, place your right hand over your heart) and Order Arms (bring the bugle down to your side as the firing party does with their rifles) on the command of the NCOIC of the firing party.
6. When a firing party is not available, the bugler will sound Taps on completion of the service and at an arranged signal by either the OIC, NCOIC, or officiating person. After sounding Taps, the bugler will render a Hand Salute and Order Arms on his/her own. A recording of a firing party should not be used.

