

They might like some local history

A Prelude to the Bugle Call "Taps": Born in an Army Field Hospital on a Civil War Battlefield

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In 1957, while preparing for a historical pageant to celebrate the Centennial of the old Post Chapel, the "Centurian," at Fort Monroe, Virginia, I was to learn from one of the "Old Timers" about the first use of the bugle call "Taps" at a military funeral. The pageant was scheduled for May 3rd, 1958. The "Old Timer" was Miss Mabel Tidball of Charleston, South Carolina.

Miss Mabel was the daughter of General John C. Tidball, a former commanding officer of the old Fortress Monroe, where she was born in 1875, where she had lived as a child, and where she had learned to read from the stained glass windows of the chapel. Our memorial committee believed her presence would do much to bring back to life the history of the old fortress. Unfortunately, Miss Mabel, then in her 83rd year, could not accept our invitation but she had a request to make. "Would you please play Taps in memory of all those who had "passed on" during the past century?" Our committee approved, and the Army bandmaster arranged for the entire Army band to sound Taps, a truly remarkable rendition.

In corresponding with Miss Mabel after the pageant, I was to learn that her father, then a Captain, had been the first individual to use Taps at a military funeral, in July of 1862, on the battlefield near Harrison's Landing on the James River in Virginia. I began to wonder about Taps; where had it come from? I wrote to the Headquarters of the US Army Band in Washington and everything Miss Mabel had told me was verified. Since that time, I have been able to piece together the background of Taps, the story of its composition, and its adoption throughout the Army.

The composer was Colonel Daniel Butterfield, who was born in Utica, New York, on October 3, 1831, and graduated from Union College, Schenectady, in 1849. When Fort Sumter, South Carolina, fell on April 14, 1861, Butterfield was the officer in command of the 12th New York Volunteers (Infantry), but happened to be in Washington on business. Cassius Clay, then Minister to Russia, hurriedly organized 300 prominent citizens in Washington to defend the Capital City against possible attack by the "Rebels." Butterfield became the First Sergeant of this group, called "Clay's Guards."

In early 1862, Colonel Butterfield and his 12th New York Militia became a part of the newly created Army of the Potomac (A.O.P.), which consisted of 100,000 men and was under the command of General George B. McClellan. Butterfield shortly became the general in command of the Third Brigade of Infantry—his own 12th New York Militia and the 83rd Pennsylvania Volunteers. On March 17, 1862, the A.O.P. boarded a flotilla consisting of 113 steamers, 118 schooners, and 88 barges, which departed for Fortress Mon-

roe, Virginia, the primary base of operations in a campaign to capture Richmond, the Confederate capital.

On April 14th, the A.O.P. departed from Fortress Monroe to fight its way up the Peninsula and across the swamps of Chickahominy to Fair Oaks, where Rebel General Joe Johnston was seriously wounded on May 31st. His replacement, General Robert E. Lee, lost no time in making plans to drive McClellan's forces into the sea.

When McClellan's troops came in sight of the capital of the Confederacy at Richmond, Lee sent General J. E. B. Stuart and his cavalry to surprise the A.O.P. by completely surrounding it. Twelve hundred troops travelled 150 miles in three days. On June 27th, a pitched battle was fought at Gaines' Mill. Here, Butterfield's 83rd Pennsylvania Volunteers began to falter. Butterfield, in spite of a serious wound, seized the Regimental Colors at a critical moment and rallied his men to hold their ground.³ This action allowed the entire A.O.P., which consisted of 90,000 men, 400 wagons, and 350 guns, to withdraw to Harrison's Landing on the James River, where seven Union gunboats gave artillery support to the tired Army. This was considered one of the most skillful withdrawals in military history.

On July 1st, General Lee, in a desperate move to push McClellan's Army into the James River, sent his Rebels up to Malvern Hill. The massed Union artillery cut the Confederates to pieces, leaving some 5000 dead on the hillside. Actually, both sides had suffered heavy losses during the Seven Days battles, and were ready to retire and bind their broken bodies. Union losses were 1,700 killed and 7,000 wounded. The Confederates suffered 3,400 killed in action and 16,000 wounded.

On July 2nd, McClellan established his base at Harrison's Landing on the James River. His Army's morale was low, but sank even lower after President Lincoln arrived at headquarters and announced that "reinforcement was impossible," advising McClellan "to wait, to rest, and to repair."

While Butterfield lay in his tent in an Army Field Hospital recovering from his wound, he reviewed all of the bugle calls of his Brigade, many of which he had composed himself. He had been a great exponent of the bugle call, being able to blow all calls, and to teach his buglers just how each call should sound. He took great pride in the fine discipline of his men, and the superior control he had of their activities through the medium of the bugle, in camps, on marches, in battle, and even in the black of night.

Butterfield was not satisfied with the final call of the day, variously known as Taps, Tatum, and Lights Out. "It did not seem as smooth, melodious, and musical as it should; it was too formal." He believed that Taps should bring comfort and peace to the tired and troubled men.¹

About the 4th of July 1862, he called his Brigade bugler, Oliver W. Norton, to his tent and showed him some notes on a staff, which he had written in pencil on the back of an

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envelope, and asked Norton to sound on his bugle.¹ After hearing the call several times as written, Butterfield hummed and whistled some changes, lengthening some notes and shortening others. After getting it to his liking, he directed Norton to sound the new Lights Out that night and thereafter.

Thus, General Butterfield, "without any formal knowledge of music, nor of the technical names of any notes, composed Taps, as we know it today, simply by ear."¹ Later, Norton said, "The music was beautiful on that still summer night, and was heard beyond the limits of the Butterfield Brigade as it echoed through the valleys. The next morning, buglers from other Brigades came to visit and to inquire about the new Taps and to learn how to sound it."¹

Several days after Taps was born, a soldier in Battery A of the 2nd US Artillery died. Normally, this soldier would have been honored by having his own squad fire three rifle volleys over his grave. At that time, however, the A.O.P. was surrounded and closely observed by the Confederate units of Jackson, Huger, Longstreet, and A. P. Hill. Captain John C. Tidball, the Battery A Commander, and later father of Miss Mabel, thought the three rifle volleys might provoke new fighting by the Rebels. Neither side was ready to renew the battle. Captain Tidball told the bugler to "just sound Taps!"⁴

In early August, as the Federal Army, exhausted and heavy-hearted, slowly retraced its steps down the peninsula, the other units of the A.O.P. gradually adopted the new bugle call. Taps followed Butterfield's commands; to Fortress Monroe, the first military post to hear its mournful song, to the Army of Northern Virginia, to the Army of Cumberland, to the Armies of the West (Chattanooga), to Gettysburg, and finally on Sherman's March to the Sea. It has been said that the Confederates also adopted Taps, using it at the burial of General "Stonewall" Jackson in 1863.

Thus, on a battlefield near Harrison's Landing (now Berkley), Taps was born, as well as the custom of sounding Taps at military funerals. Between 1871 and 1874, it became mandatory for the Butterfield Taps to be used at all Army funerals. By 1900, all US Military Services were using Taps and, during World War I, France adopted the American call.

Late in the Civil War, Butterfield was promoted to Major

General; he also received the Congressional Medal of Honor for his distinguished gallantry at Gaines' Mill and the Seven Days battles. After the war, he returned to a peaceful civil life in New York State, where he died in 1901. He was buried in the cemetery of the US Military Academy at West Point with full military honors. As Taps was sounded over his grave, few besides his wife knew that he had been its composer. Butterfield's gallantry has been reported in many Civil War histories and biographies, but little mention has been made of his composition of Taps.

There has been considerable concern as to why this bugle call has been designated as Taps. The trumpet has been well-known since Biblical times, being used by many Armies, especially to sound an alarm. In the early US Continental Army, a combination of fife and drum was popular, as seen in the "Spirit of '76." The drum was to remain the chief form of sound signal in the Infantry until the Civil War. Taps was sounded by a drummer, standing at the head of the regimental street, in single staccato beats, to which the soldiers frequently chanted:²

"Go to bed, Tom!

Go to bed, Tom!

Go to bed! Go to bed! Go to bed!

Go to bed, Tom!"

"Taps is the Army's most beautiful bugle call. Played slowly and softly, it has a plaintive, tender, and touching character. It rolls down the curtains on the soldier's day, and upon the soldier's life."¹

Now I am aware of some of the reasons why Miss Mabel Tidball had requested that Taps be played at our Chapel of the Centurion centennial. To commemorate the centennial of Taps, our memorial committee designed and installed a stained-glass window in the Old Post Chapel at Fort Monroe, depicting Oliver Norton sounding the first Taps at a military funeral at Harrison's Landing on the banks of the James River in July of 1862.

References

¹Butterfield, J. L.: Biographical Memorial of Daniel Butterfield. Library of Congress and Pentagon Memorial Library.

²Caton, B.: This Hallowed Ground. Doubleday and Co., Garden City, N.Y., 1956.

³Johnson, A.: Dictionary of American Biography. New York, 1946.

⁴Tidball, M.: Personal Communication.