



Taps

Daniel Adams Butterfield, 1851–1901

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Hymns
of
Praise

TWENTY-FOUR NOTES ON A BUGLE

Although not strictly a hymn, the strains of "Taps" are probably the most recognizable twenty-four notes in our country's musical history. The eloquent and haunting melody has drifted over the graves of soldiers since it was first played by a lone bugler on a Civil War battlefield in 1862.

It was mid-summer and the Union and Confederate armies had been fighting for seven long days at Harrison's Landing in Virginia. Brigadier General Daniel A. Butterfield was serving as commander of a brigade of the Fifth Corps of the Army of the Potomac. The fighting had been brutal and the troops on each side had suffered considerable loss. At that time, the only efficient way for leaders to communicate with their troops was with the use of bugle calls designated for specific purposes. There were calls for charge, retreat, lights out, and other orders. On this particular evening, Butterfield contemplated the traditional tattoo, or taps, used to signal lights out. He felt it was too rigid and not melodic enough to signal the end of the day. Unable to write music, he composed a variation of the tattoo in his head, called in someone who could write down the notes as he whistled them, and had him

jot down the melody on the back of an envelope. Then Butterfield sent for his brigade bugler, Oliver W. Norton. Together they tinkered with the melodic line until the general was satisfied. At the end of their meeting, Butterfield directed Norton to substitute the new call for taps from that evening on. Norton wrote in a letter to a reporter several years later:

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. 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.

The bugle call was initially intended to signal the setting of the sun, but the tradition of playing "Taps" at military funerals began very shortly after its composition. Captain John C. Tidball of the Union army was charged with supervising the burial of his cannoneer killed in action during the Peninsular Campaign at Harrison's Landing. At that time, the custom was to fire three rifle shots over the grave at the close of the funeral service. But Tidball's troops were concealed in the woods in an advanced position. He feared that the firing of three volleys so near enemy forces might renew fighting and so decided to substitute the sounding of "Taps" as a tribute to the fallen comrade. Before long, the custom was carried throughout the Army of the Potomac until it was eventually confirmed by orders as the official tribute at the grave of any fallen serviceman.

It seems fitting that a melody played most often at times of great human drama be sung both to mark the close of a day and to reflect on the close of a life. At the end of the day, as well as at the end of a life, there is the longing for assurance that "all is well for God is nigh."

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Taps

*For he hath said, I will never leave thee,
nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say,
The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear
what man shall do unto me. Hebrews 13:5-6*

Taps

Daniel Adams Butterfield

Oliver W. Norton

1. Day is done, gone the sun, From the
2. Go to sleep, peace - ful sleep, May the
3. Thanks and praise, for our days, 'Neath the

hills, from the lake, from the skies. All is
sol - dier or sail - or God keep. On the
sun, 'neath the stars, 'neath the sky. As we

well, safe - ly rest, God is nigh.
land or the deep, Safe in sleep.
go, or this we know, God is nigh.



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Taps

*Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall
I flee from thy presence? If I take the wings of
the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts
of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me,
and thy right hand shall hold me. If I say,
Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night
shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not
from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness
and the light are both alike to thee. Psalm 139:7, 9-12*