

THE ORIGIN OF THE SONG TAPs

Or

24 Notes that TAP Deep Emotions

By Don Smart

There is no military bugle call, so easily recognized, that is more apt to render emotion than the call "TAPs". As young men and women, all of us who served in the military remember those plaintive notes echoing across Military Installations and through the windows of those wooden barracks to signify "Lights Out". The melody is both eloquent and haunting and the history of its origin is interesting and somewhat clouded in controversy.

Where did this short very meaningful song come from? TAPs began as a revision to the signal for Extinguish Lights (Lights Out) at the end of the day. In the earliest army units, ie, Revolutionary War through about 1860's the song used was the one set down in Silas Casey's Tactics, which had been borrowed from the French. In July 1862, during the Civil War and in particular the 'Seven Days Battle for Richmond' General Daniel Butterfield commander of 3rd Brigade, 1st Division, V Army Corp, Army of the Potomac decided to replace the song "Tatto", the French Bugle Call used for Lights Out. He summoned his bugler, Oliver W. Norton, from Erie, Pennsylvania and the two composed the song we know as TAPs.

Daniel Adams Butterfield(31 October 1831—17 July 1901) was born in Utica, New York and graduated from Union College at Schenectady. When the Civil War broke out, he rose quickly in rank. A Colonel in the 12th Regiment of the New York State Militia, he was promoted to Brigadier General and given command of a brigade in the V Corps. During the Battle of Gaines Mill, despite and injury, he rallied the regiment at a critical time in the battle. For this he was later awarded the Medal of Honor.

As the story goes, General Butterfield felt that the 'Call to Extinguish Lights' was too formal to signal days end. He and Oliver Wilcox Norton, Bugler, wrote TAPs to honor his men during the Seven Day's Battle. The call was first sounded that night in July 1862. The song was not officially denoted as TAPs until the late 1800's. Since the song is closely related to Tattoo, the later is derived from the Dutch word, Taptoe meaning time to close up all the taps and taverns in the garrisoned towns. hence the word TAPs.

TAPs concludes all military funerals with honors at Arlington National Cemetery, as well as hundreds of others around the United States. When TAPs is played at a funeral, it is customary to salute if in uniform, or to place the right hand over the heart if out of uniform.

LEGENDS

There are several urban legends concerning the origin of TAPs. The most widely circulated one states that a Union Army Infantry Officer, name given as Captain Robert Ellicombe, ordered TAPs performed at the funeral of his son, a Confederate killed during the Peninsula Campaign. The Story goes that the Captain heard a badly wounded soldier on the battle field, he went out and brought him to Union lines and found out he was his son. The Captain found the song in his son's pocket. However, there is no record that a man named Robert Ellicombe served in the Union Army.

A second, and more historically verifiable, account involves John C. Tidball, a Union Artillery captain who during a break in fighting ordered the tune played for a deceased soldier in lieu of the more traditional-and very noisy three volley tribute. Since the unit was at a very forward position, Captain Tidball felt it was unsafe to fire the customary three volleys over the grave due to proximity of the enemy. History says this was the first time TAPs was performed at a funeral.

OTHER SONGS

The British equivalent is "Last Post", the Norwegian Army has a song named "Bonn" (Prayer). In Germany and Austria "Ich Hatt einen Kameraden" (I had a Comrade) is played.

The song takes on a special meaning when we go to the funeral of a veteran and the song is played as the last and special sendoff for a man who has served in defense of his country.