



Twenty-Four Notes That Tap Deep Emotions

The story of America's most famous bugle call

By Jari Villanueva

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For 150 years, Americans have heard the somber 24 notes of Taps, our national song of remembrance. The call holds a special place in our American heritage. At summer camp, scouts, during basic training, at Memorial Day and Veterans Day services, and at all military funerals, it is the one piece of music easily recognized for its powerful and emotional message. It is a uniquely American piece of music born on a battlefield and sounded at some of our country's most sacred locations. Originally conceived as a replacement signal to order lights out at the end of the day in the military, the call transformed into the funeral honors accorded all uniformed personnel who have faithfully served our nation. While still sounded every evening at military bases to signal Day is Done, the notes of Taps have become part of our national conscience. In times of peace and war the 24 notes of this familiar melody have been performed each day in virtually every part of our nation.

From the banks of the James River in Virginia, to the beaches at Normandy, to the Punchbowl in Hawaii, to the lawn at the White House, to the distant lands in the Middle East, to Arlington National Cemetery, it is the one call that unites all Americans in tribute, honor and remembrance. As Oliver Willcox Norton, the first bugler ever to sound the call, wrote, "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."

*It is to all the men and women who have answered the clarion call to duty
that this book is respectfully dedicated.*

Twenty-Four Notes That Tap Deep Emotions

By Jari Villanueva

TAPS

A bugle call that beckons us to remember patriots who served our country with honor and valor. It is the most familiar call and one that moves all who hear it.

Twenty-Four Notes That Tap Deep Emotions *tells the story of the famous call and those who created it.*

The origin of Taps, the ceremonies in which it is used, and the stories of those who have performed the call are a significant but often overlooked part of our history.

***“Lord of our lives, our hope in death, we cannot listen to Taps without our souls stirring.
Its plaintive notes are a prayer in music--of hope, of peace, of grief, of rest...
Prepare us too, Lord, for our final bugle call when you summon us home!
When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound and death will be no more.”***

--From the Invocation delivered by Chaplain (Colonel) Edward Brogan at the Taps Exhibit Opening Ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery, 28 May 1999

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THE PROGRESSION OF TAPS

To provide background to the music of Taps, an evolution of the call is presented.

1804 “To Extinguish Lights” “Pour Eteindre les Feux” “L’Extinguish des Feux”



Used by the French since 1804, this call, attributed to David Buhl (1781-1829), was Napoleon’s favorite bugle call. It is found in *Ordonnance Provisoire sur L’Exercice et les Manoeuvres de la Cavallerie*, printed in 1804. The call is also found on p. 17 of *Manuel Général de Musique Militaire a L’Usage des Armées Françaises* (General Manual of Military Music) by Georges Kastner, published in 1848. *Sonnerie favorite de l’Empereur* (favorite song of the Emperor) is written under the title. Both the 1835 Scott’s and 1836 Cooper’s manuals include this call, and both manuals copy virtually the entire French 1832 Infantry Manual, note for note. During the American Civil War, the call was used as the final call of the day and as the name implies, it was a signal to extinguish all fires and lights. Following the call, three single drum strokes were beat at four-count intervals. These are known as “The Taps.” In the cavalry and artillery, this tune, played as a trio, was the signal for evening roll call (The Tattoo). As a solo call in the infantry, it meant lights out.

Tattoo may have originated during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) or during the wars of King William III during the 1690s. The word tattoo in this usage is derived from the Dutch tap (tap or faucet) and toe (to cut off). When it was time to cease drinking for the evening and return to the post, the provost or Officer of the Day, accompanied by a sergeant and drummer, would go through the town beating out the signal. Innkeepers were required to “Doe den tap toe” or “turn off the taps” lest they be closed down. Another theory is that tattoo came from the seventeenth century German Army’s Zapfenstreich, meaning the time for the striking of the tap or bung into the barrel (or keg) of beer. At 9:00 p.m. when the call was sounded, all bungs (stoppers, or Zapfen) had to be replaced in their barrels. The provost would hammer the bungs in and then draw a chalk line across them to make sure they were not tampered with. If there were any signs of tampering, the innkeeper would be fined. As far as military regulations went, there was a prescribed roll call to be taken “at Taptoe time” to ensure that all the troops had returned to their billets.

How the word Tattoo became Taps is uncertain, but here are two possibilities. Tattoo was also called Tap-toe and as is true with slang terms in the military, it was shortened to Taps. The other (more likely) explanation is that the name “Taps” was borrowed from a drummer’s beat. The beating of Tattoo by the drum corps would be followed by the Drummer of the Guard beating three distinct drum taps at four count intervals for the military evolution “To Extinguish Lights.” This is known as “The Taps.” Thus the drum beat “To Extinguish Lights” came to be

called Taps by the common soldiers. These two explanations could be the derivation of the word Taps as it applies to the bugle call.

Today, although the call Tattoo is sounded at military bases (I heard it on a recent trip to the Carlisle Barracks in Pennsylvania), the term is used to describe ceremonies used as a venue for military bands and drill teams to perform before large audiences. Eventually this developed into a large-scale performance of military music by massed bands. The most famous of these Tattoos is the one in Edinburgh, Scotland, every August. Since 1950, the Edinburgh Military Tattoo has been an annual event held over the period of the International Festival on the Castle Esplanade. It is now attended by some 200,000 people each year from all parts of the world. Every year the program includes the music of the massed Pipes and Drums of the Scottish Regiments together with that of the Massed Military Bands. The participation of foreign units does much to contribute to its international flavor, and some one-third of all spectators come from overseas. These Tattoo performances are popular in Europe and showcase the talents of various military, civilian, and para-military musical groups and the precision of military drill teams.

1825 "Commodore's Dinner Call"

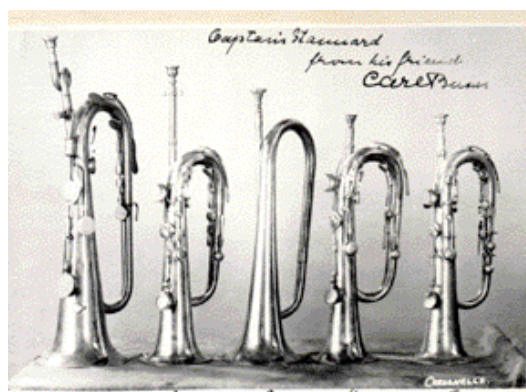


Bugle calls were used on nineteenth century U.S. Navy warships as found in the records of the U.S.S. North Carolina, U.S.S. Concord and U.S.S. Columbus. In addition to duty calls common to all military organizations, such as morning and evening signals and calls to dinner, the navy had certain musical soundings to identify small boats (or gigs) on the ships. They were used to call away the variety of ship's boats, as well as to summon the requisite ship's crew to man the boat falls. This bugle call is found in the records of the U.S.S. North Carolina and U.S.S. Columbus. The resemblance to Taps is remarkable considering that this call was used by the navy thirty-five years before the Civil War. We cannot know for certain if this call had any influence on Taps, but the last three notes are similar to the William Little arrangement of Taps found in the 1884 Luce manual.

1835 “The Tattoo” (The 1835 or Scott Tattoo)

♩ = 90

The 1835 Tattoo, also known as the Scott Tattoo, is a leftover from the old trumpet notation. In that notation, which is one octave lower than the bugle notation, the notes of middle C and the first line E are common. The trumpet calls were sounded on cavalry trumpets in D and E flat. Although the higher notes might be considered hard to play in today’s context, it was common for trumpeters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One just needs to examine trumpet music of the court and military trumpeters of the time. It is also possible that this was to be sounded on a keyed bugle. The keyed bugle is about forty centimeters long and is held in a horizontal plane. The best way to envision these instruments is to think of them almost as a hybrid of a saxophone and a natural trumpet. The keyed bugle was the same as the keyed trumpet, but had a distinctive conical shape. Made originally in England, it became known to the public through the works of Richard Willis (17??-1830), an arranger, composer, and performer. The first patent was obtained by Joseph Halliday in 1811. Halliday named his new instrument the Royal Kent bugle in honor of the Duke of Kent. His patent called for five keys. The instrument made its way to the United States with Willis when he was appointed bandmaster of the United States Military Academy Band at West Point, New York.



Examples of keyed bugles

To be clear, a distinction should be made between bugles and trumpets. In both cases we are dealing with a brass instrument without valves; each is played in the same manner. The fundamental difference is found in the shape of the bell. The musical definition of a natural trumpet is that of a horn that has two-thirds of its length in the form of a cylindrical tube--usually it is five-sixths of the total length. A bugle has a conical shape throughout. So we can make the general assumption that trumpets are cylindrically shaped with a cup-shaped mouthpiece, while the bugle is conical with a funnel-shaped mouthpiece. The shape of the bell plus the shape of the mouthpiece produces different sounds in each. The trumpet is known for its bright, strident, brash sound, whereas the bugle is known for its darker and more mellow tone. Today, the word “bugle” can mean a brass instrument without valves or slides.

Returning to the 1835 Tattoo, in the last five and one-half measures, there is a marked crescendo/decrescendo over the dotted half and whole notes. This is a similar playing style to today’s Taps interpretation. Notice that the first two measures are unplayable on a bugle. The E’s and G’s would be very difficult on (but within the scope of) a valveless E flat cavalry trumpet.

Last five and one-half measures of “The Tattoo” (The 1835 or Scott Tattoo)



$\text{♩} = 112$ 1855 “The Tattoo” (The Hardee Tattoo)



As the Civil War began, the infantry adopted a new Tattoo call. This Tattoo (the 1855 or Hardee Tattoo) in 6/8 time is more lyrical than the Scott Tattoo, and has as part of its call the distinct notes that are common to all Tattoo calls today. At the end of the call, you can hear the notes sing out “Tat-too...Tat-too.”

1862 “To Extinguish Lights (or Taps)” from Howe’s Manual



In 1861 and 1862, a number of Boston, Massachusetts area publishers printed this cavalry bugle signal, probably arranged by Elias Howe (inventor of the sewing machine, but a nonbugler). Howe dropped or modified the first two measures of the last five and one-half measures of the 1835 Tattoo, as they can’t be sounded on a bugle. Note the second measure, which doesn’t soar to the E, but instead stays on a tuning C. He wrote a half note followed by a hold on the quarter rest. The effect would be of the note dying out in silence, instead of the more melodious and haunting crescendo and decrescendo of the 1835 Tattoo. The middle area with the dotted eighth and sixteenth note combinations is very military, almost a march, not a lullaby. This rocking rhythm is interesting, as it is (outside of the Sousa book some twenty four years later) one of the very few times that we see this incorrect rhythm.

We cannot be absolutely sure that this call preceded the Butterfield arrangement. Remember, Butterfield was a colonel before the war. As I wrote earlier, his General Order No. 1, issued on December 7, 1859, stated that “The Officers and non-commissioned Officers are expected to be thoroughly familiar with the first thirty pages, Vol. 1, Scott’s Tactics, and ready to answer any questions in regard to the same previous to the drill above ordered.” Scott’s Tactics include the bugle calls that Butterfield must have known and used. If Butterfield was using Scott’s Tactics for drills, then it is feasible that he would have employed the calls as set in the manual. And the 1835 Tattoo was published in the *U.S. Army’s Authorized Infantry Tactics* from 1835 through 1861 inclusive. Therefore, he must have known of the call’s existence before the publication of the Howe manual.

It also may be possible that Butterfield had a copy of the Howe manual. He was in the process of writing his own book, *Camp and Outpost Duty for Infantry*, and may have had a copy of it for reference. The Howe manual has directions for the sounding of calls and formation of parades and funeral escorts, all of which are covered in depth in Butterfield’s book. On the other hand, Howe may have decided to include the new Taps call after hearing it sounded. It is conceivable that Howe or others heard the call being sounded as we know it today, and misarranged it (wrote down the wrong rhythms, notes) for printing after hearing the Butterfield/Norton version. Howe has several errors in his manual, such as extra measures (see the Cavalry General in the manual), missed notes, and calls written in the old trumpet scale as opposed to the bugle scale (see the Cavalry Charge).

Even though the call is written in the bugle notation, it would not be unreasonable to surmise that the 1862 “To Extinguish Lights (or Taps)” is a re-arrangement of the 1835 Tattoo. However, Butterfield’s version is the modern Taps, and is clearly more lyrical than Howe’s version of the second stanza of the 1835 Tattoo.

1862 “Taps”



At the beginning of this text, I have already relayed Oliver Willcox Norton’s version of the origin of Taps. (See his 1898 letter to *Century Magazine*.) This the Butterfield/Norton connection with Taps and is the generally accepted version of how the call came into existence. It is true that Oliver Norton does not refer to the call in his *Army Letters* book. He was an honest and intelligent man. Based on his writing style and the topics he covered, it is hard to see how he would have missed this new call if he had been involved in Taps’ development. Perhaps one day a reference might be found in an unpublished letter or account from him or another soldier in the brigade. Remember, Butterfield also made no mention of Taps until after the article was printed in *Century Magazine*. Neither the monument to Butterfield in New York City nor the monument over his grave at West Point mentions Taps.

1867, 1874 “To Extinguish Lights”



In 1867, Major General Emory Upton printed his *Infantry Tactics*, published by D. Appleton. Upton copied the bulk of his *Infantry Tactics* from Silas Casey, who had copied it from the French. This also included the bugle, fife, and drum signals. These bugle calls were the same as those heard during the Civil War and would remain unchanged for the next eight years. The Lights Out call was “To Extinguish Lights,” straight from Napoleon’s buglers. Not “Taps,” not Howe’s cavalry signal “To Extinguish Lights (or Taps),” and not John Billings’ remembrance of what was sounded in the artillery camps. The 1867 Tattoo for all branches is the 1861 Infantry Tattoo.

Upton asked Major Truman Seymour of the Fifth U.S. Artillery to revise the calls into one concise system that would be used by all branches of the service, thus providing uniformity. Exceptions were the specific calls peculiar to the cavalry and artillery. The revised 1874 edition of Upton’s *Infantry Tactics* manual contains the hard work done to the bugle signals (new calls, and consolidation of the branches into one system) by Major Seymour. Seymour threw out the French Infantry calls (which had been copied from the French 1832 *Infantry Manual*, note for note) and added new calls. Most of the calls that survived the revision came from the 1841 Cavalry manuals (Assembly, Mess Call, Officers Call, and Retreat are a few examples). Among the new calls that can be attributed to Seymour is the 1874 Tattoo. That version combined the French “To Extinguish Lights” (although the sixth measure of the call is different from the original) with the British Tattoo and the Hanoverian Tattoo or Zapfenstreich. The other calls added by Seymour include Adjutant’s Call (derived from the Civil War fife tune of the same

name), To Arms, General's March, Flourishes and To The Color. The biggest change, however, was in the naming of these as trumpet calls, not bugle calls. The 1874 Tattoo is still used today.

1874 "Tattoo"

♩ = 116

Here is the 1874 Tattoo mentioned previously. It is the longest bugle call in use in today's military. Note the difference in the sixth measure as compared to the 1804 "Extinguish Lights."

1884 "Extinguish Lights" from Luce's Text-Book of Seamanship

Slow

This arrangement of Taps is found in *Text-Book of Seamanship: The Equipping and Handling of Vessels Under Sail or Steam* by Rear Admiral Stephen B. Luce. The manual was published for use by the U.S. Naval Academy between 1884 and 1898. The bugle calls in this manual were arranged by Lieutenant William McC. Little. It shows incorrect rhythmic figures, the addition of slurs in the second and third measures, and melodic change in the penultimate note.

1886 “Extinguish Lights” from Sousa’s “The Trumpet and Drum”



John Philip Sousa published *The Trumpet and Drum--A Book of Field Instruction for The Trumpet and Drum* in 1886. Number 6, “Extinguish Lights” is Taps--and as with all the other calls in the book, includes a drum part. The title is not uncommon, as many trumpet/bugle books were published around this time and refer to the call as “Extinguish Lights” or “To Extinguish Lights.” These books were not official army regulation books and were for the most part written and published privately. Some of these other books (Ellis Pugh’s “The Trumpeters Call Book” of 1885, for example) refer to the call as we know it today, Taps. The name Taps was used unofficially by the U.S. military as the call sounded in the evening and at funerals. We can read this in many of the post-Civil War accounts and letters. Libby Custer (George Armstrong Custer’s widow) refers to this in her book “Following The Guidon” in 1890.

The biggest mistake that Sousa makes is the rhythmic figure in the seventh, eighth, tenth, eleventh, thirteenth, and fourteenth notes. The correct rhythms should be the straight eighth notes, not the dotted eighth and sixteenth note rhythm. Sousa most likely followed naval regulations in his arrangement of Taps; that is, he followed the 1884 Little arrangement of Taps, as Little’s arrangement was published in the 1884 through 1898 Luce manual listed above. The incorrect rhythmic figure seems to appear mostly in naval manuals. This may have evolved from the 1825 Commodore’s Call, as it bears resemblance to the call found in the Luce and Sousa manuals.

The best reasons for the straight eighth note rhythm come 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* that 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. The correct rhythm to Taps can be found in virtually every other manual. Sousa probably titled it “Extinguish Lights” because that was (at the time) the official designation.

1887 “Taps”



John Billings publishes *Hardtack and Coffee* in 1887. On p. 196 he says that “Taps” was the call sounded for lights out in the artillery. He also writes that the call for lights out in the infantry was the Cavalry Tattoo, which was the “To Extinguish Lights.” He contradicts himself in the next paragraph by saying “Taps ended the army day for all branches of the service.”

1887 “Taps” from Lt. Reed’s “Schools of the Squad and Company”



In 1887 Lt. Hugh T. Reed published a manual entitled *Schools of the Squad and Company*. This manual contains Trumpet Signal Music, which includes an early (second earliest?) usage of the word Taps. Every one of the calls in the manual is changed either by note or by rhythm. It would appear that the calls were written by someone who did not look at the Upton book or took the calls down by dictation from a bugler who learned them by rote. The way the calls are printed illustrates how calls can be performed after hearing them a few times. Indications of fermatas in some of the calls provide insight into how they were sounded.

The Taps in this manual has twenty-four notes, but there are rhythmic differences and the inclusion of two extra notes at the end. The call also has articulations of staccato (.), which implies a nonlegato form of single tonguing, and a percussive (v) accent, which implies a stronger attack.

1891 “Taps” from Infantry Drill Regulations



The U.S. Army published *Infantry Drill Regulations*, which were adopted as of October 3, 1891. The call is found on p. 296. The name changes from “To Extinguish Lights” to “Taps,” and the manual spells out the usage in funerals. The first official reference to the mandatory use of Taps at military funeral ceremonies is found on p. 283, although it had doubtless been used unofficially long before that.

Modern-Day “Taps”



The signal to extinguish all lights and cease talking, this is the call as it is sounded at Arlington National Cemetery. It is used today as the final call of the day on U.S. military bases world-wide and as honors at funerals, memorial services, and wreath-laying services. When sounded at a funeral or memorial service, military members should render the hand salute and civilians should place their right hand over their heart.



Taps at the Tomb of the Unknowns

“Echo Taps”



Echo Taps is a custom of sounding the call with two buglers standing at some distance apart to achieve an echo effect. Arlington National Cemetery does not permit it to be performed that way during services at the cemetery. This version was taken from the *U.S. Marine Drum and Bugle Corps Manual* of 1959. Notice that it has the incorrect rhythms in the third and fourth measures. This version was dropped from later editions of the manual. Although a popular way of sounding Taps, this is not authorized by the U.S. military and not accepted as correct. This idea of sounding Echo Taps may have started right at the creation of the new call, when Union buglers played the tune for the first time at Harrison's Landing (now Berkeley Plantation). Confederates across the James River repeated the new sound, thus introducing it into both armies. As the call grew in popularity, it was not uncommon to hear the sound of Taps being performed at the same time each evening by buglers in other companies, thereby giving an echo effect. The call is meant to be sounded by a solo bugler and really should be performed that way.