



“Butterfield’s Lullaby”: The True Story behind “Taps”: How a Standard Bugle Call was Transformed into a National Tradition

Butterfield’s Lullaby
Memorial Day; 25 May 2003

Transparencies: (1) Virginia, (2) Seven Days #1, and (3) Seven Days #2

In May of 1862, the Union army under General George B. McClellan made a timid effort to end the year-long War between the States during the Peninsula Campaign. Eastern Virginia is feathered by a series of peninsulas created by the Potomac, Rappahannock, York, and James Rivers. McClellan’s announced strategy was to attack the Confederate capital at Richmond from the northeast and thus seal a quick victory for the North.

On May 20th, McClellan’s forces bivouacked on the banks of the Chickahominy River, approximately eight miles from Richmond. There they sat in its sluggish swamp for thirty–nine days awaiting McClellan’s decision to advance. During this time McClellan exchanged a series of communications with Washington explaining why he had not mounted an attack, whining about the fact he did not have enough troops, he was greatly outnumbered, and the weather wasn’t conducive to battle.

The fact was that the Confederate Army under General Robert E. Lee numbered only 80,000 to McClellan’s 100,000. Yet the Union general miscalculated that he was outnumbered two to one:

Bradford, Ned (ed.). *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*. (New York: New American Library, 1984), 201-202:

At last, on the 25th of June, General McClelland advanced his picket lines on the left to within four miles of Richmond, and was apparently preparing for a further movement, though none was ordered, and the next day his adversary took the initiative out of his hands. General “Stonewall” Jackson had returned from the Valley. (p. 201)

As soon as this was known, on the evening of the 25th, General McClellan reported it to (Secretary of War) Edwin Stanton, added that he thought Jackson would attack his right and rear, that the Confederate force was stated at 200,000, that he regretted his great inferiority in numbers, but was in no way responsible for it, and concluded:

I will do all that a general can do with the splendid army I have the honor to command, and if it is destroyed by overwhelming numbers can at least die with it and share its fate. But if the result of the action, which will probably occur tomorrow, or within a short time, is a disaster, the responsibility cannot be thrown on my shoulders; it must rest where it belongs. (pp. 201-202)

The Battle of Gaines’s Mill followed, where, on the 27th, one-fifth of the Union forces contended against the whole Confederate army, save (John) Magruder’s corps and (Benjamin) Huger’s division; then the retreat, or “change of base,” to the James. (p. 202)

With inferior forces, General Lee engaged McClellan’s army in a series of battles that lasted for a week forcing him to retreat to Harrison’s Landing on the James River. The Battles of Mechanicsville, Gaines’s Mill, Savage’s Station, Frayser’s Farm, and Malvern Hill are called the Seven Days’ Battles since they occurred between June 25 and July 1. The key battle among these was that at Gaines’s Mill on June 27th.

McClellan’s 100,000-man army outnumbered Lee’s by 20 thousand however due to poor intelligence McClellan fought the entire week assuming he was outnumbered. At Gaines’s Mill Lee actually did have the advantage as 50,000 troops led by Generals A. P. Hill, D. H. Hill, James Longstreet, and John Bell Hood. They attacked the flank of Union General Fitz John Porter. The Confederate victories at Mechanicsville and Gaines’s Mill forced the Union Army south of the Chickahominy River and convinced McClellan that he could not take Richmond at that time.



McClellan's plan for retreat was to withdraw to Harrison's Landing on the James River where Union gunboats would supply protection and escape. As McClellan sidestepped his way to the James, Lee continued his assaults in hopes of a decisive victory before the retreat could be executed. The subsequent battles that occurred along the way led to a final clash at Malvern Hill. A summary of this battle is provided by:

Symonds, Craig L. *A Battlefield Atlas of the Civil War*. 2d ed. (Baltimore: The Nautical and Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1983), 37:

The new Federal position was a strong one, but Lee saw no real option other than to keep up the pressure on his retreating foe, so he planned to renew the pursuit the next day.

The Confederate army came up to Malvern Hill around noon on July 1. The Federal position appeared to be unassailable and Lee sought locations from which Confederate artillery could bombard the heights. Only when and if the artillery broke the union lines would Confederate infantry assault the hill. The artillery duel began at 1 P.M. and lasted for several hours, with the Federals having much the better of it. But owing to confusion in orders, the infantry divisions of Magruder and D. H. Hill attacked the hill anyway at about 6 P.M. It was a massacre. Southern bravery availed nothing against the well-placed Union guns. That night McClellan's men retreated to an entrenched position at Harrison's Landing. The Seven Days were over.

Lee was discouraged that McClellan had made good his crab-like movement to the James, and McClellan himself considered his maneuver to have been a model of logistical and tactical skill. But in fact the strategic situation had been almost exactly reversed. Though the cost had been heavy (nearly 20,000 Confederate casualties—a fourth of Lee's army [as opposed to the Union's 16,000]), Lee had broken McClellan's spirit and convinced him that he could not take Richmond without massive reinforcements.

Moreover, not only had McClellan lost confidence in himself, but Lincoln was losing confidence in him too. Lincoln's doubts were fueled by a curious letter sent to him by McClellan from Harrison's Landing, charging the president with sabotaging his campaign.

McClellan had been whining for six weeks about not having enough troops when in fact he did. His missives to Washington continued to cast blame on the President and the War Department. Following the Battle of Gaines's Mill he set off the following telegram at 12:20 A.M. the following day:

Bradford, *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 202-203:

Our men at Gaines's Mill did all that men could do ...but they were overwhelmed by vastly superior numbers, even after I brought my last reserves into action... I have lost this battle because my force is too small... The Government must not and cannot hold me responsible for the result. I have seen too many dead and wounded comrades to feel otherwise than that the Government has not sustained this army... . If I save this army now, I tell you plainly that I owe no thanks to you *or to any other persons in Washington*. *You have done your best to sacrifice this army.* (p. 202)

President Lincoln responded on July 2nd:

Allow me to reason with you a moment. If, in your frequent mention of responsibility, you have the impression that I blame you for not doing more than you can, please be relieved of such impression. I only beg that in like manner you will not ask impossibilities of me. If you think you are not strong enough to take Richmond just now, I do not ask you to try just now. Save the army, material and personal, and I will strengthen it for the offensive against as fast as I can. (p. 203)

McClellan's failure to take Richmond with superior forces caused the war to linger on for another two years and at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives. With this high casualty total on the horizon and a like number of military burials to follow, it is sobering to consider the ironic event that took place during one of those early July nights at Harrison's Landing.



The weather along the James in July was hot, muggy, and even painful for those who had contracted typhoid. In addition, heavy rain had turned the encampment's surroundings into a muddy soup. McClellan had established his headquarters at Berkeley Plantation near Harrison's landing, protected by the Union Navy which patrolled the James.

During the day the blazing sun provided the heat to hatch untold millions of flies and mosquitoes to pester the troops. One particular encampment was the field headquarters of the Third Brigade of the Fifth Army Corps of the Army of the Potomac, a thirty-one year old Brigadier General Daniel A. Butterfield.

This Utica, New York, native had just distinguished himself at the Battle of Gaines's Mill. While wounded, Butterfield seized the fallen colors of his Third Pennsylvania Regiment to rally his troops and charge the enemy lines. His heroic leadership and gallantry assisted the Union withdrawal to Harrison's Landing and earned for him the Medal of Honor. His citation was brief but to the point:

***The Congressional Medal of Honor: The Names, the Deeds.* (Forest Ranch: Sharp & Dunnigan, 1984), 736:**

Daniel Butterfield. Brigadier General, U.S. Volunteers. At Gaines [sic] Mill, Va., 27 June 1862. *Citation:* Seized the colors of the 83d Pennsylvania Volunteers at a critical moment and, under a galling fire of the enemy, encouraged the depleted ranks to renewed exertion.

Transparencies: (1) HQ-Gen. Butterfield and (2) Norton and Butterfield by Sidney King

At Harrison's Landing the only defense Butterfield had from the elements was a brush arbor, cut branches from trees atop a latticework, which served to shade his officer's tent. He was recovering from his injury and the sting of retreat, a maneuver his superior officer considered a "model of logistical and tactical skill."

Butterfield's grief for so many of his men who had been lost in battles of the past week caused him to focus not only on their deaths but also on the mental condition of those now absent the scrum of battle but who instead suffered the miserable and sweltering elements of Tidewater Virginia.

His compassion for his men, both fallen and present, motivated him to make a decision that has had an enduring impact on this nation and its armed forces. He was inspired to create something that has become a somber centerpiece of all military burials, Memorial Day observances, and military ritual. The details of what happened that evening in early July of 1862 are recounted by:

Schneider, Richard H. *Taps: Notes from a Nation's Heart.* (New York: William Morrow, 2002), 9-10:

It's easy to picture Butterfield, on that hot night in early July, wincing from his wound and he hoisted himself from an army cot and stepped outside his tent. As he stood looking over the campfires flickering in the darkness, his heart must have been heavy. So many of his young men had been lost in the recent battles. So many were grievously wounded or diseased. Now the pitiful remnants were forced to endure miserable squalor. Who could go to sleep peacefully under such wretched conditions? And sleep is what the soldiers so sorely needed.

Butterfield pulled out his watch. It would soon be time for his bugler to signal "Extinguish Lights." He had never really like this call; to him it was colorless and harsh, not at all soothing.

He looked again at his men; a deep compassion filled him. (p. 9)

He turned and asked his orderly to summon the brigade bugler.

Shortly, twenty-[two]-year-old Private Oliver Wilcox Norton appeared carrying his bugle. "O.W.", as his friends and family called him, had enlisted in Pennsylvania when the war broke out and eventually became part of the Eighty-third Pennsylvania Volunteers under the command of the man he now saluted. (p. 10)



These two men were destined to impact both military and corporate history in the United States. Butterfield's background reveals a family history of business success which he continued after the War:

Schneider, Taps, 31-33, 38, 41:

Daniel Butterfield's father, John, started out as a sharp-witted stagecoach driver in Albany, New York, in the early 1800s. Recognizing the need for fast and efficient long-distance delivery of merchandise, he developed a large network of express stagecoach lines. (p. 31)

In 1850, he merged his firm with several other delivery companies [Wells and Company, and Livingston and Fargo and Company] to form the American Express Company. Eight years later, before the advent of transcontinental rail service, Butterfield launched America's first overland express service. His Overland Stage Company's U.S. Mail coaches thundered across the plains and through mountain passes from St. Louis to the West Coast in a then-amazing three weeks' time. (pp. 31-32)

Daniel Butterfield graduated from Union College at eighteen and went on to study law. Because he was too young to take the bar exam he toured the West and then returned to Utica to work for his father. A few years later he moved to New York City as Eastern superintendent for American Express and became a colonel in the New York State Militia. When the Civil War broke out in April 1861, Butterfield's Twelfth Regiment was assigned guard duty in Washington, D.C. (p. 32)

Promoted to brigadier general of the Third Brigade of the Fifth Army Corps, Army of the Potomac, Butterfield distinguished himself in the Battle of Hanover Court House in the Peninsular Campaign in May 1862. (pp. 32-33)

The life of **Oliver Wilcox Norton** is another fascinating story of ambition and idealism. Norton was born December 17, 1839. His father, a Presbyterian minister, moved his large family many times in the ensuing years.

In 1862, the twenty-[one]-year-old Norton had become a schoolteacher in Pennsylvania, and supplemented his meager income with day work on a local farm. When the news of the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter reached his town, however, Norton raced to the enlistment office and joined the Eighty-third Pennsylvania Volunteers as a bugler under the command of General Daniel Butterfield. (p. 38)

In November of 1865, O. W. Wilcox was honorably discharged and immediately made good use of the business experience he had gained as a quartermaster. He got a job with the Fourth National Bank in New York City, where he met and married Lucy Fanning.

After five children had been born, Norton decided to take a bold step and move to Chicago to go into business with his brother Edwin, dealing in canning and sheet metal goods. Over the years the business prospered and expanded, and the brothers took on additional partners and clients. In 1901, the Nortons merged their company with a few smaller firms and formed the American Can Company. (p. 41)

These two men, destined for great success in American business and industry, now met: Private Oliver Norton saluting his commanding general, Daniel Butterfield. Butterfield returned Norton's salute and told him he felt the men needed something more comforting than the standard bugle call ("Extinguish Lights").



What happened next has been the source of great controversy over the past 140 years. There has been a series of very moving and tear-jerking versions of the origin of “Taps.” One in particular that has gained credibility over the Internet tells the tale of a Union Captain Robert Ellicombe who during the night heard the moans of a wounded soldier across the darkened battlefield. Not knowing if the man was Union or Confederate, he risked his life to go bring the man in for medical treatment. Once he was able to see the man’s face in the campfire’s light he suddenly realized it was his own son, who having gone to the South to study music had joined the Confederate army. The next day Captain Ellicombe asked permission to give his son a full military burial. Since the young man was a Confederate the request was refused but a bugler was permitted.

The captain requested the bugler play a series of notes he had found in his dead son’s pocket. The hoax concludes with the comment, “The haunting melody, we now know as ‘Taps’ used at military funerals, was born.”

Nice story. But, sorry, no cigar! General Butterfield is the source of “Taps” although most likely not its composer. It may be said that Butterfield *arranged* “Taps.”

Arrangement: A rewriting of a composition to make it simpler or more elaborate, or to make it suitable for performance by a medium of expression other than that for which it was originally written.

How Butterfield came to create this “arrangement” turns out to be the true story of “Taps.” Probably the best history of this bugle call is written by Jari Villanueva. He is author of the book, *Twenty-Four Notes that Tap Deep Emotions: The Story of America’s Most Famous Bugle Call*. He was also an advisor to David Franco, Musical Producer for the movie, *Gods and Generals*. Mr. Villanueva has a Web site that covers the history of bugles and may be accessed at: www.tapsbugler.com. It is from this site that I was able to obtain excerpts from his book.

Villanueva, Jari. *Twenty-Four Notes that Tap Deep Emotions: The Story of America’s Most Famous Bugle Call*. (<http://www.tapsbugler.com/24NotesExcerpt/Page1.html>)

Transparency: “Extinguish Lights”

As the story goes, General Butterfield was not pleased with the call for “Extinguish Lights,” feeling that the call was too formal to signal the days end, and with the help of the brigade bugler, Oliver Willcox Norton, wrote “Taps” to honor his men while in camp at Harrison’s Landing, Virginia, following the Seven Days’ Battles. The new call, sounded that night in July, 1862, soon spread to other units of the Union Army and was reportedly also used by the Confederates. Taps was made an official bugle call after the war.

The highly romantic account of how Butterfield composed the call surfaced in 1898 following a magazine article written that summer. The August, 1898 issue of *Century* magazine contained an article called “The Trumpet in Camp and Battle,” by Gustav Kobbe, a music historian and critic. He was writing about the origin of bugle calls in the military and in reference to “Taps,” wrote:

“In speaking of our trumpet calls I purposely omitted one with which it seemed most appropriate to close this article, for it is the call which closes the soldier’s day... Lights Out. I have not been able to trace this call to any other service. If it seems probable, it was original with Major Seymour, he has given our army the most beautiful of all trumpet-calls.”



Kobbe was using as an authority the Army drill manual on infantry tactics prepared by Major General Emory Upton in **1867** (revised in 1874). The bugle calls in the manual were compiled by Major (later General) Truman Seymour of the 5th U.S. Artillery. "Taps" was **called** "Extinguish Lights" in these manuals since it was to **replace** the call [by the same name] disliked by Butterfield. The title of the call was not changed until later, although other manuals started calling it "Taps" because most soldiers knew it by that name.

Since Seymour was responsible for the music in the Army manual, Kobbe assumed that he had written the call. Kobbe's inability to find the origin of "Extinguish Lights" [or "Taps"] prompted a letter from Oliver W. Norton in Chicago who claimed he knew how the call came about and that he was the first to perform it. Norton wrote the editor of *Century*:

Transparency: "Taps"

Chicago, August 8, 1898.

*I think the following statement may be of interest to Mr. Kobbe and your readers... During the early part of the Civil War I was bugler at the Headquarters of Butterfield's Brigade. One day, soon after the seven days battles on the Peninsula, when the Army of the Potomac was lying in camp at Harrison's Landing, General Daniel Butterfield, then commanding our Brigade, sent for me, and showing me some notes on a staff written in pencil on the back of an envelope, asked me to sound them on my bugle. I did this several times, playing the music as written. **He changed it somewhat, lengthening some notes and shortening others, but retaining the melody as he first gave it to me.** After getting it to his satisfaction, he directed me to sound that call for "Taps" thereafter in place of the regulation call ["Extinguish Lights"]. 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 did not presume to question General Butterfield at the time, but from the manner in which the call was given to me, I have no doubt he composed it in his tent at Harrison's Landing. I think General Butterfield is living at Cold Spring, New York. If you think the matter of sufficient interest, and care to write him on the subject, I have no doubt he will confirm my statement." — Oliver W. Norton

The editor did write to Butterfield as suggested by Norton. In answer to the inquiry from the editor of the *Century*, General Butterfield, writing from Cold Spring, on August 31, 1898, wrote:

*"I recall, in my dim memory, the substantial truth of the statement made by Norton, of the 83rd Pa., about bugle calls. His letter **gives the impression that I personally wrote the notes for the call.** The facts are, that at the time I could sound calls on the bugle as a necessary part of military knowledge and instruction for an officer commanding a regiment or brigade. I had acquired this as a regimental commander.*

"The call of "Taps" did not seem to be as smooth, melodious and musical as it should be, and I called in some one who could write music, and practiced a change in the call of "Taps" until I had it suit my ear, and then, as Norton writes, got it to my taste without being able to write music or knowing the technical name of any note, but, simply by ear, arranged it as Norton describes. I did not recall him in connection with it, but his story is substantially correct." —Daniel Butterfield



Butterfield never went out of his way to claim credit for its composition and it wasn't until the *Century* article that the origin came to light. There are however, significant differences in Butterfield's and Norton's stories. Norton says that the music given to him by Butterfield that night was written down on an envelope while Butterfield wrote that he could not read or write music! Also Butterfield's words seem to suggest that he was not composing a melody in Norton's presence, but actually arranging or revising an existing one. All officers of the time were required to know the calls and were expected to be able to play the bugle. Butterfield was no different—he could sound the bugle but could not read music.

Transparency: “Scott Tattoo”

What could account for the variation in stories? My research shows that Butterfield did not **compose** “Taps” but actually **revised** an **earlier** bugle call. The fact is that “Taps” existed in an **early** version of the call “Tattoo.” As a signal for end of the day, armies have used “Tattoo” to signal troops to prepare them for bedtime roll call. **It was sounded an hour before the final call of the day to extinguish all fires and lights.** This early version is found in three manuals: the **Winfield Scott** manual of 1835, the Samuel Cooper manual of 1836, and the William Gilham manual of 1861. This call, referred to as the **“Scott Tattoo,”** was in use from 1835-1860. A **second** version of “Tattoo” came into use just **before** the Civil War and was in use throughout the war **replacing** the “Scott Tattoo.”

The fact that Norton says Butterfield composed “Taps” cannot be questioned. He was relaying the facts as he remembered them. His conclusion that Butterfield wrote “Taps” can be explained by the presence of the **second** “Tattoo.” It was most likely that the second “Tattoo,” followed by “Extinguish Lights” was sounded by Norton during the course of the war.

It must therefore be evident that Norton **did not know the early** “Tattoo” (“Scott”) or he would have immediately recognized it that evening in Butterfield's tent. If you review the events of that evening, Norton came into Butterfield's tent and played notes that were already written down on an envelope. Then Butterfield, **“changed it somewhat, lengthening some notes and shortening others, but retaining the melody as he first gave it to me.”**

Transparencies: (1) “Scott Tattoo” and (2) “Taps”

If you compare that statement while looking at the present day “Taps,” you will see that this is exactly what happened to turn the early “Scott Tattoo” into “Taps.”

After approving of the changes he had made, Butterfield instructed Norton to replace “Extinguish Lights” with the new “Taps.” As Mr. Norton related in his letter to *Century* magazine, “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.”

The troops called the new arrangement “Butterfield's Lullaby.”

The account of the first official performance of “Taps” at a military funeral is related by:

Schneider, *Taps*, 12, 14-15:

Evidence of the moving effect of the new call is seen in its first recorded use at a military funeral. At Harrison's Landing, Battery A of the Union's Second Artillery fired from an advanced position in the woods. During a fiery exchange, a Confederate shell exploded near the Union battery, killing a cannoneer. (p. 12)

When the time came to bury the slain soldier, the battery captain, John C. Tidball, was faced with a dilemma. Traditionally, three rifle volleys were fired over the grave at the funeral. Surveying the nearby enemy lines, Tidball worried. Would hearing rifle fire so close make the Confederates think Union infantry was advancing and cause them to renew the fighting? He looked at his rifle squad, muskets ready.



Then he remembered the haunting new call that had so recently been sounded by General Butterfield's bugler. That was it, he decided. What better way to send a departed comrade off to his final sleep?

And so the rifles were slung, a bugler was called, and the strains of "Taps" sounded over the grave of a soldier for the first time in history. (p. 14)

The Army of the Potomac began its withdrawal north on August 15, 1862. All that remained was the heritage of "Taps," notes that bring comfort to listeners today as they first did for those dispirited and suffering soldiers in the mud at Harrison's Landing. (p. 15)

"Taps" soon became the standard "lights out" bugle call for the armed forces of both the North and South and has continued since. Probably the best description of the effect of "Taps" on the soul of the soldier was written in a letter home by a World War I infantryman:

Schneider, Taps, 59:

"Call to Quarters" blows, and soon "Taps" will lay us to rest for this day. As surely as the bugle calls of the day are to be damned, those of the night are to be blessed. Particularly "Taps." No matter how a man wearies of this army, here is one call he wouldn't mind hearing every night his life through. It seems to us something more than beautiful music. In a way it symbolizes and humanizes this army that rides your neck all day, whispering at night that, after all, the army wishes you well, and that it's all for the good of the service. There are men who, if they go to bed before it sounds, lie awake and await it, much as the devout await Benediction. The grind, the disgust, the oath, the spur—these it obliterates, saying all our prayers for us and sending us quietly to sleep, better ready for another day.

The following was recently written by General Richard B. Myers, United States Air Force and current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff:

In December 2001, I had the privilege of participating in two ceremonies commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor and Hickam Field.

During each of these ceremonies I could not help but be moved by the sight of the storied veterans of those attacks. As the bugle sounded the first note of "Taps," these men crisply rose to attention. Despite their hands being gnarled with the passage of time, they saluted smartly, tears running down their cheeks.

Scenes such as this have been replayed time and again across our great land. No other tune has such haunting power and none can so movingly bring to mind the sacrifices of those brave men and women who have served their country.

In the wake of the tragic events of September 11, 2001, no other melody focuses the mind so clearly on the price of freedom. "Taps" reminds us that despite the tragic costs, it is worth defending.

The "wake of the tragic events of September 11th" continues still as our armed forces have taken on the duty of defeating terrorism. In Operation Iraqi Freedom 140 American servicemen and –women have been killed in the Middle Eastern theatre. As the twenty-four notes of "Taps" flow over the flag-draped coffins of the fallen, they intone a sobering message for all of us to consider. They are a haunting reminder that life hangs by a very thin thread. They convey the realization that the person put to rest has paid the ultimate price for the freedom we enjoy. They offer encouragement to those who are left to press on while taking advantage of the freedom bought at so high a price. And they call the mind the glory of a loved one's death as he takes his place among the nation's immortals.

On this Memorial Day it is appropriate that the names each and every one of the 140 who fell should be remembered. May we salute them in prayer as we thank God for their sacrifice and remember their families:



"Taps"

*Day is done,
Gone the sun,
From the lakes, from the hills, from the sky,
All is well,
Safely rest,
God is nigh.*

*Thanks and praise,
For our days,
'Neath the sun, 'neath the stars, 'neath the sky,
As we go,
This we know,
God is nigh.*