

Taps Performance Guidelines

by Jari Villanueva



The Significance of Taps

There are two pieces of music that particularly stir the hearts and emotions of Americans - The Star-Spangled Banner and Taps.

To me, Taps conveys an important message through its twenty-four notes. To U.S. soldiers from the Civil War on, when sounded at night the call meant that all was well. It gave a sense of security and safety to those men and also signaled that another day in the service to their country was done. Because of the melodious and poignant nature of the call it is no wonder that it was adopted as the final call at funerals. As Gustav Kobbe stated in an 1898 Century article:

"Played slowly and expressively, it has a tender, touching, mournful character, in keeping with the fact that it is sounded not only for 'lights out,' but also over the soldier's grave, be he general or private, so that as with 'lights out' night closes in upon the soldier's day, so with the same call the curtain rolls down upon his life."

Over the twenty years I've sounded Taps at various national cemeteries, there are ceremonies that stand out in my memory. Of all the times I've sounded the call, the most memorable were the times I sounded it at the Tomb of the Unknowns. To me to this is the highest honor that a bugler can perform. It is the military musician's equivalent of "playing Carnegie Hall."

I sounded the call at the funeral of General Ira Eaker, commander of the 8th Air Force during World War II, and for the funeral of General Godfrey McHugh, Air Force Aide to President Kennedy. I sounded the British call "Last Post" at the grave of a WWII Australian flyer who is buried at Arlington National Cemetery, in a ceremony attended by the Australian Air Force Chief of Staff. On every Memorial Day weekend for twelve years I performed at a memorial service for the Flying Tigers, the WWII flying group, at the Old Memorial Amphitheater at Arlington. This is especially moving for me, to see these real heroes of a previous generation.

The hardest funerals at which I've been asked to sound Taps were those of active duty military members. One such was a funeral in Oil City, Pennsylvania for a nineteen-year-old airman who was killed by a drunk driver while on his way to his first duty assignment. At the cemetery, most of the mourners were teenagers from his high school. As I began to play, a wail went up from those who knew this young man. It was hard to finish the call. Another tough time was when I sounded the call for a friend's father who had served as a bombardier during WWII. As I glanced at her before beginning, I noticed that she was wearing his wings. Pretty difficult...



When I sound the call at a ceremony I'm sometimes approached by family members who wish to thank me for being part of the service. A reply of, "You are welcome," has always seemed inappropriate or inadequate, so I say, "It is my honor."

A Shortage of Buglers

Indeed it is my honor when I get a chance to perform this ritual for those who have given part of their lives to our nation. However, there is a lack of qualified buglers around the country to perform this service.

In the past, when not available, military buglers could be replaced by musicians from a VFW or American Legion Drum and Bugle Corps or even Boy Scouts. However, the tradition of bugling and drum corps in those organizations has all but disappeared. A real shame, for those groups have long fostered musicianship and patriotism. With veterans dying at the rate of over one thousand each day and with many of the funeral services only having a recording of Taps as the musical honors, lawmakers are looking into having legislation passed to ensure that each family that requests military honors for a deceased veteran will be provided with a live bugler and firing party.

If you are interested providing the service of sounding Taps at a funeral, there are several ways you can get involved. One is an organization called Bugles Across America. Headquartered in Chicago and founded by Marine veteran Tom Day, this group is trying to provide a much needed service to deceased veterans by creating a network of buglers.

You may also alert your local VFW and American Legion Posts and local funeral homes that you are willing to perform at funerals, or contact your state National Guard office and find out if they have a need for civilian contract buglers for ceremonies. Many buglers and professional trumpeters are willing to sound Taps and can be hired to do this duty.

The following guidelines are written to provide those with little knowledge of military ceremonies with the basics needed for rendering this honor. Few buglers today have the background of a military musician and many are unaware of the protocol involved. I hope this helps to guide those buglers who have a sincere interest in sounding Taps at funerals.

The Correct Performance of Taps

The exact way to perform Taps shares some of the same uncertainty as the origin of the call. The most obvious error is the rhythmic figure found in the seventh, eighth, tenth, eleventh, thirteenth, and fourteenth notes. The rhythm for those notes should be:



However, most trumpeters perform those notes this way:



I have heard this on many recordings, in movies, at live performances, and for much of my life that was how I performed it. The correct way should be the straight eighth note, not the dotted eighth and sixteenth note rhythm.

As a trumpet player schooled by teachers well versed in orchestral and solo literature, I was taught that certain solo pieces and orchestral trumpet excerpts are to be performed in a definite fashion. I feel the same about Taps. Think perhaps of changing the rhythm of Beethoven's offstage *Leonore* call, or maybe the solo in the *Lieutenant Kije Suite* of Prokofieff, because you want to subject it to your own "interpretation." It just isn't done, and Taps should be treated the same way.

The sounding of Taps can be open to interpretation in deciding how long to hold the fermata over the third, sixth, fifteenth, and twenty-fourth notes. However, there should be no question of the rhythm as mentioned above. When you examine the printed music, you will see that most bugle manuals contain the straight eighth note rhythm.

As my basis for the correct method to perform Taps I'll cite the following:

- A) The most important basis for my thesis is the many bugle, drill and tactical manuals that print the call. In most manuals, the call is written with the straight eighth notes. The most notable example of the dotted eighth and sixteenth note rhythm is John Philip Sousa's book, The Trumpet and Drum. Sousa lists the call as "Extinguish Lights" and has a drum part written to accompany the call. 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.

B) The best reason for using the straight eighth note rhythm comes 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 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.

C) It is the way it is sounded by all armed services at Arlington National Cemetery for funerals, wreath-laying ceremonies, and memorial services and at The Tomb of the Unknowns.

Why then, is it so often performed wrong? I believe that the call has always been passed around by rote, with few buglers checking the manuals. Also, it has been performed in that manner in many Hollywood movies.

Why care? As musicians and performers, we should strive to play with the utmost perfection.



US Army MSGT (Ret.) Mark Elrod sounds Taps at a funeral in Maryland

Sounding Taps at Ceremonies

As a bugler, you may be asked to sound Taps at a funeral, memorial service, or wreath-laying ceremony. With the number of veterans' funerals rising and the number of active-duty buglers declining, many non-military musicians are asked to perform at the services. The following are guidelines I have written based on the procedures followed by military buglers over many decades. I have modified them to cover those civilian buglers who may be called into service to sound Taps at funerals or memorial services.

1. Bugler is to prepare before the funeral, making sure to have the proper uniform and outerwear in case of inclement weather. Uniform, appearance, and instrument should meet or exceed the military standards as outlined in regulations. That is, make sure you look neat and presentable. A dark suit, quasi-military uniform (without rank), civilian band uniform, or Boy Scout uniform is acceptable. Retired military members may wear their uniforms.
2. Bugler is to report promptly to the funeral site at the appropriate time and report to the Officer In Charge (OIC) or Non-Commissioned Officer In Charge (NCOIC). If you are a civilian bugler performing at a military ceremony, always check in with that person to coordinate when Taps is to be sounded.
3. Bugler is to position himself near the gravesite, angled from the firing party (ideally the bugler, firing party, and funeral party will form the three points of a triangle). The bugler should take care to stand in a location where the sound will carry to the funeral party and where he can be seen. The bell of the instrument should be pointed toward the casket.
4. Bugler will render a Hand Salute as the casket is carried to the gravesite. If you are in civilian dress, place your right hand over your heart. The bugler will stand at ease during the funeral service.
5. When the service is complete, the OIC or NCOIC will Present Arms. The firing party will come to attention and fire three volleys. Bugler will sound Taps after the third volley and after the NCOIC of the firing party executes Present Arms. After sounding Taps, the bugler will render a Hand Salute (if in civilian dress, place your right hand over your heart) and Order Arms (bring the bugle down to your side as the firing party does with their rifles) on the command of the NCOIC of the firing party.
6. When a firing party is not available, the bugler will sound Taps on completion of the service and at an arranged signal by either the OIC, NCOIC, or officiating person. After sounding Taps, the bugler will render a Hand Salute and Order Arms on his/her own. A recording of a firing party should not be used.

Bugle or Trumpet?

What type of instrument should you use for sounding Taps? A trumpet, cornet, or flugelhorn is a good substitute for a bugle when one is not available. Don't use a trombone or saxophone (it's been tried), as this is a bugle call. Finding a good bugle can be a problem but there are places to check. (Refer to the section on Bugles for Performing and Collecting at www.tapsbugler.com for types of bugles to use.)

The Army is the only service that still uses bugles (made by Bach Stradivarius, and now by Stomvi) to sound Taps at Arlington National Cemetery. These bugles are based on the regulation 1892 model, but pitched in B flat. The other services use regular B flat valved trumpets except for the U.S. Marine Drum and Bugle Corps (who perform at Standard Honors Funerals at ANC); they use two-valved bugles pitched in G.

Other Logistics to Consider

Any fee charged should cover the time needed to travel and expenses incurred as part of the performance. Even though Taps takes less than a minute to play, time is needed to find the cemetery, meet with the funeral director or person in charge of the ceremony and drive home. This does not count the time spent in getting information about the funeral and waiting for the funeral party to arrive at the cemetery. Sometimes you may wind up waiting for a few hours if a church service runs long.

My advice is to get as much information ahead of time as possible about the time of the service at the church or funeral home, the address of the cemetery, and phone numbers just in case of transportation problems. Finding the cemetery on a map or through a search on the computer is helpful too.

Remember - you can be two hours early for Taps but you can't be two minutes late!

Overall Performance Guidelines

1. The sounding of Taps at ceremonies is the most sacred duty a bugler can perform. Every effort should be made to sound a perfect Taps in keeping with the solemn and impressive occasion of a military ceremony.
2. The call should be sounded with conviction and not rushed. Every effort should be made to perform musically and with good intonation.
3. Careful attention should be paid to the rhythm of the seventh, eighth, tenth, eleventh, thirteenth, and fourteenth notes of Taps to ensure that they are played as straight eighth notes.

