

# Some History—and Tips—on ‘Taps’

A retired Army bandmaster marks the 150th anniversary of the nation’s most famous bugle call.

By Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

EVERY EVENING, **JOSEF OROSZ** '55E TURNS on a CD recording of “Taps,” and broadcasts it, via loudspeakers outside his home, to the small, southeastern Pennsylvania town of Bedford.

“It is in honor of all the fallen heroes of the day,” says the retired Army bandmaster.

This summer marked the 150th anniversary of the first time the famous bugle call was played. And to mark the occasion, Orosz published a booklet, “The History of ‘Taps,’” summing up the origins of the piece, and including some instructions on playing it.

“‘Taps’ is a military bugle call, not a symphonic trumpet solo,” says Orosz. Decrying common variations of the piece in both

**ORIGINS:** A painting by Sidney E. King depicts the birth of “Taps” 150 years ago, a story told by Orosz in a new booklet and online.

dynamics and phrasing—the “Hollywood version,” he calls it—he says, “If someone is going to play ‘Taps’ at a funeral, it must be exactly as it was intended: a prayer for the fallen hero. No changes, no variations.”


Orosz enlisted in the Army following his graduation from the Eastman School, joining the U.S. Army Field Band on the bass fiddle and tuba and 10 years later had advanced to Army bandmaster. In the 1960s, one of his roles was to train band members to play “Taps” at the funerals of soldiers who lost their lives in the Vietnam War.

He hopes that an understanding of the historical context of the piece will impress upon performers the importance of playing the piece not as they might intend, but as Union Brigadier General Daniel Butterfield intended, on the bitter evening of July 2, 1862, on a plantation near Charles City, Va.

As Orosz explains, the Confederacy had mounted a steep challenge to Butterfield’s Third Brigade during the one-day Battle of Gaines’s Mill, in which 600 Third Brigade

soldiers perished. Butterfield, who couldn’t read music, had nonetheless composed a bugle call specifically for his regiment. Played immediately before any additional calls (bugle calls, along with drum rolls, were the means of communication on the battlefield), the call indicated that the following instructions would be for his regiment only.

But on that devastating evening, the general recalled years later, the call “did not seem to be as smooth, melodious, and musical as it should be.” He summoned his bugler, Private Oliver Norton, to rework the call. Norton “practiced a change in the call of ‘Taps’ until I had it to suit my ear,” Butterfield told *Century Magazine* in 1898.

Norton, in turn, told the magazine, “The music was beautiful on that still summer night, and was heard far beyond the limits of the Brigade. The next day, I was visited by several buglers from neighboring brigades, asking for copies of the music, which I gladly furnished.” 

*Orosz’s history of “Taps” may be read in its entirety at <http://joseforosz.com/taps2012.htm>.*

