

# Taps for Sergeant Holder



Steve Smith

Master Sergeant Ted Protzinger, the Bandmaster, looked my uniform over, then glanced down at my shoes. "You'd better give those a shine, Smitty. They look pretty bad."

I followed his gaze to my scuffed and waxy looking shoes. For an occasion of this gravity they clearly wouldn't do. I retrieved my shoe-shine kit from my wall locker and worked on the shoes. The Sarge studied the results from the lofty perspective of his eighteen years in the Army, his dour features expressing undisguised distaste for my efforts.

"Okay, okay" he said. "That'll have to do. There's a jeep waiting outside to take you two over to Harvey Barracks for the ceremony. Have Langdon go off to the side about a hundred feet to play the echo. Then stay at parade rest through the rest of the service. Got it?"

His pointed frown told me that a level of dignity was to be observed. As the atmosphere in the band's billets resembled that of a playful college fraternity more than a military unit, the comment was entirely appropriate.

"Okay, Sarge," I said, and nodded soberly.

As first-chair trumpet players in the Third DivArty Band, billeted at Flak Kaserne, in Kitzingen, Germany in 1960, Tom Langdon and I were occasionally called upon to bugle for ceremonies. But we had never performed for an occasion of such solemnity. An NCO of a tanker battalion, a family man, had been killed in a vehicle accident during a field maneuver four days earlier, and we were to play Taps at his funeral.

Harvey Barracks, a sister post to Flak, lay at the opposite end of Kitzingen, a small wine-producing town in northern Bavaria that hosted Third Division Artillery Headquarters. We rode the four miles there in silence under an overcast sky, our shoulders hunched against the February chill.

We parked in a wooded area on the outskirts of the post, and Tom and I levered ourselves from the jeep's cramped seats. While the driver went off to the side to smoke a cigarette, Tom and I trudged toward our intended position adjacent to the chaplain's podium. Folding metal chairs, five across and six rows deep, were arranged beneath a canopy in case the overcast skies brought rain. The coffin rested on a collapsible metal bier at one corner of the canopy and the chaplain's podium stood angled toward the seats at the opposite corner.

As we passed the bier, the young widow came into view sitting with her three children in the front row. Immediately I realized we had blundered by passing directly in front of her instead of circling behind the gathering of chairs to reach the chaplain's podium. I felt a clutch in my midriff and quickened my pace, feeling keenly self-conscious at our clumsy arrival.

The chaplain stood at his podium studying a small sheaf of notes. He looked up as we took our positions and, seeing our instruments, nodded briefly. I folded my arms over my trumpet and quietly cleared my throat.

My gaze was drawn to the widow. Though a gauzy black veil obscured her face, I could still see her swollen and contorted features. The kids, two girls and a boy, were dressed in their Sunday best and sat silently at her sides.

Seeing the young widow sitting quietly, with her gloved hands clasped together, and her body shaking as if cold to the core, made my insides twist. Now and then her mouth opened in a soundless wail. The scene jarred me. Despite the presence of some thirty people on the periphery, the family sat alone. The twenty or so chairs behind them were

unoccupied. All the while the military staff stepped busily but with delicacy and consideration around them. If this were a civilian ceremony, the atmosphere would have hummed with sympathy and warmth. But there was a cool, business-like air in the way her husband's peers circulated, as if this were just another military gathering. Some of them must have been close friends of Sergeant Holder, and certainly knew his wife.

Where were her husband's buddies? Where were the other NCOs' wives that she must have chatted with over coffee?

I glanced at Tom, and saw in his face the same troubled helplessness I felt at having to watch someone suffer so miserably. We were part of the cold process of official mourning that would circle around her without providing any supportive warmth. Tom sighed and shook his head.

The skin on my arms prickled. Besides feeling foolish and inadequate, I realized that I was unsettled, even scared by the violence of the widow's suffering. In my twenty years I had never encountered anything so desolate and soul-shattering. Maybe the others standing stiffly nearby were also intimidated by the depth of what she was experiencing, or knew that they could be of little help.

As if on cue, the kids huddled close to their mother. Lost to her grief and left to themselves by the tall, silent figures striding with brisk military gravity around them, they glanced open-mouthed at their mother, at the coffin, at the barren trees, then back at her. They seemed to flounder in quiet confusion, bereft of all that was familiar and comforting, while emotional currents beyond their understanding swirled about them.

A few couples had taken seats near the back. The widow's quaking, her shuddery moaning as she rocked back and forth, had created a maddened, grief-filled zone around her that only her kids, largely insensible to her anguish, could comfortably occupy. And maybe the words of consolation had already been offered, leaving the new widow

alone to mine her grief of its fresh, lacerating pain. I chose not to judge the bystanders too harshly, though it still nagged at me that no one was willing to approach her, even for an awkward embrace. I guessed it would take another woman, a brave woman, to force herself into the widow's deranged space and grapple and cry with her, and no one was stepping forth.

The youngest child, a little girl of four or so, leaned her head against her mother's side and flung her left arm over her mother's quaking stomach. At this innocently awkward and touching act, the only visible expression of sympathy offered to her mother, a pang went through me. It must have hit Tom the same way, because he groaned quietly, shook his head, and said, "I'll go over by those trees, Steve. Just start when you're ready. I'll know when to come in." I watched him walk past the coffin to the edge of the tree line, thirty yards away.

The post Chaplain made some opening comments and led a prayer in which everyone but the family stood. The Company Commander eulogized Sergeant Holder, then the Chaplain gave a brief service that, from the widow's pronounced shaking and weeping, I doubted she could hear. The chaplain stepped back and glanced at me, my subtle cue.

An hour earlier, while dressing for the ceremony in my class "A" uniform, I had remembered the haunting poignancy of the Taps played by Robert E Lee Prewitt in *From Here to Eternity* for his buddy Maggio, and I had wondered if I should attempt something on that order. When Tom and I walked past the band office on our way out, Sergeant J. B. Hayner, the assistant Bandmaster, stood in the doorway. He held up a hand to stop us, and said, "I've seen lots of these ceremonies, men. Just keep it clean and simple. Don't fancy it up any."

Hayner's steady gaze penetrated my usual lackadaisical attitude and gave me pause. He was connected with the army and its deeper observances in a way that I, a two-year enlistee, could neither appreciate

nor properly honor. More than once while on the march he had heard me add a few notes to jazz up a piece we were playing, or go up an octave for the sheer liberating joy of it, and he was making sure I stayed on the ground during the ceremony. This wasn't a concert or a rouser march to stir the post awake. This was something real, with lasting resonance. This required reverence and delicacy, qualities Hayner rightly felt were somewhat lacking in my makeup. I nodded my thanks.

As the chaplain finished his sermon and I watched the widow weep, I was glad Hayner had offered his advice.

I took my mouthpiece from my pocket, inserted it in my silver trumpet, fitted my wetted lips to the mouthpiece, and played the first three notes of Taps:

*Day is done . . .*

After a beat, Tom repeated the notes from the tree line.

*Gone the Sun . . .*

Again Tom echoed the notes.

*From the land . . . from the sea . . . from the sky . . .*

*Rest in peace . . .*

*Soldier boy . . .*

*God is nigh.*

We went through the slow, affecting number by turns until Tom's final three sustained notes drifted through the woodsy silence.

I stood at parade rest, with my trumpet tucked under my arm, and glanced again at the widow. Her shaking seemed even more pronounced, perhaps because of the February cold. I felt she must be near exhaustion. I wondered if our playing had freshly aggravated her distress. It all seemed a formal show that the army felt it had to go through to honor one of its own, irrespective of the feelings of those involved.

Then it occurred to me that maybe Taps was part of the poetry of the military, a way its members expressed their feelings of kinship and

brotherhood for one another and the corps. Down the years from 1862, when Union General Daniel Butterfield and his bugler Oliver Norton produced an affecting bugle call for lights out, now known as Taps, a piece that winnowed away the chaff of sentimentality, and left only the bare bones of honest reverence. Maybe the young widow welcomed the touching quality in the thin wintry voices of our trumpets, despite the sense of loss they rekindled.

An honor guard of three soldiers wearing white neckerchiefs and class “A” uniforms, with pants cuffs tucked in their gleaming jump boots, marched briskly to a point a few feet from the coffin. On quiet commands from their leader they came about, faced left, pointing away from the mourners, then maneuvered their M-1's to port arms. They aimed their weapons at a forty-five degree angle into the sky and fired, then jerked their weapons back to port arms position. They repeated this twice, then marched away.

With ritualized care, two NCOs folded the flag that lay atop the casket into a triangular bundle, and placed it in the widow's gloved hands. She stared bleakly at the bundle, then began shaking again.

As members of Sergeant Holder's command lined up to offer condolences to his widow, Tom and I trudged back to the waiting jeep. Fun-loving and well-liked by everyone in the band for his lively sense of humor, Tom now looked beaten and morose.

He heaved a tired breath and shook his head. "You know, before I go through anything like that again," he said, "I do believe I'll go AWOL."

I nodded glumly and we drove back to Flak Kaserne in silence.

“Taps for Sergeant Halder” is lifted from *Out of Step/With M/Sgt Protzinger's Flying Beerhall Brass Band*, a wacky memoir of the peacetime army in 1960's Germany. My stateside tour from Basic Training on is chronicled in *Private/A Sort of Odyssey in Olive-Drab*. Both books should be available from Amazon in early 2015.