

# Taps for Sergeant Halder



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 looked down at my scuffed and waxy-looking shoes. For this occasion they clearly wouldn't do. I got my out shoe shine kit and worked on them until they achieved a low gloss.

The Sarge studied my effort from the perspective of his eighteen years in olive-drab. "I guess that'll do," he said. "Okay, 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?"

"Okay, Sarge."

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 a ceremony of one kind or other. But we had never performed on an occasion of such gravity as the one that faced us. An NCO of a tanker battalion, a family man, had been killed during a training maneuver, and we were to solemnize his funeral service with our

version of “Taps,” rehearsed only once.

We rode the four miles to Harvey Barracks in silence under an overcast sky, our shoulders hunched against the February chill and the breeze created by riding in an open jeep. We parked in a wooded area on the outskirts of the post generally used for classes, 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 the seating area and 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 produced 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 coffin, the young widow came into view sitting with her three children in the front row. I shifted my gaze, uncomfortable with the thought of appearing a curious observer at so harrowing an event, and took quiet controlled steps, keenly self-conscious at having invaded her privacy.

The chaplain stood on 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 cleared my throat. After a moment my gaze was drawn to the widow. Though her face was obscured by a gauzy black veil,

her swollen and contorted features were still clearly visible. The kids, two girls and a boy, were dressed in their Sunday best and sat silently to either side.

The scene jarred me. Despite the presence of some thirty people on the periphery, the family sat alone. The twenty or so chairs behind the widow were unoccupied. And all the while the military staff stepped busily but with delicacy and consideration around them. If this was 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 it was an ordinary military event, their feelings buried beneath ritual. Some of them must have been close friends with Sergeant Halder, and certainly knew his widow.

Beside the coffin stood a ten-foot flagpole set in a concrete donut, the flag hanging limply at half-mast in the chill February air. In this cheerless context, 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. She vibrated as if in the grip of a seizure. Now and then her mouth opened in a soundless wail. Where were her husband's buddies? Where were the other NCOs' wives that she must have chatted with weekday mornings over coffee?

I glanced at Tom, seeing in his face the same troubled helplessness I felt at having to passively watch someone suffer

so miserably and not be able to offer her a warm shoulder to lean against or a clumsy embrace that probably would touch the depths of her anguish not at all. And now 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.

I felt a jangled mixture of feelings, mostly foolishness at thinking I could dismount from my white steed and provide any real solace. Maybe the others standing around were intimidated by the depth of what she was experiencing, or knew that they could be of little help.

As if on cue, the kids, all appearing to be under the age of eight, 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, the boy and eldest girl glanced at their mother, at the coffin, at the trees, stark and barren, 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 took seats near the back. I wondered if they felt they'd intrude if they sat close by, or if they just felt uncomfortable and somewhat intimidated. Then it hit me—her quaking, her shuddery moaning, her rocking forward and back, had created a grief-maddened zone around her that only her

kids, insensible to her anguish, could comfortably occupy. And maybe the well-meaning but ineffective words of consolation had already been said days before, and the new widow needed to be alone to mine her grief of its raw, isolating pain.

All these conflicting notions surged through my mind without finding resolution. I elected not to judge the bystanders too harshly, though it still nagged me that no one was willing to approach her for an awkward embrace that might allow some of her anguish to leach out. 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 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."

"Okay, Tom." I watched him walk past the coffin to the edge of the tree line some thirty yards away.

By now most of the seats had filled. The post Chaplain made some opening comments and led a prayer in which everyone but the family stood. Then the Company Commander eulogized

Sergeant Halder. From his remarks I realized that his death came about through a vehicular accident while on field maneuvers four days before. Following this 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. I took my mouthpiece from my pocket, inserted it in my silver trumpet 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.

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* on the death of his buddy Maggio, and 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 relaxed 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.

His sensible words put me in the proper frame of mind. This wasn't a concert or a rouser march to stir the post awake. This was something real, with lasting resonance. We were to engage in something that required a degree of reverence and delicacy, qualities Hayner rightly felt were somewhat lacking in my makeup. I nodded my thanks. Thirty minutes later I was glad he had offered his advice.

Now at parade rest with my trumpet tucked under my arm, I 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 then, if on top of the detached, almost impersonal tone of the brief ceremony, 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 worked together to produce an affecting bugle call for lights out, now known as Taps, this process had winnowed away the chaff of sentimentality, leaving only the bare bones of honest reverence. Maybe the young widow welcomed the touching quality in our thin wintry voices 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. On another command they aimed their weapons at a forty-five degree angle into the sky and fired, then jerked their weapons back to port arms position. After repeated this twice, they columned right and



marched away. The thought came to me that they were alerting the celestial powers above that a soldier's spirit was on its way, and a warm welcome wouldn't be amiss.

Two NCOs unfurled the flag and folded it with ritualized care into a triangular bundle, which they placed in the widow's gloved hands. She stared bleakly at the bundle, then began shaking again.

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

"You know, before I go through anything like that again . . ."

He heaved a tired breath and shook his head. "I do believe I'll desert."

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