

Military honors a final salute to service

By LINDA BROWN
Herald Staff

The hauntingly lonely notes of “Taps,” drifting over a somber group of mourners and the respectful, solemn folding of the American flag before it’s presented to the next of kin are two of the most recognized ways our nation honors the passing of those who have served their country.

In 2000, Congress passed legislation guaranteeing veterans the right to at least two uniformed servicemen, a flag ceremony and the playing of “Taps” at their funerals. They’re commonly referred to as “military honors.”



Photo by Elliot J. Sutherland/The Ottawa Herald

Ron Matthews has been playing trumpet since he was 5. Up until a few years ago, Matthews played “Taps” at about 10 to 15 funerals every year, he said.

The use of “Taps” at a military funeral was adopted by the U.S. Army in 1864 when a unit was too close to the enemy to fire the customary three volleys over the grave of a fallen soldier.

“[Taps is] something you never forget. Every time you hear it, you salute or put your hand over your heart. It’s unique to America. It’s remembrance and reverence and patriotism. You can hear it a thousand times, and it’s emotional every time.”

— Gary Ross,
VFW Post 5901 commander

‘Always beautiful’

Twenty-four notes.

Written on the back of an envelope in 1862, the Union Army’s Brig. Gen. Daniel Butterfield wanted something a little more colorful than the usual “Tattoo” that signaled lights out and the end of the day.

He worked out the notes with the brigade bugler and the call soon became known as “Taps” because it often was tapped out on a drum when there wasn’t a bugler.

Of all the military bugle calls, many say none is so easily recognized or more apt to render emotion than “Taps.”

“It’s something you never forget,” Gary Ross, VFW Post 5901 commander, said. “Every time you hear it, you salute or put your hand over your heart. It’s unique to America. It’s remembrance and reverence and patriotism. You can hear it a thousand times, and it’s emotional every time.”

The Department of Veteran Affairs estimates the loss of 800 to 1,000 World War II veterans a day. Add to that the number of early Korean and

Vietnam War veterans, and the need for military buglers is staggering.

To address that challenge, Congress approved “Taps” being played on a CD player or from a recording device housed inside a bugle.

Craig Dengel, owner and funeral director of Dengel & Son Mortuary, 235 S. Hickory St., Ottawa, said few people ever know when a real bugler isn’t playing.

“It’s very well done, and it’s always beautiful — even if the bugler is just pretending to play,” he said.

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