

John Clayton: There is a sad majesty to the sounding of 'Taps'

By JOHN CLAYTON
New Hampshire Union Leader Staff
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Each evening, those 24 haunting notes now echo throughout the grounds of the New Hampshire State Veterans Cemetery in Boscawen, and the mournful tune rings out because of Noel Taylor.

The 61-year-old Goffstown resident is orchestrating a program of his own creation called "100 Nights of Remembrance," and to do so, he has summoned the assistance of his fellow buglers and trumpet players from all over the state.

"The first day I ever walked into that cemetery and saw all the flags I knew I was walking onto hallowed ground," Noel said. "This was even before my brother and sister were buried there, but I knew I wanted to be a part of what the place represents."

For him, the choice was simple.

Noel and his compatriots have agreed to perform "Taps" at the Veterans Cemetery each evening at 7 o'clock, and his list of volunteers grows longer by the day. The program began on Sunday, May 27 -- the eve of the Memorial Day observance -- and it will continue through Sept. 11.

"We're not putting on a show," he said. "It's not entertainment. It's a solemn, graceful, respectful moment, and all it takes is 45 seconds of our time."

In truth, there is a lot more time involved, and no one is more grateful for the way these men and women invest their time than Roger Desjardins, an Army veteran who serves as director of the State Veterans Cemetery.

"Some of them are traveling miles and miles to get here and it's all out of their own pockets," Roger said. "They don't care if anyone is here listening to them. The veterans are here. That's what matters to them."

"It's something they're doing from the heart," he added, "and speaking not just as the director of the cemetery, but as a veteran, it means an awful lot to me personally."

Noel's inspiration can be traced back to his childhood.

"When I was a kid growing up in Manchester, my brother Bob was a bugler," he said. "He was my big brother so everything he did was awesome. Seeing my brother playing his horn made me want to do the same thing, so when I was 14, I got a bugle of my own."

Noel joined an American Legion band on the city's West Side -- it was the Henry J. Sweeney Queensmen -- and years later, after he had completed his tour of duty in Vietnam, he signed on with another Queen City band, the St. Augustine Black Knights. In time, he became a part of the celebrated Muchachos Drum & Bugle Corps, a tradition he continues to this day.

Nothing he plays on his bugle touches him as much as "Taps."

"You don't play 'Taps,'" he explained. "You sound 'Taps,' and I'm like a one-man campaign against the boom-box versions they started using at military funerals. Rather than a perfect recording, I would rather have a flawed, live



U.S. Army veteran Noel Taylor and New Hampshire National Guard soldier Tom Graham play at the New Hampshire State Veterans Cemetery in Boscawen Thursday evening. (GIL TALBOT)

sounding of 'Taps' -- and believe me, my version is not perfect -- but these guys deserve everything we can do for them."

What they do dates back to 1862.

That's when Union Army Gen. Daniel Adams Butterfield -- with the help of bugler Oliver Wilcox Norton -- revised an earlier bugle call known as the "Tattoo." The result was "Taps," and according to music historian Jari Villanueva, the first time "Taps" was played at a funeral was in Virginia that same year.

"A soldier of Capt. John C. Tidball's was buried at a time when his battery occupied an advanced position, concealed in the woods," Villanueva wrote. "It was unsafe to fire the customary three volleys over the grave on account of the proximity of the enemy, and it occurred to Capt. Tidball that the sounding of 'Taps' would be the ceremony that would be substituted. The custom, thus originated, was taken up throughout the Army of the Potomac, and finally confirmed by orders."

Noel Taylor enjoys sharing that history.

"The first time I went up to play 'Taps,' I brought my granddaughter (Brittany Cloutier) and my niece (Emily Dionne)," he said. "Brittany had written a poem on the history of 'Taps' and she read her poem and Emily had written a prayer all on her own and she read her prayer..."

Noel paused and looked away.

"And then I sounded 'Taps,' " he said.

He paused again. Then he apologized.

"I still get emotional just talking about it," he said.

Still, he's been able to talk about "100 Nights of Remembrance" with dozens of buglers around the state. He's got volunteers like Jack Ward, who is director of the New Hampshire chapter of Bugles Across America and Linda Jezierski, who's with the 39th Army Band.

He's got a Marine Corps Gulf War veteran in Robert Smith from Northwood, (who taught himself to play the bugle after taking offense at a boom-box rendition of "Taps") and he even has high school kids -- like Amos Powelson of Boscawen, a junior at Merrimack Valley High School -- which delights Roger Desjardins.

"I know Noel would like to get even more high school musicians involved," the cemetery director said, "and that works well with what we try to do here. We want to teach the children of today what a veteran is and what these guys fought for, and you can't tell me that a high school musician who comes here and plays 'Taps' won't have a whole new appreciation for what these men and women have done for us all."

In addition to those he has booked, Noel also has standing commitments from fellow Muchachos like Keith and Jennifer Raiche from Allenstown, who have pledged to fill in should any scheduled player have to cancel on short notice.

More volunteers are welcome, however.

"And they don't have to be buglers," Noel said. "It's a different key, but they can be trumpet players, too. I'd like to have as many as 100 musicians on the list and if they have them, we ask them to wear their uniforms as a measure of respect."

To volunteer, you can contact Noel at 603-669-0560 or via e-mail at noeltylr@comcast.net. Even if you can't play a note, you can still help out, since Noel is looking for sponsors so he can host a luncheon to thank his volunteers.

One of those volunteers will be in Boscawen later today.

As the shadows lengthen and day slides toward night, a lone bugler will take up his station -- tonight, it will be Glenn Beaupre from Thornton, who plays with the Bektash Temple Drum & Bugle Corps -- and those mournful 24 notes will ring out for an audience of those who have fallen.

It's an audience that is richly deserving of the tribute.

John Clayton is the author of several books on Manchester and New Hampshire, including the recently released "You Know You're in New Hampshire When". His e-mail is jclayton@unionleader.com.

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