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Digital bugle plays taps when soldiers can't

By Siobhan McDonough, Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The playing of taps to honor America's fallen soldiers is a familiar sound, but at thousands of military funerals these days, not all is as it seems.



Spcl. Michael Mauldin demonstrates a device that can be placed inside a bugle to simulate the playing of taps.

Steve Ruark, AP

Instead of a bugler playing the 24 notes, a computerized chip implanted in the horn renders the heart-stirring song.

A push of a button starts the horn. It sounds a tune that not enough people in uniform can play given the pace of dying veterans and casualties from the Iraq war.

Some traditionalists object, but other people say it's an improvement upon the more widely used substitute — someone bending over and pressing a button on a boom box to play a recording of taps.

"It's the closest and next best thing to the real thing," said Mark Maynard, director of the Riverside National Cemetery in California, where a few of the Iraq casualties have been buried. "A bone of contention with veterans organizations and families was just the sound and tackiness of the military carrying boom boxes to play taps."

And with the digital bugle — known as a ceremonial bugle — "You're guaranteed of it being played perfectly every time."

The Pentagon tested the method for six months, before approving it for wider use last year, and reported that most families were satisfied with the experience. It works using a small cone-shaped device inserted into the bugle's bell.

"I was worried about a digitized bugle until I saw and heard it," said Tim Boulay, chief of communications and outreach support for Veterans Affairs, who buried his father, an Army veteran, a few weeks ago. "It was indistinguishable from the real bugle.

"I was impressed," he said. "It brought tears to my eyes."

But some don't want anything short of the real deal.

Hugh Springston Jr. of Patel, Miss., wouldn't have it any other way. He recently buried his mother, a veteran, at a ceremony featuring a genuine playing of taps, and said his father will deserve the same.

A digital rendition "would make the honor seem phony," he said. "When my father goes, he'll get a gun salute. I wouldn't feel right about them having seven mannequins going out in the field shooting fake guns."

For generations, the bugle has mustered uniformed men and women from their beds, signaled meals and flag drawing. It has announced the charge on the battlefield.

The armed forces have 500 buglers able to play taps, but 1,800 veterans are dying per day. Only live buglers play the Arlington National Cemetery, the nation's premier burial ground for veterans, but honor guards at other cemeteries have had to scrape to find one.

The fake bugle has been used more often than the real one in the nearly 38,000 military funerals so far this year — more than half are still relying on the boom box.

Military services have purchased about 4,000 bugles, said Mark Ward, the Pentagon's senior policy adviser for military funeral honors.

Sometimes the families know and sometimes they don't.

"A lot of times when using the ceremonial bugler, we'll tell them beforehand so we don't give the feeling we are being disingenuous," Ward said.

Still, some people are determined to get a live bugler at veterans' funerals.

Tom Day of Berwyn, Ill., founded [Bugles Across America](#) to recruit civilian musicians to play taps at funerals.

"I saw too many boom boxes going bad, and too many reserve units and guard units not even bringing anything," Day said.

He's gathered 3,000 volunteers ages 10 to 97 who have performed at 36,000 funerals in the last three years — including 80% of the funerals from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

Day said even a good recorded version sounds like it's coming out of a tin can, and cemetery workers have told him some of the ceremonial buglers don't even hold the instrument to their face.

"They should at least teach these guys how to fake it," he said. "I want 'Taps' played with emotion. It's played with emotion when it's a real hornblower, it's on their lips and played correctly."

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