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**A DISTANT MEMORY? / It used to be tradition for BUGLERS to play TAPS live at gravesides of our fallen soldiers. But a DIGITAL RECORDING now fills that growing void / A somber duty has lost its human touch**

By ROSANNA RUIZ

Staff

A TWO-MAN Army honor guard stood at attention, holding an American flag over a silver coffin.

But the call for taps - that mournful tune guaranteed every veteran who wants a military funeral - fell to Jonathan Kin, a civilian representative of Houston's Veterans Affairs National Cemetery.

On cue, Kin turned with a practiced air and unceremoniously pushed a button. A prerecorded rendition began to play from an outdoor speaker.

The image of a fallen soldier or veteran being laid to rest with a uniformed bugler on the horizon is increasingly out of date, as the twin pressures of a dying World War II generation and new casualties from ongoing war in the Middle East force more families to settle for recorded music or digital devices hidden inside real bugles.

"We have not had a live bugler for some 15 years, and about five years ago they came out with an electronic bugler," said Marvin Stearns, ritual commander for Veterans of Foreign Wars' District 4. "It would be nice to have a full-time bugler, but it's hard for anyone to be able to dedicate that much time to it."

Over the past three decades, burials at the country's VA national cemeteries have increased dramatically. There were 36,400 in 1973, compared with more than 93,000 in fiscal year 2005, according to the VA. Interments are expected to increase annually until 2009.

The Houston cemetery is among the 20 busiest in the nation, with about 200 funerals each month. There were almost 20 planned on Monday.

#### Fostering a new generation

In the latest effort to increase the ranks of buglers, the VA, which oversees military cemeteries, is supporting a New York-based group, Bugles Across America, that connects families with volunteer buglers willing to play during veterans' funeral services.

The group got the VA's attention in 2005 when more than 600 brass players lined the roadway between two national cemeteries in upstate New York to play a cascading rendition of taps.

On Saturday, Armed Forces Day, the VA intends to replicate the performance with live buglers' playing taps in rounds at the local VA cemetery on Veterans Memorial and at all other veterans' cemeteries across the country and around the globe.

So far, only about 20 have registered for "Echo Taps Worldwide" in Houston.

"Veterans should have a real trumpet played for them," said Collin Cherry, a 15-year-old Cypress Ridge High School student who has signed up to play on Saturday. "They fought in the war and they deserve a real trumpet player instead of a recording."

One objective of the event is to "foster a new generation of buglers" who, like Cherry, could be called upon for veterans' funerals, said Linda Barry, of the Houston VA National Cemetery.

During another service Monday, when Stearns gave the command "Bugler, sound the taps," the call was answered by James East.

From his wheelchair, East adjusted a digital device inside the bell of his bugle and placed the horn to his lips. He raised his arms up and down along with the pulse of the recorded music.

"Never missed a note yet," he joked afterward, before he and the other members of the uniformed VFW honor guard rushed off to another service.

Cherry, a Boy Scout who has a bugling merit badge, said he wouldn't mind playing taps during funeral services. He's played the 24-note tune before.

Stearns also can turn to Mark Collado, a 33-year-old retired Marine sergeant.

"I'm a real live bugle boy," said Collado, a former ceremonial bugler for the Marine Corps during his seven years with "The Commandant's Own" U.S. Marine Drum and Bugle Corps.

### History of military taps

The earliest reference of the mandatory use of taps at military funerals can be found in the 1891 Army drill regulation manual, although it more than likely had been used before. The tune itself dates to the Civil War.

Military funerals were legally mandated for veterans with the passage of the Strom Thurmond National Defense Authorization Act, which took effect in 2000. No fewer than three honor guards - who do not have to be uniformed - are required. Live buglers are not.

The honor guards, the act states, must "have the capability to play a recorded or live version of taps for the funeral of any veteran."

Echo Taps Worldwide just might boost the number of available players, Barry said.

During the performance, taps will be played by one bugler and once he hits the third note, a second player then starts to play and the "echo" pattern is repeated down the line, explained organizer Josey Johnson III, 50.

Once completed, the buglers will play taps in unison, said Johnson, who will also play during the event.

"This offers me a way of using a talent that God gave me to play the horn," he said, "and also be able to do a service for our veterans' families."

While it comes close, the digital version of taps is not quite the same tribute for veterans, Collado said.

"When you're finally given the full funeral honors, you envision a bugler out in the distance playing taps," he said. "And to have it recorded, it's a necessity because of the shortage, but to get a live bugler is one of the biggest honors a veteran can have."

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## HISTORY OF TAPS

In July 1862, Union Gen. Daniel Butterfield, along with his brigade bugler, replaced the "extinguish lights" bugle call with taps.

It became an official bugle call after the war, according to Jari A. Villanueva, the former curator of the taps bugle exhibit at Arlington National Cemetery.

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## CALL GOES OUT

What: Buglers needed for "Echo Taps Worldwide" ceremonies

When: 10 a.m. Saturday, Armed Forces Day

Where: Houston Veterans Affairs National Cemetery, 10410 Veterans Memorial

Contact: Linda Barry at the VA cemetery, 281-447-8686, ext. 200. For more information about the event, visit [www.echotaps.org](http://www.echotaps.org).