

Military Funeral Traditions

Military Customs

The final farewell honoring individuals who have served in the Armed Forces is infused with ceremonial traditions that date back centuries. An understanding military burial customs gives greater meaning to the symbolic activities that may take place during the final resting of an active duty or retired member of the Armed Forces.

The Flag Draped Casket

The custom of draping the casket with the national flag dates back to the Napoleonic Wars when a flag was used to cover the dead who were being removed from the field of battle. When the U.S. flag covers the casket, it is placed so the union blue field is at the head and over the left shoulder. The flag is not allowed to touch the ground and is not placed in the grave. At the end of the funeral, the flag is removed and folded by the honor guard into triangular form. The highest-ranking officer then presents it to the spouse or next of kin.

Three Rifle Volleys Over the Grave

The use of three rifle volleys originated from the custom of halting warfare fighting to remove the dead from the battlefield. After each side had cleared its dead, a firing party, consisting of seven riflemen, would fire three volleys to signal that the dead had been cared for and the fighting could resume. The firing of three rifle volleys at a funeral possibly ties to this practice to signify respect for the deceased and his or her contributions to the military. This should not be confused with the 21-gun salute.

The 21-Gun Salute

The 21-gun salute is this highest honor a nation renders. Today the 21-gun salute is fired in honor of a national flag, the sovereign or chief-of-state of a foreign nation, a member of a reigning royal family, and the President, ex-President or President-elect of the United States. It is also fired at noon on the day of the funeral of a President, ex-President or President-elect.

The Riderless Horse

The single riderless horse that follows a caisson with boots reversed in the stirrups is called the "caparisoned horse" in reference to its ornamental coverings. The custom is believed to date back to the time of Genghis Khan, when a horse was sacrificed to serve the fallen warrior in the next world. The caparisoned horse later came to symbolize a warrior who would ride no more.

By tradition in military funeral honors, a caparisoned horse follows the casket of an Army or Marine Corps officer who was a colonel or above. It also follows the casket of a president by virtue of having been the nation's military commander in chief. Abraham Lincoln was the first U.S. president to be honored with a caparisoned horse at his funeral.

Playing of "Taps"

"Taps" is an American call, composed in 1862 during the Civil War by the Union Army's Brigadier General Daniel Butterfield. He wrote the call to replace "Tattoo," which had been used to signal lights out and time to sleep. The call soon became known as "Taps" because it was often tapped out on a drum in the absence of a bugler. The call was officially adopted by the U.S. Army in 1874 and was later incorporated into funerals as the 'call to the sleep of death' for soldiers. The playing of "Taps" is one of several military honors carried out at the funeral of veterans, which is mandated by law.

Military Funeral Honors and Burial

Military honors at burial are provided to recognize deceased members of the Armed Forces who have honorably served our country. The National Defense Authorization Act of 2000 mandates that the U.S. Armed Forces must provide the rendering of honors at a military funeral for any eligible veteran, if requested. This includes an honor guard of no less than two members of the Armed Forces, with one member of the detail a representative of the armed service branch of the deceased veteran. At a minimum, the honor guard detail must perform a ceremony that includes the folding and presenting of the flag of the United States to the next of kin and the playing of "Taps" by a lone bugler, if available.