



Railsplitter Obituary



Douglas "Doug" Gruehn

Douglas (Doug) Gruehn passed away unexpectedly June 30, 2018 at age 72. He was the cherished husband of Jean for 43 years. He was loved and admired by his sons Karl and Trevor Gruehn. His relatives and friends benefitted from his generous and caring nature.

After graduating from Lawrence University with degrees in history and music, he served four years in the US Navy during the Vietnam War. When he returned, he continued his education at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, obtaining graduate degrees in library science and history. Later, he was a member of the 84th Division Army Reserve Band for approximately two decades.

Doug retired after a 34-year career as an educator. Music continued to play a central role in his life when he was a bugler for the Wisconsin National Guard at military funerals for over ten years. He was a proud member of the Milwaukee Festival Brass Band for five years. His library science background was ideal for advising customers in the children's section at Harry W. Schwartz Bookshops.



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Doug was a true renaissance man. His varied interests included researching World War II history, collecting and reproducing Britain's lead toy soldiers, building and sailing remote-controlled model boats, and designing and operating a model train village.

Doug persisted in life despite Parkinson's Disease and impaired vision.

See *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* Article below.



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Doug Gruehn, a member of the Army funeral honors guard in Wisconsin, has volunteered to play Taps at funerals since he retired from his civilian job in 2003.
Credit: Nushmia Khan

By Meg Jones of the Journal Sentinel

Rifle shots punctuated the silence, followed by the quick ping of ejected brass cartridges landing on pavement.

Three volleys.

Then Doug Gruehn stepped forward. Holding his golden-colored bugle to his lips he blew the plaintive call- its notes more familiar than its words - honoring America's dead.

Day is done, gone the sun.

Taps.



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Inside the funeral home, the body of a 94-year-old man who earned six Bronze Stars in the U.S. Army Air Corps during World War II lay in a flag-covered casket, his family and friends nearby.

From the hills, from the lake, from the sky.

Gruehn, a member of the Army funeral honors guard in Wisconsin, plays taps several days every week. He estimates he's played it close to 2,000 times in the last nine years - for men and women who served their country in combat and peace time, in the jungles of Vietnam, the beaches of Normandy, the sands of Iraq and Afghanistan.

All is well, safely rest, God is nigh.

It's a simple song, really. Just four notes - G, C, E and then G above the staff, an octave higher than the first G.

For the buglers who play the call, which turns 150 years old in July, it's more than just a tune.

"It's a final honor. No matter how many times you do it, it's the last chance to pay respects," said Gruehn, 66, who played trumpet in the 84th Division band for 24 years. "You won't find many soldiers waxing eloquent about their feelings for their job. But the trumpet players I know see it as a sacred honor."

'Lights Out'

In July 1862, taps was first played by a bugler with Union troops stationed at Harrison's Landing, Va., after a battle during the Peninsular Campaign of the Civil War. It wasn't originally played at funerals. It was simply one of many calls played to signal to troops to do something, in this case to put out their campfires and go to sleep. It's the opposite of reveille, which is the wake-up call.

Union Gen. Dan Butterfield is credited with the song, which most accounts say he revised from a French bugle call to signify "lights out." A short time later, taps was first used at the funeral of a soldier killed in action in Virginia because his commander worried that firing the traditional three volleys over his grave so close to the enemy would renew fighting.



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By the late 1800s, taps became standard at military funerals.

"It's the hardest 24 notes to play," said Bill Seaman, 54, of Oak Creek, who is Wisconsin state director of Bugles Across America, an organization of volunteer buglers who play taps at the funerals of veterans. "Any person can play taps, but to do so with that much honor and pride, it's difficult."

About 250 of the 7,000 members of the group are based in Wisconsin. Seaman played taps at Arlington National Cemetery earlier this month as part of a mass performance of the call to commemorate the sesquicentennial of taps.

Every active-duty military member or honorably discharged veteran is entitled to two uniformed honor guard members at his or her funeral under federal law. If the family requests it, a firing squad will be sent, often from a local veterans group. But the number of buglers hasn't kept pace with the large numbers of funerals of World War II, Korea and Vietnam veterans. Until a few years ago, a recording of taps was often played on a boom box when a live bugler wasn't available.

Now electronic bugles are often used - an MP3 player inside a ceremonial bugle that plays a recording of taps. Many veterans groups own one and use it when a live bugler is unavailable.

Understandably, some buglers are dismissive of the faux bugle.

"I tell them would you like a recording of the 21-gun salute?" Seaman said. "Oh, no? Well then, why would you want a recording of taps?"

Added Gruehn: "I can see why they're doing it. They used to use a boom box, which caused them a lot of trouble and glances. But if the (electronic) bugle quits because the batteries are dead, then there are other circumstances you have to explain."

Buglers Log Miles

Gary Hans, military funeral honors state coordinator, sends half a dozen buglers to as many funerals as he can throughout the state. Among them are buglers in Oshkosh and Green Bay who play in the 132nd Army Band.



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With 50 to 60 funerals each week in the state, some of the trumpet players work full-time as funeral honors buglers, said Hans, a retired sergeant major.

Tyler Terrell, 37, a staff sergeant and trumpet player in the Wisconsin National Guard 132nd Army Band, has played taps at funerals full-time for seven or eight years and handles about 250 annually. Once he learns the name, he searches for an online obituary to find out when and where the veteran served. He's based in Green Bay and handles many funerals in the Fox Valley, but travels as far west as Eau Claire and north to Superior, averaging 1,000 miles a week on the road.

Terrell has played at funerals of active soldiers, including those killed in Iraq and Afghanistan, which have large turnouts. And he plays at funerals of veterans who have no family or friends. All are accorded the same respect.

"It doesn't happen very often, but I've worked at King (Veterans Home) in Waupaca quite a few times. There have been a few times where there's nobody or one or two people. Those are really sad," said Terrell, who plays a Bach Stradivarius trumpet.

Buglers play taps at military funerals in all kinds of weather. They play in driving rain. They play in snowstorms. They play in 100-degree heat. They play in frigid temperatures.

Terrell uses a plastic mouthpiece; Gruehn tucks his metal mouthpiece in his white glove to keep it warm until he needs to play his Getzen American Heritage model field trumpet. Sometimes horns freeze up in bad weather. Terrell was embarrassed when his trumpet malfunctioned in subzero weather and he couldn't play a note. He apologized to the veteran's family.

Occasionally a family requests taps not be played. But that's rare, said Gary Dierks, program supervisor at the Union Grove veterans cemetery.

"More often what we have is the family doesn't want the rifle volleys. I've had one or two families in the last 10 years out of thousands of funerals who didn't want taps," Dierks said. "They said it was too emotional."

If the rifle volleys and taps are performed at a cemetery - sometimes they're outside a funeral home - the bugler normally stands a moderate distance from the bottom



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right corner of the flag that's folded from the veteran's casket. But that can change depending on the setup of the cemetery, said Gruehn, who likes to stand within view of families so they know a live bugler is playing.

Gruehn, Seaman and Terrell often see mourners brought to tears by their music. They said they try to concentrate on playing as perfectly as they can.

But sometimes it's hard not to notice the tears.

"There are a couple I wish I could get out of my mind," Gruehn said. "I was presenting the flag after playing taps when a young man started sobbing. I could tell he must have loved his father or grandfather very much.

"Another time was for an active-duty service member who had been killed. I was at Wood (Cemetery in Milwaukee), and it was November. It was pouring rain and I was so cold the muscles in my legs stopped working. The father was very, very overcome by emotion. That was hard to see."

About Meg Jones

Meg Jones is a general assignment reporter who specializes in military and veterans issues. Meg was part of a team that was a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2003, and is the author of "World War II Milwaukee."