



The Last Post – the ‘soundtrack’ for Remembrance...

(not to be confused with the USA version ‘TAPS’)

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”

(John.15:13)

How a simple British Army bugle call from the 18th Century becomes a sacred anthem of remembrance.

Background

Trumpets and bugles have been used in the British Army for centuries. They had two main functions - firstly, to regulate the everyday routine of the camp (before the days of wrist watches) and secondly, to give commands or signals on the battlefield. The soldier’s day started with ‘Reveille’ and there were a couple of dozen further calls throughout the day to tell him what he should be doing. ‘Last Post’ was originally sounded once the officer of the day had completed his inspections, to indicate that the perimeter of the camp was finally secured at the end of the day. The title referred to the fact that the final sentry post had been inspected, and therefore all was well.

As other calls dropped out of use, this one has remained and transformed into another use. The first known reference to this new development was in 1853, when the Revd. W.B. Clarke witnessed the funeral of a soldier in the Highland Light Infantry in Quebec. In a letter home the clergyman wrote:

“When the coffin was deposited in the grave, the Last Post was played between every volley that was fired over it. There is something touching and appropriate in this, the Last Post is the call that is played at night after all the soldiers are supposed to be in their rooms. And when the soldier is placed in his long home, what music so appropriate as the Last Post.”

Although the notes are the same today, the style of delivery is very different...more evocative. One such occasion was in the ‘whispering gallery’ at St. Pauls, after the slow journey through the streets of London for the State funeral of Sir Winston Churchill, where the public had lined the streets 10-12 deep, on a cold January day in 1965. A quick-march style was clearly not appropriate.

The sound of a lone bugler playing the Last Post is perhaps one of the most haunting and evocative gifts of the British Empire. It has been adopted by groups of every political persuasion and a cross-section of cultures; Played at the graveside of millions of soldiers, Kings, and Emperors across the world. It started as a routine bugle call amongst a couple of dozen throughout the day. It is anonymous, yet perhaps the most powerful piece of folk music ever produced by Britain.

Structure

Starts with an Open 5th (C to G), rhythmically simple (in 2/4 time) and merely 5 notes on the open bugle. **The difficulty lies in its very simplicity!** Any bugler will tell you that if you just bang the notes out without much thought it is indeed a simple piece...*until* played at a state funeral or a more personal occasion, where it is invested with much greater importance.

Developments

In the 1850's the LP found a new role as it was played at soldiers' funerals. Later, it developed into being played at memorial services and for those who have died in conflict.

Gradually it moved beyond just the military – played at the funerals of those who have never been in the armed forces, such as the musician Wallace Hartley (Bandmaster of the Titanic). Now, it is known globally, and has even been extended to be played at the funerals of Nelson Mandela and Gandhi.

It was during WW1 that the Last Post was established as part of a soldier's funeral rites, and began to find a significant depth as a 'soundtrack' for all forms of subsequent remembrance. It was in this period of history that the call also began to have resonance for civilian society, as with the peace of 1918, the Last Post naturally entered the national culture – associated particularly with commemoration services at the Cenotaph in Whitehall. By this stage then, the call became invested with a poignancy that did not previously exist.

Pilgrimage & Healing

In the 1920's there was also a degree of sentimentality, especially for those who have no known grave. One obvious illustration of this emotion concerns the 50,000 British and Commonwealth souls recorded on the Menin Gate (1927) at Ypres ('Wipers') in Belgium, who were honoured by sounding the Last Post every evening. It is perhaps remarkable to note that this practice continues 'religiously' at 11am every day, and is delivered by two members of the local fire brigade in their ceremonial uniform. This is both an inspired and pragmatic decision, because over the years the military have disbanded or moved regiments, yet there will always be a

requirement for a fire brigade presence in both war and peacetime, thereby ensuring the perpetuity of the event. It has subsequently become almost an occasion of pilgrimage for old soldiers, serving military personnel, bereaved families, schoolchildren, politicians and community leaders alike.

In WW2 the Last Post was sounded over 3,000+ times during the building of the Burma railway alone, as these POWs were literally worked to death by their Japanese captors.

Later, as the British Empire began to dissolve, it was naturally the Last Post which sounded when the Union Flag was lowered for the final time in many colonies and countries as British sovereignty was gradually replaced, granting each nation their return to independence.

Where is it still played today?

The Last Post is sounded on both sides of the disputed border between India and Pakistan. It has accompanied the funerals of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and has spread beyond Empire to countries such as Belgium, Portugal and their former colonies.

It is also still played in the original form uniquely at the Tower of London, where it is still sounded every evening.

Interestingly, in a role as the preferred music of loss, it is becoming the music of choice even though our society is apparently becoming increasingly secular these days.

Why does it matter?

Although generated by military culture, the call is now a piece of public ownership. Whatever anyone may feel about the government of their day, or if people have no interest or experience in the armed services, there is still a powerful raw emotion and respect that results from hearing these solemn, deceptively simple notes and the welcome silence created on completion. It encourages a much-needed gift – a subtle opportunity for uninterrupted private reflection at a depth which is almost impossible to quantify.

Conclusions

It is salient to note, especially during the November Remembrance season, that the Last Post is a great leveller. Used by Britain's friends, *and equally significantly its foes*, this little piece heals and brings community together at the most profound level. It is therefore an integral salute and a timeless 'thank you' to all conditions and cultures, past and present.

Changing its voice through the Dilruba, steel band, mouthorgan, organ, brass band, electric guitar, trumpet, however and wherever – no matter, as it gives every generation and culture an opportunity to engage with the things that truly resonate – providing the atmosphere to reflect on fundamental issues such as equal concern and respect, sacrifice and loss.

The Last Post repeatedly illustrates that the humble, routine anonymity of the everyday can eventually become extraordinary, as the human soul is lifted to a truly noble place beyond its own self-absorption.

Fr. Mike – Remembrance Sunday 2020.