

The HONOR GUARD

— LARRY'S SHORT STORIES #110 —

We were called the "honor guard;" it was an additional duty assigned by the base commander, and I served on it for a few months during my enlisted time. Apparently every Air Force Base in the country had one – each covering a certain area. Any family could ask for an honor guard at the funeral of a veteran and the funeral director would call base headquarters.

Our lieutenant would request a bus and driver, check out the M1 Garand rifles, with blank firing attachments, and assemble the bugler and seven of us

"riflemen." In our dress blues we climbed into the Air Force bus and rode to a cemetery, in some distant town – arriving well before the funeral procession.

The routine was always the same; we practiced while waiting, and the lieutenant would order us into formation just as the procession came into view. Our set-up was on the far side of the burial location; nearby and clearly visible — but not in the way. Certainly the Air Force had rules for all of that, but I only knew my job – keep quiet and military like, and obey the lieutenant's commands to fire off the salute.

Our part of the ceremony was simple, elegant and profound – and all eyes and ears were on us. An American flag draped the coffin, as it came out of the hearse and was set on its stand. The flag was respectfully lifted off, folded slowly, carefully and tightly into a triangle of stars.

The "firing party's" part was next. The commands came; we shouldered and fired our rifles three times, in



The bugler playing taps is a longstanding tradition. (U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Wolfram Stumpf/Released)

methodical order — seven "riflemen," three rounds each – a common soldier's 21-gun salute.

Then the bugler would sound off the classic notes of Taps - "Day is done, gone the sun." Generations of veterans have heard these notes at just about sundown, calling for the lowering of the

flag before dark. Sentimental and reflective, under normal circumstances, the notes always brought tears at a funeral. Taps seemed like an appropriate bugle call to play at the sundown of a man's life.

"...every Air Force Base in the country had one..."

The flag was then formally presented to the widow, or next of kin; and we marched back to the bus and drove away, having paid our final respects to a fellow veteran we never knew. You would think that most veterans would want a full honor guard at their funeral; I certainly would.

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The firing party with M-14 rifles. (U.S. Air Force photo by Airman Jonathan Olds)



Gloved hands respectfully fold and handle the flag. (U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Willard E. Grande II)