

Fort Davis

National Historic Site

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Curriculum Materials Grades 6-8 Student Activity: The Life of a Soldier at a Frontier Fort

THE LIFE OF A SOLDIER AT A FRONTIER FORT

Just as the school bell regulates your school day, the bugle organized a soldier's day at a frontier fort in the 19th century. Most soldiers did not own pocket watches (and wrist watches had not yet been invented), so they listened to different bugle calls played by a bugler to tell them where to go or what to do next.

A soldier's day began at sunrise and ended about 9:00-10:00 p.m. He awakened from sleep with the first bugle call of the day, "Assembly of Trumpeters." This call sounded between 4:45 a.m. and 6:40 a.m., depending on the time of the year and the preference of the commanding officer. A few minutes later, just like having a snooze alarm, the call "Reveille" played, telling the soldier he had to be out of bed. On the last note of this call, the flag was raised and the day officially began.



The commanding officer at each post set the times for the bugle calls and could add or take away calls at his discretion. Once a post commander ordered "Assembly" to be sounded at 3:30 a.m.—to which the post surgeon protested that the men needed more time to sleep. The post commander took the surgeon's advice and changed the time.



The soldier's day was filled with work details and drills. Soldiers constructed and repaired buildings, hauled water and cut wood, planted and maintained gardens, and did general maintenance of the grounds along with military duties such as drilling on the parade ground, tending to horses, and preparing for inspections.

Below is an example of a daily winter schedule followed by the soldiers (except on Sundays) at Fort Davis in 1884. Keep up with the soldiers as they go from one duty to the next, following the commands of the bugle.

TIME	BUGLE CALL	ACTIVITY / DUTY
6:40 a.m.	Assembly of Trumpeters	Wake up
6:50 a.m.	Reveille	Soldiers should be out of bed
7:00 a.m.	Assembly	Soldiers line up for roll call
7:10 a.m.	Stable Call	Cavalry soldiers feed & tend to their horses
8:00 a.m.	Mess Call	Breakfast
8:30 a.m.	Sick Call	Sick soldiers report to post hospital
8:45 a.m.	Fatigue Call	Soldiers report for work detail

9:00 a.m.	Water Call	Cavalry troops water their horses
9:50 a.m.	Guard mount, 1 st Call	Signal to change 24-hour guard duty
10:00 a.m.	Adjutant's Call	Changing of the guard
10:00 a.m.	School Call	Children report to school
12:30 p.m.	Recall	Morning work details cease
1:00 p.m.	Mess Call	Dinner
1:30 p.m.	Fatigue Call	Soldiers report for work detail
2:00 p.m.	Drill Call	Call for mounted drill
3:30 p.m.	Recall from Drill	Drill ceases
4:00 p.m.	Stable and Water Call	Cavalry soldiers tend to their horses
5:15 p.m.	Recall from Fatigue	Afternoon work details cease
Sunset	Retreat	Flag lowering and evening dress parade
-----	School Call	Immediately following Retreat—call for enlisted men to go to school
9:30 p.m.	Tattoo	Soldiers prepare for bed
10:00 p.m.	Taps	All men in their bunks and lights out

Note that there is no scheduled evening “Mess Call.” Eating supper was a matter of going by the mess hall and eating whatever was left from the day’s meals. After “Retreat” and before “Tattoo,” soldiers (if they were not going to school) had free time. They often played cards, dominoes, checkers, billiards, and musical instruments, or read, relaxed, and played jokes on their fellow soldiers in the barracks.

Activities/Questions:

1. How do you think a soldier’s day today compares to that of a soldier in the 1880s?
2. Have a band member in your class play “Taps.” This bugle call has long been played at the close of each day at military posts and also at military funerals. Why do you think this call has been used at soldiers’ funerals? Using the Internet or other resources in your library, find the words to the melody of “Taps.”
3. Back before the days of wristwatches, how else—besides the bugle—might the U.S. Army have told soldiers at a frontier fort what to do at particular times? Can you think of a better way?
4. How might our lives today be different if had no wristwatches or personal timepieces? Back then, a pocket watch cost about \$20. A soldier’s salary was \$13 per month. Do you think most of us would have wristwatches today if one cost more than a month’s salary?
5. If you were a soldier at Fort Davis, what jobs would you like to do? Which jobs would you not like to do? Do you think the army gave soldiers a choice?
6. In the morning, cavalry soldiers fed their horses before they ate their own breakfast. How would you explain this? What has replaced horses in the modern army?
7. Why do you think the bugle call for soldiers to report for work detail (such as at 8:45 a.m.) was called “Fatigue Call”?

A cassette tape or CD of bugle calls may be ordered from the book store at Fort Davis National Historic Site by calling 432-426-3224, ext. 28.

20. CALL TO QUARTERS. 10.45 p.m.

Slow

Musical notation for 'Call to Quarters' consisting of two staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a common time signature, and the tempo marking 'Slow'. The melody starts with a quarter note, followed by eighth notes, and ends with a triplet of eighth notes. The second staff continues the melody with a triplet of eighth notes, followed by quarter notes, and ends with a triplet of eighth notes.

21. TAPS. 11.00 p.m.

Slow

Musical notation for 'Taps' consisting of two staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a common time signature, and the tempo marking 'Slow'. The melody starts with a quarter note, followed by quarter notes, and ends with a quarter note. The second staff continues the melody with a quarter note, followed by quarter notes, and ends with a quarter note.