

Background on the 3-Volley Salute

Many confuse the firing of three volleys by seven riflemen at military funerals with a 21-gun salute. This is not a 21-gun salute, however. In battle, opposing sides would cease fighting to clear the field of the dead. Upon safely clearing the dead, each side would fire three volleys to signal the successful removal of the dead and the resumption of battle. All members of the military are entitled three volleys of rifle fire by seven riflemen.

The origin and significance of the military custom of firing rifle volleys at funerals is interesting. During the funeral rites of the Roman Army the casting of the earth THREE times upon the coffin constituted the burial. It was customary among the Romans to call the dead THREE times by name, which ended the funeral ceremony. As friends and relatives of the deceased departed they said "Vale", or farewell, THREE times. Over time when firearms were introduced on the battlefield the custom of firing volleys was established to halt the fighting to remove the dead from the battlefield. Once each army had cleared its dead it would fire THREE volleys to indicate that the dead had been cared for and that they were ready to go back to the fight. Today, when a squad of soldiers fires THREE volleys over a grave, they are, in accordance with this old custom, bidding their dead comrade farewell.

Today, after the last rifle volley, the bugler then sounds TAPS. The fact that the firing party consists of seven riflemen, firing three volleys does not constitute a 21-gun salute. The 3-volley salute is a salute performed at military and police funerals as part of the drill and ceremony of the Honor Guard. A rifle party, usually consisting of an odd number of firers, usually from 3 to 7 firearms. Usually the firearms are rifles for military, but at some police funerals, shotguns are used. The firing party is positioned such that, when they shoulder their arms for firing, the muzzles are pointed over the casket of the deceased who is being honored. If the service is being performed inside a church or chapel, or funeral home, the firing party fires from outside the building, typically positioned near the front entrance. On the command of the NCO-in-charge, the firing party fires their weapons in unison, for a total of three volleys. Because unbulleted blanks (which will not cycle the action of a semi-automatic rifle) are used, in the United States, M1 or M14 rifles are preferred over the current issue M16 rifle, because the charging handles of the M1/M14 are more easily operated in a dignified, ceremonial manner than on the M16.

Many confuse the 21-gun salute with the 3-volley salute. The 21-gun salute is used primarily as a greeting. It's fired during presidential arrivals and departures and when heads of state visit. Also, it's not limited to the United States - many countries have similar ceremonies. ***The 3-volley salute, on the other hand, is performed during police and military funerals by the Honor Guard and is intended as a reminder.*** While the two salutes look (and sound) similar, the 21-gun salute is considered the higher honor.

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