

TAKING CARE OF OUR OWN FALLEN HERO'S
FINAL PREPARATION FOR THE JOURNEY HOME
HONOR THE FALLEN & THANK THE LIVING

401



A STORY NOT OFTEN TOLD



This is a picture the military has never let anyone see until now!

This is a picture behind the scenes at Dover Air Force Base where the bodies of fallen soldiers are prepared for burial.

And that includes being properly dressed, all the way down to the smallest detail.

In this picture Staff Sgt. Miguel Deynes is making sure the uniform is just right for an army pilot recently killed in Afghanistan.

There is a very specific process once a fallen soldier is returned home.

The Fallen Heroes are flown back to the U.S. on a cargo jet.

A team of service members wearing white gloves carries the coffins, covered with flags, to a white van that takes them to the Armed Forces Medical Examiner.

The Heroes are washed, the hands are eyes scrubbed clean, and the hair is shampooed. If necessary bones are wired together and damaged tissue is reconstructed with flesh-toned wax.

Sometimes they will use photos, sometimes just intuition to recreate the wrinkles in faces, and the lines around the mouth or the corner of the. "It has to look normal, like someone who is sleeping."

Once the Hero is ready then the uniform is prepared.

That includes putting medals in the proper order on the ribbon rack above the jacket's breast pocket.

During the height of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan 10 to 20 Fallen a Heroes were arriving every day. The embalmers often worked all night to get the Heroes home on time. That can take an emotional toll so the mortuary has a large gym so workers can blow off steam.

Many say they are haunted by how young the fallen soldiers are, and by how many of them leave behind small children.

That's why Sgt. Deynes says they are advised not to do research into the backgrounds of the soldiers. "If I knew the story of every individual who went through here, I would probably be in a padded cell."

The dress uniform being prepared in this particular case will be in a closed casket.

Even so, it will be perfectly tailored, starched and pressed. Everything will be checked down to the last detail.

Sgt. Deynes says, "They're (the family) not going to see it. I do it for myself. It's more than an honor it's a blessing to dress that soldier for the last time."



THE FOLDED MEMORIAL US FLAG

And, if words alone cannot repay the debt we owe these men, surely with our actions, we must strive to keep faith with them and with the vision that led them to battle and final sacrifice.

Ronald Regan

MILITARY FUNERAL SERVICE RITUALS
WHERE BEREAVEMENT BEGINS



For the family of an active-duty service member, military bereavement starts with a knock at the door. The news comes in person, by a military chaplain and a service member whose rank is equal to or higher

than that of the one who has died. They arrive in full dress uniform, bearing the worst news possible. It's the visit no family wants.

Before this solemn visit happened, wheels are already in motion to bring the service member home. No matter what the service member's rank was, this "dignified transfer" involves the utmost care and respect for a person whose life was given for others. The ultimate solemnity, tradition, and dignity of the military funeral are foreshadowed in the transfer process.

THE DIGNIFIED TRANSFER

Military Funeral Elements

Flag-draped casket

Honor guard carrying the casket

Firing party firing three volleys

Playing of "Taps"

Ceremonial folding of the flag

Presentation of the flag to the family

The service member's remains are packed in ice inside an aluminum, flag-draped "transfer case" and transported by military cargo plane. When fallen troops return home, they enter the U.S. through Dover Air Force Base in Dover, Del. Upon arrival they are greeted and transferred with great dignity by hearse to the Air Force Mortuary Affairs Operations center at Dover, a short distance away. Those in attendance, including the carry guard, chaplain, and any family members, VIPs, or journalists, follow on foot. The remains undergo all of the necessities of burial preparation at this time, including being clothed in full dress uniform.

Arrivals at Dover were opened to the public in 2009—for the first time in 18 years—but only with the approval of the next of kin. News coverage wasn't allowed upon the return of the 30 American troops killed in a helicopter crash in Afghanistan on Aug. 6, 2011. The remains couldn't be identified soon enough to permit the relatives to grant permission.

Before 2007, the remains were taken only as far as the major airport nearest to the burial place and then transported by hearse. That could mean a long-distance trip for the family to meet the plane. The 2007 National Defense Appropriations Act now requires a direct flight on a military or military-contracted plane from Dover to the closest airport, even if it's small. A military escort also is required by law. The family may request that commercial aircraft be used or that an escort not accompany the remains.

While the remains are transported in an aluminum case rather than a traditional coffin, the case is adorned with a special "honor" cover. According to the Department of Defense, the honor cover is a reinforced cardboard cover that fits on top of the airline industry's standard air tray for coffins. The cover is embossed with an American flag, and the Defense Department seal on both ends.

The Army designed the honor covers in cooperation with the Air Transport Association, so they are standardized throughout the airline industry. The covers are not used more than once and are treated to make them waterproof. When the remains reach their final destination, the honor cover is removed, and an American flag is placed over the coffin.

RENDERING HONORS

By tradition, the remains travel feet-first whenever they must be moved, and there are military personnel on hand to render honors—standing at attention and saluting—at each transfer point. At times the honors may be the sole responsibility of the specially trained military escort who accompanies the remains.

For all active-duty deaths, a small honor guard will provide honors for the remains when they arrive at their final destination airport. This honor guard of at least two military personnel may include the escort and one other uniformed service member

The duties of the military escort are complete when the remains are delivered to the funeral home where interment will be held. He or she is not required to attend the service.

For a personal, based-on-true-life look behind the scenes at an escort's journey, we recommend the HBO movie *Taking Chance*.

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE PERSONAL EFFECTS?

When the remains arrive in Dover, so do the contents of the service member's footlocker. The Staff at the Joint Personal Effects Depot sort, photograph, clean, and catalogue these personal belongings before turning them over to the military escort. ("These items mean so much to these families, in different ways, because it's oftentimes the last tangible thing they might have", according to Lt. Col. Kelly Kyburz in a story found here.) While most of these effects will be shipped back home, those that were on the service member at the time of his or her death may be given to the military escort and personally handed over to the family.

INVESTIGATION INTO MISHANDLING OF REMAINS

In 2011, the public was informed of an investigation into alleged mishandling of service members' remains at the Dover military mortuary. Four families were directly affected by the investigation, which had been ongoing for 18 months before the families were informed. As a result of the investigation, three supervisors at the military mortuary were disciplined but not fired. The Air Force maintains that the incidents were isolated and that procedures have been improved following the investigation.

THE MILITARY FUNERAL

Tradition, honor, and dignity are the hallmarks of a military funeral. While most of the ceremonial aspects are usually performed at the grave site, an honor guard may be present and have some part in the funeral itself. The most important elements of the service are standard, whether the service member died while on active duty or was honorably discharged or retired, or whether he or she attained the rank of admiral or was newly enlisted.

Here are the elements you are likely to see at a military grave site service held at a national cemetery:

The flag-draped casket arrives at the cemetery by hearse or horse-drawn caisson.

A six-man honor guard carries the casket to the grave site.

The chaplain or pastor (if applicable) reads a committal service.

The honor guard lifts and holds the American flag taut over the casket.

The seven-person firing party fires three volleys. A spent shell may be picked up and later tucked into the folded memorial flag.

A bugler sounds "Taps."

The honor guard ceremonially folds the American flag.

The highest-ranking officer presents the folded flag to the family with a brief statement of gratitude and a salute.

PRIVATE SERVICE

Whether at a national cemetery or at a private service, each member of the honor guard has a specific role and has practiced for these occasions. They carry out every detail of the ceremony with cadence and precision. *Salutes are offered in slow motion, honoring the sacrifice of a life given in service.*

A STORY OF ESCORTING ANOTHER SOLDIER "HOME"

My lead flight attendant came to me and said, "We have an H.R. on this flight." (H.R. stands for human remains.)

"Are they military?" I asked.

'Yes', she said.

'Is there an escort?' I asked.

'Yes, I've already assigned him a seat'.



'Would you please tell him to come to the Flight Deck. You can board him early," I said...

A short while later a young army sergeant entered the flight deck. He was the image of the perfectly dressed soldier. He introduced himself and I asked him about his soldier.

The escorts of these fallen soldiers talk about them as if they are still alive and still with us. 'My soldier is on his way back to Virginia ,' he said. He proceeded to answer my questions, but offered no words.

I asked him if there was anything I could do for him and he said no. I told him that he had the toughest job in the military, and that I appreciated the work that he does for the families of our fallen soldiers.

The first officer and I got up out of our seats to shake his hand. He left the Flight Deck to find his seat.

We completed our preflight checks, pushed back and made an uneventful departure. About 30 minutes into our flight, I received a call from the lead flight attendant in the cabin.

'I just found out the family of the soldier we are carrying is also on board', she said. She then proceeded to tell me that the father, mother, wife and 2-year-old daughter were escorting their son, husband, and father home. *The family was upset because they were unable to see the container that the soldier was in before we left.*

We were on our way to a major hub at which the family was going to wait four hours for the connecting flight home to Virginia . The father of the soldier told the flight attendant that knowing his son was below him in the cargo compartment and being unable to see him was too much for him and the family to bear. He had asked the flight attendant if there was anything that could be done to allow them to see him upon our arrival. *The family wanted to be outside by the cargo door to watch the soldier being taken off the airplane.*

I could hear the desperation in the flight attendant's voice when she asked me if there was anything I could do. 'I'm on it', I said. I told her that I would get back to her.

Airborne communication with my company normally occurs in the form of e-mail like messages. I decided to bypass this system and contact my flight dispatcher directly on a secondary radio. There is a

radio operator in the operations control center who connects you to the telephone of the dispatcher. I was in direct contact with the dispatcher. I explained the situation I had on board with the family and what the family wanted. He said he understood and that he would get back to me.

Two hours went by, and I had not heard from the dispatcher. We were going to get busy soon and I needed to know what to tell the family. I sent a text message asking for an update. I saved the return message from the dispatcher and the following is the text:

'Captain, sorry it has taken so long to get back to you. There is policy on this now, and I had to check on a few things. Upon your arrival a dedicated escort team will meet the aircraft.

The team will escort the family to the ramp and plane side. A van will be used to load the remains with a secondary van for the family.

The family will be taken to their departure area and escorted into the terminal, where the remains can be seen on the ramp. It is a private area for the family only. When the connecting aircraft arrives, the family will be escorted onto the ramp and plane side to watch the remains being loaded for the final leg home.

Captain, most of us here in-flight control are veterans. Please pass our condolences on to the family. Thanks.

I sent a message back, telling flight control thanks for a good job. I printed out the message and gave it to the lead flight attendant to pass on to the father. The lead flight attendant was very thankful and told me, 'You have no idea how much this will mean to them.'

Things started getting busy for the descent, approach and landing. After landing, we cleared the runway and taxied to the ramp area. The ramp is huge with 15 gates on either side of the alleyway. It is always a busy area with aircraft maneuvering every which way to enter and exit.

When we entered the ramp and checked in with the ramp controller, we were told that all traffic was being held for us.



[A FALLEN SOLDIER COMES HOME](#)

[TO VIEW THIS VIDEO PLEASE COPY AND PASTE THE BELOW LINK INTO YOUR BROWSER](#)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWM_O3N-Crw

'There is a team in place to meet the aircraft', we were told. It looked like it was all coming together, then I realized that once we turned the seat belt sign off, everyone would stand up at once and delay the family from getting off the airplane. As we approached our gate, I asked the copilot to tell the ramp controller, we were going to stop short of the gate to make an announcement to the passengers. He did that and the ramp controller said, 'Take your time.'

I stopped the aircraft and set the parking brake. I pushed the public address button and said: 'Ladies and gentleman, this is your Captain speaking: I have stopped short of our gate to make a special announcement. We have a passenger on board who deserves our honor and respect. His Name is Private XXXXXX, a soldier who recently lost his life.

Private XXXXXX is under your feet in the cargo hold. Escorting him today is Army Sergeant XXXXXX. Also, on board are his father, mother, wife, and daughter. Your entire flight crew is asking for all passengers to remain in their seats to allow the family to exit the aircraft first. Thank you.'

We continued the turn to the gate, came to a stop and started our shutdown procedures. A couple of minutes later I opened the cockpit door. I found the two forward flight attendants crying, something you just do not see. I was told that after we came to a stop, every passenger on the aircraft stayed in their seats, waiting for the family to exit the aircraft.

When the family got up and gathered their things, a passenger slowly started to clap his hands. Moments later, more passengers joined in and soon the entire aircraft was clapping. Words of 'God Bless You', 'I'm sorry, thank you, be proud, and other kind words were uttered to the family as they made their way down the aisle and out of the airplane. They were escorted down to the ramp to finally be with their loved one.

Many of the passengers disembarking thanked me for the announcement I had made. They were just words, I told them, I could say them over and over again, but nothing I say will bring back that brave soldier.

I respectfully ask that all of you reflect on this event and the sacrifices that millions of our men and women have made to ensure our freedom and safety in these United States of AMERICA.



THEY DIE FOR ME AND MINE AND YOU AND YOURS AND DESERVE OUR HONOR & RESPECT



PLEASE UNDERSTAND THAT EVEN THOUGH THIS INFORMATION HAS BEEN TAKEN
FROM WEBSITES & OTHER SOURCES THAT APPEAR TO BE AUTHENTIC, I CAN NOT GUARANTEE THAT ALL THE
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