

## ***Biden Receives Bodies of Service Members Killed in Kabul Bombing***

The president's first trip in office to witness the transfer of remains was a reminder of the toll of the Afghanistan war, and of his unique relationship with it.



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DOVER AIR FORCE BASE, Del. — A gray C-17 transport plane landed in Delaware shortly after 8 a.m. on Sunday. It carried the remains of 11 Marines, a Navy medic and an Army staff sergeant, who collectively could be the last Americans to die in the war in Afghanistan.

Just before 8:40 a second plane, a white-and-blue Boeing jetliner, parked next to the transport. It carried the president who gave the orders to end that war after nearly 20 years, prompting the mass evacuation effort that those 13 service members were carrying out when a bomber from the Islamic State Khorasan group detonated his charges at the Kabul airport last week.

President Biden's first trip in office to witness the transfer of remains at Dover was a reminder of the length and cost of the Afghanistan war, and of his unique attachment to it as a legislator, a vice president and now a commander in chief.

Mr. Biden made an unannounced flight to Delaware for a rare presidential appearance at a transfer of remains of service members killed overseas. They were on their way from Afghanistan, via Kuwait and Germany, to final rest in communities across the nation that have supplied sons and daughters to fight two decades of what was once called the war on terror.

The transfers began in the late morning and stretched nearly 40 minutes, finishing after noon. Time and again, service members in varying shades of green fatigues carried flag-draped transfer cases down the ramp of the transport, which faced Air Force One on the runway. First came the Army, then the Marines, then the Navy. The carry teams, as they are called, worked in three-minute cycles, marching before a host of dignitaries including the president, the secretaries of state and defense, and several top military brass. They carried the remains from the transport and lifted them through the back cargo doors of four gray vans.

The president stood with his hand over his heart as they passed by. When sets of Marines returned to the belly of the C-17, hands empty, to retrieve the next set of remains, Mr. Biden widened his stance and clasped his hands by his belt or behind his back. Often he bowed his head with his eyes squeezed shut, as if in prayer.

Across from him sat rows of family members of the fallen, so many of them that the Dover base could not house them all in its rooms built specially for next of kin.

The fallen service members returning Sunday to Dover were Marine Corps Staff Sgt. Darin T. Hoover, 31, of Salt Lake City; Marine Corps Sgt. Johanny Rosario Pichardo, 25, of Lawrence, Mass.; Marine Corps Sgt. Nicole L. Gee, 23, of Sacramento, Calif.; Marine Corps Cpl. Hunter Lopez, 22, of Indio, Calif.; Marine Corps Cpl. Daegan W. Page, 23, of Omaha; Marine Corps Cpl. Humberto A. Sanchez, 22, of Logansport, Ind.; Marine Corps Lance Cpl. David L. Espinoza, 20, of Rio Bravo, Texas; Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Jared M. Schmitz, 20, of St. Charles, Mo.; Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Rylee J. McCollum, 20, of Jackson, Wyo.; Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Dylan R. Merola, 20, of Rancho Cucamonga, Calif.; Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Kareem M. Nikoui, 20, of Norco, Calif.; Navy Hospitalman Maxton W. Soviak, 22, of Berlin Heights, Ohio; and Army Staff Sgt. Ryan C. Knauss, 23, of Corryton, Tenn.

The president and the first lady, Jill Biden, met with the families of those service members midmorning on Sunday. They then participated in 13 transfers — 11 for families who chose to allow the news media to observe the remains of their loved ones returning home, and two for families who chose to keep their transfers private.

Mr. Biden's relationship with the war has been complicated for two decades, and it was complicated on Sunday. As he prepared to meet with the families, military officials confirmed an American drone strike in Kabul. A Defense Department official said the strike had eliminated an "imminent" threat to the airport that was bombed last week. A spokesman for the Taliban, which has taken over the country as U.S. troops leave, said civilians had been killed. Mr. Biden did not speak to reporters about the strike or any other part of the trip, and he declined on Sunday afternoon to answer a question about security at the Kabul airport.

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As a senator from Delaware in 2001, Mr. Biden voted to authorize President George W. Bush to start the war after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. After assuming the presidency this year, Mr. Biden announced his plans to remove all American troops from the country by the 20th anniversary of those attacks. In between, nearly 2,500 American troops died in the war.

Reporters were not allowed to observe the transfers in the early years of the war, under Mr. Bush. Newly elected President Barack Obama, who had chosen Mr. Biden as his vice president, changed the policy in 2009 to allow news media access if families consented. His administration also began offering immediate family members transportation to witness the transfers. Since the change, Air Force officials say, more than 10,000 family members have made the trip to Dover to see a loved one's remains return to American soil.

Presidents rarely attend the transfers. Mr. Obama went twice, in 2009 and 2011. President Donald J. Trump went four times, once bringing the actor Jon Voight with him. Mr. Biden went once as vice president in 2016. Sunday was his first opportunity as president; these were the first American service members killed in combat abroad since he took office.

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**Who are the Taliban?** The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

Mr. Biden has said he hopes to have all American troops out of Afghanistan by Tuesday, and that the deadline remains on track. On Sunday, the U.S. military was shifting its focus from vetting and airlifting Afghan and American civilians to bringing its personnel home.

In Dover, the fallen service members captured the complete attention of the president and his traveling entourage, which included three federal government planes that matched the coloring of Air Force One. As the carry teams worked, the only sounds were the hum of a far-off engine and the "hup-hup" of the teams marching slowly in time, along with a few anguished cries from the family members who were shielded from reporters by a large bus. At one point in the humid weather, one of the onlookers, the wife of Senator Thomas R. Carper of Delaware, appeared to collapse and was rushed to medical attention by a team of other bystanders. The carry teams did not pause their work.

Mr. Biden's lone public reflection on the day came hours later, in midafternoon remarks to workers at the Federal Emergency Management Agency in Washington who were bracing to help the Gulf Coast withstand Hurricane Ida.

Before addressing the storm, the president told the workers he had just come from Dover, where he had seen 13 "fallen heroes" come home.

"Let's keep them in our prayers," he said.