

Afghanistan, Biden and the Taliban >

Biden witnesses the return of service members killed in the Kabul airport bombing.



By Jim Tankersley

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DOVER AIR FORCE BASE, Del. — President Biden landed in Delaware on Sunday morning to join the families of the 13 members of the U.S. military who were killed in a bombing last week in Afghanistan.

The service members include 11 Marines, a Navy medic and a member of the Army. They were killed at the airport in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, by a bomber from the Islamic State Khorasan group as they attempted to help people escape the country before American troops complete their withdrawal.

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

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.

Mr. Biden stood at attention with his right hand over his heart as service members in varying shades of green fatigues — first for the Army, then the Marines, then the Navy — carried flag-draped transfer cases containing remains of the fallen from the belly of a gray C-17 transport plane to a fleet of four gray vans with their back doors open.

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The carry teams, as they are called, worked in three-minute cycles, with the public set of 11 transfers lasting just under 40 minutes total, including a prayer at the beginning.

In between transfers, the president spread his legs wider, clasped his hands at his belt or behind his back, and frequently closed his eyes and bowed his head.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

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.

A large group of federal dignitaries were on hand for the transfers, including Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III; Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken; Gen. Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and several members of Congress. One observer, who the White House later identified as Martha Carper, the wife of Senator Tom Carper, Democrat of Delaware, appeared to faint midway through one of the transfers.

The White House did not announce the trip in advance. It is the first time Mr. Biden has witnessed the return of service members killed in the line of duty since assuming the presidency. The men and women killed in the Kabul attack were the first American

service members killed by hostile forces since March 2020. Mr. Biden witnessed a transfer as vice president in 2016.

“The 13 service members that we lost were heroes who made the ultimate sacrifice in service of our highest American ideals and while saving the lives of others,” Mr. Biden said in a written statement released on Saturday. “Their bravery and selflessness has enabled more than 117,000 people at risk to reach safety thus far.”