

Dover – the deepest water in America

The news is full of the consequence of the partial shutdown affecting military ramp ceremonies at Dover.

Been there, done that.

Among the most powerful emotional personal experiences of a lifetime.

The Casualty Assistance Officer handles it all. The family is left to cry and emote.

They transport the family to the airport. At security the CAO takes the TSA aside. The screening still happens, but the tone is very different.

The flight crew nods in silence as you enter. If need be they shuffle seating with whispers to accommodate the family staying close to one another. No one complains.

The plane lands. The pilot comes over the PA system asking all to remain seated while they escort the family off. Heads turn, some few grumble, the pilots emerge, their eyes glisten. Were those tears?

You are watched, like a hawk. Ask for anything and it appears, absolutely no questions asked.

In Philly you're shuttled to a private van. The ride begins. No attendant speaks unless spoken to first or addressed with a question.

Arriving at Dover you are situated in the Fisher House, given a room and offered again anything you want, food, beverage and even prayer.

The new Fisher House at Dover was barely a month old. The side tables in the hall holding three ring binders with photos of the grand opening, just weeks prior. Lots of people in tuxedos and fine dresses. Smiling and confident they had done the right thing building this place of comfort.

The President is in the photos, the President who re-opened Dover after his predecessor had closed it to keep the warring out of the press. Those families up to 2009 were not given the chance to receive their loved ones. Hurt has a way of spilling out into the public domain.

You wait for the incoming plane to arrive. When it does they begin preparations for the ramp ceremony.

At the appointed time the family is escorted across the street to what has to be the largest funeral home in the entire country. Well appointed with the odor of fresh cookies in the air, plush

comfortable chairs, and chaplains, lots of chaplains. An elderly, almost grandmother like woman attends the women of the family, even following them into the restroom. They are watched over.

The commander enters. He gets down on his knees before you and offers his condolences, his respect and asks again if there is anything, anything at all they can do for you to ease the pain.

The wait resumes. To break the silence I speak, softly with a breaking voice. Inquiring of the chaplain what they fill the non arrival days with and he answers, "We heal each other", for death is their constant companion, it takes its toll even on the them. There are terribly mangled bodies to reconstruct. It is no easy thing to see such destruction.

A signal is given. Escorts take the family to a waiting van. It proceeds ever so slowly to the tarmac. You are watched by rearward facing officers. The van stops.

The rear of the plane stands open. The klieg lights glare from within. On our night it is raining. It is dark. The droplets shear sideways in the wind. The family, the officers, all huddle in the rain and wind, at an angle the cameras filming the event cannot capture. You are watched over but not by a lens.

A van style hearse arrives. From seemingly no where soldiers appear.



No cadence, just the rain. Then a command. The officers enter upwards on the ramp, the soldiers follow, a inaudible prayer is uttered over the transport case. This was the longest moment of silence in my life as they bow their heads over the case.

Another inaudible command is given. The soldiers step forward, and as slow as the sun rises they raise the case. They wait, turned now to the hearse, fully 300 feet away.

A command.

They walk, they walk so slow, so slow it is if time stands still, barely a foot at a time. The officers fall in. The chaplain with us turns his head to the family. You are watched. It is hard to tell tears from the rain on his face.

The slow procession reaches the hearse. Mechanically and oh so slowly the case is laded. With all standing at attention the doors are closed and the clock seems to tick again.



The soldier is back on American soil.

In the morning as you wait for the van back to Philly the attending chaplain speaks softly of things. Perhaps the most significant stated is “You will not believe how big your family just became.”

Those were the truest words we heard. Every veteran is now family, every newspaper report of the next fatality hits as if they were your own. In your grief there is the unconditional support of anyone who has been at a ramp ceremony.

The flight home, again the flight crew is attentive and nods as you enter the plane, the pilots are there, they nod. Upon landing the PA makes its announcement to hold your seat. Again, some grumble, others seem to know what is transpiring. The usual commotion of a landing is held at bay. An individual reaches for an overhead bin, the stewardess will have none of that, take your seat is an open threat from a woman in full control mode, the passenger does.

Was the pilot on the verge of tears? Yes, those were tears.

Back home. The door jamb is stuffed with yesterday’s reporter’s notes, “Please call me.” In our absence they can’t wait, they film the house from the street. They talk with neighbors, anyone to get a scoop. Some modicum of patience and they may have gotten the real scoop.

The remains are flown from Dover by volunteer pilots, in this case to Holman field, on a private jet lent on donated fuel by some unknown but caring benefactor.

This is a second ramp ceremony in less than a week, here at Holman.

Outside waiting for the plane are the Patriot Guard. Far too many to count. Leather jackets and American flags never looked so good. Bless 'em, bless 'em one and all.

Now we're among fellow Minnesotans who as they say, "Get it," they precisely and exactly know what this is, it is one of their own, and he has come home.

Most of them look old enough to be Nam vets, some middle aged perhaps serving in Somalia or Desert Storm. They don't speak. They nod at most. This is how they pass their day, for a family member they never met. Some of them old enough for this soldier to have been their own child. They see to it you are watched over.

People are quick to say our military die for our freedom. But that is an extrapolation. Most military members know they died for the men and women they serve with.

Our fussing and fighting over K-12 budgets, debt ceilings and all the rest is to them at best nonsense on our parts. The oath to serve, the unit, the fellow warriors, that is where it is at and that is where it ends.

Literature is rife with symbolism representing life as a river.

It is here, at these ramp ceremonies, that the current is perhaps strongest and deepest. And only those who have been in its flow know this truth and strength.

For you see, there is an awfully big family living among us. This soldier, this son of ours, he now belongs to all of them.

Written by Jeff Wilfahrt, Gold Star Father of Andrew Wilfahrt