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Honor And The Flag

I've been to over 100 funerals. As a member of the Base Honor Guard, it was my duty to perform military honors for every eligible Air Force veteran and Air Force retiree who requests it. More accurately, to provide honors for the family of the veteran or retiree who requests it. When someone is considering joining the Base Honor Guard, there is a lot of "red tape" to go through, so to say. In my case, I was still studying for my CDC's (Career Development Course) which is something every airman has to study and pass after they finish their initial training right after bootcamp. If one doesn't pass their CDC's, then it reflects badly on the airman, his supervisor, his office, and his squadron. Not to mention there is some administrative punishment that goes along with the failure. So airmen usually aren't allowed to engage in any extra-"curricular" activities while studying for their CDCs because so much is at stake.

Of course, since I kicked so much ass, I was able to join the Base Honor Guard while I was still doing my CDCs. Not because I felt so strongly about the mission of the Base Honor Guard -- I didn't even know or care what it was -- but because I wanted something to do while stationed in the desert of southern New Mexico. I wanted "fun". Twirling rifles and drill was one of the reasons why I joined the military; it's one of the things that comes to mind when one thinks of the military.

Besides, the uniform for the Base Honor Guard is badass. I still revere mine to this day, hanging ceremoniously in my closet. Not because it looks awesome, but because of how much it changed me... how much the Base Honor Guard changed me.

Like any funeral, my first funeral was occasion filled with sadness. I did my best to make sure I did all the movements right, and remembered the sequence of events to make sure I didn't screw up. I didn't want to make any n00b mistakes. It was a somber experience, but from my vantage point of performing, there was a sort of a satisfaction to it -- I enjoyed myself. As I did more and more funerals, the "sadness" aspect attached to it became less prominent, as it was overshadowed by how much I enjoyed performing. I became even better at the movements and eventually started leading the funerals. Knocking out the movements like they were nothing. I was the man.

I also liked calling commands. My "command voice" became somewhat legendary on base because of the sheer volume of it. It definitely was something that grabbed everyone's attention -- which is what a good command voice is supposed to do. This coupled with my physical stature at the time -- 6'1, 190 lbs of muscle -- made me the archetypal military member. Even more so, the archetypal honor guard member. I was solemn, confident, and sharp. But it was still just all "fun".

But "fun" -- even though it was the reason why I became all of this -- was the wrong reason. "Fun" lacks the respect necessary to complete a true honor guard member. "Fun" will lack honor in general. Even though on the outside it seemed that I was a true honor guard member, on the inside I wasn't -- because the mission didn't matter to me. I doubt anyone noticed the change when I did become one. But all it took was one day. One funeral was all it took to change the reason why I stayed with the honor guard. In doing so, I went from being a myopic teenager to an adult.

It was a normal day. The sun was out, about halfway between the zenith and the horizon; probably somewhere around 9 am. A modicum of white, cotton candy like clouds populated the sky. There was a slight breeze, gently massaging the grass on the ground. A normal, beautiful day indeed – not the type of weather conditions that come to mind in the funerals portrayed in the movies.

I had my pallbearers and myself lined up in a formation of 2 rows and 3 abreast facing the mockup (the gravesite). All of us are at the position of “stand at ease”, which is supposed to be a position of rest, but still we weren’t supposed to move. I was keeping watch of the hearse approaching from my left with my peripheral vision, waiting for the right moment to call us to attention. “BEARERS. TENCH-HUAH!!!!” I bellowed. Like I mentioned before, my command voice is loud, and forceful. It serves to wake up any honor guard members that might be zoning out at the particular time of need to snap out of wherever they’re at and return to reality. A lot of the times, it makes bystanders jump, as though they just heard a cannon go off. In this particular case, an old lady who was part of the grieving family jumped in her seat. I always got a kick out of that.

We snapped to attention as the hearse crept up in dirge-like fashion and passed in front of us. The Honor Guard member in the front row who’s closest to the oncoming hearse rendered a slow 3 second salute as the front bumper of the hearse passed him. He ordered (drops) his salute when the back bumper of the hearse passed him. As soon as the hearse cut off its engine after stopping, I called my next command: “STEP!!!!” My pallbearer team and I exaggerate the first step forward so as to scrape the taps on the bottom of our shoes along the pavement in one unanimous “sccccraaaapppee”. We began our slow “hang step” and I called the next set of commands: “RIGHT. FLANK. HUAH!!!!” We turned in a couple of movements towards the hearse to our right. Some honor guard members didn’t do it exactly the same way that they should, but who cares, right? I was having a good time.

The driver got out of the hearse, and I called my pallbearers back to the position of “stand at ease”. The LT (lieutenant) began conversing with the driver and the funeral director to make sure everything was going to go according to [my] plan. While all funerals basically had the same sequence of events, all funerals that I was in charge of were still “my” plan. At this time, I noticed who the next of kin was. It was a young guy, about 25 or 30, and dress in the usual mourning attire. It was pretty unexpected to see a guy so young being the next of kin. His father must not have been that old – at least not the typical age of the usual veterans and retirees who passed away in this area. The usual vets and retirees were all from the WWII/Korean War era.

The funeral director pulled out the casket slightly from the back of the hearse, letting us know that it was about time for us to get underway. “Secure” the LT said. “BEARERS. TENCH-HUAH!!!!” I roared. We snapped to attention. “STEP!!” This time, instead of a slow hang-step, we marched in regular stride up to the back of the hearse and the protruding coffin. “BEARERS. HOLT!” We came to a stop, and the two rows of pallbearers faced in towards each other. While facing each other, we dropped our heads slowly. It’s supposed to be a 3 second head drop, but not everyone does it exactly the same. No matter, I always thought to myself.

The honor guard member who had previously saluted the hearse as it drove passed us began to march in between us. He got up to the casket and gripped it, waiting for my next command. “7 and 5 to Carry” I whispered to him. “7 and 5 to Carry” he repeated. He continued to repeat this statement as he pulled the casket out to let the other pallbearers know how many steps we were going to take. 7 steps away from the hearse, and 5 steps to turn towards the mockup. Again, this was an estimation on my

part of how many steps away from the hearse we would need in order to clear the hearse and be lined up with the mockup. As he pulled out the casket, we all gripped the handlebars. The casket was easy for me to grip and hold, but some others I could tell were having problems with the weight. “Ready” the honor guard member who initially pulled out the casket says when he was ready for us to proceed. “STEP” I command. We take 7 steps while still facing each other to my left, and then 5 steps to turn my end of the casket towards the mockup. We managed to pull it off pretty nicely. Usually, lots of people screw up the turn because the same foot that you use to step away from the hearse is the foot you’re supposed to use to turn.

We carried the casket up to the mockup and set it down. Here we proceeded to fold the American Flag that was draped over the casket. Again, since I’m the one in charge, the outcome of the flag is largely my responsibility. A properly folded flag looks like an all blue triangle with stars on it, and has one of two outcomes: a “2-4 flag” or a “1-3-5 flag”. The numbers represent the amount of stars visible from the top of the triangle to the base. A “1-3-5” denotes a perfectly folded flag, while a “2-4” is a mediocre flag. We folded a “2-4” flag. No matter, though, a folded flag was a folded flag I thought.

After folding the flag, we marched a couple of feet away where our M-1 rifles were laying, to wait for the preacher to do his thing. My main job was done, with only a few visible mistakes that I had noticed. Just another funeral. From our vantage point, we can still watch the funeral, although we usually can’t hear what’s going on. So, the LT, whom I had handed the flag off to after we folded it, stays back and will give us an exaggerated nod to let us know to proceed. While waiting, my attention drifted over to the young man; the next of kin. He was sitting motionless as though he really wasn’t there. His arms were folded and resting on his lap. I couldn’t exactly see his face in great detail, but it was enough to see what type of expression he had on his face. Blank.

The preacher gave a motion to the LT signaling the end of his sermon. The LT gives us the exaggerated nod. The NFP (the guy in charge of the firing party) calls us to attention and then proceeds to order us to begin our firing party sequence – the 21 gun salute. The rifles we were using at the time were the M-1 rifles; the same rifles used by the soldiers in WWII. When fired, they truly sound like cannons going off. 7 of us were lined up and ready to fire 3 volleys. The first volley was pretty good, one unanimous BOOM. The second sounded like popcorn. The third sounded more or less like 2 distinct volleys. The 21 gun salute is supposed to be 3 volleys of 7 rifles firing as one, and not anything else. The second and third volleys didn’t reflect this, unfortunately.

After the 3rd volley, we assume the position of “present arms” with our rifles, basically saluting with the rifle. As soon as we executed our salutes, the bugler begins to play taps on his bugle. At this moment, while at present arms and taps playing, I noticed the young next of kin. He began rocking back and forth furiously, like a pendulum desperately trying to keep time. His arms were still folded across his lap, and I could tell that he was gripping himself a lot tighter than before. And still, even though I couldn’t see every minute detail in his face due to how far away I was, I could still see the expression on it as though it was clear as day. His dark eyebrows were shifted up, his eyes closed up into what seemed like a single line. His mouth was slightly open and curled up, silently expressing his pain. His face overall was a symbol of stark despondency just from the little details I could view from my vantage point. This was when I realize that these funerals aren’t meant for my personal enjoyment. These funerals were meant for something more than that. They were meant to honor the long hours and the sacrifices made by the military members resting in those caskets. More importantly, these funerals existed to let the family of the deceased know that we, as a military, are grateful for their loved one’s sacrifice... and even more so, the sacrifices that the families of these servicemembers had to make.

Watching the young man rocking back and forth brought a lump in my throat that I had never experienced in any previous honor guard funerals. He was so stricken by grief that I just wanted to set my rifle down and go console him, but I knew that that wasn't my place. My place was holding this rifle at present arms, and I did so. I gripped the rifle even tighter than before, and stood a little more upright. That's all I could do. From that moment on, I began to dedicate myself to something greater than myself – the mission of the Base Honor Guard.