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Remembering the Fallen Soldiers By Katherine Bates

There are thousands of fallen soldiers and many more wounded in action. Having been deployed twice, I have seen plenty of them. I can not say I have been in a real war zone, having only been to two support bases, but these personnel must transit through our bases to get back for care. On my last deployment in 2007, I saw the results of war. I was working at a small airport that many commercial aircrafts and some military aircrafts transited through. I did not know what I was in for until my first Human Remains (HR) Ceremony.

I was working as a security patrol securing the interior of the base perimeter. I got a call over the radio to report to spot two on the aircraft ramp for an incoming HR aircraft. I had no clue what I was about to do since I had only been working for a week. I asked my leader, Sgt Muro, what HR meant.

“HR means human remains. We go to the aircraft to give our respects and help get the caskets on the truck so the Marines can take them to the morgue.” SSgt Muro replied. My jaw dropped with awe. I knew that soldiers died in war. I knew that they got back to the United States. I just did not realize that I would see the caskets. I guess this was a wake-up call for me. On my first deployment, it was a “grave train,” as many would call it. We just guarded supplies and I did not see anything happen. When we arrived to spot two, we saw the plane coming in.

SSgt Muro explained, “When the plane stops the engines, we will all stand facing each other in two lines parallel to the back door of the aircraft. Just follow the commands given and you will be fine. Maybe next time you can learn to carry the caskets.” I was ready to help in any way. I just felt a sorrow over everyone as the plane was pulling in to spot 2.

When the pilots ceased the power to the engines, everyone quickly assembled the two parallel lines. The pilots opened the back door to the aircraft. Being the inquisitive person I am, I looked into the interior of the aircraft. I saw four silver metal caskets with US flags neatly draped over them. My stomach felt as if it were in my throat. My eyes began to water as the reality set in. Four Airmen stood aside the first casket to carry it onto the morgue truck. The commanding officer gave the command, “Flight, Attention.” We all stood up proudly with our arms pinned tightly to our sides. Nobody moved to wipe sweat or tears from their faces. At that moment, the 120 degree temperature did not matter what so ever. The casket was raised off the bottom of the aircraft and slowly moved down to the aircraft ramp. The next command was called, “Present Arms.” As the caskets passed us one by one, we stood at attention saluting these people. The whole time, I was thinking that this could have been my brother.

The ceremony ended and there was an invisible cloud of mourning over us. We did not know this person, but still felt as if we had lost a brother. In the military aspect, we really did lose a brother-in-arms. We all began talking more in-depth about the HR ceremonies.

“The third casket was light, man!” Sgt Muro said. “I felt so bad when we lifted it so easily.”

I immediately knew what he meant by a light casket. He did not have to tell me anything else. I began thinking about having to be the one to have only found a part of someone’s body. It must be

even hard to be the spouse of a soldier and hear, “Sir/Ma’am I regret to inform you that your spouse suffered an IED attack and all we could find was their leg.” After that, I was finished with talking.

Throughout my deployment, I did get a chance to carry the caskets. We had a few who were too afraid they would drop them but still paid their respects in formation. We were there to salute and pay our respects for giving their lives for the freedom of others. Only the highest respects were given at these ceremonies.

There are some people who say, “I do not support the war in any way!” You do not have to support the war. Nobody signs up for the military because they want to fight. They sign only to defend the US. These fallen soldiers are also fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, and friends. We should support our American soldiers and remember those fallen who served faithfully.

About Katherine Bates: Katherine is a Staff Sergeant in the United States Air Force. She is currently working towards a Bachelors Degree in Family and Child Development.

