



AC-17 Globemaster III lands at Dover Air Force Base, Del. and pulls into place. Its cargo door opens, revealing a line of transfer cases; each meticulously draped with an American flag. The whirl of equipment and the sobbing of a mother are the only sounds. The dignified transfer begins.

Airmen, Marines, Soldiers and Sailors assume positions around each case and wait as the chaplain prays. Each case is carefully handed to an awaiting carry team. As the rain falls, military men and women stand at attention. Each face appears stoic during the solemn transfer. A general officer expresses his gratitude and his respect for their service; slow, deliberate salutes are rendered as the cases are loaded into a transfer vehicle. The vehicle drives to the nearby Air Force Mortuary Affairs Operations Center at the Charles C. Carson Center for Mortuary Affairs, a 70,000-square-foot facility, and the process begins.

"We're charged with fulfilling our nation's sacred commitment of ensuring dignity, honor and respect for our fallen; with care, service and support for their families," said Col. Bob Edmondson, AFMAOC commander. The colonel, who's been in the Air Force

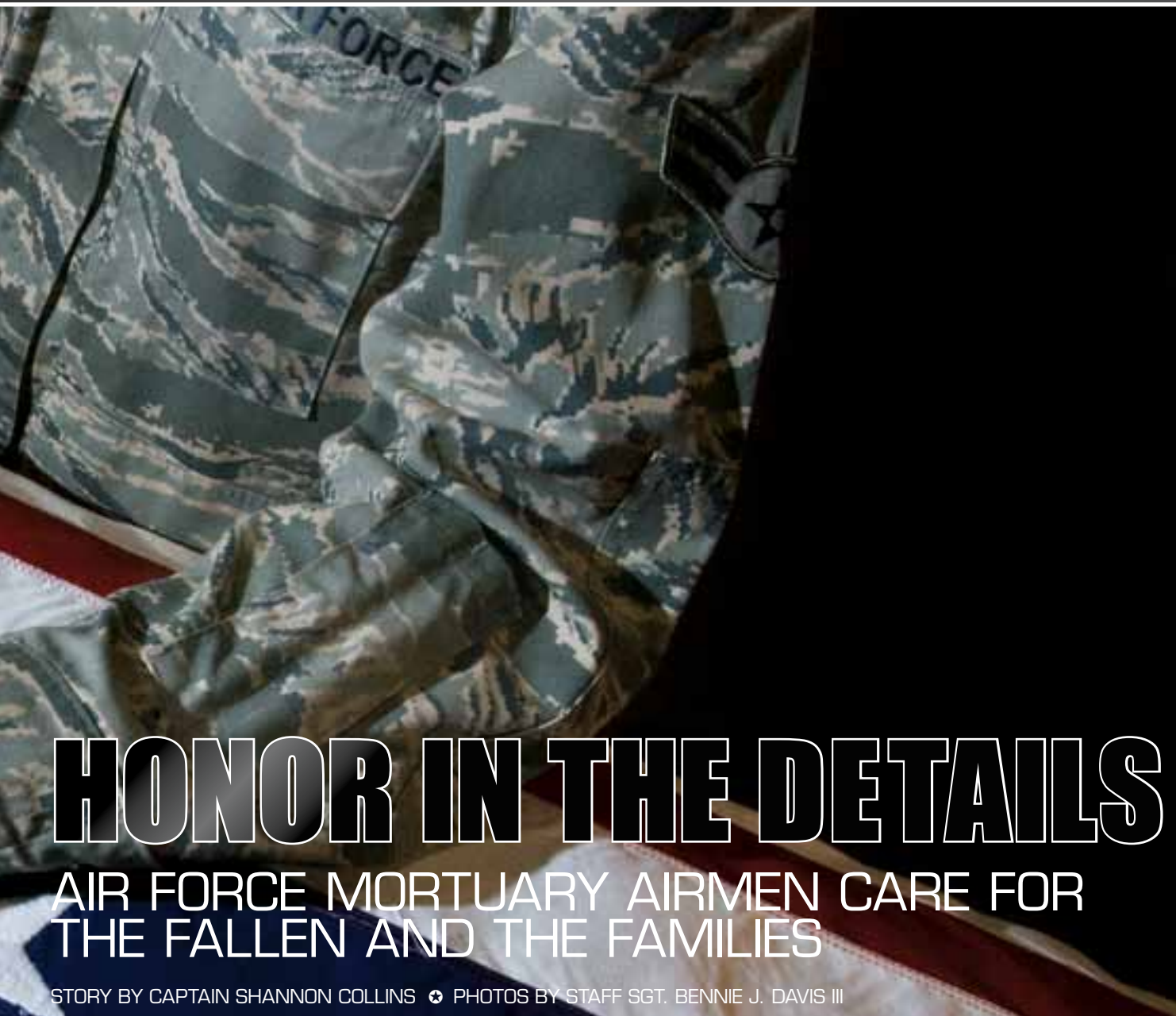
for 18 years, is humbled by his experience here.

"Dignity, honor and respect" is more than a mantra for this joint staff; it's a way of life. They pour their hearts and souls into this mission.

"There are thousands of hours of work and care, and buckets and buckets of love put into returning these fallen to their loved ones in the most expedient and professional way," he said. "There's a lot of work and there's a lot of effort, and it's all done with pride and excellence.

"There's a whole group of people . . . to make sure that our country does, in fact, fulfill its sacred commission of ensuring dignity, honor and respect and care, service and support for the families," he said

More than 70 active-duty military members, Guardsmen and Reservists deploy to the AFMAOC each year. About 100 more are volunteers from the 436th Wing at Dover and approximately 60 civilians work as embalmers, armed forces medical examiners and federal agents. They are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The arrival of remains dictates the schedule and everyone stays until the last detail of this mission is complete.



HONOR IN THE DETAILS

AIR FORCE MORTUARY AIRMEN CARE FOR THE FALLEN AND THE FAMILIES

STORY BY CAPTAIN SHANNON COLLINS ✦ PHOTOS BY STAFF SGT. BENNIE J. DAVIS III

The mortuary staff prepares the remains of fallen U.S. military government officials and family members stationed abroad. Since 1955, the remains of more than 50,000 military men and women have been identified, prepared for funerals and returned to their families.

The fallen begin the AFMAOC journey at triage, where the remains are received and X-rayed for potential explosive devices. Once cleared, each is sent to the identification section for photographs and dental impressions.

PERSONAL EFFECTS

Airmen will spend hours making personal items look as new as possible for the family members.

Personal effects could be anything from dog tags to a family photo. To many, these are the sentimental items carried or worn when serving in places such as Iraq or Afghanistan. For families of the fallen, these simple things may be cherished keepsakes. A watch could be a family heirloom, passed down from generation to generation. A necklace, once worn around the neck of an Airman can again rest close to the heart of a surviving spouse.

Three Airmen deployed from the 43rd Force Support Squadron

at Pope AFB, N.C., prepare, and sometimes repair, personal effects of the fallen. "I could be working on a broken watch for hours, but it may still have the smell of cologne, and I know I can preserve that and get it back to the families," said Tech. Sgt. Latersa Frazier, the personal effects supervisor. "It could be the one item a child has to remind him of his father or mother. That means everything to me."

Whether an item is charred, burned or severely damaged, the Airmen will spend whatever time is needed, sometimes a whole day, on it, scrubbing, buffing and polishing, trying to make it look new again.

"We put in the extra work when dealing with personal effects because we want to be able to give back to the family just a little something for their loss," she said.

In the AFMAOC mortuary, the consensus of those working in the other sections is that the personal effects section is the most difficult because it's so personal.

Staff Sgt. John Cabral, a personal effects specialist deployed from the 60th Force Support Squadron at Travis AFB, Calif., finds working in the personal effects section difficult at times.



Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen, Army Brig. Gen. Michael Harrison, Rear Adm. James Shannon and Air Force Col. Manson Morris render a solemn salute during the dignified transfer of a fallen warrior at Dover Air Force Base, Del., July 8, 2009. All fallen service members are transferred directly from the combat theater to the Air Force Mortuary Affairs Operation Center at Dover AFB where they are carefully prepared for return to their families.

"I remember my first case," Sergeant Cabral said. "He was only 19. When I saw him in triage, he was pretty messed up. Once I started looking through his personal effects to clean them up, I saw photos of him and his girlfriend; pictures of how he looked. It was just very hard for me. It takes a strong person to be able to do the job and put your emotional feelings to the side. It affects you."

The emotional load these Airmen carry could quickly become too heavy if they didn't look after each other.

"We talk to each other a bit back here, because if we don't take care of each other, we could break," said Airman 1st Class Rontera Powell, a personal effects specialist deployed from Pope AFB. "It's sad seeing people come through here, because you don't want anyone to die. We take care of the fallen, and we take care of each other."

"My motivation is this person who has served our country, who made the ultimate sacrifice," said Sergeant Frazier. "This is something I can do for them because they sacrificed their lives for us. Just cleaning a simple dog tag, even if I had to stand here half the day to clean it to get it back to the family, I would do that. Not only is the servicemember making that sacrifice . . . the families, the loved ones and the children . . . being able to support that person, that family . . . it's an amazing feeling."

Sergeant Frazier is now going to school to become a mortician and Airman Powell is studying for medical school. Both value the time spent and experience gained at the port mortuary.

"I've been in 11 years, and though I didn't expect to be working in mortuary affairs, I wouldn't trade it for anything," Sergeant Frazier said. "I feel drawn to it. I just can't see myself doing anything else. It's all about the care, service and support for the families."

EMBALMING

At another section people are performing autopsies and lab tests to determine the cause and time of death before cleaning and embalming.

One of the embalmers is Bill "Zigi" Zwicharowski, the director of mortuary operations. In his 10 years at the mortuary, he's worked in every area during several major catastrophic events including incidents involving the USS Cole bombing, the Pentagon on 9/11 and the space shuttle Columbia disaster.

"Each incident was different," he said. "The attack on 9/11 was just absolutely shocking and when we got the word that we were going to receive the remains from the Pentagon, it was a combination of motivation, of anger and sympathy for the families, all mixed in at the same time."

UNIFORMS

Representatives from each service work in the uniform section and have a special task. The uniforms they put together are the last uniforms these fallen heroes will wear when they return home.

Staff Sgt. Charles Anthony Bell, a mortuary technician, has been with the center since June 2008. He oversees the uniform section, working with liaisons from each branch of the military. He makes sure the section is fully stocked. There are new uniforms, rank insignias, ribbons, patches, medals and socks. Everything is new from the skin out. The team spends hours preparing uniforms for the fallen, even though the uniforms may never be seen.

"I want everything to be as perfect as possible," Sergeant Bell said. "Even though the shirts are covered by the jackets, we still take the time to clip the strings on all of the buttons, around the collars and the pockets. We polish the devices on the ribbons, making sure they're equally nice and shiny. We check every detail, making sure the uniform is 100 percent correct."

Details are very important for Petty Officer 2nd Class Danielle Van Orden, a hospital corpsman and the Navy - Marine Corps liaison. She's served at the center for two years and is one of 16 morticians in the Navy.

“Everybody, everybody is treated with respect, dignity and honor,” the mortician of 10 years said. “We take pride in what we do.

“We know that when the uniform leaves here, it has our stamp of approval — our name on it,” she said. “We know that people are going to be viewing their loved ones at funerals. When they open that casket, they see the military creases; they see that we took our time.”

“My motivation is this person who has served our country, who made the ultimate sacrifice.”

— Tech. Sgt. Latersa Frazier

Taking their time to make sure everything is correct, the joint team uses a variety of tools, like a ruler crafted specifically for the uniforms, stand-up steamers, mini grinders and more. They also have engraving tools to use on urns and to produce uniform name tags.

The team works around the clock to get the uniforms put together as quickly and accurately as possible, so there is no delay in sending the fallen home.

“Everyone is taken care of here to the 100 percent level of everyone’s ability,” said Lance Corporal Adam Knebler, a liaison from Marine Corps Casualty at Quantico, Va. “Sometimes I’m here 12 to 14 hours. I don’t want to leave until the mission’s accomplished.”

A reservist from Wichita, Kansas, Lance Corporal Knebler volunteered for a one-year assignment here. He plans to become a chaplain so that he can serve Marines both downrange and at home station.

Sgt. 1st Class Jimmy Toro, Army liaison and a uniform section supervisor, said measurements are taken as soon as the remains arrive.

“We get sizes as soon as the fallen heroes arrive in the building,” said the deployed Army Reservist from the 311th Quartermaster Company in Puerto Rico. “We put together their uniforms and take the items to the alterations shop, getting the patches and stripes sewn on the uniform. We verify the proper awards and decorations . . . and we put it together.”

Sergeant Toro originally took a one-year deployment here. He gained so much satisfaction from the job that he volunteered for two more years.

DRESS AND WRAP

After the body is embalmed and the uniform is pressed and ready, Airmen in the dress and wrap section step in.

“We make sure that the uniform is perfectly fitted to the individual and no detail is overlooked, from the white gloves to the black socks,” said Tech. Sgt. Katie Badowski, deployed from the 446th Services Flight at McChord AFB, Wash. “All of the troops who are processed through the mortuary have paid the same price, the ultimate price. They did it for our country. I remain strong for the families in these times of need. This is what allows me to do my job effectively and with purpose.”

Not all uniforms are worn. Some, if injuries were severe, will be draped over the carefully wrapped remains inside the casket.

After the uniform is in place, the remains are moved to cosmetology, where wounds are covered with care by experts. Once the remains are processed, the uniform donned or draped and the team takes one final look, the remains are moved to the final stop, where two Airmen make one final check.



Tech. Sgt. Willard Rico tightens a U.S. flag over a casket in practice for a dignified transfer of remains. The AFMAOC is to the Defense Department’s only joint-service mortuary in the continental United States.



Seven fallen heroes arrived at Dover Air Force Base Del., July 8, 2009. They were transferred to the Air Force Mortuary Affairs Operations Center where they were processed and prepared for transport to their final destination.

photo by Benjamin Fiske



The personal effects section cleans and repairs every personal item that may be returned to the families.

SHIPPING

Tech. Sgt. Willard Rico, deployed from the 60th Force Support Squadron at Travis AFB, Calif., and Staff Sgt. Star Samuels, a shipping specialist deployed from the 43rd Force Support Squadron at Pope AFB, inspect the caskets and perform a final check.

"We make sure everything is perfect," Sergeant Samuels said. "Our mission is to send them out the way they're remembered, not how they came in."

Flags, hang pressed and waiting. These flags will be folded by an honor guard at the funeral and presented to the family. For Sergeant Samuels, pressing the flags is prophetic and important.

"When I'm pressing a flag, I'm pressing a flag for someone who hasn't died yet," she said. "Today, we pressed 12 flags; those flags could be here until next weekend, then all of a sudden, we're pressing 12 more flags."

The Airmen perform this mission every day, knowing there isn't much they can do for the fallen. Everything is for the survivors.

"We're here for the families," said Sergeant Rico. "I'm privileged to be working here, giving dignity, honor and respect to the fallen for their families. It's the most rewarding job I've ever done so far in my career."

CHAPLAINS

While the remains of the fallen are going through that last step, the personal effects are handed to an awaiting family member or volunteer escort from the fallen member's respective branch of service. They meet with the on-site chaplains and stand by, ready to escort the fallen member home. The chaplains provide counsel to family, mortuary staff and escorts and pray over remains of fallen heroes.

"I have engaged with many escorts, but the most difficult are the family members," said Chaplain (Lt. Col.) George Ortiz-Guzman, deployed from Vandenberg AFB, Calif. "Their pain is present and palpable. As a chaplain, comforting grieving families and watching over the remains of those heroes who keep me safe is the greatest calling I could answer."

WORKING FAMILY

Sometimes working for the AFMAOC can be overwhelming. Constant exposure to the fallen takes a mental toll on mortuary staff. The chaplains and other members of the traumatic stress response team check on them regularly.

"Remaining strong and sane for the sake of the mission is a defense mechanism humans use to perform amongst all that horror," said Chaplain Ortiz-Guzman. "But, we try to be as real as we can with our troops. We cry with them and laugh with them. We are part of the team."

Staff Sgt. Amber Merefield is a mental health technician



Staff Sgt. Charles Bell is surrounded by military service dress uniforms for every service, rank and size. Sgt. Bell is the non-commissioned officer-in-charge of the uniform section at the Air Force Mortuary Affairs Operations Center, Dover Air Force Base, Del.

deployed from the 87th Medical Operations Squadron at McGuire AFB, N.J. Her mission is to provide a pre-exposure briefing to new staff members and to provide everyone with a sense of normalcy in an abnormal situation.

"We help set the tone for things to come, as well as being there when things aren't going so well for others," she said.

She said working here has changed her perspective from distant to near.

"It has made me respect and realize the cost of war a lot more," she said solemnly. "There's a big difference between hearing it on the news and seeing it in person."

Mr. Zwicharowski said sometimes it's safer to detach.

"We don't want to get too involved with what we do and with the families," he said. "If we knew all the stories of all the people who came through here and dwelled on it — the children, the wives, the families, the cause of death and everyone on the other side — we would probably end up in a padded room. So we try to separate ourselves from that and continue to focus on returning them to their families."

Chaplain Ortiz-Guzman, Sergeant Merefield and Zigi are just a few of the men and women who work here at the Air Force Mortuary Affairs Center, people who are like family. The AFMAOC commander is proud of his mortuary family. One of the hardest aspects of the mission for this "family" is leaving.

The families and the mission are why Sergeant Bell, who's been in the Air Force eight years, wants to stay here as long as he can.

"I wish I could finish out my career here, helping the families and caring for our fallen," he said, choking with emotion. "This is definitely a special place. This mission is so important because it gives the families one less thing they have to be concerned about while they are already going through such a rough time.

"Their loved ones are cared for and treated with the upmost respect and dignity here," he continued. "Everything we do here is to honor those who truly lived 'service before self' and to honor those families who have supported their loved ones as they protect our great nation. Those that have paid the ultimate price are not forgotten and just because they're not physically here to speak for themselves, we will speak for them and give them the same honor, dignity and respect."

The remains of a fallen hero just left the center. Every detail attended to. This hero is headed home. 