

# Tears and near beer honor a fallen patriot

It's amazing how normal we try to make things on a base with more than 25,000 people.

Here at Joint Base Balad, Iraq, we have hot showers, movie theaters, swimming pools, vehicles and chapels, not to mention dining halls that make the local Hometown Buffet look like a soup line.

Many of our patients have the normal scope of medical issues: broken appendages, infections, flu and appendicitis.

It would be easy to cruise along on the surface of normal, until, as they say among first responders, "hours of boredom are interrupted by minutes of sheer terror."

It happened earlier this month when we received a soldier who was the victim of an IED blast.

There's no way I would describe the carnage this bomb inflicted on the 20-year-old soldier. Suffice to say it was enough to cause some nonessential staff to leave the room for air.

Within five minutes of his arrival, our neurosurgeon, Dr. Carrie

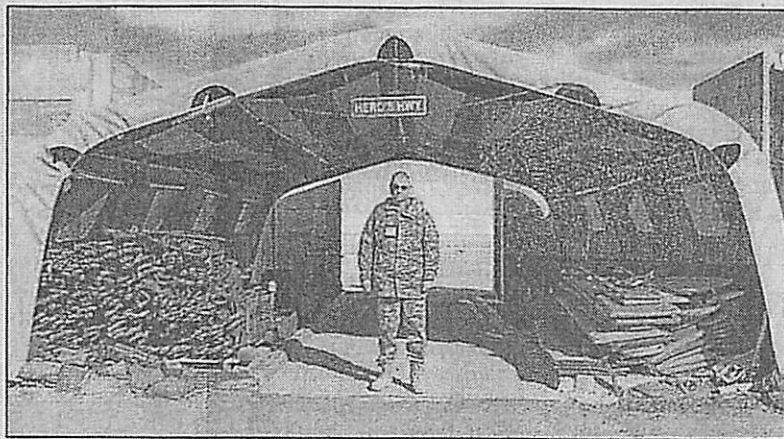


Photo courtesy of Norris Burkes

**Solemn ground.** Columnist Norris Burkes stands at the helicopter pad at Joint Base Balad, Iraq, where injured soldiers arrive for treatment.

Schmitt, examined the trauma done to the soldier's brain and broke the difficult news to a hopeful staff that the soldier really had died before he arrived.

"We've done all we can do. We've lost him."

"Chaplain," called out Dr. Schmitt.

"Here, ma'am," I said as I slowly and reverently took my place among the staff surrounding the gurney.

As one staff member held the sol-



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dier's remaining hand, another stood with an arm on his brow. Two other staff members placed sympathetic hands on the soldier's thighs.

We stood watching, we stood crying, we stood praying. None of us had ever met this soldier, but we were determined to say that his friends would see him into eternity.

There's a lot of debate among world religions over when a person's soul leaves his body. I don't have any desire to weigh in on that argument, but there certainly have been enough near-death experiences to suggest a person has some awareness of his surroundings during those moments that exist between life and death.

See **BURKES, 2D**

## Patriot Detail a ceremony similar to graveside service

**BURKES, from 1D**

It was in that belief that I stepped forward and addressed the soldier.

Calling him by name, I told him he was surrounded by people who cared. I assured him everyone tried their very best to save him. We desperately wanted to bring the normal out of the abnormal, but it wasn't to be.

Within 30 minutes, we assembled a Patriot Detail. This is a short ceremony resembling a graveside service in which I read a short Scripture and said a prayer.

Afterward, his body, draped in flag, was taken to our morgue.

Just outside the morgue, a Special Forces medic joined us, carrying cans of near beer, a product as close to alcohol as we can get in the combat theater.

"I want us to toast this young man's life," the medic declared as he distributed the near beer among us.

I'm not a beer drinker, but this wasn't the time to make that point. This was a time to create a sacred space.

As we simultaneously popped our can tops, I was reminded of the sacred sound made by the synchronized breaking of a Communion wafer during worship.

In Communion, we'll often take the wine and quote Jesus as saying, "This is my blood which was spilled for you."

In much the same spirit, the medic reminded us that the soldier's blood had been spilled for us as well.

Pouring a few ounces into the earth, the medic declared that the first sip was reserved for the fallen patriot who wasn't yet old enough to drink. Then we raised our cans in his honor and drank together. ■

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## Enemies need prayer, care, too

JOINT BASE BALAD, Iraq — "Trauma call, trauma call," announced the hospital speakers at the Air Force Theater Hospital last month.

The call sent a flurry of staff toward the ER where we commonly see patients of all kinds: U.S. service members, civilians and even enemy combatants. No matter who arrives for treatment, our doctors will scrub the same way, ER techs will prepare the same homemade blankets, and nurses will lay out the same delicate instruments.

I've seen our staff work on our service members, and I've seen them work on enemy combatants. Each time I see the latter, I'm reminded of Jesus' commandment to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

This trauma call would bring at least two wounded. One patient, a U.S. soldier, had a bullet lodged in his head. The other patient—as yet unknown — entered our ER with a tourniquet skillfully applied to his leg wound.

Since the soldier was critical, he was immediately treated by a trauma team.

The Coalition traumas arriving during the past six months had a 97.7 percent survival rate. They have that opportunity for life because our medical staff is willing to attempt what seems impossible. They define the words "heroic efforts" as they push beyond the limits of civilian medicine.

In this case, our soldier sustained an injury that would cause most stateside hospitals to initiate comfort measures and ready the family for a death.

Not here. Not this hospital. Not this staff.

The soldier was wheeled out of the ER and into the operating room where our neurosurgeon searched for the bullet. When she found it, she announced what she likely knew before surgery: The fragmented bullet made surgery impossible. The soldier would not make it.

At that point, I was summoned to a place I'd never been, the OR. I put on a mask and entered the room to see the remnants of this heroic effort: tubes, IVs, bags of blood, bandages and pharmacological equipment and monitors strewn about the room.

What I'll remember most are the bloody footprints made by a harried staff.

"Chap, he's not going to make it," said our trauma doctor, Air Force Maj. Joseph DuBose. "Can you say a few words?"

My audible prayer was short, but my internal prayer had as much to do with our reaction toward the person in the OR next door as it did this man.

For you see, the staff knew the man in the adjoining OR, the one with the bullet in his leg, had likely caused this carnage. Now that man was receiving the best medical care possible from the same people who were grieving the loss of a fellow service member.

You learn a lot when you care for your friends, but you learn a great deal more when you care for your enemies. As I heard one of the doctors say, "This is Geneva Convention 101," in reference to the requirement to treat wounded combatants.

Jesus summed it all up in the Sermon on the Mount: "You're familiar with the old written law, 'Love your friend,' and its unwritten companion, 'hate your enemy'?"

"I'm challenging that," Jesus flatly stated. "I'm telling you to love your enemies. . . . If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that." (The Message, Matthew 43-44a, 47)

This trauma team didn't settle for "run-of-the-mill."

And just so you know, neither did the fellow soldiers of the soldier who died; they were the ones who skillfully applied the life-saving tourniquet to the enemy combatant. ■

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# Small Calif. town mourns the loss of young brave soldier

You should know it was a beautiful morning for a funeral.

Rows of trees forming a shaded canopy shielded sunglass wearers from the 100-plus-degree heat expected in Woodland, Calif.

It was a beautiful morning, but not a joyous event.

The funeral was for Pfc. Justin Casillas, one of two soldiers killed when insurgents attacked his outpost in Afghanistan on July 4.

You should know Justin was only 19 when he died on Independence Day. Instead of grilling hot dogs and eating homemade ice cream like many of us were, he was standing guard at Outpost Zerok when a truck rushed his position and exploded.

Now, inside a funeral home in a town looking like a Norman Rockwell postcard, I stood, trying to mouth the prayer that would start the funeral.

"God, help us honor this



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young man today," I prayed among the sobs that filled the small chapel. "In your son's name" I begged God to "Help us see both the intent of his life and the meaning of his sacrifice."

I think you should know that many people found a connection with Justin. Don Friel was one of those. He spoke at the funeral of his connection to Justin as a football coach, vice principal and employer. With each descriptive word, a sob erupted from a younger sibling or relative.

After Friel sat down, Brig. Gen. Robert Woods from Fort Hood, Texas, spoke. The military sends a general officer to these funerals to



Bryan Patrick, Sacramento Bee

**Paying respects.** Chaplain Norris Burkles salutes as the casket carrying Pfc. Justin Casillas is placed in a hearse in Woodland, Calif.

convey "the sympathy of a grateful nation," and Woods did so with the emotion of a man who has two sons in harm's way. He then laid five posthumous medals on Justin's polished casket.

I think you should know that a Bronze Star was included in those medals.

With the general's final salute, I added a prayer and led the march of military pallbearers to the waiting hearse.

Outside the funeral home, a group called the Patriot Guard Riders lined both sides of the street with

Harley-Davidson motorcycles. Their forward-facing wheels formed a cautious gauntlet.

I think you should know their vigilance was true to their mission statement, "to show respect for our fallen heroes . . . and shield the mourning family and their friends from interruptions created by any protestor or group of protestors."

"Mount up!" shouted the Patriot Guard leader. And with that, the motorcade began their 10-mile procession to the rural grave.

I think you should know that dozens of Woodland residents lined the streets with their heads bowed or a hand over their heart. Emergency vehicles added light and ceremony as 35 Woodland police officers saluted the motorcade. Aging veterans removed their accoutrements-laden hats and gave crooked, but respectful, salutes.

At the cemetery, a huge

flag waved from atop a towering crane. Children stood graveside, asking curious questions about the casket suspended above the freshly dug hole.

I spoke for a few minutes, read the 23rd Psalm, and ended with a prayer. It was all I knew to do. People filed out of the canopy quietly, stopping only briefly to kiss the casket.

July has been the deadliest month for coalition forces in Afghanistan since the war began. Those numbers are real faces, and Casillas was one of those faces.

I just thought you should know. ■

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