

## Southtown Article #14 “Angels”

“Angels” is a code word chaplains use to communicate to one another. It lets us know that the remains of a deceased soldier, Marine, airman, sailor or contractor are being flown into or out of the airport.

At the airport we conduct a simple yet solemn prayer service as the bodies are loaded onto the plane for transport back to the States. They are called “ramp ceremonies” because they literally take place on the loading ramp vehicle.

Today at 2:00 a.m. we were supposed to hold a ramp ceremony for nine angels. One delay led to another and the service eventually began at 6:45 a.m. The human remains are treated with a reverent, respectful dignity at every moment. Not only is this an ingrained military tradition but quite frankly, we all know it could be us underneath our nation’s flag.

No one sees these services except the honor guard or other airport personnel who happen to be in the area. Photographs are not permitted. The media isn’t alerted. Very few people probably even know they take place. It is our way of honoring our dead.

Today’s ceremony was particularly rough. Not only were there many deceased Americans before us, but we also knew a little bit of their story. Their deaths were violent and I pray, quick. Most were in their early twenties. All are going back to families and friends who are heartbroken. I cannot conceive of the collective pain they must be experiencing.

Our angels have been accompanied by a couple of their buddies who traveled with them from northern Iraq. They were given the chance to sleep at a nearby rest area with beds and mattresses as their friend bodies were being prepared. Instead they chose to sleep on the floor of the airport so they could be close to their departed friends. This is how soldiers express their love for each other.

A Methodist and a Lutheran minister along with myself stood at the far end of the loading vehicle. We read from Scripture and prayed. I literally had to shout the reading from John’s Gospel describing the dwelling place Christ prepared us, as I competed with the engine noise from the aircraft.

After the prayers were offered and a blessing was given, the platform ascended the twenty feet or so to the aircraft opening. As we rose higher the sun broke from behind the plane to illuminate the flag draped caskets. It appeared as if it were an orchestrated part of the ritual. The honor guard below stood at attention and saluted as the bodies were being moved.

After the caskets were secured in the plane we departed from the mobile stairs at the opening near the cockpit. The other two chaplains and myself were on the tarmac not more than thirty seconds when a truck pulled up and told us another angel was arriving.

We formed at attention up at rear entrance of plane and saluted as the angel was carried from the plane to the waiting vehicle. We walked to the morgue and waited as they began to prepare the body.

One chaplain remarked that it wasn't so hard to see the torn up bodies of our young people as it was to collect their personal items. Pictures of girlfriends, wives, and children with ear to ear smiles on their faces reminded him of the lives they led and the lives they will never go back to.

As I write this I have tears in my eyes. This is the cost of war. I do not agree with the policy of not photographing the flag draped caskets as they arrive in the States. I think each and everyone of us need to see them. I also think we ought to cry each and every time we lose one of our brave men and women. If the cost of war is their deaths, then the price each of us should pay should be in tears, tears from all of us for our angels.

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