

KILLED IN THE LINE OF DUTY

Nov. 15



Capt. Pierre E. Piche, 29, Starksboro, Vt., helicopter crash.



Pfc. Joey D. Whitener, 19, Nebo, N.C., helicopter crash.

Nov. 17



Capt. Nathan S. Dalley, 27, Kaysville, Utah, nonhostile gunshot.



Capt. James A. Shull, 32, California, nonhostile gunshot.



Chief Warrant Officer Alexander S. Coulter, 35, Tennessee, improvised explosive device.



Staff Sgt. Dale A. Panchot, 26, Northome, Minn., fatally injured by enemy fire.

Nov. 20



Pvt. Scott M. Tyrrell, 21, Sterling, Ill., injuries from Nov. 14 attack.



Spec. Joseph L. Lister, 22, Pleasanton, Kan., vehicle hit by improvised explosive device.



Capt. George A. Wood, 33, New York City, tank rolled over improvised explosive device.

Nov. 21



Cpl. Gary B. Coleman, 24, Pikeville, Ky., vehicle accident.

Nov. 22



Spec. Robert D. Roberts, 21, Winter Park, Fla., tank collided with his vehicle.



Pfc. Damian S. Bushart, 22, Waterford, Mich., tank collided with his vehicle.

Nov. 23



Chief Warrant Officer Christopher G. Nason, 39, California, vehicle accident.



Cpl. Darrell L. Smith, 28, Otwell, Ind., drowned when his vehicle overturned in a river.



Staff Sgt. Eddie E. Menyweather, 35, Los Angeles, improvised explosive device hit his vehicle.



Spec. Rel A. Ravago IV, 21, Glendale, Calif., hostile forces attacked his vehicle.



Command Sgt. Maj. Jerry L. Wilson, 45, Thomson, Ga., hostile forces attacked his vehicle.

Nov. 26



Spec. David J. Goldberg, 20, Layton, Utah, noncombat-related injury.

Nov. 27



Spec. Thomas J. Sweet II, 23, Bismarck, N.D., noncombat-related injuries.

Nov. 28



Sgt. Ariel Rico, 25, El Paso, Texas, fatally injured by enemy mortar attack.

Nov. 29



Staff Sgt. Stephen A. Bertolino, 40, Orange, Calif., vehicle hit by enemy fire.



Spec. Aaron J. Sissel, 22, Tipton, Iowa, vehicle hit by enemy fire.



Spec. Uday Singh, 21, Lake Forest, Ill., enemy forces attacked his patrol.

Dec. 1



Spec. Raphael S. Davis, 24, Tipton, Miss., vehicle hit by an improvised explosive device.



Sgt. Ryan C. Young, 21, Corona, Calif., of injuries when vehicle was hit by improvised explosive Nov. 8.



Chief Warrant Officer Clarence E. Boone, 50, Fort Worth, Texas, noncombat-related injury.

Dec. 5



Spec. Arron R. Clark, 20, Chico, Calif., convoy hit by improvised explosive device.

Dec. 7



Pfc. Ray J. Hutchinson, 20, League City, Texas, convoy hit by improvised explosive.

Dec. 8



Names and details of four deaths this week have not been yet released.

A private homecoming at Dover base

By Carol Rosenberg
INQUIRER NATIONAL STAFF

DOVER AIR FORCE BASE, Del. — They come night and day, on holidays and weekends: steel-gray military cargo planes bearing America's war dead.

A chaplain says a prayer, and six soldiers march onto the plane. They straighten the flag that drapes each coffin, then carry the dead, one by one, over the tarmac to midnight-blue vans for the half-mile crawl to the base morgue and mortuary. All traffic — indeed, all work — stops at this sprawling base as the motorcade goes by.

This is the scene you cannot see under a 12-year-old White House policy barring news coverage, one that Pentagon officials say shields the troops' privacy and dignity. Critics, however, complain it is a bald attempt to hide bad news.

More than 400 times since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, U.S. forces have carried out the hour-long transfer ritual at this Delaware air base, the arrival point for U.S. troops who die in Iraq and Afghanistan. Not once in that time has the ceremony been shown on television.

But soldiers and civilians involved in the ceremony say they would like to reassure Americans that their fallen fighters are not "cargo being treated just like something else coming off a plane," Army Col. Chuck Taylor said.

"This is the most precious thing that we have as a nation, and we're bringing them home," he said.

As commander of the Third U.S. Infantry Regiment, known as the Old Guard, Taylor dispatches an honor guard from this base 100 miles away at Fort Myer, Va., for every dead soldier's arrival.

Rather than don the full-dress uniform worn at most military burial ceremonies, the honor guard wears fatigues, like the fallen comrades.

"The last time they left the United States of America, they were walking aboard an aircraft with soldiers, fellow service members," Taylor said. "So when they're brought back to the United States, they are met

by soldiers."

Participants say that there is no special schedule for the arrivals and that there are no special hearse flights. The corpses seem to arrive about 48 hours after the news media report the latest casualties — after troops in the field have placed the dead in body bags, then in ice-packed, 7-foot aluminum "transfer cases."

Former President George Bush's administration imposed the news-coverage ban after CBS and CNN split their screens to show Bush explaining the 1989 Panama invasion campaign while the first casualties arrived at Dover.

Pundits and politicians argue that Americans lose their resolve for war when they see the flag-draped coffins of dead soldiers. They call it the Dover Test or the Dover Factor, though there is debate on whether it is the images that are important to public opinion or the mounting casualties themselves.

"Whether or not there's an actual factor there, it seems to be that the American public will take only so many casualties before a conflict becomes unpopular," Marine Corps chief historian Chuck Melson said. "We don't have the stomach for a long conflict" in such cases.

Others say the issue is not so much the dead but how Americans view the mission. Americans united about the mission would see the images of Dover as symbolizing sacrifice and service. A mission mired in uncertainty could transform the same image into a symbol of defeat.

In any case, the air base has long been associated with dread. In Vietnam, troops would talk fearfully of ending up at Dover — code for being



LEE E. ROGERS / U.S. Air Force

In a 1996 photo from the Dover base, an honor guard removes the remains of Commerce Secretary Ron Brown and others killed in a plane crash in Croatia. Such public glimpses inside Dover are rare.

killed in action. Nearly half of the Vietnam War dead were received there — 21,693 of the 58,148 total.

"The problem with Dover is that it has an unmistakable image of a warehouse full of war dead. That's freaky," said Tim Lomperis, an intelligence officer in Vietnam who leads the political science department at St. Louis University. "Here we are, a major industrial power, and we associate images of warehouses with commerce, vitality, prosperity. And there is a warehouse with frozen corpses."

On rare occasions, America has glimpsed recent arrivals. President Bill Clinton lifted the ban in 1996 for a solemn salute to Commerce Secretary Ron Brown and the 32 others killed when their U.S. military plane crashed in Croatia. And the Navy released photos of the arrival ceremony for sailors killed in the al-Qaeda bombing of the USS Cole in 2000.

Departing air freight has tripled at Dover since Sept. 11, 2001 — for everything from paper plates and bubble wrap to humvees and helicopters, bound for Iraq and Afghanistan. Less cargo comes in. The most precious, the dead, go to the base's morgue and mortuary.

Soon after Iraqi opposition forces shot down a Chinook helicopter near Fallujah on Nov. 2, the usual nine-person staff ballooned to 60.

"It hasn't been the same since Sept. 11," said Bill Zwicharowski, 39, an embalmer and former

Marine who has worked in civilian funeral homes. He sees a special tragedy in the dead handled here. "They're in their early 20s," he said. "To think that someone intentionally pulled a trigger or set a booby trap is different than your nursing-home death."

As a distraction for mortuary workers, a radio station plays music through the public-address system. Rod Stewart was wailing "Tonight's the Night" on a recent day while an autopsy was being performed.

Usually the family requests dress uniforms, said Karen Giles, a reserve Air Force lieutenant colonel who works as a supervisor at the morgue, showing a room in the mortuary that resembles a wardrobe trailer on a Hollywood movie set. There are uniforms, ribbons, medals and insignia for all service branches. Sometimes the family requests that the beloved wear combat dress. Not long ago, someone sent a soldier's blue jeans.

"Everything has to be as close to perfect as humanly possible," said Army Spec. Eric Taylor, 21, of Chicago, who arrived about three weeks ago from corpse-recovery duty in Afghanistan. He works as a dresser, preparing a dead soldier's ribbon rack, complete with a Purple Heart.

Each coffin is draped with a fresh American flag, and there is a provision for local cremation if the family wishes.

Typically, a fallen fighter leaves Dover three to five days after arrival. A military escort accompanies each coffin in a hearse as it leaves the base. Some go to airports in Philadelphia or Washington if the families are far away.

Grieving families are encouraged to stay home and wait for their loved ones' return, the base spokesman, Lt. Col. John Anderson, said.

"We've found the final resting place is most appropriate for a ceremony," he said.

Somber work at one military mortuary in Iraq

The task: Processing the dead to be sent back to the States. "You try to forget ... what you saw."

By Maureen Fan
INQUIRER FOREIGN STAFF

BAGHDAD — The large sign at the building reminds everyone of the task at hand. "Respectful Reverence Requested," it reads.

The two-room makeshift building at Baghdad International Airport is one of the first stops on somber trips that lead to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware. Sometimes soldiers from a unit will drop off one of their own. Other times, hospital workers deliver the bodies of those they could not save.

At the mortuary, specialists — all trained in the United States — make tentative identifications and fill out paperwork, noting tattoos and scars. They cut open pockets so as not to miss any personal effects, such as wedding rings, watches and glasses. Everything is inventoried and placed in plastic bags.

"You need to have a very bad short-term memory to do this job," said Pfc. Mark Beals, 22, of Kansas City, Mo., who is with the 54th Quartermaster Company, based in Fort Lee, Va. "You try to forget about what you saw. You think about what you're going to do tomorrow rather than today."

The task is fairly straightforward. Permanent identification, embalming, and dressing of the body take place stateside. But the job takes its toll. There is a soldier to process every day, it seems.

Sgt. James Frazier of Tallahassee, Fla., said thoughts of his 11-year-old daughter and 9-year-old son came to him every time a body arrived. "I just think about their family trying to get their loved ones back as soon as possible," said Frazier, 37, who also is with the 54th Quartermaster Company.

But Frazier tries to steel himself. "You can't get emotionally wrapped up in this job," he said. "It can be harmful if you let that happen. You have to stay focused on the mission."

And the mission is to have the deceased out of Iraq and on the way home within 12 hours.

Capt. Anthony Wagner of Olympia, Wash., assistant chief of staff for logistics with the First Armored Division headquarters at the airport, said: "After we process the body, we contact the Air Force. Once we get a flight, they get top priority. They'll get a bird within the next six hours, tops."

The next stop is a mortuary collection point at Camp Wolf in Kuwait, where the dead from the war in Afghanistan also arrive. The planes then fly to Germany and on to Dover.

There are other mortuary collection points in Iraq, including Mosul and Tikrit, which send bodies straight to Kuwait whenever possible.

When Baghdad's airport mortuary gets slammed, as it did when a suicide bomber killed 23 people at the U.N. headquarters in August or when a Chinook helicopter was shot down near Fallujah last month, killing 16, the nights are especially long. Sometimes the specialists send a chemical decontamination platoon because it can set up an on-scene water-supply system to wash the dead.

"You choose to do this job," said Staff Sgt. Albert Vincent of Pensacola, Fla., the 54th Quartermaster Company noncommissioned officer in charge of the airport mortuary. "Some people think they can do it, no problem, but then they go up and see the mortuary. Not everybody's got the intestinal fortitude. It ain't pretty."

Vincent, who has been doing mortuary work for seven years, decides how many people should be present when a soldier begins his or her final flight home. He brings in a chaplain and sometimes allows a soldier's close friend from the unit to be present.

A small service is held on the tarmac, usually with the chaplain saying a prayer before and after the remains are loaded on the aircraft. Occasionally, Taps has been played, but often there is no bugler.

So much death makes one appreciate life, Vincent said. "A lot of people take things for granted, but I tell my wife I love her every day. I tell my kids I love them every day."

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