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## The Things That Carried Him

As it [wins the National Magazine Award for Feature Writing](#), revisit the true story behind one soldier's last trip home

By: Chris Jones



**UPDATE (2/26/09):** [Chris Jones responds to the Pentagon's reversal of the casket photography ban.](#)

[To learn more about "The Things That Carried Him," including how Chris Jones reported the story, please read this exclusive interview.](#)

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### [Part One]

#### Indiana, The End

Don Collins stood in the sun and mapped out in his mind a rectangle on the grass, eight feet by three feet. He is forty-nine, wears a handful of

pomade in his hair, and no longer needs a tape to take the measure of things.

Indiana state law dictates that the lid of the burial vault be two feet below the surface. That meant Collins had to dig down five feet, ultimately lifting out about a hundred cubic feet of earth. He wouldn't need a tape to measure that, either. Since 1969, his father, Don Sr., has owned the Collins Funeral Home, just up Elm Street, just past the little yellow house with the two yellow ribbons tied to the tree out front. As a boy, Don Jr. had lived upstairs with the spirits and the rest of his family, over the chapel. He and his younger brother, Kevin, would later work with their dad in the back room, embalming the bodies of their neighbors at three o'clock in the morning, and he still assists his father in his capacity as coroner. But Don Jr. has had enough of bodies in back rooms. He likes it better outside, in the sticky air, working with the earth.

Now he pushed a slick of bangs off his low forehead and lifted a square-bladed shovel out of the back of his pickup truck. It was the second to last day of May, but it was already summer hot, and he moved slowly, surveying again his imaginary rectangle. Satisfied that it lay parallel to the path, the hedgerow, and the train tracks beyond it, Collins made his first cut into the grass.

He set aside the sod and then eased a small Kubota backhoe off his trailer and onto a couple of large sheets of plywood he'd laid down to protect the surrounding ground and the vaults beneath it. The plywood creaked when he anchored the machine and pushed the teeth of the scoop into the dirt. Normally he would have left a pile beside the grave and covered it with a tarp, but as he thought about tomorrow, pictured it in his mind, he decided to haul the earth to a far corner of Scottsburg Cemetery.

The next day, Thursday, May 31, 2007, he sat in the heat on a distant tombstone, waiting until he could finish the rest of his work. Just after twelve o'clock, the first people arrived: a vanload of nine honor-guard soldiers up from Fort Knox, dressed in their green Class-A uniforms, with knotted ties and berets. Collins had seen them practicing and pointing at various spots in the grass when he dug the grave. Now seven of them stacked their M16's in one of those spots. Each gun held three rounds; Sergeant Aaron Huber, a broad-backed thirty-one-year-old veteran of the war in Iraq, had taken care to polish his ammunition to a high shine. Six of the soldiers, including Huber, then assembled in two rows between the grave and where they knew the hearse would park. The extra rifleman remained with the weapons, and the noncom in charge, thirty-seven-year-old Sergeant Kenneth Dawson, stood at attention nearby. The ninth man, Specialist Robert Leatherbee, a boy-faced twenty-six-year-old from Massachusetts, took his place about forty feet away. With his buzz cut and iron-crisp uniform, he looked like a soldier, but there seemed something smaller or gentler about him, at least compared with the others. Maybe it was just that he was holding a trumpet instead of a gun, his fingers tender on the brass.

The funeral motorcade was taking a more circuitous route than the soldiers had from Scottsburg United Methodist Church. After Sergeant Dawson had wheeled the flag-draped casket down the church's aisle and his men had carried it outside and loaded it into the hearse, they had traveled directly to the cemetery, less than five minutes away. The hearse, however — driven by seventy-one-year-old Don Collins Sr., dressed in black with a wide-brimmed black hat — led the long procession through the people-lined streets of Scottsburg, population six thousand.

Around one o'clock, it finally passed through the cemetery gates, which were flanked by dozens of flag-toting members of the Patriot Guard Riders, civilian motorcyclists who have made it their habit to attend military funerals, standing at rigid attention even in the early-afternoon heat.

The soldiers from Fort Knox removed the casket from the hearse and set it on the lowering device over the openmouthed burial vault. The vault was made by a Chicago company, Wilbert Funeral Services, Inc., designed specifically for soldiers killed in Iraq: The Operation Iraqi Freedom vault is made of precast concrete lined with Trilon, and its lid is adorned with a lithograph depicting scenes from the war in Iraq, including Saddam's statue falling. Earlier, the lid had been propped up on display for the mourners, who included fifteen or so young men wearing Nine Inch Nails T-shirts. Now the soldiers withdrew and, along with the attending rifleman, picked up their weapons from the stack. The crowd filled in the spaces around the casket and hushed.

The Reverend Doug Wallace offered a brief prayer, and then a band of kilted bagpipers played "Amazing Grace." (A freight train passed nearby, but the engineer left his finger off the horn at the crossing.) Three recorded songs were played over loudspeakers, including "Hurt," by Nine Inch Nails, before Reverend Wallace said a few more words, and then Dawson gave his men the signal.

The seven soldiers stood in a stiff line and fired three volleys each. This is a part of the ritual they practice again and again. The seven weapons should sound like one. When the shots are scattered — "popcorn," the soldiers call it — they've failed, and they will be mad at themselves for a long time after. On this day, with news cameras and hundreds of sets of sad eyes trained on them, they were perfect. After the final volley, Huber bent down and picked up his three polished shells from the grass.

Leatherbee wet his lips before he raised his trumpet. That was the first indication that he was a genuine bugler. There is such a shortage of buglers now — ushered in by a confluence of death, including waves of World War II and Korea veterans, the first ranks of aging Vietnam veterans, and the nearly four thousand men and women killed in Iraq — that the military has been forced to employ bands of make-believe musicians for the graveside playing of taps. They are usually ordinary soldiers who carry an electronic bugle; with the press of a button, a rendition of taps is broadcast out across fields and through trees. Taps is played without valve work, so only the small red light that shines out of the bell gives them away.



**Specialist Leatherbee practices with his trumpet at Fort Knox.**

Now Leatherbee, using his lungs and his lips to control the pitch, played the first of twenty-four notes: G, G, C, G, C, E... Taps is not fast or technically difficult, and even if it were, most true Army buglers, like Leatherbee, are trained at the university level, possessing what the military calls a "civilian-acquired skill." They have each spent an additional six months in Norfolk, Virginia, for advanced work in calls. But there are still subtle differences that survive the efforts at regimentation — in embouchure, volume, and vibrato, and in how they taper the notes — and there is always the risk of a cracked note, whether due to cold or heat or the tightness that every bugler feels in his chest.

"You always run into the question,"

Leatherbee said later, "do I close my eyes, so that emotion won't be involved, or do I leave them open, so that more emotion will be in the sound? In my opinion, you can't close your eyes. There's a person in a casket in front of you. You want to give them as much as you can."

After Leatherbee lowered the trumpet from his lips, the six men who carried the casket to the burial vault returned to fold the flag. For some soldiers, that can be the hardest part. "Because you're right there," said one of the riflemen, Sergeant Chris Bastille. "You're maybe two feet from the family. And the younger the soldier is, the younger the family is."

"He had a few kids," Huber said.

First, the soldiers folded the flag twice lengthwise, with a slight offset at the top to ensure that the red and white would disappear within the blue. "Their hands were shaking," Dawson would remember later. "I could see that they were feeling it."

Then they made the first of thirteen triangular folds. Before the second fold, Huber took the three gleaming shells out

of his pocket and pushed them inside the flag. No one would ever see them again — a flag well folded takes effort to pull apart — but he took pride in having polished them.

After the final fold, Bastille tucked in the last loose flap and passed the flag to Dawson for inspection. Dawson then passed it to the fifty-two-year-old woman with the general's star standing next to him.

The Army's Chief of Staff has directed that a general officer, randomly assigned, will attend every funeral of every soldier killed in Iraq or Afghanistan. Brigadier General Belinda Pinckney had flown in the night before from Washington, D.C., after she received a request via e-mail. "You're never not available," said Pinckney, an African-American with short hair and a kind face, her eyes expressive behind her glasses. She didn't know how many funerals she had attended — "I don't like to keep count" — but she remembered flashes of each of them, certain faces in the crowd, what the weather was like. Here, she would remember especially the wife, Missie, young and pretty.

"Before the service, I noticed that she had been keeping her distance. She had this look on her face," Pinckney recalled. "And in my mind, she was not dealing with the death of her husband, so I decided to approach her. I went up to her and said, 'How are you doing?' And with a straight face, she said, 'Fine.' I said, 'Missie, look at me. You're not fine. It's okay not to be fine.' That's when she started crying, when I told her it was okay to cry. And we just pulled into each other. I just hugged her, it's okay, it's okay, it's okay. That was her letting go. And I wanted that. I wanted to connect with her."

Now Pinckney approached Missie again, this time dropping to her knees in front of her.

"I was just telling myself, You have to be strong when you're doing this," Pinckney said. "Because it is emotional. I was saying to myself, When I give them this flag, they have to know it's coming from the heart, that you really mean it, and that you're there with them. Especially because these funerals are for young men and women, and being a mother, I say to myself, It could have been my son — Andre, he's twenty-seven years old — or I say, It could have been me. I try to imagine what they're going through. I try to relate to them to say that I know these are hard times. Because no one expects to get that phone call."

The meaning behind the flag folding is lost mostly to myth — the thirteen folds supposedly represent the thirteen colonies, the triangle the lines of George Washington's cocked hat — but its architecture makes it ideal for being clutched to a widow's chest, the points across her shoulders. That's how Missie held the flag when Pinckney gave it to her and said:

"This flag is presented on behalf of a grateful nation and the United States Army in appreciation for your loved one's honorable and faithful service."

Now the service was over, the end of this journey home. As the bagpipes played, the mourners left in groups. The nine honor-guard soldiers returned to their van, exhaled, and pulled onto the highway, bound for Fort Knox. General Pinckney prepared to fly back east. And Don Collins Jr. helped his father lower the casket and seal the lid on the burial vault. They were the last in a long line of men and women who, beginning late one night nine days earlier, had carried this soldier to this place.

Don Jr. began hauling back the dirt from the far corner of the cemetery, the first scoops landing on top of the lithograph, burying Saddam along with the soldier. After he had tamped down the last of the earth, he replaced the sod he had cut loose the day before, doing his best to knit the seams. Finally, he placed a temporary metal marker from the Collins Funeral Home at the head of the grave, because there had not been time yet to carve a tombstone. It read:

SGT. JOE MONTGOMERY

1977-2007

**A few hours earlier**, Gail Bond had sat in the front row of Scottsburg United Methodist, her church, and dried her eyes. She was sad and she was angry, even her happiest memories having suddenly gone spoiled. Robert Joe Montgomery Jr. had been among the first group of babies baptized in this church, days after it opened in the fall of 1977. His name is inked in the records book there in careful cursive, top of the first page. Gail could still remember so clearly holding him that day, his little head poking out the top of his blanket. Now Joey was in the flag-draped casket in front of her, new memories stealing away from the old.

Over the following hours, Gail would need a lot of things that she wouldn't get, but she would get a cigarette. She had smoked a lot over the last nine days, and she had already smoked plenty in her sixty-eight years. She has a kit — a little black leather bag to hide the ugly warnings on the cardboard pack, linked by a brass chain to another little black leather bag that holds her lighter. There was something touchingly ladylike about the kit, and there was something touchingly ladylike about her whenever she pulled it out, sparking up another brandless smoke at her round kitchen table, between bouts of tears and cans of Bud Light. She had thought a lot about quitting, but whenever she had built up enough nerve, something happened that made it impossible for her to put the kit in a drawer and close it.

When she was sixteen, Gail's nine-year-old brother, Frederick, had died of rheumatic fever. Her first husband, Joey's father, Robert Joe Montgomery Sr., had been killed in a car wreck during their seventeenth year of marriage. She had taken to calling Joey "my miracle baby," because she had learned she was pregnant with him the day after his father's funeral. Her parents died on consecutive days in 1999. Five years later, her second husband, Joey's substitute father, Don Bond, to whom she was married for twenty-three years, drowned after his pickup truck slid on a patch of black ice and into a swollen river. Somehow, Gail had weathered all of it, even when people's eyes followed her down the street — she hated their pity — but now she had lost Joey, and that was enough to make her scream at God in the night.



**Missie Montgomery at Gail's house in Scottsburg this winter.**

She looked across the front of the church at those who had survived her love. Her oldest son, Micah, forty, a master sergeant and an Army lifer, who had come home from his own deployment in Iraq to attend his little brother's funeral. Her daughter, Mindy, who has red hair and freckles like Joey did. Her brother, Bill Graham, the mayor of Scottsburg for twenty years. Her baby sister, Vicki Wells, Aunt Vicki, A.V., the two of them identical in their sad, tired eyes. Missie, Joey's wife, twenty-nine, too young to know what Gail knew, and Missie's children, Gail's grandchildren, nine-year-old Skyla, seven-year-old Robert Joe, and two-year-old Ella. There they sat, huddled in a row, and behind them hundreds of mourners, with them but without.

There were so many that the church

had opened an overflow room downstairs, and more people were standing in the parking lot outside.

A lot of them had come because they knew the mayor and were sorry that he'd lost a nephew. More came because they knew Gail, because she had helped them plan for their retirements at Edward Jones, and they were sorry for her, too. And many had come because Joey was the first of them — the first man or woman from Scott County — to die in Iraq. The truth is, not many of them knew Joey, and hardly any of them knew Sergeant Joe Montgomery, and they would learn only a little about him that morning in the church. There was no eulogy to tell them what they should think of him, as though the family had grown tired of sharing their grief and wanted to keep something of Joey for themselves. The strangers would be left to fill in the blanks on their own.

Looking at the faces of Joey's family, they could know that he was loved. Looking at his friends in their black concert T-shirts, they could guess that he really liked Nine Inch Nails. Looking at his Aunt Vicki, standing behind the pulpit and holding it together just long enough to read one of Joey's poems, they could learn that he liked to write. Looking at his flag-draped casket, they could be certain that he was a soldier. Looking at General Pinckney, giving Missie both a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star and promoting Sergeant Montgomery posthumously to staff sergeant, they could deduce that he was a brave one. They may have believed that he became a soldier because he had loved his country, but they could not have known that before he was a soldier he had been ashamed that his jobs in the steel forge and running cable for security systems had left his young family living in a bad part of town in a rented house with holes in the floor. They couldn't have known that he became a soldier because he wanted to make his older brother proud, and that he wanted even more to make a better life for his wife and his kids, this second generation of fatherless Montgomerys.

**Joey had lain** at the Collins Funeral Home since Tuesday evening, when the brothers David and Tim Barclay, state troopers on black motorcycles, had led the procession from the airport, Freeman Field in Seymour, Indiana. They had worked traffic all day and then got a call late that afternoon, May 29, that the body of a dead soldier would need an escort down the I-65 to Scottsburg. They didn't know Joe Montgomery or his family, but they knew his hometown, and they knew Seymour, and they knew best of all the stretch of highway in between. It was about twenty-three miles, a straight shot, north to south, four lanes, divided.

When they arrived at the airfield, sweat-soaked, the brothers were taken aback by the number of cars waiting in a line. There were scores, maybe hundreds, as well as about sixty members of the Patriot Guard Riders and their motorcycles, decorated with American flags flapping in the early-summer breeze. The procession would be three miles long.

"We've done a few of these, and it was by far the biggest we've seen," Tim Barclay said. They decided to shut down the highway, the main route between Indianapolis and Louisville, for as long as it took to cover the ground to Scottsburg. They would speed forward to block the on-ramps, and they told the ride captain of the Patriot Guard, Tim Chapman — they knew him from way back — to bring up the rear and not let anyone pass.

The Patriot Guard was formed a few years ago in response to the threat of protesters from the extreme-fundamentalist Westboro Baptist Church, in Topeka, Kansas, who sometimes disrupted the funerals of soldiers killed in Iraq. There were rumors the church intended to hold up signs along the highway like, "God Hates Your Tears" and "Thank God for Dead Soldiers." Gail Bond stayed up the night before for a lot of reasons, but partly because she was worried about how her family and friends might react, how she might react, to such taunts. But now she saw the men on their Harley-Davidsons, with their long hair coming out the backs of their helmets, and she didn't worry anymore.

The Barclay brothers moved out, lights flashing, with Don Collins Sr. right behind them, piloting his black hearse. In the seat beside him was Sergeant Charles Dunaway, a twenty-nine-year-old paratrooper from Alabama. He had become friends with Micah Montgomery in jump school and had volunteered to come down from Fort Richardson, Alaska — where Joey had been based before he was deployed to Iraq — to be Joey's official escort on these last legs home. On his lap was the paperwork that confirmed the details of Sergeant Montgomery's death, as well as the medals that would be presented to Missie at the church. Dunaway isn't much of a talker, and sometimes he struggles

to find the words. "I consider it an honor," he said of what it felt like to sit in a hearse with a flag-draped casket in the back and a dead soldier's medals in his hands. "It kind of hits home for you."

Behind the hearse, Gail sat in the car with her brother, Bill, the mayor, who was at the wheel. "It's hard to drive and cry," he said. The tears began flowing as soon as they pulled out of the airport and onto the main road in Seymour, bound for the I-65. Traffic had stopped. Townspeople lined the sidewalks, holding their hands over their hearts, waving flags, whispering to their children.

"It breaks your heart when you drive through and you see people and they're crying for you," Vicki said later. She was especially struck by the nameless mechanic in his coveralls, black with oil. He had crawled out from under a car, out of the pit, and he stood in front of the garage, perfectly straight, perfectly still, saluting the hearse, and lines formed under his eyes in the oil on his face.

When Joey worked at the steel forge, he would come home to the trailer that he and Missie shared, and he would be black like that mechanic. He worked the hammer in the forge, using tongs to hold strings of molten metal, and the hammer would clang down loud enough that you could hear it from the parking lot. Once, Joey had nearly done his thumb in — it got crushed between the handles of the tongs when the hammer came down — and it was scarred enough years later to look almost transparent.

In the last car of the procession, Ryan Heacock, Joey's best friend, was having trouble seeing, he was crying so hard. His fiancée, Kayla, sat beside him; he tried to focus on the car in front of him, scared that he would drive into it through his fog; his rearview was filled with motorcycles and flags. Ryan had recently e-mailed Joey in Iraq and asked him to be the best man at his wedding the July after next. "Of course," Joey had written back, and Ryan had hoped the commitment would bring Joey back home to stay. "To say that he was my brother doesn't do it justice," Ryan said one evening, sitting at Gail's kitchen table, where he sat often, a can of beer in one hand and a smoke in the other.

They became friends in high school. "We were kind of the outcasts," Ryan said. "We didn't quite fit in. We weren't hard enough to ride with the tough crowd, and, you know, we were a little bit rough around the edges for the squeaky-clean crowd. So we were something in the middle."

Together Ryan and Joey rode their skateboards on the street, and they grew their hair long — except around the back and sides, which they shaved with dog clippers — and they talked about what they wanted for themselves. Joey wanted to meet Missie, who was in Ryan's freshman math class, and Ryan helped her with her homework to set them up. Ryan wanted to go to college to study art, and he did, at Indiana University Southeast. Joey helped Ryan along, the way Ryan had helped Joey.

"Every once in a while I'd be hard up and I'd sell my painting to him for twenty bucks or whatever. I think, of anybody, Missie's probably got the biggest collection of my stuff."

Ryan eventually found work at Fewell Monument in downtown Scottsburg. Out front, there are rows of tombstones for sale. And inside, at his desk, Ryan is designing Joey's.

Now they pulled onto the I-65, this great long string of mourners and their memories. They were surprised to see every overpass — U. S. 31, Commiskey Pike, the 250 to Uniontown, 600 South — lined with flags and signs welcoming Joey home. Volunteer fire departments, dressed in full uniform, stood at attention in front of their shining trucks. Farmers drove across their fields of baby corn and soy to reach the shoulder and stood in the beds of their old pickup trucks. As reports of the procession spread — traffic helicopters joined in, flying overhead — and long-haul truckers shared the news over their radios, they pulled over and climbed out of their rigs, and cars filled with families did, too, all of them standing and saluting from across the grassy median, the northbound lanes stopped nearly as completely as the southbound.

"I can't even tell you what that meant to our family," Bill Graham said.

There had been hard times for Joey after he finally finished high school in his fifth year. He got a tattoo on his arm of an eye with an anarchy symbol for a pupil. He broke up with Missie. And then Gail and Don kicked him out of the house. "He would sleep all day and play all night," Gail said. "And I knew something was wrong — you don't do that. I put up with it and put up with it and put up with it, and tried to talk to him and, didn't work. So, tough love. Find another place to live, you get a job, you get a job and obey the rules, and you can stay here. And if not... So for probably a year, Joe was what he considered homeless. A lot of it was right around here, and I know my mother helped him out a lot. But you could see him walking up and down the road."

Eventually, Joey went down to Jacksonville, Florida, where his sister, Mindy, was living with her husband. "He was the sweetest boy," Mindy said. "I loved Joey to death. He was very sensitive, very creative. He had some troubles, but it made him turn out to be a better person in the end."

Mindy struggled to right Joey, until Ryan came to Jacksonville to visit. Maybe that was enough for him to be pulled back to Scottsburg.

"I'll never forget when he called me and asked me to bring him home," Gail said. "He wanted chicken and noodles. And I said: Joey, Dad and I aren't over this yet. So I think you need some time to think about it. Because when you get home, you gotta work, you gotta obey the rules if you're gonna live with us, that's just the way it is."

Joey did come home, he obeyed the rules, and he went to work, turned black at the steel mill. He also became a father. While he was in Florida, Missie had found herself another boyfriend, and now she was pregnant. She and Joey got back together, and Ryan remembers riding with Joey back from the hospital in 1998 with the baby, Skyla, and she was his from that moment on.

Two years later came Robert Joe, and Joey's work at the mill wasn't making ends meet. He began work running

cable, first for other security companies, and then on his own. A lot of people didn't pay their bills, and then Missie was pregnant again, and Joey decided that he wasn't going to scratch through the rest of his life. In January 2005, he joined the Army.

"He always thought a whole lot of Micah," Ryan said.

It fit Joey nearly as well. He liked the Army, and he liked Alaska. It was a fresh start, a break from their old life, looking ahead to something new, out over the mountains. He rose through the ranks, and they lived in a townhouse on base — 516A Beluga Avenue — and Joey built a swing set for the yard, and they put some money away, and they finally felt as though the constant wobble in their lives was smoothed out, like they had been properly aligned for the first time.

Gail last saw her son at Christmastime, 2006. He had been in Iraq for only a few weeks, and it would be the only midtour leave he would receive — he would have to spend more than a year straight at war — but he wanted to see his kids. Ryan took a picture of the entire family then, Joey smiling his crooked smile, his hands on Robert's shoulders, Missie smiling and holding Ella on her hip, Skyla in front of them both, shining. Gail would put that picture on the front of the thank-you cards she would send out, after. At the end of Joey's leave, she took him to the airport in Louisville, hugged him tight, and said goodbye.

"When he got ready to go on the plane, I thought, You're standing so tall, you like yourself, you're proud of yourself," she said.

And now Joey was coming home, over the Muscatatuck River, the procession pulling off the highway and into Scottsburg, the streets lined there, too, shoulder-to-shoulder, the storefronts decorated, the fire trucks out, their ladders raised and making a triangle over the road. Between them, an enormous flag had been strung. The family drove underneath it on their way to the Collins Funeral Home. There, the local police chief, Delbert Meeks, and his men met the hearse, and they carried Sergeant Montgomery's casket inside — "I'd known Joey all his life," Chief Meeks said — and placed it on a pedestal in a corner of the chapel.

Alone, Don Collins Sr. and Sergeant Dunaway peeled back the flag like a bedsheet and opened the casket. There was Joey, carefully dressed in his Class-A uniform with white gloves and polished boots, his badges and cords in place, and his face serene. It was mostly unmarked, and the two men agreed that even though the Port Mortuary in Dover, Delaware — where every soldier killed in action is prepared for burial — had advised against a family viewing, Joey looked good enough for the Montgomerys to see him if they would like.

"I needed to do that to believe it was him," Gail said. She, Missie, and Micah stood over Joey for a long time that Tuesday evening. They touched him and spoke to him gently. Gail and Missie hadn't seen him in months, and war had changed him, or maybe it was their memories of him that had changed, and now their eyes took him in, every inch of him, as though he'd been long lost.

It was Micah who noticed that his ring was missing. Joey was a Mason, and the ring was a chunk of steel that he wore on the middle finger of his right hand, a gift from Gail that last Christmas to replace the one that had been cut off him before he deployed, his finger swollen with infection. Now Micah took off his own Mason's ring, and he leaned down to slip it onto Joey's right middle finger, over his white glove. That's when Gail began to shake; the gloved finger folded in on itself, empty but for cotton and carefully rolled strips of gauze.

**Jim Stagers**, an Army chaplain, father of two young sons, and frequent reader of the Book of Job, had needed to find a quiet place to hide at Freeman Field earlier that afternoon. He had already changed into his dress blues in the airport office, and even in there, in that relative privacy, the curious and concerned had asked him about the small plane due to come in. But he didn't know more than anybody else — he had watched plenty of dead soldiers leave in the bellies of C-130's, lifting over the brown Afghan hills, but he had never before been on the receiving end, at least never in a place like this. Across the tarmac, the doors of a white hangar were open, and an empty church cart waited out front. Inside, workers had set up chairs and laid out a table of refreshments. Everybody was moving carefully, and everybody spoke in whispers. Any building can be turned into a church, Stagers thought.

He had come down to Seymour from Indianapolis in the van with the rest of the funeral detail, those Indiana National Guardsmen who had seen Sergeant Montgomery's name written on the whiteboard in their office. There were several different marker colors used on that board, but black — the color in which Sergeant Montgomery's name was written — was the most significant. That usually meant an active-duty soldier killed in action, and that meant Specialist Andrew Schnieders and Sergeants Capricia Gerth and Flor Snell-Rominger and three other pallbearers — take them out of uniform and they might look like lifeguards or college students — would be asked to carry someone very much like themselves from the plane to the church cart and into the waiting hearse. "Honorable transfer," they call it, the last in a series of military handoffs, when the Army finally turns over a dead son or daughter, husband or wife, to his or her family.

Stagers stole away behind the hangar to read his Bible. He had confronted grief for most of his adult life, but he had to get his head straight. He had somehow seen this future for himself while standing at the lip of a mass grave in Bosnia a decade ago, had seen it in the faces of two hundred men, women, and children massacred and thrown in a pit. "That was a spiritual moment," he said. "That's when I said I will follow this calling that you've been pestering me with, God, for all my years." Since then, he has worked as a sheriff's chaplain, and alongside one of the Army's casualty notification officers, and in the trauma room of a city hospital. Most recently had come his tour in Afghanistan, where he had missed the birth of his youngest son to pray over the bodies of the sorts of men he hoped his son might one day become.

Today, though, was new and it was different: It was not a farewell but a return. Today would be about framing a reality that was only now coming home. "I was thinking, What would I want for my wife and kids if I were the one not to make it back?" Stagers said. "I would want someone to give them 100 percent of their attention and preparation."

When Sergeant Montgomery's family arrived from Scottsburg a short time later, and after Don Collins Sr. had parked his hearse and opened the door, Chaplain Staggers introduced himself and did his best to prepare them for what they were about to see. He went over the mechanics of the ritual, but he also tried to steady them for the emotion that would follow. There might have been times over the past week when they felt like they were in a movie, actors playing parts. That feeling would end this afternoon.

The guardsmen had carried enough caskets to deduce, from what their arms told them as they grasped the handles and lifted, something of the person inside. They know if the dead soldier was big or little, and they can also make a good guess at how he died, whether he was killed by small-arms fire or a helicopter crash or an IED. Sometimes they'd lifted caskets and been surprised by the weight of them — wooden caskets are heavier than metal, and that combined with a strapping young man can make for a considerable burden, several hundred pounds — and sometimes there was barely any weight at all, and they knew that inside the casket was a pressed uniform carefully pinned to layers of sheets and blankets, between which might be nestled only fragments of a former life, sealed in plastic.

They had also learned how not to betray a hint of this sudden knowledge. Sergeant Montgomery's casket was lighter than they were expecting, but they kept what they call their "game faces." They'd learned to train their eyes on one place, focusing usually on a point in the distance, the way sailors settle their stomachs by looking at the horizon.

On that short march from planeside, Schnieders stared at the logo on a police car parked nearby. Gerth accidentally caught sight of tearful children and scrambled to find somewhere else to look. Snell-Rominger whispered to her to look at just this one girl in the hangar — not at her face but at her pretty dress, which had flowers on it. "Pick out a flower," she said, and both of them stared at a flower on that girl's dress until they had set the casket on the church cart.

The pallbearers withdrew in formation. Staggers took their place and stood alone with the casket, pausing for a moment. He looked at Missie and the children, and he couldn't help thinking again of his own wife and children. "God is our refuge and our strength," he began. "Therefore, we will not fear."

He finished with a reading from the Forty-sixth Psalm — *The Lord maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth* — and invited the family to approach the casket. Gail was the first to step forward, followed by Missie and Micah and then the children.

Missie folded her arms on top of the flag and put her face into them and wept.

"Daddy's here," Gail said, bending down and clutching her grandchildren from behind before she reached out to smooth a corner of the flag.

And Staggers put the flat of his right hand in its white glove onto the flag as well, over the stars, and he gave up trying not to cry.

"You can't deny your humanity," he said. "You can put up the wall for so long, but it always crumbles. It crumbles."

After a few minutes — there is no protocol for this, only feel — he signaled the honor guard that it was time to march forward and lift the casket to their waists again, and to carry it to the back of the hearse.



**The inside of the hearse from the Collins Funeral Home.**

As the state troopers, the Barclay brothers, led the funeral procession south toward Scottsburg, the honor guard turned north, heading back to Indianapolis. They talked about what they did right and what they did wrong and how they could be better next time.

A few months later, two of the people in the back of that van, Sergeant Edward Blackburn and Lieutenant Matthew Mason, would join more than three thousand members of the Indiana National Guard bound for Iraq.

## **[Part Two]**

### **Dover Air Force Base**

Steve Greene picked up the phone in

late November 2006. It was the Pentagon.

Greene, a burly guy with a nicotine-stained mustache, works for a company called Kalitta Charters out of a hailstone-dented trailer at the airfield in Morristown, Tennessee. Kalitta's head office is in Ypsilanti, Michigan, and much of its business had been staked on flying parts for the auto industry. But with Detroit scaling back production, Greene had been talking to the Air Force about chartering his fleet of white-and-burgundy Falcon 20's, reliable, low-cost twin-engine jets with decent range and an oversized door for large cargo. "I thought, There's a niche

somewhere for this plane," Greene said recently. "Of course, this was the furthest thing from my mind."

Not long ago, and for decades, the remains of soldiers were shipped like parcels in the bellies of commercial planes. That practice began to end on November 15, 2005, when a twenty-one-year-old medic with the 101st Airborne named Matthew Holley was killed by a roadside bomb in Iraq. His parents, John and Stacey, had also served with the 101st Airborne; now they were told that their only child would arrive home in San Diego as freight in the hold of a US Airways flight, ferried to the family by baggage handlers.

After lodging a complaint with the Army and receiving help from California senator Barbara Boxer, the Holleys saw their son met by an honor guard instead. Still angry, they began a campaign to change the way all military dead would be delivered. California representative Duncan Hunter, then chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, wrote legislation that eventually became known as the Holley Provision to the 2007 Defense Authorization Act. It directed that the bodies of fallen soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines would no longer be booked passage on US Airways, Delta, Northwest, or Continental but would be flown on military or military-contracted flights and met by honor guards.

The Air Force had already auditioned Kalitta: In June 2006, two soldiers, Privates Thomas Tucker and Kristian Menchaca, had been kidnapped, executed, and mutilated in Iraq, and their bodies needed to be flown from Dover Air Force Base to Redmond, Oregon, and Brownsville, Texas, respectively. "It was a high-profile thing," Greene said. "And I guess because it was so high profile, they didn't want to use the air carriers like they had been doing. I told them there was no reason we couldn't do it, and we did."

Now, just weeks before its January 1, 2007, deadline, the Pentagon was on the phone once again. Greene was asked if Kalitta's pilots could do for every soldier killed in action what they did for Tucker and Menchaca. He said they could. He was given a statement of work and a flight estimate — "Thankfully, we have not had to fly the number of missions they anticipated," he said — and Kalitta agreed to station four of its Falcon 20's and flight crews at Dover full time. After company mechanics worked through Christmas designing and building a portable electric lift and outfitting the jet interiors with ball mats and roller strips, room for two caskets each, the pilots flew themselves into place on New Year's Eve. The next day, they were back in the air.

The crews were assigned randomly out of Kalitta's ranks. One of the pilots was a low-key, goateed twenty-eight-year-old from Michigan named Greg Jones; one of the copilots was a seventy-two-year-old Alabaman named Royce Linton, an Air Force veteran, soft-spoken and sinewy. They had each worked for Kalitta since September 2003 — flying car and washing-machine parts, organs for organ transplants ("Four hours for a heart, two days for a liver," Jones said), golfers to Pebble Beach, and Kid Rock to Vail. Now they would work two weeks on, one week off, hauling bodies in caskets.

"Once you're in the plane, you're just flying," Jones said. "You just keep your eyes forward."

Jones and Linton have flown some routes so frequently they could fly them blind, because not all towns have lost in equal measure. The thumbtacks stuck into their mental maps are in bunches. Boise, Idaho, has suffered more than most, and so has Little Rock, Arkansas. Then there are the gaps, entire states having escaped their touching down. Jones has never flown into Vermont; by fluke of scheduling, Linton has somehow avoided his home state of Alabama.

Before the afternoon of May 29, 2007, neither man had flown into Seymour, Indiana. Their manifest that day included two deliveries. They stopped first for fuel in Ypsilanti en route to Fargo, North Dakota, where they set down Sergeant Jason A. Schumann, twenty-three, of Hawley, Minnesota. His nickname was Tuba, after the instrument he played in his high school band; he was killed south of Baghdad by a roadside bomb. After topping up the fuel tanks, Jones and Linton charted course southeast, with only Joe Montgomery's metal casket now tied down in the back. Sergeant Dunaway sat in the jump seat between the pilots, Sergeant Montgomery's paperwork and medals on his lap. As they approached Freeman Field, Jones and Linton circled, high in the bright blue sky. From the ground, it looked as though the pilots were offering a sweeping final salute. They were only getting their bearings.

After they touched down and taxied toward the open-sided hangar, they took stock of the waiting crowd. This is going to be tough, Linton thought. "It just seems the smaller the town, the bigger the turnout," he said later.

"Absolutely," Jones said. "Always."

Back in January, their first flights had ended in echo chambers. Linton flew a boy to Stockton, California, where the soldier's parents, divorced, were fighting over the funeral arrangements, and neither showed up. "I want to tell you, it made me mad," Linton said. Jones had a similar experience. His first assignment was a flight to Atlanta, and the dead soldier's father had insisted on accompanying his son, sitting in the cockpit jump seat. ("They have that option, but it doesn't happen very often," Jones said.) After touchdown, the honor guard was nowhere to be found, and Jones had to enlist airport personnel to help him carry the casket. "I was pissed," he said. "I'm like, this is pathetic, especially with the father there. That was the worst one. They got better after that."

By the end of May, everybody involved was more practiced, and the crowds had grown bigger, at least in small towns. The Ypsilanti-Fargo-Seymour leg was in the middle of a particularly busy, brutal run, coming with the troop surge in Iraq. Jones and Linton would log eighty-five hours of flying time in a single two-week stretch.

They unbuckled themselves from their seats, readied the lift, unlatched the door, and immediately felt the heat radiating off the tarmac. Sergeant Betty Clarett, the Indiana National Guard's designated "plane dawg," because she's little, climbed on board. She checked the paperwork to make sure the name matched the name on the office whiteboard, and that the flag on the casket hadn't slipped or been damaged in flight. After Jones had unloaded and readied the lift, Linton bent down to push the casket onto the ball mat.

Inside the hangar, Sergeant Montgomery's family had been waiting for what felt like years. Chaplain Stagers might



have tried to warn them, but they still had to live through the moment. Jones and Linton had seen it often — the moment when the family is hit by the truth, when the nose of the casket finally pokes through the door. That's when the air comes out of them and the place they're in, as it did that afternoon in Seymour. The hangar emptied with a gust that buckled men's legs.

"I think that was the hardest part of this whole thing," Gail would say later, before stopping, unable to say anything more.

Linton pushed the casket the rest of the way off the ball mat onto the lift. Jones pressed a button to lower it to pallbearer height. During his first few flights, Linton had stayed in the open door, but that was before an immigrant family in California whose son had been killed in Iraq rushed the casket when it was still on the lift. The family had angrily opposed their son's decision to enlist, and now they let loose on him, beating the sides and top of the casket and screaming at him through their tears. Linton didn't want to turn his back to their suffering, and so he stood statue-still in the door for five minutes, ten, and then fifteen, watching from above while this family aired their last grievances with their rebel son. On the flight back to Dover, Linton told Jones, "I'm never standing there again," and he never has. After he centered Sergeant Montgomery on the lift, Linton stepped back into the shadows inside the plane.

Sometimes, Steve Greene said, the phone rings in his trailer and he hears from dispatch that the pilots need a little extra time before they lift back into the air, although that happens less than it once did. Now they have delivered hundreds of dead soldiers back to their families, and their recollections of the flights have begun to run together. But some Jones and Linton remember more clearly than others. They can remember the thirty-year-old father of five they brought in south of Omaha and seeing the dead man's youngest son, maybe two years old, toddle up to the casket and twist the bottom bar of the flag in his tiny hand. They can remember dropping out of the low clouds over Juneau, Alaska, on their way to Fairbanks, and seeing the light reflecting off the mountains and the water. And they can remember their approach to Seymour, Indiana, when they circled in the sky and there were so many people below, waiting in a hangar in the heat, including a girl in a pretty flowered dress.

**The first time Major Cory Larsen** entered the Port Mortuary at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware, in 2006 — and saw what he has seen nearly every day there since — he went back outside into the sunlight and gulped down the fresh air and resolved to call his mother more often.

By 0800 on Friday, May 25, when he arrived for his shift, Larsen, a thirty-two-year-old Air Force reservist with a shaved head and hooded eyes, had completed two tours within the building, officially called the Charles C. Carson Center for Mortuary Affairs. There were only twelve permanent staff, including four licensed morticians; the rest of the fifty or sixty people who worked within the building were ordinary airmen and reservists, like Larsen, who had been pressed into tours that spanned four months. Many of them, like Larsen, had worked as many as seventy-five days in a row without a day off. Many, like Larsen — who worked in the unit that catalogs incoming remains — volunteered to return.

"Some people are broken here," said Karen Giles, the director of the Carson Center. "But there are a lot of repeaters. We're very protective of each other."

Giles has served here since 2003, when the building opened that fall, the world's largest mortuary, she said, seventy-two thousand square feet of stainless steel and tile. She is small, with a short haircut, and she dresses modestly, in a golf shirt and cargo pants, but she is a presence in the room: She has seen things that she will never discuss, but she isn't shy about what must happen here.

It is a long, low building with broad stretches of tinted glass; surrounded by parking spaces, it looks a little like a shopping mall. The original facility, which opened in 1955, was one-third the size and looked like a warehouse — too much like a warehouse, some people thought after September 11, 2001, when the men and women killed at the Pentagon were brought here for processing. Now, behind the front doors, there is an atrium with plants and a fountain. "Dignity, Honor and Respect" reads the motto on the stone wall, above a sweeping display that commemorates moments in history that ultimately ended here.

It includes, in part:

Vietnam: 21,693 Deceased... Mass Suicide, Peoples Temple Cultists in Guyana: 913 Deceased... Terrorist Bombing of Marine Headquarters in Beirut, Lebanon: 237 Deceased... Crash of the Space Shuttle *Challenger*: 7 Deceased... Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm: 310 Deceased... Bombing in Nairobi, Kenya: 11 Deceased... Pentagon, 9/11: 188 Deceased... Crash of the Space Shuttle *Columbia*: 7 Deceased...

And for Operation Iraqi Freedom — every soldier, sailor, airman, and marine killed in action to date, including number 3,431: Sergeant Robert Joe Montgomery Jr., of Scottsburg, Indiana.

When Larsen arrived that Friday morning, Sergeant Montgomery was still in his aluminum transfer case, packed in ice, inside a large refrigerator, along with the remains of the twelve other active-duty soldiers and marines who had arrived at Dover with him. He would spend five days here, being readied for the trip home.

Like every transfer case, Sergeant Montgomery's was carried first into the E.O.D. Room, or Explosive Ordnance Disposal Room. Its foot-thick, steel-reinforced walls are built to withstand a blast from a pound of C-4. Sergeant Montgomery was scanned for unexploded bombs, ammunition, booby traps... None was found.

He was then unpacked from the case, which would be cleaned and shipped back to Baghdad to be used again. He was still zipped inside the black body bag, cold and wet to the touch. His remains were lifted out onto a metal table and digitally photographed and archived. Besides the photographic record, the bodies — and parts of bodies, if separate — and their personal effects are bar-coded to make sure nothing is lost. "You can't make a mistake here," Giles said. "You make one mistake, you've automatically made two." Deliver the wrong wedding ring to one wife and

another wife is left longing.

No personal effects were found on Sergeant Montgomery's body. Had there been, they would have been taken to another room, where they would have been cleaned and placed in a clear plastic bag for return to his family. The staff assigned to the personal-effects detail are never asked to work with human remains; personal effects turn the bodies, sometimes unrecognizable, back into men and women.

In the atrium, there are two doors, labeled Counseling and Meditation. They are used by families on rare occasions — such visits aren't encouraged — but most often by those assigned to cleaning and cataloging dog tags, wallets, packs of cigarettes and gum, photographs of baby girls, and envelopes that still smell like perfume.

"If I'm shoulder to shoulder with them, working with them, that's where the conversation starts," said David Sparks, one of the chaplains here. He is retired military, a civilian now, a unit unto himself: tall, with gray hair and a bit of a belly held in check by a New England Patriots belt buckle. He was first called to the Port Mortuary during the days following September 11, and he never left.

"The chaplains are back there with us every single day," Larsen said. "Everyone appreciates that."

When Sergeant Montgomery arrived, like all the dead when they arrive, he carried "believed to be" status; identity can be confirmed only here. The fingerprints of his left hand were examined by experts from the FBI; dental and full-body X-rays were made; DNA samples would be compared with those on record, obtained before deployment with a blood sample. Only then was the body on the table officially given his name.

Then the autopsy began. (Sometimes it's made complicated by the work of doctors and medics in the field: ribs cracked open, hearts bruised from massage, holes from IV lines up and down pale arms.) The gross causes of death — explosion, automatic-weapons fire, falling bricks — may be obvious, but the medical examiners set out to chart both specific causes and the mechanisms and pathways of death. They do so, they say, because they are as interested in predicting the future as in documenting the past. Earlier in the Iraq war, for example, they began to notice a disproportionate number of deaths caused by small shrapnel wounds to the neck. They recommended that soldiers on the ground start wearing armored collars, which have significantly reduced the number of fatal neck wounds dissected at Dover.

At Sergeant Montgomery's autopsy, it was noted that he had suffered traumatic injuries consistent with proximity to an explosive device. There was massive blast and burn trauma to his legs, and he was missing most of his right hand. His torso was intact, and his face was unmarked, except for a single blemish on his forehead. But death would have been instantaneous. It was also noted that his remains were incomplete. (Not long after, as is customary, someone from the Army would call Gail at home in Scottsburg and ask: If more of her son were discovered and subsequently identified at the Port Mortuary, would she like those missing pieces returned to her? She declined.)

Once Sergeant Montgomery's wounds were documented and recorded in the mortuary's database, he was moved to the embalming suite to be prepared for burial. He was placed on top of one of about a dozen workstations, marked by an American flag on the wall and spools of wire to close skull fractures. This is difficult, painstaking work; few of the men and women brought here have died from natural causes or in their sleep, which means that most of them died with their eyes open. Sergeant Montgomery's eyes were blue. Only here were they finally closed, two gloved fingers delicate on his eyelids. For the morticians, that is almost always the first step.

What remained of Sergeant Montgomery's bodily fluids was replaced by preservation agents. Strong solutions are employed, because the morticians don't know where the body they are working on might be sent. In some cases, when injuries are too extensive, no reconstruction is attempted. Instead, the remains are wrapped in absorbent gauze and sealed in plastic; they are then tucked inside crisp white sheets, closed with safety pins, one inch off the crease, the head of every pin facing the same direction; a green blanket is wrapped around the entire cocoon, and a full uniform is pinned on top.

But the presumptive goal of the morticians and their staff is what they call "viewability" — to give the family at least part of their son or daughter back as they remember them. (In the end, the families of about 85 percent of those killed in action are able to hold at least a partial viewing.)

The mortician assigned to Sergeant Montgomery put him back together as best he could. He built a right hand out of gauze and cotton and similarly stuffed the legs of his uniform pants. He paid particular attention to Sergeant Montgomery's face, which, with the help of the airmen stationed alongside him, he washed and shaved and layered in makeup.

Chaplain Sparks tells a story he heard from one of his fellow chaplains. He was on the floor, watching an airman who was tenderly washing the blood and sand out of a young soldier's hair. He would later comb it carefully into place, but for now he concentrated on cleaning the dead man's hair, rinsing it, and washing it again, the water running through it and his fingers and into the sink. The chaplain asked the airman about that, and the airman said, "His mother washed his hair the first time, and I'm washing it for the last time."

"It's very intimate," Sparks said. "Preparing remains is a very intimate thing. This is hands-on."

Then, like Sergeant Montgomery, the bodies are placed in caskets — wood or metal, it's up to the family — and dressed. The mortuary contains a full uniform shop, the most complete in the country, including every size of uniform shirt, jacket, and pants of every branch of service — every badge, every insignia, every cord, every bar, flag, and stripe. Sergeant Montgomery was dressed in his Class-A uniform. His three stripes were stitched to his sleeve, and his Airborne wings were pinned to his chest, along with a freshly made plastic badge that read MONTGOMERY, white on black.

Karen Giles tells a story about another young airman, who was polishing the brass on a dead soldier's uniform jacket. He was using a little tool, a kind of buffer, to make sure that every button shined. A visitor complimented

him on his attention to detail. "The family will really appreciate what you're doing," the visitor said. But the airman replied, "Oh, no, sir, the family won't know about this." The airman told him that the family had requested that their son be cremated, and just a short while later, he was.

The flag comes last. They hang by the dozens on a rack on the wall beside a rollaway door, through which a beige van will carry the caskets back to the tarmac. The flags are pressed in the uniform shop, so they are creaseless. And they are longer than a standard flag — nine and a half feet long by five feet wide, a different proportion from the more usual eight by five — to ensure that they cover the ends of the casket; a polyester elastic braid is wrapped around the casket, close to the bottom edge of the flag, to keep it in place until it's folded and given to the family. The flags are always draped the same way, with the stars over the soldier's heart.

**Major General Richard P. Formica is stout**, with a high-and-tight haircut and a voice that sounds custom-built for giving orders — but now he was sitting in a boardroom in the Pentagon, choking on his words.

The Army Chief of Staff ordered that not only must a general officer attend every funeral of every soldier killed in action, but also that a general officer must greet every plane landing at Dover with dead soldiers in its hold. This is because the return of the dead to American soil is viewed as more than just another leg in their journey; it also serves to remind the corps of generals of the personal cost of war.

It had been Formica's turn on that Thursday evening, May 24, when a Boeing 747 — chartered by Transportation Command from an Oregon-based freight company named Evergreen International Aviation, and bearing the remains of Sergeant Joe Montgomery — taxied across the tarmac at Dover. This particular 747, tail number N470EV, was sometimes converted into a supertanker, dropping thousands of gallons of retardant onto forest fires. But when it touched down a little after 5:30 p.m., just a bit more than forty-eight hours after Sergeant Montgomery had been killed, it carried only the bodies of fourteen men in flag-draped aluminum transfer cases. Thirteen of them had been flown separately out of Iraq by Air Force cargo planes — including Sergeant Montgomery, whose point of departure was Baghdad International Airport — and assembled at Camp Wolf in Kuwait. Ten of them were soldiers; two were marines; one was classified as "disassociated portions" — incomplete remains that were not yet identified. The group was then flown to Ramstein Air Base in Germany, where they were transferred onto the Evergreen jumbo jet and locked to the cargo-hold floor for the flight over the Atlantic Ocean. At Ramstein, the fourteenth case, containing the body of a retired veteran who had died in Europe and was being given passage home, was also loaded on board.

Waiting for the plane were honor guards from the Army, Air Force, and Marines, including Major Larsen, Chaplain Sparks, a representative of the base commander, a Marine colonel, and General Formica. They waited together in the passenger terminal, where volunteers from the local branch of the USO had put out their usual spread of soup and sandwiches and chips; the waiting can weigh on the men and women inside the terminal, rolling in their hands the "incoming sheets," long lists of the dead.

"I remember many nights sitting there with someone from the base, talking about what his religion says to him about all of this," Chaplain Sparks said later, "and maybe there are things that are deeper, not that religion's not important, but maybe there are things that are deeper than that. And I'm born and raised religious, that's my job, that's what I do. But a lot of what religion has to offer doesn't speak very well to fourteen transfer cases. Is that an awful thing to say?"

After the pilots shut down the plane's four huge engines, the K-loader — a large truck with a platform on top that can be raised and lowered like a scissor's lift — pulled up to the cargo door, just behind the wing. On base, the K-loader is called the Red Carpet; a length of red carpet had been rolled across the platform.

The honor guards marched out in order (Army first, because it's the oldest branch of service), followed by the general-officer party, including Formica and Sparks. The Air Force detail had already boarded the plane and prepared the transfer cases, unlocking them from the floor. Now the others followed them into the belly of the jumbo jet.

Sometimes there is a single case waiting there in the semidarkness. The worst planeload Sparks can remember — he has administered to more than seven hundred of these flights — contained the bodies of forty-two men and women, a flying cemetery. "It never becomes old habit," he said. "When I walk up on the back of a plane, it takes my breath away, as much as it ever did."

The Air Force honor guard moved only one case at a time and, as is their protocol, whenever a case was moved, no matter the distance, it was given a three-second salute, present arms. The airmen carried each case onto the Red Carpet, placing them carefully in neat rows of three. When the last case was in place in front of the cargo door, the general-officer party stood at attention before it, and Sparks said a prayer. He writes a different prayer for every flight he meets. In the case of Sergeant Montgomery's return, Sparks wrote the prayer on the incoming sheet that afternoon, during the wait. Now he looked at the cases in their rows and prepared to speak.

Sparks has a beautiful, rich voice, a tenor's voice. On the night when he'd spoken to the forty-two dead, his voice had failed him. "I walked up on the ramp and opened my mouth for the prayer and nothing would come out," he said. "It took some seconds before I could get control to be able to speak at all."

But on this evening, his voice was strong and clear:

"It is the dream of all people that we may live together without fear, without prejudice, without hopelessness. We thank you this night for giving to us these so brave and courageous. We are saddened by the overwhelming and devastating loss of these young men who will now never see the fulfillment of the dream for which they died..."

"We are proud to welcome home these fallen heroes, to share the grief of their families, and to offer our honor and respect.

"Now, as always, we pray for a time when we are not cursed by terrorism and when young men and women do not die in war.

"This we pray in the name of the Prince of Peace.

"Amen."

Formica and the others returned to the ground to watch, but Sparks stayed in the plane, in the empty space. The lift was lowered, and the honor guards took turns carrying the cases off the lift and into a pair of trucks. There was no way for them to know which body was in which case, so the Army might have carried a marine and vice versa; sharing the load was also a practical matter, because the cases can weigh as much as five hundred pounds each. After the first group had been moved — again, one at a time, again saluted — the Air Force detail lifted each remaining case forward. The process was repeated, as it is repeated, exactly, for every flight, until the Red Carpet was empty and the trucks were full.

"This is the most important thing I've ever done," Sparks would say later of his job here. "I may never do anything more important."

Back in the boardroom near his office in the Pentagon, Formica would pause before talking about that day. "This is personal for me," he said. "Every one of these chokes me up. When I'm performing this service, my most conscious thought — especially when that door closes and the truck drives away — I always think about what these families are going through, waiting for their son or daughter. Please tell them that they were welcomed home with dignity and respect. Please let them know that."

Once the trucks were loaded, Sergeant Montgomery and the others were driven away toward the Port Mortuary, where their transfer cases would be carried inside, placed in the refrigerator, and guarded until eight o'clock the following morning, when it was time to go to work.

## [Part Three]

### Forward Operating Base Falcon

Staff Sergeant Terry Slaght sat in a helicopter two days earlier, facing backward, looking down at the body of his friend lying across his boots. He stared at the green Army blanket that had been draped over the body bag and stretcher; the blanket replaced the American flag that had covered Sergeant Montgomery overnight, because it was heavier and wouldn't blow off in the rotor's wash. Slaght is twenty-five, a nice kid from Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, with red hair and oversized features. He had known Monty for a long time, since 2005, when both men were among the first to join Charlie Troop, 1st Squadron, 40th Cavalry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, based at Fort Richardson, Alaska. He had a hard time believing that his friend was the shape under the blanket.

Slaght had been up all night arranging the flight — angel flights, they call them — from the moment he had first heard the letters KIA crackle over his radio at Forward Operating Base Falcon, eight miles outside the Green Zone, in south Baghdad. He had been up late planning the next day's mission, mapping out the path the platoon would walk to the next house, the next palm grove, the next weapons cache. At first, he had heard his men calling for a medevac, urgent surgery, but his stomach turned over when the calls became less urgent and the men said they didn't need a medevac anymore. KIA, they said, and they said it again, KIA, as though they couldn't quite wrap their heads around it.

Then Slaght had found out that it was Monty who was dead, through a kind of radio code: Charlie Echo Mike (for Montgomery), and the last four digits of Sergeant Montgomery's social security number, his battle-roster number. Slaght had pushed through his trembling and made new plans for tomorrow; now they included himself as courier. He'd summoned a pair of Black Hawks — they always fly in pairs — to touch down at Falcon at 0600 and lift him and his friend into the early morning light, dust-filtered and thin.

He hadn't put on the headphones, because he didn't want to listen to the chatter between the pilots and the two gunners perched over his shoulders. He just listened to the thrum of the helicopter, and he stared at the blanket, and he began to feel guilt well up inside of him. Slaght had been promoted while in Iraq, which meant that he was no longer out on hump with the rest of the guys. Instead, he helped direct their footsteps from the relative safety of Falcon, and one of those footsteps had killed Monty. I should have been there, he thought. I should have been out on that road in the tall grass in the dark.

Baghdad's low-rise sprawl opened up before him, the sun rising on this May 23, just about halfway through Charlie Troop's tour in Iraq. It wouldn't take long, maybe fifteen minutes, to reach the tarmac outside the makeshift Mortuary Affairs building, draped in brown camouflage, at Baghdad International Airport. As the helicopters touched down, a single bread truck backed up toward them, its doors open.

Slaght, the helicopter gunners, and a three-man detail from Mortuary Affairs grabbed the stretcher's poles and carried Sergeant Montgomery into the truck. It drove through a rollaway door into the two-room plywood building. After, Slaght sat in the office, waiting for another helicopter to take him back to base, trying not to think about what was being done to his friend on the other side of the wall.

Over there, Sergeant Montgomery's body was examined for distinguishing features to help confirm his identity, and note was taken of the tattoo of an eye on his left forearm; his pockets were cut open to make sure no personal effects had been overlooked; he was zipped back into his body bag, placed in an aluminum transfer case that was stamped HEAD at one end and FOOT at the other, and packed in ice.

Sergeant Montgomery would be in the air to Camp Wolf in Kuwait six hours later; Slaght would wait in the office for more than twelve. Mostly, he watched TV — ESPN was on, beamed via satellite from some distant, make-believe universe — and he watched the day turn into night before he finally got a tap on his shoulder: time to go. The

helicopters dropped soldiers off at bases all over Baghdad, up and down and up again, four or five stops before Slaght was finally back at Falcon. He had been awake for nearly forty hours. He dropped onto his cot, pulled up his blanket, and forced himself to sleep.

**Micah Montgomery**, who had visited his little brother outside Baghdad only the week before — unknowingly posing for their last photographs, his big arm draped around Joey's shoulders — was now among the first to learn he was dead. Micah had been shaken awake in his cot by someone with word from the in-country grapevine. After a few minutes, his shock was pushed aside, at least for the moment, by worry for his mother. He knew it wouldn't be long before two grim strangers, a notification officer and an Army chaplain, would receive their orders and make the short drive north from Fort Knox, through Louisville, to knock on her door. Looking at his watch, Micah subtracted the hours — it was a little after two o'clock in the morning on Wednesday, May 23, in Baghdad, but still Tuesday evening in Scottsburg — and feared that they might arrive in the middle of the night. He imagined Gail standing in the open door in her nightgown and her heart giving out.

Micah decided to call his uncle, Mayor Bill Graham, but couldn't reach him. Next he called his Aunt Vicki, who was just home from work in nearby Sellersberg. It was still light outside.

"Hi, A.V. It's me, Micah."

"I know... Why are you calling here?"

Unlike his brother, Micah rarely called home from Iraq and never called Vicki. Her heart had begun to pound.

"It's about Joey."

"What about Joey? Is everything all right?"

"No," he said.

Then Micah asked Vicki to go to Gail's house — not to tell her, please don't tell her, but to be with her when the soldiers walked up her driveway, up to the little yellow house, past the tree with the two yellow ribbons tied to it.

At Fort Richardson, Alaska, where it was only mid-afternoon, dread suspicions were first raised by a communications blackout at Falcon, which was never good. Word spread through unofficial channels that one of Charlie Troop's wives would be finding out that she was now a widow. As was the practice, women began to gather together so that one of them would not be alone when she found out. Three of the candidate wives — Britany, Tawnya, and Katie — gathered by chance at Missie Montgomery's place, 516A Beluga Avenue. The group of them had formed a kind of surrogate, extended family, first when they were new in Alaska and now in the absence of their husbands. Every Sunday, before the deployment and during, they would get together for cookouts in the courtyard behind Joey and Missie's house. They would rent an inflatable playground for the kids to bounce around in, and they would set up volleyball nets, and they would eat hot dogs and drink beer. Britany, a twenty-eight-year-old from Mississippi with three kids the same ages as Missie's three kids, was especially close to them. "We knew something was wrong," Britany said later. "But we didn't know what or who."

They sent their kids to play at a neighbor's house, sat down in Missie's living room, in a circle, and began an interminable wait, looking at one another and wondering if one of them would need to be caught. They didn't know how the news would travel or how fast: whether the phone would ring with information about another of the wives; whether they would hear crying from a neighbor's yard; whether someone would knock at Missie's door, looking for one of them.

Back in Scottsburg, Vicki pulled up in her truck behind Gail's house. From inside her kitchen, through the small window in the back door, Gail saw her sister get out of her truck, and she saw that Vicki was shaking. Gail opened the door.

"No, no, no, no, no, no..." Gail said, beginning to cry.

Vicki began to cry, too.

"Which one?" Gail asked.

Vicki could only mouth the word: "Joey."

And Gail began to scream, "Not my baby! Not my baby!" Neighbors started coming out onto their front steps, and it wasn't long before phones across Scottsburg began to disturb the early-evening wind-down, at the mayor's office, at the church, and at Ryan Heacock's house, where an ordinary day suddenly ended.

"I heard sooner than I should have," Ryan said later, his cigarette drawing down to his fingers. Too soon, because his first instinct had been to pick up the phone and call Missie, who was still sitting in that circle in her living room.

Her phone rang, and Missie answered.

"Missie," Ryan said, "I'm so sorry."

Then Ryan heard the clatter of the phone on the floor.

Britany picked up the phone and asked Ryan what he knew, which wasn't much. She hung up. The women hugged and cried and began a second round of waiting. Minutes turned to hours, afternoon to evening, and a kind of helplessness set in. There wasn't much to say — what could be said? Someone did the dishes. Someone else did the laundry. The calculations went unspoken, but the women knew that Missie and her kids would be leaving for the funeral, and that the funeral would be in Indiana, which was hotter than Alaska. Britany quietly began digging out

the children's summer clothes.

Around dinnertime, they came, two men from the base, friends of Joey's filling the door. "I can still see those men standing there, every night," Britany said, and she cried, remembering. "Missie, she just put her face into the wall."

After the men had left, friends blocked out the empty spaces in the house and bags were packed. The same sort of gathering was taking place at Gail's house in Scottsburg. People brought chicken dinners wrapped in tinfoil, cases of Diet Coke, cartons of cigarettes. Joey's boyhood friends — Ryan and the rest of "the guys" who had spent so much time on Elm Street; "I raised them all," Gail said — erected a flagpole on her lawn in the dark and roped an American flag halfway up. Soon a small stone bench arrived, and a photograph of Joey, and a Bible, and a wreath, something new for just about every person who stopped by. The house was full to bursting until late that night, when Gail was finally bundled into bed, and everybody else cleared out except for Mindy, who lay awake in the next room.

At four o'clock in the morning, there came the knock at their door.

**Sergeant Joe Montgomery** was riding shotgun earlier that night, May 22, 2007. The platoon was heading in a convoy, six Humvees on a string, from Falcon to Patrol Base Red, a drive that could take anywhere between twenty minutes and forever. To pass the time, Sergeant Montgomery had rigged up his iPod to the headsets that he and his team wore so they could talk over the noise of the engine. Now he cranked up "B.Y.O.B." by System of a Down, its ironically melodic chorus filling the night, lit by only a sliver of moon. *Everybody's going to the party have a real good time.*

A kid from Parker, Colorado, Private Kaylon Ross, twenty years old, was driving the truck. He bounced his head to the music. In the backseat, the platoon leader, Lieutenant Eric Rudberg — twenty-five, a stocky Arizonan who for some reason sounds like he's from Boston, the sort of guy you would want leading you into battle — monitored the radios. The team was rounded out by the gunner, Specialist Ron Gilliland, twenty-three, from Butler, Pennsylvania. Sometimes he shivered uncontrollably, his hands seized by tremors on the grip of the machine gun. But the loud music helped. It gave him something to think about other than snipers shooting at him from rooftops or the truck rolling over a pressure plate and liquid copper darts firing through the floorboards.

Sergeant Montgomery was quieter than usual, perhaps thinking about the conversation he'd just had with his wife and kids, his weekly morning phone call — night for them in Alaska, twelve hours behind. Skyla and Robert got on the line first, as they usually did. This time, Skyla had a question for him. Who knows how a nine-year-old's mind works, when she was going to sleep or out on the swings, but she had been thinking that she would like her name to be Skyla Montgomery from now on. She sounded almost shy when she'd asked her dad whether that would be all right. Sergeant Montgomery had promised that they would sign the papers as soon as he got back from away.

Then he'd asked to speak to Mom. They hadn't been on the phone together long before Missie heard an explosion. That wasn't unusual — explosions interrupted their conversations as often as doorbells — but this blast sounded closer than most.

"Oh, my God, I've got to go," Joey had said, and he'd hung up.

These were always anxious waits. Skyla had filled this one, excited about her new name, until a short e-mail landed. Joey had wanted to let Missie know that everything was all right before he hit the road.

"I'm okay," it read.

Now the trucks turned onto Senators, heading east toward the Tigris River. The route between Falcon and Patrol Base Red was not a straight shot; straight shots were death in Iraq. But driving remained dangerous, because there were only so many roads, and it was easy to predict American traffic. Pack an IED into what looked like a curbstone, wait in the bushes for the convoy to drive by, trip the circuit with a cell phone, and a planeload of dead soldiers would be on its way to Dover.

The music changed up, "Friends in Low Places," by Garth Brooks. The convoy turned right onto Red Wings — on Army maps, the roads in Baghdad's southeast were named after hockey teams. They were approaching the edge of the city, near an affluent collection of Sunni farms stretching between rows of irrigation canals and fish ponds. Rudberg hated the canals, because canals meant bridges, and bridges were too easy to bomb. Charlie Troop had eighty men in it; on a patrol like this, the platoon would be carrying between twenty-two and thirty packs. There just weren't enough eyes or ears between them to cover so much ground. They were too thin.

Red Wings started straight and hard-topped, but as it neared Patrol Base Red, the road began to buckle and turn to gravel and then dirt. This was the most stressful part of the drive; it was easier to hide things in dirt. The danger was worse in summer, especially on dark nights like tonight — closing in on eleven o'clock, well past curfew — when Iraqis would bed down on their rooftops to find relief from the heat. They would stir and watch the convoy, these families turned into shadows, leaning over the parapets, and it was so hard to know if they had been visited that week by men bearing threats or a small bundle of money, and if now there was a machine-gun nest where their sleeping mats had been.

At last, the Humvees pulled gratefully inside the walls at Patrol Base Red. It was a house, a mansion by Iraqi standards, once owned by a chicken farmer with a penchant for planting IEDs, so the Americans had seized it and made it into an outpost, a fort on the frontier. There were still boot marks on the front door from the first raid. Since then, the troop had built rings of defenses around it, spools of wire and T-walls, concrete slabs fifteen feet high and eight feet wide. Every window had been filled with sandbags, and firing positions on the roof were permanently manned. The platoons would cycle through in shifts: three or four days guarding the house, sleeping on the cots upstairs; three or four days, like today, shuttling between Falcon and Patrol Base Red before heading out on patrol; and then maybe two days of semirest back at Falcon, cleaning weapons and trucks, getting some proper sleep in air-conditioned barracks. The house had marble floors and chandeliers and a big kitchen with a microwave; whenever

Sergeant Montgomery was posted here, he would zap the bags of popcorn that Gail sent him by the boxful and share them with the boys. It would have been all right if the generator had given off a bit more juice and there had been running water. Its absence meant that the platoon shared buckets for their bathroom, which meant that house duty sucked, but it sucked less than patrol. At least here there were walls.

Captain Derrick Goodwin — a big guy, African-American, with a deep voice, who had taken over command of the troop only the week before — went inside the house with Rudberg to look at the maps on the wall and confirm the night's mission. In a few minutes, they came back out and briefed the platoon. While he listened, Sergeant Montgomery took a dip from his can of Copenhagen.

"If he didn't have Copenhagen, I don't think he would go on the mission," Ross said later.

They had a pretty good hump ahead of them that night, five clicks, there and back, nearly two hours each way. An informant had told them they should raid a farm out there, down a track called Compound Road; there were rumors that the farmer had a cache of weapons in his palm grove. The platoon would walk out, shake down the house and the trees, and walk back by early morning, before light.

Rudberg's custom was to rotate the squads — a platoon consists of three nine-man squads — through lead position. Tonight, it was first squad's turn, Sergeant Montgomery's squad. He volunteered, as he often did, to walk point. Ross would take second position; Gilliland would take third. Behind them were a couple more regulars — Specialist Jarod Meeks, a lanky twenty-two-year-old from Spanaway, Washington, and Specialist Mark Leland, a twenty-five-year-old Baptist from South Bend, Indiana. In the past week, Leland had pulled the guys aside, in ones and twos, and apologized to them for his letting Iraq change him. He had let himself curse and tell rude jokes, and now that part of his war was over. "I was being challenged in my faith, just because of the situation we were in," he said later. "I remember talking to Monty about it. He told me that he wasn't sure exactly what he believed, but he knew he believed in God."

Now they moved out, led by Sergeant Montgomery, outside the walls and down the road. The boys behind him, especially Ross and Gilliland, ribbed Monty all the time about his age. Only in the Army could a twenty-nine-year-old man be called Gramps, Father Time, Skeletor. But it was good-natured ribbing, because those boys loved him. They loved him because he was first in that line, and if he was scared — and he was almost certainly scared — he never let them see it. He told his family back home that he was scared only of the big camel spiders that scurried behind the men, keeping in their shadows for the extra degree of cool. He tried to ignore the sound of their chase, his boots crunching on the gravel, spitting out juice from his dip.

The men wore night-vision goggles, their nogs, over one eye, everything cast in a ghostly green. They had to choose whether to focus them near or far; most of the men chose to see on down the road rather than their feet. They didn't speak much, except for the occasional crackle over the radio. With about thirty feet between each man, they stretched in a great long line through the night. Goodwin, at the back of the line, was probably six hundred feet from Sergeant Montgomery. They snaked like that, between the farms and over the bridges, cursing under their breath at the incessant barking of dogs. The dogs were like spotlights in a prison yard. Plenty of American soldiers had died because dogs had betrayed their position.

They walked out of the houses and into the fields. There were no dogs here, and the barking stopped. About three clicks out from Patrol Base Red, beside them rose the ruins of an ADA, an air defense artillery site, concrete bunkers covered with steep mounds of earth. Saddam had built them everywhere around Baghdad; this one, like most of them, had been bombed into craters during the initial strike. Recently, though, there had been reports that insurgents had returned here to train. Weeks earlier, a car riddled with bullets, as though it had been used for target practice, had been pulled out from it. Now some of the men felt as though they were being watched.

Rudberg, who was tenth in line, called Sergeant Montgomery on the radio. They identified themselves by numbers. Sergeant Montgomery was number 11. "Hey, 11, take your time," Rudberg said. "We're in no rush."

Sergeant Montgomery had built a gap between himself and Ross. It closed a little when they rounded a bend. The track was soft here, loose dirt, bordered on either side by thick, waist-high grass. There was only one path to take, one foot in front of the other.

Two sounds broke open the night:

*Crack*, then BOOM.

It was impossibly loud, "the loudest noise I've ever heard in my life," Goodwin said.

Ross did a backflip, landing on his face. Gilliland was knocked down, too. The rest of the men dropped to the dirt and scattered to the sides of the path. In front of them, a plume of black smoke billowed, darker than the dark. It rose out of a great cloud of dust.

Ross couldn't hear Gilliland yelling at him, "Ross, are you hit? Ross, Ross!"

He staggered to his feet, his ears blasted past ringing, dirt still raining down on his shoulders. His pants were covered in blood. Gilliland thought it was Ross who'd been hurt. It wasn't.

"Then you two started screaming his name," Meeks recalled later.

"We couldn't see Monty," Ross said.

They wanted to rush forward, but IEDs were often planted in clusters, and they couldn't see anything in the dust, especially through their night vision. It was just so much green smoke.

Near the back of the line, the platoon sergeant, Bob Bostick, a skinny thirty-four-year-old Texan, was calling for Sergeant Montgomery on the radio, trying to find out what happened: "Hey, hey, come in 11, come in."

Rudberg now moved forward. He found Ross and Gilliland disoriented. "We can't find Monty," they said. Rudberg had the rest of the squad take defensive positions on either side of the path, scouting for a triggerman. He also called on the radio for the medic, who was near the back of the line. They still couldn't see for shit, but they pushed into the cloud.

Rudberg fell into the crater, dead center of the path. Gilliland fell into it, too, and he landed on Sergeant Montgomery's rifle, an M4, stripped down by the force of the blast. "That's when I got really scared," he said.

They looked all around for Sergeant Montgomery. Gilliland finally saw what he thought was a pile of dirt from the crater bending down the tall grass, about twenty feet left of the path. He reached down blindly to touch it and grabbed hold of what felt like a uniform. He adjusted his nogs, fumbling with the dials, so that he could see close-up.

That's when he saw Sergeant Montgomery. His eyes were open, but his body stopped at the waist.

"I knew he was gone," Gilliland said.

Ross staggered over and saw him, too. "There was nothing we could do. We just knew."

"I remember seeing his blank stare," Rudberg said. "It's all so surreal, too, because you have to see it with that fucking night vision."

Rudberg radioed Bostick, "It doesn't look good." He also radioed Goodwin, who radioed Patrol Base Red and then Falcon. Some of the men, including Leland, had been busy clearing a landing zone for a medevac in a nearby field, hoping somehow that Sergeant Montgomery was only hurt. Now Leland saw Goodwin walk by, saying, "KIA, KIA" into his radio to Staff Sergeant Slaght, and they stopped clearing the field.

They decided they would take turns carrying Sergeant Montgomery out. Rudberg had a poleless litter in his pack — a nylon sheet with handles, room for three carriers on each side — and together the men gathered what they could of Sergeant Montgomery and his belongings. They found his helmet, his nogs, his gun, his pack. But they never found all of him. "We didn't find his ring, either," Gilliland remembered. They laid everything on top of the litter, and they began to push out of the grass.

They stayed off the path, and they all took turns carrying the litter, including Ross, the closest of them to the blast. Everyone kept asking him if he was really all right. "It was such a big explosion, and I didn't get a single scratch," he said. "My ears really hurt, but no one believed me when I said I was okay."

The handles of the litter dug into their hands. Only Gilliland refused to be spelled. "I never let go of the litter," he said. "I just couldn't do it."

When he wasn't carrying Sergeant Montgomery, Ross put his arm around his friend. "We just kept walking," he said.

No one spoke.

Some of them were in shock.

All of them were covered in blood.

The platoon carried him like that for an hour or so, a couple of kilometers back up the track and out of the fields. About a click from Patrol Base Red, in sight of the house, one of the sniper teams met them on the road with a Humvee. They placed Sergeant Montgomery on the hood of the truck, and they drove him slowly down the road, the platoon walking flank until they were back inside the walls.

The medic later couldn't bring himself to talk about what happened next, but this is what happened next: He went through Sergeant Montgomery's pockets, and he went through his person, removing anything he thought the family might want. He found Sergeant Montgomery's wallet, his ID card, his pack of Marlboro Lights and his Copenhagen, and the laminated photographs of Missie and the kids that he kept tucked inside his helmet. The medic put them all in a bag, and then he put Sergeant Montgomery in a different bag, black with a long zipper. And then the snipers draped an American flag over it, and they placed it on a stretcher, and they laid it across the backseat of Bostick's truck.

"It felt like time was standing still," Bostick remembered. On the short, silent drive back to Falcon, in the middle of the convoy of six trucks, his mind turned to Micah Montgomery. Bostick had known him for a while, and when he had handpicked Joey Montgomery for Charlie Troop, Bostick had made a promise to his friend. "I told Micah then, I'll take care of your brother. So I had a lot of questions that night. I just kept thinking, Did this really happen? What about his wife? What about his children? What do I say to a guy who's just lost his brother?"

Bostick didn't get a chance to break the news to Micah; someone else did, and Micah was on a plane home to Scottsburg before they could talk.

The two of them didn't speak, in fact, until that July, two months after Sergeant Montgomery's death, when Bostick's own brother, Major Tom Bostick, was killed in Afghanistan. He was thirty-seven years old, with a wife and two children.

The platoon finally drove through the gates at Falcon. It was nearly two o'clock in the morning. The rest of the troop had heard, been rousted out of their cots, and they stood in straight lines, many of them in tears, and they saluted the men in the trucks.



"That's when I lost it," Meeks said.

"That's when most of us broke down," Ross said. "I've never been that emotional in my entire life."

Sergeant Montgomery was carried into the base's utilitarian morgue, laid on a rough table at the front of it. Chaplain Jay Tobin waited there. He is a big man, thirty-seven, with short black hair and round cheeks. He asked to be alone with the base doctor. He unzipped the bag, and he saw Sergeant Montgomery's blank stare, and he nodded. "This is Sergeant Robert Joe Montgomery," he said, and the doctor wrote on some papers, and then Tobin zipped up the bag and called in the platoon, red-eyed, still in their bloodstained uniforms.


He led them in a prayer. The boys bowed their heads and they cried and they prayed for Sergeant Montgomery and for his family. Leland prayed especially hard. He thanked God that he had said sorry to Sergeant Montgomery when he did.

Not many of them could sleep that night. Most of them met outside, at a burn barrel. They threw their uniforms into the fire, and they watched them burn.

**The last time the platoon** saw Sergeant Montgomery was later that morning, at first light. It was Wednesday, May 23. They all came out of their barracks to see the helicopters land. And these sleepless young men, from Colorado, from Pennsylvania, from Washington, they took hold of the poles of the stretcher, three on each side, with their friend from Indiana between them, zipped up inside a black bag tucked under a green Army blanket, and they carried him into one of the Black Hawks, and they watched them lift off into the dawn and dust, and they saluted then, saluted the start of one journey and the end of another, holding their salutes all the while as the birds flew away, until they were gone over the horizon.

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