

SOLDIER DEAD

HOW WE RECOVER, IDENTIFY, BURY,
& HONOR OUR MILITARY FALLEN

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Why It Matters

If anything is sacred, the human body is sacred...

—Walt Whitman, “I Sing the Body Electric”

WHEN THE ENGINES OF MARS LEAVE THE BATTLEFIELD, they leave behind vivid reminders of the struggle that took place: scarred land, destroyed and discarded equipment, and the corpses of those who fought and died—millions in the wars of the twentieth century alone.

During the 1900s, more than 600,000 Americans died in military service. If broadcast one portrait per second on TV, they would run for 7 complete days. The number of dead for some other countries is much greater. In World War I, Russia lost 1.7 million men, Germany 1.8 million, Britain almost 1 million, and France 1.4 million. In World War II, the Soviet Union lost 11 million military men and women, Germany 3.2 million, Britain 264,000, and France 213,000.

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These numbers are overwhelming. In the best of times, armies are able to claim their dead and bury them in military cemeteries near the battle sites or eventually transport them home to their families. At the other extreme, when fighting surges back and forth across the battlefield and extends for protracted periods, the combatants have no choice but to live among the unburied dead, often keeping such close company with corpses as civilians could never envision, even in their worst nightmares.

As England's King George V stated eloquently in 1922 at Flanders, "We can truly say that the whole circuit of the earth is girdled with the graves of our dead." In simple physical terms, these dead are nothing more than a mixture of commonly found chemicals and minerals, organic and inorganic. Left to decompose, a body soon returns to the soil, leaving little trace of its physical existence. But the body of a slain soldier holds significance beyond its corporeal properties. Men who refuse to jeopardize their safety for inanimate objects willingly do so to retrieve their fallen comrades, and our government, which performs cost-benefit studies on medical care for the living, makes extraordinary efforts to retrieve, identify, and bury the remains of members of its Armed Forces.

Why do we spend enormous resources and even incur additional deaths to recover the bodies of our military fallen? Off-the-shelf explanations that we do so to give bereaved family members closure or that we have a duty to the dead to bury them at home do little justice to the complex issues underlying this process, and even less to those who shoulder the responsibility of carrying it out. To assess why and how we undertake the mission of retrieving soldiers' remains, even while battle continues, it is necessary to consider not only practical reasons but also those that lie at deeper levels.

Forensic Reasons

Morticians use thread to seal the lips of a corpse. Yet, even with sealed lips, the dead can speak, for their bodies bear evidence available to those who know how to read the signs. Military persons do not usually die in their sleep; they die horribly, violently, and their remains provide important information about the nature and circumstances of their end. Hallam, Hockey, and Howarth, in *Beyond the Body: Death and Social Identity*, state: "The knowledge ceded by the dead body may not only explain the death and the final stages of the deceased person's life, it may also contain signs of, and clues to another act." ¹ Forensic investigation can reveal if the soldier died from outlawed weapons such as biological or chemical agents, torture, or friendly fire; was executed; or died from malnutrition and/or disease.

During World War II, the Surgeon General, obviously interested in the mechanistic effects of weapons of war on soldiers, said, "the Medical Department is especially interested in ascertaining... the type and character of the fatal wound." ²



1.1 Skull from a Confederate soldier showing a fatal bullet hole. Photograph by the Army Medical Museum, Army Medical Museum, Armed Forces Institute of Pathology

The desire for battlefield forensic evidence was conveyed to the soldiers in the field. Sgt. Charles D. Butte (now Lt. Col.-Retired) served with the 603rd Quartermaster Graves Registration Company in Europe. He wrote:

The Medics first had to ensure the individual was indeed deceased, then determine the type of wound that killed him. We were told, this was important for history in determining

the tactics, type of weapons, and armament which were most lethal in battle.³

In the aftermath of the war, the American Graves Registration Command sent personnel to “a highly specialized course designed to train identification technicians in detecting evidence of criminal violence left behind on skeletal parts.” If the Graves Registration workers examined remains that bore such marks, they were to forward them to the War Crimes Commission.⁴

Perhaps the best-known use of forensics during World War II occurred during the investigation of the Malmedy Massacre. On December 17, 1944, during the Battle of the Bulge, the Army’s Battery B of the 285th Field Artillery Observation Battalion encountered the German 1st SS Panzer Division at the Baugnez crossroads. The fight was brief and one-sided, and approximately 100 men—the actual number is unknown—of Battery B laid down their rifles and surrendered.

The SS troops herded the Americans into a field and guarded them with armored vehicles and foot soldiers. Stories differ as to what triggered the massacre, but there is no doubt that the GIs were gunned down by automatic weapon and small arms fire. After the initial fusillade, German troopers roamed through the field, shooting or bludgeoning all who showed any signs of life.

A few captives bolted when the shooting started, but most were cut down as they ran. Those who made it to nearby buildings fared little better: the Germans set fire to the shelters and shot the Americans as they fled the flames. The only survivors were those who made it to the woods beyond the field, a few who were shot and feigned death, and two who had not surrendered after the initial firefight.

U.S. leaders suspected before the day was out that the Germans had committed an atrocity, but it was not until almost a month later, on January 13, 1945, that the area was recaptured. The 3060th Quartermaster Graves Registration Service (GRS) Company was given the assignment of recovering, identifying, and processing the remains. The company began on January 14 and finished its initial recovery operation by late January 15. Enemy artillery fire, which had mangled some remains, complicated their efforts, as did heavy snowfall. A platoon from the 291st Engineer Battalion assisted in the search by using mine detectors to locate the metal gear on soldiers buried in the snow. Eventually, over the next four months, twelve more remains were found in the immediate vicinity.

Once the bodies were recovered, they were moved to a railway building several hundred yards from the massacre site. There, they were identified and autopsied to determine the cause of death, in order to rule out the possibility that the soldiers had died from normal combat injuries. The 72 autopsies revealed that at least 20 men had been shot in the head at close range and had associated powder burns, 20 had small-caliber bullet wounds to the head without powder burns,



1.2 Remains of World War II U.S. bomber crewmember are examined; bullet hole in head is noted. Reports were that the crew was executed. Pvt. J. Keen. U.S. Army Signal Corps, National Archives & Records Administration

and another 10 had “fatal crushing or blunt trauma injuries, most likely from a German rifle butt.”⁵

In a more recent example of the need to recover bodies to determine if the servicepersons were killed in a manner that could have been the result of torture or an execution, the Criminal Investigation Division (CID) of the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology (AFIP) opened an investigation into the deaths of Sgt. George Buggs and PFC Edward Anguiano, both of whom died during the 507th Maintenance Company’s ill-fated journey through An Nasiriyah, Iraq, on March 23, 2003, during Operation Iraqi Freedom. The 507th is undoubtedly better known for being Private Jessica Lynch’s unit than for two of its members dying in suspicious circumstances.

In an act considered by many to be contrary to Geneva Convention rules for prisoners of war, the bodies of five dead members of the 507th were shown on Iraqi television, and MSNBC reported, “Defense Officials who have viewed the tape [of 507th dead] have said privately that several of the bodies had execution-style gunshot wounds to their heads.”⁶ Buggs’s remains were found at the site of

Jessica Lynch's rescue; Anguiano's remains were found nearly a month later near his stripped and abandoned truck.⁷

Other investigations into the attack on and later treatment of members of the 507th led to the determination that Sgt. Donald Walters had been captured alive and "was held separately from his fellow soldiers and killed while in custody." Walters, who was posthumously awarded the Silver Star for gallantry, the POW medal, the Bronze Star, and a Purple Heart, died from two gunshot wounds to the back.⁸ (While further war crimes investigation continues, it is interesting to note that it took more than a year for the Army to release the manner of Walters's death, though the forensic results must have been known almost immediately after the autopsy and examination of the site where Walters was held.)

Without a system in place to recover bodies, identify them, and examine them, it is possible that the Malmedy Massacre and any potential mistreatment of U.S. POWs during Operation Iraqi Freedom—and subsequent occupation activity—would have been overlooked during the normal course of battle.



1.3 U.S. soldier executed during the Korean War. Sgt. Wyatt.
U.S. Army Photo: National Archives & Records Administration



1.4 A U.S. soldier stands duty next to a dead Japanese counterpart.
Cpl. Schwartz. National Archives & Records Administration

The use of forensic science to provide information about military deaths is important enough to warrant inclusion in the U.S. Code Title 10, Subtitle A—General Military Law, Part II—Personnel, Chapter 75—Deceased Personnel, Subchapter I—Death Investigations, Sec. 1471—Forensic Pathology Investigations. This law authorizes the Armed Forces Medical Examiner and commanders to “conduct a forensic pathology investigation to determine the cause or manner of death of a deceased person.”

Health Reasons

Soldiers live and fight in an environment that is not only deadly but also filthy. They go weeks without bathing; bathroom sanitation is accomplished by shoveling feces out of foxholes; food is cold; clean water is often scarce; protection from the weather is scant; and sleep is sketchy—all conditions that are inimical to good health. It is like living in the middle of a garbage dump, and attempting to survive constant enemy attacks. Improving a soldier’s fighting conditions cannot be thought of as making the environment healthy and pleasant. Rather, it often simply makes the situation more tolerable. Knowing that battles are often won by the army that stays healthy, or at least is less sick than the enemy, commanders

want the dead removed from the battlefield for sanitation purposes. This has been achieved with more or less success, depending in large part upon circumstances peculiar to specific battles.

During World War I, the lines of trenches were relatively static and stretched from Switzerland to the English Channel. Soldiers struggled to survive in unimaginable conditions, severely exacerbated by the presence of perhaps one million unburied soldiers, friend and foe, in No Man's Land. During artillery barrages, the ground would be churned and the dead would be buried, disinterred, and reburied, with bodies torn to pieces and mixed together as though run through a giant blender.⁹

Given the stationary lines, the inability to retrieve remains, and the ever-growing casualties from the senseless charges directly into withering fire, soldiers lived with the "persistent presence of the dead."¹⁰ A French soldier who fought at Verdun said, "We all had on us the stench of dead bodies. The bread we ate, the stagnant water we drank, everything we touched had a rotten smell, owing to the fact that the earth around us was literally stuffed with corpses."¹¹

Morale

To fight effectively, soldiers must have leadership, supplies, and *esprit de corps*. Morale is difficult to measure, yet is an indisputably necessary component in any successful endeavor. It is maintained, in part, by providing soldiers with as many amenities as the situation allows, even if nothing more than hot coffee and a hot meal once every two or three weeks. Morale is one product of the passionate bond that soldiers form with their fellows, a bond rarely experienced in civilian life. Combining the camaraderie of a football team, the dedication to task accomplishment of a dot-com startup workgroup, the sense of separation of a cult, the unit preservation of a police department, and the love of a family will yield a cohesive force that still falls short of the ties that bind military members together.

It is difficult for civilians to understand this connection in which a man's life depends on his buddy and vice versa. Imagine sharing a muddy hole with someone who also has been deprived of sleep, food, and water. Your buddy may be suffering from intestinal diseases, infected feet, and skin ulcers. He is as exhausted as you are. Now imagine going to sleep, entrusting your life to that person, who stays awake to watch for the enemy creeping through the darkness. You could only do that if there were a bond of blood between you. E. B. Sledge, a Marine mortarman who fought in World War II, said, "I reached the state where I would awake abruptly from my semi-sleep, and if the area was lit up, note with confidence my buddy scanning the terrain for any hostile sign."¹²

Considering the horrid conditions of war, one wonders why soldiers stay and fight at all. One reason is that they have pledged themselves to their comrades-in-arms. Johnie Webb, Deputy Director at the U.S. Army Central Identification

Laboratory Hawaii (CILHI), said, “When you look at why soldiers fight, it’s not necessarily for the nation, but it’s for that buddy of theirs that’s standing next to them in that fighting position.”¹³

Marine Lt. Philip Caputo, author of *A Rumor of War*, said that the sense of brotherhood was the one honorable aspect of a “monstrous” conflict. He described his experience in Vietnam thus: “I have also attempted to describe the intimacy of life in the infantry battalions, where the communion between men is as profound as any between lovers. Actually, it is more so.”¹⁴

Wilfred Owen, serving with the British in World War I, expressed the same sentiment in his poem “Apologia pro Poemate Meo”:

I have made fellowships—
Untold of happy lovers in old song.
For love is not the binding of fair lips
With the soft silk eyes that look and long,
By Joy, whose ribbons slips,—
But wound with war’s hard wire whose stakes
 are strong;
Bound with the bandage of the arm that drips;
Knit in the webbing of the rifle-thong.

Understanding of the closeness that builds between soldiers from the very first day of training makes clear why they will risk it all to recover the bodies of their comrades, even losing the gamble at times. Caputo said, “Two friends of mine died trying to save the corpses of their men from the battlefield.”¹⁵

Often, recovery proves to be impossible. Sledge described the Verdun-like conditions of the fighting at Half Moon Hill in southern Okinawa during World War II. Half Moon Hill was a ridgeline near the Japanese defense fortifications of Shuri Ridge, and it was littered with Marine and Japanese dead. Since the area was contested and subject to constant enemy fire, it was impossible to remove the bodies. The ground was soaked from rain and the footing treacherous. Sledge said:

If a Marine slipped and slid down the back slope of the muddy ridge, he was apt to reach the bottom vomiting. I saw more than one man lose his footing and slip and slide all the way to the bottom only to stand up horror-stricken as he watched in disbelief while fat maggots tumbled out of his muddy dungaree pockets, cartridge belt, legging lacings, and the like.¹⁶

Sledge, like millions of other soldiers who have fought in hellish conditions, could only endure. Yet, even though he was in daily combat, he felt the need to attend to the bodies of his comrades. At night, the Marines would fire star shells and flares, which cast a ghoulis pall over an already ghastly scene. One man in the foxhole would keep watch while the other tried to get whatever little sleep was possible. Sledge wrote about waking during the night and looking across the surreal landscape:

I imagined Marine dead had risen up and were moving silently about the area.... The pattern was always the same. The dead got up slowly out of their waterlogged craters or off the mud and, with stooped shoulders and dragging feet, wandered around aimlessly, their lips moving as though trying to tell me something.... They seemed agonized by pain and despair. I felt they were asking me for help. The most horrible thing was that I felt unable to aid them.¹⁷

When conditions allow and recovery is merely dangerous, instead of suicidal as at Half Moon Hill, soldiers take care of their dead. In the titanic struggle for Iwo Jima, though under constant attack, “In the midst of the battle the Marines buried their dead.”¹⁸

Soldiers have a compelling need to address the concerns of their fallen comrades. If they have to bury them on or near the battlefield, they do so with much care and compassion. Richard Holmes, in *Acts of War: The Behavior of Men in Battle*, described it well: “Proper burial of the dead, accompanied by a degree of formalised mourning, is as necessary for those who die in battle as it is for those who perish in more peaceful circumstances. Having some sort of focus for mourning is useful for the dead soldier’s comrades.”¹⁹

While it is doubtful that proper burial is necessary for the dead themselves, abundant evidence demonstrates its importance to the living. The funeral, however simple, helps to dispel the wanton randomness of death in battle, and the performance of even simple rites helps the soldiers make contact with a reality they have left behind and hope to regain.²⁰ In somewhat more sociologically defined terms, the “unfinished bodies”—the dead for whom bereaved/survivors have not been able to provide customary rites—“haunt the imaginations of survivors... family and friends may be dogged by a fear that the dead and decomposing body will return, uninvited.”²¹

Soldiers take particular pains to provide whatever dignity they can for their dead. During the World War II fighting in Italy, casualties were sometimes brought down from the mountains on mules and laid out in front of headquarters.

One of the dead was Capt. Henry T. Waskow, from Belton, Texas. He was well liked and respected, a valuable combination for an officer, and his death greatly saddened his men. Slowly they filed by his body to pay their respects. One infantryman said, "I sure am sorry, sir." Another said nothing but held Waskow's hand for five minutes; then: "He reached up and gently straightened the points of the captain's shirt collar, and then he sort of rearranged the tattered edges of his uniform around the wound."²²

Holmes offers several accounts of the care given to burial of fellow soldiers. Lance-Corporal Harold Chapin sent a letter to his wife detailing how they buried two men in May 1915. He described the graves as "level," "rectangular," and "parallel." Another war later, Brigadier Lord Lovat was touched by a burial in a Normandy orchard: "There was a tenderness under the apple trees as powder-grimed officers and men brought in the dead; a tenderness for lost comrades, who had fought together so often and so well, that went beyond reverence and compassion."²³

James Patrick Shenton, medic in World War II, had the duty of cleaning, dressing, and otherwise preparing remains for transfer out of field hospitals. "We cleaned them, put on new uniforms, and tried to make them look as normal as possible."²⁴



1.5 Marines soldier on past the grave of a comrade who died at Iwo Jima.
Pfc. Charlie Jones. National Archives & Records Administration



1.6 Simple grave side services being held by two soldiers, World War I.
Lt. Wm. Fox, S.C., National Archives & Records Administration

Because soldiers feel honor bound to take care of the bodies of their buddies by recovering, cleaning, restoring some semblance of order to, and then burying them, a corollary is that they do not want the bodies to fall into the hands of the enemy. The duty to care for fallen comrades is not a military tradition that has passed into the annals of history books; it is still very much a force that motivates soldiers today. During the ill-fated raid on General Adid's headquarters in Mogadishu, Somalia on October 3, 1993, U.S. Army Rangers and Delta Force operators became engaged in a fierce firefight in which 18 were killed and more than 70 injured. The mission went wrong early on and took a decided turn for the worst when a Blackhawk helicopter was shot down. A rescue force was sent in after the pilots, with the result that an increasing number of men were pinned down, injured, and killed, resulting in the commitment of even more men. At one point, Specialist Phil Lepre and others dragged the body of Private James Martin into an alley and then took cover in a building. Lepre noticed that Martin's genitals were exposed—because of the heat, few soldiers wore underwear. With bullets striking all around, Lepre ran into the alley and tried to tug Martin's pants up.²⁵

After the battle, Marine General William F. Garrison sent a handwritten letter to President Clinton, listing in outline form points about what went wrong during the raid. Point 10 was: "Rangers on 1st crash site were not pinned down. They could



1.7 Marine Colonel Francis I. Fenton prays at the foot of his son's grave on Okinawa. Pfc. Mike Fenton, 19, was killed during a Japanese counterattack on the road to Shuri. T.Sgt. Glenn A. Fitzgerald. National Archives & Records Administration

have fought their way out. Our creed would not allow us to leave the body of the pilot pinned in the wreckage.”²⁶

There are many controversial issues about this battle and General Garrison's letter. Did the soldiers know the pilot of the helicopter was dead or not? Could they have fought their way out had they attempted to do so without trying to rescue/recover the pilot? In discussing morale, bonding, and recovery, these questions are irrelevant; what is important is that the commanding general wrote of a “creed” of not leaving a fellow soldier's body in enemy hands.

This bond among a “Band of Brothers”²⁷ is not unique to our time or culture, or even to actual events. The strong desire to retain possession of the remains of dead comrades is reflected in classical mythology. In *The Iliad*, Patroclus kills Hector's chariot driver, Cebriones, and the two of them fight over the body “like a couple of lions on the mountain heights, each as hungry and high-mettled as the other, disputing the dead body of a stag.” In the end, after many men on both sides have died, the Achaeans prevail and “dragged the noble Cebriones from among the weapons and the yelling Trojans, and they stripped the armour from his back.”²⁸

And, later, when Patroclus is killed, Menelaus says:

Come forward, each of you, without being named.
And think it infamy
that the dogs of Ilium [Troy] should have Patroclus
for a toy.²⁹

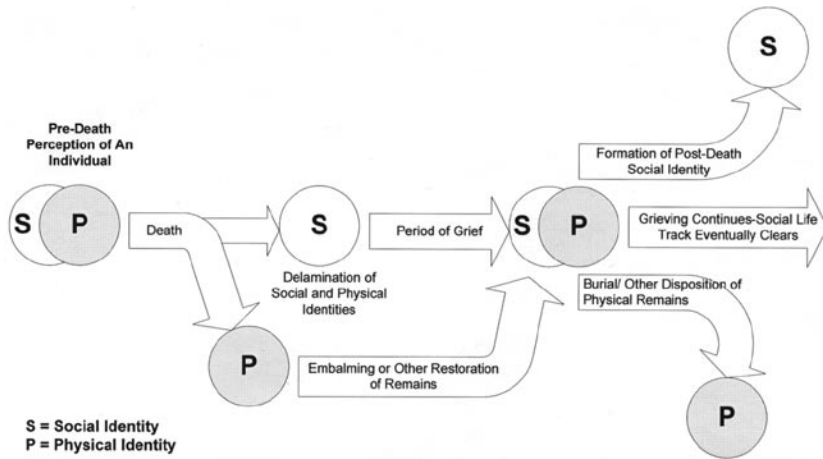
Family

While the soldiers who die have brothers-in-arms who look after them, back home are brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, nephews, nieces, cousins, wives, sons, daughters, fathers, and mothers who may have nothing at all. It is difficult for families to cope with the death of a loved one in any circumstance; it is more difficult when the death is premature and violent, and it is most difficult if they have no body to mourn and bury.³⁰ Soldiers who die are usually young men in the prime of physical life; they are not octogenarians for whom death may be a form of release or awaited transition, and their deaths, because of how, where, and when they die, present special problems.

John D. Canine likens the death of a member of society to the action of a mobile: "When one part of the mobile is moved, all the other parts move in response." The death creates an imbalance that begs for resolution. One obvious reason is that the duties previously performed by the dead must be reassigned among the survivors.³¹ However, there are more obscure forces behind the creation and nature of this imbalance.

When a person is alive, his physical self and his social self proceed on parallel, if not identical, tracks, and the two are often viewed as one. However, at death the tracks begin to diverge, for the body, if not embalmed, will rapidly decay. The social status of the deceased, however, tends to remain with the living for a more extended period of time. Hallam, Hockey, and Howarth describe this state as "socially alive but biologically dead."³² This duality of identity creates a dissonance in the minds of the living, who, in order to achieve "closure," must recognize and accept that the new physical status is irreversible; hence, they must establish a new social identity for the dead that is harmonious with it. To put it another way, thinking of the social and physical selves as occupying the rails of a train track, at death the body is shunted off onto a siding, the grave, while the social self continues to move down the line until it, too, is eventually switched aside. Without this process of resolution, the social self of the dead continues to occupy space on the track that is normally assigned to the living.

Interestingly, the formation of this new social identity is a process that lends itself to considerable interpretation or even outright manipulation. The new



1.8 How social and physical identities are viewed during life, separated upon death, and then temporarily reunited to aid grieving process. Graphic by Cathy Amy

identity that survivors create for the dead is not necessarily a fair representation of the former living person. A martyr is remembered for his ultimate sacrifice, not for his misdeeds. A leader is praised for a few notable accomplishments, not condemned for his inefficacy in reaching a broader range of goals. The eulogy of a man who lived a mean-spirited life may contain references to his ability to provide physical sustenance for his children and his dedication as a worker, while leaving unmentioned his constant infidelity, physical abuse of children, and workaholic lifestyle.

Second Lt. Paul Fussell, serving in Europe in World War II, became an unintended casualty of the creation of a postdeath social identity. Fussell had been severely injured by a shell blast that also killed his sergeant, Edward Hudson. After recovering from his wounds, he was reassigned to his unit but found that he was no longer a member of the close-knit fraternity. He later wrote, “I was obviously not welcome. No one was friendly or comical, and I seemed excluded from intimate group conversations. I had become a pariah, and it hurt.”

For nearly fifty years Fussell was puzzled by his expulsion, until a friend doing archival research in military records came across a document awarding Hudson a posthumous Silver Star. Hudson had performed admirably, as did the others who served the country during that time, but the award cited him for meritorious actions far beyond the norm that he had not done. The men of Fussell’s company had perjured themselves to create this fiction, and they knew that Fussell would have objected and exposed their crime; thus, they sentenced him to exile.³³

Pericles, speaking to the assembled mourners at a public funeral during the Peloponnesian War, said, "Turning to the sons or brothers of the dead, I see an arduous struggle before you. When a man is gone, all are wont to praise him, and should your merit be ever so transcendent, you will still find it difficult not merely to overtake, but even to approach their renown."³⁴

It takes time for the bereaved to form a new social identity for their loved ones and to work through their grief. The formal funeral and burial ceremonies that have evolved attempt to remedy the disjunction between the new physical state and the changing social self and provide the survivors with a process to help them grieve. Jessica Mitford, in *The American Way of Death*, puts forth quite specific criticism of funeral and burial practices in the United States, but formalized funerals do have a place. The Wyoming Funeral Directors Association states that the funeral helps the living by confirming the reality of death, providing an occasion for mourning, giving the community an opportunity to express its respect for the dead, creating a mechanism for the many to share the sorrows of a few, and encouraging the affirmation of faith.³⁵

The process of grieving is highly culturally specific, and in the United States there is a general consensus about the steps required to work toward resolution of the death of a loved one. The first is the acceptance of the reality of death. Obviously, the presence of a properly identified set of remains is final proof.³⁶ J. W. Worden, quoted in *Beyond the Body*, says, "Seeing the body of the deceased helps to bring home the reality and finality of death."³⁷ For those who have lost family members in military service, the recovery and return of the body confirms the death of their loved one. Sgt. Lemuel Herbert of Scranton, Pennsylvania, was taken prisoner during World War II and, according to witnesses, executed. Based on this information, the Army reclassified his status from missing in action (MIA) to killed in action (KIA). In 1988, a farmer near Kommerscheid, Germany was plowing a field and disinterred Herbert's remains. After recovery and subsequent identification, the remains were buried at Arlington Cemetery. A niece, Mae Miller, said, "My grandmother was always hoping and praying that he would be found. Even though he was listed as being killed, without his remains we were always hoping."³⁸

That Herbert's relatives held out hope of his being alive for decades after he was declared KIA is evidence that, without strong proof of death, families almost never give up believing that maybe their missing and presumed dead soldier is still alive. Herbert's case was resolved, in part, because he had died in Europe during World War II, which the United States and its allies won and after which they occupied much of the territory of the defeated powers. In Korea and Southeast Asia, and even in the Gulf War in Iraq, the United States lost control of most of the land, and this set the stage for much of the conflict that has ensued regarding the status of missing U.S. servicemen.

For some survivors, the performance of rituals provides a sense of peace. The *Times-Journal*, Fort Payne, Alabama, carried a particularly poignant story about a family finding the lost grave of a brother killed in World War II. Charles L. Wooten accompanied his mother and her three sisters to France to pay respects to their brother, Charley Edgar “Tont” Summerfield, whose grave had been located after the family had made repeated inquiries to U.S. government offices. “My mother carried a small amount of soil from their homeplace, the farm where the family lived when Tont went off to war in 1943.” Wooten described how they mixed the soil in with the “French turf that held her brother in its eternal grip” and then scooped up some French soil to take back home and mix with the earth covering the graves of his mother and father.³⁹

When Creon, King of Thebes, forbade the burial of Polyneices, leaving his corpse to rot upon the battlefield, Antigone, sister to Polyneices, felt so strongly about giving him some semblance of a burial that she risked her life to do so. Her sister was not willing to help perform the sacred task, prompting Antigone to say, “If thus thou speakest, thou wilt have hatred from me, and will justly be subject to the lasting hatred of the dead.” While performing a simple ceremony of sprinkling the body with dust and pouring wine three times on its head, Antigone was observed violating the king’s decree and was captured and condemned to death. When confronted by Creon, she said, “If I had suffered my mother’s son to lie in death an unburied corpse, that would have grieved me; for this, I am not grieved.” As in much history and classical literature, Antigone’s words about grief ring as true today as they did when written.

Sometimes, the family is prevented from carrying out the wishes of the deceased soldier, which may be for them an essential part of the grieving process. Staff Sgt. Kenneth Hobson II, one of a dozen Americans killed by a terrorist’s bomb at the U.S. embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, told his wife, Debbie, that if he were to die, he wanted his ashes scattered off the coast of Big Sur, near where they had met. California law prohibited the spreading of crematorium remains on land or within three miles of shore, so Debbie reluctantly made alternate plans. “Personally, this is a matter of closure,” she said. “Granting his wish is how I can bring some peace to my shattered life. Knowing that I cannot do this in a personal way without much red tape and expense is agonizing.”⁴⁰

War, unfortunately, is about breaking things and killing people, and the killing often does terrible damage to bodies. Yet, even in the most violent deaths, some elements of the body often remain. As long as there is credible knowledge of the death of a soldier, and especially if it is accompanied by some sort of physical evidence, be it partial remains or personal effects, funeral rites and burial can still be satisfying to the bereaved family. Body parts, even ashes, can substitute for the complete corpse in fulfilling the role assigned to it in our formal social process

regarding death: certification, preparation, eulogy, burial, all of which are designed to give the dead a new social presence.⁴¹ And when remains are nonexistent, cannot be found, or have deteriorated, personal effects can stand in their place and be returned to family members.

Rayford “Scotty” Scott of Oceanside, California was cleaning out his attic with his son, Bryan, when they came across a rubber container that Scott had brought home from the Pacific during World War II. The container held the personal effects of a Japanese lieutenant, Matsubara. Bryan turned the effects over to a fellow teacher and Japanese native, Rie Tsuboi. Tsuboi forwarded the contents to her father in Japan, who, in turn, contacted an agency whose purpose was to find relatives of deceased Japanese soldiers. In time, Scott received a letter from the soldier’s family, who expressed gratitude for the return of Matsubara’s effects and asked for additional details of his death. The return of his personal items and the opportunity to receive more information about his death gave them closure. They asked for the precise location of Matsubara’s burial site, but all Bryan could offer was a map with notations indicating where the battle had occurred.⁴²

More recently, families have been reluctantly accepting symbols in place of the bodies of deceased loved ones. For some, the symbol is actually preferable to remains. A. R. Torres, whose husband died in the World Trade Center attack on September 11, 2001, said, “Having something of my husband’s is even bigger than having body parts, because it’s something you can see when the remains are unviewable.”⁴³

September 11 has, to a certain degree, brought family members into the fraternity that unites soldiers, firemen, and policemen, all of whom view the physical and social body as one. The body is still the person and is important to the eventual formation of a new social identity for the dead.

Political Reasons

Closure is also important for governments. Complex political reasons motivate the federal government’s interest in the return of our Soldier Dead. At a surface level, a soldier’s body is the physical representative of a specific former living person and of all members of the Armed Forces. At a symbolic level, a soldier’s body is the physical representative, or envoy, of his nation and, as such, embodies its ideology, political beliefs, and culture. Anthropologist Mary Douglas (not to be confused with archaeologist and paleontologist Mary Douglas Leakey) “argued that the human body is the most readily available image of a social system.”⁴⁴ How a government views the corpses of its soldiers is indicative of how it views its citizens, and how a government views the corpses of its enemies is likewise a reflection of its attitudes toward the enemy’s social and cultural system.

Soldiers do not want their dead comrades to fall into the hands of the enemy. Nor does our government, although for different reasons. A country may win a battle

or even a war, but if the adversary possesses its soldiers' remains, it is a constant reminder and certain acknowledgment that, at some point, the enemy controlled not only the field of battle but also some of the victor's might.

A perfect example of the power of possession is the footage of dead American soldiers being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu by jeering crowds of Somalians in 1993. While the common military response to the scene was outrage, it is quite likely that most civilians, not experienced or trained in violent affairs, were simply horrified. It is difficult for politicians to make controversial military decisions when the results might create fear and shock among the governed.

More important, though, is that a government desires to keep peace and favor with its citizens, and the days when bodies would remain overseas for years because it was militarily inconvenient to return them are gone. Our efforts to recover and return soldiers who have died indicate that the nation's leaders expend political capital on matters of significance to its people.

Moral Reasons

There is another reason, perhaps the most important one, for the recovery and return of our Soldier Dead. During battle, with all of its grotesque and horrifying aspects, soldiers fight for their lives and for those of their comrades—they do not fight for causes. But it must be remembered that they find themselves in battle conditions because they are serving their country. The cause for which they are sent to fight must be a just and vital one. Recovering the remains of our fallen measures the political and human costs of that cause, creating a ledger against which accounts must be balanced. We must take to heart the words of the soldier, Michael Williams, in Shakespeare's *Henry V*:

But if the cause be not good, the king
himself hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all
those legs and arms and heads, chopped off in
a battle,
shall join together at the latter day and cry all, "We
died at such a place," some swearing, some crying for
a surgeon, some upon their wives left poor behind
them, some upon the debts they owe, some
upon their
children rawly left. I am afeard there are few die well
that die in a battle; for how can they charitably
dispose
of anything when blood is their argument? Now, if

these men do not die well, it will be a black matter for
the king that led them to it. (IV.1.134–145)

Author's Notes

“When I saw the images of the dead Americans, whose charred, lifeless bodies were being dragged through the streets of Fallujah, Iraq, and then hung on a bridge, my mind went back to 1993 [about the mutilations in Somalia].” John Figel’s comments, appearing in the April 2, 2004 issue of *USA TODAY*, reminded me again of the usually undetected layering of physical and social identity, for his words, to be grammatically and technically correct, should have been, “When I saw the images of the charred, lifeless *bodies* of the dead Americans...” Figel’s thoughts were probably shared by many, with few detecting the subtle yet significant implications of his phrasing.

Any attempt to explain why it is important to expend resources on the dead involves the living, for surely the dead care not, and one of my first challenges in writing this book was to try to understand the “whys” of grief recovery and the importance of actual human remains in that process. Omitting the obvious physical/forensic reasons for recovering the dead, we are left with social and religious issues. Our understanding of the workings of the mind and heart has moved from very primitive to very complex theories and practices to help those in mental anguish find some relief. But, despite an ever-improving lexicon and delineation of issues, humans are not inherently any wiser or smarter than 10,000 years ago, and it is possible that what are generally considered to be advances in some fields may hinder our emotional recovery in times of grief.

Therefore, I found myself reaching back in time to find out what has been done with remains in general, and the remains of servicepersons in particular. Then, I had to try to relate these historical elements to recent events to determine if current policies exist simply because they are the most efficient and/or expedient, or because they result from a realization that there was a better way to handle the dead and, had we known and/or been able, we would have instituted these processes earlier.

It is almost a modified “Which came first, the chicken or the egg?” dilemma. A good example is the current funerary practice of third-party undertaking, which often involves embalming, canned music, and a gardenlike cemetery. Has this practice evolved because of consumer demand, or because improvements and the availability of chemicals, refrigeration, and transportation have enabled third parties to “sell” these services, pushing them in the role of supplier?

Clearly, this is a rhetorical question; we can’t go back and figure out what would have happened under different circumstances, and the answer is likely not an all-or-nothing proposition. In the interactive and changing relationship among the

living, the dead, and the body handlers, there is seldom a one-size-fits-all solution—some families need more “proof” than others; some families have different religious beliefs and burial practices. Studying this relationship, I realized that many of our problems stem from the failure to recognize and acknowledge these differences.

But there does seem to be a universal theme that reverberates through the centuries: humans want to see their dead, if at all possible. Only then is the passing of a loved one real. Only then can we say our good-byes and begin to form a new social consciousness for those who have moved to another sphere of existence, or nonexistence, depending upon one’s belief (or lack of belief) in a spiritual afterlife. While Americans have become accustomed to having remains of servicemen killed in action upon which to base an acceptance of the finality of death, other cultures make do with much less physical proof. Andi Wolos, who maintains a POW advocacy Web site, remarked that some of the Vietnamese with whom she had spoken knew their missing father, brother, or husband was dead only because if he were alive, he surely would have returned to their village.

But for someone living in Vietnam, where the fighting took place and which the foreign forces left, it is easy to base an evaluation of life or death on such simple questions. For us, the foreign forces, knowing the status of the missing, especially in the face of evidence of detainment of live and dead U.S. servicepersons, is a problem (covered at length later in this work).

Investigating the ownership of the details of death, I gained a sense of the importance of “ownership” of the bodies of the dead. Different parties at different times exercise power and control over remains, and these parties can and do put their own interests first. I realized that the remains of the dead carry “weight” with the living and that the dead mean different things to different people.

This issue led me to ask, to whom do the dead belong? I found that ownership applied not only to physical remains but also to information about the dead and to their memory. Understanding that there are different types of possession has provided insight into social discourses regarding the dead. Often taking place in a national forum, these discussions assume many shapes, some verbal, many visual. They are ways to acknowledge emotionally that, while you can rebuild a bridge, you can never replace a life.

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