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Symbol of sacrifice

From tattoos to statues, ‘battlefield cross’ is this war’s iconic image of loss

By [C. Mark Brinkley](#) - Staff writer

Boots, rifle, helmet and bayonet.

Taken individually, each piece is just a means to an end, the tools of a deadly trade. But together, they become an iconic representation of the end itself, of paying the ultimate price.

Generally called a “battlefield cross” — and, more recently, a “fallen soldier’s cross” — this time-honored display has become a powerful symbol of loss for a generation of Americans shielded from photos of flag-draped coffins that bear the remains of fallen troops. It is the image of choice for troops seeking memorial tattoos and communities hoping to honor the bravery and sacrifices of friends, neighbors, parents, spouses and children.

Rarely has a single emblem come to mean so much to so many, transcending both time and place. The public’s exposure to traditional images of the nation’s war dead has been limited, and a more powerful symbol has filled the void.

In the process, it has taken on a life of its own.

ICONIC IMAGES

They say a picture is worth a thousand words.

It’s hard to argue otherwise, even for those who pay the bills by slinging words. Writers need room to tell their tales, to set the scene.

To paint the picture, so to speak.

You could imagine, for instance, a craggy mountaintop so tall the clouds seem close enough to taste. Or perhaps that mist is the smoke of battle, as the six military men standing among the rubble and the refuse on that mountaintop seem determined to make a point.

Struggling with a pole twice as long as the tallest man, as the American flag attached to its end fights to unfurl, these troops seem unaware of anyone watching nearby.

Their mission is to raise the flag, and in that moment, it is the only thing that matters.

Yes, you can imagine it. Or you can just see it for yourself. And you have, hundreds of times, as it is arguably the most reproduced photo of all time.

But Joe Rosenthal’s photo of the flag-raising over Iwo Jima isn’t the only image that needs no description.

There’s “the kiss,” the image of an American sailor holding a nurse in a passionate embrace on a busy street on Aug. 14, 1945 — V-J Day. Her back arched, her right leg slightly bent, she appears to have been quite nearly swept off her feet by the man holding her. Who these people are makes no difference — it’s clear there was cause for celebration.

Some images go the other way.

A naked Vietnamese girl fleeing a napalm attack. The execution of a Viet Cong prisoner on the street in Saigon. Black smoke from burning oilfields billowing into the sky, and black-and-white targeting camera shots of smart bombs hitting home.

Then there is the image of the flag-draped casket.

Often considered a blow to both troop morale and public support for the wartime mission, photos of flag-draped coffins have historically been the enduring images associated with war deaths. Before 1991, ceremonies for and media coverage of the returning dead were common.

But a Pentagon policy that took effect early that year ended the traditional ceremonies for fallen troops coming to or leaving U.S. military bases and banned media coverage of arrivals of remains. That policy was randomly enforced for more than a decade, until the war in Iraq brought renewed focus on protecting the privacy of the fallen and their families.

Further still, civilian media embedded with U.S. troops in Iraq were generally required to sign agreements not to publish photos of identifiable dead troops from the field. Some call the crackdown a matter of respect; others don’t see it that way.

“It is the most respectful, memorable moment you’ll ever see in your life,” said Michael Sledge, author of the book “Soldier Dead: How We Recover, Identify, Bury and Honor our Military Fallen,” of the traditional ceremonies for returning remains. “And it’s a moment the nation should be able to share.”

Either way, the move created a space that needed to be filled. Enter the battlefield cross.

STATUES OF LIBERTY

The idea of the battlefield cross possibly dates back to the Civil War, but its origin is hard to trace. That's due largely to military regulation changes over the years regarding the handling of remains.

In World War I, for instance, it was common to bury soldiers where they fell, in makeshift war cemeteries on foreign soil. It wasn't until after that war that Congress enacted a law affording families the opportunity to arrange the return of their loved ones to the U.S., Sledge said.

Battlefield burial services were held throughout World War II, as well, offering troops a variety of ways to memorialize their fallen comrades. Then, in December 1950, the Korean War brought forth the idea of "concurrent return."

"Bring 'em back, instead of burying them overseas," Sledge said. "By that point, we were able to do that."

The change forced the military to explore new options for providing closure to the troops left to continue the fight, leading to battlefield "memorial services" instead of funeral rites. It's likely that the battlefield cross idea began to take hold then, ultimately becoming routine by the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

At Tattoo World in Fayetteville, N.C., where soldiers stationed at nearby Fort Bragg have had ink applied to skin for 20 years, one of the shop's oldest battlefield cross designs dates back to 1992.

"We did one yesterday, I think," said artist Mike Sands, 36, a former Army air traffic controller who has been tattooing for 15 years, six of those at Tattoo World. "Almost always it's been a memory for a buddy."

Sands said the image has been growing in popularity for several years, since the Iraq and Afghanistan wars began.

"It didn't seem like it was very popular before," he said. "It definitely seems to have come from this campaign. They come in and get a battlefield cross, which is a pretty cool image."

For sailor-turned-sculptor [Richard Rist](#), the need for an enduring monument to the war dead became clear in early 2003. His art company had been dealing with requests from friends and family members of troops killed in Afghanistan for some sort of appropriate monument, which didn't exist.

But such custom work can be extremely expensive, so the artist decided to create something on his own and make it available to all comers.

"There's a lot of different things you could choose to make a monument out of," Rist said. "I come from a long history of military service in my family. In the end, I wanted to do something that would be akin to how soldiers memorialized each other."

He chose the battlefield cross because of its growing popularity among the troops, because it is apolitical and expresses neither support for nor condemnation of the war.

"I was really touched by it," Rist said. "These guys are like brothers. When they arrange these things, they all know that the next one might be for them. That's why I chose the image, because it means so much to them."

The idea took hold, as communities, families and veterans organizations across the country began placing orders.

Rist's bronze statue was cast to actual dimensions using real weapons and gear, and sits on a 6-inch base. The cost is \$4,400, which includes free shipping to anywhere in the lower 48 states, discounted to \$3,900 for family members or units dealing with a lost loved one.

So far, Rist has sold more than 100 of his sculptures — including a 7-foot-tall model recently delivered for a memorial in California — and is beginning to take orders for a 22-inch tabletop version that will retail for about \$1,500.

"It's so meaningful to the troops themselves," Rist said. "That's why it means so much to everyone else. You know what it means. It's self-explanatory, at this point. People like images like that."

FINDING CLOSURE

Susan Whitman is one of those people.

The loss of her son-in-law, Army Staff Sgt. Kyle Eggers, hit the family hard. Eggers, 27, of 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division, was killed Dec. 5, 2004, when his vehicle was hit by a roadside bomb in Habaniyah, Iraq.

"My husband, at 66, that was his first tattoo," said Whitman, a city councilwoman in Yakima, Wash. "I'm not a tattoo person, but I like this one. Because it has so much meaning behind it."

Her family participated in the drive to raise money for a battlefield cross memorial

to honor seven local troops killed in the war, and the bronze statue was dedicated just before July 4, 2006. Imagine Whitman's surprise less than four months later when she discovered that the statue had been stolen.

Police quickly caught the two men responsible and discovered that the crime had been a random event, not a war protest. The statue was recovered from the Yakima River, where it had been dumped, and the thieves were sentenced to jail time in April.

In May, the repaired statue was rededicated. Getting it back in place was all that mattered to Whitman and the other local families hit hardest by the war.

"To us, that image is basically the final image we have of Kyle," Whitman said. "I don't take it as a sad thing. To us, it's more of an honor. For Kyle's name to be on that statue here in town, along with six others, is an honor."

But such memorials aren't erected everywhere, which is one reason Sledge hopes to see a return to media coverage of returning remains — to help the nation as a whole understand the losses and cope with the deaths.

"They're being robbed of the chance to commemorate the dead," he said. "That's why people are doing all of these things."

"They need a way to relieve the pressure. We don't have a national process for this."

Whitman, however, hopes the repeated images of flag-draped caskets are in the past.

"I'm glad it went from that to this," Whitman said of the shift from coffins to battlefield crosses. "To me, that was too individualized. For me, now, looking at a flag-draped coffin is still too personal."

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