

SOLDIER DEAD

Prior to WW II, "Soldier Dead" was the term used by the US military to refer to members of all branches of our armed services who had perished while on active duty. When a family member joins the military, especially during peace time there is little thought to that person dying while away from home. During a time of conflict, as a soldier leaves his home in uniform to be deployed, the concern about death is increased. Will we ever see that person alive again? For most people what does not go through their mind as a loved one departs for war, is the possibility that they may never see the body of a dead family member again. Ships go down at sea with all hands on board. Military aircraft crash in a ball of fire and everything is destroyed beyond any recognition. And in the fog of ground warfare the remains of a Soldier Dead can be lost to his country for years if not generations. To this day, occasionally, the remains of Civil War combatants are uncovered during the excavation of a new construction site. Most countries in Europe still have permanent teams established to recover the remains of both WW I and WW II soldiers who in many cases are found where they died so many years ago. I just finished reading the book "Soldier Dead" by Michael Sledge (www.mikesledge.com). It was both an extremely morbid and fascinating learning experience. While on active duty in the Air Force, I served as a casualty notification officer. You are assigned this task for a period of time and must be ready on a 24 hour basis to don your dress blue uniform and make the heart wrenching first notification to the next of kin that a military family member has died on active duty. When you are given this temporary duty you pray that no one dies on your watch. Approaching a home along side a military chaplain with news that will destroy the current way of life for a family, is not something you take lightly. The first thing the family wants to know is how their relative died and when will the body be returned to them for burial. Prior to the Korean War the remains of a Soldier Dead may never have gotten back home to the family. When the remains did return to US soil it was years later. During WW I and WW II the repatriation of Soldier(s) Dead did not occur until after both wars ended. Every war the US has fought in we have re-invented the wheel on how our Soldier Dead were cared for. The US was not prepared to handle the large numbers of our dead in WW II, especially in areas where combat was still actively raging. Many dead were hastily buried where they fell and poorly marked which hindered the recovery of remains later. During the Korean War the policy of "current return" was implemented. This meant that the dead were removed from an active battlefield and sent out of the war zone and back to the US as soon after death as possible. The battlefields of Korea were overrun by the enemy numerous times and the temporary graves of our Soldier Dead were lost in many cases forever to the North Koreans. These captured remains were what drove the "concurrent return" practice that is still in use with the US military. To date many first world nations have not developed a concurrent return policy for their Soldier Dead. The photos and file footage that you have seen of a military funeral for a returned Soldier Dead is only the tip of the iceberg. That funeral is the final physical (not emotional) process for the return and burial of our military dead. We as a nation and as the family members of a Soldier Dead demand an accounting and return of our forever lost military member. There is sadly over 88,000 Soldier(s) Dead who have never been found, identified and/or accounted for since WW II. Even without combat losses, military members die in

peacetime active duty and their remains must be accounted for and returned if possible to the family. "If possible" will always be a factor in the timely (if ever) return of our Soldier Dead. The Department of Defense quietly spends hundreds of millions of dollars in an ongoing effort to locate, identify and repatriate the remains of our fallen Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines. It is the least this nation can do for its Soldier(s) Dead and perhaps more importantly for the surviving family members. We must honor, we must remember, but first we must attend--to our Soldier Dead.

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