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'Sacred Duty:' how the military cares for its fallen

By Amy O'Loughlin / Off the Bookshelf
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"We can truly say that the whole circuit of the earth is girded with the graves of our dead. ... I have many times asked myself whether there can be more potent advocates of peace upon earth through the years to come, than this massed multitude of silent witnesses to the desolation of war."

— King George V. Flanders, Belgium, 1922

"I believe I was chosen to write this book," notes Michael Sledge in the Introduction to his impressive "Soldier Dead: How We Recover, Identify, Bury, and Honor Our Military Fallen." "I woke in the middle of the night and found myself sitting bolt upright in bed. I had not been dreaming ... yet before me in my mind's eye was a blazing vision of a single, solitary soldier lying dead in a foxhole. ... [After this vision] a desire and curiosity were planted in me that I knew would change me forever. The next day I began searching for an answer to the question, what happens to members of the Armed Forces when they die?"

Using official government documents, interviews with military personnel and families who have lost loved ones during America's wars and conflicts, never-before-published photographs and his own insights (which connect the book to current events), Sledge unravels the intricate details of the U.S. military's efforts to retrieve, name and lay to rest its fallen servicemen and women. The historical record of recovering soldiers' remains dates back to the 1800s during the Seminole Indian Wars of Florida. And though these centuries-old

recovery efforts have undergone numerous name and policy changes, the military has always considered the treating of soldier dead as a "sacred duty."

With keen reverence, Sledge reveals the "extraordinary lengths to which we go to care for [our deceased military] — and why we do so." You get a picture of what it was like for World War II soldiers to identify remains, bury them in temporary graves and exhume and prepare them for repatriation or reburial in permanent cemeteries when the United States was losing approximately 500 service personnel on an average daily basis. You meet military personnel whose duty was to retrieve soldier dead during combat, "one of the most heroic and dangerous [recovery operations] ... that poses some of the most challenging questions about American policies, both written and unwritten, because soldiers are often wounded and killed bringing back the dead." You learn about the psychological toll that is exacted on the living when handling the bone fragments, pieces of flesh and decayed skeletons of the dead. You see how the misidentification, misplacement and mishandling of remains — as well as delays in their return to bereaved families — has affected the government's credibility.

Skepticism regarding the government's ability to properly identify and process remains is not a new phenomenon. "Burial irregularities," which include the opening of caskets to find the wrong soldier's remains inside or no remains at all or, during exhumations, the finding of a body buried face down, not in a coffin, or multiple bodies in a single grave, have been documented since World War I. And, dating as far back as the Civil War, family members have often made the disconcerting discovery that the remains they have received are not those of their loved ones. Similarly, the military's occasional withholding of information about how a soldier has died, where the remains — if any — are located and how the process of return of remains functions has fostered distrust.

It was the Korean War, Sledge states, which marked the beginning of public disillusionment with both the country's inducements for war and the government's attempts to account for its military personnel. The Vietnam War came thereafter, and its delinquency created a "suspicious" and "jaded" American public.

Public sentiment for war has not altered significantly since the 1950s. However, the current Iraq War has generated a great swell of detractors who have voiced misgivings about the war's purpose, timing and strategy. And in considering the Iraq War's soldier dead, it is believed that there are no "unaccounted-for" personnel. Sledge wisely adds a cautionary note to that declaration, writing that the "situation could change as the 'regime change' has not brought about the expected peace and U.S. soldiers are still dying."

The Iraq War has once again called into question the government's integrity and authenticity as a result of its many blunders and false claims. One area in which Sledge identifies a particular disingenuousness is the continued media ban on photographing or filming the return of soldier remains "anywhere along the chain of custody" — a policy instituted during the Persian Gulf War in 1991, America's first major war since Vietnam.

During major combat in the Iraq War, Sledge, as a member of the press, was embedded with the Army's 54th Mortuary Affairs Company in Baghdad. Watching this group of military personnel perform their duty was Sledge's "introduction to the 'real world' of repatriating our Soldier Dead from the Iraq War." He reflects on our nation's motives for maintaining the ban on media coverage:

"I may have been one of the few, if not the only media person, allowed to witness the movement of remains, but even this access was tightly controlled. ... From military's members' comments and from the well-known aversion to losing American lives in wars considered by many to be of questionable value, I believe the 1991 ban on press access to the return of the dead is grounded in the desire to minimize the public outcry over body bags. The military will vehemently tell you that the media strictures are to 'protect the privacy of the families,' but I can't help believing that they are also trying to carry out our national agenda with the use of military force while de-emphasizing the persistent corollary that the use of force results in the loss of life."

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Sledge contends that the most striking feature about the debate on keeping the dead from view is that "no one is asking the right questions. Why would a photograph of a flag-draped casket being unloaded from an airplane be considered a breach of family privacy? If we are not allowed to see the physical manifestations of the human cost of battle, then how do we, as a nation, note the sacrifices of those killed and the families who are left to grieve?"

"It is fortunate," Sledge avows, "that our dead are brought home soon after death instead of months and years later as in World War I, World War II, and the Korean War. ... Yet the prompt return of remains means that there is no occasion to receive, en masse, our Soldier Dead in a fitting ceremony, and this diminishes the collective recognition of the lives lost in military duty. ... Now, with the loss of media coverage, what little national recognition there was is reduced ever further. While some have tried to provide a visual image of the dead — the display of 500 pairs of empty Army boots in Chicago's Federal Building Plaza in January 2004 is [a] good example — we still lack a poignant reminder of the national loss of American lives."

We must "form and preserve an image that reminds citizens collectively that someone else paid the price for their well-being," he says.

"Soldier Dead" is substantial and meticulously researched. It honors the contributions of our fallen soldiers and further sanctifies their "supreme sacrifice." For Sledge, "Soldier Dead" is an intensely personal journey of discovery; for readers, it is edifying and powerful. This timely, yet enduring book deserves a place in the annals of American history.

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