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## **Book tells an important story that's often difficult to see**

By JULES WAGMAN  
Special to the Post-Dispatch  
Sunday, May. 29 2005

"Soldier Dead" is not an easy or pleasant book, but it is an important and compelling one about the way all our military services treat their dead.

Michael Sledge reports in a matter-of-fact manner, never in an insensitive or maudlin way. He does not shy away from sometimes-gory details. He thinks it is important to remember the men and women who died in service, and how they died.

Throughout the book are photos of both American and enemy dead. Some of the photos are especially gruesome and many have never been published before.

Sledge says that the recent debate over whether the return of remains should be covered by the press "was not about whether we should be allowed to view the dead upon arrival, but how we, as a nation, note and commemorate the deaths of those killed in military service." Sledge feels that the public wants to know, and should know, how their men and women in military service died, how their remains were treated and where and when they were buried. As we have learned in recent weeks in connection with misleading reports of the death of football player-soldier Pat Tillman, the military does not always go by the book in these matters.

Treatment of soldier dead has changed over the years. Before the Civil War, only commissioned officers were identified with headstones. By 1870, the remains of nearly 300,000 Union soldiers were buried in 73 cemeteries, but more than 26,000 were never located.

After the Spanish-American War, 1,200 dead were returned from Cuba for burial. But many who died in the conflicts in the Philippines at about the same time were buried there, where a U.S. military cemetery is still maintained.

Many fallen soldiers are buried at or near the battlefield where they fell. The remains are later moved to collection cemeteries and then finally to the permanent cemetery. Sledge argues that American dead in overseas cemeteries are eternal and powerful heralds of America's willingness to fight to protect the ideals that guide this country and that it fosters in the world.

Since the Vietnam War, efforts have been increased to locate, find and repatriate the remains of soldier dead in Southeast Asia. That has resulted, Sledge learned, in renewed efforts to locate and identify remains from World War II and the Korean conflict.

Sledge is especially unhappy that Memorial Day has lost its original serious significance and has become a three-day holiday. He marks May 30 as his Memorial Day, the day to remember the soldier dead.

### **"Soldier Dead: How We Recover, Identify, Bury & Honor Our Military Fallen"**

By Michael Sledge  
Published by Columbia University Press  
376 pages, \$29.95

*Freelance reviewer Jules Wagman is a veteran of the Korean conflict.*

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