

Flag-draped Coffins

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During Grandpa's funeral, there wasn't much crying. This was twelve years after his stroke, and everybody had watched my grandmother become worn down by caring for him, had visited the nursing homes with their astringent odors and nondescript food, had seen him go from a man who held two jobs in retirement to an ignored shell of a person leaning to the right so heavily he seemed as if he may fall out of his wheelchair. I felt relieved as I helped ease the steel casket onto the mausoleum's catafalque. We were finally out of the rain, and as the minister spoke, I wiped my glasses and watched it fall through the double doors leading to the cemetery.

The funeral director and his wife took a place at each end of the casket and picked up the corners of the flag. The cloth drooping, they turned and took a casual step away from my Grandpa, then folded the flag in half lengthwise. Slowly, awkwardly, they turned triangles in the cloth to form a loose tri-corner, white stars on a blue backdrop on both sides, which they handed to my mom and aunt. They played a cassette of *Taps* on a Wal-Mart boombox, then said, "This concludes the cemetery portion of the services. Thank you all for coming."

I don't remember being angry at the way they went through the motions of a military funeral. I just wasn't moved by it. A few years later, as a small-town newspaper reporter, I covered the funeral of Chillicothe Police Officer Larry Cox, who had been shot in the throat while chasing a robbery suspect. He was off duty, walking home through an alley from a visit to his parent's house. He had been a nineteen-year veteran and the department's D.A.R.E. officer.

Officer Cox wore his uniform and white gloves as he lay in his casket, a stoic guard at either end. Schoolchildren had scrawled good-bye notes with crayon, and those were taped to the windows of a basketball auditorium, the only room in town large enough for

thousands of mourners; schools were closed that day. Over 400 cruisers from around Ohio snaked through the streets to the cemetery, each with lights flashing through the drizzle. Officers stood at attention and civilians huddled together for warmth as a piper played “Amazing Grace,” then walked away by himself. People started to break down. Seven state troopers fired three volleys from their service shotguns, and people flinched with each blast. A riderless horse, boots backwards in the stirrups, was led past the casket. Four police helicopters screamed overhead, one peeling from the diamond to execute the missing man formation, and I started to cry. The radio of the D.A.R.E. cruiser squawked Officer Cox’s badge number for a last call: “Dispatch, twenty-one; dispatch twenty-one? Twenty-one out, in service with God.” The funeral director wiped his eyes with his sleeve. A bugler played *Taps* after officers put sharp creases into the flag from Larry Cox’s coffin and handed it to his widow. Officers throughout the ranks broke down, lips trembling, shoulders shaking, as they forced their fingers into alignment at their brow. But not a single officer fell from attention until after the flag was presented.

Grandpa’s funeral came decades after his military service and had none of this pomp, none of the stateliness that seems requisite of an officer. That’s fine. Jack Riehl wasn’t the kind of man who made sure everybody knew he’d been a soldier. There was no honor guard at his funeral, no volley of fire across his grave. There was not, to my knowledge, another veteran among the mourners.

The procession’s escort had been a sheriff’s deputy on a motorcycle, a grey man with a paunch and a pistol, probably retired. As he passed our limousine for the first time, I saw him look into the hearse; he must have seen the flag on the coffin before speeding ahead to clear the next intersection.

When my family filed past Grandpa’s coffin and out of the mausoleum, the officer was standing next to his motorcycle. He’d hoisted his aging body to attention as he stood in the drizzle, his helmet perched on the seat of his Harley-Davidson. He slowly folded his right elbow and brought his hand to his brow. He’d stayed through the service, waiting in the rain, just to salute, and I felt my stomach tighten and my back straighten, and tears welled up in my eyes.