Death detachment
Transporting the fallen, fighting to keep emotions in check

By Martin Kuz
Special to Stars and Stripes

BAGRAM, Afghanistan

The first day was the most difficult. Pfc. Durell Siverand found a family portrait in the dead soldier’s wallet that showed him posing with his wife and two daughters. A mortar blast had killed him on the day he turned 21. Siverand, one year older, had landed in Afghanistan less than three weeks earlier with the 54th Quartermaster Company of the 82nd Sustainment Brigade. The mortuary affairs unit occupies a large metal space, where a small wall sign reads “Dignity Reverence Respect,” death controls the order of life.

Siverand and Pfc. Alex Valdivia belong to one of the company’s two teams of mortuary affairs specialists. As the “dirty hands” crew of their eight-member team, they prepare the bodies of fallen troops for their eight-member team, they prepare the bodies of fallen troops for their eight-member team, they prepare the bodies of fallen troops for their eight-member team, they prepare the bodies of fallen troops for their eight-member team, they prepare the bodies of fallen troops for their eight-member team, they prepare the bodies of fallen troops for their eight-member team, they prepare the bodies of fallen troops for their eight-member team, they prepare the bodies of fallen troops for their eight-member team, they prepare the bodies of fallen troops for their eight-member team, they prepare the bodies of fallen troops for their eight-member team, they prepare the bodies of fallen troops for their eight-member team, they prepare the bodies of fallen troops for their eight-member team, they prepare the bodies of fallen troops for their eight-member team, they prepare the bodies of fallen troops for their eight-member team, they prepare the bodies of fallen troops for their eight-member team, they prepare the bodies of fallen troops for their eight-member team, they prepare the bodies of fallen troops for

By evening, after delivering the private’s remains to a cargo plane, he felt unmoored.

Standing outside the hangar, he smoked three cigarettes in 20 minutes, his first three since deploying. His mind fixed on the soldier’s family photo. He wondered whether he could last here.

“This is not something that everyone can do,” said Siverand, of League City, Texas, recounting the episode some weeks later: “I won’t lie — sometimes it’s very hard for us, too. But you know that you’ve got to get these heroes back to their loved ones as fast as you can.”

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About this series
Stars and Stripes is looking at the mental health of U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan and how they cope with the war’s internal burden while deployed. This series is produced with the support of a Rosalynn Carter Fellowship for Mental Health Journalism.

Read more from this series at stripes.com/go/pts

SEE DESTROYER ON PAGE 2

US destroyer prepares for first ballistic missile patrol

By Steven Beardsley
Stars and Stripes

ROTA, Spain—The fanfare of its arrival has passed, and the USS Donald Cook is preparing to make its first patrol in support of Europe’s ballistic missile defense patrol sometime in the next month.

On a quiet, holiday morning when most of its sailors were away, Cmdr. Scott A. Jones, commanding officer of the Arleigh Burke-class destroyer now anchored at this Navy base in southern Spain, spoke about the Cook’s mission and the recent move from Norfolk to Rota, where the crew was welcomed last week by Spanish and U.S. dignitaries, including Navy Secretary Ray Mabus.

“I’ve got a million and one business cards,” Jones said. “I’m Rota’s latest social butterfly, as I told my wife.”

The Cook is the first of four American destroyers to move to Rota over the next two years, each equipped with the Aegis radar system and SM-3 missiles capable of intercepting medium-range ballistic missiles.

Together the ships will form the centerpiece of Europe’s Phased Adaptive Approach program, a missile shield with radar in Turkey, a command element in Germany and ground-based interceptors in Romania and Poland.

Although the U.S. insists the system is meant to provide a defense against rogue states such as Iran, its development has caused a major rift with Russia, which says the shield is aimed against its own nuclear missile arsenal.

SEE DESTROYER ON PAGE 2
Mortality: Though physically undemanding, their work exhausts the spirit

FROM FRONT PAGE

The Uniformed Services University reported in 2010 that one in five mortar affairs specialists sent to Afghanistan or Iraq returned with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. The rate parallels that of infantry soldiers and suggests the mental burden borne by those who handle the dead.

 Barely into their 20s, immersed in the carnage of war, Siverand and Valdivia are witness to fate's indifference.

“People die on their own, on my age,” said Valdivia, 21, of Houston. “And you know they all have someone who loves them—a mom, a dad, maybe a wife and kids. And now they’re gone.”

Practical urgency

The process starts when the phone rings. An officer tracking flights into the base calls the mortuary affairs unit with an alert that in 30 minutes to an hour an aircraft will touch down carrying a servicemember's remains.

The team in the hangar responds with practical urgency. One member of the “clean hands” crew contacts the unit of the deceased to gather details for a case file that will travel with the body to the United States. Two members iron an American flag to drape over the top half of an aluminum transfer case that will hold the remains.

If their team receives the call, Siverand and Valdivia climb into a box truck parked in the mortuary compound and drive to the flight line. They set a routine, which includes “Call of Duty” or poker, a relaxed repartee between them. They typically return to the flight line after 45 minutes. The remains are in the hangar, and the biologic team is ready. They extract “leftover” remains — teeth, bone fragments, bits of flesh — and wipe away dried blood after bodies are removed.

“Call of Duty” or poker, a relaxed repartee between them, is a small act that allows them to brace for a moment that never feels normal. He has seen bodies maimed by mortar attacks. Valdivia knows the dense, violent odor of unopened mortuary hangars.

The two privates then slip the objects into the transport plane. A memorial ceremony takes place on the runway apron. Dozens of troops, sometimes hundreds, in uniforms that stretch straight back below either side of the plane's tail, create a human corridor. Eight servicemembers carry the transfer case through the corridor and ascend the loading ramp.

Siverand and Valdivia trail them into the plane to perform a short ceremony that ends with a salute. They sign over custody of the remains to the flight crew. They walk out the door and drive back to the hangar. They forget.

Stray details

Valdivia knows the dense, violent odor of the dead. He has seen hands mangled beyond semblance to the human form by roadside bombs. His hands have passed over bones pulverized by mortar rounds.

None of those sensations troubles him as much as opening a body bag to find a soldier who appears unbroken, face in repose.

“‘It’s harder when you’re not really messed up because they look like an actual, live person,” he said. “If they’re jacked up... I just try to think of it as the person was never real, because after dealing with so many, it does become hard not to be affected.”

The Army operates a second mortuary affairs “collection point” at Kandahar Air Field in southern Afghanistan. Every U.S. servicemember who dies in the country passes through Bagram or Kandahar en route to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware.

In the sequence of steps to repatriate remains, soldiers assigned to the collection points fulfill a duty at once vital and invisible. They gain perspective on the moral dimensions of a position that most of them, including Siverand and Valdivia, did not seek.

“We know what we do is important,” said Staff Sgt. Charles Ellis, 48, of Brookhaven, Miss., who leads the company’s two teams of mortuary affairs specialists. “We also know that what we do isn’t about us.

There’s something wrong if there’s attention on us.”

Mortuary affairs units deploy to Afghanistan for six months. (In 2012, the Army cut one-third of its units to 12 months to nine.) The short deployments reflect the military’s awareness of the mental trauma that can afflict mortuary affairs specialists, who are repeatedly exposed to death despite seldom leaving their base.

Valdivia has opened more than 40 body bags. Stray details resurface. He remembers the soldier with the same first and last name as one of his friends in Houston. Another soldier carried a photo of his mother whose likeness reminded Valdivia of his own.

“If you try not to associate with the person,” he said, “but occasionally you notice something about them, and it hits you: This person isn’t all that different from me.”

Siverand and Valdivia mostly refrain from lingering over a soldier’s personal effects. A sense of self-preservation guards them as much as respect for the dead.

Siverand learned the need for detachment while working on his first body, the private with a wallet photo of his wife and two daughters. Afterward, as he smoked outside the hangar, one of his superiors offered him solitude and advice.

“I’ve been through this, and I know what it’s like,” the sergeant told him. “Don’t personalize what you’re seeing. Don’t spend a lot of time looking at their effects. Just keep your mind on sending them home.”

Yet there exists a natural desire to understand the life of a person who is met only in death. It is an impulse not easily subdued. “We’re human — we’re interested in people,” Siverand said. “Sometimes you wish you could know what someone was like.”

The job requires them to scrutinize materials for classified information. Valdivia recalled the letter he pulled from the sleeve pocket of a 21-year-old specialist killed in a mortar strike in eastern Afghanistan.

He saw the note from the soldier’s father and told Siverand, who urged him to set it aside.

Valdivia instead read on, curiosity overriding his better judgment. He discovered that the soldier’s father held a letter he had recently reconciled. The father wrote of his pride for the son and his anticipation of their reunion in a few months.

The body lying on the gurney was no longer simply a name without a past. Valdivia felt a jolt of grief. The reunion would happen much sooner but for the worst reason. He wanted to unread the letter. He cannot escape the memory.

Helping to say goodbye

Siverand and Valdivia find relief in the limited diversions available to soldiers in Afghanistan. They watch movies and play video games on their laptops, lift weights at the gym, talk and text with family members in America. The respite provides separation from work that, if physically undemanding, can exhaust the spirit.

In addition to the remains of U.S. troops and civilian contractors, they receive the bodies of soldiers from NATO and coalition forces, and the U.S.-led war here. Along one wall of the mortuary hangar, the flags of Germany, Poland and other coalition countries hang side by side, forming a veil of solidarity.

The two share another-duty known as vehicle clearance, cleaning out armored trucks in which soldiers have been killed. They extract “leftover” remains — teeth, bone fragments, bits of flesh — and wipe away dried blood after bodies are removed.

“Have you got your mind ready before you go in,” Siverand said. “I try to think of it as going to a scary movie. That helps make what I’m about to see seem less real.”

For the two friends, war has imposed clarity about the human condition. Handling the dead has instilled an awareness of life’s brevity; observing the reactions of the living to the fallen has revealed how one person can inspire many.

They prepared the remains of a 25-year-old sergeant killed in a mortar attack on Bagram Air Field last summer. Dozens of soldiers from his company appeared at the hangar for the prayer service. As they embraced and wept, Valdivia strained to stifle his emotions.

“I didn’t know him and he still touched my heart,” Valdivia said before his unit redeployed late last year. “You could easily tell he had a big influence on people, and that made it easier for us to affect people and what you mean to them.”

Similar thoughts occurred to Siverand. “I stood there wondering, ‘What did this guy do as a soldier to make this many people care?’ That’s when you start saying, ‘Hey, I want to be good at what I do.”

Following the service, several soldiers hugged them in gratitude. In those moments, they realized the deeper purpose of their work: keeping soldiers safe in battle against their own internal struggles.

“When you see the faces of the guys who know the victims,” Siverand said, “You realize it’s when you understand the importance of the job. You’re helping them say goodbye.”

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