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Paying respects to fallen Airmen: A lifetime in 8 minutes

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Commentary by Staff Sgt. Patrice Clarke
386th Air Expeditionary Wing Public Affairs

5/9/2011 - **SOUTHWEST ASIA (AFNS)** -- It was just eight minutes. I would think about that later. It was just eight short minutes from the time the troop commander called everyone to attention to the time he dismissed us. Just eight short minutes that I will remember for the rest of my life.

Eight short minutes in which I watched two fallen military members transferred out the back of a C-17 Globemaster III and onto a waiting truck. Eight minutes where I, along with about 90 other military members, all ranks, all services, civilians too, stood at attention and slowly rendered a salute as those two flag-draped cases were carried off of that aircraft.

Before those eight minutes, the passengers who had been sharing their flight with these two fallen warriors were asked to exit the aircraft and form up two lines, one on either side of the cargo ramp at the 387th Air Expeditionary Group, which is part of the 386th Air Expeditionary Wing.

Twelve across, we stood. Soldiers, Sailors, Marines and Airmen all stood solemnly at parade rest. No one told us to; it was just natural, like the moment demanded every ounce of our military discipline.

It didn't matter that some of these passengers had traveled all day and were only stopping for a little while. It didn't matter that some of us had worked an entire 12-hour day when that aircraft landed late that night.

What mattered were those eight minutes.

As the troop commander called the formation to attention, I saw a movement out of the corner of my eye. I saw the sharp snap of the six Airmen whose charge it was to carry these fallen warriors off of the aircraft. With grace and poise, these six Airmen performed the transfer.

As they walked past me, I thought of the warriors in those cases. I thought about how these warriors wouldn't be able to feel the soft breeze on a still night. They wouldn't be able to hold their families, hug them or kiss them again. They wouldn't be able to see the stars again.

For those eight minutes, I thought about a lifetime of things these two fallen warriors would never be a part of again. As that thought passed through me with a shiver, I stood a little bit taller, saluted just a little bit sharper. If these two warriors were never going to see these simple joys again, the least I could give was everything, every single thing I had, for the remainder of those eight minutes.

They deserved it. They deserved all that the solemn 90-man formation had that night.

These two warriors gave their life for those simple freedoms, for those things that many of us take for granted. In those eight minutes, I thanked those warriors from the depths of my soul. I thanked them for their sacrifice, and for paying the ultimate price.

My day started as mundane and routine, just another day on my deployment, one more day closer to me returning to my family. It did not, however, end that way.

In those eight short minutes my perspective was forever changed.

Comments

5/14/2011 10:34:40 AM ET
Powerful story

TSgt S.Harris, undisclosed location

5/11/2011 2:40:31 PM ET

Thank you. You painted the perfect picture to recognize those that have given the ultimate sacrifice. They will not be forgotten.

MSgt Richard Holguin, 820 RHS

5/11/2011 8:34:12 AM ET

Excellent word picture and telling of the greatest story about those who have given. They paid the ultimate price Thanks for reminding us all about what is truly the most important mission. My thoughts and prayers go out to these service members' families and I hope they can gain a small piece of comfort from your words. God Bless!

CMSgt Reggie Bass, Robins AFB GA

5/10/2011 10:17:42 PM ET

SSgt Clarke, your words brought back a similar experience on a windy ramp that snapped the hinges of the doors of a truck parked behind the aircraft. That ceremony left an indelible image. Thank you for your service and your perspective on our fallen brothers and sisters. Retired CMSgt, El Paso, Texas

Kevin Skinner, El Paso Texas

5/10/2011 3:55:29 PM ET

As I read this article I was reminded to put out the flag in their honor. A generic salute to you all who can call themselves a veteran. All veterans are responsible for our liberty and freedom. Here is proven once again that Freedom is NOT free!

R Soucy SMS Ret., N. California

5/10/2011 2:08:15 PM ET

SSgt Clarke, your story brought back memories of my deployment. You wrote how I felt while paying respect to our fallen. Thank you for sharing your experience and your service.

CMSgt retired, Scott AFB IL

5/10/2011 12:26:45 PM ET

When we lose any of our troops it is personal, but as a former Blue Suiter, when we lose one of our own, it is family. A great tribute, and to the grieving families, you have confidence in knowing your loved ones were doing exactly what they wanted to do. God Bless! Alton D Womack, CMSgt., USAF Ret.

A.D. Womack , Melbourne Florida

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5/10/2011 12:25:36 PM ET

SSgt Clarke, thank you! Your commentary brought back memories from Nam. May all of our brothers and sisters rest in peace. They are not forgotten.

rick dugas USAF 66-75, baton rouge louisiana

5/10/2011 11:19:51 AM ET

Sergeant Clarke, this story was an awesome tribute to those fallen warriors. The way you described the ceremony and how all the military members stopped to pay their respects was so moving. Thank you

SSgt Picariello, Schriever AFB Colo.

5/9/2011 9:29:18 PM ET

Wow...this story was great, SSgt Clarke. We have read many commentaries that have been posted here recently with a similar subject. Your story however struck a chord with me and I'll never forget it. You share a very unique perspective one that we should not forget anytime soon. Thanks for the great article!

MSgt Brian Potvin, 47 CS Laughlin AFB TX

5/9/2011 4:58:49 PM ET

SSgt Clarke - Thank you for a moving story. It's a great reminder that all of our heroes who have paid for our freedoms with their lives should not and will not be forgotten. Thank you again for a great story.

MSgt Scott Sturkol, Scott AFB IL

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