

## Shutter

On a dusty corner of my cherry-wood desk, hiding in the shadows, is a photo I took of the first ramp-ceremony I covered as an Army photojournalist on my last deployment. In it, seven cold, metal caskets are tightly wrapped in crisp American flags. The caskets are the only cargo in the belly of a Lockheed C-130 Hercules aircraft, but must be staggered so they can all fit. In the center of the photo, a young chaplain's assistant kneels over a casket, head down, eyes closed, face carved in the stone of a Soldier who refuses to let the ghost of his brothers see him cry. His hand rests on the rounded edge of parallel, alternating stripes of white and red; white symbolizing innocence and purity, red symbolizing resilience and courage. The symbolism strikes me every time I look at this photo: the kneeling Soldier's dirty, trembling hand, fingers curled into a fist, resting on those stripes, in opposition to everything they stand for. The process of returning a fallen Soldier home to his loved ones is referred to as a 'dignified transfer,' but the only thing dignified about it is this moment before the rear cargo hatch is raised for the last time. When the surviving comrades of the fallen Soldiers enter the aircraft and make their final salutes and farewells to their fallen brothers.

This is the ramp-ceremony and it is a grave affair, one of the many grim tasks a military photojournalist must undertake in the course of a combat deployment. I placed the photograph on my desk in the fall of 2012 to serve as a reminder, but what I am reminded of has twisted and morphed with the passing of time. In the early days of my retirement, I used to feel pride when I looked at the photo. I dusted the corner of my desk and adjusted the light of my lamp to reflect on the kneeling Soldier. My heart swelled with pride at sharing service with this anonymous kneeling man; and it mourned the sacrifice of our brothers, eternally sleeping in their flag-draped

coffins. I only saw the surface of things then: the caskets, the flags, the dutifully praying Soldier. I felt only solidarity.

Several months after placing the photo, I woke early one morning, disoriented and drenched in sweat. I slipped out of the warmth of my bed and stood in the middle of a cold, dark room, waiting for my eyes to adjust. The earliest rays of the sunrise crept slowly through the cracks of my window shutters and eased across my goose-pimpled flesh before resting on the photo in the corner of my desk. I was instantly transported from the safety of my room to the corner of the military cargo plane holding seven caskets draped in seven American flags on the tarmac of a runway in Kandahar, Afghanistan.

*Click-click. Click-click, click-click. The sound of my shutter releasing echoes like thunder through the belly of the plane. It bounces off a metal lens, metal walls and metal caskets and lands on the shoulders of a kneeling Soldier. "Why doesn't he look up?" I think to myself. "Why doesn't he look at me?" Click-click. Click-click, click-click. "Why am I here, documenting this? What will I say if he looks up?" A panic settles in. I am an intruder in this private, intimate scene. My presence and my camera interrupts, offends. The Soldier's fingers curl into a fist, resting on parallel, alternating stripes of white and red, but he doesn't look up. I've been standing in this corner for 45 minutes, snapping photos constantly as men file in and stand before each casket to pay their last respects. They stare intently at the pattern of the flag and raise their stiffened right hands from the bottom stitches of their trouser pockets to the edge of their brows and back down again in an agonizingly slow, final salute. They set their jaws and file back out of the aircraft, making room for the next man to enter. As they pass each other, they grip arms and shoulders and look each other in the eye. Solidarity. Not one of them cries. Not one of them even looks in my direction. Click-click. Click-click, click-click. The thunder of my*

*shutter almost drowns out the soft echo of combat boots making their way up and down the lowered rear ramp. It hits me: I am an extension of this aircraft, this camera, these caskets; a part of the machine, something not human, not humane. The kneeling Soldier closes his eyes, lowers his head. He doesn't cry, but somewhere inside the machine hot tears finds their way down my cheeks, rusting me in place, freezing me in time, forever trapping me behind a wall of metal.*

As the memory fades out I'm left standing in the middle of my room, still rusted in place, still crying, still trying to claw my way back to the present. When I walked into my office after covering that ramp-ceremony, I sat on the wooden floor in silence and tried to make sense of what I had just documented. My commanding officer took one look at me and walked over to close the office door. He didn't say a word. He just knelt down and hugged me for a long time, a breech in protocol. But the warmth of that long hug isn't enough to erase the permanent chill that memory brings. It isn't enough to stop the shifting perspective that now haunts my dreams and photo albums. And it isn't enough to keep me from moving the photo to a darker corner of my desk, then readjusting the lamplight to lengthen the shadows around it.

