Final salute

Inside a limousine parked on the airport tarmac, Katherine Cathey looked out at the clear night sky and felt a kick.

“He’s moving,” she said. “Come feel him. He’s moving.”

Her two best friends leaned forward on the soft leather seats and put their hands on her stomach.

“I felt it,” one of them said. “I felt it.”

Outside, the whine of jet engines swelled.

“Oh, sweetie,” her friend said. “I think this is his plane.”

As the three young women peered through the tinted windows, Katherine squeezed a set of dog tags stamped with the same name as her unborn son:

James J. Cathey.

“He wasn’t supposed to come home this way,” she said, tightening her grip on the tags, which were linked by a necklace to her husband’s wedding ring.

The women looked through the back window. Then the 23-year-old placed her hand on her pregnant belly.

“Everything that made me happy is on that plane,” she said.

They watched as airport workers rolled a conveyor belt to the rear of the plane, followed by six solemn Marines.

Katherine turned from the window and closed her eyes.

“I don’t want it to be dark right now. I wish it was daytime,” she said. “I wish it was daytime for the rest of my life. The night is just too hard.”

Suddenly, the car door opened. A white-gloved hand reached into the limousine from outside — the same hand that had knocked on Katherine’s door in Brighton five days earlier.

The man in the deep blue uniform knelt down to meet her eyes, speaking in a soft, steady voice.

“Katherine,” said Maj. Steve Beck, “it’s time.”
To our readers:

Almost everyone has heard of “the knock at the door”— the knock that all military families dread. Once the door opens, though, the story has barely begun.

Rocky Mountain News reporter Jim Sheeler and photographer Todd Heisler spent the past year with the Marines stationed at Buckley Air Force Base in Aurora who have found themselves called upon to notify families of the deaths of their sons in Iraq. In each case in this story, the families agreed to let Sheeler and Heisler chronicle their loss and grief. They wanted people to know their sons, the men and women who brought them home, and the bond of traditions more than 200 years old that unites them.

Though readers are led through the story by the white-gloved hand of Maj. Steve Beck, he remains a reluctant hero. He is, he insists, only a small part of the massive mosaic that is the Marine Corps. With the families’ permission, he agreed to take us inside.

More online: To see a multimedia version of this story and additional photographs, go to RockyMountainNews.com.

Contact Jim Sheeler sheelerj@RockyMountainNews.com or 303-492-2561

Contact Todd Heisler heisler@RockyMountainNews.com or 303-492-2430

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The American Airlines 757 couldn’t have landed much farther from the war. The plane arrived in Reno on a Friday evening, the beginning of the 2005 “Hot August Nights” festival — one of the city’s biggest — filled with flashing lights, fireworks, carefree music and plenty of gambling.

When a young Marine in dress uniform had boarded the plane to Reno, the passengers smiled and nodded politely. None knew he had just come from the plane’s cargo hold, after watching his best friend’s casket loaded onboard.

At 24 years old, Sgt. Gavin Conley was only seven days younger than the man in the coffin. The two had met as 17-year-olds on another plane — the one to boot camp in California. They had slept in adjoining top bunks, the two youngest recruits in the barracks.

All Marines call each other brother. Conley and Jim Cathey could have been. They finished each other’s sentences, had matching infantry tattoos etched on their shoulders, and cracked on each other as if they had grown up together — which, in some ways, they had.

When the airline crew found out about Conley’s mission, they bumped him to first-class. He had never flown there before. Neither had Jim Cathey.

When the plane landed in Nevada, the pilot asked the passengers to remain seated while Conley disembarked alone. Then the pilot told them why.

The two had grown up together — which, in some ways, they had.

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The two had grown up together — which, in some ways, they had.
When he first donned the Marine uniform, Beck had never heard the term “casualty assistance calls officer.” He certainly never expected to serve as one. As it turned out, it would become the most important mission of his life.

Each door is different. But once they’re open, Beck said, some of the scenes inside are inevitably the same.

“The curtains pull away. They come to the door. And they know. They always know,” he said.

“You can almost see the blood run out of their body and their heart hit the floor. It’s not the blood as much as their soul. Something sinks. I’ve never seen that except when someone dies. And I’ve seen a lot of death.

“They’re falling — either literally or figuratively — and you have to catch them.”

“In this business, I can’t save his life. All I can do is double-checked. And then the name began its journey home.

During World War I, World War II and the Korean War, the message arrived in sparse sympathy letters or in the terse language of telegrams, leaving relatives alone to soak in the words. Near the end of the Vietnam War, the military changed the process, adding state-side traffic accidents.

But he never strays far from his roots. "One of the first things they said was, 'Don’t-embrace them. If they embrace you, keep your distance,” he said, shaking his head. “I didn’t have much use for them.”

Beck supports Katherine after she breaks into tears at the sight of her husband’s casket at the Reno airport. When Beck knocked on Katherine’s door in Brighton to notify her of her husband’s death, she had cursed him, then refused to speak to him for more than an hour. Over the next several days, Beck helped her deal with her grief. By the time they reached the airport, she wouldn’t let go.

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“They’re falling — either literally or figuratively — and you have to catch them.”

“In this business, I can’t save his life. All I can do is catch the family while they’re falling.”

Hours before Beck’s first call, a homemade bomb exploded. Somewhere in the Iraqi desert, in the midst of the rubble, lay the body of a Marine from Colorado.

The information from his dog tags was checked. Double-checked. And then the name began its journey home.

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Beck looks like the job: hard and soft. His white cotton gloves cover calloused hands. They lead to thick, regular-guy arms shaped by work instead of weightlifting, and a round, pale face with big cheeks that turn red when he hasn’t had enough sleep, which is most of the time.

Beck’s bookshelf is packed with titles ranging from the History of the Peloponnesian War to the 9/11 Commission Report. He can quote Clausewitz and Sun Tzu in regular conversation.

But he never strays far from his roots. Born in Sand Springs, Okla., he still pronounces his home state “O-koma.” He’ll describe another Marine’s muscles as “hard as a woodpecker’s lips,” and when he wants something done with precision, he’ll require his troops to get it “down to the gnat’s ass.”

His car radio is eternally tuned to country stations because, he insists, “a day without country music is like a day without sunshine.”

It’s an Everyman quality that can’t be faked, one that has become a crucial component in helping the families of fallen Marines.

After receiving that first call last fall, Beck grabbed for a thick, acronym-studded manual, The Casualty Assistance Calls Officer’s (CACO) Guide. It offered only the basics: “In cases of death, the following is suggested and may be modified as follows,” it reads, in part.

“The Commandant of the Marine Corps has entrusted me to express his deep regret that your (relationship), (name), (deceased) was killed in action (place of incident), (city/state or country) on (date). (State the circumstances). The Commandant extends his deepest sympathy to you and your family in your loss.”

When he began the job as site commander at Marine Air Control Squadron 25, Beck knew that death notification was a possibility. The previous commandant already had supervised three funerals in the region that includes Colorado and parts of Wyoming, Kansas, South Dakota and Nebraska.

Until that first call, however, Beck had plenty of other worries. From their base among the top-secret radar installations at Buckley, Beck and his Marines are highly trained to support aircraft and missile operations. They also are continually training Marine Reservists and sending them to Iraq.

Since the beginning of the war, the Marines stationed at Buckley have made 19 notifications following the deaths of active-duty Marines. Fifteen of those were killed in action in Iraq and four died in state-side traffic accidents.

Beck personally has notified five families, but even when he isn’t the one who delivers the message, he is involved.

Before leaving on his first notification, Beck asked for advice from two men in another branch of the service.

“One of the first things they said was, ‘Don’t-embrace them. If they embrace you, keep your distance,”’ he said, shaking his head. “I didn’t have much use for them.”

Different services have different guidelines for notification. In the Army, one officer is responsible for the knock, while another steps in to handle the aftercare.

In the Marines, the same person who knocks on the door is the family’s primary contact for the next year or more.

There is no group of Marines whose primary task is death notification. Just as every Marine is a riflemen — expected to be able to handle a weapon and head to the front if tapped — any officer also may be called to make the walk to the door.

For Beck, that door is the “LOD” — the line of de-
Passengers aboard the commercial flight bringing home the body of 2nd Lt. Jim Cathey watch as his casket is unloaded by a Marine honor guard at Reno-Tahoe International Airport. Beck described a similar scene last year at Denver International Airport on the arrival of another fallen Marine:

"See the people in the windows? They'll sit right there in the plane, watching those Marines. You gotta wonder what's going through their minds, knowing that they're on the plane that brought him home. They're going to remember being on that plane for the rest of their lives. They're going to remember bringing that Marine home. And they should."
parture. The point of no return.

After all of the racing, all of the frantic scramble, it’s

the point where time freezes.

“Once I get to the porch, I stand there and take a
depth breath. At that point, you can wait 10 seconds,
wait 30 seconds, wait an hour — it’s not going to go
away,” he said.

“There’s no option. There’s no fork in the road. You
just stare down that straight path. You step up be-
cause there is no fork.

“I pick myself up, gather my thoughts and ring the
bell.”

There were no footprints in the snow.

That struck Beck as he sat across the street in his
government SUV that night, outside a house in
Laramie blanketed by cold and quiet.

In his briefcase was a sheet of paper: “INITIAL CA-
SUALTY REPORT,” it read. “LCPL. KYLE W.
BURNS.”

Every second he waited would be one more second
that, for those in the house, everything was still all
right. He stared at the front door, at the drifting snow,
then looked at his watch.

When he left Denver, it was still Nov. 11; now it was
well past midnight.

Veterans Day was over.

Inside the house, the lights were still on.

All during the drive to Laramie, Beck imagined
what would happen at the door and what he would
say once it opened. This was his second notification.

There was no script for the rest.

He talked it out with his passenger, Gunnery Sgt.
Shane Scarpino. In the truck, the two men played out
scenarios the same way they would if headed into bat-
tle. What if the parents aren’t home? What if they be-
come aggressive? What if they break down? What if,
what if, what if.

Two Marines are required for every visit, not just for
emotional support, but for each other’s protection.

While most parents eventually grow close to their ca-
sualty assistance officer, the initial meeting tests all
emotions. One of the Buckley Marines had been
slapped by a mother. Last year, a group of Marines in

It’s nearly 2 a.m. when Beck hugs his wife, Julie,
before leaving to conduct a casualty notification.

Marines make notifications around the clock, usually
within four hours of receiving word of a comrade’s
death. They see it as their duty to the families.

“Wouldn’t you want to know as soon as you possibly
could?” Beck said. “If it was your son, would you want
us to let you sleep?”
Florida had their van set on fire by a distraught father. Amid sheets of blowing snow just outside Laramie, Beck had pulled the truck into a gas station and the two Marines grabbed their garment bags. When they emerged from the restroom, their spit-shined black shoes clicked on the floor. Their dark blue pants, lined with a red stripe signifying past bloodshed, fell straight. Their jackets wrapped their necks with a high collar that dates back to the Revolutionary War, when Marines wore leather neck-straps to protect them from enemy swords. As they walked out of the gas station, Beck felt the eyes of the clerk. He knew, Beck thought. Once they drove into the family’s neighborhood, the modest white house found them first, beckoning with the brightest porch lights and biggest house numbers on the block. Beck pulled to the curb and cut his headlights. He looked at Scarpino. Then the two men climbed out of the truck, and walked into the pristine snow. From then on, every step would leave footprints.

Down in the basement of their home in Laramie, Kyle Burns’ parents didn’t hear the doorbell. The couple had spent most of the snowy night trying to hook up a new television. It was nearly 1 a.m. when the dog leapt into a barking frenzy. Jo Burns looked out the window and saw the two Marines. “I thought, ‘Go away! Get the hell away from here!’ ” she said. “Then I just started screaming.” Down in the basement, Bob Burns assumed that someone was trying to break in. He grabbed a flashlight and flew up the stairs. “When I got up there, I saw Major Beck and the (gunnery) sergeant,” he said. “I’ll never forget Major Beck’s profile.” It was a silhouette their son had warned them about. “When Kyle left, he sat us down and told us that if he didn’t come back, the Marines would come,” Jo said. “So when I saw them standing there...”

Six weeks after his brother was killed in Iraq, Kris Burns, closest to the house, and a friend carry boxes of Kyle Burns’ possessions into the family home in Laramie. Beck, who personally delivered the boxes, also was the one who notified the family of the 20-year-old’s death on Veterans Day 2004. “Now for the hard part,” said Jo Burns, after opening one of the boxes. Then she corrected herself: “It’s all hard.”

Jo Burns weeps as her husband, Bob, unpacks a box containing their son’s uniforms that Beck, right, brought from Denver. “For me, having all this back is a good thing,” Jo Burns said. “I don’t ever want to forget or to stop feeling.” “I don’t want to forget, either,” Bob Burns said. “I just don’t want to hurt.”

Beck was a Marine who spent time with the family, telling them the little information they knew, promising they would take care of everything they could.

Over the next five weeks, Beck found a way to bring home two Marines who had died alongside him. He helped organize a memorial service and a burial at Fort Logan National Cemetery in Denver. He helped the Burnses navigate the piles of paperwork associated with a Marine's death.

The whole time, Marines from Buckley watched over the body of a fallen service member, and some airports around the country have refused to bring one of their guys home. How are the families doing?

"I don't know how Major Beck does this," Jo Burns said. "He's just an awesome guy. He's very supportive."

"You know, it's just one of those things," Beck said. "If I had my way, they'd know which Marine had died."

"Now they're watching over us," said Sgt. Andrea Scarpino, of Buckley Air Force Base. "That's all he asked for: a Marine colorguard."

As he grew up, the family changed. Some days he wore Blue Angels clothes to school. Other days, he was a Marine. He never went back.

His relationship with his father — a cop and former Drug Enforcement Administration agent — wasn't as close as that with his mother, they eventually reconciled. Then his father was diagnosed with cancer.

As a toddler, he learned to hold a syringe to inject insulin and his diabetic mother with insulin. His parents had diabetes.

Eventually, Beck channeled his anger into books and studying medicine. He never went back.

Through his relationship with his father — a cop and former Drug Enforcement Administration agent — wasn't as close as that with his mother, they eventually reconciled. Then his father was diagnosed with cancer.

"I just want it to be over," he said. "We're at the airport, getting ready to bring one of our guys home. How are the families doing?"

"Oh, they're doing all right," Beck said. "They're going to remember bringing their Marine home."

"We're going to remember bringing that Marine home," Beck said. "And they should."

After graduating from boot camp, every Marine makes the blank stare — the focused-but-distant look that conveys more than two centuries of tradition.

They're meant to strike fear in enemies, the one intended to provide pride is bigger than the pain. But the pain — you gotta live with it, you gotta take it home."

Beck and his family went to the airport. The whole time, Marines from Buckley watched over the body of a fallen service member, and some airports around the country have refused to bring one of their guys home. How are the families doing?

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They're meant to strike fear in enemies, the one intended to provide pride is bigger than the pain. But the pain — you gotta live with it, you gotta take it home.
“But you never really know until you carry one of them in the casket. When you feel their body weight. When you feel them, that’s when you know. That’s when you understand.”

Thomas said he would rather be in Iraq — or anywhere he doesn’t feel so helpless.

Still, he said, he has learned lessons from funeral duty that he knows combat can’t teach.

“T’ll be sitting in front of the computer and I’ll see the news. Another service member killed. It’s enough to choke me up, tighten my chest. That’s another hundred people that are about to be affected,” Thomas said.

“It’s almost enough to wish that you could take his place, so these people wouldn’t hurt so much.

“There’s no way that doing one of these funerals can’t make you a better person. I think everyone in the military should have to do at least one.”

Still, it doesn’t end at the cemetery.

“People think that after the funeral, we’re finished.” Beck said. “It’s not over. It’s not over at all. We have to keep taking care of the families.”

The sound of strapping tape ripped through the living room in Laramie.

“Now for the hard part,” Jo Burns said, after opening one of the cardboard boxes from Iraq filled with her son’s possessions.

Then she corrected herself.

“It’s all hard.”

It had been more than a month since Beck’s midnight drive to the white house with the biggest numbers on the block. Beck wasn’t required to personally deliver the boxes to Laramie. He didn’t have to stay with the family for two hours more as they sifted through them, either.

But actually, Beck said, he had no choice.

“I know that Kyle Burns is looking at me, making sure I’m squared away — with his family and with him,” he said during the drive to Wyoming. “I know I’m going to have to answer the mail on that one day — not with God, but with Kyle.”

Inside the living room, Bob Burns began lifting Ziploc bags from the box, cataloging the contents in a shaky voice.

“Here’s his wallet,” he said, as he looked inside. “A fishing license. A hunting license. A Subway Club card. Good grief.

“They’re things that reminded him of home,” Jo Burns said.

A few minutes later, she pulled out a list in her son’s handwriting and started to cry.

“What is it, Jo?” Bob Burns asked.

“It’s everyone he wanted to call. And write.”

“Well,” Bob said, “now we’ve got a list, don’t we, Jo?”

They found more. A camouflage Bible. A giant clothespin. Pens with their tops chewed up.

Corporal’s stripes.

“Already bought them,” Beck said. “He only had a couple more tests to take.”

Kyle’s older brother, Kris, pulled out a book, Battlefield Okinawa, and feathered the pages, then placed his finger at a wrinkle on the spine.

“Looks like he only got to about here,” he said. “He only got halfway through.”

Jo Burns never wanted Kyle to be a Marine. When he invited a recruiter over to meet her, she was openly hostile.

“I have to be honest,” she said later. “I didn’t believe all that brotherhood bull——. I thought it was just a bunch of little boys saying things that boys say.

“I never believed it until after he died.”

In the midst of it all, they found a little snow globe with a typical Wyoming scene: trees, an elk, a bear and a coyote.

Jo Burns shook it up and watched the flakes fall.

She then grasped Beck’s hand.

“He told us several times. You won’t be alone through this — we’ll be here,” she said.

“I guess I didn’t understand what that meant.”

Thongs of raucous, face-painted fanatics filled the Stevens High School gymnasium in Rapid City, S.D., preparing for the biggest basketball game of the season.

As the time for tipoff neared, some of the kids cheered and others stomped their feet on the stands.

But when the lights dimmed, the teams didn’t take the court.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,” said a uniformed Marine major, as the gym fell to murmurs, then silence.

Eight Marines from Buckley marched to the front of the gym floor, along with a dozen members of the Stevens High School football team and the family of Lance Cpl. Joe Welke.

“For some of you, this is a surprise,” Beck said. “For others, you knew we had something special. For everyone, I promise you, this will be a memorable night.”

In the gym rafters hung the retired jerseys of former Stevens High football players who later turned pro. On Feb. 5, the crowd’s attention was drawn to a special display case for three more uniforms, all worn by the same man.

Spear Joseph Welke long in your memories, for his sacrifice and that of others should never be forgotten,” Beck said. “For it is, none of us deserve our freedom.

The spotlight swept across the line of football players as they passed the jersey of No. 36 from player to player, across the gym, until it rested with Joe Welke’s mother.

Then the light shone on the Marines. Many of them had been the last to carry Welke’s body, the last to feel the weight.

This night, they carried his empty uniforms.

“T’ Marine dress blue uniform is the only uniform in use today that is comprised of all the colors of the American flag,” Beck said to the crowd, as the suit was passed along, through white-gloved hands, until it also rested with Betty Welke.

“T’ Marine combat utility uniform has seen duty around the globe in the toughest of environments,” Beck said. “Joe’s uniform is with us tonight and comes directly from the deserts of Iraq.”

The Marines passed the uniform along until it reached Beck. He turned, cradling it with the same reverence he showed months earlier at the funeral when he presented Betty Welke with the folded American flag that had covered her son’s casket.

The lance corporal’s mother buried her face in the uniform. Her sobbing lifted into the silence of the gym.

On Feb. 5, before the biggest high school basketball game of the season in Rapid City, S.D., Marines stationed at Buckley Air Force Base conducted a surprise ceremony honoring the memory of Lance Cpl. Joe Welke, who died in Iraq last November. Stevens High School will display Welke’s military uniforms in the gym alongside the former football star’s jersey. Gunnery Sgt. Todd Martin, above, carries the dress blue uniform of the man he helped lay to rest.
The family paint smeared into tears. Beck whispered in Betty Welke's ear.

"I said, Do you want to hold that for a little while?" And she said, Yes.

"She was crying into it pretty good. And for me, that was kind of perfect. Because his combat uniform from Iraq has her tears in it. Her tears are in those threads. Forever."

The day after the ceremony in the gym, the Welke home in Rapid City filled with Marines Joe Welke never knew. Around the country, as people prepared for the Super Bowl, the Marines prepared for a birthday party.

"Today he would be 21," said Joe Welke's older brother, Nick. "He'd be back in town now. His battalion just got back."

"Twenty-one," he said. "The one you look forward to."

When the Colorado Marines arrived, they were met by Joe Welke would have welcomed them — with backslaps and beer.

"The Marine were so adamantly about coming up here with me on this," Beck said. "They were the ones who carried Joe. That funeral touched them so deeply."

After the start of the football game, the Marines and Joe Welke's high school buddies headed for the big-screen TV in the basement. Betty Welke remained upstairs, looking through photo albums as Beck hovered nearby.

When they were alone, she pressed an album closed and looked up at the major.

"I want to know what's really happening over there," she said.

For the next hour, Beck spoke passionately about the scenes he said not enough people see: the Iraqi elections, the small, successful everyday missions, and the positive days he saw ahead for Iraq — turning points he said her son helped make possible.

He then explained how he believes it could take more than a decade until the sacrifices made by the military pay off. The American public, he said, would have to learn to be patient.

She remained quiet, soaking it all in.

"But is it worth it?" she asked him finally. "Was it worth his life?"

He looked her in the eyes.

"Betty, with all you've been through, that's not something I can answer for you," Beck said.

"That's something for you to decide."

Casualty notification isn't always conducted with the same care.

In May, the parents of an Army private first class were stunned when their son's casket was delivered to them on a forklift in a cargo area of a St. Louis airport where employees on break smoked nearby. They also thought it insensitive that, when informing them of their son's death, the casualty assistance officer literally read from a script.

Others have watched their casualty officers "drop off the radar," or end up in Iraq, with no replacement provided. In some cases, the military has taken months to pay for a funeral or left families alone to navigate the morass of paperwork that follows the death of a loved one.

Recently, the governor of Illinois met with Army officials to voice the concerns of military families in his state. Other cases surfaced in February, during congressional testimony by war widows.

"Successful casualty assistance is not the rule, it is the exception," one Marine widow told the congressional committee. "This is certainly not the military taking care of its own."

Some branches now offer daylong courses on casualty notification. Next week, the Marine Corps is holding a large symposium in Quantico, Va., where casualty assistance calls officers — including Beck — will convene to share stories and advice.

Many problems could be solved, Beck said, if everyone followed a simple principle:

"To do this right, to do it properly, you have to look at these women as if they were your mother or your wife, and these men as if they were your father or your brother. And you have to ask, 'What would I want someone to do if it were me?'"

Inside a ballroom at an Aurora hotel in April, Beck adjusted a line of medals on a banquet table, struggling with all they reflected.

"When you think about what these guys did, it's not easy to look at these medals," he said. "What's the trade-off? What's the exchange? How do you say..."
Standing at attention, several Marines sought to contain their emotions and maintain their “Marine stare” as medals were presented posthumously to the families of their fallen comrades. Capt. Chris Satherland, Lt. Col. May, Maj. Nicki, Staff Sgt. Clifford Colinet, Gunnery Sgt. Todd Martin and others also presented each family with a bouquet of yellow roses—one bloom for each year of their loved one’s life.

Before presenting medals to the families of Lance Cpl. Greg Rand at a formal ceremony in April in Aurora, Marines read the details of the battle that took his life and of the heroism that saved his comrades. Rand’s mother, Jane, and wife, Kariisa Marcum, held the weight of the medals that he would never hold.

She screamed as the casket moved slowly down the conveyor belt. She screamed until she nearly collapsed, clutching Beck around the neck, her legs almost giving way. At the base of the luggage ramp, the screams hit the pallbearers.

Of all the Marines Greg had met or trained with, Jim Cathey was the one they considered irreducible, built with steel-cable arms and endless endurance—a kid who had made sergeant at 18 and seemed destined to laugh last.

Most of the Marines who served as pallbearers had first met “Cat” at the University of Colorado, while enrolled in an elite scholarship program for enlisted infantrymen taking his difficult path to becoming officers. They parted with him, eventually got into trouble with him, then watched him graduate with honors in anthropology and history in only three years.

When they lifted his casket, they struggled with the weight, their eyes filling with tears as they shuffled to the white hearse.

After they placed the flag-draped coffin inside, Katherine fell into one corner, pressing her face into the blue field of stars.

Beck put a hand on her back as she held the casket tight. By then, he was close enough to her to know that she wouldn’t let go. He kept his hand on her back until they found their way to the hearse. Something about Cat’s military uniform— coś an almost ghostly way— made Katherine let go of him.

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took one last look at the scene, fixing on the plane. By then, the passengers had moved on, leaving the Marines and the family alone with the casket — and everything that was about to follow.

Five days before Jim Cathey returned home, two uniformed men sat in a government SUV, several blocks from Katherine Cathey’s home in Brighton, and bowed their heads.

Beck and Navy chaplain Jim Chapman closed their eyes in prayer as the chaplain asked for “words that will bring the family peace.”

This time, Beck was dressed in a drab green uniform in accordance with a controversial new mandate from the top brass not to wear dress blue uniforms to notifications, based on concerns that the distinctive blues had become too associated with tragedy.

It was a warm, blue-sky Sunday afternoon. Nearby, a neighbor mowed his lawn.

When the knock came, Katherine Cathey was taking a nap. Her stepfather saw the Marines first and opened the door.

“We’re here for Katherine,” Beck said quietly.

“Oh, no,” Vic Leonard said.

At first, Katherine’s mother thought it was someone trying to sell something. Then she saw her husband walking backward and the two men in uniform.

“Oh, no,” she said.

“She’s pregnant!”

Leonard suggested to his wife that she wake up Katherine. Vicki Leonard shook her head. She couldn’t speak.

When her stepfather opened the door to her bedroom, Katherine could hear her mother crying. She thought something had happened to someone in her mother’s family. She had never heard her mother cry like that.

“What’s going on?” Katherine asked her stepfather.

“It’s not good,” he told her. “Come with me.”

Her own screams began as soon as she saw the uniforms.

Katherine ran to the back of the living room and collapsed on the floor, holding her stomach, thinking of...
the man who would never see their baby. Finally she stood, but still couldn't speak.

As Beck and the chaplain remained on their feet, she glared at them. She ran to the back of the house and drew a hot bath. For the next hour, she sat in the tub, dissolving.

Shortly after their arrival, Beck had ducked back outside to make a quick phone call.

Inside a government SUV in Reno, just around the corner from the home where Jim Cathey grew up, another phone rang.

The toolbox was a mess.

Jim Cathey's mother stood in the garage, trying to find the right wrench to fix a sprinkler head in her front yard.

What a frustrating morning, she thought.

As she prepared to leave for the hardware store, the family dog started to howl — a howl she had never heard before. She put the dog in the house and drove off.

When the silver SUV pulled up, the Marines inside assumed someone was home. A lawn mower sat outside and it looked as if someone was doing yardwork.

No one answered the door.

A neighbor drove up, looked at them and pulled into an adjacent driveway. The Marines started to get nervous. The neighbor looked out a window at them. Their orders were to remain parked at the house until the parents returned.

When Caroline Cathey drove up, she saw the strange government vehicle, then fixed her eyes on the man in the driver's seat.

"She saw me; she pulled in," Capt. Winston Tierney said. "And I hate this, but I think she might have suspected when she saw me. She got out of her vehicle and I told my guys, 'Time to go.'"

Caroline Cathey's hands went to her face.

"As I made my way up the driveway, we didn't say anything," Tierney said. "I wanted to wait until I was there. She looked at me and it looked like she was going to collapse. I supported her and tried to give her a hug."

He recounted the conversation from there:

"Please don't let it be," she said.

"I'm sorry to have to be here today. Can we go inside and sit down? There are some things we need to confirm."

"Please tell me it's not Jimmy, please tell me it's not my son."

The Marines stayed with the Catheys for the next 10 hours. With Caroline's help, they contacted Jim Cathey's 10-year-old daughter, Casey, who was born while he was still in high school. Casey, along with Katherine, had pinned the lieutenant's bars on her father only a few months before.

Casey's mother and stepfather drove the little girl from Carson City, Nev., to Reno, where another one of the Marines — an operations chief who had children of his own — told her that her daddy had been hurt in the war and wouldn't be able to come back. He asked her if she understood. She answered with tears.

The Marines held fast until Jim Cathey's father, Jeff, returned from a trip he had taken to his son's favorite hunting grounds, where he was scouting for game birds.

When it was all over, the Marines climbed back into the silver SUV. A staff sergeant looked at Tierney.

"Sir," he said. "Please don't take me on another one of these."

The flag never left Jim Cathey.

From the moment his body departed Iraq, the sturdy, heavyweight cotton flag remained nearby, following him from the desert to Dover Air Force Base, Del., where a mortuary affairs team received his body.

According to the Department of Defense, Cathey was killed in Al Karmah, Iraq, on Aug. 21. Members of his unit later told family members that Cathey was leading the search of an abandoned building when a booby-trapped door exploded. The explosion was so fierce it blew off an arm and leg of the Marine directly behind Cathey. That man, now in recovery, credits his lieutenant with saving his life.

Once Cathey's remains arrived at Dover, the mortuary affairs team began the delicate task of readying his body for the final trip home. When possible, military morticians prepare a body for viewing by the family. In Cathey's case, that wasn't an option.

Specialists at Dover wrapped his body in a white shroud and covered it with a satin body-length pillow and his dress blue uniform before closing the casket lid and securing the flag nearby.

When the plane landed in Reno, the same flag was draped over the casket, which was loaded into the hearse to continue its journey to the funeral home.

At the family home in Reno, Caroline Cathey shows Beck an apron her son gave her when he was a child.

Before Jim Cathey went to Iraq, his mother received a phone call from him late one night while he was at a bar with some friends. He said he wanted to toast her, then had all of his friends serenade her with the Neil Diamond song "Sweet Caroline," then said, "That ornery little grin."
Katherine presses her pregnant belly against her husband’s casket. The baby, a boy due Jan. 1, will be named James Jeffrey Cathey Jr.
After all the noise at the airport — the screaming, the crying, the whining of jet engines — inside the funeral home each footstep echoed.

The pallbearers carried their friend’s body to the front of an enormous empty room, then faded into the background. Beck posted himself at the head of the casket, his face frozen in the Marine stare.

His eyes trained forward, he still saw everything. Inside the room, Cathey’s mother, Caroline, bent down to hug Katherine. They squeezed each other for a long time.

“You give me strength,” the young widow said.

Other family members sat on couches and some sat on the floor — hugging, holding hands, their eyes locked on the casket, for nearly half an hour.

Finally, Beck broke the silence.

“I’m sorry,” he said, excusing the family from the room. “There are some things I need to do.”

Beck motioned to the pallbearers and began the instructions that would hold for the next three days.

Although the Marines are required to stand watch over a comrade’s body, once the casket is safely inside a locked mortuary or church, they usually leave at night and return when the mortuary reopens.

This time, however, the watch would not end.

“Katherine and Caroline have both expressed concerns about Jim being left alone,” Beck told the Marines. “So we won’t leave him alone.”

He then explained how to guard the casket. They all had posted watch before. They had stood at attention for hours as part of basic training, but nothing like this.

They were to take shifts of about an hour at a time, Beck instructed, standing watch 24 hours a day. When changing the guard, they were to salute Cathey’s casket first, then relieve the other Marine the same way.

He showed them the slow salute — the one they aren’t taught in basic training — three seconds up, hold for three seconds and three seconds down.

“A salute to your fallen comrade should take time,” he said.

For Beck, that salute embodies more than the movement itself. Earlier in the day, someone had asked him about the arrival of “the body.” He held up his hand with a firm correction.

“The body has a name,” he said. “His name is Jim.”

In the room, he walked up to the casket and paused.

“Now, this is important, too,” he said. “If a family member wants you to break, you can break. They may want to hug you or kiss you. That’s OK. Hug them. If someone wants to shake your hand, shake their hand. I’ll take my glove off when I shake their hand — you don’t have to, it’s up to you. But then go back to position.

“Everyone understand?”

“Yes, sir,” they responded. “Roger that.”

“This is a serious business,” he said. “Jim is watching you.”

As the other Marines filed into the hallway, closing the door behind them, Beck walked back to the casket. For the first time, he and Jim Cathey were alone.

It was time for the final inspection.

Beck walked up to the casket and lifted the flag back, tucking it into neat pleats and leaving just enough room to open the heavy wooden lid. He walked around the flag several times, making sure each stripe lined up straight, smoothing the thick stitching with his soft white gloves.

Then he lifted the lid.

For the past five days, Beck had spent hours looking at pictures of Jim Cathey, listening to the family’s stories, dabbing their tears. When he looked inside, they were no longer strangers.

For the next 10 minutes, Beck leaned over the open casket, checking the empty uniform that lay atop the tightly-shrouded body, making sure every ribbon and medal was in place. Occasionally, he pulled off a piece of lint or a stray thread and flicked it away.

Although casualty assistance officers receive an advisory from military morticians about whether a body is “viewable,” some families insist on looking. The casualty assistance officer is often the one to make last-minute recommendations, since by then he knows the family and — after the final inspection — knows exactly what the family will see.

Whether or not the family decides on a viewing, Beck said, the procedures are no less meticulous.

In Cathey’s case, the family decided not to look under the shroud. But Katherine wanted a few minutes alone with the open casket, to give her husband a few of the things they had shared — and one he never got to see.

Beck ran his hand alongside the shroud, taking one top. After opening the casket for Katherine, Beck took her hand and pressed it on the uniform. “He’s here,” he said quietly. “Feel right here.”

Because Jim Cathey was killed in an explosion, his body was wrapped in a shroud and covered by a body-length pillow. His uniform was then placed on top. After opening the casket for Katherine, Beck took her hand and pressed it on the uniform. “He’s here,” he said quietly. “Feel right here.”

Katherine drapes herself over her husband’s casket as Beck stands by. “I would suck all her pain away if I could. Every Marine would,” he said. “They’d take every ounce of pain and just absorb it.”

There are no words to describe how much I love you and will miss you. I will also promise you one thing... I will be home. I have a wife and a new baby to take care of and you guys are my world.”

2nd Lt. Jim Cathey, in a letter he wrote to his wife, Katherine, before leaving for Iraq.
Katherine draped her body over the smooth wood, pressing her pregnant belly to the casket, as close to him as she could get.

Beck placed a hand on her back.

"Tell me when you’re ready," he said. "Take your time."

She stepped back. The air conditioner cycled on, filling the room with a low hum. Ten minutes passed. It cycled off, leaving the room to her soft morn. She moved only to adjust her belt, continuing to rub her belly against the wood. She closed her eyes and pressed her lips to it.

Then she looked up at Beck.

"OK," she said.

As she stood up, he opened the casket.

She didn’t cry. She didn’t speak. She gave her a few seconds, then took her hand and brought it to the middle of the empty uniform. He held her hand there and pressed down.

"It’s here," she blubbered. "Just right here."

She held her hand on the spot, pressing the uniform into the shrouded body beneath. She dragged her hand the length of all that was there. She didn’t cry. She didn’t speak. They were married by a justice of the peace in Denver, planning a big wedding on his return from Iraq. Her wedding dress still hangs in her closet at home, unworn.

She walked the length of the casket, then turned again to them major.

"You do your part in saluting," she said. "I’ll do the rest."

She placed the flowers alongside the uniform, gently added a bottle of her perfume, then picked up the dried, fragile flowers of her wedding bouquet. Then she looked away from the note and at the shelves in the casket. The fuzzy image was taken two days after her husband’s death. Katherine had scheduled the appointments for a day when she was supposed to be sad, so they could both hear the baby snuggle together. He had a feeling it was a boy, he had told her. If so, she suggested, they should name the child after him.

She stood cradling the ultrasound, then moved forward and placed it on the pillow at the head of the casket. She stood there, watching for several minutes, then removed it.

She walked the length of the casket, then stepped back, still holding the only image of their friend 2nd Lt. Jon Mueller.

Katherine opened a laptop computer on the floor. Earlier that day, Katherine had told them she couldn’t bear to spend the last night away from her husband. She said she would sleep on a pew if she had to. The Marines found her an air mattress instead and promised to be ready. Arriving exhausted, she almost immediately crawled onto the bed they had made for her. Heripelgrimagehelped her in.

"Do you have another pillow?" she asked. "I need one to put between my legs."

Another looked at the blanket.

"Who are you, Martha Stewart?" the other shot back.

One of the Marines who has a child of his own smiled. "I think it would be kind of nice if you kept doing those things that made Jim Cathey who he was."

"But you really know how to carry one of them in the casket."

"You hear the president talking about making sacrifices. But you never really know until you carry one of them in the casket."

"When you feel their body weight."

"When you feel them, that’s when you know. That’s when you understand."
The night before her husband’s burial, Katharine refused to leave his side, asking to sleep next to him one last time. They had no gathered sheets, pillows, and an air mattress, setting up a makeshift bed for her. Before she fell asleep, Katharine opened her laptop and played her favorite songs they would have listened to at the wedding they never held. One of the Marines asked if she wanted them to stay and watch as she slept. “I think you would be kind of ridiculous doing that,” she said. “I think that’s what he would have wanted.”
wanted us there tonight. Even if she wanted us to go, I would have stayed there for her. I would have walked around in the shadows. Some way or another, we're always going to try to take care of her.

Of all the hours he has walked sentry, the last hour and a half was the hardest.

"It's almost selfish of us to die. James won't have to see her like that. They train us as warriors. They don't teach us how to take the pain away."

2:28 a.m. 2nd Lt. Charlie Loya Jr.
They call him the joker of the group: a massive man with a massive laugh.

"(After Cathey got killed) People would ask me how I'm doing and I'd say, 'I'm fine.' And I was. Then (at the airport) . . . we picked the casket up off the conveyor belt and all I heard was Katherine screaming. I thought, 'My wife would be doing the same thing.' Then all I could think about was my son."

When he heard about Cathey's death, he was scheduled to leave for Iraq in two weeks. Inside the room, he realized there were only eight days left.

"(Before Cathey died) people would ask how I felt about going over there. I'd say, 'I'm confident, I'm prepared and my boys are ready.' "

"Now I'm f---ing scared."  

3:19 a.m. Staff Sgt. David Rubio
"Cat" would have wanted them to laugh, he said, so he did.

"He was the smartest dumb guy I knew. I used to always tell him that. He was just a big oaf. I keep seeing that face, that big cheesy face."

He got up, paced the floor, holding the grin, the way the big oaf would have wanted.

"I got a call from him a couple months ago . . . The last thing he said was. "Mark time, dude. Mark time. I'll see you in the fleet.'"

"It just basically means, 'I'll be waiting for you.' "

4:23 a.m. 2nd Lt. Jon Mueller
He looked at the dark wall and thought of the casket on the other side.

"I'm still going to go when they ask me to go. But I also want people to know what I am doing. I'm not a very emotional guy. I don't show emotion, but I know that it's important for people to know how much you care for them. I'm not the kind of guy who can say, 'I love you.' It's not easy for me."

"I'll make it so that my loved ones know that I love them."  

5:19 a.m. 2nd Lt. Jason Lindauer
"Cat was doing what he loved. I suppose that makes it a little easier, but . . . I called my (4-year-old) son on the phone, and he said, 'Daddy, my friend Cat got killed.' (My wife had told him.)"

"I said, 'Yeah, I know buddy, Cat's in heaven.' "

"The Marine began to cry."

"(My son) said, 'Well, when's he coming back?'"

He lowered his head.

"I said, 'He's not, buddy.' "

As the sun rose in Reno, the casinos continued to chime. Diners began to fill. In the newspapers that hit the porches, Iraq had been pushed to the back pages again.

While the city churned, the sun found the building where Katherine Cathey awoke.

"It's the best night of sleep I've had," she said, surprised. "I really slept."

As she sat, wrapped in a blanket, her eyes bleary, she looked at the casket.

"You take for granted the last night you spend with them," she said. "I think I took it for granted. This was the last night I'll have to sleep next to him."

Behind her, the next Marine approached, preparing to take over the watch.

"I feel like they're my angels looking over me," Katherine said.

She placed her hand on her belly.

"Looking over us," she said.

It starts in slow motion.

At a windswept cemetery near 2nd Lt. Jim Cathey’s favorite hunting grounds, the Marines who died there during World War II. They each took home a sackful of sand from the beach. At Cathey's funeral, his friends drizzled fistfuls of it over his casket.
moved as if underwater, a precision slowness, allowing everyone in the cemetery to study each move, each frame, holding it as long as possible until it’s gone.

Beck stood back and started the ritual again.

“Present military honors,” he commanded.

In the distance, seven members of the rifle guard from Reno readied their weapons. Because the Reno unit was so small — with many of its members in Iraq — they called in recruiters and other Marines from across the state to help with the duty.

“Ready. Aim. Fire.”

With each volley, almost everyone in the shelter flinched.

“Ready. Aim. Fire.”

The Marines at the casket held steady.

“Ready. Aim. Fire.”

They knew the hard part was still to come:

Taps.

As the bugler played, the Marines held onto the flag, Second L.t. Loya blinked almost continuously, trying to hold back the tears.

After the last note, they began to fold.

The afternoon before, the pallbearers spent more than an hour with Beck as he instructed them on how to fold the flag. For such a seemingly simple task, there are hundreds of ways to get it wrong. Especially when you’re folding it for your friend’s pregnant wife — especially when you’re folding his flag for the last time.

The Marines took their time, stretching one fold after another, until the flag strained, a permanent triangle. A sergeant walked up and slipped the still-hot shells from the rifle salute into the folded flag.

Beck took the flag, cradling it with one hand on top, one hand below, and carried it to Katherine.

He bent down on one knee, looking at his hands, at the flag, his eyes reddening.

Before his tears could spill, his face snapped up and he looked her in the eyes.

“Katherine,” he said.

Then he said the words meant only for her — words he had composed. When he was done, he stepped back, into the blank stare.

Capt. Winston Tierney walked forward, carrying another flag for Caroline Cathey. The night before, the Marines had used the flag to practice, draping it over the casket — not only for themselves, but also so that Jim Cathey’s mother would know that it had covered her son.

The captain bent down on one knee, passed the flag into Caroline Cathey’s hands, then faded into the background.

For a group of Cathey’s friends, there was one more task.

The Marines, many of whom had flown in from Okinawa the night before, walked up to the casket. One by one, they removed their white gloves and placed them on the smooth wood. Then they reached into a bag of sand the same dark gray shade as gunpowder.

A few years ago, while stationed in the infantry in Hawaii, Jim Cathey and his friends had taken a trip to Iwo Jima, where nearly 6,000 Marines had lost their lives almost 60 years before. They slept on the beach, thinking about all that had happened there. The day before they left, they each collected a bag of sand.

Those bags of sand sat in their rooms for years. Girlfriends questioned them. Wives wondered what they would ever do with them.

One by one, the young Marines poured a handful of sand onto the gloves atop the casket, then stepped back.

Sgt. Gavin Conley, who had escorted his friend’s body to Reno, reached into the bag, made a fist and drizzled the grains onto the casket.

Once again, he slowly brought his bare hand to his brow.

A final salute.

“(The day after sleeping on the beach), we all did a hike up Mount Suribachi, where our battalion commander spoke, and we rendered honors to all the fallen on Iwo Jima,” Conley said.

He looked over at the sand.

“Now they can be part of him, too.”
Before leaving for a funeral in December, Beck hugs his children, Stephen, 2, and twins Lindsey and Abigail, 4. The Marine major’s job often means long periods away from his own family to care for others. “One morning after burying a lance corporal, all I wanted to do was come home and play with my children...” he said. “But you know, all I was thinking about while I was playing with them were all those guys out there in harm’s way, making all that possible.”

Minutes after the ceremony ended, a windstorm blew into the cemetery, swirling the high desert dust. Beck was one of the last to leave, giving his final commands to the cemetery caretakers in the funeral shelter: Make sure the sand on the casket doesn’t blow away.

“IT’s important,” he told them.

As he drove away from the cemetery, Beck replayed the last few hours in his mind, looking for lessons for the next time, hoping there wouldn’t be one, but knowing there would.

He thought back to the latest funeral — from the moment he rang the doorbell in Brighton until he handed the flag to Katherine and said those words that usually begin, “On behalf of a grateful nation...”

“You know, everyone always wants to know what the words are, what it is that I say,” he said. “I don’t say it loud enough for everyone to hear.”

There are scripted words written for the Marines to follow. Beck has long since learned that he doesn’t always have to follow a script.

“I’m basically looking into that mother, father or spouse’s eyes and letting them know that everyone cares about them,” he said. “But the words are nothing compared to the flag.”

He then drove several miles without speaking. In his mind, the subject had not changed.

“You think about the field of cotton somewhere in Mississippi, and out of all of it comes this thread that becomes this flag that covers our brave. Think about it.

“I had a cotton field right behind the house when I was going to command and staff college. Imagine being that farmer who owned the cotton field. Imagine if one of these parents was able to take a flag back to him and say, ‘That flag came out of your field and escorted my son home.’”

He shook his head.

“The things you think about,” he said.

It’s usually on these long drives that he allows himself to step back from it all, or at least tries to. He still hasn’t learned how to step back far enough.

“One morning after burying a lance corporal, all I wanted to do was come home and play with my children...” he said. “But you know, all I was thinking about while I was playing with them were all those guys out there in harm’s way, making all that possible.”

“Here we are, while they’re out there. Someone could be under attack right now. Someone could be calling for an airstrike...”

Someone could be standing at a door, preparing to knock.

“This experience has changed me in fundamental ways,” Beck said. “I would not wish it on anyone, but at the same time, I think that it’s important that it happened to me. I know it’s going to have an impact on someone’s life that I’m going to meet years from now.”

In a year, he said, so many scenes return. The doors — and doorbells. The first time he completed a final inspection. Sand on a casket.

The scene he sees the most, however, is not of a single moment but the entire journey, viewed through someone else’s eyes.

“One thing keeps coming back to me,” he said. “It was during the memorial service for Kyle Burns.”

The service came only a week after Beck first parked in front of that little white house in Laramie, watching the perfect snow, preparing to walk through it all.

During that memorial service, Kyle Burns’s uncle, George Elsom, recounted the call from his devastated sister, who phoned him after she first saw the Marines at the door.

“At Kyle’s memorial service, his uncle talked about all they had learned since that night.” Beck said. “Then he looked at us and said something I’ll never forget.”

“He said, ‘If these men ever come to your door, don’t turn them away.’”

“He said, ‘If these men come to your door...’

“Let them in.”

“Let them in.”