

On a Cold April Night
Holy Thursday Mediation
April 9, 2009
by Dr. Frank Trotter

On a cold April night forty-eight hours ago, the body of Army Specialist Israel Candelaria Mejias arrived at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware in a flag-draped aluminum case. Mejias, of San Lorenzo, Puerto Rico, was killed by an improvised explosive device (or IED) while serving in Iraq. His return Tuesday was the second time this week that members of the media were allowed to witness a U.S. combat casualty being brought back from overseas. When President Obama ended the Pentagon's 18-year ban on such coverage last Sunday, he announced that media could be present at such ceremonies at Dover if the family of the deceased gave their approval.

A little more than hour after Army Specialist Mejias' body arrived at Dover, an eight-member team from the Army's Old Guard in Washington, D.C., slowly walked up the rear ramp of the C-17 and into the cargo hold, where an advance team from the military mortuary at Dover stood quiet sentinel over the fallen soldier's body.

Col. Robert Edmondson, commander of the mortuary affairs operations, chaplain Maj. Klavens Noel, and Brig. Gen. Walter Davis, director of Army aviation, were there to pay their respects. After the chaplain offered a prayer, the carry team then gently picked up the case bearing the soldier's body and carried it to a waiting vehicle for transport to the mortuary, where it will be processed and returned to the family.

About two dozen members of the media were present at Dover. One of them, Kavitha Cardoza of WAMU in Washington, DC, was given permission to speak with members of the Honor Guard about their duty.¹

Here are some of their remarks and reflections: "There's nobody there, but it kind of has to be perfect... You don't want to mess up... It's our job to make sure we transfer [the remains] from the plane to the mortuary truck... We have to march out to the plane. At that time I can see the transfer cases, the caskets, on the side of the plane lined up – a metal casket with a flag on

¹ "Feeling the Weight of Their Duties at Dover Air Force Base," *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, April 6, 2009, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=102791680>.

it. I've never seen a casket like that before... In person, it's different. My legs were shaky... The chaplain says a prayer at the very beginning... We march up in formation... There's no music. Even the commands we call out are not loud... I can feel my heart beating. Every part of my body feels like it's one big heart, pounding... You never know if there's a 6'5" person in there weighing 300 pounds ... Sometimes it's really light because not all of the body comes back. There might just be a leg in there... It hits home. This is a service member who's made the ultimate sacrifice for his country... You're there to make sure he gets where he needs to go safely... All these thoughts come into your head. Was he young? Was he old? You don't know if it's a man or a woman. It could be a rank of private or a colonel, what type of person he is, where he's from, I wonder what he liked to do whether he was a mother, or father, or son... My very first one, I had one tear and I had to pull myself together... You can't really forget them. I remember every one I've ever done... These are your boys... I haven't known any of them. When I get out there, I feel like I've been serving with them the whole time I've been in the Marine Corp. When I pick up a fallen brother, I feel like it's family."²

Early today on a chilly April morning, lives and families suddenly changed forever. Many of us woke this morning to hear the tragic news that Nick Adenhardt, the rookie pitcher for the Anaheim Angels, had been killed when a drunk driver, driving on a suspended license, ran a red light and struck the car in which Nick and three friends were riding – slamming the car into a light pole. Two of Nick's three friends in the car were also killed – Courtney Stewart of Diamond Bar and Henry Pearson of Manhattan Beach. The fourth friend, Jon White, is in critical condition in the hospital.

At a news conference this afternoon, Scott Boras, Adenhardt's agent, said that Nick had called his father in Silver Spring, Maryland yesterday and "told his dad that he'd better come here, that something special was going to happen."³ Jim Adenhardt listened to his son and flew to California not knowing it would be the last evening he would spend with his twenty-two year old son. Indeed, last night's game was thrilling for the young pitcher and the Angels as he scattered seven hits over six scoreless innings against

² The Honor Guard in their own voices, interview with Kavitha Cardoza of WAMU, Washington, DC, <http://www.npr.org/templates/player/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=102791680&m=102805031>.

³ "Angels Pitcher Killed in Crash," ESPN, April 9, 2009, <http://sports.espn.go.com/mlb/news/story?id=4055343>.

the Oakland Athletics. All day Adenhardt's family and many friends across the country are coming to terms with his death.

In a way, the grieving offered for all of the men and women of the Armed Forces whose bodies are returning to Dover, the grieving for Nick Adenhardt, and the grieving for anyone who has died is a "requiem."

A requiem, of course, is a Christian liturgical service offered for the dead, particularly within the Roman Catholic Church as well as some Anglican and Lutheran churches. It came into being without music at first. When musical settings were introduced, the requiem was meant to be performed only in a liturgical service with monophonic chant. Over the centuries, the "dramatic character [of the requiem] began to appeal to composers to an extent that they made the requiem a genre of its own."⁴ Some of the great composers who have set this sacred text to music are Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Giuseppe Verdi, Hector Berlioz, and in the twentieth century composers like Benjamin Britten and John Rutter.

Behind the music, behind even the requiem itself and its history lies one of the strongest traditions in Christian faith: that the dead and their souls are to be offered with the greatest dignity and humility to what one ancient writer called "the awful majesty of God."

Behind even the tradition is the ancient story of Jesus, our Lord, who once came to an Upper Room with his closest friends, who gave them a holy meal, who went to the garden to pray, who was betrayed by one of them, who was forsaken by all of them in the very moment of his arrest, who was tried and convicted as a criminal, and who was crucified for our sakes. When his body was taken down from the cross, it was anointed and wrapped with the greatest dignity by his mother, Mary, Mary Magdalene, and the other women as they offered it up to God.

A sick man turned to his doctor, as he was preparing to leave the examination room and said, "Doctor, I am afraid to die. Tell me what lies on the other side." Very quietly, the doctor said, "I don't know." "You don't know? You, a Christian man, do not know what is on the other side?"

⁴ "Requiem," Wikipedia: the Free Encyclopedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Requiem>.

The doctor was holding the handle of the door; on the other side came a sound of scratching and whining, and as he opened the door, a dog sprang into the room and leaped on him with an eager show of gladness.

Turning to the patient, the doctor said, “Did you notice my dog? He's never been in this room before. He didn't know what was inside. He knew nothing except that his master was here, and when the door opened, he sprang in without fear. I know little of what is on the other side of death, but I do know one thing... I know my Master is there and that is enough.”

On a chilly April night, we gather here in this sacred place and pray for the beloved dead – those we know, those we know not, and especially, on this night, we pray for Jesus.

Tonight as we shroud the cross, it is a symbolic re-enacting of the wrapping of his body in linens when they took it down from the cross. Just as frankincense and myrrh given at Jesus' birth were prophecies of his death and burial, so the shroud is a symbol both of death and of the power that is to come when the shroud was cast aside on the third day.

On this cold and chilly night, we pray the words of the Requiem that have been spoken, chanted, and sung across the centuries: “Grant them eternal rest, Lord our God, we pray to thee: and light perpetual shine on them for ever. Thou, Lord, art worshipped in Zion; thy praises shall ever be sung in all Jerusalem. O hear us; O Lord, hear thy faithful servants' prayer; to thee shall all mortal flesh return. Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.