



FIRST-PERSON: A September memorial day

By David Sills

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--It was one of those travel days you hope to avoid, and once you're in the middle of one, you hope to forget as soon as possible. At least it started out that way.

I was trying to fly through Atlanta to make it back to Louisville, Ky., to see my bride and catch a bit of sleep before teaching an early seminary class. The long lines and grumbling passengers were my first indication of plans gone awry when I arrived at the tiny but congested airport where I began my journey homeward. Terrific thunderstorms around the country coupled with resulting flooding in Atlanta had canceled my flight, but I was able to get rebooked on the 1 p.m. flight to Atlanta -- which left at 6 p.m.! I arrived in Atlanta after a kidney-punching flight and walked into an airport that resembled a scene from a made-for-TV disaster movie. Of course, all outbound flights were delayed for hours; while we waited, I slipped into my anthropologist role to study the people.



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Five young men who would be flying to Louisville with me really caught my eye. They seemed both nervous and excited as they met and became friends -- and with just cause: They had just enlisted in the Army and were on their way to basic training and their military careers.

I remember Air Force basic training with all of its emotions and trials. Their young lives were about to radically change. At last, we all boarded and, while the atmosphere was thick with the tension of road-weary travelers, everyone behaved and kept their sanctification. Some even joked good-naturedly to ease the stress of those around them, although no one could manage more than a slight smile at the effort.

Just before we pushed back from the gate, the captain came into the passenger cabin and informed us that our plane was carrying a fallen soldier home. He explained that the military escort was on the plane with us and said, "I know that you are tired and that this has been a long and trying day for all of you. However, I would like to ask that when we get to the gate in Louisville, if you would be so kind, please allow the escort to leave the plane first so he can deliver the body to the waiting military detail on the tarmac for a short ceremony."

Everyone seemed stunned and sobered by the news. No one spoke. Suddenly, in the time it took the captain to speak those words, our terrible travel experiences were put in perspective. All of the frivolity of

returning vacationers, stress of tired passengers and timetables of business people paled into insignificance.

Below us in the plane was the body of a man who had gone into harm's way and died serving our country.

The total and tacit agreement of respect was obvious when no one moved as the arrival chime sounded the clearance for us to gather carry-on bags and leave the plane. The escort left to fulfill his duty and responsibility, and then we began to deplane. As we did so, we noticed that the ramp outside was illuminated by the flashing lights of a dozen patrol vehicles, flanked by uniformed police officers standing at attention. One by one, the disembarking passengers stopped and gathered at the terminal's glass wall to watch and "participate" in the ceremony to honor this fallen hero. The military detail marched to the plane to receive the flag-draped casket and then marched away to a respectful distance as two private vehicles drove up bearing family and friends.

Our hearts were in our throats as we watched the family approach the casket that waited in darkness on the ramp. They reached up and placed their hands on it. Some reached under the flag, as if to get as close as they could. I wondered whether denial made them want to open it to prove that some horrible mistake of identity had occurred. I could not help but imagine the last time they would have seen him -- all smiles and excitement as he was deployed. I wonder whether he suspected he might come home this way. I also wondered what the new recruits who were just beginning their military careers must have been thinking -- surely this would not be the first time they considered this as a possibility. All of us have read news accounts of the many soldiers earning our freedom who came home this way.

Still, when you see it in the middle of the night, in the middle of an airport, amid the normally racing and rushing crowd now in seeming suspended animation, it shakes you. When you hear your heart pounding and breaking for a man and a family you never knew, in a vacuum of profound silence that you are sharing with other strangers in such an unplanned and unforeseen somber gathering, it grips you. It reorders your priorities. It reminds you of what is important.

We watched the precise and formal military detail complete their duties to receive this fallen soldier with the honor that he deserved and had earned. Some rough and tough-as-nails types watched with hearts full and eyes brimming. Others wept. Others waited until we got home.

When the hearse door was closed, we began to disperse not en masse, but one at a time. It seemed that each one was praying before they left, or making a mental note about something important, or remembering a promise they thought they would never forget. Unfortunately, this kind of ceremony and the receiving of a loved one's earthly remains happen often, but this seemed unique somehow. Surely, it was not just I who felt that God was near and moving. We went home, but not the same. We had each been changed by what we witnessed.

September 21 did not start out to be Memorial Day, but it was.

To all of you who are serving our country and willingly stepping into harm's way for our sake, Thank You.

To all of you who have sent your sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, and moms and dads, Thank You. And, to those of you who have received your precious one back in such a solemn ceremony, and now pass the days remembering, Thank You. It may not help, but I promise to remember, too.

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