

Nec Metus De Morte Matthew Rawlings

Sixty-seven. I used to remember the names and social security numbers of most of the sixty-seven Marines, sailors, and soldiers I recovered or processed. Over time, those numbers and names have started to fade. The forgetting is bittersweet. I don't want to forget them. I feel I owe it to them not to forget. But remembering those details can burden one's soul and psyche. Sixty-seven lives ceasing to exist, with just memories left for their loved ones.

I take solace in the hope that I, with my fellow Marines, helped bring closure to the many sons, daughters, wives, brothers, sisters, mothers, and fathers. We were part of a mortuary affairs detachment; our deployment was one of beginnings and endings. We were with them soon after their lives ended and started them on their journeys home.

When asked what I did in Iraq, I usually just give a brief description, saying that if someone died, we were the ones who went out and got them and sent them home. I would just leave it at that; usually that was good enough for most. My hesitancy is not driven by secrecy, but a fear that I won't be understood. When most people hear of mortuary affairs, the first thing that comes to mind is a mortician. But that doesn't begin to describe our job. Some probably feel pity or sorrow for what we had to do. I seek neither.

While in Iraq I was a part of the Al Taqaddum detachment. We helped search for and recover service members killed in action, processing their remains at our unit's collection point (CP), a building with makeshift tables where we would search for personal effects. Most of them had been killed by improvised explosive devices (IEDs), the favored weapon of the insurgents. The remains were brought to us by the service member's unit or by the base hospital, usually

in remains pouches, what most people refer to as body bags. The trepidation and apprehension always set in when it was time to open the remains pouch.

I would try and imagine the worst possible condition a human body could be in and think that what I was about to see was “normal,” or not as bad as I thought it was. Sometimes it worked. Other times my imagination paled in comparison to reality. The insurgents began to use white phosphorous (WP) in their bombs during our deployment. I have yet to see a movie accurately portray what WP does to a human body. We had a search and recovery where WP was used in an attack on a humvee. The chemical, which burns ferociously, had scorched their bodies and practically welded the Marines to their seats. It is terrible to see a human being, especially a fellow Marine, reduced to char, nothing of what they once were.



When sorting through personal effects that were on service members when they died, I often came across bloodied or burned pictures of wives, children, girlfriends, parents, brothers, and sisters. Key chains with “World’s Greatest Dad” and letters from loved ones: Those are the memories that will never go away. So long as my mind functions, I will never forget those things. I remember going through a wallet of a young Marine, looking for identification. This Marine had two driver’s licenses from two different states. Neither was expired and, after further investigating, my teammates and I realized that one of them was a fake ID. I started to make a connection to my own memories of friends from back home. This Marine was younger than me when he died. Thinking about how he would never be able to go home again and share a drink with friends and loved ones was one of first times that the job got to me and made me think of home and my friends and family.

Another day it was a Marine brought to us from the base hospital. He had been hit by an IED while on a foot patrol in the city outside our base. Most of his body was shredded by the explosion and he was missing both legs—one at the knee and the other higher up on his thigh—and one arm was broken. We searched every pocket on him and pulled everything out so it could be documented.

After we finished, we sealed the Marine back up, put his remains in a transfer case, and draped it with an American flag. Our chaplain performed final rites according to the Marine's listed religion and we waited to send him on his way back home to his loved ones. Later that night, I drove out to the flight line with five other Marines and we carried him onto a waiting C-130. The entire flight crew and both pilots served as honor guards, lining both sides of our procession, saluting as we passed. I participated in this same event sixty-seven times throughout the deployment.

When we weren't in the CP or out on a recovery, we spent most of our time in the housing area or the weight room, trying to distract ourselves from thinking about the remains we had processed. We tried to keep to ourselves. The very

nature of our job meant that we could very well have to recover or process friends we made outside of our unit. To prevent that, we turned inward. But we did become close with a unit of Marine Military Police and their explosive ordinance disposal (EOD) team. Our jobs kept us in constant contact with each; inter-unit bonding was inevitable. Most of the time, they were the ones who secured a site for us to perform our search and recovery missions. The camaraderie between our units naturally grew with the more missions we conducted together. The master sergeant of the EOD team became another leader for us during our deployment. He helped get us access to areas of the base that made our jobs easier; he helped us acquire gear that we sorely needed. Even though he wasn't a part of our unit, he exemplified the practice of sustaining troop welfare.

Thanksgiving of 2005 is a holiday I will never forget. Our unit, the MPs, and EOD gathered to celebrate the holiday with a pig roast outside of our CP. Eating and drinking our O'Doul's "near beer" almost made us feel like we were home cooking out for the weekend. This was one of only a few days in which we had any fun, when *where we were* became a distant thought. That evening, our units parted ways to prepare for the next day's work.

On the following day we all received news that the EOD master sergeant had been killed by an IED. I will never forget the devastation that my unit and I felt upon hearing the news. Our biggest fear, knowing the person we were about to recover, had been realized. The MPs got most of master sergeant's remains back to us for processing, but we conducted a follow-up search and recovery the very next day. Our unit walked in search patterns. I looked for any other remains of the master sergeant, saw where the piece of shit that set the bomb off was probably hiding when he did it, and picked up a part of my friend's face. It all became *so* personal. It is a very sobering experience—not just in the military but anywhere—to speak to someone and share a holiday only to have them taken from you in the most violent way possible the very next day.

I kept to myself after I returned home, hoping to avoid having to explain what we had experienced. I tried to dismiss everything I had done and seen in the hopes that I might one day be okay with it. But you can never really be okay with anything like those experiences. I have realized, as I've gotten older, that what we did—the care and attention we put into recovering and processing the dead—helped to bring closure to families. It helped give them ease of mind in knowing that, though they would never hold their loved ones again, they were able to see them buried and at home. And that has eased the burdens I carry.