

Maj. Steve Beck, site commander of Marine Air Control Squadron 23 at Buckley Air Force Base, folds back the flag while preparing to open the casket of 2nd Lt. James J. Cathey, 24, for final inspection. Five days earlier, Beck had informed Cathey's pregnant wife, Katherine, of her husband's death in Iraq.

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."



Katherine Cathey, 23, waits in a limousine next to a hearse at Reno-Tahoe International Airport, preparing herself for the arrival of her husband's

casket. On Aug. 21, she learned of Jim Cathey's death in Iraq. Two days after that, she learned their baby would be a boy.

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 unite 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.

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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.

On the flight, the woman sitting next to him nodded toward his uniform and asked if he was coming or going. To the war, she meant.

He fell back on the words the military had told him to say: "I'm escorting a fallen Marine home to his family from the situation in Iraq."

The woman quietly said she was sorry, Conley said. Then she began to cry.

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 passengers pressed their faces against the windows. Outside, a procession walked toward the plane. Passengers in window seats leaned back to give others a better view. One held a child up to watch.

From their seats in the plane, they saw a hearse and a Marine extending a white-gloved hand into a limousine, helping a pregnant woman out of the car.

On the tarmac, Katherine Cathey wrapped her

arm around the major's, steadying herself. Then her eyes locked on the cargo hold and the flag-draped casket.

Inside the plane, they couldn't hear the screams.

Each door is different.

Some are ornately carved hardwood, some are hollow aluminum. Some are protected by elaborate security systems, some by loose screen doors.

During the past year, the 40-year-old Marine major in the white gloves has stood at the front doors of homes in three states, preparing to deliver the message no family wants to hear.

It is a job he never asked for and one for which he received no training. There are no set rules, only impersonal guidelines. It is a mission without weapons.

Steve Beck trained to fight as a Marine, winning accolades as the most accomplished marksman of his class — a man who later earned two master's degrees in a quest to become a leader on the battlefield. He had hoped to deploy during the Persian Gulf War and definitely thought he would get his chance this time.

Instead, he found himself faced with an assignment that starts with a long walk to a stranger's porch and an outstretched hand. It continues with a promise steeped in the history of the Corps that most people associate only with the battlefield:

Never leave a Marine behind.

In combat, men have been killed while retrieving their comrades' bodies, knowing that the dead Marine would have done the same for them. It's a tradition instilled in boot camp, where Marines are steeped in 230 years of history and the sacrifices of tens of thousands of lives.

For Beck, that promise holds long after the dead return home.

In the past 12 months, he has seen inside the caskets, learned each Marine's name and nickname, touched the toys they grew up with and read the letters they wrote home. He has held grieving mothers in long embraces, absorbing their muffled cries into the dark blue shoulder of his uniform.

Sometimes he's gone home to his own family and found himself crying in the dark.



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.

When he first donned the Marine uniform, Beck had never heard the term "casualty assistance call 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 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.

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, saddling stateside troops with the knock at the door.

On that day in October 2004, inside an office at Buckley Air Force Base in Aurora, Beck's phone rang.

"We have a casualty in your area," the voice said.

At the time, Beck wasn't sure what came next. He did know that he didn't have much time. Once the call is received, the goal for notification is four hours.

Troops in the field now often have access to e-mail and satellite telephones. So when a service member dies, his commander is directed to shut off communi-

cations back home to keep rumors from reaching the family before the notification officers.

Still, the pressure is palpable. The call often comes in the middle of the night. Officers must retrieve vital information from headquarters — the Marine's next of kin, the basic circumstances surrounding the death, addresses and phone numbers — and there is no room for error.

With each step, they get closer to the door.

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 Tsu 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), (died/was killed in action) in (place of incident), (city/state or country) on (date). (State the circumstances). The Comman-

dant 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 23, Beck knew that death notification was a possibility. The previous commander 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 stateside 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 rifleman — 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."



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?"

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 deep 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 because 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 CASUALTY 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. He had easily memorized the words in the manual. 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 battle. What if the parents aren't home? What if they become 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 casualty 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



Beck and another Marine approach Jim Cathey's family home in Reno, preparing to escort his loved ones to the airport to receive his body. On the day Cathey died,

another pair of Marines followed the same path, carrying the news of the 24-year-old's death, signified now by the gold star flag in the window.

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 neckstraps to protect them from enemy swords.

As they walked out of the gas station, Beck felt the eyes of the clerk.

He knows, 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 and Scarpino spent hours with the family, telling them the little information they knew, promising they would take care of everything they could.

Over the next few weeks, Beck found a way to bring home two Marines who had enlisted alongside Kyle. He helped organize a memorial service and Kyle's burial at Fort Logan National Cemetery in Denver. He helped the Burnses navigate the piles of paperwork dealing with insurance and benefits.

The whole time, Marines from Buckley watched over Kyle's body.

That first night, as the two men prepared to leave, Jo Burns gave each a hug. Bob Burns shook their hands.

"I don't know why, but even then I felt compassion for them," Bob Burns said. "I've done a lot of reflecting on that first night and that's what comes back: compassion."

"I don't know how Major Beck does this," Jo Burns said. "Because nobody wants to see him."

"You know, he feels every one of these like they were his own. He does. I tried to talk to him about that once, but he just put his hand up and turned around to face the wall."

"He had tears in his eyes. And he just said, 'I know.'"

Although Beck had no training as a casualty assistance officer, in a way he had trained for it all of his life.

His earliest memory begins with a needle.

As a toddler, he learned to hold a syringe to inject his diabetic mother with insulin. His parents had divorced when he was 1. Sometimes, he was the only one there to help.

As he grew up, the family scraped by. Some days he wore Salvation Army clothes to school. Things got harder from there.

When he was 13, Beck and his mother watched his 3-year-old brother die after being hit by a car. Months earlier, young Steve had taught the little boy to play catch.

Before the funeral, Beck stood at the open casket and placed his brother's baseball glove inside.

It took years for Beck and his mother to recover. She retreated and he rebelled, leaving home early.

Eventually, Beck channeled his anger into books, even planning to go to medical school, where he hoped to find a cure for his mother's diabetes.

But the stirrings of the Persian Gulf War shook him as he prepared to take his medical school entrance exams. His father had been a Marine and Beck had long thought of joining. He figured this would be the war of his generation and he didn't want to miss it.

His mother died while he was attending officer training school. When he lost her, he also lost his reason for studying medicine. He never went back.

Though 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.

"On my last trip out to see him, I took a drive with him and asked him if there was anything I could do," Beck said.

"He asked me if I could get a color guard at his funeral. That's all he asked for: a Marine color guard."

"I said, 'Dad, that's easy.'"

"I didn't get to talk to him again."

On a winter night, Beck pulled his SUV into Denver International Airport and looked into the sky, staring at all the lights that were not stars.

A limousine pulled in behind him, followed by an empty hearse.

It was early December, nine months before he would stand on the tarmac in Reno alongside a 23-year-old widow.

There is no rule requiring airports to allow a family into a secure area to receive the body of a fallen service member, and some airports around the country have refused, Beck said, shaking his head.

"In my mind, this is the first time that a Marine is back on Colorado soil, and (the family) deserves to be there," Beck said. "If I had my way, they'd know which frickin' light in the sky is him, which plane is bringing him in all the way."

Inside the SUV, his phone rang. He looked at the number and smiled.

"Hi, babe," he said. "We're at the airport, getting ready to bring one of our guys home. How are the kids?"

For Beck's wife, Julie, and their three young children, his job has sometimes meant his absence on birthdays and anniversaries. He spent last Thanksgiv-

Marine Sgt. Raymond Kocher stands watch near Lance Cpl. Evenor Herrera's casket in Eagle. Like many of the Buckley-based Marines, Kocher says funeral detail is one of the most difficult missions they face. "I actually start thinking about it the moment I wake up," he said. "I just want it to be perfect."



A Marine honor guard marches behind the hearse on the way to Evenor Herrera's burial in August. Since the war began, casualty assistance officers at Buckley Air Force Base have overseen the funerals of 19 active-duty Marines, 15 of whom died in Iraq and the other four in traffic accidents.

ing at a funeral.

Still, when he wakes up in the middle of the night to an ominous call, Julie wakes with him and remains nearby until he heads off to knock on another door. He talks about her the way the families he cares for talk about him: She's his rock.

"Hang in there," he said into the phone. "I'll be home late."

Then another call. Again, he recognized the number: another one of his families.

The contact list on Beck's cell phone is programmed with the numbers of grieving parents and spouses from Rapid City to Reno.

But he's not the only one, he insists, over and over. He said he takes his cues from his Marines, the men and women who get involved to the point where many of their families say they might as well have been deployed overseas.

"This job is all about sacrifice," Beck said. "We sacrifice our family stability. Many of us sacrifice income. We sacrifice our bodies. We break through. We're hard on ourselves. We break each other. And we're asked to make the ultimate sacrifice."

Outside the car, a Denver police officer's walkie-talkie crackled and he motioned to Beck.

The cortege pulled behind the police escort, heading toward the tarmac.

"There are moments in this experience that energize you, and there are moments that suck you dry," Beck said. "Those moments are short, but they're so defining."

"And you're about to see one of them."

As jet engines roared around him, Beck looked at the plane. The Marines marched to the cargo hold, toward the casket.

"See the people in the windows? They'll sit right there in the plane, watching those Marines," Beck said. "You gotta wonder what's going through their minds, knowing that they're on the plane that brought him home."

Commercial airplanes transport caskets every day — including service members killed in action. For the most part, the passengers have no idea what lies below.

Most people will never see the Transportation Security Administration officials standing on the tarmac with their hands over their hearts as a body is unloaded. They won't see the airport police and firefighters lined up alongside their cars and engines, lights flashing, saluting the hearse on its way out.

Occasionally, a plane load of passengers is briefly exposed to the hard reality outside the cabin.

"They're going to remember being on that plane for the rest of their lives," Beck said, looking back at the passengers. "They're going to remember bringing that Marine home."

"And they should."

Before graduating from boot camp, every Marine masters the blank stare: the focused-but-distant look that glares down from recruiting posters, the one meant to strike fear in enemies, the one intended to convey more than two centuries of tradition.

Marines are taught to hold the stare no matter what. If a fly crawls on their face, or in their ear, they are ordered to remain steady.

No training could prepare them for the funerals.

According to protocol — an extension of their sacred "never leave a Marine behind" mandate — a fallen Marine's body must be guarded by another Marine whenever it is accessible by a member of the public.

During the past year, the 60 active-duty Marines stationed at Buckley have taken turns standing guard over the caskets. Inevitably, they get to know the person inside.

Underneath their formal white caps, or "covers," many of the Buckley Marines keep the funeral brochures of every Marine they have watched over.

"Now they're watching over us," said Sgt. Andrea Fitzgerald, as she turned over her cap, revealing a photo tucked inside. "I call them my angels."

At the visitation, Marines hear the families talk to the body. At the memorial services, they hear the eulogies. During the burials, they see the flag presented to the grieving mother or widow.

Throughout it all, they try to hold the stare.

"They can stand there for hours," Beck said. "Their feet fall asleep up to their knees. The pain we're feeling drives us. It drives us for the family because the pride is bigger than the pain. But the pain — you gotta eat it, you gotta live with it, you gotta take it home and cry in the dark. What else are you going to do?"

For Sgt. Kevin Thomas, of Aurora, it starts when the Marines first meet the casket at the airport.

"You always hear all these statements like 'freedom isn't free.' You hear the president talking about all these people making sacrifices," he said.



Marines lift the flag from Evenor Herrera's casket during his funeral in Eagle, preparing to fold it for the last time and present it to Herrera's mother, Blanca, center. Even after watching so many similar scenes, the Marines say the cries

and grief of the families never leave their mind. "It's enough to choke me up, tighten my chest . . ." said Sgt. Kevin Thomas. "It's almost enough to wish that you could take his place, so these people wouldn't hurt so much."



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.

"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 anyplace he doesn't feel so helpless.

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

"I'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.

"He already bought them," Bob 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."

Thronged 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.

"Keep Joseph Welke long in your memories, for his sacrifice and that of others should never be forgotten," Beck said. "For if 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.

"The 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.

A Marine then held up a desert camouflage uniform — one that had arrived in the U.S. only a few days earlier.

"The Marine combat utility uniform has seen duty around the globe in the toughest of environments," Beck said. "Joe's combat 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.

In the stands, the face 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 Super Bowl Sunday, 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 the way Joe Welke would have welcomed them — with backslaps and beer.

"The Marines were so adamant 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 quite 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 (hold-



The raucous crowd inside the Stevens High School gymnasium falls to a hush in February as Marines from Buckley Air Force Base pay tribute to one of their fallen comrades: Stevens High grad Lance Cpl. Joe

Welke. "Keep Joseph Welke long in your memories, for his sacrifice and that of others should never be forgotten," Beck told the crowd. "For if it is, none of us deserve our freedom."



Upon receiving her son's combat uniform at the Stevens High ceremony, Betty Welke buried her face in the rough fabric. Beck, who handed her the uniform, said he asked her, "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."

"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?'"

Maj. Steve Beck



Before presenting medals to the family of Lance Cpl. Greg Rund 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. Rund's mother, Jane, and wife, Karissa Marcum, felt the weight of the medals that he would never hold.

ing up a medal), 'This is for your son?'

At the beginning of the year, Beck realized there were a number of medals due the Marines whose families he watched over. Instead of mailing the medals to them, which often occurs, he decided to hold a formal ceremony to present them to the families personally.

He called the ceremony "Remembering the Brave."

Beck considered the medals again, feeling their weight.

"It's not a trade, but in the minds of the mothers, I wonder if they think it is a trade, and that they're thinking, 'I don't want this medal. I want my son,'" he said.

"The only way I can dispel that is through something like this. By showing them the honor. By honoring their son."

After the lights dimmed in the ballroom, more than 500 people fell silent.

"You are about to hear the descriptions of individual acts of courage," Beck said. "Listen closely."

"Listen. Closely."

For nearly an hour, they heard detailed accounts of rocket-propelled grenade attacks and improvised explosive devices, of ambushes and assaults — each with the same ending.

Slowly, methodically, the Marines brought out the medals and citations and knelt before a mother or father they had first met on a doorstep. For each family, the Marines also presented a vase of yellow roses, one rose for every year of the Marine's life.

After it was over, Beck sat back and took another deep breath.

"Even some of our Marines say, 'Why are we doing this to the families? Why do you have to keep reminding them?'"

Beck shook his head.

"This isn't about reminding them — they don't need reminding. These families think about this every day of their lives."

He looked up, addressing every person who hasn't felt what those families have.

"This isn't about reminding them," he said.

"This is about reminding you."

On the tarmac in Reno, the white glove reached into the limousine, but Katherine Cathey couldn't move.

"Katherine," Beck said, "it's time."

"I'm not ready for this," she said. "I'll never be ready."

Her mother leaned into the car and spoke to her daughter.

"Katherine," she said. "Jim would want you to see this."

Katherine looked at her mother, then at Beck, and took his hand. After climbing from the car, she steadied herself, her arm intertwined with Beck's. Then she looked toward the plane.

At the sight of the flag-draped casket, Katherine let loose a shrill, full-body wail that gave way to moans of distilled, contagious grief.

"NO! NO! Noooooo! Not him! Noooooo!"

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 they had met or trained with, Jim Cathey was the one they considered invincible, built with steel-cable arms and endless endurance — a kid who had made sergeant at 19 and seemed destined to leapfrog through the ranks.

Most of the Marines who would serve as pallbearers had first met "Cat" at the University of Colorado, while enrolled in an elite scholarship program for enlisted infantrymen taking the difficult path to becoming officers. They partied with him, occasionally 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 visibly 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 onto 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 he found a solution.

"Would you like to ride with him?" he finally asked. She looked up, dazed, and replied with a sniffing nod. She took his hand again as he guided her to the front seat of the hearse, where the surprised funeral directors quickly moved papers to make room for her.

Jim Cathey's mother, father and sister took their own time with the casket, caressing the flag, remembering.

His mother, Caroline, thought of the baby who used to reach out to her from the crib. His father, Jeff, saw the boy he watched grow into a man on long hunting trips through the barren landscape nearby.

His sister, Joyce, saw the kid who became her protector. The day after she learned of his death, she had his face tattooed on the back of her neck, so "he will always be watching my back."

Last of all, the young Marine who had escorted his friend home walked up to the casket and came to attention.

Only a few months before, Gavin Conley had stood before his best friend at the formal commissioning ceremony in Boulder, where Cathey received his brass lieutenant's bars.

For Cathey, it was one of the most important days of his life, and Conley knew the best way to share his pride.

At the end of the ceremony, Conley walked up to the new lieutenant and snapped his arm to his brow, giving the new officer his first salute.

In front of the casket on the tarmac, Conley again brought his hand to his face, this time in one slow, sweeping movement. As the family wept, his hand fell to his side.

His job as escort was officially over.

Before climbing into the hearse with Katherine, Beck



Standing at attention, several Marines fought to contain their emotions and maintain their "Marine stare" | left, Sgt. Maj. Jeff Study, Staff Sgt. Clifford Grimes, Gunnery Sgt. Todd Martin and others also presented as medals were presented posthumously to the families of their fallen comrades. Capt. Chris Sutherland, each family with a bouquet of yellow roses — one bloom for each year of their loved one's life.



Jo Burns, of Laramie, puts her hand to the face of Beck, who has assisted her family following the loss of her son Lance Cpl. Kyle Burns. The tender moment occurred at a ceremony that Beck called "Remembering the Brave." Friends of the fallen Marines, left, posed for photos with their comrades' pictures and uniforms. After seeing his friend Kyle Burns die, Lance Cpl. Mike Ball said, "I started to let the tears come, but we had patrol in 10 minutes. . . . That night when I got back, I tried to mourn, but it was gone, and I knew I'd have to wait."



Second Lt. Marcus Moyer offers comfort to Katherine Beck before leaving for the Reno airport to receive the casket of her husband, Jim Cathey. Jim's mother,

Caroline, and sister, Joyce, hold tightly to each other as they prepare for a moment they all said they would never be ready to confront.

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



Katherine weeps on her husband's casket at the Reno airport as Beck comforts her. She clung to it for several minutes, refusing to move. "I know Jim's going to be

with me in so many ways," she said later. "And there will be so many people who will teach his son about his father."

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 like 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 9-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.

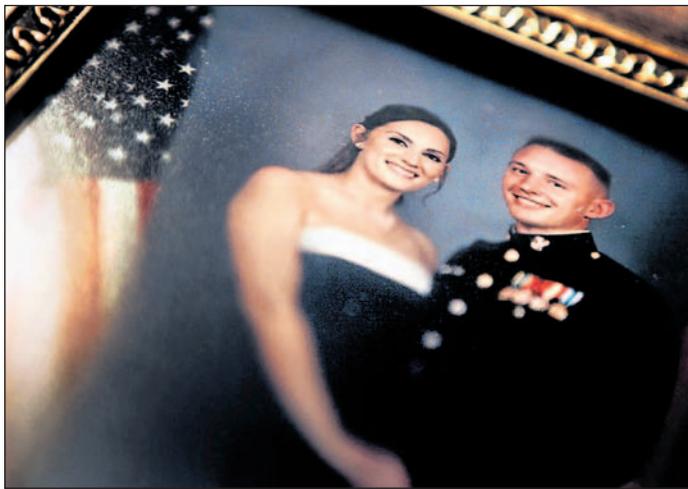
From the moment his body departed Iraq, the sturdy, heavyweight cotton flag remained nearby, following him from the desert to Dover Air Force Base, Del., where a mortuary affairs team received his body.

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.



Second Lt. Jim Cathey and his wife, Katherine, in one of her favorite photos. Since he couldn't wear his wedding ring into combat, he had her name tattooed around his ring finger. "I talk with the Iraqi people a lot and they always see my tattoo of your name and ask, 'Madam?' which is the word for wife," he wrote in one of his last letters to her. "Usually that leads into a conversation about our baby and their families. It's really quite nice and it always makes me happy."



Before leaving for the airport to receive his son's body, Jeff Cathey hugs two of Jim's best friends, 2nd Lt. Jon Mueller, left, and 2nd Lt. Marcus Moyer. As the funeral neared, Jeff Cathey, who suffers from

clinical depression, was surrounded by Marines who flew in from bases around the world to honor their friend and comfort his family. "Tell me about my son," Jeff Cathey asked them. "Tell me about my son."



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*. "I can still see that grin," she 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 procedure is 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

"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



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."

last look at the uniform.
He closed the lid and turned toward the door.

Katherine draped her body over the smooth wood, pressing her pregnant belly to the casket, as close to a hug as she could get.

Beck placed a hand on her back.
"Tell me when you're ready," he said. "Take your time."

He stepped back.
The air conditioner clicked on, filling the room with a low hum. Ten minutes passed. It clicked off, leaving the room to her soft moans.

She moved only to adjust her feet, continuing to rub her belly against the wood. She closed her eyes and whispered something.

Then she looked up at Beck.
"OK," she said.

As she stood at his arm, he opened the casket. She didn't cry. She didn't speak. He 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.

"He's here," he told her. "Feel 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.

Beck walked back to get the personal belongings Katherine had brought with her from Colorado.

"Where do you want to start?" he asked.
"With the picture of us kissing," she said.

She placed the picture at the top of the casket, above the neck of the uniform. She bent down and pressed her lips to it.

"I'm always kissing you, baby," she whispered.

She took several other photos of their lives together and placed them around the uniform. She gently added a bottle of her perfume, then picked up the dried, fragile flowers of her wedding bouquet.

Before Jim Cathey had left for officer training, 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 placed the flowers alongside the uniform, then turned again to the major.

"The ultrasound," she said.

The fuzzy image was taken two days after her husband's death. Katherine had scheduled the appointment for a day when Jim was supposed to call, so they could both learn the baby's gender together. He had a feeling it was a boy, he had told her. If it was, she suggested they 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 James J. Cathey Jr.

She leaned in and placed it over her husband's heart.

In the house where Jim Cathey grew up, a tattered stuffed animal still peers from a heavy wooden chest.

"This is Floppy Floyd," his mother said. "The last time he was here he said he wanted to take Floyd back, for the baby."

She held the stuffed animal to her face. Elsewhere in the house, she still has all of Jim's baby teeth and every award he ever won.

On his bookshelf, encyclopedias are shelved near the Louis L'Amour novels she used to read to him, next to a collection of Thucydides' writings.

"These are the things that made him who he is today," she said, then caught herself in present tense.

"Who he was today," she corrected herself softly.

Later, in the kitchen, she paused at a note that has hung on the refrigerator since the day Jim left home.

"See you all later. You know I love you and will be thinking about you every minute of every day. I miss you. Don't worry about me too much. I'll be back May 8th as a Marine! Write as much as you can. I will look forward to the letters. With all my love, J.C."

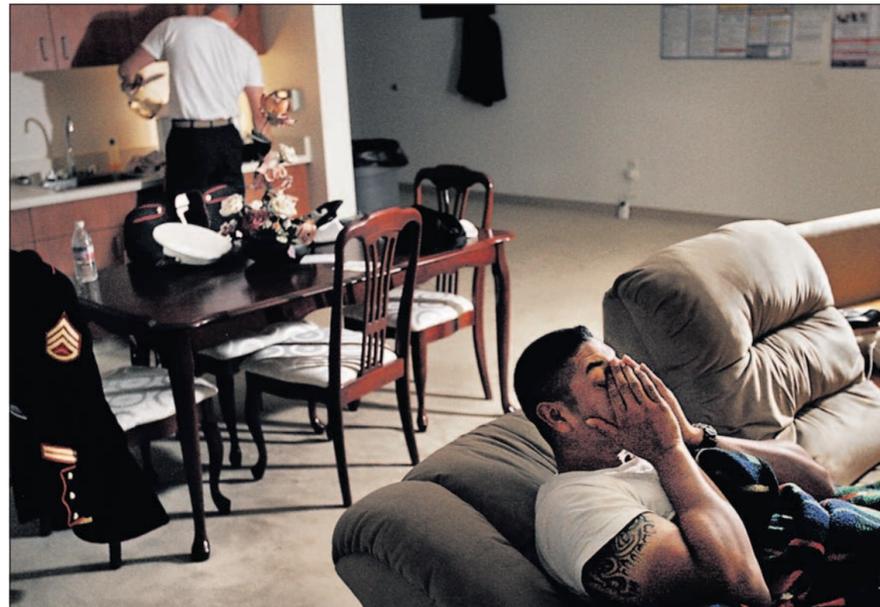
She looked away from the note and at the things that made Jim Cathey who he was.

"Maybe now I know why my son was always in a



"You hear the president talking about all these people 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."

Sgt. Kevin Thomas



The day before the funeral of their friend 2nd Lt. Jim Cathey, 2nd Lt. Jon Mueller, above left, and 1st Lt. Matthew Baumann practiced for hours folding the American flag. "That will be the last time his flag is folded," said Beck, as he gave them instructions. "It has to be perfect."

For three days, Marines stood watch over Jim Cathey's body, taking breaks in a room at the mortuary, where Staff Sgt. David Rubio rubs his eyes after a nap. "When you're in college, you're so detached from what's happening in Iraq," Rubio said. "The more we talk about it, the harder it seems to get."

hurry," she said.

Jeff Cathey almost didn't make it to his son's funeral. From the moment he saw the Marines at the door, he was thinking of his own.

Jeff, who suffers from clinical depression, spiraled deeper the day the Marines came to the house, to the point where his family worried more about him than their own grief. His wife hid all of his guns. Even so, the day after he found out about his son's death, he insisted on going back to the hunting grounds where he and Jim had spent their best times together.

"Before he left, I made him swear on his son's life that he would come back to me," Caroline said.

"I thought about doing it. Ending it," Jeff said, breaking into tears. "I really did. I want to be with him."

As he sat on the couch, he tried to compose himself.

"Good thoughts," he told himself. "Good thoughts."

And then found plenty.

"One of my finest memories was when we were hunting and he came back to the car, overturned a pail, sat down and started doing his homework."

"I wish I had a picture of that."

"You do," his wife said, rubbing his back, pointing to his head. "Right up here."

Inside the mortuary the night before Cathey's funeral, two Marines stood near the casket, unfurling sheets on a makeshift bed.

"Make it look nice, dude, make it look nice," one of them said.

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

Another looked at the blanket.

"If you're pregnant, do you get hot or cold?"

One of the Marines who has a child of his own looked at the bed.

"She's going to need another pillow," he said.

"Since she's pregnant, she'll need to put a pillow between her legs."

Then they saw car lights outside and took their positions.

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. Her stepfather helped tuck her in.

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

One of the Marines crouched down and asked if they should continue to post guard in the room.

"We can do whatever you want," he said. "We can stay or we can give you some privacy."

"I think it would be kind of nice if you kept doing it," she said. "I think that's what he would have wanted."

After one of the Marines dimmed the lights, Katherine opened a laptop computer on the floor. In the blue glow of the screen, she listened to the songs they would have played at the wedding they never held.

She swayed, then closed her eyes.

As drowsiness set in, she picked up an old T-shirt — the last shirt Jim Cathey wore before changing into his cammies to leave for Iraq. She hadn't washed it. It still smelled like him.

She held the shirt to her face and breathed in.

Just past midnight, Staff Sgt. Andrew Price walked to the back of the room and, like a watchful parent, dimmed the lights further. Then he closed Katherine's computer.

For the next hour he stood, barely illuminated by the light behind the altar, until another Marine approached from the shadows, paused before the makeshift bed and raised his hand in slow salute.

As each man was relieved, he walked into a spare room next to the chapel. In the darkness, one by one they spoke:

1:37 a.m. Staff Sgt. Andrew Price

The lanky Marine had stood watch at dozens of funerals at Arlington National Cemetery, but none prepared him for this.

"We would have stayed as long as Katherine



The night before her husband's burial, Katherine refused to leave his casket, asking to sleep next to him one last time. The Marines gathered sheets, pillows and an air mattress, setting up a makeshift bed for her. Before she fell asleep, Katherine opened her laptop and played the songs they would have listened to at the wedding they never held. One of the Marines asked if she wanted them to continue standing watch as she slept. "I think it would be kind of nice if you kept doing it," 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.

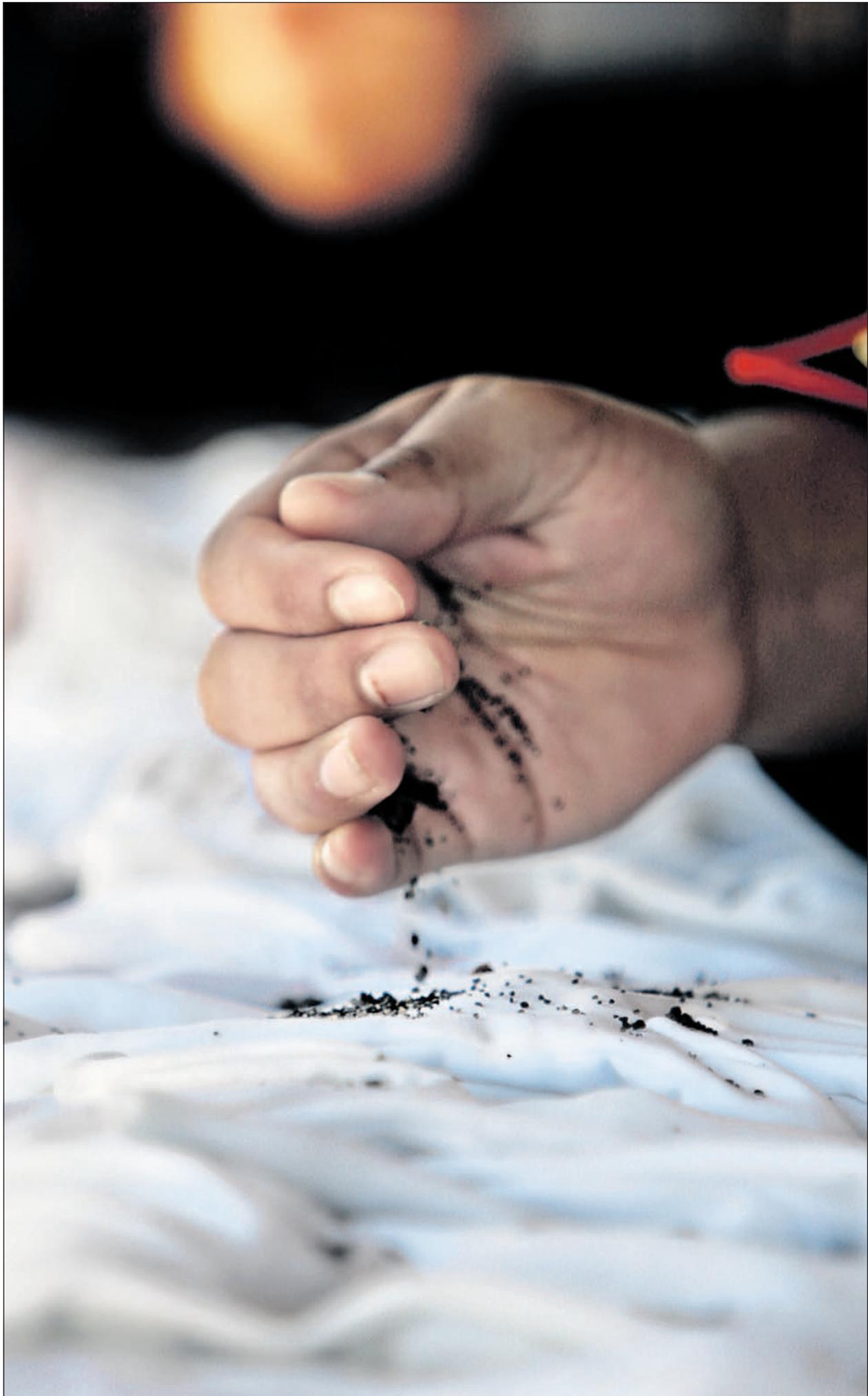
"Looking over us," she said.

It starts in slow motion.

At a windswept cemetery near 2nd Lt. Jim Cathey's favorite hunting grounds, the Marines

"The pain we're feeling drives us. It drives us for the family because the pride is bigger than the pain. But the pain — you gotta eat it, you gotta live with it, you gotta take it home and cry in the dark. What else are you going to do?"

Maj. Steve Beck



While stationed in Hawaii, Jim Cathey and his Marine buddies took a trip to Iwo Jima, where they camped on the beach and remembered the nearly 6,000 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.



During a wake for Jim Cathey at his family home in Reno, friends toast his memory. Most of the toasts

ended the same way: "Semper Fi" — Latin for "Always faithful," the Marine Corps motto.



Jim Cathey's father, Jeff, hugs a Marine as his son's funeral nears. "Someone asked me what I learned

from my son," he said. "He taught me you need more than one friend."



At Jim Cathey's burial, his casket was covered with the white gloves of the Marines who carried him, sand they brought from the beaches of Iwo Jima and a single red rose.

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 Lt. 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. Just take them into a corner with all their things and play with them," 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.' "