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In-demand honor guards train intense



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ly for veteran funerals

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Silently, six Soldiers work in tandem to fold the American flag. Poetically, this red, white and blue symbol of a nation is folded 13 times into a triangle. Upon the final fold, the flag is handed to a steely-eyed Soldier for some final caressing.

The Soldier methodically moves his gloved-hands over the flag feeling for imperfections in the fold – nothing but perfection will suffice. His arms crisscross the flag as he holds it tight against his chest until done. Its white stars and a blue background are accented against a uniform adorned with various ribbons and medals. He stands statuesque in the sweltering Arkansas heat. The only hint of mortality is the perspiration that begins to roll down the seemingly stone face.

The Soldier begins his precision move to hand off the flag. It exchanges hands several times before reaching the head of the casket and enters into the arms of the NCO-in-charge (NCOIC). With a salute rendered, and the delivery complete, the NCOIC stands facing the six like-figures, at attention facing the casket.

Quietly, a voice commands “ready, face” and the six Soldiers turn as if one. The NCOIC watches as they depart and fade into the distance. Finally, he is left alone, literally alone, as there is no seventh man on this day – no fallen Soldier. Today is a training day for the National Guard’s Honor Guard Training Course at the Professional Education Center (PEC).

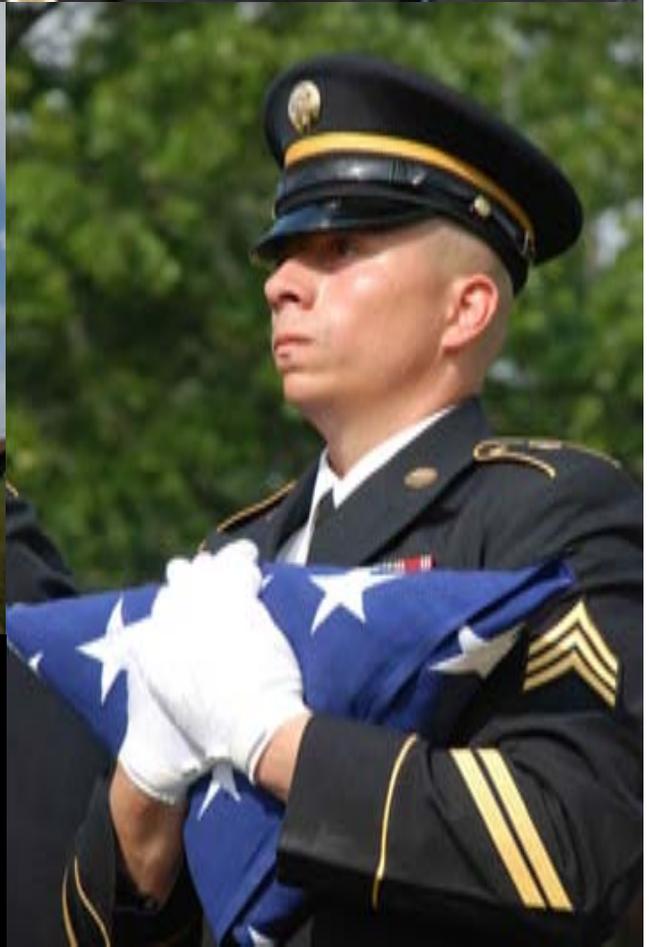
On this day, instead of marching over to the ‘next of kin’ and presenting the flag, the NCOIC simply hands it to his instructors, Justin Helton and Tim Ferrell. They understand the meaning of pride, honor and respect as the two served in the Army’s famed ‘Old Guard’ at Fort Myer, Va. They have participated in the funerals of Presidents Ronald Reagan and Gerald Ford.

The course Helton and Ferrell teach is a two-week ‘train-the-trainer’ course covering all aspects of military funeral honors, including firing party, transfer of remains, uniform standards, escort missions, drill and ceremony, weapons handling, as well as military funeral honors history

Its 16 students find themselves in a classroom consisting of rows of tombstones, an old-fashioned hearse and a casket. Today marks the end this surprisingly exhaustive, yet rewarding, course.

‘Reflection of what they lost’

“You’re there to give honor to a fallen Soldier,” said Sgt. 1st Class Michael Rios of the New Jersey National Guard, who attended the course. “For me, our presence instills the picture of the veteran that passed away. I believe the next of kin looks at us and sees their loved one; we are a reflection of what they lost.”



Soldiers face the riggers of a two-week National Guard Honor Guard Training Course at the Professional Education Center at Camp Joseph T. Robinson in North Little Rock, Ark. Graduates of the program are deemed certified trainers and then can go back to their state/territory and provide instruction to fellow Soldiers who will participate in their state Funeral Honors Program. Photos Army Maj. Craig Heathscott.

"I had one family member tell me, 'my husband wore that uniform,' and that should drive home that this is one of the most important jobs in the military. Our fallen veterans deserve the proper honors, and my uniform must be up to standards. They risked their life for our freedom, and they deserve the best."

Another student, Sgt. Chris Canady of the Georgia National Guard, reiterated the statement of his fellow classmate. "During the time that the family is going through a hard time, you are representing the military at the highest standard because you are the last thing they see as far as the military and their loved one. The mental toughness and discipline is pretty intense."

For Canady, simply attending the course at the PEC was deemed an honor: "Being sent to PEC from Georgia is a privilege, not a right. You must have experience coming into the program as you're standing in front of two members of the 'Old Guard' that are serving as your instructors. Even though I've done a lot of funerals, I was very nervous coming to PEC."

Canady and Rios recalled a week earlier standing at attention for long periods of time during uniform inspections; inspections that could be deemed a failure for wearing uniform accoutrements as little as one-sixteenth of an inch off. And Rios fondly recalls – with a smile – the numerous hours spent looking over and pressing his uniform.

Uniforms under a microscope

Even the most minute detail can't be overlooked in this world of exacts. The long hours would pay off for Canady and Rios when their peers graded their uniforms a week earlier. Standing at the position of attention, they waited patiently as their fellow Soldiers moved a six-inch metal ruler around their uniform, taking measurements that require 20/20 vision just to make out. The creases, overall uniform fit and general appearance are the focus of this block of instruction. Only two small errors are allowed, but fortunately, each individual in this class is a 'go' at this station.

"Literally, you can spend hours creasing your shirt with steam," said Canady, referring to the classroom portion focused on uniforms where steam machines are actually used. "That, along with worrying about errors of

one-sixteenth of an inch, requires discipline. Now, take all that in consideration and then stand at the position of attention for long periods of time at the head of a casket, and do it flawlessly. You do it because you love it. You do it out of respect."

Each of these Soldiers brings a different level of experience to the class. At the high end, Canady has participated in over 300 funerals. He's helped lay to rest veterans from the Korean War, World War II and the Pearl Harbor attack, and a 20-year-old KIA.

It was an increase in aging veterans and the passing of public law by Congress

111,524: Funerals that the Army Guard participated in 2009

53: Percentage that Guard participated of all DoD funerals

2005: Year that National Guard Funeral Honors Program began

13: Number of times the flag is folded before it's presented to deceased servicemembers's family

300: Funerals that Sgt. Chris Canady, Georgia National Guard, took part in last year

80: Percentage of all Army funerals that the Guard participated in last year

3 to 7: A rifle party will consist of an odd number of servicemembers within this range

1862: Year "Taps" was composed by Union Army's Brig. Gen. Daniel Butterfield while in camp at Harrison's Landing, Va.

that allowed every eligible veteran the right to receive a respectful and dignified tribute that brought the National Guard into funeral honors ceremonies. Along with Veterans Service Organizations, the National Guard was authorized to perform ceremonies in the late 1990s.

Program in high demand

The National Guard Funeral Honors Program began in 2005 and is currently active in 52 of the 54 states and territories. While funding and policy standards are controlled at the national level-National Guard Bureau and course taught at PEC, the states and territories

carry out the funeral honors.

The need for standardization in training is evident from the fact that over 652,000 veterans have died across all of DoD and over 323,000 Army veterans have passed away. And while all these vets are authorized military honors funerals, the families don't all make the request.

"The ARNG Funeral Honors Program establishes a direct connection with local communities and state government, and in effect, they take a lot of pride in what they do," said Sgt. 1st Class Jeffery Gilbert, Training NCO for the PEC Honor Guard Training

Course. "Our program ensures there is a national standard, and veterans get the respect they deserve. Aside from that, 'Big Army' doesn't have a school that teaches how to conduct military funeral honors, and we participate in 80 percent of all Army funerals."

In total, the Army Guard participated in a staggering 111,524 funerals in 2009 with that number expected to increase substantially this year. In the same year, the National Guard participated in over half (53 percent) of all DoD funerals. The need to have nationally trained standard is understandable.

Considering Guard Soldiers participate in over 80 percent of all Army funerals – active and reserve – and a huge percentage of DoD funerals, the commandant of the PEC understands the importance of this training.

"The reach of this program is beyond the 54 states and territories when you think about it," said Col. John "Jack" Frost, commandant. "It encompasses a nation, thousands upon thousands of veterans here and gone, and those who have supported them throughout their lifetime."

"It's more than going to class and getting a passing grade and a diploma. I ask you, 'have you ever seen a classroom environment that can give you chills, instill pride and demand respect?' Well, that's what SFC Gilbert, and his team, are challenged with daily, and that's what they deliver in a short amount of time. But much of the kudos must go to the states for sending such highly motivated, experienced Soldiers who make all that possible." 🇺🇸