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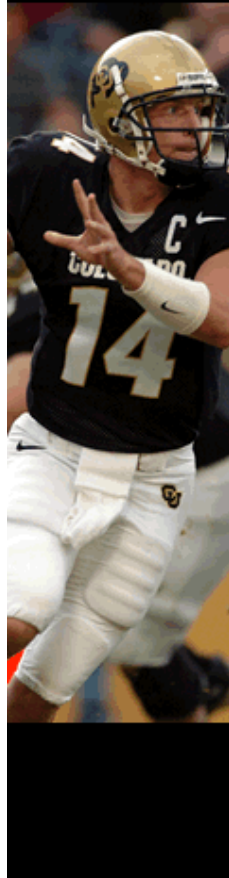
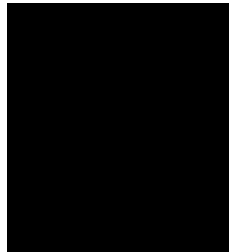
Retrieving the dead: In cloaking KIAs, are we blinding ourselves to war's cost?

By **Clay Evans**, Camera Books Editor
April 17, 2005

The United States of America goes to extraordinary lengths and expense — an average of \$1.2 million for each remains recovered from World War II, Korea and Vietnam — to recover its "soldier dead" from the battlefield. The soldiers who do the recovering often put their own lives at risk.

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That question, and many others surrounding America's evolving traditions regarding the treatment of soldiers' remains is answered at length in Louisville author Michael Sledge's graphic, informative new book, "Soldier Dead."

"The first reason is forensic: Did the armor fail? What type of weapons killed the soldier? Was he tortured? And then there are reasons of morale among soldiers and family members," says Sledge, who went to Iraq to research current practices.

And there is another, highly important reason, which Sledge conveys in a lengthy quote from Shakespeare's "Henry V": "But if the cause not be good, the king/ himself hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all/those legs and arms and heads, chopped off in/a battle,/shall join together at the latter day and cry all, 'We/died at such a place'..."

In other words, if the people are to know the true costs of war, they need to see the destruction it has wrought, Sledge argues. But especially since the first Gulf War, the U.S. government has strived mightily to keep all remains — even those enclosed in flag-draped, aluminum "transfer cases" — from public view.

"If we could even start using 'soldier dead' again, we could begin to bring back the realization of just what happens in war," Sledge says. "This is not an anti-war book, but I'm saying, if we do this (go to war), we need to know what happens. Give people information and by and large, they do a pretty good job of deciding what to do."

He notes that since 1990, the military has been aware of the "Dover test," named after the U.S. base where remains are repatriated: "Is the American public prepared for the sight of our most precious resource coming home in flag-draped caskets...?" General Hugh Shelton said in 2000, in describing the government's attempt to avoid the "Dover test."

But if Americans have little exposure to their own soldier dead (an expression used until the 1930s, when it morphed into the less personal "war dead"), they see even less of the destruction of the enemy. The military pointedly

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avoided "body counts" in Iraq until recently, Sledge says, when it began reporting the numbers of "insurgents" killed as a way to measure "progress."

Some Arab media heavily criticized by the United States are unabashed in their portrayals of the Iraq war's impact.

"I give (Arab news network) Al Jazeera a lot of credit for their depiction of human carnage," Sledge says. "If people don't want to see that, that's fine, but they are missing the point: It doesn't matter which side causes death and wounded, but how can we judge the worth of our mission if we don't even know the death count of the other side?"

He also notes that while U.S. forces go to great and dangerous lengths to recover their own dead, they show no similar concern for the enemy. Dead combatants (and others) in Fallujah were left in the streets for days after American dead had been recovered. Saddam Hussein's dead sons were shown on television at the order of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

"If insurgents had captured (former American Iraq administrator) Paul Bremer and put his picture out there like we did with Uday and Qusay, we'd have nuked them. It's a double standard made worse by the fact that Muslim people don't like to do anything to (their dead) but cleanse them and bury them quickly," Sledge says.

Sledge also wonders what will happen if the military succeeds in its efforts to conduct war almost entirely by mechanized means: "If we get to the position of sending robots out to kill for us, then we will lose that very in-depth pathos involved in assessing just what we are doing to the other side. When the other side has death rained down from our machines, they will find a way to get inside our borders."

Despite such questions, "Soldier Dead" is anything but polemical. It is well-researched and respectful in its exhaustive examination of the history of the treatment of U.S. and enemy war dead. But in an unusual twist for such a book (warning: it includes graphic black-and-white photos of war's "human carnage"), Sledge inserts himself in author's notes at the end of each chapter, and in writing, moved away from strict dispassion.

"We may not want to see this. But we need to know the numbers, see the pictures, have the information," he says.

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