

Why our heroes rest in peace

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The image comes vividly to mind: grief-stricken families at the grave site, mourning their loved ones in flag-draped caskets. It is a picture saturated with honor, grief, patriotism and sacrifice.

It wasn't always this way. This Memorial Day, we should stop and appreciate a little-understood fact: America has made great strides toward caring for the slain members of its armed forces. Indeed, those who serve as stewards of the fallen today are unheralded heroes in their own right.

Less than 200 years ago, during the Seminole Indian Wars in [Florida](#), the family of a slain soldier would receive notice of his death and an offer to return his remains, provided that the soldier was an officer and that the family provided a casket and paid all shipping costs. An enlisted man? Sorry. No money? Too bad.

The first return of dead to family members began during the Mexican-American War (1846 to 1847), when [Kentucky](#) authorized and set aside funds for the return of its fallen.

Following that brief conflict, the American Civil War wreaked havoc in the nation and among families, killing more than 600,000 soldiers. Orders were given during its duration to set aside cemeteries for the dead, the most famous of which is [Gettysburg](#), where [President Lincoln](#) delivered his stirring address.

What is little known about this cemetery, though, is that it was reserved for Union dead only.

After the end of the Civil War, teams of men swept through the countryside, finding all the remains of Union soldiers they could, and reburied them in national cemeteries, making identification when possible. It wasn't until 1927 that those killed, Union and Confederate, were duly recognized and provided with a final resting place.

In its wars across the globe since, beginning with the Spanish-American War, America has brought back its dead - at tremendous cost and even after sometimes considerable delay.

I have traveled across the world to personally view the remarkable process that goes to great lengths to assure family members of a final reunion with their loved ones. In [Europe](#), our personnel, to this day, investigate leads and mount recoveries of men who fell during World Wars I and II. The same is true in [Vietnam](#), where teams trek through forests and climb mountains, searching for missing remains.

And this process of recovery hasn't come cheap. Dedicated personnel have died in these searches.

The noble acts continue in the [U.S. Army](#) Morgue in [Baghdad](#), where many remains make their first stop before beginning the journey across the ocean and back to the States. There, I saw men of the U.S. Army Mortuary Affairs company carefully load the bodies of the fallen on a [C-130 Hercules](#) aircraft for the trip to [Kuwait](#); from there, the remains were transferred onto larger and faster jet transports bound for the [United States](#). The journey is undertaken with not only precision, but also with due reverence from all involved.