

Pararescuemen: Honoring fallen warriors

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SAN ANTONIO – More than 200 pararescuemen, active duty, retired and prior service, donned their service dress uniforms, with boots and maroon berets, and fell into formation. Local freedom riders holding American flags lined the street of the funeral procession. As their fallen comrade's remains arrived and were retrieved by honor guard members, the formation saluted him.

On a bright sunny afternoon in San Antonio, the mood is far from light on this day as pararescuemen from across the U.S. paid their final respects to their fallen comrade, Tech. Sgt. Michael Flores, in a funeral ceremony at Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery June 19 here.

There are only about 350 to 375 pararescuemen currently in the Air Force, said Chief Master Sgt. Lee Shaffer, the Pararescue career field manager.

"Once you're a Pararescueman, always a Pararescueman," Chief Shaffer said of the retired and prior pararescuemen who came out to honor Sergeant Flores. "It's not uncommon for prior (pararescuemen) to show up at these events. We want them to wear the berets. We are a brotherhood. "

The ceremony went on much like many other services do, but once the official ceremony was over is when the Pararescue ritual began.

The pararescuemen fell out of formation and formed a line up to the casket. One by one, they marched smartly to the casket and saluted Sergeant Flores. Then, they took off their berets and removed the flash, and placed it on Sergeant Flores' casket. They put back on their beret and saluted Sergeant Flores for the last time.

The flash is a device worn on the beret and is worn only by pararescuemen who have completed the two years of training it takes to become fully qualified. The flash comprises a guardian angel wrapping its arms around the world, which symbolizes the mission of pararescuemen. Underneath the flash it reads "That others may live", the Pararescue credo.

The tradition of slamming the flashes into the casket, so they stick and stay with the member forever, began shortly after Sept. 11, 2001, when Senior Airman Jason Cunningham, a pararescuemen, was killed in the battle at Roberts Ridge in Afghanistan, Chief Shaffer said.

"We've found, through the years, that some of the families like that tribute that we pay," Chief Shaffer said. "When one of our warriors falls we want to give as much back as we possibly can to the service member who lost his life and the family members. This beret, and the flash that's pinned on it, is probably the single most important thing to a pararescuemen. To us it represents all of our hard work, our dedication and basically our heart and soul. We want our fallen warrior to be forever buried with what's most precious to us and what was most precious to him."

Medevac crash victims returned home

DOVER AIR FORCE BASE, Delaware Public Affairs — The transfer team's steps were meticulously synchronized. Their white gloves were spotless. The flag wrapped around each case was tight, each with an identical number of stars and stripes showing.

They said little — just a few orders, barely audible over the clanging rotors of the Boeing 747. The Air Force chief of staff held a sharp salute as they walked by. The service secretary held his hand over his heart.

Four of their colleagues were killed two days earlier, when insurgents shot down their HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopter during a medical-evacuation mission in southern Afghanistan. And on June 11, the fallen returned to the U.S.; their remains were met here with full honors.

The Air Force transfer team first carried the flag-draped case containing the remains of Lt. Joel C. Gentz, a combat rescue officer who enrolled in ROTC because he wanted to be a pilot and fly rescue missions, from a hydraulic lift to a waiting cargo van.

Next came the body of Tech. Sgt. Michael P. Flores, a pararescueman who had previously been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and had served overseas eight times in 12 years.

And then Staff Sgt. David C. Smith, a flight engineer who had served in Iraq and Afghanistan during his nine-year Air Force career.

And, lastly, Senior Airman Benjamin D. White, a pararescueman on his first deployment.

Their helicopter crashed in Helmand province, leaving three other airmen injured and leading to the Air Force's deadliest day at war in more than five years. The remains of Lance Cpl. Michael G. Plank, a Marine killed in Helmand province on June 9, also made the trip from Germany.

Fellow pararescuemen escorted the remains from Germany and snapped a salute as the cases were moved from the plane to a hydraulic lift. The lift was lowered, and the transfer teams solemnly walked each case to one of two waiting cargo vans. Family members stood near the tail of the jet and watched.

Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Norton Schwartz and Secretary Michael Donley didn't provide a statement or take questions from the handful of reporters here — standard procedure for the event, known to the Air Force as a dignified transfer. And a port mortuary spokeswoman wasn't sure the last time such an event drew the service's top uniformed and civilian officials.

But the Air Force hadn't lost four or more airmen since May 30, 2005, when a prop plane crashed in Diyala province, Iraq. The incident killed four American airmen and an Iraqi officer.

The Pave Hawk carrying the pararescuemen crashed in the Sangin district of Helmand as it was providing support for British troops. A Taliban spokesman told the New York Times that insurgents shot it down with a rocket-propelled grenade.

Flores and White were assigned to the 48th Rescue Squadron at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Ariz. Gentz was assigned to the 58th Rescue Squadron at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev. Smith was assigned to the 66th Rescue Squadron at Nellis.

The wounded airmen are members of the 66th Rescue Squadron. They are being treated at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, Germany.

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TSgt Marisa Flores kisses her son, Michael Flores Jr., age 21 months, after they viewed photos of her late husband, TSgt Michael Flores, during a memorial service for the PJ who died in Afghanistan

The funeral flowers were red, white and blue. The flag overhead was three stories tall. The salutes numbered in the thousands.

Davis-Monthan Air Force Base paid somber tribute to two elite combat rescuers killed in action in Afghanistan, but amid the pomp, the tiny hand of a toddler hammered home the loss.

Nestled in the arms of his tearful mother, 21-month-old Michael Flores Jr. reached out and petted a photo of his late father's face that overlooked an empty pair of combat boots.

The moment capped an emotional morning at Thursday's on-base memorial for Tech. Sgt. Michael Flores, 32, a Texas native, and Senior Airman Benjamin White, 24, of Tennessee.

White and Flores, both of Davis-Monthan's 48th Rescue Squadron, are the first D-M fatalities since fighting began in Iraq and Afghanistan. They're also the 43rd and 44th service members with ties to Tucson and Southern Arizona to die at war during that time.

The military is probing the crash and hasn't released details. Foreign news outlets have reported that the Taliban claimed responsibility for shooting down the aircraft, which was on a rescue mission at the time.

At D-M, two HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopters, the same kind the airmen died in, flew past the memorial service to honor the fallen pair.

Flores was on his eighth deployment; White, his first.

"Our hearts ache for their passing," said their squadron commander, Maj. Jason Pifer, his voice breaking.

Yet both men died "doing what they loved," he added.

PJs undergo grueling training in daring rescue techniques, such as rappelling from helicopters or parachuting from high altitude.

About 85 percent of hopefuls flunk out during the two-year program. Those who succeed are bestowed maroon berets as symbols of their achievement.

Dozens of maroon berets topped heads bent in mourning as loved ones eulogized the late airmen. About 1,200 attended the service held inside an aircraft hangar.

"My soul is surrounded by darkness right now," said Flores' wife, Tech. Sgt. Marisa Flores, who is stationed at D-M and wore her dress blue uniform to the memorial service. The couple also have a daughter, Eliana, 3.

Marisa Flores described her husband as a devoted father, and a man so humble he'd shush her whenever she mentioned his career achievements, which included a Distinguished Flying Cross awarded for heroism.

"Michael and Eliana," she said, speaking to her children, "I want you know your Daddy loves you very, very much. He's not here to say it anymore, but I'll never let you forget."

White's father, Anthony White, recalled his son as a formerly aimless teenager who found a sense of purpose through his Air Force career.

After graduating from PJ school, he said, Benjamin White had a Bible verse tattooed on his back that symbolized his commitment to helping others: "Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for a friend."

White also is survived by his mother, Brenda Logozo and stepfather, Frank Logozo.

Staff Sgt. Jason Walker, White's supervisor, recalled him as a strapping man whose most frequent question to his boss was "What can I do to help?"

"The truth is," Walker said, as if speaking to White, "it looks like your heart was the biggest muscle of all."

In Memory of Michael P. Flores, Senior Airmen Benjamin White, 1st Lt Joel Gentz, and SSgt David Smith

Today I remember my oldest and most respected cousin Michael P. Flores. He was killed in action on a rescue mission in Afghanistan on June 9, 2011 as part of Operation Enduring Freedom. His helicopter was shot down by a rocket propelled grenade (RPG).

As a young child, Michael was someone that I looked up to for anything and everything. We spent a few summers in the small town of Agua Dulce, Texas with our grandparents. We stayed up late playing Madden and wrestling. I was always second fiddle, and I didn't mind one bit. He was the oldest, he was the strongest, the quickest in the pool, on the field, the smartest, the most handsome, the YOU FILL IN THE BLANK AND HE WAS IT adjective. Countless people are walking the Earth today because of his, and his compatriots, valiant efforts. They faced the most hostile conditions day in and day out rescuing people in danger. Their creed – "THAT OTHERS MAY LIVE."

His memory lives on with us day to day, frozen as a young 30-year old father of two, husband to a beautiful and caring mother, wonderful parents, brother and sister, loving grandmother, aunts and uncles, and countless cousins and family that span from the Middle East to Hawaii. We love you and will never forget your courage and selfless dedication for others.

D-M remembers fallen pararescuemen



DAVIS-MONTHAN AIR FORCE BASE, Ariz. – Senior Master Sgt. Michael Atkins (middle), 48th Rescue Squadron, salutes a newly unveiled memorial plaque while Staff Sgt. Brandon Daugherty (left) and Staff Sgt. Brent Moore, both members of the 48th RQS, stand at attention here June 9. The memorial plaque honors Tech. Sgt. Michael Flores and Senior Airman Benjamin White, both pararescuemen from the 48th RQS, who were killed in the Pedro 66 crash in Afghanistan June 9, 2010