

"NO WAY, SIR"

By Ryan Helfenbein

On Aug. 27, flags were ordered to be flown at half-mast out of respect for Sen. John S. McCain. In many countries this concept of having the flag flying below the summit on a pole is viewed as a sign of admiration, mourning, distress and, in some cases, a salute. According to most sources, this tradition began in the 17th century to make room for an "invisible flag of death" flying above. To many of us today it is an attention-getter and reminds us of the person(s) to be remembered.

Flying a flag at half-mast is only one of the many long-standing traditions that are carried out in honor of a fallen soldier. Another very common tradition is that of the folding of the flag over the casket at the gravesite. This is a military honor offered to all veterans who were honorably discharged from the US military. If you watch the honor guard closely, they fold the flag a total of 13 times in the form of a triangle. Many today believe that this is to represent the original 13 Colonies, but that is not the case. Each of the folds represents 13 individual symbols of remembrance and respect for the individual and country. Individual folds stand for everything from womanhood to our national motto of "In God We Trust." With the flag completely folded and tucked, it has the appearance of a cocked hat. According to the

American Legion flag-folding procedures, this is done to remind us of "the soldiers who served under Gen. George Washington and the sailors and Marines who served under Capt. John Paul Jones and were followed by their comrades and shipmates in the U.S. Armed Forces, preserving for us the rights, privileges and freedoms we enjoy today."

Nowhere is the level of respect for our military dead greater than at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery. The service members who volunteer for this duty of honor must commit two years of their lives to guard the Tomb. They must live in the barracks under the Tomb, cannot drink any alcohol on or off duty for the rest of their lives, cannot swear in public for the rest of their lives and cannot disgrace the uniform or the Tomb in any way. Since 1930, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier has been patrolled continuously, 24 hours a day, seven

days a week. In 2003, during Hurricane Isabelle, the assigned military members patrolling the Tomb respectfully declined the offer of suspending their duty. They simply responded, "No way, Sir." Completely drenched, withstanding torrential rain and wind, they patrolled the Tomb. Afterward they said that guarding the Tomb was not just an assignment, it was the highest honor that can be afforded to a service person.

Arlington National Cemetery truly does go into a veteran's records to be sure all aspects of military service is honored. For example, I recall one service we oversaw at Arlington where the veteran received full military honors. This consisted of a caisson, band, casket bearers, firing party and six honor guards marching in front of the band. The chaplain leaned over to the widow as they approached the graveside saying, "Mrs. Williams, those six honor guards are to represent something your husband did during his military career. You will never know what that was, but it was so admirable that those six servicemen are there to honor that deed."

Honoring those who put their lives in jeopardy to guarantee the freedom we enjoy today is something that is beyond commendable. This final salute is often done in a variety of ways, ultimately leaving those who are

left behind with a sense of pride and a strong feeling of respect.

During the holidays, to further honor those who served, wreath-laying ceremonies will take place on Dec. 18 at more than 1,400 military cemeteries throughout our country, as well as at sea and abroad. To donate or to volunteer with Wreaths Across America, log onto www.wreathscrossamerica.org

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