

A Most Dignified Ceremony

At the time of this writing, it was late September, and my lovely bride, Sue, and I just returned home to North Carolina from a weekend in Chicago and Memphis, where I attended my very last American Dental Association Continuing Education Recognition Program (ADA CERP) meeting, and the two of us made our very first visit to Graceland in Memphis, Tennessee (a surprisingly great trip). On our trip to Chicago, I witnessed a most amazing tribute.

On our way to the departing gate at Raleigh Durham International Airport, an honor guard of soldiers in dress uniforms, marching in unison, one carrying a folded American flag, passed us. As we were a good distance from our gate at the time, we did not think much about it. After boarding and reaching our cruising altitude, however, our pilot came on the intercom and commented on the honor guard, and informed us that we were, in fact, carrying the remains of a soldier who had died in combat back to Chicago, his home town, along with two soldiers accompanying the remains. After landing, when we were taxiing toward our gate, the pilot again came on the intercom and informed us that emergency vehicles, as well as an honor guard, would meet us at the gate. He informed us that a ceremony to remove the fallen soldier would be held, that the casket would be removed from the plane and placed on a luggage transport, and that the emergency vehicles and soldiers accompanying the body would escort the remains to some location in the greater Chicago area. He also asked that everyone remain seated until the two soldiers accompanying their fallen comrade exited the plane for the ceremony.

The pilot understood that there were 150 or so passengers on board the aircraft, many of whom had connecting flights to catch. You have been there before—your flight arrives late, you have fewer than 20 minutes to catch your connecting flight, you are seated half way back in coach, and the pilot or flight attendants also ask that if you are NOT having to connect at this or that particular airport, you stay seated and allow those with connecting flights to exit first to give them a fighting chance to make their next plane. And, you know what happens next. As soon as the seatbelt sign goes off, everyone on the plane stands, clogs the aisles, and begins the laborious disembarking process. If you happen to be the one needing to make a

connecting flight, you begin to kiss your chances of making that connecting flight goodbye. However, not on this day, and not on this flight. Not only did the two soldiers accompanying their deceased comrade exit the plane as requested, but NO ONE got up to exit until the entire ceremony concluded, which took nearly 15 minutes. I was awestruck by what I witnessed that Thursday morning on that American Airlines flight. The ceremony was also impressive. When our aircraft approached the gate, there were fire trucks and emergency vehicles forming a pathway to the gate for the plane. The fire trucks were the farthest from the gate, and when the aircraft passed them, they turned on the water cannons over the aircraft. All emergency vehicles had their emergency flashers on, and all of the grounds crew, including emergency vehicle operators, security personnel, baggage handlers, firemen, and military personnel were in line, at attention, awaiting our arrival. The casket was removed from the plane and was taken by pallbearers to a waiting luggage carrier—even the curtains on the side of it were painted with the American flag. All on the tarmac saluted, and the emergency vehicles accompanied the casket to some undisclosed location. Only then did anyone start to exit the aircraft, and everyone was genuinely impressed by what we had all witnessed that day.

My thoughts turned immediately to not only the beauty, honor, and dignity of the ceremony, but the fact that somewhere in the Chicago area, some parent had lost a son or daughter, some sibling had lost a brother or sister, a child had lost a parent, or a colleague had lost a close friend and compatriot. I was also highly impressed with the manner, in which, American Airlines handled this ceremony, and can only congratulate them, and everyone on board the flight that morning, on the compassionate and dignified manner, in which, they conducted themselves. Perhaps this type of tribute happens on other airlines, and I sincerely hope it does, as this is a wonderful tribute to those who have served in our armed forces and given so very much to keeping us free and strong. This was a very dignified ceremony I will never forget.

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