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Dignified transfer ... honorable mission

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4/13/2009 - **CHARLESTON AIR FORCE BASE, S.C.** -- Charleston C-17 aircrews are used to transporting cargo to and from the Middle East to support the warfighter; however, on April 7 an aircrew here had the most precious of cargo on board, the remains of a fallen hero.

Army Spc. Israel Candelaria Mejias, 1st Battalion, 2nd Infantry Regiment in Task Force 3rd Battalion, 66th Armor Regiment, 172nd Brigade Combat Team, Grafenwoehr, Germany, was killed April 5 near Baghdad, Iraq, from wounds he sustained when a mine detonated near him during combat operations.

An aircrew from the 14th Airlift Squadron here was in crew rest at Spangdahlem Air Base, Germany, when they were alerted and notified their mission back to the U.S. would be a dignified transfer from Ramstein AB, Germany, to Dover AFB, Del., where Specialist Mejias' family would be waiting for him.



Members of the 14th Airlift Squadron and the Army wait to render honor to the body of Spc. Israel Candelaria Mejias at Dover AFB., Del., April 7. The 14 AS crew was tasked with bring the remains of Specialist Mejias back to the U.S. where his body was prepared by the Air Force Mortuary Affairs Operation Center for final travel to San Lorenzo, Puerto Rico. (Photos by Leo Shane III. Used with permission from the Stars and Stripes. © 2009 Stars and Stripes)

There was an unspoken silence on the two-hour bus ride from Spangdahlem to Ramstein and all the priorities you had at home come to a screeching halt, said Tech. Sgt. Erin Manley, 14 AS loadmaster.

"You go out to the jet and reality sets in," she said.

Once the Charleston-based C-17 departed Ramstein, the aircrew flew a 9 1/2 hour direct flight to Dover AFB. It is the policy of the Department of Defense and the mission of the Air Force Mortuary Affairs Operations Center to return the remains of any fallen service member to their family as quickly as possible.

"It taxes on your emotions," said Senior Airman Stephen Adams, another loadmaster from the 14 AS. "We have a lot of time to reflect about the sacrifice of the individual."

After touching down at Dover AFB the aircrew stood in formation on the ramp of the C-17 and saluted Specialist Mejias as an Army carry team transferred his body.

Some mistake dignified transfers as a ceremony. The AFMAOC, however, says it's a solemn movement of the transfer case by a carry team of the military personnel from the fallen member's respective service. Each dignified transfer is presided over by a senior ranking officer of the fallen member's service.

Sergeant Manley said while standing in formation they could see Specialist Mejias' family near the end of the ramp.

"With as much grief as they are feeling, you hope they can see the care and the attention to detail; there is more sense of pride, the jet's clean, the flag's on straight. There's nothing you want to go wrong, because this guy deserves everything," she added.

"It's pretty emotional," said Airman Adams. "We try to return our military service members with honor, and that's what we did."

Once Specialist Mejias' body was transferred from the C-17 to a waiting vehicle, he was taken to the Port Mortuary where the AFMAO prepared his body for his final trip home to San Lorenzo, Puerto Rico.

"I can speak for most of the people here at Charleston AFB; we've all been a part of a mission or something like this," said Capt. Curt Haase, 14 AS pilot and the mission's aircraft commander. "It is one we are honored to do."