



An Airman rises to honor a fallen Soldier

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Today I had the privilege to be a very small part of several hundred people who gathered to honor a fallen warrior. Army Sgt. Thomas Bohall returned to Texas today from Afghanistan and he was met by a line of respect that stretched for more than half a mile.

Words, however, are a poor substitute to the sights and more specifically to a single face in which a whole world of non-verbal emotion collided.

Lining the road there were uniforms, mostly ABUs, the odd BDU, flight suits, civilian slacks, skirts, suits. They were representative of the team that makes the military work. They were worn by every skin tone you could consider and they came equipped with boots, shoes, pumps, and heels; with berets, flight caps, garrison caps and even cowboy hats, and they stood under a double line of 50 state flags - everywhere you looked you could see all of America represented.

At the end of the line, through the base gates, two ladder trucks from local fire departments formed an arch across the road, with an American flag hanging. And as the procession approached, what little noise there was ceased. Cars stopped, contractors doing grounds maintenance stood at attention and doffed their hats, uniformed service members saluted.

As Sgt. Bohall passed I dipped my eyes and in a fraction of a second, locked eyes with a woman who I can only assume was a wife, girlfriend or sister. I'll never know. She was no more than two feet away. She was sitting sideways in her car, facing directly into the row of us lining the road. Her face, wracked with grief and desperately straining to hold back tears that would end her connection with us, was a storm of emotion.

Barely visible beneath the grief there was also a hint of a smile on her tear-stained lips. That near-smile and her wide eyes spoke clearly of pride - the pride she had for Sgt. Bohall - Thomas -- regardless of the relationship they shared. Mostly, however, I saw in her face thankfulness. She was staring at people who had never met Thomas, never met her or her family, and yet here they were. On some level I think she probably understood at that moment that Thomas had always been around family, even when he was far from home.

In a second, she was gone, replaced by the low rumble of 74 motorcycles from the Patriot Guard, providing top cover for Sgt. Bohall and his family.

Salutes were lowered, cars moved, groundskeepers went back to work, but it was all quieter now. Did it matter that we were there; that we took an insignificant portion of our lives and saluted a fallen comrade?

Had you seen this woman's face, her eyes, her gratitude, you wouldn't even ask.

It made a difference. It mattered ... a lot.



A crowd gathers as a motorcade procession transporting the remains of Army Sgt. Thomas A. Bohall, of Bel Aire, Kan., travels down Harmon Drive at Randolph Air Force Base, Texas, June 7. Bohall was assigned to the 4th Battalion, 101st Aviation Regiment, 159th Combat Aviation Brigade, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), Fort Campbell, Ky. Sergeant Bohall was one of six soldiers from Fort Campbell who were supporting Operation Enduring Freedom and killed by an improvised explosive device during an insurgent attack May 26, 2011 in Kandahar province, Afghanistan. (U.S. Air Force photo/Melissa Peterson)