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Sacred Duty: A Soldier's Tour at Arlington National Cemetery

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TOM COTTON was elected to the U.S. Senate from Arkansas in 2014, following one term in the U.S. House of Representatives. He serves on the Senate Banking Committee, the Senate Intelligence Committee, and the Senate Armed Services Committee. A graduate of Harvard College, he studied government at the Claremont Graduate School and received his J.D. from Harvard Law School in 2002. In 2005, he was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in the U.S. Army, rose to 1st Lieutenant, and served deployments in Iraq with the 101st Airborne and in Afghanistan with a Provincial Reconstruction Team. His military decorations include the Bronze Star Medal, Combat Infantry Badge, and Ranger Tab. He is the author of *Sacred Duty: A Soldier's Tour at Arlington National Cemetery.*

The following is adapted from a speech delivered on April 9, 2019, at Hillsdale College's Allan P. Kirby, Jr. Center for Constitutional Studies and Citizenship in Washington, D.C.

Every headstone at Arlington tells a story. These are tales of heroes, I thought, as I placed the toe of my combat boot against the white marble. I pulled a miniature American flag out of my assault pack and pushed it three inches into the ground at my heel. I stepped aside to inspect it, making sure it met the standard that we had briefed to our troops: "vertical and perpendicular to the headstone." Satisfied,

I moved to the next headstone to keep up with my soldiers. Having started this row, I had to complete it. One soldier per row was the rule; otherwise, different boot sizes might disrupt the perfect symmetry of the headstones and flags. I planted flag after flag, as did the soldiers on the rows around me.

Bending over to plant the flags brought me eye-level with the lettering on those marble stones. The stories continued with each one. Distinguished Service Cross. Silver Star. Bronze Star. Purple Heart. America's wars marched by. Iraq. Afghanistan. Vietnam. Korea. World War II. World War I. Some soldiers died in very old age; others were teenagers. Crosses, Stars of David, Crescents and Stars. Every religion, every race, every age, every region of America is represented in these fields of stone.

I came upon the gravesite of a Medal of Honor recipient. I paused, came to attention, and saluted. The Medal of Honor is the nation's highest decoration for battlefield valor. By military custom, all soldiers salute Medal of Honor recipients irrespective of their rank, in life and in death. We had reminded our soldiers of this courtesy; hundreds of grave sites would receive salutes that afternoon. I planted this hero's flag and kept moving.

On some headstones sat a small memento: a rank or unit patch, a military coin, a seashell, sometimes just a penny or a rock. Each was a sign that someone—maybe family or friends, or perhaps a battle buddy who lived because of his friend's ultimate sacrifice—had visited, honored, and mourned. For those of us who had been downrange, the sight was equally comforting and jarring—a sign that we would be remembered in death, but also a reminder of just how close some of us had come to resting here ourselves. We left those mementos undisturbed.

After a while, my hand began to hurt from pushing on the pointed, gold tips of the flags. There had been no rain that week, so the ground was hard. I asked my soldiers how they were moving so fast and seemingly pain-free. They asked if I was using a bottle cap, and I said no. Several shook their heads in disbelief; forgetting a bottle cap was apparently a mistake on par with forgetting one's rifle or night-vision goggles on patrol in Iraq. Those kinds of little tricks and techniques were not briefed in the day's written orders, but rather got passed down from seasoned soldiers. These details often make the difference between mission success or failure in the Army, whether in combat or stateside.

After some good-natured ribbing at my expense, a young private squared me away with a spare cap.

We finished up our last section and got word over the radio to go place flags in the Columbarium, where open-air buildings contain thousands of urns. Walking down Arlington's leafy avenues, we passed Section 60, where soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan were laid to rest if their families chose Arlington as their eternal home. Unlike in the sections we had just completed, several visitors and mourners were present. Some had settled

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in for a while on blankets or lawn chairs. Others walked among the headstones. Even from a respectful distance, we could see the sense of loss and grief on their faces.

Once we finished in the Columbarium, "mission complete" came over the radio and we began the long walk up Arlington's hills and back to Fort Myer. In just a few hours, we had placed a flag at every grave site in this sacred ground, more than two hundred thousand of them. From President John F. Kennedy to the Unknown Soldiers to the youngest privates from our oldest wars, every hero of Arlington had a few moments that day with a soldier who, in this simple act of remembrance, delivered a powerful message to the dead and the living alike: you are not forgotten.

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The Thursday before Memorial Day at Arlington National Cemetery is known as "Flags In." The soldiers who place the flags belong to the 3rd United States Infantry Regiment, better known as The Old Guard. My turn at Flags In came in 2007, when I served with The Old Guard between my tours in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Old Guard is literally the *old* guard, the oldest active-duty infantry regiment in the Army, dating back to 1784, three years older even than our Constitution. The regiment got its nickname in 1847 from Winfield Scott, the longest-serving general in American history. Scott gave the regiment the honor of leading the victory march into Mexico City, where he directed his staff to "take your hats off to The Old Guard of the Army." Perhaps Scott felt an old kinship with the 3rd Infantry, because he had fought the British alongside them outside Niagara Falls during the War of 1812.

Among the few regiments to participate in both of the major campaigns of the Mexican War—Monterrey in 1846 and Mexico City in 1847—The Old Guard made history alongside American military legends. A young lieutenant later wrote that "the loss of the 3rd Infantry in commissioned officers was especially severe" in the brutal street-to-street fighting in Monterrey. That lieutenant's name was Ulysses S. Grant.

The 3rd Infantry was part of the main effort again the next year at the Battle of Cerro Gordo, the last stand on the road to Mexico City by Mexican General Antonio López de Santa Anna. The Mexicans had a numerically superior force on the high ground on both sides of the only passable road to the capital. But Santa Anna underestimated the Americans' ingenuity and audacity. With a young captain of engineers blazing the path, the 3rd Infantry hacked through the jungle and crossed ravines to attack the Mexicans from their rear, finishing them off with a bayonet charge. That captain's name was Robert E. Lee. And to this day, The Old Guard remains the only unit in the Army authorized to march with bayonets fixed to their rifles in honor of their forerunners' bravery at Cerro Gordo.

From President John F. Kennedy to the Unknown Soldiers to the youngest privates from our oldest wars, every hero of Arlington had a few moments that day with a soldier who delivered a powerful message to the dead and the living alike: you are not forgotten.

The Old Guard returned to the battlefield in the Civil War, fighting with other "regulars"—the career professional soldiers of the federal government, as opposed to the volunteer soldiers of the state regiments. The Old Guard fought in every major battle in the eastern theater from the First Battle of Bull Run to Gettysburg, where they

helped hold off Confederate charges against the weakened salient in Union lines at the Wheatfield. Watching from the nearby Round Top Hills, a state militiaman later wrote, "For two years, the regulars taught us how to fight like soldiers. At the Wheatfield at Gettysburg, they taught us how to die like soldiers." Though out of the fight, the regiment later served in Grant's headquarters at Appomattox Court House as he accepted the surrender of their old pathfinder from Cerro Gordo.

The Old Guard then went west following the American frontier, and ultimately to the Philippines at the turn of the century, fighting under General John "Black Jack" Pershing against Muslim radicals in Jolo and Mindanao—the very places where al Qaeda and the Islamic State have franchises today. They guarded our southern border with Mexico against Pancho Villa during World War I, and they trained the vast army of new recruits for World War II before deploying to Europe in the final months of the war.

It was after World War II that the Army assigned its oldest unit to its most sacred ground: Arlington National Cemetery, whose seal calls it "Our Nation's Most Sacred Shrine," and with good reason. To borrow from Tocqueville in a different context, those rolling hills seem "called by some secret design of Providence" to become our national cemetery.

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George Washington's adopted son—his wife Martha's only surviving son—bought the land that became Arlington in 1778 to be closer to his mother and his stepfather at their beloved Mount Vernon. General Washington advised him on the purchase in correspondence from his winter camp at Valley Forge. But our national triumph three years later at Yorktown shattered the family's dreams. Their son died of a fever contracted there, leaving behind a six-month-old son of his own. George and Martha raised the boy, who was named

George Washington Parke Custis but was known as Wash. When Wash came of age and inherited the land, he initially christened it Mount Washington, in honor of his revered adoptive father. Though he later renamed it Arlington, Wash used the land as a kind of public memorial in his lifelong mission to honor the great man. From hosting celebrations on Washington's Birthday to displaying artifacts and memorabilia to building the grand mansion still visible from the Lincoln Memorial today, Arlington got its start as a shrine to the father of our country.

A new resident arrived in 1831, when then-Lieutenant Robert E. Lee—himself the son of Washington's trusted cavalry commander during the Revolutionary War—married Wash's only surviving child, Mary. For 30 years, the Lees made Arlington their home and raised a family there between his military assignments. Because of his ties to Washington and his own military genius, Lee was offered command of a Union army as the Civil War started. But he declined on the spot. His long-time mentor—none other than the 3rd Infantry's old commander, Winfield Scott, now the General-in-Chief of the Army—scolded him: "Lee, you have made the greatest mistake of your life, but I feared it would be so." Resigning his commission, Lee left Arlington for Richmond, never to return. The United States Army occupied Arlington on May 24, 1861—and it has held the ground ever since.

Arlington at first became a military post, key terrain for the defense of the capital. The Old Guard even camped there for a few days in the summer of 1861. But as the horrific war ground on, casualties mounted and Washington's cemeteries filled up. Montgomery Meigs, the Quartermaster General, and Edwin Stanton, the Secretary of War, detested Lee as a traitor and saw a double opportunity: by turning Arlington into a Union cemetery, they gained hundreds of acres in new land for graves, while also foreclosing Lee's return after the war. On May 13, 1864, Private William Christman was the first soldier interred at Arlington. Thousands more would soon join him, fixing Arlington as a new national cemetery.

Arlington's seal calls it "Our Nation's Most Sacred Shrine." To borrow from Tocqueville in a different context, those rolling hills seem "called by some secret design of Providence" to become our national cemetery.

Or so it was thought. Lee's son inherited the family's claim to their old farm. Himself a Confederate officer, his name nevertheless reflected the nation's deep roots at Arlington: George Washington Custis Lee. Known as Custis, he petitioned Congress to no avail, then sued in federal court to evict the Army as trespassers. *United States v. Lee* worked its way over the years to the Supreme Court, which upheld the Lee family's claim. Fortunately for the government, the nation, and the souls at rest in Arlington, Custis was magnanimous in victory, asking only for just compensation. In 1883, he deeded the land back to the government in return for $150,000. The Secretary of War who accepted the deed was Robert Todd Lincoln, the son of Abraham Lincoln. After that final act of reconciliation between the firstborn sons of the great president and his famed rebel antagonist, Arlington's dead could rest in peace for eternity.

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Since 1948, when The Old Guard became the Army's ceremonial unit and official escort to the president, it has marched in inaugural parades, performed ceremonies at the White House and the Pentagon, and provided color guards and a drill team for events around the capital, among other missions. But one mission takes priority

above all else: military-honor funerals in Arlington National Cemetery. In manning, in training, in operating, funerals always come first, and they are a no-fail, zero-defect mission. While we often performed more than 20 funerals a day, we knew that—for the fallen and the family—each funeral was a once-in-a-lifetime moment, a lifetime in the making.

No matter how often we conducted funerals—and most of us performed hundreds of them—the pressure to achieve perfection for the fallen and their families never relented. Lieutenant Colonel Allen Kehoe, the battalion commander in charge of Old Guard funerals, has served in the 75th Ranger Regiment and is a five-time combat veteran. Yet he told me, "I've never experienced pressure like this anywhere else in the Army." He paused and added, "I know that sounds crazy." Perhaps to some, but not to me, and not to his soldiers. We felt the same pressure every day in Arlington, the pressure to perform our sacred duty to honor America's heroes.

Nothing interferes with The Old Guard's mission in Arlington—and when I say nothing, I mean nothing, not even 9/11. On that beautiful morning, the 9 o'clock funerals were underway when American Airlines Flight 77 slammed into the Pentagon, blasting debris across Washington Boulevard into the cemetery's southeastern corner. The Old Guard's Medical Platoon rushed to the scene, becoming the first soldiers to deploy to a battlefield in the War on Terror. Yet those funerals continued. So did the 10 o'clock funerals. And the 11 o'clock funerals. Over the next month, even as hundreds of Old Guard soldiers pulled guard duty at the Pentagon and carried remains from the crash site, funerals never stopped in Arlington.

Last year was no different during the state funeral for President George H.W. Bush. As the nation awoke to news of his passing, The Old Guard had already assembled in the pre-dawn darkness of a Saturday morning. Over the next six days, hundreds of Old Guard soldiers would honor the old aviator in Texas and at Andrews Air Force Base, the Capitol, and the Washington National Cathedral. Yet far from the limelight, funerals in Arlington continued as planned. As one Old Guard soldier told me, "Our standards remain the same, whether it's President Bush or a private first class."

Old Guard companies have industrial-quality press machines in their barracks to achieve razor-sharp pant creases. We measured uniform insignia out to one-sixty-fourth of an inch. Sitting down in uniform between funerals was prohibited to avoid wrinkles. We prepared for funerals in sweltering summer heat, winter blizzards, and driving rain. Even when inclement weather shuts down the cemetery, it does not stop The Old Guard from performing funerals on time and to standard.

Each morning, casket teams practiced folding the flag, even though they had folded thousands of them. Firing parties practiced their three-volley salute, seven rifles cracking as one in the parking lot. In the cemetery, we talked through the key sequences and cues before each funeral, sometimes conducting the very same talk-through six times in a day. Nothing was taken for granted.

For rare or complex funerals, The Old Guard goes to even greater lengths. I participated once in a group burial for twelve soldiers killed in a helicopter crash in Iraq. We rehearsed it for several days. Last year, The Old Guard dedicated the newest 27 acres of the cemetery by laying to rest two unknown Civil War soldiers whose remains were recently discovered at the battlefield of the Second Battle of Bull Run. The soldiers involved rehearsed the mission six times. Researchers believe, incidentally, that the two soldiers may have died from wounds suffered during the Union's failed assault on the third and final day of the battle—an assault in which The Old Guard participated.

Arlington is not the only site of The Old Guard's mission to honor our fallen. Since the earliest days of the Iraq War, The Old Guard has performed the dignified transfer of remains at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware, where our nation's fallen soldiers return home for the last time. My tour with The Old Guard coincided with the Surge in Iraq, so sadly we had Dover missions almost every night—and they typically happened at night, given the flight times and time zone changes. Whatever the time and whatever the conditions, The Old Guard was there when the remains landed. My soldiers and I once drove to Dover two days early to get ahead of a potential blizzard. If a soldier was coming home, we would be there to honor him.

Most Americans have seen the iconic photographs of flag-draped cases at Dover; few have stood among them on that windy ramp. But Old Guard soldiers have. We've stood alone in the cargo hold, inspecting flags for the slightest deficiencies. We've strained with a heavy case of a fallen soldier still in full combat gear, packed in ice. We've felt the lightweight cases of the dissociated remains of a soldier killed by an improvised bomb, the enemy's most deadly weapon in Iraq and Afghanistan. We've saluted from the airplane as the remains were driven away to be prepared for the return to their family.

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These poignant moments at Dover, like The Old Guard's unflagging dedication to our fallen at Arlington, tells not only a story about our war dead and the soldiers who honor them, but also a story about the nation on whose behalf they serve. We go to great lengths to recover fallen comrades, we honor them in the most precise and exacting ceremonies, we set aside national holidays to remember and celebrate them. We do these things for them, of course, but also for us, the living. Their stories of heroism, of sacrifice, and of patriotism remind us of what is best in ourselves, and they teach our children what is best in America.

We honor our fallen for them, of course, but also for us, the living. Their stories of heroism, of sacrifice, and of patriotism remind us of what is best in ourselves, and they teach our children what is best in America.

In doing so, we assure our fighting men and women around the world that they, too, will be remembered in death and their families will be cared for, a mutual pledge that shaped our identity as soldiers and our willingness to fight—and, if necessary, to die—for our country. "It is well that war is so terrible," observed Robert E. Lee as he watched his army slaughter Union troops at Fredericksburg, "or we should grow too fond of it." No one understands that lesson better than the soldiers who have fought our wars on the front lines and the soldiers who have honored the sacrifices of our fallen at places like Arlington and Dover. We know that sometimes our nation must wage war to defend all that we hold dear, but we also know the terrible costs inflicted by war.

No one summed up better what The Old Guard of Arlington means for our nation than Sergeant Major of the Army Dan Dailey. He shared a story with me about taking a foreign military leader through Arlington to lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Sergeant Major Dailey said, "I was explaining what The Old Guard does and he was looking out the window at all those headstones. After a long pause, still looking at the headstones, he said, 'Now I know why your soldiers fight so hard. You take better care of your dead than we do our living.'" ■

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