

FAREWELL AT ARLINGTON

WET SNOW FELL ON THE FIELDS OF WHITE GRAVESTONES as his family and a band of aging Condors from his old unit watched the honor guard lift Major Jim Newman's flag-draped casket onto a caisson. A plastic cover kept the flag dry but muffled its colors. One of the horses in the team of six whites and grays shook its bridle as it flicked flakes from its ears. White-gloved soldiers moved like animated stick figures, reaching ever so slowly for the old commander's coffin, raising it with absolute precision in endlessly rehearsed motions, following no audible command. They slid the box onto the wagon bed as the mourners closed on the scene, converging toward each other as they neared the troops and stopped. Hardly anyone looked around to see who else was there. All eyes were on the soldiers in dark blue dress coats and gold-striped pants. The horses stepped off, easing the shoulder-high wheels of the caisson into motion on the shiny-wet street.

THE PRICE THEY PAID



The band of mourners—a little girl with red hooded cape and umbrella, ex-cavalry soldiers in black Stetsons, an aging first sergeant with jump boots and a cane—fell in behind the caisson as the little troop made its way to Section 64, Arlington National Cemetery. Past the bleak gray walls of the Pentagon, the snow now sticking on the ground and grass, the cortege trooped through the maze of closely spaced white gravestones, identical but for their engravings.

Family and friends gathered around the grave site as the Army band played “America, the Beautiful.” By prior agreement with military officials, the major’s youngest son, who goes by Jay, took the

FAREWELL AT ARLINGTON

seat of honor reserved for next of kin. Two older sons unhappily stood their distance with their mother. His kid sister Elaine, the one he liked, sat next to Jay's wife and young daughters. On her left, in a scarlet-lined black hood, sat Pat, the black-sheep sister who shot and killed her husband in a trailer down in Georgia. Jay's mother, Kim, the second wife, wasn't there, but on Pat's left, in the last chair, staring straight ahead at the casket, was Cheryl, the last wife, another casualty on home soil. Standing in the open, their Cav hats protecting their faces, stood clutches of Condors, the men who served him nearly four decades earlier, who never forgot, and came to say good-bye.

Many of the Condors weren't there, of course. Some had been killed in air crashes after the war. Others died young. Many were far away. One, a promising pilot who planned to go to medical school after Vietnam, was living in a filthy, falling-down shack in the woods of Washington State. One way or another, war changed them all.

Chaplain Stanford Trotter, wearing gold braid, his hat bill embellished with the "scrambled eggs" of a senior officer and the golden oak leaves of an Army major on his shoulder straps, began with a familiar reading from the Gospel of John: "Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.'" The Protestant service never varies. Time is tight. The nation's military buries a couple dozen veterans a day at Arlington. "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. . . ."

In a brief eulogy that Jay asked me to deliver at the grave site, I mentioned that Jim was severely wounded during his first tour in Vietnam and, many years later, found and thanked the crew chief of his aircraft for saving his life by using his belt as a tourniquet to stanch the blood pouring from Jim's boot.

THE PRICE THEY PAID

Jim Kane, one of those in the small crowd gathered around the grave, stared at the casket, somber and attentive, his eyes unblinking in the falling snow. He knew he would not be standing there were it not for the personal courage and flying skill of Major Newman. He was not alone. Quite a few others credited Newman with saving their lives. At least a dozen of the men who served under Condor Six in Vietnam were there to say farewell. They came from all over the country and from foreign lands as well.

It was February 18, 2009, thirty-eight years to the day since Major Newman had flown his command ship through a storm of fire to retrieve four crewmen of a U.S. Army medevac helicopter that had been shot down at a besieged firebase in Laos. His decision to go in and get those men when a crew from their own unit determined it



Major Newman's wartime colleagues come to say farewell at Arlington National Cemetery.

FAREWELL AT ARLINGTON

was too dangerous earned Condor Six the first of two nominations Newman received for the Medal of Honor. Only six days earlier, he had driven his Huey helicopter into a grove of trees and deliberately cut off the treetops with his main rotor blade to haul Jim Kane and Jim Casher to safety after their Cobra gunship was shot down and surrounded in enemy territory.

Richard Frazee, Jim's sometime crew chief in those days, put it best: "It always amazed me how so many people with so many different backgrounds and personalities could all find common agreement on the value of this one man. Jim Newman was a man of immeasurable courage who made us all feel invincible and hard-pressed to keep up."

He couldn't save them all. Thirteen of his Condors were killed while he commanded the troop. He never forgot them.

Former infantry officer Ed Kersey, looking out at the cold, miserable, gray weather at Arlington, had a flashback to Vietnam. He remembered riding in Major Newman's Huey in the western mountains, bumping their heads on the cloud ceiling and dipping ever lower to keep the ground in sight. At the grave, the temperature crept above freezing, and the snowflakes started to melt as they landed on the cavalrymen's hats. Kersey looked over at Jim Kane and saw a big drop about to slip from the brim of Kane's Stetson. It was blood red! He saw another on Chuck Vehlow's hat. The microfine red-clay dust from their base at Khe Sanh, the color they had scrubbed for weeks to get out of the pores of their skin after the Laos operation, was still embedded in the felt of their beloved black Cav hats. As they stood paying respects to the man who had led them through those dangerous days, the dust that had permeated their skin and clothes and hair was now being drawn from the felt to the surface of their hats by the melting snow. It was dripping onto the ground at Newman's grave.

"In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ," the chaplain intoned, "we commend to

THE PRICE THEY PAID

Almighty God our brother, James Newman, and we commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”

The pallbearers stretched the flag above the casket, folded it crisply, and as the officer in charge knelt to hand the bundled blue star-spangled triangle to Jay, a flock of Canada geese swept over the heads of the mourners in V-formation, hooked a turn in the air a hundred yards off, and made a second flyover before the mourners. A Cobra gunship platoon couldn't have executed the maneuver more gracefully or with better timing.

A squad of riflemen, standing off among the grave markers in the snow-blanketed field, fired three volleys over the grave, and a lone bugler played the haunting strains of “Taps.”

Jim Newman was at rest. The mourners split up into three groups, those who had known him before the war, those who followed him into combat, and Jay's family and friends who were born afterward and knew an altogether different Jim Newman.