

## Last Flight Home - Forward Operating Base Salerno Khowst Province Afghanistan

Today I bared witness to a ceremony that is too common here at this forward operating base and other camps in Afghanistan. I am currently on travel to FOB Salerno, AKA Rocket City just outside the village of Khowst.



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A government colleague who has been keeping count since his arrival in March 2011 informed me that fifty-six rockets have impacted this forward operating base and thirty-seven communications blackouts has been implemented. More on the communications-blackout later.

Yesterday at approximately 0910 I was working in a tent on some hardware when an explosion went off. This explosion felt close however there were no sirens representing a direct FOB impact. At approximately 1030 the camp went in to a communications black out.



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The blackout occurs when a soldier dies and is implemented to prevent the family from being notified prior to official notification is received. I later found out that that explosion was the result of a vehicle rolling over an improvised explosive device which resulted in the death of a soldier.

Today, an announcement came over the PA that there was a “HERO” ceremony in fifteen minutes. I was on my post lunch walk around the FOB and moved post haste to the flight line to see this ceremony. Several hundred soldiers and civilians formed multiple lines in a double vee pattern lining both sides of the tail of a C130.



The assembled was called to attention by the sergeant major. As the ambulance slowly rolled pass each soldier raised his/her hand to salute the fallen soldier. Their hand fell back to their side after the ambulance passed by.

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I wished I could have taken photos of this but it was fitting not to. The ambulance stopped, the orderly personnel opened the rear doors and removed the body. I was expecting to see a flag draped coffin however this was not the case. I saw a flag wrapped body bag showing the outline of the soldiers' body. It was just twenty-nine hours prior that this person was living, breathing and walking. Today his lifeless body was prepared for his final flight home, to his final resting ground on his home soil. This body bag was on a green Army mesh field stretcher and was ceremoniously carried by six soldiers to the rear of the Air Force C130 where he was placed on the cargo deck. The Chaplin gave final rights and the standing assembled masses provided one last salute as his body was walked passed them. The Chaplin asked everyone to kneel and bow their heads while he said another prayer for the fallen soldier. After

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the prayer, everyone was released. The C130 started its' engines and departed for this soldiers' next destination on his last journey home.



Every time I come to this FOB it seems that there is just too much death here. It only seems that way because this FOB is small and they announce incoming wounded and fatalities. This is a FOB that I enjoy coming to sans the deaths. Now, it's time for me to look for a flight back to my base camp. With a few weeks remaining I hope is my last trip flying around Afghanistan. What I don't want is a mishap in my final days or hours of being here. Yes, call it a little superstitious, but I feel the more times I fly in this

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country the more times I tempt fate. But it's a mission that I must do for my customer who risks their lives to save the foot soldier on the ground.

Thanks and good night,

Carl Boler, eastern Afghanistan