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## The invisible wounded

Injured soldiers evacuated to the U.S. never arrive in the light of day -- and the Pentagon has yet to offer a satisfactory explanation why.

By Mark Benjamin

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March 8, 2005 | In January 2000, then Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Gen. Henry Shelton told an audience at Harvard that before committing troops, politicians should make sure a war can pass what he called the "Dover test," so named for the Air Force base in Delaware where fallen soldiers' coffins return. Shelton said politicians must weigh military actions against whether the public is "prepared for the sight of our most precious resource coming home in flag-draped caskets."

It's widely known that on the eve of the Iraq invasion in 2003, the Bush administration moved to defy the math and enforced a ban on photographs of the caskets arriving at Dover, or at any other military bases. But few realize that it seems to be pursuing the same strategy with the wounded, who are far more numerous. Since 9/11, the Pentagon's Transportation Command has medevaced 24,772 patients from battlefields, mostly from Iraq. But two years after the invasion of Iraq, images of wounded troops arriving in the United States are almost as hard to find as pictures of caskets from Dover. That's because all the transport is done literally in the dark, and in most cases, photos are banned.

Ralph Begleiter, a journalism professor at the University of Delaware and a former CNN world affairs correspondent who has filed a suit to force the Pentagon to release photographs and video of the caskets arriving at Dover, said news images of wounded American soldiers have been "extremely scarce." Wounded soldiers, like caskets, mostly show up in the news only after they arrive back in their hometowns. Begleiter said the Pentagon has tried to minimize public access to images and information that might drain Americans' tolerance for the war. "I think the Pentagon is taking steps to minimize the exposure of the costs of war," said Begleiter. "Of course they are."

A Salon investigation has found that flights carrying the wounded arrive in the United States only at night. And the military is hard-pressed to explain why. In a series of interviews, officials at the Pentagon's Air Mobility Command, which manages all the evacuations, refused to talk on the record to explain the nighttime flights, or to clarify discrepancies in their off-the-record explanations of why the flights arrive when they do. In a written statement, the command said that "operational restrictions" at a runway near the military's main hospital in Germany, where wounded from Iraq are brought first, affect the timing of flights. The command also attempted to explain the flight schedule by saying doctors in Germany need plenty of time to stabilize patients before they fly to the United States.

From Germany, the military flies the wounded into Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland. Troops with some of the worst injuries are delivered from there to the military's top hospitals nearby, Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington and National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md. But both hospitals bar the press from seeing or photographing incoming patients, ostensibly to protect their privacy. Other patients flown from Germany are held at a medical staging facility at Andrews until they are transported to other military hospitals.

Paul Rieckhoff, founder and executive director of [Operation Truth](#), an advocacy group for veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan, said the nighttime-only arrivals of wounded, along with the restrictions on coffin photos and other P.R. tactics, are designed to hide from the public the daily flow of wounded and dead. "They do it so nobody sees [the wounded]," Rieckhoff said. "In their mind-set, this is going to demoralize the American people. The overall cost of this war has been continuously hidden throughout. As the costs get higher, their

efforts to conceal those costs also increase."

But the Pentagon says it's not trying to hide the wounded from anyone. (Pentagon officials have also denied that banning photographs of coffins at Dover was a P.R. decision.) Capt. Herbert McConnell, a spokesman for Andrews Air Force Base, said that while it's true the flights of wounded arrive only at night, the schedule is not designed to minimize images of wounded soldiers. "There is no conspiracy, I can tell you that. I am absolutely sure there is no effort to bring them in under the darkness of night," McConnell said. "There is nothing shady going on here."

From Andrews, some of the most seriously wounded are driven to Walter Reed or Bethesda Naval Medical Center in buses, ambulances or unmarked black vans. Photos of the arrivals at the hospitals are prohibited. (Salon obtained the images of wounded arriving at Walter Reed at night despite the ban. The images do not show the identities of the patients.)

Nearly 4,000 soldiers hurt in Iraq have been bused from Andrews Air Force Base to Walter Reed, according to the hospital. Because the planes come in late at Andrews, patients arrive at Walter Reed after dark and after the hospital's clinics are closed. The wounded are unloaded into hallways empty of the patients, families and media who typically are present during the day. They are not unloaded into the common entrance closest to the emergency room.

On one recent night at Walter Reed, about 10 hospital medical officials wearing green camouflage lined up gurneys in the empty hospital lobby just before 10. At around 9:45 p.m., someone announced that the "buses are here," and staff began putting on light blue rubber gloves. White school buses converted into ambulances and marked "Walter Reed" pulled up. Two unmarked black vans did too. The convoy did not go through the main circular drive to a covered entrance close to the emergency room and pharmacy, where most patients go in and out. The vehicles instead pulled into a raised drive above that entrance and unloaded the wounded under the open, dark sky.

The medical officials slowly unloaded the wounded who were on stretchers. Others entered in wheelchairs, hobbled in on crutches or walked. Two soldiers brought in on wheeled gurneys were swollen-looking, appeared unconscious and were fully intubated with large ventilators strapped across their beds. A bag of what could have been bloody urine hung off the side of one gurney.

The walking wounded were handed white bags from the Red Cross off a cart outside. A handful of civilians came in at the same time and walked solemnly through the empty hallways to the hospital's Family Assistance Center with suitcases in tow. I witnessed two other arrivals like that on cold winter nights. Soldiers I know at Walter Reed have seen many more.

Walter Reed bars any media coverage of incoming wounded, ostensibly to protect their privacy. But the photos obtained by Salon prove how easy it is to photograph the arrival of patients at Walter Reed without violating privacy rights.

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