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# Begun on September 10, 2007, About 10:30 p.m . . . .

Stan Hardegree

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# Begun on September 10, 2007, about 10:30 p.m....

by Stan Hardegree

There is a certain awful meter to this thing, a beat set to an unseen and unheard metronome — of getting the first hint that something is wrong and then waiting and praying and waiting some more. Her Rosary beads are wrapped tight around her hands as she sits at her desk and prays in metered tones, Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee....

The second hand on the clock is a little louder and slower than you remember as the seconds tick by. No one knows anything yet so the phone isn't ringing. There's just that metronome tocking along toward the inevitable as the sun rises and climbs the summer sky toward noon. This is going to be a pretty day.

I go to my office upstairs to track the story on the Internet. The first shoe drops.

"There's a government vehicle in the driveway," comes the message from downstairs.

Braden, Michael's adopted brother, makes the announcement. He's been pacing the sidewalk out front while his girlfriend, Grace, rocks on the front porch.

I go downstairs and walk with his mother out to the driveway to greet them, a chaplain major and a sergeant major. The notification team.

"They're here to tell us that Mike has been hurt." I think to myself as we walk toward them.

I correct myself.

"You idiot, they don't send a notification team for that. They only call when they've been injured. And they don't send a notification team unless they are dead sure."

"Are you sitting down, Dad?"

"Huh?"

"I want you to sit down. Are you sitting down?"

"I am now...."

Most of my memory of those 15 days stops here. From this point forward, a good deal of my

life exists only from the perspective of a camera. For about 15 days, I live a third-person existence in my own life.

The only thing I remember saying to Mike's sister in Virginia is, "The notification team just left. You need to come home, sweetheart."

I don't remember her and her family arriving.

Most of the rest of the next two weeks exist to me only in personal accounts, pictures, newspaper accounts, and television interviews I did but can't remember doing.

I remember going to the airport to get Mike. Jay Collins leased a limousine for the family, and a motorcade of three or four cars went to West Georgia Regional Airport where a chartered Lear Jet with Mike aboard waited for us. There were a lot more people at the airport than I expected. I remember the crew opening the door of the plane and seeing the flag-draped casket inside. I remember the honor guard and pall bearers carrying Mike in front of and past us toward the hearse, and I remember seeing his dog tags hanging from the end handle of the casket.

"This is real," I vividly remember thinking.

We had his wake in Villa Rica at Jay Collins's Funeral Home; I was there, of course, but I don't remember much of it. Jay tells me that 2,500 people came through his funeral home during the two-day wake. There was a constant line outside the door, he tells me. Now and then a memory will push through the fog.

"I always liked chaplains when I was in the Army, but something tells me that I don't want to see you today," I say, greeting the major as he gets out of the Blazer.

"Are you Stan Hardegree?"

"I am." He introduced himself, but I don't remember his name. "Can we go inside? We need a quiet place to talk."

Then the certain awful meter starts again as we



begin the slow pace up our sidewalk, past Braden and Grace, toward the inevitable.

Once inside, his mother and I sit on the love-seat and we hold hands and we face the soldiers and we don't say anything and we don't breathe. The duty today falls to the sergeant major, with the chaplain standing alongside him at parade rest, silent and somber. The sergeant major, also at parade rest, pulls a piece of paper from his blue folder and after a pause begins to read.

"Mr. and Mrs. Hardegee, the Secretary of the Army sends his deepest regrets over the death..."

And he stops. That word stops him cold.

"...over the death..."

He gets to the inevitable. He has to...and the second shoe drops.

"...of your son Sergeant Michael Christopher..."

There is no mistake. They are dead sure.

"Goddamit," I say to no one in particular.

Now the awful meter is the sobbing of a mother who just found out that she has lost her only son in Baghdad. She lies on her side on the loveseat next to me as her tender heart breaks and she cries the most awful cry, the cry of a mother who just lost her son to war.

I stick my head out the front door where Braden is pacing the sidewalk on this pretty September day in Georgia.

"Mike's dead," I say, not able to manage much above a whisper. And that's all I say.

I go back in to thank the notification team and see them off on their rounds; dear God, I hope they don't have far to go today.

Now I don't know what to do. I am supposed to know what to do, but I don't. Dads and husbands are supposed to know how to fix things, but I don't know what to do.

The remainder of the day and night is the certain awful meter of people coming and going, one new group after the other about every five

minutes.

I station myself by the upstairs phone so that Cindy is relieved of the duty of informing friends and relatives — and of receiving calls. Calls come in every 15 seconds (they will come in every 15 seconds for 10 days). The news spreads fast.

The calls from good friends are rough.

"Stan? This is Andy. Is it true? Oh, shit, man! Oh, shit! I'm on my way. I love you two, man. I'm on my way, OK? Oh, shit. I love you, man!"

"Stan? Roger here. I just heard. Is it true? It will take me until tomorrow to get down there. I'm bringing Beth with me. She loved Mike. He was her first teenage crush. Oh, shit, Stan."

Some calls out are worse, one in particular.

"Dad?"

"Hey, boy..."

I remember seeing Keith Lipham, whom I met at a friend's place the Friday before Mike died on Monday. He hugged me and said, "Hello, my new old friend." Nice.

I remember that the 15 days between his death and burial were nice days as summer changed to fall.

I don't remember much about our time in Washington and Arlington Cemetery. That day is a blur. I am told that there were two congressmen and an ambassador at Mike's funeral and that I met them. Bill Clontz and Chris McClain, both old friends, were there, but I don't remember talking to them.

I remember sitting there at the grave looking at Mike's casket and thinking, "He will lie here forever. From this moment forward, he will never move from this spot in this ground." And I remember that the feeling of despair was overwhelming.

There is a picture of Cindy and me just after this moment, when General Galen Jackman presented us with the tri-fold flag at the end of the ceremony. I know what he was saying to us only because I have presented flags to widows and moms myself. Funeral detail.

