

The painful homecoming

By Dave Hansen

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I was a medic in the Air Force when the Marines were blown up in Beirut, Lebanon in 1983. After the survivors received immediate care, they were flown to various hospitals in Europe. I worked in an intensive care unit in Wiesbaden, Germany and took care of several seriously injured men and women. One man, in particular, I remember vividly. His face was blown off.

With our troops now dying in the Persian Gulf, no doubt being killed in ways unimaginable, I can't help but think about my dark experiences with death and war.

The sight of helicopters bringing in wounded bodies, medics rushing out with their heads stooped low, stretchers in hand — blood and agony ... the cries of pain are deafening.

After a while you become numb, working feverishly the way you were trained; your mind is focused, your body a machine, your hands swift and essential. Time becomes critical, but it passes in another dimension.

There are many medics now experiencing things they will never forget. There are many soldiers who will come home and not look the same, having had their bodies torn apart, their personalities and spirits forever changed, their scars forever tender.

We, too, will hurt. We hurt already, wondering who is being killed, wondering when it will end, wondering when we should cry.

Our anguish is unavoidable, but we have to face it because soon our troops will be coming home — one way or the other. They will arrive amid tears and heartache. Some of us will be devastated, others joyous. The happy ones will cook healthy meals and provide love and support in ways that we never did before because, well, things are different now.

We will talk and listen, but not rush things. Eventually, we may discuss the war, but only in certain terms. When the time does come, however, and the stories told, they will not be pretty. Images involving death never are.

I certainly will never forget what I saw, and I hope it is a long time before anyone has to see it again.

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