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Big issues lacking in Dover mayor race

Expert: Election likely to come down to 'personality'

By Bruce Pringle
Delaware State News

DOVER — It was their chance to grab the spotlight.

But when the three candidates for mayor of Dover appeared together Wednesday night in a forum at Dover

High School, none may have impressed potential voters in the April 20 election much more than any other.

Mayor Carleton E. Carey Sr. and his

See Mayor — Page 19

INSIDE

Classified.....42	Obituaries.....12
Comics.....FUN	Puzzles.....TV
Corrections.....2	Public Forum.....6-7
Dear Abby.....FUN	Real Estate.....42
Employment.....53	Sports.....21
Lotteries.....2	Upcoming events.38
Movies.....41	Weather.....2

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Delaware State News/Jessica Eisenbrey
The transfer case holding the remains of U.S. Army Sgt. Kurt E. Kruize rests on a K-loader during a dignified transfer at Dover Air Force Base on Tuesday. Soldiers of the carry team proceed to ground level to meet the case when it is lowered.

A SOLEMN ANNIVERSARY

One year since media allowed to cover dignified transfers again at Dover

By Jessica Eisenbrey
Delaware State News

DOVER — Last Tuesday, at around 7:40 p.m., the transfer case carrying the body of U.S. Army Sgt. Kurt E. Kruize arrived at Dover Air Force Base.

Sgt. Kruize, 35, died in Baghdad of wounds suffered in a noncombat related incident, the Department of Defense said.

Each fallen member of the military is provided a dignified transfer by the Air Force Mortuary Affairs Operations Center (AFMAO) in Dover. Sgt. Kruize's family attended the dignified transfer from his home state of Minnesota.

The dignified transfer is a solemn process where the transfer case, draped with an American flag and containing the remains of the deceased soldier, is transported from the aircraft it arrives on to a waiting transport vehicle. According to the AFMAO Web site, each transfer ensures dignity, honor and respect are afforded to the fallen.

Sgt. Kruize's dignified transfer did just this for him.

Limited media attendance

Until last year, media outlets were banned from attending these rituals. A decision made by President George H. W. Bush during the Persian Gulf War created this rule in an effort to shield grieving families.

Ralph Begleiter, a professor at the University of Delaware who sued the Department of Defense in 2005 to gain access to photographs of dignified transfers, said people often assume representatives of the media fought with the

See Transfers — Page 14



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Transfers

Continued From Page 1

current administration to have the ban overturned, but this was not necessarily the case.

In 2009, a CNN reporter at a press conference asked Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates where the ban stood. Gates announced then that a review process was under way.

"Although the question was asked by a media representative, the Obama administration had already begun reviewing it," Mr. Begleiter said.

When the ban was first lifted and the media was permitted to cover a dignified transfer on April 5, 2009, more than 30 media outlets attended.

Now, a little over a year to the day that the ban was lifted, one lone photographer from the Associated Press is usually the only member of the media in attendance at these events.

Steve Ruark, an AP photographer who has been to at least 70 dignified transfers, said he understands why other media outlets don't often cover the ceremonies.

Mr. Ruark said multiple dignified transfers can occur during a week or in one day and most newspapers don't have the resources to cover these.

"I do understand why there aren't so many people there all the time," he said. "Nobody has the practical space to be able to display all of these pictures several times a week."

Another reason Mr. Ruark thinks representatives of the media don't attend every transfer is location.

"Oftentimes, the individuals we're photographing may be from Montana or Idaho or somewhere far away," he said. "So, I think it's not a matter of the media not seeing the importance of this. It's a little bit of a practical matter."

Mr. Begleiter said because the media wasn't necessarily directly involved in getting the ban lifted, there isn't an obligation for them to cover the transfers unless they're newsworthy.

"After it became routine and coverage is available all the time, I don't think it's so surprising that the American news media don't show up for every version of that event," he said. "It's news that drives it, not some policy about whether coverage is available or not."

David Skocik, a Dover resident active in veteran's affairs, said now that the ceremonies are open and media is able to attend, the mystery surrounding dignified transfers has gone away.

Once Americans and the media were able to photograph a transfer for the first time in 18 years, everyone's curiosity was satisfied, he said.

"People saw what they needed to see," Mr. Skocik said, "and I think once they realized that the military was hiding nothing and once they'd seen what it comes down to that's when the controversy over the whole procedure faded."

'Casualties of war'

Mr. Begleiter said the media should not be blamed for their lack of attendance at



U.S. Army soldiers carry a transfer case holding the remains of Sgt. Kurt E. Kruize at Dover Air Force Base on Tuesday. Sgt. Kruize, of Hancock, Minn., died in Baghdad from injuries suffered in a noncombat related incident.

Delaware State News/Jessica Eisenbrey

dignified transfers — instead, it should be focusing on a different question related to dignified transfers.

"Of much more interest to me, and I think of much significance for the nation," he said, "is the overall question of how much attention do we want to pay as a nation to the return of casualties from our wars?"

In tallying up the cost of war, Mr. Begleiter said, military and government officials often add up the cost of equipment used, the number of troops deployed and the cost of these deployments.

While these are important factors, there is one aspect of war that Mr. Begleiter said should never be left out of the equation.

"In my view, you cannot leave out the most important cost of any war and that is the human lives that it costs," he said.

"To not pay attention to the return of U.S. casualties from the wars the United States is fighting, I think, leaves out of the big picture of those wars, the most important human cost, the men and women in our services who give the ultimate sacrifice on our behalf."

Mr. Begleiter said that as a nation, he thinks we should be paying attention to the number of casualties arriving at Dover Air Force Base, especially now that the media is permitted to cover their returns.

"We, in the media, like to cover the combat but we don't like to cover the consequences in terms of the returning casualties," he said. "That's not a function of how many (media) show up at Dover. That's a function of editorial judgments in every newsroom, on every broadcast and on every Web site through which our population gets its news."

With this comes the issue of how we measure media coverage. The number of photographers or reporters present at dignified transfers does not tell us whether anyone in the country or nation actually sees the picture or reads the article, Mr.

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Begleiter said.

"The pictures are taken, almost all the time, but they're not published or they're rarely published," he said, "and I think that is the fundamental tragedy of the media's coverage of these wars."

Families welcome coverage

When the ban on media coverage was lifted, the Obama administration organized the policy so that families of fallen soldiers can choose whether or not to allow media coverage at their loved ones' dignified transfer.

According to Capt. Newman Robertson of the AFMAO, about 55 percent of the time the primary next of kin of a fallen soldier agrees to permit some form of media at their loved ones' dignified transfer.

Capt. Robertson said the families can choose to allow Department of Defense media only or Department of Defense media and external media.

Mr. Begleiter said these statistics don't surprise him — in fact he thought the numbers would be higher.

"Most of the families that I've spoken to over the years on this issue feel that their sons and daughters have made an enormous sacrifice and that that sacrifice has not been adequately acknowledged by the nation," he said.

According to the AFMAO Web site, the military service of the fallen service member funds the travel of the primary next of kin plus two additional family members in order for them to witness the dignified transfer.

This was a policy stipulation specifically made when the ban on media coverage was lifted.

Once in Dover, the families of the fallen are provided support from the AFMAO, including a Family Liaison Officer and access to the Center for Families of the Fallen.

A final farewell

Sgt. Kruize's dignified transfer lasted about 20 minutes.

Six soldiers from the U.S. Army and one team leader carried the transfer case. From the open side of the 747 aircraft it was transported in to the end of a K-loader platform.

From the K-loader, the carry team leader stood with the transfer case, ensuring Sgt. Kruize was never left alone, while the others proceeded around the aircraft to the ground.

After the K-loader was lowered, the carry team carefully lifted up the transfer case and slowly moved it into the white mortuary transfer vehicle.

Once the case was placed safely in the vehicle, the carry team went into a slow movement salute, honoring Sgt. Kruize with a final farewell.

The doors were slowly closed on the transfer vehicle and the soldiers remained in salute as it drove away toward the mortuary.

After photographing dozens of transfers similar to Sgt. Kruize's, Mr. Ruark said the pictures and memories of each can start to blend together.

But when he reads the stories written around his photos, Mr. Ruark is reminded of those families, like the Kruizes, who have lost loved ones.

"I photograph these cases," he said, "and while they kind of start to blend together some, when I read the story about the individual it reminds me that there is a person with their own world that they've left behind."

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