

FINAL SALUTE: A STORY OF UNFINISHED LIVES¹

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*The curtains pull away. They come to the door. And they know. They always know. . . . You can almost see the blood run out of their body and their heart hit the floor. It's not the blood as much as their soul.*³

I. Introduction

In *Final Salute: A Story of Unfinished Lives*, Jim Sheeler vividly tells of the pain and suffering Families and casualty notification officers experience after loved ones serving in the military are killed in action. From the first-hand stories that display the sacrifices Families make, to the emotional toll casualty notification officers experience, Sheeler provides leadership and legal lessons applicable to Judge Advocates (JAs).

Sheeler does what few authors have done before him: he chronicles the aftermath of a casualty notification by “bear[ing] witness to the ways in which casualties from Iraq are shielded from sight.”⁴ The thesis of the book is to show the true cost of war to those with no personal stake in the war through the eyes of five Families who lost loved ones to the war in Iraq. The book is not a political piece; it does not advocate for or against the war. It simply explains the aftermath Families and notification officers experience after a servicemember’s death. “Ultimately, *Final Salute* is about the price being paid by the men, women, and children of the military. It’s not a statement about the war, but it is a statement about the sacrifice and how we all need to feel it more than we are.”⁵

II. The Author

Jim Sheeler graduated with a degree in journalism from Colorado State University (CSU) and a master’s degree in journalism from the University of Colorado.⁶ He has received numerous national writing awards including the Pulitzer Prize for feature reporting for his series of articles published in the *Rocky Mountain News* that served as the basis for *Final Salute*.⁷ He is currently a scholar in residence at the University of Colorado.⁸

After graduating from CSU, Sheeler worked as a general assignment reporter at the *Rocky Mountain News*. In 2003, he was assigned to cover the funeral of Lance Corporal Thomas Slocum, the first casualty from Colorado.⁹ He never stopped covering the war from this point forward. As a journalist, he has an innate ability to see what few others are able to see. Sheeler spent numerous hours as a silent observer at countless military funerals; he “started seeing things . . . that nobody else was seeing, from the gravediggers in the cemeteries, to the old veterans who turned up, to the Marines themselves who were carrying the[] caskets for the last time.”¹⁰ This was the birth of *Final Salute*.¹¹ Sheeler first met Major Steve Beck, a Marine Corps’ casualty notification officer,¹² at a funeral at Fort Logan National Cemetery in Denver, Colorado.¹³ He told Major

¹ JIM SHEELER, *FINAL SALUTE: A STORY OF UNFINISHED LIVES* (2008).

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³ SHEELER, *supra* note 1, at 9 (quoting Major Steve Beck).

⁴ Janet Maslin, *Bearing Witness to the Fallen and the Grieving*, N.Y. TIMES, June 5, 2008 (reviewing SHEELER, *supra* note 1), available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/05/books/05maslin.html>.

⁵ Eric Barnedsen, *Final Tribute: An Appreciation for Jobs Done Well Under the Most Difficult Conditions*, BYLINES (Univ. of Colo. at Boulder), Fall 2007, available at <http://www.colorado.edu/journalism/bylines/fall07/features/sheeler.html>.

⁶ SHEELER, *supra* note 1, at inside back cover.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ See Verna Noel Jones, *A Final ‘Salute’ to Sacrifice*, ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS, May 1, 2008, available at <http://www.rockymountainnews.com/news/2008/may/01/a-final-salute-to-sacrifice/>.

⁹ See Barnedsen, *supra* note 5.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² See Jones, *supra* note 8. Major Beck has since been promoted to lieutenant colonel. *Id.*

¹³ SHEELER, *supra* note 1, *Author’s Note*, at 276.

Beck he “wanted to follow him, to learn the resonance of the knock.”¹⁴ Major Beck agreed, but only after he grilled Sheeler to confirm he had no hidden agenda and received the blessing of the Families.¹⁵

III. Organization and Content

Sheeler takes the reader on an emotional journey in four chapters structured in the same order as the steps taken after a servicemember’s death—The Knock; Reverberations; Bringing Them Home; and After the War, Stories. He tracks the stories of five Families: Marine Lance Corporal Kyle W. Burns, Navy Corpsman HM3 Christopher “Doc” Anderson, Marine Second Lieutenant James J. Cathey, Marine Lance Corporal Brett Lee Lundstrom, and Army Private First Class Jesse A. Givens.

Sheeler weaves Major Beck’s story throughout the book to fully explain the emotions experienced by Major Beck while serving as a notification officer. Parts one and four, the key parts of the book, focus on the full circle of emotions experienced by Families after the notification. Parts two and three focus primarily on the emotions felt by strangers and fellow servicemembers.

Part one describes the emotional turmoil that notification officers experience before making the initial notification. “For Major Steve Beck, it starts with a knock or a ring of the doorbell—a simple act, really, with the power to shatter a soul.”¹⁶ There is no turning back as he approaches the door, he “pick[s] himself up, gather[s] his thoughts, and ring[s] the bell.”¹⁷

Military Families live their lives praying that they never receive the knock. However, for every second Major Beck waits to make the knock, it is “one more tick of his wrist-watch that, for the family inside the house, everything remain[s] the same.”¹⁸ For every notification, Major Beck has “to walk up to someone else’s mother, carrying the name of someone else’s son.”¹⁹ Major Beck describes his angst at being the source of intense pain for the family: “that’s what hurts me the most: that because I’m standing in front of them, they’re feeling as bad as they’re ever going to feel.”²⁰

As Sheeler points out, not all Families receive the notification calmly. Some Families scream or curse at the notification officer blaming him for being the bearer of bad news, while others physically strike.²¹ Major Beck’s job is to “catch the family while they’re falling”—“literally and figuratively.”²²

In part two, Sheeler briefly discusses the pain and suffering felt by those whose voice typically goes unspoken—family members and fellow servicemembers. Sheeler shows how the death of a servicemember affects even those who see death every day. Sheeler describes how Andy Alonzo, a grounds keeper at Fort Logan National Cemetery, takes great pride preparing the headstones and gravesites for two Marines killed on Veteran’s Day.²³ Sheeler walks the reader through Mr. Alonzo’s emotions as he prepares headstones to place them on the graves after the funeral. His job allows him “to honor men and women he never knew.”²⁴

In part three, Sheeler delicately explains how notification officers react when asked the toughest question: when is the body coming home? The most painful account of a homecoming is Marine Second Lieutenant James J. Cathey. A photograph shows passengers peering out windows from their seats to the tarmac below waiting for Lieutenant Cathey’s

¹⁴ *Id.* at 277.

¹⁵ See Jones, *supra* note 8; see also SHEELER, *supra* note 1, *Author’s Note*, at 277.

¹⁶ SHEELER, *supra* note 1, at 6.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 48.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 3.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.* at 40.

²¹ *Id.* at 16.

²² *Id.* at 9.

²³ *Id.* at 41–46.

²⁴ *Id.* at 43.

body to be escorted off the plane.²⁵ The passengers cannot see a group of Marines preparing Lieutenant Cathey's flag draped casket for departure; they can only see a hearse and "a Marine extending a white-gloved hand into a limousine."²⁶ The passengers can't hear Lieutenant's Cathey's wife's screams.²⁷ "It's a sound no one should have to hear, but, in a way, it's a sound that everybody should hear."²⁸

In part four, Sheeler tells the stories of how friends and Families left behind must continue living their lives after losing a loved one who served in the military and made the ultimate sacrifice. The notification process is "not a period at the end of their lives. It's a semicolon. The story will continue to be told."²⁹

Typically as months pass, Families want and need to hear stories about their loved ones from close friends and fellow servicemembers. This not only gives Families a chance to grieve, it gives friends a chance to grieve as well. Sheeler describes how Families reach out to fellow servicemembers for answers to lingering questions notification officers often cannot answer. A young Soldier, Corporal Barker tells Lance Corporal Kyle W. Burns' mother, "[y]ou can ask us anything. We need to get it out. We've been holding it in for so long. . . . That's why we're here."³⁰ Melissa Givens asks her husband's fellow Soldiers the question no one else could answer: how did my husband die? She needed them to tell her everything about her husband's death in Iraq.³¹ Mrs. Givens took her quest one step further; she sat in the exact tank where her husband drowned to try to experience what he went through moments before he died.³²

Sheeler also describes the guilt experienced by survivors. Sheeler's dedication to the story and his constant presence with the families appears to have earned the trust of Sergeant Gregory Edwards, convincing him to tell the story of what happened the day Navy Corpsman HM3 Christopher "Doc" Anderson saved his life in Iraq.³³ Before being interviewed, Sergeant Edwards "lied when asked about it, saying he couldn't remember anything. The problem was he could remember almost everything."³⁴ Sergeant Edwards was alive because Doc Anderson saved his life. Doc Anderson later told "friends and parents that it was the most terrifying day of his life, that he constantly second-guessed himself, wondering if he had done everything he could have and should have."³⁵ At Doc Anderson's funeral, Sergeant Edwards told Doc Anderson's Family to be proud of their son: "He did everything right."³⁶

IV. Strengths and Weaknesses

The book's greatest strength is it sheds light on the impact notification officers have on fallen servicemembers' Families. Sheeler displays how Major Beck is often the glue that holds together Families throughout the grieving process. Sheeler's success should be attributed partly to the fact that he chose the right notification officer to shadow. Major Beck's ability to connect with the Families is truly remarkable. Additionally, unlike many notification officers, Major Beck remains in close contact with Families for many years after the initial notification.³⁷

Next, Sheeler's work gives Families a chance to continue to tell the stories of their loved ones. It "does more than honor those killed and the families left behind. . . . It also tells of the many ways that a nation, when confronted with the almost

²⁵ *Fresh Air: A 'Final Salute' to Fallen Marines* (NPR radio broadcast Apr. 30, 2008) (Interview by Terry Gross with Lieutenant Colonel Steve Beck and Jim Sheeler), available at <http://www.npr.org/templates/player/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=90065224&m=90067153>.

²⁶ SHEELER, *supra* note 1, at 100.

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ See Jones, *supra* note 8.

²⁹ *Id.* SHEELER, *supra* note 1, *Epilogue*, at 243 (quoting Steve Beck).

³⁰ *Id.* at 164.

³¹ *Id.* at 178.

³² *Id.*

³³ *Id.* at 181–82. Marine Sergeant Gregory Edwards lost both of his legs in an explosion in Iraq. *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.* at 181.

³⁵ *Id.* at 182.

³⁶ *Id.* at 214.

³⁷ See *Fresh Air*, *supra* note 25. Lieutenant Colonel Beck has remained in contact with Lieutenant Cathey's wife for four years since Lieutenant Cathey's death. *Id.*

unacceptable deaths of loved ones in uniform, finds ways to give healing and meaning to the loss.”³⁸ Sheeler gives a voice and name to servicemembers who would otherwise remain nameless. By giving Families a chance to share their grief with an absolute stranger, Sheeler evokes a deeper understanding of the true tragedies of war to Americans who don’t have a personal stake in the war.

Finally, Sheeler avoids politicizing the book by telling the first-hand accounts of Families through monologues. Use of the monologue method of writing allows Sheeler to refrain from inserting his personal political views on the war. It also allows Sheeler to solely focus on the Families involved. It isn’t a “book about leaders or government; it’s a book about leadership, principle, and sacrifice.”³⁹ Sheeler avoids making a political statement by leaving out editorial or political bias.

While the book vividly displays the gut wrenching account of the grieving process, it has several weaknesses. The book’s greatest weakness is that it is written from only one notification officer’s point of view. The reader could be misled to assume that all notification officers are as trained, professional, and caring as Major Beck. Sheeler breezes over the lack of formal standardized training for notification officers. He briefly explains “[d]espite the public’s perception, there is no group of service members whose primary task is death notification.”⁴⁰ “Successful casualty assistance is not the rule; it is quite the exception. Not only is there a significant lack of continuity, but casualty assistance is a ‘learn as you go’ for officers that otherwise have jobs that need to be done”⁴¹ Sheeler appears not to focus on the lack of standardized training or duty performance because this would take away some of the impact of the book.

Next, Sheeler writes in a disjointed and random manner often leaving the reader confused. While the chapters of the book are written in chronological order of the notification process, individual chapters bounce back and forth between different Families’ stories, Major Beck’s thoughts and emotions, and fellow servicemembers’ stories. To some readers, this method of writing might help keep the book from being too painful to read because Sheeler has the ability to change topics at the most painful point of each story. For others, it can be frustrating and difficult to follow the individual stories.

Finally, *Final Salute* only documents the stories of five Families who lost male servicemembers. Some readers might also criticize Sheeler for not including stories of female servicemembers.⁴² Sheeler recognizes this weakness by admitting “there are still not enough names in this book. For each of the service members listed, there are thousands more names . . . who have helped them”⁴³ It would be impossible to include stories from all the Families who have lost loved ones and Sheeler gives a face to the name of the servicemembers that would otherwise remain anonymous.

IV. Leadership Principles

Final Salute is relevant to all JAs working in administrative law, legal assistance, and brigade judge advocate (BJA) positions because it offers a glimpse into the complexities involved in combat death cases. It also serves as a valuable tool to educate JAs on possible questions Families might ask months after the Soldier’s death.

Administrative law JAs can learn invaluable lessons from reading *Final Salute*. Administrative law JAs serve as final gatekeepers to death investigations; their legal review is the final check before forwarding the investigation to the final approving authority.⁴⁴ *Final Salute* affirms the importance of ensuring investigations into death cases are thorough and complete enough to withstand scrutiny from Families, higher levels of the chain of command, outside agencies, and media months after the investigations are complete. Administrative law JAs must also keep in mind investigations can be released

³⁸ Daniel Zantinger, *Deep Wounds: Book Delves Into Lives of Dead Soldiers’ Families*, May 9, 2008, <http://www.dailycamera.com/news/2008/may/09/deep-wounds-book-delves-into-lives-of-dead/>.

³⁹ Paul Robichaux, *Final Salute (Sheeler)*, Paul’s Down Home Page, June 11, 2008, <http://www.robichaux.net/blog/2008/06/final-salute-sheeler.php>, (reviewing SHEELER, *supra* note 1).

⁴⁰ SHEELER, *supra* note 1, at 48.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 146 (citing *Hearing on S.109-32 Before the S. Comm. on Veterans Affairs*, 109th Cong. 13 (2005) (statement of Jennifer McCollum, surviving spouse of Captain Dan McCollum, U.S. Marine Corps), available at http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=109_senate_hearings&docid=f:20729.pdf).

⁴² See iCasualties.org, Iraq Coalition Casualty Count, available at <http://icasualties.org/oif/> (follow “Statistics: Female Fatalities” hyperlink) (last visited Jan. 14, 2009). There have been 109 female deaths since the war began. *Id.*

⁴³ SHEELER, *supra* note 1, *Epilogue*, at 280.

⁴⁴ See U.S. DEP’T OF DEFENSE, REG. 600-8-4, LINE OF DUTY POLICY, PROCEDURES, AND INVESTIGATIONS (4 Sept. 2008).

to Families through a freedom of information act request.⁴⁵ Armed with this knowledge, administrative law JAs should ensure they properly advise investigating officers on how to conduct investigations correctly.

Final Salute is relevant to legal assistance JAs because it shows the many legal assistance issues Families could possibly face after losing a loved one. Legal assistance JAs could find themselves probating wills, unraveling complicated estates, advising on child custody, to name but a few legal assistance issues. Both legal assistance and claims JAs are now working with casualty assistance officers more than ever handling claims for damaged personal effects on behalf of the surviving spouse or next of kin. In these cases, special accommodations can and should be made to ensure Families are handled with the utmost respect and dignity.

Finally, Sheeler's work is relevant to BJAs because it shows the importance of taking a proactive role rather than a reactive role in death cases. Being proactive will help military units avoid issues months down the road by ensuring that they take responsive action in death cases such as properly appointing summary courts-martial officers to handle the deceased's last personal effects.⁴⁶ The book is also relevant because it sheds light on possible questions Families might ask when briefed by the chain of command in training and non-combat accident deaths.⁴⁷ Finally, it serves as a reminder to BJAs that all death investigations should be thorough and complete. Brigade Judge Advocates should also work closely with the Public Affairs Office to ensure they handle media requests properly.

V. Conclusion

Final Salute is an exceptionally well researched book based on hundreds of interviews conducted over a two-year period with countless Families, friends, and fellow servicemembers. Sheeler did an exceptional job showing the true cost of war to those with no personal stake in the war. *Final Salute* will inspire and have an emotional impact on all that read it. Casualty notification officers and JAs should be required to read *Final Salute* to understand the significance of the notification process and to understand the impact the process has on surviving Families. Finally, *Final Salute* serves as an inspiration for anyone who has loved ones serving in the military and to anyone who has lost a loved one in action.

⁴⁵ See U.S. DEP'T OF DEFENSE, DoD 5400.7-R, DOD FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT PROGRAM (Sept. 1998).

⁴⁶ See U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, REG. 638-2, CARE AND DISPOSITION OF REMAINS AND DISPOSITION OF PERSONAL EFFECTS (22 Dec. 2000).

⁴⁷ See U.S. DEP'T OF THE ARMY, REG. 600-34, FATAL TRAINING/OPERATIONAL ACCIDENT PRESENTATIONS TO NEXT OF KIN (2 Jan. 2003). Surviving family members of deceased Soldiers killed in fatal training or operational accidents are entitled to a desk-side brief. *Id.* at 3.