

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

A Marine's Journey Home

MICHAEL R. STROBL

Page | 1

This selection, written during the recent Iraq War, addresses the crucial question of how we should treat the mortal remains of those who die in our nation's service. Private First Class Chance Phelps of the United States Marine Corps was killed in action on April 9, 2004, in Baghdad. Marine Lieutenant Colonel Michael R. Strobl (b. 1965) served as the officer who escorted Phelps' remains to his home and family in Dubois, Wyoming, where he was then buried. Strobl kept a diary during the trip, recording his experiences and feelings; with the permission of Phelps' father, he published this essay in the San Francisco Chronicle on May 2, 2004. A longer version, titled Taking Chance, was the basis of a fine made-for-television movie of the same title.

What do we owe the mortal remains of our fallen soldiers? Why is it so important that they—their bodies—"come home"? Why is it fitting that a military comrade accompanies the body on its journey? Attending to all the rituals and gestures that were used in handling the coffin, can you understand the reasons for them? How was Lt. Col. Strobl affected by his journey, and what did he learn about himself and his fellow Americans? What was the reaction of Phelps' family to the return of his body and personal effects? What about the importance of the flag and the crucifix? Can you understand why Strobl says at the end, of a man he never knew, "I miss him"?

The Nation mourns.

Chance Phelps was wearing his Saint Christopher medal when he was killed on Good Friday. Eight days later I handed the medallion to his mother. I didn't know Chance before he died. Today, I miss him.

Read the rest of the essay at the National Endowment for the Arts:

www.nea.gov/national/homecoming/submissions/strobl.html.



www.whatsoproudlywehail.org