

Last Flight

Mr. Witt was in Maryland on Feb. 16 to attend a Navy ceremony. As it so happened, his return flight from Washington, D.C., to Los Angeles was also carrying the body of 1st Lieutenant Jared Landaker, a Marine helicopter pilot from Big Bear, California, whose helicopter was shot down in Iraq. Mr. Witt's commentary is written in the form of a diary, and although it is rough in places and contains a few technical terms familiar primarily to pilots and military personnel, I believe the sentiment behind what he has written will shine through. Here, then, is Stuart Witt's "Diary of a Last and Final Flight Home."

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Diary of a Last and Final Flight Home

Feb. 17, 2007, 0350: Curbside at 24th and M, Washington, D.C., Sixteen degrees with a light breeze. I was going home after my second week of freezing temps to my home in Southern California. Fly my aircraft, ride a horse, climb a mountain and get back to living. I'm tired of the cold.

0425: Paying the taxi fare at Dulles in front of the United Airlines counter, still cold.

0450: Engaging the self-serve ticket machine, and it delivers my ticket, baggage tag and boarding pass. Hmmm, that Marine is all dressed up early . . . ? Oh, maybe . . . hmm, "Good morning, Captain, you're looking sharp."

Pass security and to my gate for a quick decaf coffee and five hours sleep. A quick check of the flight status monitor. UA Flt 211 is on time, I'm up front, how bad can it be? Hmmm, that same Marine, he must be heading to Pendleton to see his lady at LAX for the long weekend all dressed up like that. Or maybe not?

"Attention in the boarding area, we will begin boarding in 10 minutes. We have some additional duties to attend to this morning, but we will have you out of here on time."

That Marine Captain now has five others with him. BINGO, I get it, he's not visiting his lady, he's an official escort. How I remember doing that once, CACO duty. I still remember the names of the victim and family, the Brunos in Mojave . . . all of them, wow, that was 24 years ago. I wonder if we will ever know who and why?

On board, 0600: "Good morning, folks this is the Captain. This morning, we have been attending to some additional duties, and I apologize for being ten minutes late for pushback; but believe me, we will be early to LAX. This morning, it is my sad pleasure to announce that 1st Lt. Jared Landaker, USMC, will be flying with us to his Big Bear home in Southern California. Jared lost his life over the skies of Iraq earlier this month, and today, we have the honor of returning him home along with his mother, father, brother and uncles. Please join me in making the journey comfortable for the Landaker family and their uniformed escort. Now sit back and enjoy our ride: We are not expecting any turbulence until we reach the Rocky Mountains; and at that time, we will do what we can to ensure a smooth ride. For those interested, you can listen in to our progress on button nine."

Up button nine: "Good morning, UA 211, you are cleared to taxi, takeoff and cleared to LAX as filed." From the time we started rolling, we never stopped. First Lt. Landaker began receiving his due.

Four hours and 35 minutes later over Big Bear Mt., the AB320 makes a left roll and steep bank and then one to the right . . . Nice touch, Captain. Five minutes out from landing, the Captain says, “Ladies and gents, after landing I’m leaving the fasten seatbelt sign on, and I ask everyone in advance to yield to the Landaker family. Please remain seated until all members have departed the aircraft. Thank you for your patience. We are 20 minutes early.”

On roll out, I notice red lights, emergency vehicles everywhere. We are being escorted directly to our gate, no waiting anywhere, not even a pause. Out the left window, a dozen Marines in full dress blues, Highway Patrol, police, fire crews all in full dress with lights on. A true class act by everyone, down to a person from coast to coast. Way to go, United Airlines, for doing the little things RIGHT because they are the big things; air traffic control for getting the message, and to all law enforcement for your display of brotherhood.

When the family departed the aircraft, everyone sat silent. Then I heard a lady say, “God bless you and your family; thank you.” Then another, then another, then a somber round of applause. The Captain read a prepared note from Mrs. Landaker to the effect of, “Thank you all for your patience and heartfelt concern for us and our son. We sincerely appreciate the sentiment. It is nice to have Jared home.”

After they departed the aircraft, I found myself — along with 30 others from our flight — looking for a window. Not a dry eye in the craft. All of us were bawling like babies. It was one of the most emotional moments of my life. We all stood silent and watched as Jared was taken by his honor guard to a waiting hearse. Then the motorcade slowly made its way off the ramp.

I have finally seen the silent majority. It is deep within us all. Black, brown, white, yellow, red, purple: We are all children, parents, brothers, sisters, etc . . . we are an American family.

Early in our taxi out from the gate at Dulles, the gent next to me (a Fairfax city council member) and I were talking to the flight attendant and mentioned that we had sons serving on active duty. We commented, “What do you say? How tragic, they must be devastated.” The flight attendant said many of the passengers had told him the same thing, so somewhere in the flight he shared his tidbits with Mrs. Landaker. Our flight attendant had been struggling with what to say, to find the right words, so he told the Landaker family about passengers who were parents of service members who connected with their grief as parents.

After I collected myself, I stepped back to their row, two behind me, and introduced myself to Mr. Landaker (a veteran of Southeast Asia as a tanker) and Jared’s uncle and brother. What a somber moment. Their Marine Captain escort was a first-rate class act. He had been Jared’s tactics instructor and volunteered for this assignment. As he said, “Sir, it is the least I could do, he was my friend and a great stick. He absolutely loved to fly. It’s an honor to be here on his last flight.”

1115: On my connecting flight, my mind raced. How lucky I was to have had an opportunity to fly my father to Spain and ride the carrier USS John F. Kennedy home in 1981. The same year Jared was born. How lucky I was to have my father on the

crow's landing when I made my final cat shot in an F-14. Jared's father never had that chance. Jared was at war, 10,000 miles away.

When Mr. Landaker and I were talking, he shared with me, "When Jared was born, he had no soft spot on his head and doctors feared he would be developmentally challenged. But, he became a physics major with honors, high school and college athlete, and graduated with distinction from naval aviation flight school! He was short in stature, but a Marine all the way." Visit his life story on line at bigbeargrizzly.net. Bring tissue.

Feb. 7, 2007, Anbar Province, Iraq. 1st Lt. Jared Landaker, United States Marine Corps, hero, from Big Bear, California, gave his life in service to his country. Fatally wounded when his CH-46 helicopter was shot down by enemy fire, Jared and his crew all perished. His life was the ultimate sacrifice of a grateful military family and nation. His death occurred at the same time as Anna Nicole Smith, a drug-using person with a 7th-grade education, of no pedigree, who dominated our news for two weeks while Jared became a number on CNN. And most unfortunately, Jared's death underscores a fact that we are a military at war, not a nation at war. Until we become a nation committed to winning the fight, and elect leaders with the spine to ask Americans to sacrifice in order to win, we shall remain committed to being a nation with a military at war, and nothing more. (And possibly no funding if Congress has its way!)

1st Lt. Landaker, a man I came to know in the skies over America on 17 Feb. 2007, from me to you, aviator to aviator, I am unbelievably humbled. It was my high honor to share your last flight. God bless you.

Semper Fi

~Stuart Witt