

I released a book called the “The Widow’s Might”. It is a survivor’s guide, if you would, about the strength God has given me in the restoration of my life after the death of two husbands. (Both Military) While book signing at the AAFES on Fort Hood, Texas, I was introduced to the plight of the “Geographical Widow”, those whose spouses are currently deployed. Their lives parallel the traditional widow in so many ways I felt the need to let them know that our nation is as grateful to them for their sacrifice as we are to those that have physically lost a spouse. I’ve written a short article, “The Folded Flag” as an expression of gratitude.

The Folded Flag
Copyright © 2007 by Cherie Brown

I had done it. The relatives were properly seated, the church was full, the eulogy was written and Dennis was lying in state. The previous week had elapsed in a haze leaving me with vague impressions that were only clarified during my sleepless nights. Just as streams of people had appeared at my parent’s home many bringing their families; in the days that followed the accident that took my beloved Dennis’ life; they were now filing into the sanctuary, quietly taking seats, eyes filled with tears.

When my colligate children were not tightly fitted together in some out of the way place, they made sure each one was close enough to observe the condition of the others. If questions became unbearable or if a well meaning friend was just a bit too friendly, another sibling would charge to the rescue, and with little or no focus on the outsider, move the brother or sister out of harms way. They arrived within hours after I was informed of Dennis’ death and although the semester was only a few weeks old they made their way home from three Texas cities and New Orleans. Their college room mates were also present as were their high school friends.

For some reason I thought of my appearance. I had actually been able to pull myself together and shop for the perfect black wool pill box hat with just enough veil to hide my Ralph Lauren sun glasses. My Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, “classic- elegant” widowed look was completed with a black knit long sleeve plain dress accented with black suede shoes and a simple strand of pearls.

The family is seated last you know, and as we walk to our places of honor, reserved in the front row I notice that the church is full. It is packed with the same people who only eight years earlier attended our wedding. This was the same aisle that I walked down as a bride only the pill box hat was then a beaded wedding head piece and the black short veil was an ivory cathedral simmering train. The simple black dress I now donned was then an ivory wedding gown and the strand of pearls, was hundreds of small stones used as accessories to cover the hand-made Italian lace of the dress bodice and form fitting skirt. At this moment those that had witnessed our vows are now saying their good byes. ‘What was just said?’ I can’t recall all I can hear are my son’s sobs. My baby so broken, I’ve got to get to him but my feet won’t move. His cries are now echoed through the church

and are harmonized by the weeping and laments of the rest of the mourners. I can get to him; everyone is adjusting their seating so he can set next to me. That's right its okay now you're with your mm and I am not letting you go. It's okay for a grown man to cry, this is the second father you've had to bury and I'm going to join you.

Now it's time to go to the grave site, and as we are leaving the church I realize that I am cold, and then someone places their rain coat over my arms. Even if the wind would stop hurling, my thoughts wouldn't. Now what, how about my children, can I think clearly enough to return to work. Dennis, why did you leave me? They are going to put you in the ground and I will be without you. I am not prepared for this and I don't want to do it. The chill was icy when we left the limousine and made our way to a tent and it felt like my skin was torn by each rain drop.

It is bad enough to have to bury my husband, but why on such a miserable day. I notice the military funeral detail also chilled and waiting near the freshly dug grave. They are not complaining, they weather the cold and stand strong against the wind. Their white gloved hands are saluting as the hearse arrives just ahead of us. They are acknowledging Dennis's Military service and as we slowly make our way to the green tented protected grave site, their solitude and straight backs illustrate the comfort I have in my military benefits as a widow. I believe my country cares about its deceased soldiers and their families.

I am not crying and the Pastor has finished his final words. Finally we can pray and I know I will get strength from the prayer. Shots ring out, then again, then again. I've lost count, how many was it? It's the 21 gun salute. The soldiers are in a line and I am sure I will never experience such perfect precision again. The exactitude of their stance, the meticulousness of their movements, and the focus of their shot was in perfect formation. It is four riflemen who are firing three volleys into the air but I know it is still considered a 21- gun salute

Dennis deserves a 21-gun salute, Dennis deserves to be honored, and oh there is music, its Taps. A bugler is actually playing Taps. Everyone is silent giving tribute to Dennis I'm still holding on, I can do this I can make it through this final ceremony without falling apart. Thank you God for getting me through this day, I am still holding on. This is the last stanza of the tribute and I am going to make it.

Hey, I was about to say good bye, Dennis but the highest ranking Solider is slowly moving to the head and now to the foot of the coffin and precisely folded the flag lengthwise twice. Four other troops, two on each side of the flag, moved in and hold it taut.

I can't take my eyes off of their accuracy. Each fold and each crease is perfect. Finally, the flag is tightly wrapped into a star-studded blue triangle, what are they doing? Oh those are three shell casings from the 21-gun salute being placed in the folds. Okay we must be finished now. Why is he looking at me, I feel like a military field problem. He is on one knee in front of me so I graciously respond with eye contact. He's speaking and extending the flag to me. He's going to say something, "On behalf of the

president of the United States and a grateful nation,” I begin to cry now, “I present this flag as a token of appreciation for the honorable and faithful service rendered by your loved one. God bless you, your family and the United states of America.” I can’t see him anymore, tears have filled my eyes and through the watery, waves, of light variation, I focus on his hands, my arms are extending and I’m trying to say thank you but all I can do is cry, I’ll nod, yes a nod will work and as it does. He saluting me now, I may never stop crying.

I’m clutching the flag to my chest as I watch them lower the casket. I still can’t stop crying. The soldiers have taken position on one side of the driveway, and the Bishop and his Elders are parallel on the opposite side.

As we pass I see the honor guard and they are saluting as we drive by. I’m still holding the folded flag close to my heart the sting of the cold is leaving and I remember now that the three shell casing represent “Duty, Honor, and Country.”

I now think of you, the women of the United States whose husbands are at war. In the tradition of Rosie the Riveter, who was the icon of the women that answered the need of our nation by filling the jobs left vacant by those who had gone to war, you too have taken the task of supplying the missing areas of our society. You are both mother and father to your children, independently shouldering the responsibility of feeding, clothing, disciplining, and making decisions about their whereabouts. You must insure that the grass is cut, the car is serviced, bills are paid and that the children get to school, to practice to dance, to church and after all that you still have to go to work and maintain your volunteer duties.

I want to present to you a symbolic folded flag because you are the staple of our nation. As we make a constant show of our appreciation for your spouses during this war, please do not forget that you are cherished. As the presentation statement says “On behalf of the president of the United States and a grateful nation, I present this flag as a token of appreciation for the honorable and faithful service rendered by your loved one. God bless you, your family and the United states of America.”