



Staff Sgt. Jonathon Goodrich, 4th Squad's leader in the Caisson Platoon, 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard), rides alongside his Soldiers as they escort the remains of a fellow Soldier to his final resting place in Arlington National Cemetery, Va. The C Company casket team marches next to the coffin. (Photo by Meghan Portillo)

Caisson Platoon NCOs Work to Honor Fallen Comrades, Families

By Meghan Portillo

NCO Journal

Staff Sgt. Jonathon Goodrich shined his boots and brushed horsehair from his dress uniform, taking time to pick a small string off the shoulder of his jacket and burn away stray fibers with a cigarette lighter.

Though the sun had barely risen, Goodrich and the other NCOs of the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard's) Caisson Platoon at Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall, Va., had already polished every piece of brass and leather on their tack; fed, washed and brushed their horse; and double-checked the same tasks completed by their Soldiers for each of their two horses.

The meticulous routine is performed every day the riders and horses pull flag-draped caskets on caissons

from the Old Post Chapel into Arlington National Cemetery, escorting fellow Soldiers to their final resting place.

Goodrich, the 4th Squad's leader, said it can be hard to spend so much time making a uniform perfect, only to have it ruined minutes later when his horse rubs against another, re-scratching his boots and covering him once again in hair.

"But I don't do this for me," he said. "I pay close attention to whose services we are doing each day, because I dread the day a name comes up that I know personally from previous tours."

Staff Sgt. Daniel Twomey, 2nd Squad's leader, said each NCO and Soldier of the platoon takes pride in even



Staff Sgt. Daniel Twomey, 2nd Squad's leader in the Caisson Platoon, 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard), shines the brass on the bridle he will use on his horse during funerals that day. (Photo by Meghan Portillo)

the smallest task, because they are conscious of the honor of their duties and of what their work means to the families of the Soldiers being laid to rest.

"The whole job is an honor," Twomey said. "I have friends in Arlington National Cemetery. It's good to be able to see what we can do for the families, for all of the people who they have lost — to see that they are honored, that we do right by them. We try to give them everything we can give, because they gave us everything they could give — their lives."

Work ethic: an example for the rest of the Army

The work ethic displayed by the platoon — comprised of all NCOs and enlisted Soldiers with the exception of one officer — is impressive. Not only do they engage in hard, physical labor from dawn till dusk, they do it with little or no oversight and with impeccable attention to detail.

The platoon's 56 members are divided into four squads and a headquarters element. The four squads share duties through a four-week rotation. On alternating weeks, when a squad is not performing missions in the cemetery, Soldiers spend their days maintaining the platoon's barn and equipment. Every buckle is unbuckled; every piece of brass that is removable is removed. The brass is polished, and the leather is scrubbed clean, dyed and re-oiled. Every piece is made perfect before it can again be part of a procession into the cemetery.

"The most honorable part of our work is paying tribute to the families and to the Soldiers we lay to rest. Right underneath that

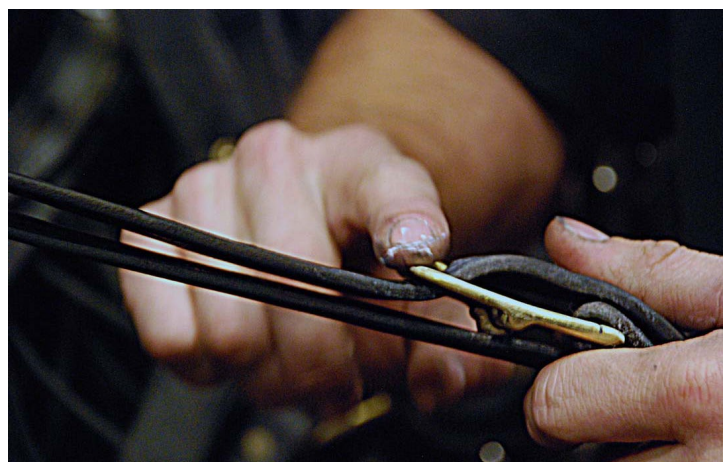
is being able to uphold such a high standard," Twomey said. "The work ethic that these guys put out — it's an honor just to be their leader."

The labor is not reserved for the Soldiers. NCOs work in the stables just as hard as their subordinates do — polishing tack, mucking stalls, picking hooves, feeding and bathing horses, and cleaning the century-old barn until it shines.

"During my training, I actually got a blister in the web of my hand because it had been a long time since I had pushed a broom with any sense of urgency," said Staff Sgt. John Ford, the caisson operations NCO. "The Caisson Platoon is the hardest working platoon in the Old Guard, definitely. ... An NCO is here at 4 o'clock in the morning, and an NCO is the last person out the door, usually around 6 o'clock at night. It's not always the same NCO, but it does happen."

Responsibility beyond their rank

Ford said the responsibilities given to NCOs of the Caisson Platoon prepare them to be some of the best leaders in the Army, as they are required to deal with situations far and above what most NCOs at their grade are expected to handle. He explained that the E-5 sergeant in charge of supply is responsible for submitting and reviewing bids for contracts usually handled by a battalion-level executive officer. The NCO in the cemetery responsible for the conduct of the mission — the one who deals with the officer in charge of a funeral — may be a corporal who happens to be an experienced rider.



Polishing all of the leather and brass on their tack is one of the first things the Soldiers and NCOs do when they arrive at the barn each morning. (Photo by Meghan Portillo)



Spc. Cheyenne Rakestraw of the Caisson Platoon, 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard), walks with a horse during his final test to become a caparisoned horse walker at Arlington National Cemetery in 2013. A caparisoned horse and his walker follow behind a funeral procession for Army and Marine officers in the rank of colonel and above. The horse is seen without a rider and wears reversed boots in the stirrups of the empty saddle to signify that the service member will never ride again. (Photo by Sgt. Jose A. Torres Jr.)

“That corporal will be dealing with the civilians who are naturally going to approach us in the cemetery between missions,” Ford said. “He’ll be dealing with other branches. It may be a Marine Corps lieutenant colonel he is dealing with for this funeral, and for the next funeral, it will be an officer from the Coast Guard.”

Sgt. 1st Class Eric Hayman, platoon sergeant for the Caisson Platoon, agreed that his NCOs have more than the usual responsibilities on their shoulders. In addition to being responsible for the health and welfare of their Soldiers, squad leaders are also responsible for the health and welfare of their horses.

“NCOs have to be hands-on with these horses to find out what they need,” Hayman said. “A horse may be acting up and you don’t know why — it could be a health issue. A tooth may be growing up and needs to be floated — filed down so it’s not cutting up into their gums. It’s just one more thing the NCOs have to pay attention to, and it’s a *big* responsibility. This is hard work that has to happen every day, and it does wear on you. You don’t get Saturdays and Sundays off; the work has to be done. ... The NCOs here just shine. They do their jobs well and they don’t think twice about it. In my eyes, these are some of the best NCOs we have in the Army.”

Missions steeped in history

The Soldiers — and it seems even the horses — are aware of the significance of their job. The rich traditions upheld by the platoon date back to Civil War times, giving deep meaning to everything they do.

The team of six horses — either all white or all black — pulls the casket in a 1918 replica artillery caisson. Originally, the caissons were used to pull cannons on the battlefield. But when they weren’t pulling weapons or ammunition, they hauled the dead and wounded, leading to their use in military funerals today. The Caisson Platoon usually participates in eight funerals per day — more than 1,700 funerals each year.

The six horses are hitched in three teams: the lead team in front, the swing team in the middle, and the wheel team closest to the caisson. The draft horses used as the wheel team — large breeds often weighing more than a ton — are usually ridden by the most experienced Soldier. They do most of the pulling, and serve as the brakes for the caisson.

All six horses are saddled, but only three Soldiers ride on the left, or “near,” horses, just as they did during the Civil War and World War I. The “off” horses were not ridden, but were instead used to carry provisions and supplies.

Ford noted that two caisson teams used to work together, one leading the way with the weapon and the other following with the ammunition and tools.

“In an emergency, if something terrible were to happen to the caisson that was forward with the battery, those three [off] horses could be detached from the team ... and you could go up and recover the riders from the gun crew,” Ford said.

A seventh horse, ridden by the squad leader, is not attached to the caisson. The squad leader rides next to the team of six, giving directions to the three riders. Ford explained that this configuration originated out of necessity. Having the section chiefs mounted on their own horses enabled them to move between the two teams, he said.

One of the oldest and most significant traditions used by the platoon is the caparisoned horse — a riderless horse led behind the caisson during a funeral procession. The practice can be traced to the time of Genghis Khan, when a horse was sacrificed at the burial of a soldier to serve the individual in the afterlife. Today in the United States, the horse represents the Soldier being buried and takes on his or her rank. Boots are placed backward in the stirrups of the empty saddle, as if the rider were facing back for his final ride, overlooking his family and troops.

Use of the caparisoned horse is reserved for funerals of Army or Marine Corps officers with the rank of colonel or above, as well as for the funerals of presidents and those who have served as the Secretary of Defense.

Goodrich explained that the tradition of tying boots backward in the stirrups came from a cavalry practice



Sgt. Charles Morrison, the Caisson Platoon's farrier, tightens a horse's shoe at Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall's John C. McKinney Memorial Stables as the Soldiers prepare for the funerals that day. (Photo by Meghan Portillo)

during the Civil War. Even during the funeral procession for Abraham Lincoln, his horse followed the casket with the president's boots tied in the same manner.

“If an officer were to go down in battle, Soldiers would take his boots off, tie them in the stirrups backward in the same way and smack the horse,” Goodrich said. “The horse, being a creature of habit, goes back to where he is comfortable, where he is fed, where he knows — back to camp. When the horse showed up with the officers' boots tied backwards, they would know that officer had perished in combat. We use it the same way now, with that horse specifically representing the person who we are burying, to carry on the traditions of those times.”

The tack used by the platoon can also trace its roots to the early days of the country. Fabricated from scratch by the in-house saddler, everything from the bridles and bits, to the harnesses that attach the horses to the caisson is a replica of the tack used in 1916, the year of the last major design change for the field artillery harness and tack. In 1943, most active horse-drawn and horse-mounted artillery and cavalry made the transition to motorized modes of transportation. In 1948, the remaining horse-mounted units were deactivated, and the Caisson Platoon became the last full-time horse-mounted unit in the Department of Defense.

“There are a couple of installations that have horse-mounted units, but it's not their full-time job,” Ford said.



Pfc. Dustin Davis (left) and Pvt. Sean Chapman play a soccer match with their horses as part of the Caisson Basic Rider's Course at Fort Belvoir, Va., in 2013. Although it looks like a game, the exercise helps the riders learn how to control the horses. (Photo by Sgt. Jose A. Torres Jr.)

Learning from horses

The NCOs of the platoon said they view their horses as fellow Soldiers. The special bond formed between them is clear in the gentle way the Soldiers handle the horses and in the happy voice they use to talk to them as they work. By spending time with individual horses on a daily basis, the Soldiers quickly learn the funny quirks they may have and each one's likes and dislikes.

The farrier, Sgt. Charles Morrison, works with each horse in the platoon. Every morning, he tightens the shoes that need to be tightened before the horses go

physical signs they are showing you before they act out. Sometimes, they just get impatient.”

Morrison said observing and learning from the horses has improved his human communication and made him a better leader.

“It made me realize that there are certain points — so much that Soldiers can take — before they start acting out. It's helped me to step back and look at the overall picture with my Soldiers. A lot of times, with Soldiers as well as with horses, it's not necessarily what they're doing. It's what *I'm* doing to cause them to do it.”



Spc. Alex Krieger drapes the flag-covered casket after a Caisson Platoon team leaves a burial site, signifying that there are no longer remains being carried on the caisson. The casket pictured is a “mock” casket, with a compartment in the back used to carry cremated remains on the caisson. (Photo by Meghan Portillo)

into the cemetery. Every six weeks, he brings each of the platoon's 61 horses into his shop for a “manicure” and new shoes. Morrison said he continues to learn all there is to know about being a farrier — including traditional blacksmith work — from Robert Brown, a contractor who doubles as the platoon's herd manager. In turn, Morrison teaches his Soldiers and anyone else in the barn who wants to learn.

Morrison was glad to say he has never been hurt on the job, something he attributes to paying close attention to the horses and their modes of communication.

“Part of working with the horses is getting to know their personalities,” he said. “You get to know their signs. It's like working with a bunch of kids: You get to learn the action that comes before the action. You see the

Learning from Soldiers

Soldiers and NCOs who come to the Caisson Platoon are handpicked from the best of the Old Guard. Though most come from an infantry background, the platoon is open to men and women of any MOS — from truck drivers to public affairs specialists.

According to Hayman, 99 percent of the Soldiers and NCOs who come to the platoon have no horsemanship experience. They actually prefer it this way for uniformity and to avoid having to correct bad habits, Hayman said. New Soldiers and NCOs attend a 9-week course at nearby Fort Belvoir, Va., where they learn all the basics of riding and horse care. Once they arrive at Fort Myer, there is an additional month and a half of training before they are allowed to participate in a mission.

“Sometimes it’s really difficult for the NCOs who come here, because they’ve spent years being a subject-matter expert in their field,” Ford said. “They know everything about their current job and have been reading up on all the latest publications, trying to stay ahead of the curve, trying to learn about the most recent thing the enemy’s doing and the most recent equipment the Army is fielding. . . . Then they get here, and the manual that we go off of is the 1942 field artillery mounted instruction manual, which hasn’t changed in 75 years.”

Morrison agreed that NCOs new to the platoon quickly realize that their skills as an infantryman will not help them much.

“They still have the leadership skills, the responsibility and all of what makes an NCO. But now they have to learn to step back and take cues from the lower enlisted guys,” Morrison said. “It’s the same with NCOs who leave here to go elsewhere, even within the Old Guard. They are going to a new job as well. Now they have to step back and take their cues from the front-line guys who have been there and know their job. It’s a role reversal. The NCO becomes the student. It takes a little time to get used to that — especially for NCOs who have been out there and done a lot in their career. They have been leaders for a while. They have been the ones who have taught. And now, they have to learn.”

Surrounded by sorrow

Though it may initially be difficult for NCOs to be students instead of teachers, the NCOs of the Caisson Platoon recognize that it only makes them better leaders. By working alongside their Soldiers, NCOs are better able to inspire them and help them cope with the stresses of the job, Goodrich said.

It takes a certain kind of NCO to not only motivate the Soldier to maintain such a high standard, but to also lead them in an environment where they are surrounded by grief on a daily basis, he said.

Spc. Alex Krieger, one of the riders on Goodrich’s team, was the life of the party in the barn. He made everybody laugh. But as soon as he mounted his horse

to head to the chapel, his demeanor changed. He and the other riders donned relaxed, somber expressions, and sat tall on their horses, with their chests out and their backs straight. They are not supposed to turn their heads or maneuver in any way. Goodrich said each Soldier processes the grief in his or her own way, and recalled the difficulties of participating in funerals when he first came to the platoon.

“There was a private first class who had been killed in Iraq, and when the service was taking place, the next of kin came out,” he said. “The girl couldn’t have been more than 19 or 20 years old, as pregnant as you can get, and just bawling, people having to hold her up. It ripped my heart out. That was the only time I broke composure to the point where I shed a tear on a mission. But I’ve come a long way since then; I’ve done a lot of them. I’m able to channel a lot more of that now and focus during the mission. After the mission, I can just kind of relax and let it blow off, and then get ready for the next one.”

Because the Soldiers are so restricted in their view of the funeral, Goodrich said he often takes them on a day they are not on a mission to watch a funeral from the distance. He wants them to be able to see the families, to know what it means to them that they are there. The more conscious they are of the service they are providing to the families, the easier it is for them to handle the sorrow and do their jobs well, he said.

“A lot of times the families will come talk to us and ask us questions, and they always say ‘Thank you’ to us for being out there. To me, the honor is mine,” Goodrich said as he waited with his team in front of the chapel for a funeral to finish. “I always tell them, ‘Thank you.’ They ask, ‘Why are you thanking me?’ And I always tell them, ‘Thank you for allowing me to be here for this.’”

“The people we are putting in the ground laid the foundation for me to even be here. I take it personally, and hold a lot of pride in this,” Goodrich said. “But all good things have to come to an end. I have a year left, and then I’m off to somewhere else. Hopefully by then, I will have helped others to see things the same way. Because it is — it’s important.” ■



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