

John's funeral procession rolled up to the Basilica escorted by a fleet of dark SUV's with brilliant strobbing lights and a squad of Philadelphia, Morrestown and New Jersey police. His family merged from the spotless black limousines only after the procession guests had preceded them into the Cathedral. They had a distant stare on their faces, without focus. Rich walked behind his parents, solemn but attentive looking. The mourners numbering over 1,000 had began gathering an hour before the procession arrived. The weather was crisp and clear. About 45 degrees with a slight breeze. The wind made the New Jersey State Police honor guard's flags snap in the wind as they lined the first step to the mammoth Cathedral behind them. The media had also gathered but remained respectfully restrained across the street and somewhat disguised from the family's view behind cars from the procession that had parked in front of them. Dr. Schwab stood on the curb outside Carmela's limousine, waiting to assist her out of the vehicle. Carmela, her children, Mr & Mrs Pryor and the rest of John's extended family steadily climbed the dozen or so steps into the Cathedral. They were each given a black and gold ribbon as they entered. As were all of the mourners. Earlier Dr Schwab, John's boss saw me fumbling with mine and said "Chris, I can help you with that, I'm a surgeon." We smiled and he quickly dispatched with putting my ribbon on. It was very settling for him to have remembered my name while only meeting the day before. John's family walked the long center isle to their seats on the right side of Cathedral. Dr. Schwab escorting Carmela. Seated on the left of the isle were perhaps as many as 200 service people from all branches of the military. Ranging in rank from Airman to 3 star Generals. Also seen where people dressed in everyday street cloths, \$1,000 suits and surgical scrubs.

Two days before John's funeral his brother, Richard, had called and asked if I would like to serve as one of John's pall bearers. He suggested I talk it over with Nancy, my wife. As soon as I was able to clear the lump that had risen in my throat and with my eyes welling up I replied that I did not need to talk to Nancy, I told Rich it would be an honor to serve as one of John's attendants. Rich shared with me that he intended to seek out Brian McClintock and Chris Gomes to also serve as pall bearers. In the cloud of chaos that Richard had lived in during the last week and one half, what an honor to be considered by John's brother to be important enough to his brother to be asked to serve.

The funeral director gave the pal bearers final instructions. The eight of us stood shoulder to shoulder, four to a side. Brian, a medical practice partner, John's brother in law, John's police officer cousin. Time was so short; I was not able to learn the association of the other 3 gentlemen. We reached under the American flag draped over his casket. It smelled of freshly sewn cotton. It was held fast by an elastic band. We grasped for the side rail as the casket rolled out of the hearse. The metal rail was cool to the touch. The burden of weight shifting as the casket moved further out. Once fully extricated, a noticeable weight came to bear. I had to make sure to brace myself with the weight. One that I was proud to support. It was at that point I heard what seemed like a roar of clicks behind us. At first I thought it was birds. Without turning I realized the media cameras were firing away. We stutter stepped back from the hearse then a cautious swing to the right. We began the climb up the steps. The State Police honor guard's drill master barking a sharp command that the flags be dipped in respect as we passed.

We passed into the vestibule of the Cathedral where we set the casket down onto the carriage that it would roll in on. The pall bearers assisted with the informal folding of the American flag so that the Christian burial shroud could replace it over the dark walnut colored casket. I noted a fine scratch on its top. Where the loved one's chest, shoulders and head would be viewed if the casket were to be opened. I wondered if it was from a diamond ring from John's wife or mother, with their ring rotated palm down, as their hands stroked the casket as they said good bye a final time at the funeral home.

When I noticed the scratch I wondered if the funeral director had enclosed my varsity letter inside John's casket. After discovering my HS Varsity jacket while unpacking from a recent move to a new home I had wondered what to do with it. I couldn't just throw it into the land fill. Most of my life long, enduring friendships were forged while I earned the letters. I earned this letter with John during our first year playing varsity football. We were pictured together in the news paper after winning the Section II Super bowl. I thought it a fitting symbol of my friendship with John and the depth of my sadness in losing him.

With the shroud placed on the casket we placed our closest hand onto the casket and walked next to it as the funeral director and his assistant guided the casket into the Cathedral. The mourning crowd had been standing since the inside doors had opened to reveal our presence. It was like walking down the isle at a wedding when the entire audience turns to see the bride. Only for this trip there would not be a single smiling face. It was near impossible to make eye contact with any individual. If I did I'd find my eyes tearing and me needing to quicken my breath so as to not weep. I couldn't look at Brian either. If I did I would end up with the same tearing result. The isle almost had a perspective of a vanishing point on the horizon. Like rail road tracks disappearing in the distance. I focused on the memorial candle and its large brass holder that was at the center and end of the isle. After passing by the 50 or so rows pews we arrived at the candle. The presiding priest came forward, recited a prayer then blessed the casket with holy water. The shroud darkened where the water landed but could be seen quickly drying by evaporation. After the blessing and before we peeled off to opposite sides of the outside of the church I located Carmela. Her distant 1,000 yard gaze had momentarily disappeared and was replaced by her head tilting slightly to the side and a sorrowful stare at the casket that now rested 5 feet away from her.

We were asked by the director to assemble at the rear of the church so we could be reassembled quickly at the end of the service to escort John back out. From the back of the church we had a unique perspective. The soaring domed ceilings of the cathedral in full view. The colorful murals on the ceilings that were interrupted by the massive columns reaching up to them. The naves on either side about 2/3 of the way to the altar. Seared in my mind will be the image of the long center isle we'd just traversed. A diamond pattern of antique white and faded black marble tile. The center diamond pattern lining up perfectly with the long axis of the burial shroud cross that covered the casket. At one point Francis had to get up to leave, I assumed he had to use the bathroom. He was escorted out by one of his Aunts I assumed. She hunched over so as to not obscure anyone's view of the reader who was speaking at the time. Not that hunching would

matter. The readers podium was perching high to the right of the alter, wrapping around one of the massive columns. At one point during communion I thought I saw John come out into the isle and lightly touch the side of the casket.

The Nave's were not quite full but a good number of the temporary folding chairs had been occupied. People stood 3 deep in the vestibule of the church. Each time a late comer arrived the door would swing open and a rush of cool air would sweep in. The repetitive chill began to wear on me. To keep warm I exited into the vestibule and headed to another entry door that would still keep me in the back of the church but out of the chilling breeze. I passed by a man who'd just started a cell phone call. I thought "God Man! It's a funeral service! Can't it wait?" I had begun to think about telling him to take it outside when he introduced himself to his caller as Special Agent in Charge so & so. He asked the caller if he was speaking to the officer in charge of the military services at the cemetery. I decided I wouldn't mess with the FBI.

Dr. Schwab, one of John's bosses, delivered a reading with a gentle demeanor. I heard in his voice an occasional tremor of grief. He too was settling for me. We'd talked with the Dr at the wake the day before. Dr. Schwab recruited John from Buffalo and, he was from Colonie. Probably a foregone conclusion that the recruiter would connect with the local roots John had.

Fr. McElroy homlized the group with his Irish brogue, smoothly recounting John's and Carmela's life together. He tried to summarize John's driven commitment for service to man. It was somewhat comforting but what could possibly put this out of our minds. The part of the homily most vivid to me was his reciting John's won words that "he hopes his family can forgive him for his difficult decision to serve" in such a dangerous theater.

I've seen it before, the confusion of mass attendees who are and are not catholic. As they stumble between sitting and standing as the mass progresses. But the majority seemed to understand the decorum of the mass. I ventured many may have been catholic. I went down the center isle to receive communion and on the way down to the midway communion station I saw my wife Nancy and Brian's wife Lori. Our eyes met for just a moment. As the communion came to conclusion and people were kneeling for their post communal prayer the Director brought us to the front of the church via the side rows. The firm clicks of our heels audible to all the mass to hear.

We paused at the outside of the isles. I looked inward and saw Danielle who was forward of the pew with about 12 feet of clear space to the altar's communion rail. She reached over the pew and slung one of her nieces on her hip and carried her to her seat on the isle with the confidence that a 35 year old mother would have. Once seated she passed her niece off to, I assume, her mother. The 4 clergy left the alter & moved towards the casket and readied to bless the casket and with incense. It was a little slow to ignite as they sprinkled the finely ground material into the urn.

We where signaled in by the funeral director to resume our positions adjacent to the casket. The aroma of incense still hung in the air. The entire audience had risen to their

feet and we started the long slow pace to the vestibule of the church. The same solemn stare we'd received when we entered. Now immaculately manicured, mature men and women with elegant presence were openly weeping as we passed. Every 10 steps or so I had to puff rapid breaths so I'd not lapse in tears myself. Two thirds way down the isle I had to wipe my welling tears because I'd passed my wife and had eye contact with her, I could not see ahead of me. John's family silently left their pews and began to file out behind us. We reached the vestibule again paused in order to rotate the casket for its proper exiting orientation. We assisted the funeral director with the removal of the burial shroud and replace it with the stiff American flag. The Blue field placed so it would be over John's face casket.

The Police honor guard had retired but a Medical Reserve honor guard of officers had assembled and had snapped into a stiff salute as we descended the steps. I felt a stumble from some one so I started to quietly call out "step". Almost like a cadence so we all knew a step was coming. We again stutter stepped to turn the casket to the hearse. We placed the lead end on the rollers on the floor of the hearse and began to hand over hand pass it into the rear of the vehicle. It was almost awkward. None of not knowing when to stop passing it along. Looking back it was almost like we didn't want to let go of our friend. We wound up almost being bunched up in the rear of the hearse. All the pall bearers separated without words being said. I stood off the right rear of the vehicle, alone on the curb looking into the swinging open door of the hearse. The bright red and white stripes of the flag visible. For me I felt like this was the moment where I was saying goodbye to my friend.

I now had to get our car positioned to join the procession to the cemetery. I quickly drove clockwise around cathedral and got in line behind a Philadelphia PD SUV. While waiting for Brian to retrieve Nancy and Lori I found myself chatting with an officer in Army dress blues. He identified himself as the Chaplain for John's reserve Unit. His clergy cross on his lapel in clear view. I told him I would much rather of had to do something different today. He said while true there is no other place I'd rather be today. He said by doing this I will be able to heal and will be more at peace when I am able to reconcile what has happened to my friend.

Brian, Nancy and Lori found me and we waited for the procession to begin. Brian had been given an American flag that all procession vehicles were encouraged to display in the drivers side rear window. The type why fasten in your window frame so it flutters above your vehicle as you drive down the road. The FBI agent I'd seen in the vestibule emerged from the crowd and gave direction to his driver to turn the concealed emergency lights on. The 3 darkened window governments SUV's rolled forward, slowly followed by the hearse, and then Carmela's and other family members stretch limousines. 4 in total if I remember correctly. There was a momentary paused at a traffic signal just past the church probably to allow the procession to form up behind the lead vehicles.

As we began to roll I understood why the police honor guard had not been present when we exited the church. The 695 out of Philadelphia is like an urban expressway with on and off ramps. As we began to pass ramps I saw State and Local Police cars blocking

every ramp and cross street. No one was coming or going, only our procession. I'd recalled a similar situation a few years ago in Rochester where we closed a similar highway facility, to allow for the safe passage of President George Bush. This police blockade took place during the entire trip to Colestown cemetery, about 15 miles. Imagine closing the Northway from Colonie to Saratoga, or the old elevated causeway through Boston. IT was awesome in a very depressing way.

We were behind an EMS vehicle that was part of the procession. I had trouble making sure I didn't follow too close. The vehicle had its emergency flashing lights on and it made it hard to tell when they were applying their brakes or not. I figured the motorcade was 1.5 miles long. Allowing about 75 ft per car that made around 110 vehicles. Assuming 4 persons per vehicle, that put about 400 people on their way to the cemetery.

As we moved into the New Jersey Area State and Local Police were standing at attention in the middle of intersections with their cars blocking traffic for us. Some were saluting as we passed. Many with mourning ribbons over their badges that were on their chests. Every so often men in plain cloths stood on the curb, saluting as we passed. I ventured that maybe they were former military. Maybe not, but it was moving to see none the less. Some motorists who were stopped due to the traffic control stood saluting next to their cars, some with just a respectful stance. It crushed me to see this measure of respect from people who'd inadvertently and momentarily been inconvenienced. I looked in my rear view mirror and saw behind the procession 3 police cars abreast, holding following traffic back. I think we made a normal 30 minute commute in 15 minutes, and most of the way were stop and go.

The procession slowed as we approached the cemetery, the 4 way intersection was blocked by police on all 4 approaches. Pedestrians had gathered at all corners of the intersection. As we swung into the Colestown Cemetery the Cherry Hill Fire Department Hook and Ladder came into view. They had extended the boom and suspended from the ladder an American flag measuring perhaps 15 x 25 ft. behind the flag was the cemetery entrance that had what appeared to be a sentry type housing above the stone arch that lead into the cemetery. The procession broke off to different narrow pathways, all following the general direction towards the hearse. The lead vehicles of the procession stopped and John's family waited inside the limousines while the majority of those in the procession walked to the grave site. The military honor guard stood at attention waiting the same.

The hearse had parked on the narrow cemetery road way about 75 feet from the burial site. The site was sheltered by a green canopy; red velvet like chairs had been arranged parallel to what was the open grave site. One the opposite side of the canopy about 15 feet away the soil that had been removed to make way for John's casket was somewhat disguised by the green indoor out door carpeting and the flower sprays form the funeral home. The mourners had gathered in a crescent shape on the east and west sides of the site. Nancy and I stood together on the west crescent, close to the hearse. My heart sank s the door opened to the hearse. My friend was going to be taking his last steps here.

The honor guard sharply removed the casket from the hearse, the rehearsed scrape of their shoe soles as they guided the casket out in unison side step shuffles. They similarly pivoted to face the grave site. The honor guard silently marched in short steps toward the canopy. Stopping to turn towards it at a 90 degree angle and then moved forward again in silence. As they settled over the burial excavation the cemetery staff assisted with setting the casket on its mooring position. The honor guard retreated and the wide berth that the mourners had given them now closed around the north side of the canopy. Almost like the crowd closing ranks behind the family in their support.

Nancy and I moved to the south side of the site, looking over the disguised soil, toward the family that was seated under the canopy and facing us. Danielle on the far left, Frankie right of her, John Jr next to Frankie and Carmela right of Frankie. A relative sat right of Carmela almost looking like he was providing physical support to her. Mrs. Pryor was right of Carmela's relative and Mr. Pryor sat on the extreme right of the seating. Fr. McElroy led a simple grave side ceremony. Probably reading passages that John had picked out. Two other priests offered blessings one more noticeably emotional than the other. I'd seen him at the funeral home the day before and could tell that he'd been crying. He was a bit older than his counterpart and Fr. McElroy had neatly combed grey hair. Almost Richard Chamberlain style.

I heard a single click in the background. I looked in my peripheral vision and noticed a single photographer standing off about 60 yards from the grave site with a long camera lens. I hoped he was there with the Pryor family consent. There were persons I noticed walking around the grave site as well. They stood off about 25 ft from the canopy. One was awkwardly taking pictures and the other equally so shooting a hand held camcorder. Jeez man, let's leave this to the written and mental memory. Don't try out your new Christmas gift here !!!

Fr. McElroy concluded the Christian portion of burial by blessing the casket with holy water and then the military honors portion began. Orders were barked and the firing team made ready for a 7 shot volley repeated 3x's. The shots rang out but almost had a muffled tone due to the quickening breeze. The report was not startling and was slightly louder than a cap gun, but not the deafening roar that movie theater surround sound promotes. After each volley the clatter of spent shell casings could be heard as they bounced on the pavement at the firing team's feet. Once the firing team was commanded to parade rest TAPS began. Again looking out of my peripheral vision I felt an overwhelming sense of relief. It was a real bugle. Not some cheap recording that had static. The tone and pitch were perfect. There were no cracks in his delivery.

The mourners on the west side of the site parted as the honor guard silently re-entered and formed up on either side of the casket. They reached down and began to loosen the band that held the flag fast. They rose with the flag but it sagged in a loose manner. I was troubled by this and it soon came to be why I was. The flag began to be folded from the red and white stripes while they stood over the casket as it tradition. But I noticed that the folds were not crisp, they were not being held taught. I hoped there would be sufficient slack to tuck the spine of the flag (the part with the grommets) once the blue field had

been folded into. Once there the Master Sergeant running the ceremony struggled, even winced to gain slack to be able to fold the spline into the blue field. The flag presented to the loved one, and any flag folded for storage should only have the blue field and white stars showing. No other portions. This was not going well. The soldier who held the flag struggled to stay stationary, his forearms parallel to himself, one hand on top with palm facing down and one hand underneath palm facing up and as the soldier who held the flag with his. The point of the folded triangle pointed towards the soldier. The master sergeant wincing to get the fold to work. At that point I started to think, fold the god dam flag! I thought, are Rich and I and some other boy scouts going to have to do this for you? God my Cub Scouts know how to do this better!!

At that moment in the distance a shutter could be heard just over the tree line to the west. A helicopter appeared. It was low, about 1,000 feet. There were bright landing lights illuminated on its belly. My first inclination was "Are you kidding me? A News helicopter? I hope they crash right about now." Then right behind it, staggered to the north was another, and staggered behind the second, to the south was a third. It was a fly over. As they came closer the civilian medivac identification could be seen on their fuselages. These helicopters continued towards the east they waggled as they flew over. Almost like a wave good bye. The whup whup of their rotors not as loud as their engines. Then a moment later a 4th appeared from the west, out of formation. It was closing fast, almost like it was trying to catch up but then abruptly banked north, just short of the grave site. The missing man formation.

During the distraction of the fly over the honor guard had unfurled the flag and began refolding it. Still with some effort the Master Sergeant got it folded correctly but it was clear by the expression that I could see on his face, that the family could not see, he was not happy about refolding the flag.

The presentations of the flags took place. Carmela received the just folded flag first. I saw her lean forward, not to hear the commanding officers condolence or universal flag presentation statement "a grateful nation" but more from an emotional ache. A moment she knew was coming but did not want to experience. Each child was then presented with a pre folded flag. The attending enlisted man using the same palm up, palms down posture knelt at the head of the casket and made contact with its surface then passed it to the ranking officer for presentation to the children, then finally Mr. & Mrs. Pryor.

Carmela was on Mars at this point she looked like a person who had transformed into an out of body experience so as to get through this setting. She would somewhat become more aware as little John fidgeted in his seat next to her, she spoke a word or two to him. He settled and she slipped back to her blank stare.

Brigade General of the Army Medical Corp. Brass, he as much said what he says here today makes no difference in what happened but he offered that the Army and its entire medical corp. mourns the loss of John. I believe he was sincere, he'd lost a colleague, someone who he'd never met, but he appreciated John's skill, he mourned the loss of a man who was meant to save lives.

One of the enlisted men read a prepared script describing the 10 or so medals that John was awarded posthumously. The Bronze Star, The Purple Heart, Operation Iraqi Freedom meritorious service medals, and Army Medical Corp service medals. In reverence to John I keep my true feelings about why he received these medals to myself.

The General presented separately to each one of the children an identical set of John's posthumous medals. The children were attentive to the man. I wondered if they really got it. Did they understand? Little John, how deep is his understanding? After, the kids struggled to keep the awkward stack of medal boxes from falling from their laps.

At the conclusion of the presentation those who wished, were asked to place a red carnation on John's casket and vacate the site to allow John's immediate family the opportunity to place their single long stem red roses on the now bare casket. I almost felt I had invaded a private moment for John's family. Nancy & I left for our car to allow John's family this last intensely private moment. May God bless my friend and his family. May God and our community support John's family as they begin to recover from this loss. I miss you John. I am proud to have been your friend.