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A SOLDIER'S SOLEMN DUTY

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Cover Story

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Cpl. Alex Kessler enjoying Hawaii with his wife Shelbi and daughter Marceline

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The military is rich in history and traditions, and no unit exemplifies the nation's heritage more than the U.S. Army Caisson Platoon of the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment, known as The Old Guard. The Caisson Platoon is responsible for the final act of honor for fallen service members, providing a somber escort and funeral procession at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia.

Images of these formal ceremonies are

part of the national collective consciousness: The funeral procession consists of a flag-draped casket carried by a stately black artillery caisson pulled by six horses of the same color. The caissons were built in 1918 and originally used for 75mm cannons; the cannons and equipment have been replaced by a flat deck on which the casket rests.

The riders of the Caisson Platoon dress in the formal blue Army uniform complete with riding breeches, boots, and spurs. The Section Chief in Command of the Caisson unit rides to the left front of the team on a

separate mount. For soldiers or Marines with the rank of colonel or higher, a caparisoned horse is led behind the caisson wearing an empty saddle with the rider's boots reversed in the stirrups, indicating that the fallen warrior will never ride again. This honor is also accorded to fallen U.S. presidents for their role as Commander in Chief. The funerals of presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt, Herbert Hoover, John F. Kennedy, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Lyndon B. Johnson all featured the caparisoned horse.

The 3rd U.S. Infantry is known as "The Old

Guard" because it is the oldest active-duty infantry unit in the Army, serving the nation since 1784. It has been the official ceremonial unit of the U.S. Army and escort to the president since 1948, and it also provides security for Washington, D.C. in times of national emergency or civil disturbance. Soldiers of The Old Guard maintain a 24-hour vigil at the Tomb of the Unknowns, and they also participate in numerous historic pageants and Presidential Inaugural Parades.

Soldiers selected for the Caisson unit must try out and train constantly with their horses, which can be a powerful incentive for applying for this time-honored duty. "Caisson Platoon is one of the last full time equestrian units, and I decided the morning of tryouts to sign up, since I wanted to face my fear of horses," explained Corporal Alex Kessler, a former member of the Caisson Platoon now stationed in Schofield Barracks Hawaii. "Tryouts consist of an Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT), an interview with the Platoon leadership, and a 10-week Basic Horsemanship Training."

According to the Army's public affairs office, most of the men and women selected for the Platoon, based in Ft. Myer, Virginia, are not expert horsemen and must undertake rigorous training on the proper riding style, which the Army has not regularly used since 1948. This includes learning to ride in an erect posture at military attention and to sit in a McClellan saddle, designed by Civil War General George B. McClellan. The Army adopted the McClellan saddle in 1859, and it was used by the cavalry and horse artillery until late in World War II.


Members of the Caisson Platoon also must learn to properly care for their horses, and they must learn how to use, clean, and maintain the ceremonial tack and harness used during funerals and special events. The horses themselves require extensive training, and horses and riders drill, train, and live together until the pair are considered qualified to undertake the ceremonial duties. Because of this extensive equine training and experience, the Army labels the Caisson Soldiers with the additional skill identifier D2 - Army Horseman.

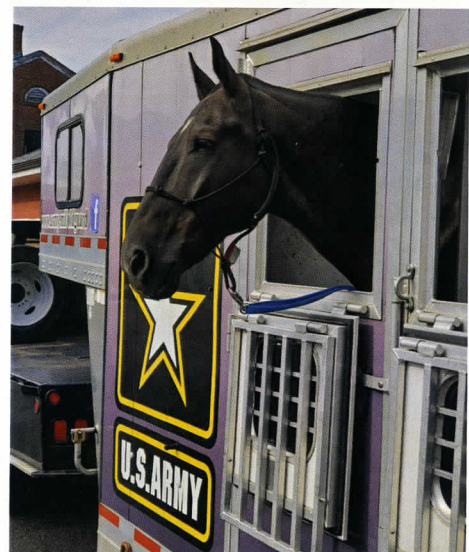
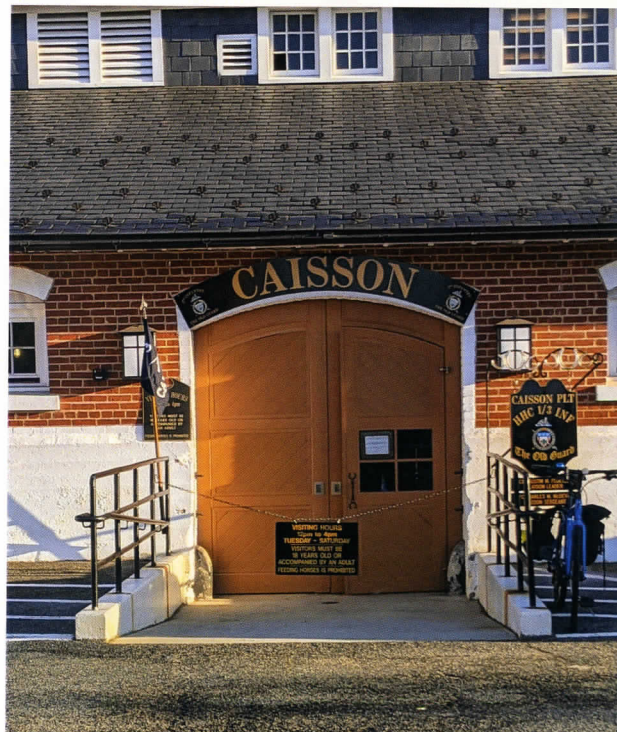
Kessler points out that the Caisson unit can be extremely busy and demanding, but it is also a poignant and worthwhile endeavor to provide final honors for service members. "The Caisson Platoon provides a full honor funeral for all branches of the military

in Arlington National Cemetery – about eight funerals a day split between two caissons," he explains. "It's a lot of hours. For a lot of soldiers, it could mean having at least four guard shifts a month (24-hour duty day.) A riding day with four funerals starts at 04:30 and can go as late as 17:00, and you have weekend work at least once a month."

In spite of the long hours, the duty is moving and inspirational. "Every single ride was a service member's final military ceremony, whether it be MIA (Missing in Action), KIA (Killed in Action), or a retiree," Kessler notes. "To put it in perspective, at the end of the day you're not doing four funerals a day, you're doing one funeral four times a day, and we do our best and look our best for every service."

And, there is an added benefit for the family members, according to Kessler's wife Shelbi: "The highlight of having a spouse in the Caisson Platoon is I was able to go to the Caisson barn and pet the horses whenever I wanted!" she enthused. "The Platoon also made everyone welcome inside the barn. Most holidays the Budweiser Clydesdale team would be stalled at the Caisson barn, so we got to chit-chat with handlers and pet the Clydesdales. And of course, it was important that my husband is held in high esteem."

The Old Guard was Kessler's first assignment, and he said it was an extremely rewarding one. "The Caisson Platoon is hands down the best job I've had," he declares, adding "I would do it again!" 



Above top: Plaque noting Kessler's Caisson service dates; Above middle: The Caisson barn at Ft. Myer, VA; Above bottom: A Caisson horse poking its head out of the trailer