



Before leaving for a funeral in December, Beck hugs his children, Stephen, 2, and twins Lindsey and Abigail, 4. The Marine major's job often means long periods away from his own family to care for others. "One morning after burying a lance

corporal, all I wanted to do was come home and play with my children . . ." he said. "But you know, all I was thinking about while I was playing with them were all those guys out there in harm's way, making all that possible."

**M**inutes after the ceremony ended, a windstorm blew into the cemetery, swirling the high desert dust. Beck was one of the last to leave, giving his final commands to the cemetery caretakers in the funeral shelter: Make sure the sand on the casket doesn't blow away.

"It's important," he told them.

As he drove away from the cemetery, Beck replayed the last few hours in his mind, looking for lessons for the next time, hoping there wouldn't be one, but knowing there would.

He thought back to the latest funeral — from the moment he rang the doorbell in Brighton until he handed the flag to Katherine and said those words that usually begin, "On behalf of a grateful nation . . ."

"You know, everyone always wants to know what the words are, what it is that I say," he said. "I don't say it loud enough for everyone to hear."

There are scripted words written for the Marines to follow. Beck has long since learned that he doesn't always have to follow a script.

"I'm basically looking into that mother, father or spouse's eyes and letting them know that everyone cares about them," he said. "But the words are nothing compared to the flag."

He then drove several miles without speaking.

In his mind, the subject had not changed.

"You think about the field of cotton somewhere in Mississippi, and out of all of it comes this thread that becomes this flag that covers our brave. Think about it.

"I had a cotton field right behind the house when I was going to command and staff college. Imagine being that farmer who owned the cotton field. Imagine if one of these parents was able to take a flag back to him and say, 'That flag came out of your field and escorted my son home.'"

He shook his head.

"The things you think about," he said.

It's usually on these long drives that he allows himself to step back from it all, or at least tries to. He still

hasn't learned how to step back far enough.

"One morning after burying a lance corporal, all I wanted to do was come home and play with my children. Just take them into a corner with all their things and play with them," he said. "But you know, all I was thinking about while I was playing with them were all those guys out there in harm's way, making all that possible.

"Here we are, while they're out there. Someone could be under attack right now. Someone could be calling for an airstrike . . ."

Someone could be standing at a door, preparing to knock.

"This experience has changed me in fundamental ways," Beck said. "I would not wish it on anyone, but at the same time, I think that it's important that it happened to me. I know it's going to have an impact on someone's life that I'm going to meet years from now."

In a year, he said, so many scenes return. The doors — and doorbells. The first time he completed a final inspection. Sand on a casket.

The scene he sees the most, however, is not of a single moment but the entire journey, viewed through someone else's eyes.

"One thing keeps coming back to me," he said. "It was during the memorial service for Kyle Burns."

The service came only a week after Beck first parked in front of that little white house in Laramie, watching the perfect snow, preparing to walk through it all.

During that memorial service, Kyle Burns's uncle, George Elsom, recounted the call from his devastated sister, who phoned him after she first saw the Marines at the door.

"At Kyle's memorial service, his uncle talked about all they had learned since that night," Beck said. "Then he looked at us and said something I'll never forget."

"He said, 'If these men ever come to your door, don't turn them away.'

"He said, 'If these men come to your door . . .

" 'Let them in.' "