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AFROTC POW/MIA 24-hour Vigil

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Seth Ward
Logan, Utah
November 19, 2018

“AFROTC POW/MIA 24-hour Vigil” Calendar Customs

Informant:

Seth Ward is a freshman at Utah State University and is in his first semester with the ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps). He was recently awarded a scholarship by the Air Force due to his demonstrated academic and athletic excellence. Cadet Ward served a two-year service mission for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in St. Louis, Missouri. He is from Almo, a small town in Idaho, and has three sisters and one brother.

Context:

Every year, for more than three decades, the Utah State University Air Force ROTC detachment holds a twenty-four hour vigil on Veterans Day to remember and honor prisoners of war and servicemembers missing in action. I was especially aware of the vigil this year as my husband is a staff member with the USU AFROTC. An Instagram account for USU (@usuaggielife) featured a picture of Cadet Ward in uniform participating in the vigil. I was put in contact with Cadet Ward and he agreed to participate in my collection project which is focusing on legends, stories, and traditions pertaining to USU.

Cadet Ward and I met in a vacant staff room in the Military Science building on a Monday morning. Cadet Ward was in civilian clothing as the cadets are only required to wear uniforms on Thursdays. We chatted for a few minutes about Cadet Ward’s background information before talking specifically about the vigil.

The leadership laboratory Cadet Ward talked about is a weekly afternoon meeting the cadets are required to attend and participate in. The lead labs are planned and carried out by the three-hundred level (junior year) cadets as an opportunity for all cadets to learn military skills vital to active duty officers, and upper class cadets to learn leadership and organization skills.

Text:

RS: Ok, so this is an interview with Cadet Seth Ward on 11/19/18. Just have at it, tell me what you know or how you felt.

SW: Ok, so I first found out about the POW/MIA vigil in ahh, in ahh, presentation by Cadet Palmer, he told us all about it and I didn’t really know what it was to be honest, when I first heard about it, but, he seemed pretty passionate about it so it got me very interested. I then learned that it was for prisoners of war and missing in action soldiers and to like, commemorate them and honor them and umm, know they are not forgotten like it says right there [points to a

POW/MIA not forgotten flag painted on the wall]. Umm, and, so, yeah, I became very interested I guess and, and decided that I wanted to sign up for sure. Umm, so that's what I did, Uhhh, I knew that it's something that uhhh Utah State's been doing for a while, I don't know how long, umm, but LT COL Smith- I remember him umm sharing with us a cadet that was here forever ago that had graduated and now was in I think umm pilot training or something like that. Umm, and LT COL Smith telling us that he said that the POW/MIA vigil was his favorite [stresses word] thing- very favorite thing to do. And so I guess just to talk about it specifically I remember the lead lab we had a normal leadership laboratory Thursday from three to five so at five o'clock was when we were going to start it, gonna go for twenty-four hour the guards- err, the flags were going to be constantly guarded which I thought was really cool, umm, by either four or two cadets. End of lead lab we go to the quad we're all there together and that's where we began the ceremony. And I remember getting to the quad, umm, and like, like feeling [stresses word], it was actually pretty cool. I remember walking up to the quad and umm then we stopped 'cause we were marching you know it can be kind of hectic when you're marching 'cause you're trying to think about stuff and think how to get there. And we get there and we stop, we fall out which means we can just start walking normal and just feeling like a [pause] like, I don't know how to describe it, but it was very like, palpable, felt like reverence I guess you could say, a calmness as we as we walked up and I saw what was about to happen and it was just really cool. It felt sacred even.

RS: Where the flags already up at that point or did ya'll set them up?

SW: Umm, the flags weren't yet posted [RS: um-hum] so they were going to post the flags then begin the ceremony, I believe.

RS: So you did a ceremony where, uhh, the colors were presented [SW: yes] by some of the cadets?

SW: Yes ma'am. Yeah that's exactly what we did. Ahh [pause] so at least three cadets, right, had flags, umm and then there were more along with the ceremony. Umm, anyway so right at five when lead lab ended like basically is when they posted them and usually we end leadership laboratory with this big chant called our det cheer, or just cheer whatever, and we didn't do that, it was a silent ending it was cool, like, just very respectful it felt really right. So we were all able to get a flag and after the ceremony had began and put a flag in the grass and salute the flag and show our respect. Which I thought was neat just the feeling you got. Umm, so yeah from then on all through the night are cadets there, two in the morning, three in the morning and so forth and I got to do it at eight [RS: um-hum] the next morning, which was perfect.



RS: So when you, ahh, when you were there [SW: yes] doing it, was it with, umm just one other cadet or three other cadets?

SW: I was with three [RS: um-hum] yep.

RS: Did you find that the students who passed you were respectful?

SW: I did [voice sincere].

RS: Yeah? Did anyone, like, try to talk to you or anything? Were they just kind of [SW: umm] were reverent and-

SW: For the most part I feel like they were pretty reverent [RS: uh-huh]. Umm, for the- I guess for the most part I felt like they didn't know what was going on [RS: sure] but as they walked by and looked at the signs or whatever they started to figure it out, and yeah, everybody was really respectful, umm, they recognized it was something serious.

RS: Oh that's good. So how- I know that ya'll had to turn and march in formation at [SW: yeah] the same time so did you just have to count in your mind [SW: yes!] the entire time?

SW: I've never counted to ten so many times in my whole life!

RS: Just over and over?

SW: Seriously. So yeah, yeah, what you do is I guess you all start in the middle [makes a square shape with hands on table] right? [RS: uh-huh] And then you, I guess turn around and you march out ten paces [drops hands flat onto table] count to ten, turn around, ten paces back. So basically you just count to ten over and over again and then you do a few movements to get to the next straight way, sidewalk, and do it again [RS: um-hum]. So that's what you do the whole time.

RS: And did you find that you were able to, while you were doing that, were you able to reflect on things or were you just so focused [laughs while talking] on counting to ten over and over?

SW: Yeah. You know what I mean, at first you want to get a feel for it, right? So I was pretty worried about ugh, does this look good? Do I- am I doing it right? Like, we all want to be in unison but after a while you get a feel for it and you're able to- I wouldn't say let your mind wander, but when you're there for an hour, it was an hour shift and some people did more, so

you're able to really actually think about what you're doing [RS: um-hum] which is a pretty neat experience in and of itself. The calmness, you know that feeling you feel [pause] it's pretty real and you're able to, I don't know, help others to feel that too, cause uhh, like we said the students came by and some would see what was going on and they'd grab a flag and put it in the ground and that was pretty neat.

RS: Did you have, umm, did faculty- did you notice if any like professors [SW: yep] seemed obviously older, seemed to stop by as well?

SW: Yeah, probably more so [RS: ohh?] the older you know, maybe faculty or-

RS: Older students like me [laughs while talking]?

SW: No [laughs while talking] but they would stop more it felt like, and even take pictures there were a few that were- that would take pictures of us.

RS: Did that make you nervous?

SW: Yeah, [small laugh] a little bit.

RS: Yeah? Cause, honesty you were on the Instagram page [SW: yeah...] I was like 'Hey! That kid that was on that's who I want [SW: right] to talk to.' Do you mind if I put your photo in with this?

SW: Oh no. Yeah, go ahead that's great.

RS: Ok, super.



SW: Yeah I remember- yeah! And there was like people filming some stuff. It was all good, but I remember walking out once and the guy with the camera was like click, click, click [x a lot] a bunch of pictures all in a row and I was like ‘Oh! I gotta look good [laughs while talking] this is important.’

RS: So, what do you want to do when you graduate? What kind of comm- uhhh, what do you [SW: yeah] want your career field to be?

SW: So, so the goal is to be a pilot [RS: uh-huh] ummm [pause] to be honest with you I don’t know, I’m learning more about the Air Force as we, you know, as I come along [pause] I’m learning as I go and deciding as I go. And so I’ve decided that I really like the ROTC, I really like everything that the Air Force teaches [RS: um-hum] and [pause] yeah, I’m very interested in trying to become a pilot [RS: that’s great] and as far as specific planes or anything to fly I do not have enough knowledge to even tell you what I would, you know even necessarily want to fly.

RS: So as you’re doing this vigil and you’re thinking about MIA and POW [SW: yeah] and thinking that you’re going to go active duty and as a pilot the potential to be shot down or-

SW: Is there.

RS: Does that enter into your mind? Did you think about that? And, how did that make you feel?

SW: Yeah, it definitely enters my mind, I mean as you progress in the program it starts to become more real and less abstract I would say. Umm, which I'm still pretty early in the program [unclear] it's not totally completely real yet but, yeah, it does enter your mind. It's something you gotta think about. Umm, well I guess for me it is more than just, yeah, like getting to fly a plane or the Air Force paying for my school or [RS: sure] you know getting good benefits, it's- I think it's got to be more than that. I mean it's gotta [taps table with fingers for emphasis] the motivation has gotta be deeper [RS: I agree] than those things. I feel like it's becoming that, you know? The core values are I think amazing and I like everything the Air Force and I guess the military stands for.

RS: Well I tell you [laughing while talking] Air Force is the best [SW: yeah?] but it's not like I'm biased or anything. Do you have any family that's military and-

SW: Umm, so my grandpa was in the Korean War he was in the Army [RS: ok] but other than that no.

RS: So are your parents supportive of you wanting to do this?

SW: Yep they are, yeah, of course it makes my mom nervous [RS: sure] like anything else I go do like getting on a bucking horse or whatever else makes her nervous but she's supportive none the less.

Texture:

Cadet Ward was extremely sincere while telling of his experience participating in the POW/MIA vigil. He seemed a bit overwhelmed by the attention his picture has drawn, but at the same time grateful for the opportunity to share his feelings about the vigil. Cadet Ward spoke with conviction when talking about his views on the Air Force and military and his desire to find something deeper for himself than just a job.

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