News

BOOK TALK

Section 60 of Arlington National Cemetery Offers Tragic Testimony to America's Most Recent Wars

Improvised explosive devices have transformed battle—and disrupted one of the central rituals of grieving, author says.

On May 27, 2007—Memorial Day—Mary McHugh mourns her dead fiancé, Sgt. James Regan, in Arlington National Cemetery's Section 60. Regan had been killed by an IED explosion in February in Iraq.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN MOORE, GETTY

By Simon Worrall
for National Geographic

PUBLISHED OCTOBER 21, 2014

It's a tiny piece in a much larger jigsaw puzzle. No famous poets or presidents are buried there. No admirals or generals. Instead Section 60 in Arlington National Cemetery, just across the Potomac River from

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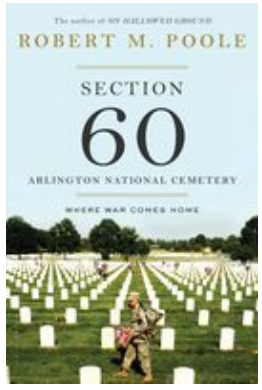
Washington, D.C., is the final resting place of the men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice in America's most recent wars, especially Iraq and Afghanistan. The emotions it inspires, intensified every November 11 on Veterans Day, are raw. Its stories, heartbreaking.

Robert M. Poole, a former executive editor of *National Geographic*, spent several years listening to those stories for his new book, *Section 60: Where War Comes Home*. Speaking from his home in Vermont, he explains why he wanted to commemorate this patch of hallowed ground, why it takes years of practice to fold a ceremonial flag, and why Section 60 is one of the few places in America where it's considered normal to talk to the dead.



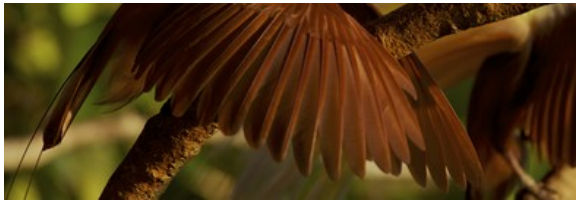
BOOK JACKET COURTESY BLOOMSBURY

What is Section 60?

Section 60 is a small part of a much larger story. It's a piece of Arlington Cemetery, roughly 14 acres out of 624. It's most notable as the place where a lot of the people killed in Iraq and Afghanistan are buried. So a walk through Section 60 is a way to get to know some of the people who served there—what they did, what brought them to Arlington, and what their friends and families do to mourn their loss—but also to get on with life. My idea for this book was to use Section 60 as a way to talk about our most recent conflicts: how they are different from earlier conflicts, and how they are at

the same time much the same.

CHLOE QUINN; INTERNATIONAL MAPPING



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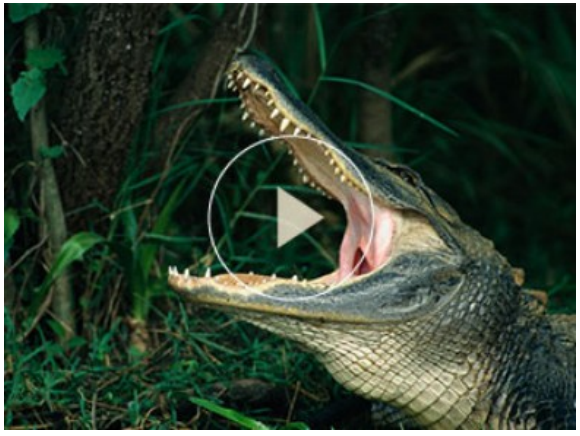

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SOURCES: ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY; ARLINGTON COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES

You say Section 60 is one of the few places in America where it's considered normal to speak to the dead. Can you explain that?

If you walk around Section 60, you soon learn that the rules of engagement are quite different from what you see everywhere else in the world. There's the community of the dead under the ground, and the community of the living aboveground. And people have no hesitation about carrying on conversations with dead brothers, husbands, fathers, or mothers buried there. It's like they're still alive. Why people do this I don't know. But it's maybe a way to help them come to terms with the loss of a young person and to continue having some sort of contact with them, no matter how weird it sometimes seems.

Do you come from a military background, Bob? What drew you to the story?

I come from a long line of cowards myself [laughs]. But I married into a military family. My wife's father was a career naval officer, from a long line of naval officers going back to George Washington's day. So I'm sort of married to the military. What really drew me to Section 60, though, was a book I published in 2009 called *On Hallowed Ground*. No one had ever written a history of Arlington Cemetery, and it was while doing that project that I came upon Section 60.

I noticed, as any visitor to Arlington will notice, that this part of the cemetery is different, because of the rawness of emotion. People are dealing with the recent loss of a loved one or friend. It's very near the surface. It even looks different. The tombstones are the standard-issue

white tombstones that you see in your mind's eye when you think of Arlington Cemetery.

But people bring an incredible array of things to place on those tombstones. They camp out there. They lay out a blanket and sleep on the graves of their brothers, husbands, or sons. They pour a drink of beer or booze—one for the person under the ground, one for the person aboveground. It has its own unique personality.

The first casualty from Iraq was buried in Section 60, in 2003. It's a poignant father-and-son story, isn't it?

His name was Russell Rippetoe. He was an Army ranger, and he was killed very early in the fighting in Iraq, in March 2003. He was at a checkpoint on the Iraq-Syria border where they were screening people. He approached a car. There was a woman in the car and a driver. Some accounts say there were two women in the car. But in any event, one of the people in the car was outfitted with a suicide vest and blew herself and the car up, killing Russell Rippetoe. He was brought to Arlington and buried in Section 60. At his burial was his father, Joe Rippetoe, who had also been an Army ranger in Vietnam, where he was disabled. He was all suited out in his dress greens, with his Army ranger tab and his many medals. So there he was: one generation seeing the next generation into the ground.

You spent a lot of time in the cemetery talking to people at sensitive moments of grief and memorial. How did people react to you? And how did it affect you?

I lived for many years in the Washington, D.C., area, about ten minutes from Arlington. So I was there pretty much every day between 2010 and last year, when I finished the book—hanging out, wandering around, looking at tombstones, trying to figure out what happened to a particular

soldier.

When I met friends or family, my rule was, don't make a move, don't talk to anybody, unless they make eye contact. They weren't there to talk to me. They were there to talk to their kid or their husband. If they did make eye contact, I would introduce myself and tell them what I was doing. In 99 out of 100 cases, people were not only very friendly; they were very eager to talk to somebody about their guy or their girl, as a way to keep them alive in some way.

One thing that is almost universal among the families who visit Section 60 is that they feel very isolated. They feel as if nobody knows about what's happened to their loved one or their friend. I can't tell you how many people said, Nobody even knows there's a war going on. There's no gas rationing. There's no war tax. People don't even think about it here on the home front.

It's a place of very raw emotion near the surface. So there were times when I just put down my pencil and walked away. It was a difficult book to write, emotionally. And very intense. I used to have to take a break for a day, or a week. I think I had a mild form of PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder], which families certainly get, even though they weren't in combat. You think about it. You dream about it. I had to steel myself to do the reporting, and the writing.

But there were occasional moments of levity too. Out of respect for the people being buried at Arlington, and the families coming to visit, I always went to Section 60 dressed for a funeral: dark suit, white shirt, sober tie, highly polished shoes. In other words, the same treatment that the dead receive from members of the Old Guard and the other honor teams, who get dressed up to see their comrades off. I was always there, lurking in the shadows, waiting for a funeral to start. And because of the way I was

dressed, people would come up to me and say, Oh, are you from the funeral home? When is the casket team arriving?

Marine Staff Sgt. James Malachowski died in an IED blast in Afghanistan on March 20, 2011. He and other fallen fighters in Afghanistan and Iraq are remembered in Section 60.

PHOTOGRAPH CHRIS MADDALONI, CQ ROLL CALL/GETTY

I love the story of Maj. Jeffrey Toczylowski, aka Toz. He went out with a bang, didn't he?

When you start zeroing in on the people beneath the tombstones, you

discover that there's an incredible cast of characters in Section 60. Toz was in a helicopter in Iraq. He fell out of the helicopter and died. A few days later, all of his buddies started getting emails saying, "If you got this email from me, it's not just another sick Toz joke, I've been killed. I hope you can come to my funeral at Arlington. If you can't do that, I'll understand. But please do try to make a party I'm throwing in Las Vegas."

He had about a hundred thousand dollars in life insurance. He left that to his mother with instructions that she should throw a blowout for all of his friends in Las Vegas. And that's what they did. He flew everybody there, and they had an all-night party. He was there in spirit. But he was also there in the form of a life-size, cardboard cutout.

You say that improvised explosive devices (IEDs) have not only altered warfare but also disrupted a key ritual of the grieving process. Explain that, please.

The phrase IED comes from the British Army in Northern Ireland. IEDs take all forms. But many of them are very, very powerful. So when you step on one or when it's set off remotely, it does tremendous damage—so much so that the person who was killed is horribly disfigured.

When you are returned to the United States, you're received by a medical examiner, usually at Dover Air Force Base, Delaware. They do a medical exam. They take forensic pictures to document how you died. Then they will recommend to your next of kin whether [they] should or should not view the body. Sometimes it's considered too traumatic for a family to see their son or their husband or sister. Ultimately, the decision is up to the family. But many families go along with this recommendation, so they never get to see their friend or relative for the last time, which many consider an important part of the healing process.

I think readers will be amazed, as I was, to discover that more than 2,500 deaths in Afghanistan and Iraq were caused by IEDs. Did the government do enough to protect its soldiers?

It's easy to say now that it should have and it could have. But with this war, as with earlier wars, we don't always know what we're getting into. We don't know the nature of the enemy or the situation on the ground. There was a lot of criticism of George W. Bush and his defense department for going into Iraq without proper planning or protection. Humvees weren't properly armored. Our men didn't have the right body armor.

But nobody anticipated how much resistance there would be to the presence of allied forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Pentagon took a lot of heat from Congress. But they eventually got moving. They increased the armor for the vehicles we were sending to Iraq and Afghanistan. They developed new body armor. They spent millions and millions of dollars trying to figure out a way to counter IEDs.

But these bombs are so easy to make and easy to conceal. And there can be so many of them that it's hard to protect yourself against them, no matter what kind of body armor you're wearing or what kind of vehicle you're driving. If there are enough people who want to use IEDs, you're going to encounter them if you leave your base and go out into a city, which by definition you're going to have to do. They are not new. The French Resistance used some version of the IED against the Germans in World War II. They were called booby traps in Vietnam. But it's been particularly devastating in our most recent wars.

One of the stories you tell, involving Pvt. David Sharrett, lifts the lid on one of the most controversial subjects of recent wars: friendly fire, or fratricide. You say it accounts for nearly 40 percent of casualties in Iraq. Why has there been this spike in numbers?

Nobody really knows the reason for the spike in numbers. And we don't really know exactly what the numbers are. That 40 percent is a wild guess. I tried to track it down. But I've never been able to really source it. What is sure is that the numbers have really spiked in the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This may be because, especially in Iraq, a lot of the fighting was in a confined urban setting where it's very difficult to identify friend from foe, especially at night. And this made friendly fire much more likely.

Tell us about the Old Guard—and why one of the hardest things they do is to fold the Stars and Stripes.

One of the traditions everyone remembers from an Arlington funeral is the folding of the flag. It's done with great dignity and precision. It looks effortless, but the service members who do it do it very well, because they spend hours practicing. It's folded 13 times into a tight blue triangle, so that the stripes disappear, and you end up with just the blue triangle and the white stars. That is what is handed to your family.

The Old Guard is the Third Infantry Regiment, stationed at Fort Myer, Virginia, which is really part of Arlington. Old Guard is a nickname from the Mexican-American War. So it's the longest continuing infantry unit in the United States Army. They not only fold the flag. They carry the caskets, fire rifle salutes, and maintain a stable of something like 50 horses. These horses are trained to pull the caissons, which, if you qualify for a full honors funeral, will be your final, glorious, last journey.

What did you take away from this story, in terms of your own life and your views about war?

You come away with a great feeling of loss and almost helplessness. George Bernard Shaw once said the only thing we ever learn from

experience is that we never learn anything from experience. I think there's an element of that here.

On the other hand, I came away with a very strong feeling that, for whatever reason, this seems to be part of human experience, as far back as you want to go. And it will probably remain part of human experience into the future. The overwhelming feeling I had is that the people willing to serve, who suit up and go to war, really deserve our respect and admiration. The main point of this book is to keep [the memory of] some of these people alive so they don't slip away completely.

Simon Worrall curates Book Talk. Follow him on Twitter or at simonworrallauthor.com.

CLINTON A.

Heroes all.

Phillip Lake

I can't imagine how this man managed to face this everyday in such close contact with all of these families. While I am sitting hear looking at the picture, trying to find the right thing to say, it hurts so that it makes it hard to cry, even though I want too. I spent 23 years in service to my country, but I want NO pat on the back. I spent my time in the Air Force as a crew chief on various airplanes. The closest I came to being in combat was in Nam during Tet. Other than that I just tried to keep the planes going. I know that we were responsible for delivering food, clothing, weapons and all the other things needed to fight a war. But every time I saw my plane loaded with Army or Marines heading to the front lines, I hurt inside. I felt ashamed at times because I didn't go into harms way like they did. And I always wondered if this guy was married, did he or she have kids, or were they leaving behind a Mother and Father they loved very much. No matter how much they loved their families they chose to go into a strange country and put their lives on the line for people they did not even know. God tells me that there is no greater reward than to give your life for others, and I hold that belief very closely. The families that were interviewed speak the truth when they say that no one even knows there is a war going on because we are so far away from it and we don't see and feel the pain and suffering inherent in this NEW war. And a lot of the soldiers are not remembered by many until Memorial Day or some other tragic event. Thank you Mr. Worrall for taking part of your life to bring their lives into focus. God Bless every one of the brave men and women and their families.

Rugeirn Drienborough

It is simply not true that the horrors of war have changed much due to IED's. One of the products of war has always been shredded, dismembered, disfigured and mutilated human bodies. What do you think a human body looked like back in the pre-gunpowder days after being hacked up with swords and riven with spears? What do you think a human body looked like back in the 16h, 17th 18th or 19th century after being hit by a cannonball, or grapeshot, or chain shot? What does a human body look like after being blown up by a land mine, or shredded by machine-gun fire, or blasted by a mortar round or an artillery shell, or torn apart by an aerial bomb? Aeschylus wrote about this in the Oresteia, over 2,500 years ago. He wrote about how the gore of war was hidden, as much as it could be, back then, and we are still doing it today. The truly remarkable thing about humanity is that despite

our knowledge of the gore of war, we still go out and fight wars.

Dave Hickman

@Phillip Lake I appreciate your comments, I have the same feelings. Thank you for your service. Dave

Simon Worrall

Thanks for the comments, I am glad you liked the piece. Though it is really the author of the book, Robert Poole, who deserves the plaudits. I am just the curator of this section, Book Talk, and the one who posed the questions.

Diane Beatty

@Phillip Lake As I have never been in the military or obviously close to any combat zone, I have absolutely no idea what war is like other than the stories that I hear, watch or read. I could not imagine being tasked with transporting soldiers to the front lines. However, your other responsibilities were crucial to the survival of those same soldiers. So thank you, Sir, and thank you Mr. Worrall for giving us all a different perspective on war, and thank you to all who have served in our military and to the families who pay their share of the ultimate sacrifice.

Paul Tabone

@Rugeirn Drienborough The difference in warfare is that as time goes by, more and more victims are saved, resulting in terribly disfigured and crippled "survivors" that would have died in previous wars. Viet Nam was a big contributor because of the dust-offs that were able to bring soldiers who would have died previously back to areas for medical attention. While the gore may have been hidden in days gone by, injuries often resulted in death due to lack of facilities being nearby.

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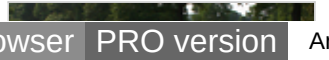

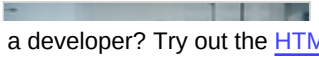

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