

## **My Favorite Funeral (July 2015 Writer's Group Assignment)** **by Sally Priest**

My favorite funeral was that of a homeless veteran held at Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors. There were only three people in attendance, the homeless veteran's also homeless brother, a White House staffer, and the President's secretary.

The deceased had been found dead on a park beach in Washington D.C. in the bitter cold month of December just before Christmas Eve. It took over an hour for EMS to arrive. No veteran should be treated like that. The White House became involved when the White House staffer's business card was found in a pocket of the coat the deceased was wearing. The White House staffer had donated the coat to Good Will and took this as a sign that he was to advocate, on behalf of the deceased, for the funeral he deserved for fighting for his country during the Korean War. Even with resistance from the President and other White House staffers, he persevered and my favorite funeral was conducted.

By the way, did I mention that this was a fictional funeral on an episode of the television drama, *The West Wing*? *The West Wing* won an Emmy for this episode and the White House staffer won an Emmy for his performance in this episode.

The President's secretary asked to attend the funeral because she had lost her twin sons in battle on a Christmas Eve during the Vietnam War. They both had been in medical school when their number came up but chose to fight for their country together. As the White House staffer and the President's secretary leave for the funeral, a boys choir is singing in The White House for the President and his guests. The song they are singing is "Little Drummer Boy" .... *Pa Rum Pum Pum Pum ... Pa Rum Pum Pum Pum*.

A military funeral is very moving and this was no exception as it was intercut with the boys choir singing at The White House. The first scene at

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Arlington shows the flag-draped coffin being pulled out of the hearse by the Honor Guard in their crisp white slacks with their straight back posture, their white-gloved hands moving with reverence while their legs march in time with the tune of "Little Drummer Boy" .... *Pa Rum Pum Pum Pum ... Pa Rum Pum Pum Pum*. It is now that the tears start flowing as it does

every time I watch this segment of the episode. In the background, you can see row upon row of white headstones while the music plays on .... *Pa Rum Pum Pum Pum .... Pa Rum Pum Pum Pum.*

The 21-gun salute startles the three funeral attendees and they all brush away a tear as the Honor Guard meticulously folds the American flag and presents it to the brother of the deceased, all the while “Little Drummer Boy” plays his drum as he has no gift to give .... *Pa Rum Pum Pum Pum .... Pa Rum um Pum Pum.*

On June 15, 2015, I tuned out The West Wing funeral and attend a real military funeral at the Florida National Cemetery in Bushnell, Florida. The deceased was a Marine veteran of the Vietnam War and was only 67 years old. As I walked toward the assembly area, I noticed the Honor Guard standing off to the side with their rifles. The service began immediately. It was only a 9-gun salute but I, too, was startled when the shots rang out. Instead of hearing the .... *Pa Rum Pum Pum Pum ....* a rendition of *Taps* played. The deceased had been cremated so there was no flag-draped coffin. The Honor Guard unfolded a new flag and refolded it with the same precision as shown on The West Wing. Every fold of the flag stands for something, the last fold with the stars uppermost reminding us of our nation’s motto, “In God We Trust”. The flag now resembles a cocked hat, reminding us of the military from long ago to the Armed Forces of the United States today who preserve for us the rights, privileges, and freedoms we enjoy today. This flag was presented to the deceased’s 17-year old son who seemed lost without his mentor and ever present father. The deceased was Samuel Phillip Clark, my brother .... *Pa Rum Pum Pum Pum .... Rum Pum Pum Pum .... Rum Pum Pum Pum.*