

## **Iraqi war victim Chad Clifton given hero's memorial**

*By Karl Chalabala*

The Greek philosopher Sophocles wrote that war never slays a bad man, but the good ones always.

And if judgment between a good man and a bad one rests in lives touched, friends made and ideals kept true, Lance Cpl. Richard Chad Clifton must be placed among the good.

An overflowing crowd filled Parsell Funeral Home and parking lot in Lewes the afternoon of Feb. 13 to pay final respects to Cape Henlopen's first son to fall in Iraq.

The attendees, many of them not old enough to buy a drink in a bar, heard descriptions of a young man who, from a young age, fully committed to a soldier's life and fulfilled its highest duty.

Clifton, a radio operator, died Feb 3 from a mortar attack on a security and stability operation in Iraq's North Babil Province, south of Baghdad. He was scheduled to come home next month.

"How proud we are of Richard Chad Clifton," said Sergio Huerta, a family friend and the service's master of ceremonies.

"A young man of 19 years, so valiant, so mature and so courageous. He always talked about becoming a soldier, a United States Marine. He developed a strong sense of duty to protect the values we hold so dear: freedom and the pursuit of happiness. There is an old Celtic proverb that says 'Don't give a man a weapon until you have taught him how to dance.' A soldier must deeply care. Chad felt the same love and compassion we all feel. Chad held a weapon, but he knew how to dance."

Military rituals and trappings constantly reminded those present of the exceptional and heroic nature of the funeral.

An American flag draped over Clifton's coffin. His Purple Heart rested next to memorial resolutions from the Delaware House and Senate. Two Marines kept guard over the coffin. Every 20 minutes or so, the guard changed. The replacements walked lock step through the aisle between rows of grieving people quietly sobbing. The Marines presented themselves, crisply clicked their heels and slowly saluted. The relieved Marines walked slowly away, a cycle repeated three or four times, undeterred by the service.

A number of veterans attended the service, including five leather-sporting Vietnam veterans who saluted the closed coffin; members of the Millsboro Detachment of the Marine Corp League; and retired Marine Capt. Mike Dierdorf, who never knew Clifton but said the fallen Marine reminded him of his younger self.

**“It’s not so much Chad and I were alike as individuals, but as Marines,” Dierdorf said. “There is a special kinship between Marines, among those who have proven themselves in combat, that is difficult to explain. Chad would want you not to mourn his passing but be proud of his accomplishments and celebrate his life.”**

**Clifton’s friends chose to salute him in their own, different fashion through recognizing not just a soldier, but also a friend.**

**With tear-filled eyes, Charlotte Clark’s voice rang out a haunting rendition of an Eve 6 song, “Here Come the Nights,” popular during her final year at Cape Henlopen High School. It was a song played at many proms and graduations in 2003, positive and filled with nostalgia, well-suited for life’s first ending when young people leave their homes and see if they really can set the world on fire.**

**The chorus goes: “Here’s a toast to those who hear me all too well. Here’s to the night we felt alive. Here’s to the tears you knew you’d cry. Here’s to goodbye, tomorrow’s gone and come too soon.”**

**“Chad’s mom asked me if I would sing,” Clark said. “I remember distinctly driving around with Chad listening to that song. I remember him saying ‘I feel so alive right now.’ It seemed clear to me to sing that song. He made us all feel so alive.”**

**Clifton’s best friend Rob Kunzig saluted Clifton by comparing him to German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s Superman.**

**In “Thus Spake Zarathustra,” Nietzsche wrote, “I want to teach men the sense of their existence, which is the Superman, the lightning out of the dark cloud.”**

**Kunzig said Clifton was a man who willingly walked headfirst into danger regardless of the moral, political and religious antagonism he faced. Clifton was a man who rose above the normal, everyday concerns that bind people, Kunzig said, and answered only to his own sense of duty and will, which made Clifton a Nietzschean Superman.**

**But Kunzig also painted the lighter side of his friend as well.**

**“In sixth grade, Chad founded a paramilitary group called FAR, Forever a Rebellion. We all remember for most of seventh grade, Chad sported a mullet,” he said. “At his going-away party when he was six or seven sheets to the wind, he cuddled with my girlfriend and mocked me while he did it. ”**

**Not all of the salutes were spoken though. Clifton’s brother, Ryan, created a slide-show of pictures from Clifton’s service in Iraq.**

**The room grew still as speakers played The Rolling Stones’ song “Paint It Black,” known for closing out Stanley Kubrick’s Vietnam epic, “Full Metal Jacket.”**

**The pictures moved from shots of Clifton graduating from Camp Pendleton in California, to pictures of him and a friend mugging for the camera with shiny, black sunglasses wrapped around close-cropped heads with cigars in their mouths.**

**Some picture showed Clifton in full gear and another was a group picture of his unit.**

**Perhaps the funniest was a picture of a wall with chalk writing scrawled on it: "Please do not feed the bad guys."**

**The family, none of whom chose to speak during the services, displayed letters Clifton wrote home that described the things he'd seen and done. In one of them, he described his feelings about the war.**

**"I'd rather fight them here than have my family killed in a bombing, or snipers gun them down or an innocent in the street," he wrote. "It's better here than home, you know? Pick your battles."**

**Clifton picked his battle and fought it. He did not live to see it won. He was buried with full military honors in Arlington National Cemetery on Feb. 14.**