

Author's note: In telling a story like this, there is always a risk that someone crucial will be left out. Even though only three employees are mentioned by name in this article, every single person I talked to stressed first and foremost that it is a colossal team effort. GC.

Fallen but not forgotten

In most airports, only one thing can bring an entire operating ramp to a halt: Lightning. But in Toronto Pearson, there are two: Lightning, and a fallen Canadian soldier being carried home for the last time.

No one can say exactly when it started, but they all remember how. Handling human remains is sadly a regular occurrence for the Cargo team, and they have long had a respectful process in place for the carriage of the deceased. One day a few years back, **Nick Wasielewitsch** answered the phone and was told there was a casket to handle that day. But this one carried a Canadian soldier who had recently been killed on tour.

"He was going to be flown out on a 320, so we got out one of our regular PKC folding units," recalls Nick. "I looked at it, and even though it was perfectly clean and fine for a regular day, it just seemed that to carry the body of a hero, it should be made to shine."

Nick's feelings were shared by several others, so with some help he power-washed and polished the unit until it sparkled. Caskets are put on skids to help with balance, but the gang felt the wooden skids looked too industrial. So Nick found some silver paper to wrap the skids, taped it up, and made sure it looked neat and clean.

"Respectable," is how he describes it. "I mean, this is Air Canada. We are carrying a fallen soldier. He gave his life for our country; we can give him a respectful carriage."

And so began the "Ramp Ceremony." Now when they receive word that they will be transporting a fallen soldier, the Cargo team as well as many others are ready.

When a soldier is killed in battle or on tour, the remains are flown to Trenton, Ontario aboard military aircraft. They are accompanied by another soldier, usually a friend, of equal or lower rank. From Trenton, they are taken to the coroner in Toronto



where a funeral director arranges to transport the body to Toronto Airport. Air Canada then flies the deceased to wherever they are going to be buried.

It's not just clean equipment that goes into transporting a fallen soldier onto an Air Canada aircraft.

Jason Hay was the STOC Coordinator when the Ramp Ceremony started up, and has taken on the communications responsibility.

"I hear from Corporate Security, or sometimes from the funeral home, that we will be transporting a fallen soldier. Once I get word, I make sure everyone who wants to know knows."

A lot of people want to know – **John Collins** was one of the first to get involved, and takes care of making sure the right equipment is available, while Jason looks into having the accompanying soldier upgraded, gets bag tags from Concierge, and meets everyone else on the ramp.

"We are able to escort the accompanying soldier from the ramp; he doesn't have to go up through the airport. We have CATSA, GTAA, GARDA, and everyone else we need to screen them on the ramp," says Jason.



PAGE 9 >

It is John who drives the accompanying soldier across the ramp.

"We have roadways we always follow; we don't have radios to the tower so we must stay on track. Once we get to the gate, the GTAA veer off and I bring in the van. It's pretty solemn. Everything just stops as we pass. All the fire department, all the police, the military, even pilots come out to salute as we drive by. They hold a spontaneous Honour Guard until he is onboard.

"Watching a 767 fall into procession behind a van carrying a surviving soldier who is travelling home with his deceased buddy – it's something else."

As time has gone on, more and more Air Canada employees have heard about the Ramp Ceremony and found ways to get involved. One person started making skids from materials he paid for from his own pocket. Several others helped him finish them. Lots more go out and buy flags to carry or adorn the ramp. And still someone else special-orders cargo straps that are clean and white. Many help out on their lunch breaks. Others show up whether they are working that day or not.

"Even people who can't be right here are still helping," John says. "For example, while I'm doing my part with the ceremony, someone else is covering my shift. We can't just stop the whole operation, so even colleagues who aren't out here are still helping."



Left to right: Nick Wasielewitsch, John Collins and Jason Hay.

Asked why he thinks so many people put in the effort, Jason says "Well for one thing, we are Canadians and we work at Air Canada. There is a lot of pride with that. But mostly, we have a lot of employees here who have sons and daughters in the military. Many have even served themselves, or are in the Reserves now. It's a sign of respect for our colleagues."

Nodding, John adds "I think we are all also thinking of the family of the fallen. They almost never see the ceremony, but even if they don't, I just want to help give them peace of mind that their son or daughter is

being honoured and taken care of."

In addition to all the employees who are involved in carrying out the Ramp Ceremony, even more have written letters to Montie commending the team, or posted messages on the blog to say how proud they are of their colleagues. But no one seems to want to own the effort, and all praise is humbly shrugged off.

"We don't do it to be thanked," John explains. "The accompanying soldiers are always so grateful. But we keep telling them, don't thank us. Just tell your buddies in Kandahar what you've seen here. Tell them that Air Canada is still here for them."

"I think it's pretty amazing for us to be able to do this," Jason reflects. "I can't think of many other jobs that would even have this opportunity. We all feel so strongly about it. No one told us to do it. We just took it on."

"You know, something else always strikes me," John begins. "I don't think a soldier could possibly notice this, but during the ceremony all our divisions are gone. We are just one little Canada. When we are out there, on the ramp with a deceased soldier and his buddy, we are not STOC and Cargo and Ramp. We are Air Canada. All of us."



Station Attendant **John Collins** wears a vest supporting our troops.