

BY AMY SCHLESING

ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

BEEBE — A lone bugler blew taps in Spc. Bobby West's honor for the third time in a week Wednesday, this time penetrating the warm air of his hometown cemetery as soldiers carefully removed the flag from his coffin.

Taps blew for West a few days earlier in Dover, Del., as airmen gently unloaded his flag-draped coffin from the military transport plane that returned his body to American soil.

And last week, shortly after his death May 30, taps blew in Baghdad as his fellow soldiers slowly walked past his empty boots, rifle and dog tags to say a final goodbye.

West, 23, died as he walked foot patrol on the streets of Baghdad when a roadside bomb exploded. He served with the 4th Infantry Division's 1st Brigade, 22nd Infantry Regiment based at Fort Hood, Texas.

Beebe First Baptist Church filled with family and friends Wednesday afternoon. Army-green uniforms adorned with the decorations of Infantry soldiers and Iraq war veterans were sprinkled throughout the crowd. West served in the Arkansas National Guard's 39th Infantry Brigade before joining the Army full time three years ago.

They came to pay respect to a friend they agree will always be remembered for his quick wit and laughter.

The Rev. Win Callison read off the names of West's family.

"But that's not all of his family," he said. "I look out here and not only see family but friends. I not only see friends, but brothers."

Callison is a veteran, well aware of the bond of war.

West's brother Patrick took the podium to eulogize his little brother, calling Sept. 17, 1982 — his brother's birthday — "a big day."



Bobby West

Patrick West is a specialist with the 101st Airborne Division, also serving in Iraq. He flew home for the funeral, but will return to war after his emergency leave is done.

"He was born to defend the greatest nation on earth," Patrick said of his brother.

The two joined the Arkansas National Guard and then decided to join the active Army.

"There's no question that my brother shines now at the feet of Jesus Christ," he said.

Bobby West was recently baptized in Iraq by an Army chaplain.

"Thank you for serving with me in the greatest Army on earth," Patrick said to the coffin sitting before him in the chapel. "Be patient, Bobby, I'll be with you when God allows me to."

The Rev. Bob Hall told the family that Bobby died for freedom, so that people could stand up for what they believe in.

"He did not die in vain. He didn't die for a worthless cause," Hall said. "He died protecting what we all cherish. Bobby died so that others might be free, politically."

Hall pointed to the glass doors of the chapel, toward the driveway lined with men and women holding American flags in Bobby West's honor. Beyond the flags a handful of protesters had gathered before the funeral, claiming soldiers' deaths in Iraq are God's punishment to America's tolerance of homosexuality.

"Out of respect for the freedom which Bobby died," Hall told the crowd, "please do not acknowledge the protesters on [U.S. 64 West]."

The protesters were gone by the time the funeral procession turned east from the driveway toward the cemetery. And there, in a long, gray line stood the police officers who spent the funeral directing traffic and monitoring the crowds.

They stood motionless for the first time in more than an hour, their hands raised in salute to Bobby West as his hearse slowly rolled away.