



Office of the County Executive

Monroe County, New York

Maggie Brooks
County Executive

James P. Smith
Deputy County Executive

November 29, 2006

The Honorable Gordon England
Deputy Secretary of Defense
Department of Defense
1010 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1010

Dear Deputy Secretary England:

I was distressed to read Cynthia Hoag's op-ed in yesterday's *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* describing the treatment of a casket holding the remains of a fallen United States soldier. The casket, which arrived on an October 27, 2006 flight into the Greater Rochester International Airport (GRIA), was being transported en route to a location in Pennsylvania. I have attached a copy of this article for your reference.

According to Ms. Hoag, she "sat silently watching the casket roll down the belt, and then, to our surprise, disappear into the cart with the rest of the luggage. The waiting soldier stayed with the casket and rode in the cart as they pulled away."

After immediately expressing my outrage at the treatment of this fallen hero, I immediately instructed our Airport's director, David Damelio, to find some answers. Mr. Damelio has informed me that as a matter of procedure, only the airline was notified regarding the casket containing the fallen soldier, and that the airport is notified only when requested by either the military or the family.

To provide the proper respect for those soldiers making the ultimate sacrifice, I strongly encourage you to change your policy. By providing this critical information to local airports like GRIA, we can give these heroes the special attention they deserve on their final journey home. Our County would be honored to make any special arrangements needed to help facilitate a respectful homecoming for the brave men and women who have given their lives in the fight for freedom.

Honorable Gordon England

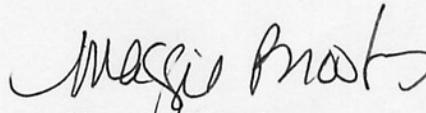
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In addition, I have learned that the transportation of caskets, such as those belonging to the fallen American soldier in question, are permitted to be conducted in the manner that had occurred. It is unfathomable to me that our federal government would allow a fallen military hero to be returned home in this manner, and then transport him along with someone's checked luggage.

Through your responsibilities as Deputy Secretary of Defense and as a key leader in the Bush Administration, I am asking you to do whatever is necessary to end this abhorrent practice. Our military personnel and our veterans deserve better.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



Maggie Brooks
Monroe County Executive

Enclosure

cc: Honorable Donald Rumsfeld, Outgoing Secretary of Defense
Honorable R. James Nicholson, Secretary of Veterans Affairs
Honorable Thomas Reynolds, Member of Congress
Honorable James Walsh, Member of Congress
Honorable Randy Kuhl, Member of Congress
Honorable Louise Slaughter, Member of Congress
Honorable Charles Schumer, Member of the Senate
Honorable Hillary Clinton, Member of the Senate
James Carra, Monroe County Director of Veterans Affairs
David Damelio, Director, Greater Rochester International Airport

Where was outpouring of respect for fallen soldier?



**CYNTHIA
HOAG**

**GUEST
ESSAYIST**

On Oct. 27, I was waiting for a flight with three friends at the Greater Rochester International Airport. As we talked and laughed, we watched airport personnel unloading luggage from a plane. And we were surprised to see a soldier in uniform standing by the airplane looking things over, and watching the luggage belt that was loaded with baggage.

Since I have served in the

Army Reserves for 21 years, my friends asked me why I thought he was standing there. I did not need to answer because as I looked down, a box with the American flag draped over it came down the belt. The lone waiting soldier stood at attention saluting the fallen soldier.

My friends and I sat silently watching the casket roll down the belt, and then, to our surprise, disappear into the cart with the rest of the luggage. The waiting soldier stayed with the casket and rode in the cart as they pulled away.

My friends and I were speechless. I, as many Americans, support our troops and know they believe they are truly making a difference in Iraq. As I read the

paper every day, I see the number of soldiers who are killed every day. I served with soldiers who were deployed in support of the war. I have not, however, known anyone who has been killed in it. After I read the paper I usually go about my business not thinking again about the young men and women who died trying to complete their mission. Since I have not been affected by the death of a loved one, or a friend, I haven't been as aware of the devastation that their families must endure. I'm afraid most people feel that way.

This incident, however, changed that for me. I saw the casket of a fallen soldier, saluted by a lone soldier, and then placed in the baggage cart. Bag-

gage. There was a young man standing at the window watching intently with us. He made no comment, but I can only hope that he was not a relative.

At the very least, couldn't there have been a hearse to transport the fallen soldier? At the very least, couldn't there have been a group of soldiers to receive one of their own? If it had been a dignitary/celebrity arriving, the reception certainly would have been different.

It was a very sobering, sad experience for all of us. Please, don't let this happen again to any soldier. Let's not treat our fallen troops like baggage. □

*Hoag lives in Dansville,
Livingston County.*