

# THE PRICE OF THE SALUTE

CPT MICHAEL ANDERSON

To receive the military salute comes with a price — a heavy burden. Customarily, a salute is rendered to a superior officer, or in the case of enlisted personnel, to every officer they see. This is a sign of respect for the rank that the officer wears and not necessarily to that specific individual. Salutes are rendered to officers, and the one presenting the salute may have never seen the officer before or know at all, but still the Soldier salutes him or her. It is also customary for the saluted officer to return the sign of respect. And in this simple act — rendering and returning of the salute — lies the price and burden of the salute. That action signifies the responsibility and trust placed in the officer by the subordinate, and likewise, the return of the salute demonstrates the respect and understanding that the officer is responsible for this Soldier's well-being, success, and ultimately his or her life. This awesome responsibility that officers have — beginning from the earliest parts of their careers as lieutenants leading platoons all the way to the generals who lead armies of nations — has been summed up with the phrase “the price of the salute.”

Historically, the action of the salute has been traced back to the middle ages and the days of the knight. Tradition holds that the current act of raising the right hand to the brow comes from a knight lifting the visor of his helmet so the other knights could see his face as a show of respect. Possibly, it was also done as a symbolic means to show deference in that raising one's right hand showed you were approaching without malice as typically your left hand was encased in a shield and the right hand being raised to the face showed it was free of any weapon. In later years it was associated with the practice of lower-ranking soldiers removing their hats in the presence of superiors; this existed in most European militaries until the 19th century when headgear became more complex, at which point the custom became simply reaching a hand to the brim of the headgear to signify removing it. This it is believed to have resulted in the current practice in most militaries of simply raising a hand to the brow.<sup>1</sup> In any case, the custom remains clear that even as it has developed many different forms varying among services and militaries around the globe, the right hand is raised in recognition of an officer of superior rank. Although among the first things both recruits and officer candidates alike are taught is the salute, saluting and the price of the salute still remain hazy to many who regularly engage in the practice. This is unfortunate.



**Soldiers in Company B, 1st Battalion, 168th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade, 34th Infantry Division, Task Force Lethal, render a final salute to SGT Brent M. Maher, who was killed in Afghanistan on 11 April 2011. (Photos by SGT John P. Sklaney III)**

Something that is commonly seen as simply ceremonial, a holdover from a more caste-like system, or even as an annoyance should serve as a reminder to both the one rendering the salute and the one returning it of the incredible bond that exists between them. This recognition should be a constant reminder of the responsibility inherent and respect therein. It should be seen for what it truly is, and that it is an honor that comes with a price and can carry a heavy burden.

Some may go their entire career and never fully understand the price of the salute — the significance of the action. For one young lieutenant, it wasn't until he was deployed to the mountains of eastern Afghanistan that he truly began to understand the price of the salute. During a mission on 11 April 2011, that lieutenant issued the operations order for Operation Rainbow Valley — he had the final say on the order of movement for the vehicles and he made the plan. And on that day, those decisions along with actions of insurgent forces in a mountain pass resulted in one Soldier from his platoon killed in action and multiple wounded (to include his platoon sergeant and platoon radio operator). He was the one responsible for (and to) his platoon and made the call to report the wounded and dead. The young lieutenant, who only minutes before had been simply driving down a rocky road, escorted the wounded to the medical evacuation helicopter and guided the group that carried the fallen Soldier to the next helicopter. And it was that lieutenant who regularly received a salute from his men and returned it.

The price of the salute and the heavy burden it carries is something he will never forget. They saluted the lieutenant because of his rank, his position, and they placed trust in him that he knew what he was doing — that he trained and prepared for it. This is a responsibility that is more than just to a mission or an order from higher, though it is certainly that too. The salute rendered by a young Soldier and seasoned NCO alike is not for the lieutenant's responsibility to a higher order or command, it is rendered for his responsibility to them. That is the price the salute carries, and on days like 11 April 2011 that have occurred throughout the history of warfare, it is a heavy burden carried by the young leaders who do what they must for the mission and to care for their men.

The burden of that salute carries on through an officer's career. And it is signified in the "final salute." The final salute is the time that young lieutenant along with the rest of his platoon saluted the memorial to their fallen comrade at their mountain outpost in Dand Patan, Afghanistan. It is that final salute a Soldier gives the flag as it is presented to the widow or the next of kin.

The salute is more than just an act, a ceremony, or an archaic holdover from another era. It is symbol. And it comes with a price. The price of the salute and the inclusive burden is one of responsibility to the subordinate Soldier for



**A lieutenant pays his respects to SGT Brent M. Maher during a memorial ceremony at Combat Outpost Dand Patan in Afghanistan on 18 April 2011. Maher died on 11 April 2011 after an improvised explosive device detonated under his vehicle.**

his success, his well-being, and for giving him purpose and meaning in his sacrifice. In exchange, the returned salute is one of respect for the Soldier rendering that trust, telling them that they are recognized, that they matter. The price of the salute should be known and understood and can never be forgotten. It does not need the mountains of Afghanistan to be instilled; all it needs is understanding.

#### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> “Origin of the Hand Salute,” U.S. Army Quartermaster Center and School, posted at <http://www.qmmuseum.lee.army.mil/history/vignettes/respect1.html>.

**CPT Michael Anderson** is currently the executive officer for Special Operations Command (Forward) - Central Africa. He previously served as commander of Company A, 2nd Battalion, 124th Infantry Regiment, 53rd Infantry Brigade. Other previous assignments include serving as a dismounted scout platoon leader and troop executive officer in C Company, 1st Squadron, 153rd Cavalry Regiment (Reconnaissance Surveillance Target Acquisition); battalion S3 plans officer in 2-124 IN; rifle platoon leader in B Company, 1st Battalion, 168th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade, 34th Infantry Division (Iowa Army National Guard); assistant professor of Military Science at the University of Central Florida Army ROTC; and as a historian at the U.S. Army Center of Military History. He earned a bachelor’s degree in history and political science (international relations) from the University of Central Florida, and a master’s degree in military history from Norwich University.