

The engines roared a bit louder and the gentle downward tilt of the plane told me that we were making our final approach for landing. The mechanical voice of a stewardess intoned the familiar details about connecting flights and not smoking in the terminal.

The disembodied voice continued, “When the captain turns off the fasten seat belt sign, please remain in your seats. We have two Marines on board today who will gather their belongings and deplane first. We appreciate your co-operation.”

I returned my tray to its upright position. The voice directed us to check our seatbelts and, “Thank you for choosing us as your carrier today.” She went on, “If this is your final destination,” and I tuned out. My mind was on our connecting flight and the interminable two-hour layover. I wasn’t looking forward to pacing the airport hallways.

When the plane stopped at the gate, like obedient children, all the passengers sat quietly while two young men in matching uniforms stood up and efficiently retrieved small duffle bags from an overhead bin. The sharp-shouldered silhouettes retreated briskly down the aisle.

As the two disappeared through the front door of the airplane pandemonium erupted. A heavy-set woman with a hairdo like a rusted helium balloon wriggled for space in the already crowded aisle. A man wearing a red sweatshirt emblazoned with “Oklahoma Sooners” in white script across his chest towered above me. He extracted a huge satchel with wheels from the overhead bin. He held it aloft because the space below his shoulders was buzzing with travelers in a hurry to get to their destinations.

Not eager to join the war zone in the aisle, I stayed in my seat and gazed out the tiny window at my right. A three-car trolley rolled up to the ramp below. A parade of mismatched suitcases wobbled down the ramp and into the waiting transport cart. The two marines marched briskly across the tarmac and snapped to attention, their focus on the luggage ramp.

Suitcases stopped spilling down the rubber belt. A wooden crate with a cardboard top and metal straps appeared. It looked like the box we store our artificial Christmas tree in. Except this one was bigger, maybe 7 feet long and 3 feet wide. The box moved down the conveyer belt and the script of a bold felt tip pen came into view. “PFC. OWENS” it read.

I gasped. My hand flew to my mouth and tears welled in my eyes. Awareness of what I was seeing seeped in.

Was it an accident that I traveled on this particular flight and looked out the window? The fact that I witnessed the box on the conveyer belt has inextricably connected me to Pfc. Owens. Suddenly, I am mourning a man I never met. I’m overwhelmed by the certainty that his life mattered and that my seeing him at this final stage is important.

The words from the stewardess about our final destination came back to me. The concept of “final” would be far less literal for those of us walking off the airplane than for Pfc. Owens. The voice that ten minutes ago had thanked me for “choosing this carrier” played in my ears. Pfc. Owens will never make another choice.

Did he have a wife? Did Pfc. Owens have children? The pain his mother is feeling sears me. The mother in me is connected to this woman I will never meet.

All I know about Pfc. Owens I can see on the tarmac. Without any more knowledge about him than that he died, I grieve because Pfc. Owens made his last trip home in a box.