

THE CALL by Willard Manus is a brief monologue about a US Marine who is rehearsing the speech he must make to a family whose son was just killed in Iraq.

THE CALL

By Willard Manus

An office, minimally furnished. An American flag stands in one corner, a Marine Corps flag in the other.

A MARINE MAJOR zips up the pants of his dress blue uniform, the rest of which is draped over a nearby chair. The Major practices a line as he buckles his belt.

MAJOR

"The commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps has asked me to inform you that your son, Private Herman Binton, has been killed in action--"

Hit with overwhelming emotion, the Major breaks off and struggles to gain control of himself. Then he draws himself up and tries again.

"The commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps has asked me--"

A sob breaks out of him; his shoulders sag. He turns and makes an imaginary cell phone call.

MAJOR (con't)

Chaplain? Major Daniel Luster here. Look--I just got the call. Yes, I've been expecting it, but even so, it's my first time and--(BEAT) I don't think I can do it. I'm sorry, but I just don't think I can go through with it--

Breaks off, listening.

I know, I know--I won't be alone when I make the call, you'll be with me, but--

Breaks off and listens again.

I agree. I agree that this is an important challenge --that it could be a fulfilling experience for me, handling such a stressful, difficult situation, but--

Breaks off, listens again.

Look, it's not as if I can't handle pressure. I've seen combat, I've faced death. I stood up, I didn't crack--but this--this is different. This is-- (BEAT) How do you tell someone-- a mother and father-- that their son has--

Breaks off, hit with pain and anguish.

That's not why I became a Marine. That's not something I'm equipped to do--

Breaks off, listens. Then:

Yes yes, I'm aware that I've been given an order, that it's my duty, but--
but--

Listens again, then:

Can't you be the one to deliver the news? After all, it's your job to deal with the big stuff, the heavy stuff: life and death, God--

He paces around.

What if they ask me about God, why He allowed their son to die in battle. Why did he, chaplain? I'd like to know that myself. If there is a God, a controlling power, and you believe in Him, worship him, obey his commandments, respect Him--why should He allow a 21-year-old boy to be killed on some distant battlefield?

Chaplain, chaplain?

He listens, briefly, then puts imaginary phone down.

Yeah, yeah, I heard you. It's not for us to reason why. God works in mysterious ways his miracles to perform. He will bring to light things hidden in darkness.

Trust in Him. He will shed light on things hidden in darkness.

Darkness. Darkness.

The Major resumes dressing, slipping into his shirt as if it were a religious vestment.

Just go by the book, follow instructions. Obey orders.

Stops buttoning up his shirt, picks up a computer printout and reads from it.

"You are not expected to be an expert, just a member of the team."

"You are there to help a family in time of need. Provide assistance with difficulties...help them adjust to the tragic event."

He looks up from the page.

The tragic event, the tragic event.

Shakes his head.

Don't use that terminology. Use the word death. Do not try to sugarcoat the loss. Keep the description of the circumstances brief and accurate.

He resumes dressing.

Do not be defensive if the next of kin start blaming the Marines.

Breaks off, aghast at the thought.

Suppose that happens? Suppose they suddenly turn on me?

He assumes the voice of an angry mother.

"You killed my son! You shipped him off to some godforsaken country and got him killed! And for what? For what?"

The Major fends off a physical attack.

Please, ma'm, please! Don't, don't! Stop it, stop it! Get a hold of yourself--!

She stops pummeling him. He stands breathing hard, staring at her. Then, more calmly:

It's all right, you needn't apologize. I know how you feel, I understand, really. I ...

His voice trails off. He picks up the printout again, checks it.

How did it happen? Well, all we know at this point is that your son was on patrol when his unit was ambushed. A fire fight broke out. His unit came under mortar attack and--

Breaks off, checks printout again. Reads aloud from it.

"Keep explanations brief. Be factual. Do not embellish. Explain that more details will follow."

Puts printout down, resumes dressing.

His body? His body--the remains--are still overseas. The Marine Corps would like to know where you want them shipped. To a private funeral home? Or would you prefer that the Corps handle everything, arrange for military honors--?

Breaks off, hit with a wave of pain.

I can't, I can't! This kind of thing isn't for me! I never liked funerals, wouldn't go to them as a kid, not even when my grandfather died.

He relives that episode.

No--I won't go! I don't want to see grandpa dead! I don't want to see him in a wooden box, all stiff and --

He is nearly in tears.

I won't go, you can't make me! I don't care what you say, I'm staying home, I won't go with you!

Fights back his tears. Finishes knotting his tie, then slips into his dark-blue dress jacket. As he buttons it up he quotes from the printout.

"There are financial advantages if the family allows the Marine Corps to handle all funeral arrangements--the dressing and casking of the remains--"

Breaks off.

Hate that word. "Remains." Remains. All that's left of your son. Bits and pieces. Scraps gathered up on the battlefield and put in a body bag and shipped home. To be boxed here. Casked.

A tisket, a tasket, I lost my little casket...

Breaks off, upset with himself.

What the hell is the matter with you? Why are you acting like this? Are you a man or a--? Do your duty, Major! Shape up! Be strong. Resolute. Conquer your fears!

Adjusts his jacket, then puts his cap on and squares it.

Casualty notification is a solemn event, a noble event. Honor the Corps! Honor the uniform. Honor the dead. Honor the family! Assuage their pain. Provide support! Give them strength! Let them know their son has not died in vain. Make them see that the Corps cares about its own. Point to the red stripe that runs down the sides of your trousers!

He addresses the parents, pointing to the stripe.

See this? It represents the blood shed by Marines in the war with Mexico in 1847. The battle for the Halls of Montezuma! The blood shed by Marines in countless wars since then. The shores of Tripoli! Iwo Jima! Okinawa! Korea! Viet Nam! The glory of battles won and the pain of brothers lost.

Sisters lost. Sons lost. Daughters lost. Nephews. Nieces. Girlfriends and boyfriends. Parents. Fathers and mothers. Lost in battle. Killed in action. Injured in battle. Reported missing. Shot down over-- Captured at-- Blown up during--

Ambushed. Boobytrapped. Stepped on a mine. Came under fire. Was hit by. Enemy bombs. Friendly fire. Suicide bomb. Helicopter crash. Missile attack--!

Incoming, incoming!

The Major ducks, as if back in battle. He breathes hard as he tries to recover equilibrium. Suddenly he straightens up and snaps off a salute.

Yes, sir. I'm fine, sir. No problems, sir. Thank you, sir.

He stands fighting for control, fingering the medals and citations on his chest. Then he slowly draws himself up, squares his shoulders and crosses the stage to make the call.

Knocks on an imaginary door and waits. He salutes as it is pulled opened.

MAJOR (con't)

"The commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps has asked me to inform you that your son, Private Herman Binton, has been killed in action."

As the Major holds his pose, the LIGHTS FADE DOWN, leaving only a PIN SPOT on his grim, ferociously clenched _expression.

Then the spot GOES TO BLACK.

-End-