

NEW RELEASE 2025

Inbal Abergil *The Presence of Absence*

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When a doorbell changes everything: the story of the Gold Star Families and their moving fight back to life

The Presence of Absence is a decade-long documentary body of work that reveals the many layers of trauma, loss, grief, mourning, and healing, in the aftermath of war.

Inbal Abergil weaves stories of the Gold Star Families whose relatives were killed in action, together with still lifes of the loved one's personal effects, and portraits of the Casualty Notification Officers who deliver the horrific news to the families of loved ones killed in military service. The still lifes reveal the survivors's methods of coping with death, and how an object can contain the presence of a loved one, reminding us how painful and comforting it can be at the same time. The portraits urge us to look at what no family member wants to meet at their front door, and yet the notifiers knock on the door, knowing that everyone involved will be scarred for life; each time, they hope to remember their script and make no mistakes so that healing will be possible.

While every loss is unique, the Four-channel video brings our attention to four Gold Star Mothers who lost their sons and discuss how to continue living after the war. They offer guidelines for dealing with loss and how to approach others who might be struggling with grief. The photographs, personal stories, and videos in *The Presence of Absence* invite us to reflect on the poignant story of a community of survivors who keep the memories alive as they strive to rebuild their lives in the aftermath of loss, and invite us to create a platform for reflection and discussion of the human price of conflict.

From the essay *Foreword* by **Robert G. Bean**, Sergeant First Class (Ret):

It's one thing to help a family through the darkest time of their life, but it's a completely different thing to introduce them to it. [...] I just gave them news that will devastate their lives, and they want to offer me coffee, empathize with my mission, and hug me when I leave. [...] There is a bond between the Notifier and the family cemented in empathy and grief.

From the essay *Grief's Flowing River* by **Kathleen R. Gilbert**, PhD:
Grief is a river that you may never leave, but you will learn skills and abilities that help you deal with its power. [...] Grief is not about closure—it is a process of progressive reconciliation. Death does not end a relationship—it transforms it.

Inbal Abergil is a documentary photographer of North African descent. Her research focuses on the aftermath of war and the human cost of conflict, using still and moving images along with testimony to examine loss, grief, and healing.

Abergil is Associate Professor of Photography at Pace University in New York. She received the Pollock-Krasner Grant and the Documentary Essay Prize (both in 2018), and was chosen as an alternate for the Smithsonian Artist Fellowship (2020). Her work has been exhibited internationally and is held in major public collections, including the National Gallery of Art, the Library of Congress, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. She holds an MFA from Columbia University.

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Press Images



01_ LTC McCarty

"We are not supposed to hug the family member; they say clearly don't hug. But when you notify a mother who is alone in her house, in the middle of the country, she is looking at us sobbing and asking, can I have a hug? The Chaplain and I looked at each other and said, you bet. I don't care what the rules are. You know what, you put me here to make decisions, you have to be a certain rank, you have to have a certain professional matraite, you placed me here to make decisions, and that is the call we made, and we don't regret it."

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02_ Chaplain Smith

"One of the things that we ask is, 'Do you mind if I pray with you?' I know there's a lot of things going on in the-in the family's minds right now, and probably the last thing on their minds is praying. So we always ask, 'Hey, do you mind before we leave if we- if we pray,' and yes, they were-they were receptive. I've never been turned down. I've never had anybody say, 'No, please don't.'"

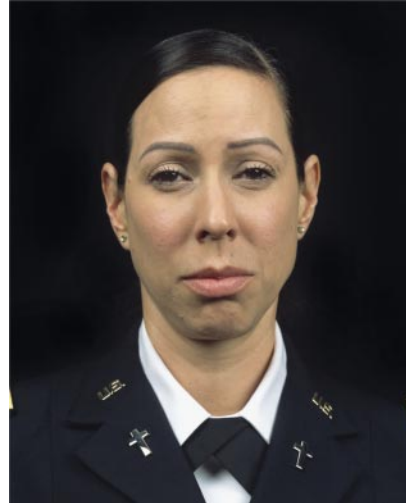
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03_ SFC Hernandez

"On behalf of the Secretary of the Army, blah, blah, blah--" And you don't get through the whole message before they just break down. Well, now the wife, of course, understandably, didn't react the same as the Father. She breaks down and starts crying out loud, which is 100% normal, you would think everybody react- would react that way, but you still can't prepare yourself for that. It's emotional. Uh, you knew you ruined somebody's life."

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04_ Chaplain Martinez Perez

"I bring the Chaplain Corps a little bit extra than anybody: prior experience in the military, being a female, being a Spanish speaker, being a Christian, all these different roles. My fellow chaplains know that. Families are still notified in English while they speak only Spanish."

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05_ 1SG Annabell Lujan

"There's no words to even express or say, or you can't even say sorry. 'Cause if you almost imagine yourself in their situation and to hear the words "I'm sorry" and to hear all these other words, I don't think are the words that they wanna hear. So sometimes you just sit by them. You just sit by them and try to guide them the best that you can, especially to go through all the processing of the paperwork and stuff for them to prepare them. And it happens so fast 'cause it seems like you do the notification and about a week later you're already preparing funerals and rosaries."

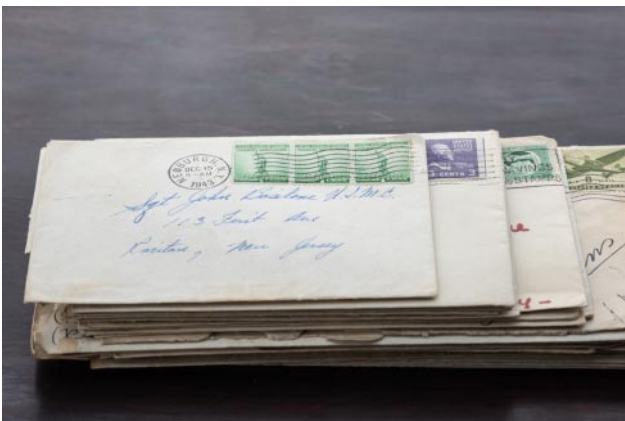
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06_ Chaplain Paul

"Uh, the crying—when somebody cries, our natural tendencies are to tell them not to cry. When we do that, we're telling them not to feel what they're feeling. Cry is a natural way for them to express their grief. Sometimes, you know, it's OK for them to cry. It's a natural response for them to do it; let them cry. My job is to just to be there, not to say platitudes, not to say things, but just to be with that person. Our presence is all they want, somebody to be there."

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07_ Diane Hawkins, niece GySgt. John Basilone, Killed in action, February 19, 1945 Japan

"My grandfather would talk about how they had the parade for him, and they named a ship after him, they named streets after him. There's a Basilone Drive in New Jersey, on the town park; there is one in Santiago. There is a bridge in New Jersey, there is a piazza in Santiago. I mean, you kind of remember this is a little town in New Jersey, and all of a sudden there is a hero."

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08_ Christina Bixby, wife CH Dale Allen Goetz, an Army chaplain, Killed in action, August 30, 2010 Afghanistan

"He said, "Honey, I want you to give me a haircut. I do want the boys to help out a little bit. Just shave it all off." And he had salt-and-pepper hair. The boys came and he had them shave a little bit off and a little bit off, and then of course I made it look better [laughs]. I cut the rest of his hair, just shaved it off so he won't worry about having it the right length for his profession when he got to Afghanistan. I swept it up and I put it in the baggie, which is not normal, and so—anyway, I did that. And then about two o'clock, he grabbed that duffel bag over there and had his stuff, and he drove away in the car."

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09_ The Presence of Absence- Tracy Dice-Johnson, wife Sgt. Donna R. Johnson, Killed in action October 1, 2012 Afghanistan.
 "Part of the heartache about that was, like, even her wedding ring—she did not have her wedding ring on that she was wearing when she was killed, and this is a necklace I keep it on me at all times. I'd bought her this when she graduated law enforcement. It is Saint Michael, which is the patron saint of protectors. These were supposed to be given to her mom because I wasn't considered her Next of Kin, and it really hurt that I had to give her our wedding ring. I do what I was supposed to do; I turned everything over to her mom, and then her mom turned around and gave it to me."
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10_ The Presence of Absence- Janice Chance, mother. Captain Jesse Melton III, U.S. Marine Corps, Killed in action September 9, 2008, Afghanistan.
 "Every place that he touched he left that fragrance. When he said he was going to make a change, he did it. He changed the lives of so many people. God used him in those 29 years to do more than some people do at 89 years. I believe that Jesse's day, if it had not been Afghanistan, would have been somewhere else. That was the day that was written for him in God's book, 29 years. That was it."
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11_ The Presence of Absence- Barbara Moinester, sister. LTJG Robert W. Moinester, Killed in action January 31st, 1968, Vietnam
 "My parents got very involved in the ship. It was a living legacy, if you will. When the ship would come into the Brooklyn Navy Yard or up to Maine, they were always there. They were in communication with all of the commanding officers, the Captains of the ship. They would go to the Helen Farewells. They met them all. They met the crew. They were very, very involved. And I think that was their way of saying: We're assisting in keeping the legacy of Robert alive by being involved. Lots of memorabilia."
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12_ Kendra L. Lynn, sister Staff Sergeant Steven R. Tudor, Killed in action April 21, 2007, Iraq
 "He gave this doorbell to me when I first bought this house, and I never put it up until two years ago, and he had this made for us. When we got this new door, my husband finally put it up two years ago. I love when I walk in, I would see this, and I would think of him every time someone knocks on the door. Yes, it's him."
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