

The New York Times



Robert M. Boetticher Sr. with the coffin of President George Bush before it was carried into St. Martin's Episcopal Church in Houston in December. Credit Credit Tamir Kalifa for The New York Times

When Important People Die, He's There

You've probably never heard of Robert M. Boetticher Sr., but he has helped arrange the funeral services of multiple presidents, first ladies and celebrities.

By Emily S. Rueb

- May 15, 2019

The world watched in December as a 72-year-old funeral director pushed the coffin of President George Bush into a polished Cadillac hearse in Houston. He had done the same before at services for Presidents Gerald R. Ford and Ronald Reagan, the first ladies Betty Ford and Nancy Reagan, and many other well-known figures.

He is Robert M. Boetticher Sr., the chief executive of a boutique death services firm that contracts with the federal government for state funerals.

For almost two decades, Mr. Boetticher has been privy to perhaps the most intimate, and delicate, conversations around a commander in chief's death. The planning begins almost as soon as a president is elected.

"It doesn't matter if it's the first family or if it's the barber down the street, they all react the same," Mr. Boetticher said in an interview earlier this year. "They just lost somebody that they loved. You are the person that they trust, that they look up to, to help them through it."

Since 2011, Mr. Boetticher has been at the helm of L.H.T. Consulting Group, which primarily provides top-shelf services for wealthy individuals, and is a subsidiary of Service Corporation International. A \$3 billion entity known for its Dignity Memorial brand, S.C.I. owns about 2,000 cemeteries and funeral homes in North America, including the home in California where Mr. Boetticher had one of his first jobs, and a parlor in Washington used during high-profile services. Mr. Boetticher has also assisted at services for Senators John McCain and Edward M. Kennedy, as well as the Rev. Billy Graham and the actress Farrah Fawcett. This week, his consulting group was assisting at services in Indiana for former Senator Richard G. Lugar, who died in late April.

State funerals are reserved for presidents, presidents-elect and people designated by the president, and unlike civilian services, they stretch for days, mixing military, religious and familial traditions, usually for a live television audience.

Since President Herbert Hoover's funeral in 1964, ceremonies have been scripted down to the drumbeat and the sun's position in the sky, and, in recent years, rehearsed with coffins weighted by sandbags. (Mr. Reagan's was about 700 pounds.)

When a president dies, the military conducts about 4,000 service members, from piccolo players to pallbearers. But Mr. Boetticher works with the family on the more prosaic aspects, like embalming (a recommended service because of the travel involved), headstone and coffin selection, private events and the burial. His firm mobilizes a Ceremonial Funeral Team, a flying squadron of licensed funeral directors, to assist at local funeral homes.

There are a lot of moving parts, Mr. Boetticher said, and "you've got one shot to do it right."



Mr. Boetticher, the chief executive of L.H.T. Consulting Group in Houston, has been a part of funeral services for presidents and other politicians and celebrities. Credit Loren Elliott for The New York Times

As a child in Southern California, Mr. Boetticher had ambitions to become a movie director like his uncle. But he often sneaked out of Saturday matinees at a theater in Santa Monica to check out the antique cars parked in the driveway of a nearby funeral parlor.

In high school, a career aptitude test forecast his path as a funeral director. At 18, he handled his first dead body while working at an ambulance and mortuary accommodation company that leased equipment and removed bodies when regular funeral homes were tied up.

“I made myself sick,” Mr. Boetticher said about the encounter. But he responded to “the next death call” to prove to his parents he was committed to the job.

After studying at the California College of Mortuary Science and a tour embalming military personnel in the Army, he purchased his first funeral home in Wyoming with his wife, Jarka Boetticher.

There, he served as a coroner in Teton County, investigating mountain climbing deaths and drowning incidents in Yellowstone National Park.

In 1983, Mr. Boetticher started working for S.C.I. and eventually moved to the company's headquarters in Houston, where, among other jobs, he managed the development of a new embalming fluid and became president of S.C.I.'s museum of funeral history.

He also indulged his passion for filmmaking, by advising set designers on a pilot for "Six Feet Under," the HBO series about a family-run funeral parlor, and playing an undertaker in a mini-series starring Sally Field.

But it was a call from a representative for Mrs. Reagan in 2002 that thrust Mr. Boetticher into a rarefied circle of military and Secret Service personnel, government employees and family members of the president.

Joanne M. Drake, a chief of staff to the Reagans, recalled pulling all-nighters with Mr. Boetticher in the weeks before Mr. Reagan's interment in 2004. He was a "calming" partner during the planning process, she said, and "sensitive to the odd things that have to happen, and the obvious."



A hearse carrying the coffin of Senator John McCain was escorted to a memorial service at the North Phoenix Baptist Church in August. Credit Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

Mr. Boetticher helped the family select the solid mahogany Marsellus Masterpiece coffin. He pressed the American flag that was draped over it, too.

At a funeral parlor in California, Mr. Boetticher worked with a team to embalm Mr. Reagan's body. They also made sure the bouquets of flowers and the mementos left by mourners at a fountain outside faced the news cameras.

When Mr. Reagan's body was returned to California for burial after lying in state in Washington, Mr. Boetticher led a motorcade with the chief of Mr. Reagan's security detail to the presidential library in Simi Valley in time for a 6 p.m. sunset.

It was "very humbling" to escort the president's body, Mr. Boetticher said.

The plan for Mr. Ford's funeral was developed by Gregory D. Willard, a White House staff assistant in 1975 who later served as the Fords' personal lawyer in California. Mr. Willard spent three years on the 597-page plan for the nine-day funeral event, he said. It required late-night rehearsals on airport runways.

"A large part of the secrecy in the planning is not that we're dealing with classified information," Mr. Willard said. "But it's inevitable if people were to observe us, it would immediately be in the headlines: 'Ford on the Brink of Death.'"

About eight minutes after Mr. Ford died on Dec. 26, 2006, in Rancho Mirage, Calif., Mr. Willard called Mr. Boetticher. He was in the parking lot of the hospital where the body was taken, having flown in from Houston.

For the Bush services in December, Mr. Boetticher led a half-dozen licensed funeral directors at a funeral home in Houston owned by S.C.I. Descending like a SWAT team in black suits, red-and-black-striped ties and "Ceremonial Funeral Team" pins, they communicated with motorcade drivers about through earpieces and radios.

During services in Houston, Mr. Bush's coffin rested on a padded bier, provided by L.H.T., that has only been used during services for the Fords, Mrs. Reagan, and the first ladies Barbara Bush and Lady Bird Johnson.

Michael D. Wagner, the chief of national events planning for the Army's Military District of Washington, a command that oversees official military ceremonies, has worked closely with Mr. Boetticher and his company during several state funerals.



Mr. Boetticher waiting in 2004 for President Ronald Reagan’s coffin, to transport it to the Point Mugu Naval Air Station from the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, Calif., en route to Washington. Credit Ted Soqui/Corbis, via Getty Images

“They provide a unique capability in terms of the level of expertise and also availability of equipment across the country,” Mr. Wagner said.

The Department of Defense contracts with L.H.T. to supply ceremonial sedans, S.U.V.s and limousines (as well as drivers, including Mr. Boetticher) for multiple motorcades and convoys and for rehearsals, Mr. Wagner said. The department also rents specialty equipment, like a wheeled bier to transport the coffin, and the modified Cadillac hearse used in Houston, as well as a backup just in case.

Mr. Boetticher declined to disclose the fees for his funeral squad, which are paid by the families, or the fees paid by the federal government.

“Our prices are client-based,” he said. “Any of that is highly confidential.”

“If we ever broke that trust, we would never get it back,” he said.

A spokeswoman for the Department of Defense said that “services are provided at market rates.”

Joshua Slocum, the executive director of the Funeral Consumers Alliance, a watchdog group that promotes affordability in the industry, is a vocal critic of L.H.T.'s parent company, calling it "an adversary in our line of work."

S.C.I. has settled multimillion-dollar class-action suits after families accused funeral homes owned by the company in California and Florida of mixing up remains, losing them or secretly digging up plots and reselling them, but did not admit wrongdoing.

In the late 1990s, the company's chief executive, Robert Waltrip, was accused of calling on Gov. George W. Bush of Texas to halt an investigation by the state Funeral Service Commission into the company's practices, which the company denied.

An S.C.I. spokeswoman declined to comment on past allegations.

Mr. Boetticher, who speaks with an adopted Houston drawl, said he "very rarely" talks to the news media.

"I've been a funeral director for 53 years," he said. "And I was just very, very lucky and honored to be asked to fill the position that I'm in now."

He would not say whether the five living presidents or their families have requested his services for future state funerals. His company's contract with the government runs through November 2020, according to the Defense Department.

He was likewise closemouthed about his own funeral.

"It's like asking a doctor if they've had a checkup," he said. "You're always thinking about it."

Susan C. Beachy contributed research