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Emotions run deep in Aggies' victory

Day is bittersweet amid tributes to bonfire victims

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By Bill Minutaglio / The Dallas Morning News

COLLEGE STATION - Four F-16 fighters flew in "missing man" formation over 86,128 people packed into Kyle Field on Friday for the game between the Aggies and the University of Texas. It was the largest crowd to ever attend a football game in the state, according to A&M officials.

The symbolic flyover before the game's 10 a.m. kickoff was one of several emotional moments on a campus still scrambling for ways to find some measure of peace after the deadly collapse of a bonfire stack eight days earlier. The tragedy left 12 people dead, dozens injured and two still hospitalized.

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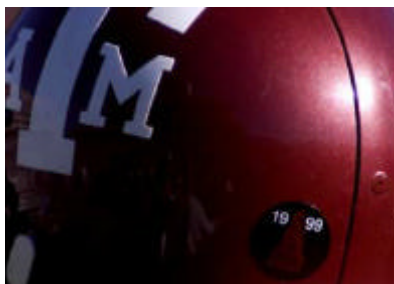
The football game, won by Texas A&M 20-16, seemed to serve as a cathartic experience for some students, players, coaches and the visitors who flooded into the Bryan-College Station area.



Huy Nguyen / DMN

"This game doesn't make up for what happened last week," said Jeremy Rogerson, a sophomore from Carthage and a member of Texas A&M's Corps of Cadets. "It just eases the pain. It takes your mind off of it."

Mr. Rogerson, who helped fire the cannons that traditionally signal a score by the Aggies, knew one of the victims from the corps - senior psychology major Jeremy Frampton. Traveling with other corps members on a chartered plane trip arranged by the university, Mr. Rogerson attended funeral services for his friend on Tuesday in Turlock, Calif.



Huy Nguyen / DMN

Texas A&M players wear a special sticker on their helmets in the game Friday against the University of Texas.

On Friday, Aggie players had special bonfire memorial patches affixed to their helmets, commemorative ribbons were painted over the on-field A&M symbols and stadium flags flew at half-staff.

There was also a moment of silence in the pre-game ceremonies - a moment finally punctuated by the thunderclap from the roaring F-16s flying overhead. As the fighters passed over the stadium, one suddenly veered toward the heavens to represent the "missing man." The jet pilots were all former Texas A&M students.

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While the thousands of fans began trooping into Kyle Field hours before game time, the enormous scoreboard displayed sobering images of the long line of mourners who continued to visit the site of the bonfire tragedy on the other side of campus.

"I've been doing this for 10 years, and this has been the most difficult game we've ever had to do," said Mike Caruso, who was directing the pre-game and halftime itinerary for the university.

Given the size of the crowd, an already complicated set of logistics was compounded by the arrival of former President George Bush, Gov. George W. Bush and Texas first lady Laura Bush.

Two Aggie roommates had asked university officials for permission to take the field and release a dozen white doves before the game. Lauren Harms of Houston and Shaleah Hester of Nacogdoches - both from the class of 2002 - said they wanted to do something to expedite the healing process.

"It's still a very, very difficult thing for so many of us," said Ms. Harms. "It's very important to us that we remember the victims in some way."

Rivalry tempered

If there was a silver lining to the day, she said, it had to do in her belief that the fierce rivalry between A&M's Aggies and the Texas Longhorns had been tempered by the nightmarish realities of what happened in the bonfire tragedy.

"What happened last week brought us together as a state," said Ms. Harms.

Any Longhorns traveling from the University of Texas toward College Station would have been hard-pressed to miss the signs dotting the city and A&M campus. On Stotzer Parkway, on the outskirts of the Aggie campus, was a large sign: "Horns, thanks for your care and support."

Standing on the sidelines, 1985 A&M graduates Steve and Dianna Wimberley said they were impressed by the way the University of Texas had shown solidarity. "It's really raised my respect for that campus," said Mr. Wimberley, wearing a bonfire memorial button that said "They Live On."

Mixed feelings

As he prepared for halftime ceremonies that featured tributes by the A&M and Texas bands, cadet Eric Sacher said that he and many other students had mixed feelings about the game.

"It's kind of melancholy. The memory of what happened will still be around for a long time," said Mr. Sacher, a senior from Houston and one of the 400 cadets who make up the Aggie band. "It's changed the way a lot of us look at things."

At halftime, Mr. Sacher and other corps members waited patiently as the Longhorn band played music not normally heard at halftime - ginger versions of the intermezzo from Bizet's *Carmen* and "Amazing Grace." Members of the Longhorn band also clutched Texas A&M banners and then doffed their hats and slowly, silently, left the field.

The Texas A&M band performed its signature march, "Noble Men of Kyle," and then band members formed a silent formation of the block letter "T" from the school's logo. Without a word and with the only sounds coming from the clicking of boot spurs, the entire band marched away.

"I think this game is a big turning point for everyone," said Mr. Sacher.

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