

Military OneSource Podcast — Disposition Options for Military Families

Episode transcript:

Intro voiceover:

Welcome to the Military OneSource podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department, with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit militaryonesource.mil.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. We are in Baltimore this week attending the conference of the National Funeral Directors Association. The Defense Department attends these gatherings to keep current with the many options for memorializing a loved one, from the traditional casket to an ever-growing range of creative and beautiful options.

Funeral services, memorial services, these are deeply personal events to honor a service member's life and service, and we're going to talk about that today with my guests. Joining me on the podcast today is Trevor Dean from the Defense Department's Casualty, Mortuary Affairs and Funeral Honors Program. Trevor, it's good to have you with us.

Trevor Dean:

Thank you, Bruce. It's a pleasure to be here.

Bruce:

Also joining us today is hospital corpsman Third Class Petty Officer Eric Bopp. He is a mortician with the Navy, and he'll be joining us on the podcast.

Eric Bopp:

Thanks for having me, Bruce. Thank you.

Bruce:

Thank you. We'll get back to you in a couple of minutes. Trevor, I want to begin with you, because when we talk about memorializing folks, there are a number of terms and

processes. We don't want to get too deep in the weeds, but let's begin with some of the terminology. What are we talking about when we say something like final disposition?

Trevor:

Thanks, Bruce. I appreciate the chance to talk to families about this. Final disposition is a family-directed and very personal way to honor their loved one with a funeral or memorial service, and then the final resting place. This generally includes arrangements for the casket, the location of the service, involvement of clergy or the family also, and then whether or not cremation is desired, and then the cemetery or other location, depending on the wishes of the family.

The military, if asked by the family for active-duty members, we can provide the services that generally include the professional mortuary services, those things that are necessary at the very beginning to prepare their loved one for funeral or memorial services.

Typically, families are given a choice between a metal casket with a white interior or a hardwood casket that is typically made of walnut or poplar with a Rosetan Crepe interior. The wood casket is usually suitable for cremation. However, we can also use a hardwood casket that contains less metal and has a different finish to lessen the impact on the environment.

If cremation is something that a family requests and they work with their funeral home to effect, we'll also provide either a solid bronze urn or a hardwood urn. Both of those are suitable for ground and interment or above-ground disposition, say in a niche like in a columbarium, which is a wall that the urn would go into, or definitely suitable to keep it home if that's what the family wishes.

Bruce:

OK. We're talking about family wishes, but who in the family is representing the family? What is the terminology, and how does that come about?

Trevor:

All service members are required to name a person authorized to direct disposition, which we call the PADD. They do this on their DD Form 93. This person is usually a next of kin, a family member. They are designated by that service member to make those decisions regarding the funeral, the interment and those services that are done to honor their loved one's memory.

Bruce:

OK. So, it is the DD Form 93. Let's assume somebody has gone ahead and filled out that form and they want to change it or update it. Life changes. Is that an option to them, and how do they go about doing that?

Trevor:

Sure, that is it. It's done a little bit differently by each service, and some will allow it to be done virtually online. Generally speaking, they should update it on their birthday through their military personnel office or they can do it online if that's what their service allows.

They update it either on their birthday or whenever there's a life change. So, if they get married or divorced, or if they make decisions, or the notification of family members if a parent unfortunately dies and they need to change that information, someone moves, there is different contact information, that's when they change it.

Bruce:

OK. All right. So, it's a form that is out there, and a trip to the personnel office is a great start for figuring out whether it's still accurate, if they want to update it, that sort of thing.

When we're talking about the various arrangements that have to be made, the military offers a casualty assistance officer. Goes by different names, different services, but generally speaking, what does this person do and how do they interact with the family?

Trevor:

Right. They're assigned at the very beginning. When we learn of a service member's death, the assignment is made; they are there to assist the family. Whether they're a casualty assistance officer, representative mortuary officer, they will help that family through those very first initial decisions that they need to make regarding disposition of their loved one.

This also works into some of the specific funeral arrangements that they may be making and their determination for a receiving funeral home, which will eventually go into those details that will personalize the service for their service member.

Bruce:

When we're working with a [casual assistance calls officer], a family is working with a CACO, how long is that person available to the family to help them through the process?

Trevor:

Well, they're available until their decisions are completely made. They are available to them throughout that process. It could be 10 days; it could be 15 days. They're also available later if they have questions. There are certain things that they may request later, documents that they may need to fill out with their casualty assistance officer. There's no real set time limit for that. They are available to them. And then there are long-term care providers that each of the services will have also for these family members.

Bruce:

But initially, the intent, I believe, is to have a single individual. So, we have a family that has a lot of decisions to make, a lot of emotions going on. And the [Defense

Department], their intent is to make it simple for the family to have a single point of entry, a single individual that they can go to for their questions. Do I have that right?

Trevor:

That's absolutely right.

Bruce:

When we are talking about the things to consider, when we're talking about arranging a funeral, an internment, what are the sort of things that need to be considered?

Trevor:

This is where it gets really personal, whether or not they want to have a traditional service where they're viewing their loved one, an open casket funeral, whether they're going to make transportation, travel arrangements to the internment location, who's going to be going, whether or not they're going to arrange for military funeral honors.

Choosing the internment site is very critical to this whole process because there are certain things that have to be done if you're using a national cemetery or even a state veterans cemetery, those requests have to be done, documents have to be provided, and that's what those casualty assistance or mortuary officers are there to help with.

Their funeral director is there to help them go through those very personal things like, do they want music, who their clergy is going to be, who their pallbearers might be if they're not using the military for that. All of those special things that will help honor their loved one in a very personal way is something that their receiving funeral director will help them through.

Bruce:

Some of the initial preparations for the disposition of remains, what are the various options that are available?

Trevor:

We'll go to a family and we'll talk that through with them because we use contract mortuary services that will prepare their loved one, meaning embalming their loved one, which is helping to preserve them so that we can affect transportation to their receiving funeral director.

It also helps with our ability to dress their loved one in either civilian or military attire. It's really up to them. They can make those decisions. And then they'll provide the casket. We have those two types of caskets. And then we make those transportation arrangements for them.

All of that is done on their behalf as long as they direct it. And then once their loved one gets to their receiving funeral home, they can begin to make those other decisions. And that's very personal. For instance, if they want cremation, afterward, what do they want to do with cremated remains? Do they want them scattered? I mean, we're finding out

here at NFDA that they could have cremated remains made into stones that they could keep in their home.

There are a lot of different options. They can scatter [the ashes] at a very personal location that their loved one is connected to. They could keep them at home. And if they don't like the urn that we provided, they certainly can go on their own and make those choices that they want specifically for their loved one and for their family. They can work with that funeral director on those more personal things, where the military provides a few options for them in the beginning to get them to that point of making those other decisions with their receiving funeral home.

Bruce:

Along with that, we have a number of what you're terming as disposition options. But I guess we would say, if we're looking at various burial options, what are we looking at as in terms of the options that are available?

Trevor:

Absolutely. We go from the very traditional, which is an in-earth ground burial where you would have a grave, a headstone and a place to go and visit. There could be things such as natural burials, where they're buried in an eco-friendly type environment where maybe the casket isn't used. We would provide that for them, but then their funeral director would make those other arrangements for that natural burial.

There's above-ground burial, which normally refers to a mausoleum space where the casket is placed. Or, in the case of cremation, the urn would be placed in a niche in a columbarium. Or families can elect cremation where they do either the scattering themselves or they contract for scattering at sea. That's completely up to them. Or keeping the cremated remains at home, like we talked about. There are other things that they can do in memory of their loved one, like living memorials, like planting a tree in their memory.

Bruce:

Another option is burial at sea.

Trevor:

Yeah. That is an option that is available to military members. We're going to hear from the Navy on that in just a moment, but that certainly is an option, and it doesn't matter what service. So, we're going to find out about that right now.

Bruce:

All right. Excellent. To that, we're going to turn to Petty Officer Eric Bopp. You're a mortician with the Navy. Why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself, what you led to this line of service?

Eric:

Thanks, Bruce. That's a great question. I was licensed in Nebraska and Iowa prior to joining the military. I always kind of wanted to help out. The funeral service as a whole is kind of a selfless act. And then we can even take it one step further, but now we're helping our service members that have given the ultimate sacrifice and we can allow them to come home. It was just another step that I could be available for the fallen service members.

Bruce:

Now, this is in your family as well, right?

Eric:

That's correct. I have an uncle that owns two funeral homes. I think his intent was for me to come back and kind of take over, but when I told him my plans to join the Navy, he could not have been more proud.

Bruce:

So, how does one become a mortician in the Navy?

Eric:

Like I said, you have to be licensed prior to joining. Once you have all your credentials verified, you will actually go through boot camp just like any other sailor would. And then you're essentially going to get assigned as a hospital corpsman, so you go through a school. And then upon graduation you get selected for this job as mortician. There's no training in the military offers. That's why they had to recruit after the credentialing process has already taken place.

Bruce:

And there are how many morticians in the Navy?

Eric:

There are 14 of us.

Bruce:

And you know each other?

Eric:

Yeah. We know each other very well, yes.

Bruce:

Excellent. Well, thank you for your service. As we were saying, one of the options is a burial at sea. Talk about this option. I think we want to make the point that you don't necessarily have to just be in the Navy in order to be eligible for a burial at sea. Talk to us about the Burial at Sea Program, if you would.

Eric:

Yeah, so the Burial at Sea, it's an amazing program that the Navy and the Coast Guard offer. And like you said, the biggest question that we get is people typically think that you have to be a Navy veteran. Well, as long as you're honorably discharged from any of the branches of service, you will be eligible for the program.

The misconception comes when people want to sign up ahead of time, but the program itself is going to be all you need because there's going to be certain forms that will be needed that you won't have until the time of death. So, like I said, as long as you're honorably discharged, you will be eligible.

There are five ports that participate in the Navy Burial at Sea Program: San Diego, Calif.; Honolulu, Hawaii; Bremerton, Wash.; Norfolk, Va.; and Mayport, Fla. When selecting a port of embarkation for cremated remains, you can choose from any of the five. It does not have to be the closest one to you, so a lot of times their loved one may have served at a certain base or retired out of a base and they want to go back there, which is completely fine.

For the intact burial at sea, which people think it's going to be basically a full casket, there's certain requirements, there's only two ports that participate in that. It's going to be San Diego, Calif., or Norfolk, Va.

Bruce:

Do families actually go aboard to watch the ceremony?

Eric:

Once a port of embarkation is selected, the loved one will get to the port and the port will actually take custody. Upon that time, the remains will get assigned to a certain ship that's going out at a normal sea rotation. So, there's going to be no family.

After the fact though, they will get a letter from the commanding officer of the ship and it'll have a map with latitude and longitude of where the ceremony took place, as well as, at minimum, still photographs and possibly a video.

Bruce:

Trevor, let's get back to you. Funeral honor programs differ from service to service. What sort of examples do we have of the differences?

Trevor:

That's a great question. Military funeral honors are specific to each service. They're run by the service departments, and they look a little different, although they contain the same elements typically. But for the Air Force, for certain rated and non-rated individuals, they might ask for and, in some cases, receive a flyover. That's one difference that you would see for the Air Force that you might not see for the other services.

Bruce:

We're going to put in the program notes of this episode, a number of links that people can click on within the Military OneSource website for information about funeral arrangement, the Burial at Sea Program, and what to expect during military funeral honors.

Just in a broad sense, Trevor, why are military funeral honors such a commitment? Why do we have this sort of commitment within the military?

Trevor:

This is our way, the service department's way, to honor their loved one's service and sacrifice. And I believe it's also a way to honor the family sacrifice. They are there watching these honors unfold in front of them. Whether it's a pallbearer, a firing party, a color guard, Taps, and then the flag-folding and presentation to that family member, or if it's just the flag-folding and presentation and Taps being played, that is our way to say thank you to them for their loved one's sacrifice and honor them and honor their memory.

Bruce:

Petty Officer Bopp, what does it mean to you to be serving in the Navy as a mortician?

Eric:

Like I mentioned earlier, it's the whole other opportunity that you are to help all the service members that did pay the ultimate sacrifice, whether that's overseas or even within the United States. And to be a part of and to be able to help the families and the CACO's understand all the benefits that they're entitled to throughout the whole process, it's amazing.

Bruce:

Well, thank you very much. I appreciate both of you being with us today. Joining us today we had Petty Officer Eric Bopp and also Trevor Dean of the Defense Department's Casualty, Mortuary Affairs and Funeral Honors. Gentlemen, thank you so much for joining us today.

And I want to remind you that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We are a website, we're a call center, we're all over social media, and now we are a podcast.

We hope you'll go ahead and subscribe to our podcast. We cover a number of topics, a wide range of topics helping military families as they navigate military life.

I'm Bruce Moody. Thanks for listening. Bye-bye.