

Military OneSource Podcast — Honor Guard Services

Program title: Military Funeral Honors

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](https://militaryonesource.mil).

Bruce Moody:

Providing military funeral honors is our nation's way of showing gratitude and paying final tribute to a veteran's honorable military service.

I'm Bruce Moody, and I'm joined today by members of the Nellis Air Force Base honor guard. We're going to talk about paying final tribute. We're going to talk about military funeral honors, what that means to families, and what it means to actually serve on the honor guard.

So, gentlemen, it's a pleasure to have you with me today, and what I'm going to do is I'm going to point the microphone at you, and just ask you to introduce yourselves.

Kavion Norman:

Airman Kavion Norman.

Jacob Salus:

And airman Jacob Salus.

Bruce:

Excellent. OK. If you could tell me a little bit about yourself, hometown, when you joined the Air Force, what you had envisioned to do, what your plans with the Air Force are.

Kavion:

I'm from St. Louis, Missouri, and I joined the Air Force in August of 2020. My goals are to become an officer potentially, and to maybe join the Space Force through commissioning programs, and different things like that.

Jacob:

I'm originally from Ohio, small town, and I joined back in October of 2019. My goals are still somewhat undecided, but just want to keep continuing what I'm currently doing.

Bruce:

Certainly. OK, now how does the honor guard fit into this? What I understand is that the members of the honor guard are actually assigned to different units. You all have different jobs and units, and you're temporarily assigned to the honor guard. How does that work?

Kavion:

So, with the honor guard, I'd say, the honor guard cycles are for four months, but every two months we bring in new people and some old classes are leaving, but we bring in people from all over the base with could be different AFSCs, and different jobs, but they bring us all together. We all train together, learn and we work with each other for those four months that we're in honor guard, which is a pretty cool experience.

Bruce:

We'll get into the experience as well. Now, you mentioned training. How much training goes into this before you're finally able to go and start participating in funerals?

Jacob:

So, when you first join, you go through a two-week training period where you come in at 7 a.m., leave at 3:30 p.m., and you're there training all day for two weeks. Then, that last Friday, you have your graduation. Then once you graduate, after that, you start going on ride-alongs with older classes. You don't actively participate in those ceremonies. You just watch and observe, and figure out how to go about doing these ceremonies.

Bruce:

So, it seems like there's a real cycle. You're new to it, and then you're doing it, and then you're showing it to the next round of people who are going to be involved.

Kavion:

Yes, sir, without a doubt. I think that it all happens pretty fast. You get worked in pretty easily, and they only let you start working when you're comfortable with everything, but it's a pretty fast process, and you get the hang of it pretty quickly.

Bruce:

Now, as far as the comfort level, that's an interesting question, because you're dealing with ... at some point you've learned how to do it, but you are actually doing funerals. So, what is the comfort level with that? How does that come around?

Jacob:

So, when you first start, you go on your first couple [of] what we call details or ceremonies or funerals, what have you. I think everyone, it's normal to be very nervous to the point where some people are almost shaking, but after you get a couple under your belt, not necessarily saying you get used to it, but you get used to having that level of nervousness. You become comfortable performing under those nerves.

Bruce:

All right. So now you're stationed at Nellis Air Force Base. So, what sort of geographical area do you cover?

Kavion:

I know that we can go as far as Arizona and even Utah. It's more like a four-hour radius for the most part, just as long as we're able to get there and get back within the same day. But we can go very far, as far as traveling to do different ceremonies, and awards, and different things like that.

Bruce:

OK. So, there's the traveling, and how many funerals would you typically do? What does a typical week or a day look like for you?

Jacob:

Typical week, we have funerals or ceremonies, because we're not just limited to funerals, but the ceremonies in general, there's usually probably one or two at least per day that we do, and that's Sunday through Saturday. So, we're constantly doing these ceremonies and funerals, and performing.

Bruce:

OK. Let's talk about the families. You're doing funerals for the families of a service member, and what is it like? When do you first meet a family member, and what is that like? What is the purpose of those initial meetings with the family?

Kavion:

Typically, when we meet a family member, it's right before the service so that we can meet the next of kin, see who we're handing the flag off to, and essentially talk to them before the funeral. Sometimes it could be 30 minutes before the funeral starts, or sometimes it could be right before the funeral starts. You got to keep in mind that some of these families are going through the worst day of their life because they've lost someone. We just kind of work with them, and see what they would like. We fit their comfort level and their needs, but, essentially, we just try to talk to them to offer our condolences, but also soothe them, and to let them know that we're here to take care of them.

Bruce:

You're with them a relatively brief time, but a very important and meaningful time. What does that feel like for you? What is that like when you're doing these funerals?

Jacob:

When we're interacting with the family, it's slightly nerve-racking because everyone handles situations very differently. That's something you have to keep in mind, because you may approach someone one way, but that might come off as disrespectful, or whatever you want to call it, to another person. You always just approach them first, offering your condolences, and trying to see what their comfort level is. Almost reiterating what he says, you've just got to be understanding of what these people are going through. You have to take a more gentle approach toward the grieving family members.

Bruce:

Did you want to add to that?

Kavion:

Oh, yeah. It's just the same thing, but it's like you said, everyone's goes through grief and everything differently. So, it's just fitting that person's needs, and seeing how we can best help them, essentially.

Bruce:

Now, for you personally, attending these funerals, so many of them, does that change your perspective on either life in general, or service in the military? What is seeing that ... because you're seeing a slice of life played out in so many different ways. You must have some impressions of what that's like.

Kavion:

Without a doubt. I know that prior to joining honor guard, I wasn't too sure how it worked, and how all of the different movements and stuff went into each funeral, but after being a part of it, and seeing what it's like, and truly getting a feel for it, I've learned that it can be very tough to handle. It can be almost depressing even, but it's just you staying calm, and our shop works with us best to fit our needs.

If we're not feeling OK, then they'll talk to us. I know last week we just talked to a mental health program. So, they definitely fit our needs as much as they can.

Bruce:

Has this changed your ... or given you just a perspective on life or service in the Air Force?

Jacob:

Yeah. You're surrounded by all of these events that happen to families, and how they grieve, and losing family loved ones, and it just gives you, or myself personally anyways, it gives me more respect for what we're doing, more of a positive outlook, just knowing that we're there for the family should they need us. We're there to take care of them. It is sad, yes, but it's also very rewarding in that aspect.

Bruce:

Now you had mentioned that you do these services, but you also do ceremonial work as well as that. So, what is the purpose of the ceremonial work?

Kavion:

With the different ceremonies and things like that, we can do as much as parades, ceremonies, retirement ceremonies, award shows, all that kind of stuff, but essentially the purpose, when we go do these different ceremonies and things, they want us to present the flags, do colors and things like that.

We just go in and do colors essentially. They're a lot of fun. It could be a good experience, like being here, the people are really nice to us and really good to us. So ever since I've done them myself, they've been a really good experience.

Bruce:

All right. When you say here, we are at a convention hall. It's a convention of the International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association. It's a giant hall, and we're looking at displays of caskets and urns, and also a really amazing display of innovative and creative and beautiful ways to memorialize a loved one.

Also, the Defense Department is here. Generally speaking, when it comes to that final tribute, what do you want family members to know? What do we want them to understand about military funeral honors as a benefit to them and their family, to the service member and the family?

Jacob:

One thing we want them to understand is that, yes, this is our job. It's what we do, but at the end of the day, we're all there for the family, for what they're going through. We understand because we see it a lot and want them to know that we're taking care of their loved one, and that they shouldn't have any worry.

Bruce:

Something you'd like to add to that?

Kavion:

Yeah. With these different funerals and things that we do, we're doing funerals for some people who served back in World War II, or something like that. Regardless of how long ago you served, we still take care of those families, and still look out for them as well.

Bruce:

Gentlemen, it's been a real pleasure to speak to the both of you. I just want to let people know that in addition to this conversation, we're going to have podcast episodes that get into different aspects of military funeral honors.

We've got members of the DOD's Casualty, Mortuary Affairs and Military Funeral Honors Program. The leadership from that program are with us here at this convention, and we'll be talking to them for future episodes.

I'll just wrap up by saying, of course, Military OneSource, we are an official resource of the Defense Department, and we have a ton of resources and articles for military families to help them navigate military life. That's why we want people to subscribe to this podcast, because we do touch on so many different topics, and so please subscribe so that you can get the most out of what Military OneSource has to offer you.

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