

Military OneSource Podcast — Military Funeral Honors

Program: Casualty, Mortuary Affairs and Military Funeral Honors

Podcast transcript:

Speaker 1:

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:

This week, we are at the convention of The International Cemetery, Cremation, and Funeral Association. I'm Bruce Moody, and I'm looking across a convention floor. I see displays of caskets, urns, and among them, there is an amazing variety of innovative, creative, and beautiful ways to memorialize a loved one. In the midst of all that, the Department of Defense is here with a booth. So, why are we here? We're going to discuss that with Deb Skillman. Deb is a colleague, and she is the Director of the Casualty, Mortuary, and Military Funeral Honors Program. Deb, it's great to be talking to you today.

Deb Skillman:

Same here. Thank you, Bruce. Appreciate it.

Bruce Moody:

All right. So well, let's just start with your job. Explain what your office does, and what you provide.

Deb Skillman:

So, my role is to provide the policy oversight for the military service departments for Casualty, Mortuary Affairs, and Military Funeral Honors, and in that endeavor, our goal is to provide the best services, the most compassionate and professional services to our surviving family members to honor their service members who have died while serving on active duty.

Bruce Moody:

So, in doing that, it's important to be at conferences or conventions like this. Why do we come to conventions like this?

Deb Skillman:

So, this is really critical for our program to improve our outreach. The members here, the vendors who are participating in this event this week, they're the ones who actually provide services to our family members through funerals, through memorial services, through burials at their cemeteries. So, we want to make sure that number one, we have that outreach to them. It also gives us an opportunity to learn of those new innovative ways that they're taking care of

family members, memorializing family members, because DOD may want to adopt some of those meaningful ways. We also want to make sure that they know how can they reach to the Department of Defense with regards to military funeral honors. That is a key part of our program, in that we provide probably 260,000 funeral honors every year, and funeral directors, and the cemetery directors need to know how to reach out to the Department of Defense to ask for those honor details.

Bruce Moody:

So, as we have that incredible number of funerals and services that we provide to an increasingly diverse military force, what is that number, and that diversity of backgrounds, and traditions, and just individual personalities? How does that come into play as you're putting together policy?

Deb Skillman:

Well, our first thing is we want to make sure that we are honoring every veteran and every family member who ask for military funeral honors. Service customs and traditions are very critical. Army may do funeral honors a little differently from the Air Force, and a little different from the Marine Corps, and the Navy, et cetera. So, we want to provide that veteran their branch's customs, and traditions, and their funeral honors, honor their service in that particular branch, and also to make sure that team is there. We do funeral honors. Every veteran who's eligible for funeral honors receives, at a minimum, a two-man detail who will fold and present the flag to family members and play Taps. For anyone who dies on active duty, we will ensure that there is a full honors detail, which will include pallbearers, a firing detail. So, this is our way to honor the service and sacrifice of every veteran, honor their customs and traditions of their branch of service, and the family members who have asked the department to be there.

Bruce Moody:

And, also, with us today, the Honor Guard from Nellis Air Force Base. What is that sort of a display? They provided the colors. Can you describe the exhibition, the demonstration that they provided, and what does that do for the people who are here who may not have a military background?

Deb Skillman:

They did a great job, by the way. So those young airmen, when they present the colors, that's representing our nation and all service members who ... They're fighting for freedom defending our nation. So, when they present the color guard, I think it's very meaningful to this body of personnel, because they serve our veteran population. We have veterans, active duty, guard, and reserve who are serving all across the United States, and these funeral homes are going to interface often with those family members. So, it's important, number one, that we present the flag, but to see the way the airmen, when they fold it and presented the flag, you can see how they regard their duty to honor the service members. It's done very deliberately, purposefully, and with a great deal of honor. So, they want to make sure when they do that for any veteran, the family member feels that we are honoring them as a nation.

Bruce Moody:

I watched the demonstration, the folding of the flag, the presentation, and totally did not expect it, but I got really emotional watching it. I was talking to the airmen afterward and they said even in a demonstration, it's still an emotional experience for them.

Deb Skillman:

It is for me as well. The flag represents the service to our nation, and there's a great deal of respect for that.

Bruce Moody:

There is. All right, well, as you are engaging with people, as people come up to the Military OneSource booth, and they're talking to you, what are the observations or the kind of questions that people have as they come into the booth?

Deb Skillman:

So, one of the biggest questions is how can we contact the Department of Defense to ask for military funeral honors? So, we have a lot of pamphlets. We've created a new three by five card, which has a QR code, how they can reach Military OneSource, all the phone numbers for each of the branches of service. So, if they have a veteran of that branch, how can they get funeral honors quickly? So, that's one of the main questions. The other one, sometimes it's brought up to our attention that there may be some issues in a certain area of the country where they may be having some challenges requesting funeral honors. The last thing that we hear quite often is how can I advise a family member about where to get a copy of their DD214, their discharge papers. Because of COVID, the National Archives has been shut down for two years, although they do respond to emergency requests for certificates of service, or request for discharge papers to support a funeral. So, we advise them of how to get that. We want to hear back from them if they're having any challenges with that guidance.

Bruce Moody:

Any final words about the work we're doing here?

Deb Skillman:

I am happy to be here. I've talked to so many great people. They're just very excited about their products, and we've learned a great deal. Some of these ideas we need to adopt at DOD to provide greater services to our survivors, but really appreciate being here this week.

Bruce Moody:

Deb Skillman, thank you so much. What we'll do is we'll take a link on Military OneSource to the Military Funeral Honors page. Ton of resources there. It's a great starting point, discussion of all of the benefits and all of the resources that are available for family members, and also people from the funeral industry. So, we'll get that posted in the program notes for today's episode. So, thank you all for joining us today. I want to remind you that while at this convention for the International Cemetery, Cremation, and Funeral Association, we did do a number of interviews with members of the honor guard, and that will be the topic of an upcoming episode on the Military OneSource podcast. So, we really encourage you to subscribe to our podcast. Just reminding you that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Department of Defense, and

we will have all sorts of topics that we cover, all sorts of topics to help military families as they navigate military life. So, thanks for joining us today, and take care. Bye-bye.