

Military OneSource Podcast — PADD Rights

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.

A funeral or a memorial service is a deeply personal event. It's a time to honor a service member's life and service. In the military, an individual can be authorized to direct the disposition of remains for a service member who died while serving in an active-duty status. The Defense Department acknowledges the individual as having been entrusted by the service member with this special and sacred responsibility.

Along with this acknowledgement, the DOD provides a series of rights and support to ensure that the individual is able to carry out this responsibility. Those rights and that support provided by the DOD is our topic today. Trevor Dean joins us. Trevor is with the DOD's Casualty, Mortuary Affairs and Military Funeral Honors program. Trevor, welcome to the program.

Trevor Dean:

Thank you, Bruce. It's great to be here with you today.

Bruce:

Absolutely. Let's begin. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

Trevor:

Sure. I am a program analyst for the Department of Defense's Casualty, Mortuary Affairs and Military Funeral Honors office. I am also a licensed mortician out of the state of California, and I've been licensed for 30 years now. For 24 of those, I worked for the Air Force as a mortuary officer.

Bruce:

We were talking a little bit before this program. You and really the entire team that works in this program, they are committed, they're passionate about what they do. Can you tell us a little bit about your motivation behind the work that you do?

Trevor:

Absolutely, Bruce. For me personally, where I grew up in California, we had quite a bit of military around us. My father worked for the Navy. I joined the Army at a young age and, when I came back home, I went to school to the San Francisco College of Mortuary Science, worked for a funeral home, but I also wanted to give back. I wanted to do that service that I had experienced with the Army and found out, it just so happened that down the road, we had a port mortuary out at Travis Air Force Base and the first position that opened up, I applied for, and was fortunately selected. It's really that desire to give back, to serve our service members and their families. The entire team, their heart is in what they do on a daily basis. We all have either service in our background, service members also in our family, and we want to give back and this is the way that we've all chosen to do that.

Bruce:

Yeah, absolutely. It's an honor to call you a colleague and a friend, and it's humbling to watch you and the team at work. To get to the topic for today, it's an acronym. PADD means persons authorized to direct disposition. It's a wonky bureaucratic title, but there's a real important responsibility behind that acronym. Can you talk about what this is and what are the responsibilities of this individual?

Trevor:

Absolutely. So that acronym, which is like you said, the person authorized to direct disposition, is an important designation that's made. A service member makes that designation on their record of emergency data. It's a document that all service members have to do, and they typically review those and update them every year just to make sure that nothing has changed. Or, if it has, they can update it and that is one of those designations. That person is the one person that ultimately makes decisions regarding mortuary services provided by the military and then ultimately their funeral services. The PADD will decide what receiving funeral home will handle those funeral services and then there's a lot of other detailed decisions that they make that this service member is entrusting to them to make when they designate them as their own PADD. We can talk about those specifics later as we kind of go through our conversation.

Bruce:

I really want to get into the specifics of those decisions that have to be made. There's a lot of them. They're really important. When it comes to making them, a person does not have to make them alone. There are other people who can lend a hand in the decision-making. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Trevor:

Yeah, absolutely. Each of the services will have their own names for these helping individuals, their casualty assistance, their mortuary officers, these people that are called in when a death occurs are there to help the PADD understand quite a few things that are going to be going on, like the timelines, the services and support that are provided by the government, and then the entitlements that they will receive that will

be like a reimbursement to their funeral home, for example, to help defray those expenses. All of those discussions that are had with the family with the PADD specifically will help them make informed decisions about the return of their loved one and then the way in which their memory will be honored.

I'd like to add something else here. The PADD might seek help from their family. They may go to their religious leaders or maybe other trusted friends, and that's a great way to seek that outside support and guidance. The PADD, however, is really the person, that one person, that will convey those decisions. They'll sign documents that will direct the service department's actions to prepare their service member, and then those follow-up arrangements for transportation home and those funeral services that are very, very personal once their service member gets home. They'll be surrounded by those that come from the service department and then potentially their own trusted advisers from family or church or what have you.

Bruce:

I understand. In the area of legal advice, what sort of support is available?

Trevor:

The PADD might have questions that would have legal implications. They can get support from the installation's staff judge advocates office. There may be some questions that they have in the state where the burial or the interment services will take place and they can certainly work through their casualty assistance officer or mortuary officer to be able to link up with the staff judge advocate that can help advise them.

Bruce:

OK. Let's get into the PADD's rights, what's available, and I really appreciate you going through it.

Trevor:

Absolutely. One of the things that I want to start with, it might sound odd to start this way, but the first thing that a PADD has the right to do is they have the option of relinquishing this designation. Even though they've been named, the service member has identified them to be their PADD, maybe at the time of the death, they don't feel up to making those decisions and that's okay. They can relinquish their right, but this will then pass to the next person according to law within the hierarchy of the living family members.

So, it will go according to that list. It's in law and policy, but that's rare. It's just there to make sure they understand. If they don't feel they can make those decisions, they have the right to do that. But for the PADD that has been designated and they take on this responsibility, they have the right to be notified in a timely manner of their service member's death, and then receive the necessary updates in a timely fashion.

They're provided with updates, especially if any recovery efforts are necessary. If the death, for instance, was caused by an incident where search-and-recovery efforts are

initiated, then those updates are going to go to the PADD. They have the right to receive a briefing from casualty assistance and mortuary affairs regarding all of those things that we talked about earlier about preparation, what the government will do, and then what they're entitled to, how the transportation of their loved one will be affected, how they're going to get home. Then any of those disposition options that they have, and when I say disposition, I just mean generally the decisions that they make with their funeral home as it relates to the funeral services, the burial and other things that we'll talk about a little bit later, too.

Then, of course, they have the right to request the military funeral honors for their loved one. They'll receive chaplain support, if they request it. They will select the funeral home of their choice. So, it is their choosing. They identify the funeral home, they let their casualty assistance and mortuary officer know that they've selected a funeral home, and that's who they will end up working with on the receiving end. Then they direct the government how they will prepare their loved one, whether their loved one ultimately will be casketed, the type of clothing, whether it's a military uniform, civilian clothing, things like that, and then if cremation is their decision at their receiving funeral homes. They will go through all of those types of decision-making points with those helping individuals that are working with them.

They'll do things like make a selection of a casket or an urn, if a cremation is desired, and then they make the decision about viewing their loved one. We can go through some of those scenarios too, unless there's a law that prohibits it, like in the case of a contagious disease or a death that happens because of an instance like that. They will direct final disposition. That could include that in-ground burial placement in a mausoleum, cremation, and then placement in a niche or even scattering at sea for instance. Or if it's legal in their state, scattering at a location that their loved one would have wanted.

They also can request a second autopsy if that's something that they think needs to be done. But I do want to say with that one, along with that, there may be some expenses because then it becomes an issue of who will be conducting the second autopsy. Where will that take place? Those transportation expenses are borne really by the PADD, and then the autopsy expenses for a private autopsy would be borne by them as well. But they certainly have that right to make those decisions. There's a lot of things that are packed into this, and like you asked me earlier about those helping people, they're with them every step of the way, walking them through each of these decision points and giving them information so that they can make those informed decisions.

Bruce:

There is a lot of information that you're going through and we really appreciate it and we'll make sure we've got links in the program notes of this episode. People can click into it and see the list of things we're going through today and figure out how to learn even more on this topic.

Trevor, a couple more questions on this issue. What is the process for a PADD deciding whether to view the deceased service member's remains? Do they get guidance from the Defense Department when they're having to make this decision?

Trevor:

They do. That is one of the most important parts of this whole process. Just from working with families, typically the two questions that I would get is when will my loved one come home and do I get to see them? Generally, the contracted funeral home's licensed embalmer will make that viewability recommendation, and that's just what it is. It's a recommendation. It's communicated over through their casualty assistance mortuary officer to the PADD so that they can take that recommendation and then take those next steps.

Bruce:

What happens if the recommendation is that the remains are considered non-viewable?

Trevor:

This is a really difficult part of what we do, and there are specific standards that must be met to ensure that the service member is cared for with the highest level of dignity, honor, respect. We take great pride in that part of what we do. The preparing mortician may decide they didn't recommend a viewing. They might still be able to be dressed according to the PADD's direction, so maybe in a uniform or civilian clothing, but then what the embalmer would do is they might use sterile gauze to wrap the head and face, or a decision might be made that the person must be wrapped completely in a military green blanket and then the clothing is placed over them. Those are really important distinctions because we do those so that the PADD and the family, they may still have those private moments that would be arranged in each of those instances, even with the casket open in working with their receiving funeral home so that the family can still spend a moment saying their goodbyes.

Maybe they want to place a sentimental item in the casket directly with their loved one. I've had experiences with families where they still wanted to put their hand in the casket, place their hand maybe on that uniform or on their loved one's gloved hand if they were able to be dressed, and they take that very important time where they may not have a traditional open casket viewing, but they can still spend that time, be there with their loved one in these difficult circumstances. That kind of brings me to my next point, the PADD, they may or they may not want any detailed information. These are really difficult conversations to be had and our folks in the field, they carry this out with candor and as compassionately as possible.

When the service member arrives at the PADD-designated funeral home, their funeral director is also another trusted agent that can help them with those next steps. The decision might be that there's no viewing at all and the casket's closed for services, which might still include a visitation, a church service and burial. Those traditional elements would still be there, but the PADD might still decide that they want to see

their loved one privately and they would work with their funeral director to see them. They should take their time, discuss this with their funeral director, maybe again bring in their religious leaders, their family, and determine the best way to handle a private viewing under circumstances like that. We would really want them to do this incrementally so that at any time they can decide, "OK, I don't want to do this," but if they really want to see them, they would work with their receiving funeral home to do that.

Bruce:

Regarding all of these important decisions, what is the process for the PADD when it comes to arranging funeral honors?

Trevor:

The PADD will request the funeral honors through those helping individuals, like we've talked before, the casualty assistance mortuary affairs folks. So, the people that have been with them all along the way, they will ask them or request military funeral honors, and those people will reach out to those military funeral honors teams that serve the location where the funeral service will be held. I can tell you, it's our commitment fully to serve families, honor their loved ones, and those military funeral honors teams are grateful to really show the nation's appreciation for their sacrifices and they do a fantastic job doing it. It's such a moving experience to have an honor guard there at the service presenting a flag as a memorial to those loved ones.

Bruce:

It's a very intense experience for the honor guard who attend, for everyone. Trevor, as you were talking through all of this, I think of this, this is military funeral honors, but it is also really a reflection of the service member, the family, their wishes, their culture, their preferences. It does seem like part of the concept of military funeral honors is in also reflecting the individual and the family. Can you talk about that a bit?

Trevor:

Yeah, absolutely, and that's why each of the services has their own honor guard, just for those reasons that you stated. It's ingrained in our culture. It's what we expect to see at a service member's funeral and we have that commitment, that obligation. Our teams want to be there. They want to take care of their own. These are their peers, by the way. These are people that they serve with and they are selected to be honor guard members. It's an incredible job that they have to do, but it's more than a job. It is really a calling for that time that they're on these honor guard teams, and it means the world to our families. We want to make sure that our honor guard teams are there, they're prepared, their uniforms are impeccable, and that they carry on these services as we would expect. It just does such a good service to the community to show that we continue caring. Even after a service member's death, we're going to be there for them.

Bruce:

Absolutely. Trevor, it's always a pleasure. It's always an honor to have you on the program. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Trevor:

Thank you, Bruce.

Bruce:

Trevor Dean is with the Defense Department's Casualty, Mortuary Affairs and Military Funeral Honors program.

I want to remind you that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We are a website, a call center, we're on social media, and we have podcasts. Subscribe to us wherever you get your podcasts because we cover a whole range of topics to help military families as they navigate military life.

I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you so much for listening today. Bye-bye.