

The Military's Role in K.I.A. Funerals

For a parish pastor, the news that one of his members has been killed in action often brings an additional layer of questions to an already heart-wrenching situation. He may have become accustomed to deaths in nursing homes and hospitals. He may have conducted funerals for Veterans. But for most pastors, the funeral for a member killed in the war zone is an uncommon event.

The first question to cross the pastor's mind might be: *"What does the military expect of me?"* The second question may be: *"What should I expect of the military?"*

The pastor will quickly learn that, unlike with the death of a civilian, he now has people from outside of his church who have rapid and direct contact with the family of the deceased—beyond the funeral director. The pastor is no doubt aware of the fact that color guards and gunshots will be part of the graveside service. He may wonder what else he should expect.

Each branch of the Armed Forces has its own version of the protocol for K.I.A. funerals. In addition, exceptional situations may pop up at any time and any place. But there is a common approach shared by all Branches of Service, and the details are rather simple.

In the War Zone:

A memorial service is held at the camp, FOB (Forward Operating Base) or aboard the ship where the person was serving. Attendance at the memorial service is mandatory for a large number of people, including members of the unit who are not out on a mission. All officers in the area who are not required to be at their post will be expected to attend, including the Commanding Officer.

One or more military chaplains from the person's unit will conduct the service. There will be reference to God, but most of all there will be reference to Country.

The memorial service will be well-attended. Most in attendance will find it meaningful. We probably can best understand it by recognizing that it reflects and reinforces comradeship, rather than spirituality. If the home pastor is flippant about, or dismissive of, the memorial service because it lacks authentic spirituality, the "Band of Brothers", including some Vets, will view his actions as a shameful slap in the face.

Even as troops vow to "Leave no one behind!" they also view the military memorial service as an obligation of respect for a fallen comrade.

In the States:

As soon as possible, perhaps before the memorial service in the field, the body is shipped to Dover AFB, home of the Department of Defense's only Port Mortuary. It is held there until the family makes further arrangements, usually in connection with a local funeral director. A memorial service may also be held at the person's home base or post.

Notification:

Normally, notification of death is made by a personal visit to the immediate family by two members of the military: a military chaplain, and a Notification Officer. The Notification Officer will be of rank equal to or higher than the deceased. At a minimum, he will hold the rank equivalent to an Army sergeant.

Military Follow-up Support:

The main point of contact for the family, and for the pastor, is the third military person assigned to the detail: the Casualty Assistance Officer. This person will meet with the family to review personal, legal, financial details and the final rites. He is there:

- To advise and support
- To coordinate,
- Not to make decisions.

Final Rites:

"The religious event is driven by the family." All Armed Forces branches agree with this quote from the office of the 82nd Airborne Casualty Office. If a WELS pastor receives some opposition to the way he wants to conduct a worship service for a person who died while active in the military, it may come from the family, but it should not come from the military.

A military chaplain will be present at the final rites of a member of the military killed in action. He may already be present during the visitation time at the funeral home. But he will remain a respectful bystander, unless invited to do more. He is there to represent our nation as a whole, and honor the sacrifice that was made. He has no inherent spiritual role.

An American flag will be made available to cover the closed casket. A military honor guard will offer to stand at attention during the worship service inside, or outside of the church. It will also offer to position itself next to the hearse as the body is loaded in. But it will respect the directions of the officiating pastor.

The Graveside Service:

Once again, the military representatives will be in attendance. But unless asked to function in a different role, they will only carry out military activities *after* the religious portion of the graveside service is completed.

The following military activities may be expected when the pastor speaks the final "Amen."

- The flag on the casket will be carefully folded, then presented to a designated member of the family

- Military awards will be presented to the family on behalf of the deceased.
- A bugler will play “Taps”
- An honor guard will fire a 3-volley salute

In General:

Our responsibility as a pastor when a member dies as the result of war is no different from when death is caused under any other circumstances. We are to proclaim Law and Gospel. We are to give glory to God. We are to comfort with the assurance of grace.

Usually, such funerals give us a chance to proclaim the Word of God to a wider and more-mixed audience than usual. Unlike at a wedding, people’s minds will be focused upon the big questions of life and death. It is a golden opportunity.

Emotions may be running even higher than those at many other funerals. The deceased will be comparatively young. He or she, most likely, will have been purposely killed. Similar to deaths caused by murder, some of those in attendance may have thoughts of revenge. Some may be angry with the government. Some may expect the pastor to make political statements, either for or against the military or the government.

The pastor will be closely watched both by civilians and military personnel. What he says in casual conversation will count just as much as what he says in the sermon.

Some times working with the military can be confusing, or frustrating. There may be an unusual delay before the body reaches the States, or before it is released from the mortuary at Dover. Changes may occur in the schedule of events. Our questions about the reason for things may go unanswered.

Putting the best construction on it, what for us is a simple event, for the military is a complex operation. It involves not only military and medical investigators, but also the scheduling of transport and personnel—all while a war is going on.

If we see that the family needs help addressing the military side of the picture, or if we have problems or questions regarding military actions, the first point of contact should be with the assigned Casualty Assistance Officer. The family should have his phone number. He will welcome your call.

If the problem continues, contact me at welsmilitary@wels.net or (239) 218-8494. Directly, or indirectly, I should be able to be of assistance.

May the Lord bless your efforts to serve those who serve our country—and those who love them!

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