THE HISTORY OF MILITARY FUNERAL HONORS

Maryland State Funeral Directors Association
Online Course – 1.0 CEU
October 2017
Credit approved and accepted by the Maryland Board of Morticians & Funeral Directors
Course Objectives

Our national tradition of honoring those who have served is never more in evidence than following the death of a military veteran or active duty soldier. The ceremonies of these funerals recall their accomplishments in life and demonstrate the Nation's recognition of a debt owed for their services.

This course provides an overview of the history of Military Funeral Honors, traditions associated with Military Funeral Honors and information regarding the procedure for requesting honors.
Military Funeral Honors - Introduction

On almost any day at cemeteries throughout the United States, a military ritual occurs that is both familiar and moving. An escort of honor comes to attention and presents arms. Next, a firing party fires three rifle volleys. After the briefest of moments, a bugler sounds *Taps*. The flag that has covered the casket is then folded into a triangle reminiscent of the cocked hat from the American Revolution. The flag is then presented to the next of kin on behalf of the president, the parent service of the deceased and a grateful nation. This is, of course, Military Funeral Honors, the ceremonial rendering of respect in a solemn and dignified manner.
From Modest to Elaborate...

Long-standing military customs, various religious traditions and the wishes of the next of kin are the foundations of these ceremonies. Military departments consequently have important roles in performing these last rites, although many other agencies of federal, state and local governments (such as police, fire departments and veteran service organizations) participate in varying degrees at times. Collectively these agencies conduct several types of funerals ranging from the modest to the elaborate. From simple two-person graveside support up to full State Funerals for high-ranking military and civilian officials, these Military Funeral Honors follow the same basic ceremony that consists of, at a minimum, the folding and presentation of the United States flag and the sounding of *Taps*. This is done by a minimum detail of two uniformed members of the military.
Military Customs

The military customs observed, many of which are rooted deeply and distantly in our past, have changed little over the years. However, the ceremonies themselves have changed with the times. The military honor guards, flag-draped caskets, the firing of three volleys, the sounding of Taps, and the folding of the flag are steeped in our history and the rendering of these honors is the ceremonial paying of respect and the final demonstration of the country’s gratitude to those who, in times of war and peace, have faithfully defended our nation.
A Maxim of the Soldier’s Creed

The current traditions and practices of honoring fallen soldiers have a long and interesting evolution. What began as an afterthought during the Revolutionary War is now a maxim of the Soldier’s Creed. We will look back, beginning with the Revolutionary War, and discover how the idea to “never leave a fallen comrade” became so important. Fighting the war was a priority; the dead were dead and would usually have to wait. Pressure from the public brought about legislation from Congress that would give guidance and requirements for the caring of the war dead. The laws required the military to bury the dead and return all of the soldier’s personal effects to the family.
The Early History

During the Revolutionary War, we see the beginnings of Military Funeral Honors provided by the military whenever the situation provided the opportunity. Early accounts from journals describe many of these funerals. Some of the honors in the journals describe a scene that would begin with the soldier’s unit forming outside of his tent. While drummers and fifers played, the body would be brought to the gravesite by six soldiers from the man’s unit. A religious service would be performed, and three volleys would be fired over the grave after the body had been interred. The honor afforded officers did not differ much from those of the enlisted man. This would be the start of recognizing the sacrifices of the individual common citizen.
Families Get Involved

The War of 1812 (1812-1814), the Seminole War (1835-1842) and the War with Mexico (1846-1848) brought about challenges for the Quartermaster Department charged with recovering and burying the dead. Time was taken to honor the dead even as the battles surged back and forth. It had become important to the soldier to know that, in the event of his death, he would be cared for until the end. The first major change was the financial involvement of the government in shipping the remains home. If the families would pay for a lead coffin, the government would pay for the shipping costs. This encouraged many of the families to get involved in recovering the remains of their loved ones. This set a precedent for the government’s responsibility in recovering all those killed in combat.
New Regulations During the Civil War

The Civil War (1861-1865) brought new regulations on the handling of the remains of the war dead. Laws were passed to provide every man with a new coffin, clean garments, grave maker, and a death notice sent to the family. Unfortunately, the nature of this war would make this almost impossible. Battles could now be fought over greater distances and advances in technology resulted in an unprecedented number of dead. This created major problems for recovering the remains of soldiers, often scattered over miles, with armies constantly in motion. While the sentiment regarding the importance of caring for the dead increased, the reality was that it was a step backwards from that ideal.
President Lincoln Mandate

During the Civil War, the Army came out with updated regulations for the ceremonial honoring of the war dead. At the end of the war, the regulations stated:

• The deceased would be given an escort based on rank
• Six men to carry the casket
• Three volleys from the riflemen in the escort
• A flag draped over the coffin

Abraham Lincoln mandated for the honoring of those in his Second Inaugural Address: “….to care for him who shall have borne the battle.”
After the war, National Cemeteries were established on major battle sites and former prison camps. It would be the largest burial project in the world. The work began in 1865 and finished five years later in 1870 with almost 300,000 soldiers buried in 73 National Cemeteries. In 1867, Congress approved money for the replacement of temporary wooden grave markers and in 1873, the Secretary of War approved the use of marble headstones.

Arlington National Cemetery, which has become our nation’s most sacred shrine, was originally the property of the Robert E. Lee family. The Union seized the land during the war and it eventually became used as a cemetery. After the war, the government paid the Lee family for the property and Arlington became a National Cemetery. Today Arlington is the final resting place for over 400,000 Americans.
Spanish-American War & The Army Burial Corp

The Spanish-American War, which began with the sinking of the USS Maine in Havana Harbor, was a war fought on foreign soil. President McKinley ordered that the military provide proper burial of casualties and permanent grave markers. In 1899, the Army Burial Corp was formed to meet the demands of the public to return the remains of the soldiers. In the Philippines, Captain Charles Pierce was given $200,000 by Congress to open the Morgue and Office of Identification. His work would become the blueprint for the later Grave Registration Units. His office would work to identify, embalm, dress the body in a uniform, and place them in a flag draped coffin. This war also brought veterans groups who lobbied for the proper retrieval of our war dead. It had now been established that the responsibility for the care of remains belonged solely to the government. The families of war dead would no longer have to provide for the shipment of their loved ones.
Graves Registration Service

World War I brought about the formation of the Graves Registration Service (GRS). This war would bring a new set of challenges to the newly formed units. In 1917, four companies were established to identify and bury casualties in temporary cemeteries. The first unit of its kind, the GRS began operating on the front lines in 1918. Their initial system of burial was to place a bottle with the name, rank, unit, and cause of death with the body. These men often risked their lives to recover and identify the dead from the battlefield. During the war, dog tags became required items for soldiers. This would help identification, but only to an extent. In 1918, the GRS would find itself supervising 2,400 cemeteries within Europe. It would take two years to exhume and ship the remains home. The GRS was dissolved after the war in 1934 and the memorial affairs were left to the 54 men of the Quartermasters Memorial Branch.
The Unknown Soldier

After the war, in 1921, Congress called for the selection of an unknown soldier to be interred in the United States. Four bodies were selected from European battlefields and moved to Chalone, France. All records concerning them were burned. SGT Edward Younger, an Infantry Sergeant, was tasked with selecting the unknown by laying a spray of roses on one of the caskets. The remains of the selected soldier was transferred to a silver and ebony casket. The soldier lay in state as thousands of mourners passed through the US Capitol to pay their respects. On November 11, 1921, the body was interred in a tomb at Arlington National Cemetery with full Military Honors.
In preparation for America’s entrance into World War II, the Graves Registration Service was reactivated with 13 companies, each with a strength of 125 personnel. They became frontline combat troops. They were in the initial push into Normandy, and began burying casualties immediately so that the follow-on troops would not be met by the remains of their comrades. The soldier’s unit was responsible in getting him back to the collection points. Once there, the GRS would take over the processing.

Units began recruiting chaplains to provide funeral services for those killed, and the GRS held funerals at the end of every day. They consisted of full military honors and a religious service. The importance of rendering honors is demonstrated by the designation of personnel whose sole duty was to provide honors for the fallen.
The Korean War

At the start of the Korean War, the Graves Registration Service was operational and ready to process casualties. This war was different from wars fought in the past. Battle lines changed quickly, sometimes as much as 100 miles in a week. The old system of following the troops and establishing cemeteries was not effective. Shortly into the conflict, General Douglas McArthur, overall commander, ordered all cemeteries evacuated and moved to an extreme southern location which allowed for easy access for returning the remains home. Now they could be identified and shipped home in a miraculous 30 days. This was a vast improvement over the 2 to 6 years it took in World War II. This became possible to the dedication of air assets for evacuation and shipping. With advances in technology, the GRS could see the possibility of all war dead being returned home. “All will come home” became their motto.

Starting on Christmas Day in 1950, the United States made a sweeping change in its policies regarding the handling of soldiers who had been killed in action. Rather than burying them in temporary cemeteries for return at a future date after the conclusion of the war, soldiers killed in action were immediately returned to the United States. This policy, known as concurrent return, remains in effect to this day.

On May 30, 1958, an unknown was selected from both World War II and Korea and interred in Arlington National Cemetery, again with full Military Honors.
Vietnam proved to be a new kind of war. It was fought, not over strategic land, but over body counts. There were no front lines. Most of the war was a series of skirmishes fought in triple canopy jungle and hilly terrain. Individual units were responsible for evacuating the dead along with the wounded to the rear collection points for processing and shipment home.

Two ports of entry were established in the United States: Oakland, California and Dover, Delaware. Today, Dover is the only port of entry. The time of return of remains had been reduced to seven days.

Though it may be hard to see any success from Vietnam, the GRS obtained a 96% recovery rate. In 1994, Congress approved the honoring of an unknown from Vietnam. In 1998, the body was exhumed and identified through DNA. There is no longer an unknown from this war. Since Vietnam, we have brought every soldier home, and will never again need to honor another unknown. Today that Tomb is known as the Tomb of the Unknowns.
GRS Becomes Mortuary Affairs

Today, casualties in combat areas are identified, prepared and returned home with remarkable speed as opposed to earlier conflicts. The Graves Registration Service (GRS) is now known as Mortuary Affairs which is part of the United States Army Quartermaster Corps tasked with the retrieval, identification, transportation, and burial of deceased military personnel.

The Charles C. Carson Center for Mortuary Affairs at Dover Air Force Base is where remains of soldiers who are killed in action are processed and returned home. There are currently two U.S. Army Mortuaries located in Germany and Korea. These locations have U.S. licensed funeral directors and embalmers along with military staffing to provide services to all Department of Defense components that are located within their respective areas.

Religious and military rites are provided to the deceased military at the departure from the operational area and arrival at Dover Air Force Base. These are known as Dignified or Honorable Transfers.
Military Funeral Honor Traditions

There are traditions associated with Military Funeral Honors.

The firing of three volleys over the grave of a soldier can be traced back to the Roman Empire. After the burial rites, the Romans would shout the name of the deceased three times to insure that it would never be forgotten. This practice was passed to the English and then to the American colonies. More often than not, the deceased would be buried quickly with only the three volleys being fired. This practice had a dual purpose. It not only rendered honors to the dead, but was also used to signal the end of cease-fire agreements that were often negotiated to allow for the burial of the dead. Although referred to as a “21-Gun Salute,” the three volleys is the correct terminology. Today this salute is not a required part of military honors. It is performed by a firing party of anywhere from three to seven persons.
Bugle Call of Taps

The bugle call of Taps had also begun to be used during the Civil War. General Daniel Butterfield (1831-1901) changed the existing nightly call to end the day’s activities to Taps. It soon caught on and began to be used throughout the Army. During the Peninsula Campaign, Captain John Tidball (1825-1906) ordered it played at the funeral of his men that were killed in action. Although the call was used as an honor at funeral services for soldiers, it was not until 1891 that it was entered into the regulations.
Prominent in a military funeral is the flag-draped casket. The blue field of the flag is placed at the head of the casket, over the left shoulder of the deceased. The custom began in the Napoleonic Wars of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, when a flag was used to cover the dead as they were taken from the battlefield on a caisson. The flag is folded at the conclusion of military honors and presented to the next of kin.

After Taps has sounded, the flag is carefully folded into the symbolic tri-cornered shape. A properly proportioned flag will fold 13 times on the triangles, representing the 13 original colonies. The folded flag is emblematic of the tri-cornered hat worn by the Patriots of the American Revolution. When folded, no red or white stripe is to be evident, leaving only the blue field with stars.

Instructions on folding the flag can be found at:
http://www.usflag.org/foldflag.html
Flag Presentation Language

Effective April 17, 2012, the Department of Defense (DOD) standardized the flag presentation language for military funeral honors ceremonies. The following language is used when presenting the American flag during the funeral service:

“On behalf of the President of the United States, (the United States Army; the United States Marine Corps; the United States Navy; the United States Air Force; or the United States Coast Guard), and a grateful Nation, please accept this flag as a symbol of our appreciation for your loved one’s honorable and faithful service.”
Another military tradition is the caisson and caparisoned horse, or riderless, horse. Horse-drawn caissons were the primary means of moving artillery ammunition and cannon and used to transport the dead from battlefields. The single riderless horse that follows the caisson with boots reversed in the stirrups is called the "caparisoned horse" in reference to its ornamental coverings, which have a detailed protocol all to themselves. By tradition in military funeral honors, a caparisoned horse follows the casket of certain ranks. The custom is believed to date back to the time of Genghis Khan, when a horse was sacrificed to serve the fallen warrior in the next world. The caparisoned horse later came to symbolize a warrior who would ride no more. Today this tradition is continued at Arlington National Cemetery.
The Department of Defense (DOD) is responsible for providing military honors to eligible veterans. DOD Instruction 1300.15 sets policy and assigns responsibilities for military funeral support. The DOD has established a website that provides information including eligibility criteria, relevant law, information for funeral directors, and related links, at www.dmdc.osd.mil/mfh/.
Today’s Request for Military Funeral Honors

The tradition of providing Military Funeral Honors has evolved over the past century. Today, requests for military support are initiated by funeral home directors based on eligibility criteria provided by the family of the decedent. Those eligible include:

• Military members on active duty, retired or in the Selected Reserve.
• Former military members who served on active duty and departed under conditions other than dishonorable.

The preferred method is a certificate of release or discharge from active duty, most commonly referred to as a DD-214 form. Proof of service must be made at the time of request.

Information on Memorial Benefits from the VA can be found at: https://explore.va.gov/memorial-benefits.
Thank you for taking our online course.

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