



Sgt. 1st Class Jimmy Toro, a mortuary affairs specialist assigned to the Casualty and Mortuary Affairs Operations Center, U.S. Army Human Resources Command at Fort Knox, Ky., steam cleans the uniform of a fallen Soldier during preparation for the dignified transfer of remains. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Bennie J. Davis)

Soldiers, Families of Fallen Come First

By Martha C. Koester — NCO Journal

When it comes to taking care of their own, noncommissioned officers at the Casualty and Mortuary Affairs Operations Center and the Soldier Programs and Services Division, fully embrace their mission to make Soldiers and their families a No. 1 priority. Whether they are processing an award for Soldiers injured in combat or coordinating efforts to notify a fallen Soldier's next of kin, both divisions at U.S. Army Human Resources Command at Fort Knox, Ky., work diligently behind the scenes to honor their commitment to Soldiers, the deceased, missing, injured or ill.

NCOs in both divisions realize their jobs afford them high visibility. For the noncommissioned officers of CMAOC, the importance of taking care of families is no more evident than when their main branch, Casualty and Mortuary Affairs Branch, notifies a Soldier's next of kin of a casualty. Notification to the Soldier's parents, spouse or other next of kin must be made swiftly. It isn't a job for the faint-hearted.

'Best of the Best'

"Casualty notification and assistance officers should be the best of the best Soldiers," said Sgt. Maj. Lucinda A.



Gen. David Rodriguez, former commander of U.S. Army Forces Command, presents in January 2013 the Distinguished Service Cross to the widow of Staff Sgt. Eric Shaw. Shaw was posthumously presented the award in recognition for his actions while serving as a squad leader with 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, in Kunar Province, Afghanistan, in June 2010. (Photo by Sgt. David Hodge)

Ramos, retired sergeant major of CMAOC. “They are the Army’s liaison. This duty is an honor for the Soldier — to assist the family of a fallen fellow brother or sister. We have to have [CNOs and CAOs] who will show compassion, care, dignity and respect.”

“There are so many things that have to be taken care of; [the CAO] pretty much works off a checklist,” said Master Sgt. Rodolfo P. Lozano, the senior enlisted advisor for CMAOC. “We provide services from the initial notification of death. We have to react, and we strive to get those notices out. At CMAOC, we work to coordinate the entire effort on notification.”

Among the most challenging issues for casualty notification officers is when Soldiers have not updated their records of emergency data, Ramos said.

“That’s the biggest problem we are finding — wrong addresses,” Ramos said. “What we are seeing is that when the Soldier deploys, the spouse decides to live with [his or her parents], and the form does not get updated with the new address. Then, [a fatality occurs], and the casualty notification officer is [hindered] trying to track down the spouse.”

Soldiers should pay special attention to naming a beneficiary for Servicemembers Group Life Insurance and to whom the Soldier’s remains will be sent.

“It’s very important for these Soldiers to understand these [serious] decisions they are making,” Lozano said.

“Nobody ever makes plans to die, but Soldiers have to give a little thought about if something were to happen to them,” Ramos said. “Will my family be taken care of? How will my family be taken care of? I’ve heard Soldiers say, ‘Well, I’m not married.’ They may not be married, but someone out there cares about him or her, and they will be responsible and ensure that the Soldier’s remains are taken care of. Soldiers need to take these [casualty] forms very seriously because it’s not really about the Soldier if a casualty occurs. The Soldier is gone. It’s about [taking care of] who is left behind.”

Ready to serve

CNOs and CAOs are on hand to help families cope with the loss of Soldiers, as well as to provide time-sensitive assistance in collecting benefits and recognitions. Training teams are often sent out into the field to train CNOs and CAOs to prepare them for their solemn, but vital, duties.

However, the families can sense when a Soldier is not comfortable performing his or her role as a CNO or CAO, as they work closely with the families of fallen Soldiers as the Army’s liaison. The families often let CMAOC officials know in a follow-up survey, Ramos said.

Aside from casualty notification and assistance, CMAOC also reviews policies, plans and training, as well as gathering and reviewing recommendations from the



Sgt. 1st Class James Shockley looks through a binder containing case files for Pvt. Richard Clapp, a Soldier who died in 1950 in the Korean War. Shockley was assigned as a casualty assistance officer to Clapp’s surviving next of kin after the Soldier’s remains were positively identified 62 years after his death. (Photo by Sgt. Mark Miranda)

field in those areas. CMAOC also handles non-fatal line-of-duty investigations and congressional inquiries.

Additionally, CMAOC collects and assesses information on unaccounted-for service members of past Army conflicts. Recovery efforts are not only focused on human remains but personal effects as well, such as a Soldier's decades-long lost class ring found recently by forensic anthropologists at a plane crash site. The engraved ring was reunited with the Soldier's grateful 90-year-old widow, Lozano said.

That care and professionalism extends to the NCOs at the Joint Personal Effects Depot, who handle the remains and personal effects of all military service members killed in theater. JPED coordinates with other divisions, such as the SPSD, to make sure that when the fallen Soldier's family receives his or her remains everything related to the Soldier is accurate and up-to-date, including any posthumous promotions, Ramos said.

Posthumous honors

The Awards and Decorations Branch, which works under the SPSD, coordinates with CMAOC to ensure that posthumous awards are processed within 48 hours in order to present the award during the Soldier's funeral services. If the next of kin prefers, posthumous awards may be presented at a private ceremony at another time.

Though posthumous awards are the priority, the branch receives and assesses numerous inquiries from Soldiers and veterans about awards, including those passed down through congressional requests. The vetting process may take up to two years.

"We get quite a few phone calls from the field asking, 'I was deployed, and I'm not sure if my unit received any type of award. How can I find out?'" said Sgt. Maj. Barbara O'Hara, the sergeant major of SPSD. "We even get some Soldiers right before a board asking, 'My records are being reviewed; should I have this [decoration] on my uniform or not?'"

O'Hara advised Soldiers to have as many specific details as possible before contacting the branch about awards. Also, documentation is important. An awards processing and training package is available online at www.hrc.army.mil/tagd under the Soldier Programs and Services Division and offers a step-by-step guide.

O'Hara said helping Soldiers or veterans receive their awards is gratifying. Awards and Decorations Branch workers often witness the fruits of their labor first-hand when the medal ceremony is aired on television.

"It's a great feeling to see that Soldier, our veteran [after the years-long process] finally get that award," O'Hara said. "It definitely gives you a sense of accomplishment. Now, [that Soldier or veteran] can sit on their porch in their rocking chair and explain why they received the award to their grandkids. It's very rewarding." ■



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