

Military repatriations and the role of the funeral director

There can not be a funeral director in the land who is not aware of the very high media profile of the repatriation work carried out by the Ministry of Defence's (MoD) repatriation contractor. The Service Personnel and Veterans Agency (SPVA) is the area of the MoD which is responsible for the repatriation of Service personnel to the UK. There has been some confusion in the past as to the role of the MoD contractor and a Service person's family funeral director; therefore; it is hoped that this article will go some way to defining the MoD's repatriation process and define where the MoD service ends and a Service person's family funeral director's service begins.

Operational deaths receive most media attention but any Service person who dies anywhere in the world receives the same care in being repatriated to the UK (and onward to their home country if applicable) by the MoD. In all cases, the MoD wants to return a Service person to their family as quickly as possible and in the best condition to allow the family to see their loved one, commence the grieving process and proceed with their private funeral arrangements.

Taking operational deaths first, SPVA instructs the contractor to deploy staff to the relevant Operational Theatre to be with the deceased and to oversee the repatriation. Once a family has been informed of a death, the MoD appoints a Visiting Officer (VO) to offer assistance and, at an early stage, the VO explains to the family that they will need to appoint



a local funeral director. In the meantime, arrangements for the repatriation are made and the MoD contractor liaises with the VO to ascertain what the family's wishes are, including finding out what they would like their relative to be dressed in when they are returned home. The Repatriation Ceremony is, in fact, a Military event, and the contractor provides the vehicles and staff to assist with the ceremony in the manner in which the Military requires. Following the Ceremony, the deceased is taken to the John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford. Once in Oxford, the Coroner takes responsibility for the deceased. Following the necessary medical examinations the deceased is collected by the contractor and taken to its

premises for dressing and embalming. The deceased is then placed in a new coffin for the final journey home. Under the Military Covenant, it is the MoD's responsibility to return a Service person to their family as quickly as possible and, as stated before, in the best condition possible, and this is why one of the MoD's requirements under its Repatriation Contract is that the contractor will prepare the deceased prior to returning them to their family. The National Association of Funeral Directors and the British Institute of Embalmers monitor the work undertaken by the contractor under the terms of their membership. Following the completion of the embalming and dressing at the contractor's premises,



the contractor will liaise with the family's funeral director to agree the time of arrival.

If a Service person dies whilst serving overseas (a non operational death) in a country where there is a regularised funeral profession, the contractor makes arrangements for a standard repatriation. This would be in accordance with local regulations, normally through local funeral directors, usually using civil airlines. The contractor will return these deceased directly to the family's funeral director as long as all the documents a Coroner will need are in place. At the request of the next of kin similar arrangements are also put in place to return foreign and commonwealth personnel serving in the British Armed Forces to their country of origin following a death in the UK.

Once the deceased is delivered to the family's funeral director the MoD repatriation contractor has no further role to play. The MoD/SPVA do, however, still have a role.

The families of all deceased Service personnel can choose whether they wish to give their relative a "Service" or "Private" funeral, the difference being that, with a service funded funeral, the Armed Forces liaises with the family funeral director over the arrangements and will meet the majority of the costs, whilst consulting with and reflecting the wishes of the next-of-kin, whereas, with a private funeral, the family make all the arrangements direct and settle the funeral bill themselves and may or may not invite the military to attend. There are differences in the financial and practical support offered depending on the funeral choice but, in all cases, the MoD makes a considerable contribution to the costs of the event, either direct to the funeral director or via a grant to the next-of-kin. One additional benefit of the family choosing a service funded funeral is that the MoD will also offer to provide, at public expense, a Service Pattern Headstone (burials) or Urn Plot Marker (cremations). Such memorials are supplied by the MoD under the terms of a separate contract. Military pattern

headstones, on plots owned by the MoD, will be then be maintained in perpetuity by the MoD, should the family so wish.

In summary, the MoD must ensure that the Military Covenant is upheld whilst respecting the needs of the family to have their own funerals. This is why there will always be a need for the local funeral director in the process. If funeral directors have any questions, they should contact the SPVA's Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre (JCCC) on 01452 519951 at any time to clarify your role.

The NAFD is pleased to announce that the MoD will be making a presentation on *Deaths in the Armed Forces - Repatriation and Funeral Entitlement* at the Autumn General Meeting on 1 November. The SPVA will also be present at the National Funeral Exhibition next year in order to answer queries and provide detailed briefings on any future requirements.