
Advising Commanders Regarding Memorial Events after a Military Suicide Death

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One of the most divisive issues in military suicide postvention is holding memorial services for a service member who has died by suicide. Unit commanders and senior noncommissioned officers frequently express concerns about holding these events, such as the idea that a memorial service will “glamorize” suicide. Accompanying this concern is the idea that the event will encourage other service members to attempt suicide, or that a “suicide cluster” will result. Other leaders may have a more extreme view that “A coward’s death by suicide should never be celebrated in the same way the military honors those who die on the battlefield.”

Working alongside our chaplain colleagues, military psychologists can advise commanders on making decisions regarding all aspects of postvention following a suicide death, including the potential impact of memorial events. In addressing these concerns, military psychologists should consider the regulations concerning memorial events, as well as the impact on the unit if these events are not held.

At least three kinds of events might be held or supported by the unit after any death of a service member. These events are not specific to a suicide death.

1) If the death occurs in an overseas or deployed context, or a decedent’s body is otherwise being transported by aircraft away from the assigned duty station, a Ramp Ceremony may be held. In a Ramp Ceremony, the unit may attend and salute the flag-draped transfer case containing the remains of the deceased while it is conveyed onto the transport aircraft. The Ramp Ceremony provides an opportunity for members of the unit to see off the deceased service member on their journey home.

2) A Unit Memorial Ceremony is planned by the chain of command to honor the life of a deceased service member. Unit members attend the ceremony to remember their fallen comrade, and other appropriate guests can be invited. Family members typically are invited to attend if the Unit Memorial Ceremony unless it occurs in a deployed environment. Remarks are usually delivered by the unit commander, chaplain, and those who wish to pay tribute to the deceased service member. These ceremonies often are most iconic for the display of a rifle with boots, helmet, and the unit colors. The ceremony typically includes a Last Roll Call, a firing of volleys, and the sounding of Taps.

3) Military Funeral Honors can be included at the funeral, burial, or memorial of any eligible service member or veteran. In coordination with the service member’s family or another authorized representative, a military funeral honors coordinator arranges the inclusion of Military Funeral

Honors at the service. At a minimum, Military Funeral Honors include the folding of the flag, presentation of the folded flag to the family, and the sounding of Taps. In certain circumstances—and where permitted—the firing of a gun salute or a military aircraft flyover may be included in military funeral honors.

Department of Defense policies address each of these events to some extent, but may not provide sufficient guidance to mitigate the concerns of unit commanders. Department of Defense Instruction 1300.15 specifies that all service members who die while on active duty will be provided with Military Funeral Honors (Department of Defense, [2017a](#)). Only in rare circumstances—such as the service member being convicted of a capital crime—can Military Funeral Honors be denied. Furthermore, the authority for denial of funeral honors is the respective Secretary of the Military Department concerned, and can only be delegated to the General Officer / Flag Officer level or an equivalent member of the Senior Executive Service. Thus, a service member who dies by suicide will receive Military Funeral Honors except in very rare circumstances, and these honors are not dependent on the opinions of unit leaders.

Guidance for Unit Memorial Ceremonies after a suicide death is provided in Department of Defense Instruction 6490.16 (Department of Defense, [2017b](#)). Although unit commanders have more latitude regarding the decision to hold such an event, this regulation strongly encourages Unit Memorial Ceremonies after every service member death, regardless of the circumstances. In addressing worries about suicide contagion and “glorifying” suicide death, this regulation goes on to specify the elements of a Unit Memorial Ceremony that can mitigate these concerns, such as focusing on comforting grieving family and friends, eulogizing the service member in a way that reflects positive accomplishments, and avoiding commentary on the personal circumstances that may have led to the suicide death. Note that Army regulations are even more prescriptive regarding Unit Memorial Ceremonies, specifying that commanders will hold these events for all service members assigned to their units “regardless of the manner of death, to include suicides” (Department of the Army, [2020](#), p. 60). Exceptions to this policy are similar to those in Department of Defense Instruction 1300.15, and must be approved by the first General Officer in the chain of command.

Decisions regarding Ramp Ceremonies often must be made quickly, since the primary concerns in operational settings are the preservation of remains and the integrity of forensic evidence (Department of Defense, [2021](#)). Because the Ramp Ceremony is limited to the ceremonial

honoring of the deceased during transit and often only includes a brief prayer by the chaplain, there is less likelihood of problematic public comment that may glorify suicide, disclose inappropriate details regarding the circumstances of the death, or denigrate the deceased service member. Furthermore, formal determinations regarding these deaths typically are still pending investigation during this timeframe, so a suicide death only could be suspected at this point.

The best resource to guide commanders in planning for memorial events is the *Postvention Toolkit for a Military Suicide Loss* created by the Defense Suicide Prevention Office (2019). This toolkit is available free from <https://www.dspo.mil/download/> and is intended for a variety of leaders—including unit commanders, chaplains, casualty assistance officers, investigators, and prevention personnel—who may have a role in suicide postvention support. The toolkit provides specific steps for planning unit-sponsored memorial events, with guidance for those who may be preparing remarks. Although prevention personnel and unit members may want to emphasize suicide prevention as part of a Unit Memorial Ceremony, the toolkit provides guidance for balancing the opportunity to encourage help seeking with an inappropriate overemphasis on preventing future suicide deaths.

Unit leaders also should be aware of the perceptions of other service members—and the attendant effects on unit cohesion and morale—when making decisions regarding a Unit Memorial Ceremony or Ramp Ceremony. Even if leaders are well intentioned, such as not wanting to encourage others to engage in suicide behavior, other unit members may interpret this reluctance to memorialize the deceased as a statement that the service member's life had no value. Other service members also may generalize this thought to suggest that unit leadership does not value the life of any individual service member. This interpretation can be exacerbated if “business as usual” activities such as routine training or vehicle maintenance are emphasized in the days following a suicide death to the exclusion of activities that may help other unit members grieve.

Among other postvention activities, a commanding officer may need additional support in processing the loss

of a service member under their command. One potential step in this process is writing a Letter of Sympathy to the deceased service member's next of kin. Army Regulation 638-8 requires that the Battalion Commander typically prepares and sends this letter. Although this letter typically will include a brief statement on the circumstances of the death, this regulation further requires that the individual soldier's contribution to the unit be emphasized in the case of a suicide death. Other members of the chain of command also can be included in this process, affording an opportunity to share personalized details about the value the deceased service member brought to the unit. The *Postvention Toolkit for a Military Suicide Loss* also includes guidance for the preparation of these letters.

In short, military psychologists consulting with commanders regarding memorial events following a suicide should encourage these events whenever possible, in accordance with military policies and accounting for the impact on other service members. Available toolkits from the Defense Suicide Prevention Office can provide a valuable framework for all suicide postvention activities, emphasizing the value of every service member life and that support resources are available.

References

- Defense Suicide Prevention Office. (2019). *Postvention toolkit for a military suicide loss*. Department of Defense. <https://www.dspo.mil/download/>
- Department of Defense. (2017a). *Military funeral support* (Department of Defense Instruction 1300.15).
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