



Coming Home

By Merri M. Shaffer, Associate Editor

Reuniting families with the remains of their loved ones killed in combat is one of the Air Force's most sacred duties.

The 8,426-square-foot Fisher House at Dover AFB, Del., offers a place of comfort for military families going through one of their toughest moments: awaiting the return of the remains of a loved one who died in combat overseas.

Dedicated in November 2010, the Fisher House for Families of the Fallen serves a unique mission. Its nine suites provide lodging for the families to occupy at no cost as they prepare for that arrival. The house is located on Dover's Campus for Families of the Fallen.

"It is unique both in size and function," said David A. Coker, Fisher House Foundation president. "The last interaction with the service shouldn't be simply staying at a strip hotel," he said. "These families need to know there's a grateful nation."

The Fisher House Foundation is the private organization known for the homes it runs near major military and Department of Veterans Affairs medical centers in the United States

and Europe. Fisher Houses offer temporary free lodging to military families as their loved ones recover from serious wounds suffered in combat.

Families come to Dover at the Department of Defense's invitation to witness what DOD calls the "dignified transfer" of their loved ones. It takes place within 48 hours of notification of the death. But that's just one stop in the journey to return the fallen home and help bring closure to the families.

Dover's Air Force Mortuary Affairs Operations is charged with preparing the fallen for their final resting place. The mortuary's personnel give "dignity, honor, and respect to [the] nation's fallen and then [provide] care, service, and support to their families," said Col. John M. Devillier, AFMAO commander. Since its activation in January 2009, AFMAO has returned nearly 1,800 service members' remains from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.



USAF photo by 2nd Lt. Michael Gibson

The Remains Arrive

DOD assigns the highest priority to moving the remains of US military personnel back to Dover from the combat zone. Space for them is made on the first available aircraft, typically a 747, C-5 Galaxy, or C-17 Globemaster III, according to AFMAO.

When the remains arrive at Dover, a team of seven military personnel from the member's service carry them from the aircraft in an American flag-draped metal transfer case about 75 feet to a vehicle that transports them to the mortuary.

While AFMAO is rather new, its port mortuary's operations aren't. Established in 1958, the Dover Port Mortuary was a flight under the 436th Services Squadron. With the closure of the port mortuary at Travis AFB, Calif., in 2001, Dover became the sole remaining continental US military mortuary, with responsibility for handling the combat as well as mass casualty-incident deaths inside the United States.

The port mortuary has "always done dignified transfers for any of the fallen," but up until 2009, families could only come at their own expense, said Devillier. DOD instituted a "significant" policy change then that allowed families to travel to Dover at government expense, he said. This ramped up the workload of AFMAO staff and the logistical needs and support of the families.

"When the policy changed, only a small percentage of families were expected to travel to Dover, but today more than 85 percent come," said Devillier. "In fulfilling our mission of taking care of the fallen and their families, our operation has grown to include a family support team and facilities like the Center for Families of the Fallen and the Fisher House for Families of the Fallen to provide the much needed support and comfort to families."

The new policy also allowed members of the media to attend the transfers with the consent of the families.

Preparing the Remains

Approximately 80 military and civilian personnel work in the port mortuary, including Total Force airmen, marines, sailors, soldiers, and permanent-party licensed mortuary specialists.

Preparation of the remains—involving identification, embalming, dressing, and casketing—takes place at Dover's Charles C. Carson Center for Mortuary Affairs. This center, named after the Air Force civilian mortician who supervised mortuary remains preparations from 1971 to 1996, houses the port mortuary, mortuary affairs, and other operational support functions.

The Carson Center replaced the 48-year-old Dover Port Mortuary facility in 2003. At the center's entrance, a wall highlights the mortuary's more than half-century of operations. It lists the names of the conflicts and number of fallen whose remains the mortuary has handled over the years. This includes service members who died in the Vietnam War, the crew lost in the space shuttle *Challenger* explosion in 1986, and those killed during the wars in Southwest Asia.

Connected to the center by a series of hallways under the same roof is the Armed Forces Medical Examiner System, which comes under a different chain of command. AFMES leads the identification process and the autopsy. This occurs before the death certificate is issued, according to system officials.

All US military personnel remains arriving at Dover fall under the "believed to be" status until a medical examiner at AFMES positively identifies them, explained Lt. Col. Edward

USAF photo by SSGT. Carlin Leslie



A celebration of life ceremony was held Dec. 13, 2013, at the Air Force Memorial in Arlington, Va., for Col. Francis McGouldrick, who went missing in action on a mission over Laos in 1968.

Mazuchowski II, a forensic pathologist. That process, in most cases, requires about two to three hours.

Before the ID and autopsy, the transfer case is opened and the body bag

inside, called the human remains pouch, is passed through a rapid scanner to check for unexploded ordnance. Once the remains are cleared, the seal on the pouch is broken, an action that only a

Maj. Kevin Hopkins (l), an Air Force chaplain with Air Force Mortuary Affairs Operations, leads a prayer in honor of Army officers Lt. Col. Todd Clark and Maj. Jaimie Leonard at Dover AFB, Del., on June 12, 2013. The remains arrive at Dover in an American flag-draped metal transfer case and are met by seven military personnel from the member's service, who carry the case to a vehicle for transport to the mortuary.

USAF photo by Roland Balik



A Long-Missing Airman Laid To Rest



The flag-draped coffin was carried to the foot of the Air Force Memorial in Arlington Va., on the brisk morning of Dec. 13, 2013, lifted by the grandsons and great nephews of the honoree, Col. Francis J. McGouldrick Jr.

A ceremony was held there to honor the fallen airman, followed by the burial of his remains with full military honors that same day at nearby Arlington National Cemetery.

Forty-five years earlier to the date, the New Haven, Conn., native went missing in action at age 39 following a midair collision in Savannakhet province, Laos, during the Vietnam War. Then a major, he was serving as a navigator aboard a B-57E Canberra with seven crew members when the aircraft collided with a C-123 Provider during a night mission. McGouldrick was already the recipient of the Distinguished Flying Cross and Purple Heart, among other decorations.

None among McGouldrick's wife, mother, brother, or sister was able to take part in the memorial service and burial. Their deaths preceded all this winter's events. His four daughters, Marri, Megan, Melisa, and Michele, however, did get the closure of seeing their father's remains come home and be interred in a final resting place.

"We are very [proud] of our past conflicts mission," said Col. John M. Devillier, Air Force Mortuary Affairs Operations commander. The efforts required to bring home the remains of the nearly 1,500 airmen still missing in action from the Korean War onward require patience.

"It takes time to find those remains, to identify them. But one at a time, we are trying to bring all those airmen home to their families," said Devillier.

Between 1993 and 2004, there were several unsuccessful attempts to locate McGouldrick's crash site, according to the Defense Department's narrative of his recovery. Then in April 2007, a joint US-Laos team located a possible crash site near the village of Keng Keuk. From October 2011 to May 2012, American and Lao excavators found human remains and aircraft wreckage consistent with a B-57E there.

As typical with decades-old remains, Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command scientists and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory used circumstantial evidence and forensic identification tools, such as mitochondrial DNA, to help identify McGouldrick's remains.

DNA from the remains matched with McGouldrick's great nephew and niece, according to DOD.

"The McGouldrick family [case] was 10 years prior to putting shovels into the ground," said Allen Cronin, head of AFMAO Past Conflicts Branch. "It takes a long time. You've got to talk to the right people, get to the right place, and then hopefully get remains."

Though it took nearly half a century, an unyielding commitment to locate the crash site allowed McGouldrick to return home.

medical examiner can carry out, said Mazuchowski.

The contents of the pouch are photographed, including personal effects like wedding rings and cell phones, and archived. How the body arrived in the pouch and the initial viewing of the full body are documented. The personal effects are laid out and Joint Personal Effects Depot (JPED) personnel catalogue those articles. From there, the fallen service member is given "a unique medical examiner number" that stays with him or her throughout the process, said Mazuchowski. Then, the identification process continues.

With assistance from the FBI, the deceased is fingerprinted. The ID process also entails dental and full-body X-rays, computerized tomography scans, and DNA tests. The more complex cases can take longer, such as airplane crashes with multiple victims, whose remains may become commingled and require separation, said Mazuchowski.

Cases involving charred remains require the forensic pathologists to run more DNA samples to match remains with the right person. DNA samples are compared with those on record. Today, US military personnel give DNA samples during basic military training.

The autopsy is meant to learn the cause and manner of death. The remains are undressed and the examiner determines the wounds that may have contributed to the death. This helps to give the families a full account of how their loved one died.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan mark the first conflicts during which AFMES has done an autopsy on every US service member who has come through Dover, according to Paul Stone, an AFMES spokesman. "Evidence of DNA gives us the ability to do it," he said. "Families no longer just accepted the fact ... that their son or daughter died," he added. "They would want a more full account."

Iraq and Afghanistan represent the first long-duration wars where AFMES

has been able to identify every service member killed in action, said Stone. "DNA gave us that ability," he said.

The final autopsy report includes the personal information of the deceased (e.g., height, weight, age), along with the cause and manner of death.

Lessons From the Dead

The value of the autopsies does not end with a death certificate. AFMES now keeps a database of every autopsy report. DOD is applying the observations from the autopsies to help improve casualty care and influence the design of medical devices.

For example, autopsies of service members who had chest or lung trauma revealed that the thoracentesis needles



USAF Photo by Christin Michaud

Air Force Vice Chief of Staff Gen. Larry Spencer greets Lori Parrish, a volunteer with Friends of the Fallen, a local group that provides comfort and support to families coming to Dover.

medical personnel used as they fought to save their lives were, in many cases, not long enough. In fact, CT scans showed that more than 50 percent of those bodies had a greater chest-wall thickness than the length of these particular needles, used to insert tubes into the chest-wall cavity to remove fluid. "Information was pushed up to the Department of Defense and [Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for] Health Affairs, and a memo [came] back down to change the length of the needle," said Mazuchowski.

After the autopsies, AFMAO personnel prepare the deceased service members for transport to their final destinations, as determined by the families. Remains are embalmed before morticians reconstruct the faces and bodies for viewing, if possible.

"Our No. 1 goal is to make the remains viewable for the family, to help with closure," said Devillier. However, "every case is different," he said. "A gunshot wound is much different than an [improvised explosive device]. And an airplane crash is the worst of them all." Unfortunately, in some cases, "the family will never see the remains."

In AFMAO's dressing room, three walls are devoted to accoutrements, such as rank insignia, crests, unit patches, and service medals and ribbons. Deeper into the room are a set of cubbyholes. Based on family wishes, mortuary personnel will dress the

deceased in anything from a service uniform to a favorite pair of jeans, said Devillier. Each cubbyhole holds the attire and accoutrements for one service member.

In most cases, the last stop in the AFMAO is departures for casketing before the official sendoff, where the remains travel to their final resting place via air or hearse. Sometimes, however, that's not the end of the tale.

"Because of the nature of the conflict today and the widespread use of improvised explosive devices, the remains of many of our fallen are fragmented," said Lt. Gen. Darrell D. Jones, then deputy chief of staff for manpower, personnel, and services, at a Pentagon briefing in 2011. "We strive to return these fallen to their families as intact as possible."

Jones briefed reporters following the completion of a year-long investigation that the Air Force inspector general began in June 2010 into the handling of remains at the port mortuary. The probe resulted after whistleblowers came forward with concerns about remains being mishandled. The findings were troubling for many.

In two separate incidents, the port mortuary lost body parts of service members killed in action, and the families weren't notified.

In another case, personnel dismembered the body of a fallen marine so that it would fit inside a uniform. This

also occurred without the family's knowledge or consent.

The investigation found cases where the mortuary dumped some remains of fallen service personnel in a landfill. This occurred in cases where the official shipment of the deceased's body had already been made to the family, and they had elected not to receive notification of subsequently identified remains.

Reverence, Dignity, Respect

The landfill practice followed a two-step process: The remains were cremated and then incinerated. A contractor disposed of any residual material in the landfill. Port mortuary operations received a firestorm of criticism when news of the process became public.

Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee in November 2011, then-Chief of Staff Gen. Norton A. Schwartz took responsibility for the situation, along with then-Secretary of the Air Force Michael B. Donley, and discussed the changes the Air Force was implementing. "In 2008, the Air Force came to the conclusion that that was not the best way to deal with those remains, and so it is now done in the traditional fashion of burial at sea," said Schwartz. "Our obligation is to treat our fallen with reverence and dignity and respect and to provide the best possible support and care for their families."

The retirement-at-sea procedure, first used by the mortuary in January 2011, takes place in partnership with the Navy and Coast Guard. The remains, ashes at this point, are placed in sea salt urns and cast into the water.

Future plans, however, include the construction of an ossuary for such remains. As of the end of 2013, Arlington National Cemetery officials were still in the process of identifying locations for this vault. An Army spokeswoman said there had been no decision yet on the location or the estimated completion date.

Devillier acknowledged that mortuary operations prior to AFMAO's activation had not had "the best media coverage."

"We have really made an effort to try to show folks that we really do know what we're doing here," Devillier said. "I'm very proud of what we do here."

AFMAO underwent its first Air Force Unit Compliance inspection in 2012, receiving an "excellent" rating,

said Devillier. "AFMAO is preparing for its next level inspection in 2014, with the goal of exceeding our last inspection results."

Additionally, retired Army Gen. John P. Abizaid, former head of US Central Command, led an independent panel established in December 2011 by then-Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta to make recommendations for improvements. The Dover Port Mortuary Independent Review Subcommittee examined records and anecdotal evidence as far back as 1990. In its report, the panel presented 20 recommendations on how DOD, the Air Force, and Army could improve port mortuary operations.

Among them, it called on the Secretary of the Air Force to install an existing flag officer-level commander at AFMAO or to create a new flag officer-level command to oversee it. It urged the Secretary of Defense to direct the DOD IG to inspect port mortuary operations each year, along with its relationships with the AFMES, JPED, and the service's liaison units.

The panel saw the need for increased communication between AFMAO and AFMES and increased training. Of the 20 recommendations, nine were specific to the Air Force, said Devillier. "To date, eight of the nine have been completed, with the ninth focused on where AFMAO will be aligned under the Air Force hierarchy. This recommendation is in the final stages of being staffed, with an expected completion by the summer 2014," he said.

AFMES has evolved over the years as well. Based on a 2005 Base Realignment and Closure recommendation, AFMES relocated from Rockville, Md., to Dover in September 2011. Previously, its specialists would commute the 100 miles each way between Rockville and Dover, on a regular basis, to fulfill their tasks.

Extended Support

The extent of AFMAO's operations far exceeds preparations of the bodies. It includes logistical and ceremonial support for the families as they retrieve their loved ones and say their final farewells. AFMAO's Mortuary Affairs Division oversees payments due to families of the fallen, a task it handled as part of the Air Force Services Agency in San Antonio from 1993 to 2008 before AFMAO's creation. Soon thereafter, the division transferred to Dover and joined the other operations at the Carson Center.

The division's Past Conflicts Branch works to help bring closure to the

USAF photo by TSgt. Shane Heiser



One of the rooms available to families at the Fisher House, stocked with toys and games for the children and teens who stay there.

families. Branch officials work closely with the Honolulu-based Joint Prisoners of War/Missing in Action Accounting Command. JPAC conducts global search, recovery, and laboratory operations to identify unaccounted-for American service members. Branch officials become engaged after identification of the remains. AFMAO officials then sit down with the families to work on the steps for returning the remains to them.

"At that point, I sort of take off my government hat ... and I put on my funeral director hat because now I have to set up a funeral," said Allen Cronin, Past Conflicts Branch chief.

Cronin said he finds his role helping bring closure to the families rewarding. "I know it's a cliché, but I sometimes don't believe that they really pay me to do this job. The honor is much bigger than the paycheck will ever be," he said.

The branch is responsible for recovered airmen from the Korean War and afterward. The Army handles the coordination with families for those airmen returned from conflicts prior to the Air Force's founding in 1947.

Still Busier Than Wished

From January to November 2013, AFMAO handled 118 dignified transfers with 727 family members present. That total was 60 percent lower than in 2012 due to the end of war in Iraq and the drawdown in Afghanistan, Devillier said. The roughly 1,800 transfers since AFMAO stood up in 2009 involved 8,574 family members.

Fortunately, the mortuary affairs mission has the support of the local community and state.

"Ultimately all of us in Delaware take enormous pride in the sacred work done at the Air Force Mortuary Affairs Operations Center, and we want to be certain that the critical mission there is carried out in a manner that is nothing short of perfection," said Sen. Tom Carper (D).

In addition, Friends of the Fallen, a local community-based volunteer organization, is on-call to help the Families of the Fallen Support Branch of AFMAO. The group provides comfort to the families coming to Dover, ranging from a simple cup of tea to providing personal hygiene or specialty items the families might have forgotten in the rush to get to the base.

"We want our families to stay focused on why they are here, not on what they forgot to bring," said Karen Mordus, Friends of the Fallen president. "We do not counsel any family members; we do not give any grieving advice. We are simply there to provide a calm presence before they go to the flight line."

Ultimately it's a debt due to those who served this country and made the ultimate sacrifice.

"It is not my mission alone to handle the remains of our nation's fallen. It's not Team Dover's mission. It's not the city of Dover; it's not the state of Delaware's. It's our collective mission as a nation," said Devillier. "Less than one percent of our nation put on the uniform; less than one percent of 300 million people serve. ... We owe it to them." ■