



By Brittany Simmons

Following my time as a battalion and brigade S3, I experienced a broadening opportunity working in the Department of the Army's Casualty and Mortuary Affairs Operations Division at Army Human Resources Command for about 20 months. CMAOD is mostly a civilian employee-run organization that, alongside installation Casualty Assistance Centers and Casualty Assistance Officers, works extremely hard with immense compassion to honor our fallen and take the utmost care of Army Families. In my time at CMAOD, I made some observations on what our Army units do well, don't do well, and simply don't know when it comes to Soldier deaths.

The Army trains to treat and evacuate casualties on the battlefield, but I saw enough from inside the process to believe we can do better at home, where we see most of these casualties, simply by gaining some additional knowledge at all levels of leadership. We, Army leaders, put an emphasis on taking care of Army Families, as we should. This is quite possibly the most important part of that.

Preparing for casualties has to go beyond planning our casualty collection points and

knowing where on the battlefield our medical assets are. We have to prepare at home, too. Don't get me wrong, we are not failing at this mission; however, at the unit level we can better posture ourselves in order to reduce the stress and complications that occur when tragedy happens, and thereby increase the readiness of both our formations and our Families.

In thinking through my time at CMAOD, I captured six key areas that I would offer to my fellow Army leaders to chew on and consider in order to do the casualty mission even better than we already do.

Soldiers are not invincible. We expect casualties with war. Combat losses, while heartbreaking, are more expected than non-combat deaths. But death comes in many forms, and in my time in CMAOD, I saw it all: combat, training accidents, off-duty accidents, suicides, various illnesses, motor vehicle accidents, foolish decisions, and more. Non-combat deaths happen more often in the Army than deaths from combat. You may think you have a formation full of young, physically and mentally fit Soldiers, and that nothing outside of combat would result in you losing someone. But, that's not true. Leaders have to realize that something could happen way out of their control or predictability. Don't assume it won't happen to you. I hope it does not, but we know hope is not a course of action.

Leaders, from platoon sergeant through brigade staff, ought to have an idea on where their local CAC is, and the basic steps necessary to take when a casualty occurs in order to protect and support the Family. We understand this on the battlefield, and we need to extend the same to garrison where the environment sometimes has even more variables and complications.

Records REALLY do matter. The Army has emphasized accurate Soldier records, a leader and Soldier responsibility, as part of readiness. Records may be tedious and time consuming to update, but they are SO critical to taking care of your Soldiers and their Families.

Beyond a Soldier's annual record review, leaders must make sure their Soldiers update records when significant events happen: marriage, divorce, birth of a child, citizenship, awards, schools, etc. This includes adding birth certificates and divorce decrees to iPERMS and adding/deleting dependents from DEERS, as required. The CACs and CMAOD use these documents for verifying all eligible Family members and validating Soldier records. The SGLI Online Enrollment System is helping with updating SGLI, and commanders now have the power to monitor their unit's compliance with that requirement. SOES really makes this easy. Of utmost importance, Soldiers MUST update DD93s annually (or more if life events

require, especially divorce or birth of children) as it is the basis for taking care of Families when their loved one is a casualty. Soldiers owe it to their loved ones, whomever that might be, to designate provisions for them in regard to death gratuity and pay.

Additionally, their designation of the Person Authorized to Direct Disposition is critical to their own wishes on what they want done with their remains should they pass. Failure to update this could mean that an estranged family member, such as an ex-spouse, could make those decisions or receive death gratuity if the Soldier failed to update their records. The pain, anger, and additional grief that old and poorly updated records cause Families is enormous, and it reflects very poorly on the Army and the unit. Understand the purpose of the DD93 and impart the gravity of it to your Soldiers. BN and BDE S1s ought to train their clerks on this so that they convey the proper information to Soldiers and understand the importance of what they are helping the Soldier to update.

Units should consider including DD93 and SOES reviews as part of their regular battle rhythm or counseling SOPs. Records really do take care of Soldiers and their Families, in many more ways than I've listed here. Lastly, DON'T neglect your own records. Walk the walk, don't just talk the talk. You are not invincible either, and I saw way too many senior leaders who had completely neglected their own record management and their Families suffered because of it.

Suicide is a problem. We hear that suicide is bad in the Army, but it truly is a real problem. It has been heartbreaking for me to see the number of Soldiers who take their own lives. It is not easy to train suicide prevention well, but as best as you are able try to make that training valuable and useful because it could save a life. I am not implying that leadership is to blame for suicides, but rather that our Army, just as our American society, is facing a suicide problem and we have to be innovative to both grow resiliency and prevent as best as possible. There is no magic solution, but keep at it!

At the same time, if you are the unfortunate leader that does lose a Soldier to suicide, please don't also be the leader that punishes the deceased Soldier. That Soldier is gone. Anything you do, like a hasty unit memorial that may hinder family attendance, has no impact on that Soldier. But their Army Family feels it, their friends and your troops feel it. Have compassion and understanding. While you may not agree with the reasons why the Soldier took their own life, and you may have legitimate anger and grief on how it impacts your organization, their loved ones are feeling so much more. We can't ask the Soldier "why?" but we can support their Family and fellow Soldiers who, in the midst of grief, are asking themselves what they could've done to prevent it.

Understand posthumous promotions. If a Soldier in the grade of E4 and above is eligible for posthumous promotion, and their death did NOT occur because of misconduct (examples: Soldier drove drunk, hit a tree and died; Soldier died in shootout with police), then Army regulations provide for their posthumous promotion. The semi-centralized selection process for E5-E6, the TIG requirements for O2 and CW2, and the centralized selection process for E7 and above / O3 and above means that the Army has already said that Soldier is promotable. Barring the misconduct requirements mentioned above (also see AR 600-8-19 and 600-8-29), that Soldier deserves their promotion even if the command, in light of the death, doesn't want them posthumously promoted. It's too late at this point, and leaders should've acted on that while the Soldier was alive if the reasons, aside from death, were serious enough to warrant stripping promotable status. Posthumous promotion only affords rank; there is no pay associated with it. The Family receives a posthumous promotion certificate, and the Soldier's headstone will reflect the new rank, as will the uniform for burial. So please, don't push against posthumous promotions because you're mad the Soldier is dead due to some reason you personally disagree with, but does not meet the misconduct requirements of the ARs.

Additionally, if the CMAOD case manager and the CAC notify the unit and Family of a posthumous promotion, they are not doing so as a decision maker, but rather as simply conducting the administrative requirements required within the casualty process. Enlisted and officer promotion branches are involved in determining the applicability of posthumous promotion for all cases.

Finish investigations. Most (not all) Soldier deaths result in AR 15-6 and line of duty investigations. It is my observation that the Army and commands closely monitor the progress and finalization of the 15-6 investigations. However, LODs may linger for extended periods of time because commands fail to fully complete and submit them. You're doing a disservice to Families when you delay completing a LOD because there are financial benefits tied to whether or not a Soldier was in the line of duty at the time of their death. Don't stop with the completion of the 15-6, but thoroughly and expeditiously complete the LOD as well.

Help, don't hinder. Every Soldier death is different because every circumstance and family is different. The Army's primary means of assisting families is through the various CACs, CAOs, and CMAOD case managers. When unit representatives reach out to family members beyond the requirements of offering condolences or providing invitations to unit memorials, it not only stresses the family out, but it disregards the deliberate Army casualty process. This doesn't mean you should be completely hands off, but it does mean that you should meet with your CAC. Questions for the families should go through CACs or CAOs. You are

not the SME on benefits or mortuary procedures; you cannot release beneficiary information to Family members. Additionally, CAOs work for the CACs in assisting the Family, it is not your role to compel them to do things for the command in regards to the family. CACs advise commanders and are the catalyst for Family support. They can assist in memorial ceremony planning, and will facilitate most of the travel (to include the cost) of eligible Family members to attend the ceremony. They can also assist the command in writing letters of condolence and keeping abreast of the schedule and location of services for the Soldier. So use those CACs! In fact, go visit them BEFORE you need them, and hopefully you never will.

Losing a Soldier from your formation is always hard and painful to the organization and the family. We, Army leaders, know a lot of this information already, but it is often tucked back behind more currently pressing issues. Not to mention our own emotions and stress kick in as well. It is my hope that some of the thoughts here will help you think through some ways you might better prepare in case tragedy does occur.

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