

Coming Home

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 an Executive Agency of the MoD and 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 SPVA are publishing this article to inform funeral directors of the MoD's repatriation process and define where the MoD service ends and a Service person's family funeral directors 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 the operational deaths first, the Contractor may be required 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 assist the family 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 require. Following the ceremony, the deceased are taken to the John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford. The route to the Hospital is through Wootton Bassett where so much of the media interest is concentrated. 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 their premises for dressing and embalming. The deceased is then placed in a new coffin for the final journey home. The Contractor will liaise with the family's funeral director to agree the time of arrival. Once the deceased is delivered to the family's funeral director the MoD Contractor has no further role to play. SPVA does however still have a role to play. The family can choose whether they want a 'Service' funeral or private funeral, the difference being whether the family want an overt service event or a private event to which they may or may not invite the military to attend. There are subtle differences in the financial and practical support offered depending on the choice, but in all cases the MoD makes a considerable contribution to the costs of the event. If a service person dies on duty they are entitled to a Service Headstone or Urn Marker, this will be provided by the MoD under the terms of a different Contract and these memorials are maintained in perpetuity by the MoD.

If a Service person dies overseas on duty in a country where there is a regularised funeral profession the Contractor makes arrangements for a standard repatriation to the UK, usually using routine civil airlines. The Contractor will return the deceased directly to the family's funeral director as long, as all the documents a coroner will need are in place.

In summary, the MoD wants to ensure that it meets the military covenant by ensuring that Service personnel return home from all corners of the globe quickly and with dignity. However,



we respect the needs of the family to have their own funerals and this is where there will always be a need for the local funeral director in the process. If funeral directors have any questions please contact the SPVA's Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre (JCCC) on 01452 519951 at any time to clarify your role. Moreover, SPVA will be represented at the National Funeral Exhibition next year in order to answer queries and provide detailed briefings on any future requirements.

SPVA provides a range of 'through life' support functions direct to around 900,000 serving and retired personnel and supports the 4.8 million Veterans Community. These functions include the Joint Personnel Administration (JPA) system, Armed Forces Pension Schemes and the issue of all current campaign and WWII Medals. As explained in this article, SPVA is also responsible for Casualty Notification and Repatriation services as well as Compensation Schemes for those killed or injured as a result of Service. SPVA's support continues as Service personnel leave the Services and become Veterans. SPVA has a dedicated helpline and welfare service for veterans which provides one to one support, in the home if needed. Services for veterans are provided under the brand Veterans-UK. It's the first stop for veterans who need help and advice.

The FREE Veterans-UK Helpline 0800 169 2277 is the single point for accessing information.