

Despite small numbers, Navy morticians provide care worldwide

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It's one of the smallest job specialties in the Navy – so small in fact, that most of the fleet isn't even aware of its existence.

However, when its services are required, those who need them couldn't be in better hands.

Most Sailors know little about Navy morticians, but the services they provide and the missions they perform have some of the most far-reaching impacts of any career field in the service, even though there are less than 15 of them. They provide dignity, honor and respect for fallen service members, and more importantly, a sense of closure for grieving families.

As the only uniformed morticians in the Department of Defense, Navy morticians possess a level of education, training and experience far above that of most Sailors in the fleet. All Navy morticians are fully licensed embalmers and funeral directors before they even walk into a Navy recruiting office.

There is no "A" or "C" school for mortuary science, and there is no Navy Enlisted Classification. All morticians are trained and rated as hospital corpsmen.

"We have to be licensed prior to coming in the Navy, and there are mortuary schools around the country we attend," said Chief Hospital Corpsman Amy Tucker. "Every state has different licensing requirements. Some states have a dual license, and some have a single license. Once you complete mortuary school, you serve an apprenticeship. Then, once you pass the state-required board test, you become a licensed funeral director and embalmer, which is what we all are."

There are seven duty stations for the 15-member career field: Millington, Tennessee; Quantico, Virginia; Dover, Delaware; Rota, Spain; Naples, Italy; Hawaii and Guam.

The headquarters element at NPC, which falls under the Navy Casualty Office, performs administrative functions, as does Quantico and Hawaii. Most of its mission involves transportation of a fallen Sailor to a location specified by the family, the family's travel and benefits, and payment to the family's selected funeral home for its services. The Millington morticians arrange for Navy escorts and burial details, and the office manages the burial-at-sea program. .

Sailors who perform the more traditional mortician duties staff the remaining sites, usually located at a military medical facility.

"We are the ones who are working closely with commands, Casualty Assistant Calls Officers, Navy regional offices, and local governing agencies," said Hospital Corpsman 1st Class Jonathan Shewchuk, who currently works out of the Naval Hospital in Guam. "Our work is focused around recovering our fallen service members, proper preparation through embalming and restoration procedures, and sending them home with the upmost honor, dignity and respect they deserve."

In Rota, Spain, Chief Hospital Corpsman Milton Sloane covers a wide area, made even larger by the vacancy in Naples. He also maintains oversight over Djibouti and other areas, acting as a detachment of Navy Casualty. His impact on the community extends far beyond perception.

“People who had no idea which way to go, what questions, to ask, or what to do come to me for answers,” said Sloane. “It is not at all unusual for me to see families I have served in the commissary or Exchange and see that they have been able to grieve and are in the process of moving on. My impact is far larger than I am as one individual. It is like being the small town funeral director that everyone knows.”

The job itself is not much different than what it is in the civilian world, according to Tucker, adding that DOD standards and military regulations are what separate civilian from military. “We have certain standards when it comes to the preparation, processing and shipping of any type of active duty service member. And for us, that would be an active-duty Marine our Sailor, because we take care of the Marine Corps as well.”

Jeff Hayes, the Navy's only civilian mortician, is the Mortuary Branch head and subject-matter expert for the Navy and Marine Corps. While on active duty in Guam in 1996, he experienced a situation overseas morticians might have to face.

“Within my first six weeks (in Guam) we had Korean Airlines Flight 801 crash into the side of Nimitz Hill outside the hospital,” he said. “I and the other mortician were the only two morticians within the Pacific region, so for nine months we were in charge of getting the bodies of the souls around the plane back to Korea.”

Hayes interprets the complex laws and regulations, communicates with the fleet to ensure everyone who has a part understands their role and ensures the Navy's money is being spent properly to avoid fraud, waste and abuse. He and Tucker are also the approving officials for all escort travel and benefit entitlements.

“Any active-duty Sailor or Marine who dies on active duty is entitled to preparation (embalming), they are entitled to a uniform – if theirs is not serviceable – and they are entitled to a casket,” he said. “Then we pay transportation to the funeral home. Once at the funeral home, we cover visitations, the funeral, flowers, clergy honorariums, and urns if the family ops for cremation, which we also pay for.

“Basically, we've covered most everything as part of a funeral, except for food and drink. If a family has a catered event, they would have to pay for it either out of their own pocket, out of the SGLI they get, or from the death gratuity,” said Hayes, who has worked – active duty or civilian -- for every service branch.

With just 15 positions, the competition for spots is fierce and there isn't much turnover. Usually, a mortician cannot move from Stateside until a mortician transfers from overseas, Hayes said. The rotation schedule rarely matches up so that a mortician can be stationed in a location for several years, and if there are two morticians transferring from Stateside, the competition can be fierce.

The Navy morticians also provide their skills for short-notice missions around the world, such as a unique group of individuals, known as Special Category Residents (SCR). Because of the Cuban revolution in 1961, about 4,000 nationals, friendly to America, were granted refuge at Guantanamo Bay.

More than 50 years later, less than two dozen remain, and the Navy's mortuary services are a part of the U.S. commitment to these exiles.

"When one of these individuals' passes, a Navy mortician is flown down to prepare dress and casket (the deceased) and facilitate the funeral, making sure they get a dignified burial per the family's wishes," said Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Stephanie Kitchen, who recently traveled to Cuba in this capacity. "Each time we need to go down, the corpsman, nurses, doctors and staff from the Naval Hospital are always more than willing to help us out, make sure we have the tools that we need in order to facilitate a dignified burial for their individual they've been caring for for so many years."

In another instance, Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Richard Jenkins coordinated a high-visibility transition and burial at Arlington National Ceremony for Cmdr. James Mills, a Naval Flight Officer who went missing in Vietnam, and whose remains were recovered in July 2018.

Navy morticians are a small group of Sailors with variety of missions, but appear to have a common motivation.

"I think the most satisfying part of this job is whenever the families finally have them home and they're able to take care of their loved ones the way that they want, and to make sure that they were memorialized the way they want," said Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Floyd Price. "I think our whole job is to make sure that happens and make sure that brings some type of peace of mind to the families, and that's what I like doing."