



"Sometimes you really do not know what to say right away. You have that person in tears, another relative must take the telephone. Some people are old and I'm sensitive to older people. I don't know their health condition and I visualize something happening to them if they can't take the news, like a heart attack. Sometimes we have to send an ambulance out."

a Notification
NCO



When Tragedy Calls

By Morten G. Ender and Carla D. Porter

As a senior NCO you may be called to assist bereaved families following Army deaths, serious injuries or illnesses. Many of you can expect to serve at least once in your career as a Casualty Notification Officer or Casualty Assistance Officer (CAO) as names rotate on your unit's additional duty roster.

Casualty Notification Officers are active duty and retired Army personnel living or working nearest the deceased soldier's next of kin. Although the name implies officers, sergeants (E5 and above) may be called. DA policy requires personal notification of the death within 24 hours, if possible, to the next of kin.

Like the Notification Officer, the CAO can be a senior NCO or officer. After being briefed by the Casualty Notification Officer on any special circumstances regarding the next of kin, the CAO makes arrangements to visit the home of the next of kin.

A CAO must handle a host of time-limited, but intense, duties. First, the CAO must meet the family. Next, needs are assessed. The initial death gratuity must be obtained. CAOs are also responsible for escorting the remains from airports or train stations to private or Army burial sites. Burial rights and benefits must also be coordinated with the family. Arranging for a burial plot, headstone and full military honors, such as positioning the firing party and bugler

at the gravesite, are all key tasks associated with being a CAO. Likewise, administrative responsibilities are required after the funeral. Any additional death gratuities and autopsy reports are furnished to the next of kin. New identification cards are issued to qualifying family members. Personal effects of the deceased are itemized, assessed for appropriateness and handed over to the next of kin. Insurance payments must be applied for. Dependent educational benefits for surviving children may need assessing and legal counsel and assistance sought when necessary.

Hundreds of questions from bereaved family members and friends may face the CAO. Sometimes, the bereaved family may not be receptive. You may come to represent the organization responsible for taking their loved one's life, or not providing for survivors appropriately.

"Coping with the family's anger and frustration was hard. They wanted results now. But due to the time involved with the identification of remains, I could give no quick answers. Later, when it was determined that the deceased's illegitimate son was to be the primary beneficiary, more anger and frustration were directed towards me from brothers, sisters and other family members."

a CAO

You'll find CAO duty stressful. Performing these duties may produce negative psychological effects. Some CAOs complained of headaches, nervousness and insomnia.

However, CAOs emphasize the importance of receiving support from their commander, unit, family and friends in helping them cope with the duty. Helping a family through "tough times" also carries its own rewards.

Notification NCOs work primarily via telephone and are typically career-oriented NCOs with five to 15 years active duty and some college. The primary MOS is 71 Lima. Notification NCOs are assigned to the Casualty and Memorial Affairs Operation Center, and serve at least three years.

The most stressful part of the Notification NCOs job? A 1989 survey reported that informing families over the phone was the hardest and most stressful part of the job, both for themselves and the next of kin.

CAOs, Notification Officers and Notification NCOs share the responsibility of acting as the official representatives of the Army. Members of all three groups said the "unofficial Army ambassador" role is mostly positive.

As one NCO said: "We're only treating the families like we would want our family to be treated."

The research projects summarized in this article were supervised by Paul T. Bartone, Ph.D., principal investigator, Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, Washington, D.C.