

Funeral Planning Tips for Veterans

By Rev. Peter Hook, Chaplain - peterhook@verizon.net

Making decisions surrounding arrangements for the funeral of a veteran who has made no preparation can add stress and confusion on top of sorrow for family members. Changing customs, increased expenses, lack of familiarity with laws and options, and trying to locate the deceased veteran's DD 214 can make arranging and planning a funeral an overwhelming experience. Therefore, please get your important documents organized, make your wishes known, and help your families to make wise decisions when that time arrives.

I recently received a call from the daughter of a VFW Life Member whom I had befriended, informing me that her father had passed away. Our common interest, besides being veterans, was Classic Country Music. Bill was a radio DJ, and I was a regular listener to his weekly program. While we only met in person two times, every once in a while I sent a note thanking him for the program. And, from time to time, he would send greetings to me over the air. I was surprised to learn of his passing. I was even more surprised when she said the family found a note amongst his papers requesting that I officiate at his funeral. Bill was organized. He had all his important papers in a file folder and on top, written on the back of an envelope, was the note to call me. He made the planning of his funeral less stressful for his family. Unfortunately, that is not always the case.

Preparing ahead of time for key decisions relieves the stress of making choices at a time of deep sorrow, ensures that your desires are carried out, and can save money. Here is some information which may be helpful to you:

- **Military Funeral Honors:** Upon the family's request, the law requires that every eligible veteran receive a military funeral honors ceremony, which includes the folding and presentation of the U.S. flag, and the playing of "Taps" at no cost. The Dept. of Defense is responsible for providing military funeral honors, and the request should be made by the family through the funeral director.
- **Burial in a Private Cemetery:** The VA suggests that if burial will be in a private cemetery and a government headstone or marker will be requested for the veteran's grave, that the family apply for one in advance so that the application can be placed with the veterans military discharge papers for use at the time of need. The VA furnishes, upon request, at no charge, a government headstone or marker for graves of any deceased eligible veterans in cemeteries worldwide.
- **Burial at a National Cemetery**
Grave sites in VA national cemeteries cannot be reserved in advance. Families are encouraged to prepare in advance by discussing cemetery options and collecting the veteran's military information, including discharge papers (DD 214). While PA has nine national cemeteries, only three still have space to accommodate casketed and cremated remains. The cemeteries that are still open are Indiantown Gap National Cemetery, National Cemetery of the Alleghenies, and Washington Crossing National Cemetery. The following is very important to pass on to your family if you desire to be buried in a national cemetery with military honors.

During the meeting with the funeral director, the deceased veteran's family must tell the funeral director that the deceased was a veteran, who was discharged under conditions other than dishonorable, and present the director with a copy of the DD 214.

If your wishes are to be buried in a veteran's cemetery with military honors, the family must make that known to the funeral director. Military Honors are not provided by the national cemeteries. Honors must be arranged in advance by the family and the funeral director.

The funeral director will then contact the VA and make arrangements for burial in a national cemetery. If the funeral director is not sure of the procedure, detailed information can be found on the National Funeral Directors Association website.

The funeral director must indicate to the VA that the family has requested Military Honors.

The VA will make all the arrangements for internment, and together with the funeral director, schedule a date and time. It is suggested, but not necessary, that when the family is notified of the schedule, they contact the cemetery administration to ensure that military honors have been scheduled.

Taking time to get your important papers organized, to write your desires, and to give guidance helps your family know what to do and sure makes things less difficult for your loved ones. It also gives the family a great sense of relief knowing they carried out your desires.

Post Chaplains should visit the Chaplain section of the Department website, www.vfwpahq.org, to find resources for providing spiritual leadership to Post comrades. To reach Chaplain Hook by phone call (267) 229-7722.