

Leadership through Tragedy

by Lt Col Rene M. Leon

“How you lead will not only determine your unit’s recovery, but a family’s lasting impression of the Air Force.”

You’ve been woken up by your First Sergeant at 0430 and told that you have a reported missing Airmen. You’re in PT gear when he picks you up at 0500 and drives 30 minutes to the Airmen’s apartment to meet and reassure his wife. Within 2 hours, you’re with the local authorities when they find his car by a dock and when they recover his body out of the sound. What do you do now?

This is one of those papers you hope to never have to use. It is NOT a summation of Air Force instructions or a description of Air Force agencies that will help you. It is written from the perspective of a Squadron Commander and First Sergeant and is mainly intended for people in command positions or Officers and Airmen who will be in those kinds of leadership positions in their future. It is NOT meant to be the “text book solution,” but offered only as a guide and as an example of what a Commander and First Sergeant thought about and did to get through an arguably difficult year. Knowing many reading this will not have a lot of time, the last two pages include a distilled summary and some Do’s and Don’ts as take-aways.

In order to protect their honor, dignity, and privacy, I have changed the names of the deceased Airmen and their family members, but other names and the situations, like the opening paragraph above, are all real. Between May of 2008 and April of 2009, my unit suffered through six active duty and two dependent fatalities. I was the squadron commander at the time and SMSgt(Ret) Tracy Black was my incredible First Sergeant. While just as tragic and devastating, the main focus of this paper will be on the active duty fatalities rather than the dependent deaths. Before I go further, I have to acknowledge Brigadier General Brad Webb, Colonel Peter Robichaux and Lt Col Shelley Rodriguez. While my other commanders, senior leaders and Chiefs were an immense help during this time, these three were the ones who most helped me organize my various thoughts and crystallized my perspective on dealing with tragedy as a commander. In particular, Shelley Rodriguez, then Wing Safety Officer took a disorganized e-mail from me and made it into a briefing for my Wing Commander at the time, then Colonel Webb. The flow of this paper and the Focus and ACT construct, are from that briefing. CMSgt Brooke McLean, then the Wing Command Chief was the impetus for me to actually record this experience. I am also indebted to Lt Col Diana Stuart and MSgt Karl Kile, who reviewed this paper after them, as the 3rd Component Maintenance Squadron Commander and First Sergeant, suffered and dealt with a fatality of their own. Their perspective was invaluable.

Every fatality we went through was unique in its details, but there were a few commonalities. Everyone had family who was clearly suffering more than anyone in the squadron except for maybe the closest of friends. Every family had questions about the entire process, “What happens next?” And everyone, both inside and outside the squadron, looked to

the squadron commander and first sergeant for leadership and guidance. Other than that, every other detail was different. I remember having a million things running through my mind when I first found out one of my Airmen was dead, but ultimately, the path Tracy Black and I took was to focus on a few key things and then act on them to execute them as best we could. All of my actions and decisions were run through three filters in priority order:

1. Take care of the immediate family
2. Take care of any close friends within the squadron
3. Take care of the Unit/Squadron to get them back "FMC" as quickly as possible.

I converted these three priorities/goals, into what I first called my "3 Truths" and which became my "Commander's Intent" for the squadron:

1. We will take care of the family to the best of our ability.
2. Understand that this will be painful.
3. We will get through this as a squadron and make sure the family is right there with us.

This guidance stayed constant throughout all of the fatalities we suffered. I tried to come up with a Commander's Intent that anyone in the squadron could understand and that, if a question arose about what action to take, they could refer to in order to make a decision without having to ask me or the Shirt.

Despite the differences in each case, SMSgt Black and I reacted the same through each one. First, we focused on taking care of the family, consciously building a bond with them. We did this in part by providing presence. We made sure either he or I was there whenever the family met with an outside agency like the Funeral Home, Casualty Affairs, or Mortuary Affairs. Once the Family Liaison Officer (FLO) and Summary Courts Officer (SCO) were trained, we introduced them to the family and made sure they knew the FLO and SCO could call us at any time. It helps to have a good rapport with the support agencies. I recommend developing that rapport right when you take command or become a First Sergeant.

We also tried to make sure all of their needs (meals, etc.) were taken care of to the best of our ability, but we made sure we tempered that and not promise something that wasn't true or something we couldn't deliver. (e.g. We never said anything like "Don't worry, the Air Force will pay for everything.") I'm convinced that building that bond with the family is crucial and sets up the overall impression the family takes away about the Air Force. While every family was different, all but one family eventually made the decision to let us into what was an extremely intimate event in their lives.

What you want to do is establish that bond BEFORE the family enters the "Angry" stage of the 5 Stages of Grief. The only way to know that is to be there with the family member from the beginning. If they are asking you for guidance or expect a call from you, that is probably your best opening to start developing that bond. Doing this was emotionally taxing...If you find yourself alone for a while with a grieving spouse or parent, what do you talk about? It'll be different for everyone and often just being there helps but, if you're not up to it or it's just not in your personality, I recommend finding someone in the squadron that can fit the bill. With the

proper bond, the family will be more prone to ask questions and open up about issues that they may be having that they wouldn't normally tell you. You don't want the family walking away from the Air Force with some festering problem you probably could have solved. Moreover, the family will be more willing to accept details from you that may be contentious to them.

Second, we made sure the squadron was OK through several means. We always offered people an opportunity to talk to mental health or a chaplain; however, we didn't restrict them down a single path. As a matter of fact, we had to pull back one chaplain. Right after I notified the squadron of one of the fatalities, he met with the section the deceased Airmen belonged to and, instead of saying he was available, he started to go through a group "Lets-explore-your-feelings" session right there. It was clear that no one was comfortable with what was going on (including me on a number of levels) so I cut that particular Chaplain off and told him the people will come to him if they need to.

While I set an expectation that we will recover, I knew that people in the squadron were in varying degrees of mourning. Honestly, most were not emotionally affected at all, while some were completely devastated. Regardless, I found that people recovered fastest by having something to do. It was even better if they could tie what they were doing as somehow helping with the fatality. That ranged from being a FLO or helping to set up the memorial, to taking up the slack fixing and launching airplanes while others in the squadron tended to the family.

The rest of the lessons are embedded within the narratives of each case below.

Case 1: A1C Timothy Mueller

On 27 May at about 0430, my Shirt woke me up to tell me that Amn Timothy Mueller had been reported missing by his wife Carol and that he would be by to pick me up. He said he was in PT gear so I put on the same thing not really thinking about how the situation would unfold. We drove out to the Mueller's apartment where I met Carol who was sitting with a couple of friends and two County Deputies.

Carol told us she had bought Tim a new kayak the day before, Memorial Day, his birthday and had probably gone out to try it. She had to go to work. When he wasn't home when she returned, she didn't think anything of it and fell asleep. She called the police when she woke up in the early morning and he still wasn't home. Shortly thereafter, Tracy and I went to a dock parking lot where the Sheriff found Tim's car.

They searched the sound in the immediate area and soon found Tim's body floating just under the surface of the water. He had been struck by a boat propeller. After positive identification was made, the Sheriff told us that he was obligated to tell Carol and that we could follow if we wanted to. He also passed guidance to the team that found the body, to not pass any information across the radio since the Deputies sitting with Carol would be tuned to the same frequency.

It was a matter of time before Carol found out and it would take 30 minutes one way to travel to get our Service Dress. So, my first command decision was go with the Sheriff or miss

the event entirely. As we re-entered the apartment, the Sheriff was in the lead, with me following and the Shirt right behind me and all eyes were on us. The Sheriff rounded the breakfast bar looking at Carol who was sitting on the kitchen counter. As he got closer he stopped, paused and then turned around and looked right at me. It was at this moment that I realized that everyone, even civilians, look to the “commander” to lead. I stepped forward and simply said “Carol, we found Tim and he’s passed away.” I can tell you I was nervous and anxious the whole time we were traveling back to the apartment knowing what we were about to do. I recalled the best advice given to me by Lt Col Michael Lawrence who told me “If you ever have to do that, don’t mince words or try to make it sound better. Just say it. Nothing you say can make it better.”

As Carol collapsed and cried with her friends, the Shirt already had the game plan to support her. We figured out who were Tim’s closest friends and personally notified them. Then we did a telephone recall to squadron leadership and told them that there would be a mandatory commander’s call first thing the next morning. Not knowing how many people would be affected by this surprise fatality, I asked my Group Commander at the time, Col Socrates Greene, to cancel the next day’s flying. I had been in contact with him from the beginning so he knew the whole situation and could keep the wing informed while we took care of Carol.

Between the time Tim’s body was discovered to when we notified Carol, the First Sergeant was already mobilizing various functions like Command Post for the OPREP, Chaplains, the Med Group, and Mortuary and Casualty Affairs. One of the first pieces of information that needs to be passed is confirmation that the Next of Kin was notified. Casualty Affairs will also tell you who HAS to be notified per the vRED. Once everyone is told, the support functions in the wing can begin to act. Honestly, I don’t recall the specifics of who did what and when. I relied on Tracy’s training and experience. He was on the phone with the various agencies making sure we were all on the same sheet of music. I was focused on making sure Carol was Okay and keeping my chain of command informed. I was also thinking about what to tell the squadron the next morning.

We stayed with Carol for hours, doing our initial coordination via cell phone. We asked his Aircraft Maintenance Unit (AMU) for a good Family Liaison Officer and Summary Courts Officer. We identified them immediately after the Commander’s Call the next morning and got them trained as soon as possible so they could begin to help the family. The FLO was most crucial up front since he would be our representative. We also identified a few of the Mueller’s closest friends and told them their duty for the next few days was to take care of Carol under the FLO’s guidance. They were hurting too and I think it helped them to heal faster knowing they were placed in a position of trust and that their specific mission was to help Carol.

We held a memorial and went to the funeral in Tim’s home state. The family didn’t realize at first that we were attending the funeral at their hometown and they were very happy that we took the time to attend. While the memorial was very professional, we did not award Tim a medal at that time. I had not yet learned to articulate how I felt about awarding him a medal and the rest of that story is closed in Cases 4 and 5.

Case 2: SSgt Rob Paterno

SSgt Paterno was struck by lightning on Sunday, 13 Jul 08. He survived the strike for a week, but then succumbed to his injuries and died approximately 0200, 19 Jul 08. Rob was single and was on a boat in the sound watching the Blue Angels with some friends. A thunderstorm came in quickly and, realizing the danger, the group made for shore. Not having access to a dock, the friends waded to shore in about waist high water after tying the boat to a post. Rob was struck while he was wading. He was stabilized and eventually life-flighted to a Hospital in Mobile, AL where Tracy and I caught up with him. His family (Father and 4 siblings) were already enroute from Tennessee and we met them that first night in the hospital. We bonded with the family through that week. Rob was stable at first, but then his systems shut down Friday night.

Tracy and I had just returned from visiting the family that Friday when we got the call that Rob wasn't expected to make the night. We immediately put our uniforms back on and drove the 2 hours back to Mobile. As an indication of the kind of bond we had made, Rob's father waited 2 hours for us to arrive before conferring with his sons about taking Rob off of life-support. I never thought that, as a squadron commander, I would ever have been a witness to the death of one of my Airmen...But, Tracy and I were with a brother and a sister-in-law in Rob's hospital room when life-support was stopped and Rob passed-away. His father and another brother stayed in a separate waiting room. We held another memorial and went to Rob's funeral in Tennessee. Like with Tim's family, we tried to show Rob's family a little of what his life was like with us so, on top of the memorial, we gave his family VIP tours of the unit and the aircraft he had worked on.

Case 3: TSgt Kevin Dahl and SSgt Melissa Dahl

The Dahl's were killed while walking their dogs the evening of 29 Aug 08. They were struck from behind in a hit-and-run from a suspected drunk driver. The driver was caught the next day. Kevin was killed right away; Melissa initially survived but died the next day. Between the two of them and previous marriages, they left 4 children behind. The adult next-of-kin were out of state and were notified by the Air Force Base nearest them. They in-turn told the children what happened.

Kevin was one of my expeditors and Melissa worked for Mental Health in the Med Group. I was deployed during this event and my Ops Officer; Major Charles Dunaway had the squadron. Because Melissa survived by one day, the Med Group had lead for all of the events with my squadron providing significant support. Essentially, Melissa inherited Kevin's estate since she was still alive when he died. When she died, everything went to Melissa's mother.

The Dahl's should serve as *THE* text-book example of a family who was organized and had planned for the worst-case scenario that, tragically, their children had to endure. They had a 3 ring binder that laid out step-by-step instructions of how their collective estate would be executed and who would take custody of their children should they both perish. With children from previous marriages, ex-spouses, and a combined estate worth almost \$1 million, the

potential for a nasty legal battle was high. To my knowledge, it was all avoided because of Kevin and Melissa's detailed planning. The memorial for the Dahl's was held in an aircraft hangar that was decorated appropriately for the somber event. The base chapel was too small. Both Dahl's were extremely popular and the hangar was full. I had asked to come home for this event, but my leadership advised against it. The squadron was doing OK and by now knew how to handle all of the details which they shared with the Medical Group. At our deployed location, we flew a flag at half staff. Due to the time difference it was set to half staff at the exact same time as the memorial. We then mailed the flag home for the family.

One thing that I didn't anticipate was the idea of being a 'snake-bit' unit. Col Webb himself held a commander's call with my squadron and addressed it...The message being that we made our own luck. My wife also had to deal with it with spouses asking her if their husbands could be moved out of the unit. The leadership chain handled the situation by directly addressing it from the MAJCOM Commander on down. Basically, we emphasized that we made our own luck. People brought up SSgt Paterno's lightning strike as "unavoidable," and I always countered with the fact that Rob himself didn't think it was...Why else would he try to seek shelter. Yes, he still got hit, but that doesn't mean you leave everything to chance. If he had left 10 minutes earlier, he might have survived...You make your own luck. Another stance I took when talking to my squadron was to turn the "bad-luck" idea around bit. I would ask, "If luck or fate killed our Airmen, why did fate put us into the squadron? If people were 'fated' to die anyway, maybe fate put us in the squadron because we were the best ones to handle it." I used how well we took care of the families as an example and asked, "Could other units have done better?" In essence, this was a take on the adage that God doesn't give you anything that you can't handle. I used that and expanded it to the squadron's identity.

It may have been a little too philosophically deep for some, and I'm sure many of my Airmen didn't buy it, but my message was, "If the squadron was destined to go through this anyway, there was no team better suited or more well knit, to not only take care of each other, but to take care of our mission while doing so." I emphasized that I was talking about the Airmen, not the unit leadership. As an example, I noted the fact that I wasn't even present when they took care of the Dahl's. Moreover, right in the middle of the event, Major Dunaway suffered his own loss and had to go on Emergency Leave and they still did superbly.

Cases 4 and 5: TSgt Cody Johnson and A1C Wayne Carlisle

TSgt Johnson, single, died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head, 14 Oct 08. He had been busted for a DUI 2-days prior. While his family knew it and his peers suspected, no one in the supervisory chain or leadership knew he had a drinking problem. Although his supervision escorted him to his apartment and reassured him he would be OK after the DUI, they did not check on him on 13 Oct since he seemed to be doing fine. As a matter of fact in the course of taking him home from downtown jail, the supervisor and Cody ran into Cody's arresting officer in a convenience store. The officer over-heard Cody being worried about his job and the DUI and actually reassured him as well saying he'd seen this a lot and that he would be OK.

I was still deployed at this point. Major Dunaway called me at the beginning of our work shifts and told me of the suicide. About 8 hours later, I received another call from him and I was expecting an update on the suicide. Instead, he told me that A1C Wayne Carlisle, also single, had died that same afternoon after accidentally running into the back of a stopped school bus on the way home. I know I brain-locked a little after this statement because the next thing I recall hearing was Chuck saying "Sir, are you OK?" I said I was fine and that I was going to ask again about going home. Col Webb was already ahead of me and had asked my deployed commander to send me back and was already working a backfill. For the second time that shift, I gathered the deployed members on shift and broke the news. A few hours later, I was on a C-17 headed back to my squadron. In a little over 24 hours, I was back in the squadron planning two memorials, supporting two different kinds of investigations and trying to assess how my Shirt and the squadron were doing.

At first, people suspected that A1C Carlisle was affected by TSgt Johnson's suicide, but it turned out that he had been at M-16 training and not at work so he didn't even know about the suicide. The investigation ultimately determined that he had been distracted while driving. He was found with a traffic ticket in his hands that we suspect he was reading. The fine on it was due that day, so we also suspect he was in a rush to go and pay it. We reenergized the same processes for the memorials that we had before. Both families were not local to our base and notifications were made by other Air Force Bases. Since I was travelling back from the AOR, it was Major Dunaway and Tracy who made first contact with the respective families. We never really bonded with Cody's family as well as we'd had with others. His parents were divorced and he had a twin brother in the Air Force. We did contact the twin's commander and told him of the suicide on the off chance his brother was similarly disposed.

Cody's family chose not to attend the memorial we held for him. Wayne's mother and sister eventually decided to attend after being initially hesitant. We worked with them a little to commit to a date due to the other memorial. We thought that attending the memorial service would give them closure, and that it would also show them the Air Force family that Wayne was a part of. It really opened their eyes and they were thankful for it. Because of the timing of the two memorials and the two funerals in different states, I chose to send Tracy and Chuck to the funerals instead of going myself. Because of my initial absence from being deployed, the family had bonded with them more than me. Plus, I was sent home to take care of my squadron and so didn't want to leave them again while they were planning two different memorials. Even though the bond with Cody's family wasn't as strong as with the others, when Tracy and Major Dunaway arrived for the funeral at his home town, they were welcomed with open arms and thanked for bringing their son home.

Another question we wrestled with was whether to give Cody a medal given his DUI and suicide. We submitted one, but the chain understandably balked at it. Ultimately, we emphasized the medal was more about the family than Cody.

In a few years, no one would remember Cody or whether he got a medal or not. But, his family would remember and, despite his faults, they knew how much he loved being in the Air Force. I'm sure many reading this would not even consider granting a medal. That stance is just as valid. The threshold I use is if the individual in question caused harm to others. In the end, as

a commander, you need to be able to look yourself in the mirror whichever way you decide to pursue. Since the decision wasn't ours to make, we were prepared either way. We held a very dignified memorial for A1C Mueller without a medal presentation because that was what was decided at the time. However, once we knew Cody's medal was going to be approved, I approached my leadership and got a medal approved for A1C Mueller as well. My 1st Sergeant and I thought it was the right thing to do. Immediately after both Cody's and Wayne's memorials and funerals were completed, Tracy and I flew back to A1C Mueller's home town and, in a private setting, we presented Carol Tim's posthumous medal. The rest of Tim's family were there as well and Tim's father, being retired Air Force, understood the nuances of what we were doing.

Case 6: A1C Louis Frederick

A1C Frederick shot and killed himself after having an argument with his supervisor, 10 April 2009. He came home from work, waved to his roommates and friends in the living room, went upstairs and killed himself 30 minutes later. He was a moody person who didn't like to lose and wasn't used to the level of competition in the Air Force since he was an only child. He was known to not only be moody, but at times dramatic. He had also started using the drug Chantix as a part of the Air Force Smoking Cessation program. More than any other case, this one had the potential to go awry. The parents were aloof and at least in part, blamed us as an Air Force, for the death of their son. After introductions, Louis' Step Father's first question was "What can you tell me about why my son got a 4 EPR?"

We eventually broke through the parent's initial reluctance to let us help them by being as open as we could be about what we knew of the circumstances surrounding the suicide. With good reason, some people recommended against talking about information that was still unconfirmed, but I think the wing made the right choice in being as forthright as possible. The concern was to avoid a situation like what happened with Pat Tillman, the NFL star turned Ranger who was killed by friendly fire and to lose the family's trust because they felt we were withholding information. His mother also asked if the memorial service could be done the very next afternoon. I told the Vice Wing Commander who asked if we could do it. Given our experience, I replied that if there was a squadron that could pull it off, it would be us...The Service was performed with honor with one day's planning, and they were very grateful.

After the memorial, I carried Louis' ashes back to his parents learning a lot of what it takes to transport a metal urn through the airport without having to get it inspected. I had a letter from the funeral home and it helped that I carried a military ID. When we met with the parents, we also shared all of the information we had at the time. Our attitude made the meeting about sharing information versus interrogation. Due to their research using local authorities, his parents knew more than we did about Louis' last days. We gave them what we knew and tried to confirm what they found out. The investigation was still on-going when I left command so I don't know what they ultimately found out or determined. I do know that we gave them everything we knew at the time and, in doing so, hopefully avoided making a tragic situation even worse.

Some people have asked me how I got through the stretch of difficult times. It was grueling, but having my First Sergeant there along with the rest of the wing, group and squadron leadership made it about as smooth as it could be. I was deployed for part of the time, but Tracy dealt with all the fatalities. I made a conscious effort to keep an eye on him. At the same time these tragedies were going on, Tracy's wife Karen was diagnosed with Breast Cancer. They were dealing with their own life-crisis while he was caring for the squadron. To this day I still don't know how he did it. At one point we had a unit "eyeball check" where all the supervisors had to look each other in the eye and tell each other whether they were OK or not. If they were not OK, and a few were not, we made sure they received the necessary treatment and care.

Another piece that helped was that I knew I had all of the 1 SOW's incredible resources at my disposal. Col Webb and Col Lengyel after him struck the perfect tenor for us. While I knew I had the Wing's support, the Wing agencies were not so intrusive that it distracted us from taking care of the family. Personally, I re-energized myself by playing with my children and escaping from the tragedies for a little bit. I highly recommend getting rest while you can and finding whatever activity it may be that will allow you to re-energize yourself and clear your mind. I left the detail work to my awesome Officers, SNCOs and NCOs and focused on the things only I could do; like writing my words of comfort and hope for the memorial or update the Wing leadership.

Knowing Commanders and First Sergeants don't have a lot of time, I tried to condense most of the lessons learned into some "Do's and Don'ts" below. I hope the information I passed on will help you come up with your own way to handle these kinds of events and your own techniques to lead your squadron. Finally, I hope that you never have to use them.

Leadership through Tragedy Summary

Between May of 2008 and April of 2009, my unit suffered through six active duty and two dependent fatalities. I was the squadron commander at the time.

- What this is: A perspective and guide of what a Squadron Commander and First Sergeant thought about and did to get through a difficult year.
- What it is NOT: A summation of Air Force instructions or a description of Air Force agencies that will help you...nor is it offered as the “text-book solution.”
- As the Squadron Commander and First Sergeant, expect everyone to turn to you for leadership and guidance. This includes any civilian agencies you will be dealing with.
- If you ever have to notify someone of a fatality, be respectful and professional, but don’t mince words. Just say it. Nothing you can do or say will make it any better.
- Know that the lasting impression the family will have of the Air Force will be based largely on how you and the squadron treat them.
- Delegate the daily squadron functions that still need to go on to other officers and SNCOs. You and your Shirt will be busy.
- Understand that every fatality is as unique as the individuals involved but the healing process for the families and the unit contained similarities.
- All of my actions and decisions were run through three filters in priority order:
 1. Take care of the immediate family
 2. Take care of any close friends within the squadron
 3. Take care of the Unit/Squadron to get them back "FMC" as quickly as possible.
- I converted these three priorities/goals, into what I first called my “3 Truths” and which became my “Commander’s Intent” for the squadron:
 1. We will take care of the family to the best of our ability.
 2. Understand that this will be painful.
 3. We will get through this as a squadron and make sure the family is right there with us.

Do's and Don'ts

Do's

- Try to develop a bond with the family without forcing yourself on them
- Put a lot of thought into identifying a good FLO and SCO
- Get the FLO and SCO trained right away
- Identify a good person to set up the Memorial
- Keep your chain of command informed of details and environment
- Be on-the-scene when possible
- Be present with the family when they meet with other agencies. They normally appreciate a person that they know from the start.
- Know who the identified NOK is and understand your duty is to them. Other family is secondary.
- Try to see the body so you can advise the family on open or closed casket. The family will most likely ask you what the condition of the body is.
- Write a memorial or words of encouragement that "speaks" to both the family and the squadron
- Ensure the family understands that the memorial is more for the Squadron than the family
- Be there for the actual funeral and try to also send a couple of friends if possible
- Allow squadron members to grieve in their own way, understand that some may not grieve at all, but expect a level of professionalism and support for the memorial (i.e. max participation)
- Ask about flying the flag at Half Staff (Wg/CC prerogative). If approved, make sure the family is aware of the honor
- Write a medal (Commendation minimum) unless the person has done harm to others (Subject to approval and can be a contentious topic).
- Use the entire supervisory chain to keep an eye on all the Airmen and each other
- Take care of the First Sergeant
- Get some rest when you can
- Do the right thing by the family and the squadron (meals, child care, etc.) but only promise what you can actually deliver.
- Develop a rapport with your supporting agencies before something happens and always go back and thank them if they do a good job. You cannot do this without them.

Don'ts

- Don't EVER say "I know how you feel" unless you've actually been through the EXACT same situation.
- Don't write a memorial that was based off of (or sounds like) a retirement speech
- Don't hide the truth from the squadron or the family, but spare gory details if you can
- Don't allow the squadron (or anyone else) to participate in rumor mongering
- Don't shy away from words like "death," or "suicide" but don't dwell on them either
- Don't get caught up in the minutiae delegate it to others
- Don't allow base agencies to set the pace/agenda for the family (e.g. interviews, briefings, memorial timing, etc.) They will adjust to the family's needs.
- Don't restrict the squadron to a limited path through the grieving process
- Don't let less immediate family members (Ex-spouse, non-existent parent, etc.) to interfere with the identified NOK or the memorial. Treat them with respect, but with a firm hand if necessary.